

It's All True

by John Kessel

On the desk in the marina office a black oscillating fan rattled gusts of hot air across the sports page. It was a perfect artifact of the place and time. The fan raised a few strands of the harbor master's hair every time its gaze passed over him. He studied my papers, folded the damp sheets, and handed them back to me.

"Okay. Mr. Vidor's yacht is at the end of the second row." He pointed out the open window down the crowded pier. "The big black one."

"Is the rest of the crew aboard?"

"Beats me," he said, sipping from a glass of iced tea. He set the perspiring glass down on a ring of moisture that ran through the headline: "Cards Shade Dodgers in 12; Cut Lead to 5-1/2." On the floor beside the desk lay the front page: "New Sea-Air Battle Rages in Solomons. Japanese Counterattack on Guadalcanal."

I stepped out onto the dock, shouldered my bag, and headed toward the yacht. The sun beat down on the crown of my head, and my shirt collar was damp with sweat. I pulled the bandana from my pocket and wiped my brow. For midweek the place was pretty busy, a number of Hollywood types down for the day or a start on a long weekend. Across the waterway tankers were drawn up beside a refinery.

The *Cynara* was a 96-foot-long two-masted schooner with a crew of four and compartments for ten. The big yacht was an act of vanity, but King Vidor was one of the most successful directors in Hollywood and, though notorious for his parsimony, still capable of indulging himself. A blond kid who ought to have been drafted by now was polishing the brasswork; he looked up as I stepped aboard. I ducked through the open hatchway into a varnished oak companionway, then up to the pilothouse. The captain was there, bent over the chart table.

"Mr. Onslow?"

The man looked up. Mid-fifties, salt-and-pepper hair. "Who are you?" he asked.

"David Furrow," I said. I handed him the papers. "Mr. Welles sent me down to help out on this cruise."

"How come I never heard of you?"

"He was supposed to call you. Maybe he asked Mr. Vidor to contact you?"

"Nobody has said a word about it."

"You should call Mr. Welles, then."

Onslow looked at me, looked at the papers again. There was a forged letter from Welles, identifying me as an able-bodied seaman with three years' experience. Onslow clearly didn't want to call Welles and risk a tirade. "Did he say what he expected you to do?"

"Help with the meals, mostly."

"Stow your gear in the crew's compartment aft," he said. "Then come on back."

I found an empty bunk and put my bag with the portable unit in the locker beneath it. There was no lock, but I would have to take the chance.

Onslow introduced me to the cook, Manolo, who set me to work bringing aboard the produce, poultry, and case of wine the caterer had sent. When I told him that Welles wanted me to serve, he seemed relieved. About mid-afternoon Charles Koerner, the acting head of production at RKO, arrived with his wife and daughter. They expected to be met by more than just the crew, and Koerner grumbled as he sat at the mahogany table on the afterdeck. Manolo gave me a white jacket and sent me up with drinks. The wife was quiet, fanning herself with a palm fan, and the daughter, an ungainly girl of twelve or thirteen, all elbows and knees, explored the schooner.

An hour later a maroon Packard pulled up to the dock and Welles got out, accompanied by a slender dark woman whom I recognized from photos as his assistant, Shifra Haran. Welles bounded up onto the deck. "Charles!" he boomed, and engulfed the uncomfortable Koerner in a bear hug. "So good to see you!" He towered over the studio head. Koerner introduced Welles to his wife Mary.

Welles wore a lightweight suit; his dark hair was long and he sported a mustache he had grown in Brazil in some misguided attempt at machismo. He was over six feet tall, soft in the belly but with little sign of the monstrous obesity that would haunt his future. A huge head, round cheeks, beautifully molded lips, and almond-shaped Mongol eyes.

"And who's this?" Welles asked, turning to the daughter. His attention was like a searchlight, and the girl squirmed in the center of it.

"Our daughter Barbara."

"Barbara," Welles said with a grin, "do you always carry your house key in your ear?" From the girl's left ear he plucked a shiny brass key and held it in front of her face. His fingers were extraordinarily long, his hands graceful. The girl smiled slyly. "That's not my key," she said.

"Perhaps it's not a key at all." Welles passed his left hand over his right, and the key became a silver dollar. "Would you like this?"

"Yes."

He passed his hand over the coin again, and it vanished. "Look in your pocket."

She shoved her hand into the pocket of her rolled blue jeans and pulled out the dollar. Her eyes flashed with delight.

"Just remember," Welles said, "money isn't everything."

And as quickly as he had given the girl his attention, he turned back to Koerner. He had the manner of a prince among commoners, dispensing his favors like gold yet expecting to be deferred to at any and every moment. Haran hovered around him like a hummingbird. She carried a portfolio, ready to hand him whatever he needed—a pencil, a cigar, a match, a cup of tea, a copy of his RKO contract. Herman Mankiewicz had said about him, "There but for the grace of God—goes God."

"Shifra!" he bellowed, though she was right next to him. "Get those things out of the car."

Haran asked me to help her. I followed her to the pier and from the trunk took an octagonal multi-reel film canister and a bulky portable film projector. The label on the canister had *The Magnificent*

Ambersons scrawled in black grease pencil. Haran watched me warily until I stowed the print and projector safely in the salon, then hurried back on deck to look after Welles.

I spent some time helping Manolo in the galley until Onslow called down to me: it was time to cast off. Onslow started the diesel engine. The blond kid and another crewmember cast off the lines, and Onslow backed the *Cynara* out of the slip. Once the yacht had left the waterway and entered San Pedro Bay, we raised the main, fore, and staysails. The canvas caught the wind, Onslow turned off the engine, and, in the declining sun, we set sail for Catalina.

On my way back to the galley I asked the passengers if I could freshen their drinks. Welles had taken off his jacket and was sprawled in one of the deck chairs, regaling the Koerners with stories of voodoo rituals he had witnessed in Brazil. At my interruption he gave me a black look, but Koerner took the break as an opportunity to ask for another scotch. I asked Barbara if she wanted a lemonade. Welles's hooded eyes flashed his impatience, and I hurried back below deck.

It was twilight when I served supper: the western horizon blazed orange and red, and the awning above the afterdeck table snapped in the breeze. I uncorked several bottles of wine. I eavesdropped through the avocado salad, the *coq au vin*, the strawberry shortcake. The only tough moment came when Onslow stepped out on deck to say goodnight. "I hope your dinner went well." He leaned over and put a hand on Welles's shoulder, nodding toward me. "You know, we don't usually take on extra crew at the last minute."

"Would anyone like brandy?" I interjected.

Welles, intent on Koerner, waved a hand at Onslow. "He's done a good job. Very helpful." Onslow retired, and afterward I brought brandy and glasses on a silver tray.

Welles put to Koerner the need to complete the *It's All True* project he had gone to Rio to film. RKO had seen the rushes of hordes of leaping black people at Carnival, gone into shock, and abandoned it. "Three segments," Welles said. "'The Jangladeros,' 'My Friend Bonito,' and the story of the samba. If you develop the rest of the footage I sent back, I can have it done by Thanksgiving; for a small additional investment, the studio will have something to show for the money they've spent, Nelson Rockefeller will have succeeded in the Good Neighbor effort, and I can go on and make the kind of movies RKO brought me out here to make."

Koerner avoided Welles's eyes, drawing lines on the white tablecloth with a dessert fork. "Orson, with all due respect, I don't think the studio is interested anymore in the kind of movies you were brought out here to make. *Kane* took a beating, and *Ambersons* doesn't look like it's going to do any better—worse, probably."

Welles's smile was a little too quick. "The version of *Ambersons* that's in the theaters now bears only passing resemblance to what I shot."

"I've never seen either version. But I saw the report on the preview in Pomona. The audience was bored to tears by your tragedy. 'People want to laugh,' they said. The comment cards were brutal."

"I saw the cards, Charles. Half the audience thought it was the best movie they had ever seen. The ones who didn't like it spelled 'laugh' l-a-f-f. Are you going to let the movies you release be determined by people who can't spell 'laugh'?"

"We can't make money on half-full theaters."

I went back and forth, clearing the table, as they continued to spar. Haran was busy doing something in

the salon. After I helped him clean up, Manolo headed for his bunk, and except for the pilot and me, the crew had turned in. I perched on the taffrail in the dark, smoking a twentieth century cigarette and eavesdropping. So far Koerner had proved himself to be an amusingly perfect ancestor of the studio executives I was familiar with. The type had not changed in a hundred years. Barbara, bored, stretched out on a bench with her head in Mary Koerner's lap; Mary stroked Barbara's hair and whispered, "In the morning, when we get to Catalina, you can go swimming off the yacht."

"Mother!" the girl exclaimed. "Don't you know? These waters are infested with sharks!"

Mother and daughter squabbled about whether "infested" was proper language for a well-bred young woman to use. They fell silent without reaching a decision. It was full night now, and the moon had risen. Running lights glowed at the top of the masts and at the bowsprit and stern. Aside from the snap of the flag above and the rush of the sea against the hull, there was only the sound of Welles's seductive voice.

"Charles, listen—I've got the original cut of the movie with me—the print they sent down to Rio before the preview. Shifra!" he called out. "Have you got that projector ready?" Welles finished his brandy. "At least have a look at it. You'll see that it's a work of merit."

Barbara perked up. "Please, father! Can we see it?"

Koerner ignored his daughter. "It's not about the merit, Orson. It's about money."

"Money! How can you know what is going to make money if you never take a chance?" His voice was getting a little too loud. Mrs. Koerner looked worried. "What industry in America doesn't spend some money on experiments? Otherwise the future surprises you, and you're out of business!"

Haran poked her head out of the doorway. "I have the projector set up, Orson."

"Orson, I really don't want—" Koerner said.

"Come, Charles, you owe me the favor of at least seeing what I made. I promise you that's all I'll ask."

They retired to the salon. I crept up alongside the cabin and peeked in one of the windows. At one end on a teak drop table Haran had set up the projector, at the other a screen. The film canister lay open on the bench seat, and the first reel was mounted on the projector.

"I'm tired," Mary Koerner said. "If you'll excuse me, I think I'll turn in."

"Mother, I want to see the movie," Barbara said.

"I think you should go to bed, Barbara," said Koerner.

"No, let her see it," Welles said. "It may be a little dark, but there's nothing objectionable."

"I don't want her to see any dark movies," Koerner said.

Welles clenched his fists. When he spoke it was in a lower tone. "Life is dark."

"That's just the point, Orson," said Koerner, oblivious of the thin ice he was treading. "There's a war on. People don't want to be depressed." As an afterthought, he muttered, "If they ever do."

"What did you say?"

Koerner, taking a seat, had his back to Welles. He straightened and turned. "What?"

Welles stepped past Haran and, with jerky movements, started to remove the reel from the projector. "Forget it, Shifra. Why waste it on a philistine?"

Barbara broke the charged silence. "What's a philistine?"

Welles turned to her. "A philistine, my dear girl, is a slightly better-dressed relative of the moron. A philistine wouldn't know a work of art from a hot dog. And you have the bad fortune to have a complete and utter philistine for a father."

"I've had just about enough—" Koerner sputtered.

"YOU've had enough?" Welles bellowed. "I am SICK to DEATH of you paltry lot of money-grubbing cheats and liars! When have any of you kept your word to me? When? Traitors!" He lurched forward and pitched the projector off the table. Koerner's wife and daughter flinched at the crash and ducked down the companionway. Haran, who had clearly seen such displays before, did nothing to restrain her boss.

Koerner's face was red. "That's it," he said. "Whatever possessed me to put my family in the way of a madman like you, I am sure I don't know. If I have anything to say about it, you will never work in Hollywood again."

"You bastard! I don't need your permission. I'll work—"

Koerner poked a finger into Welles's heaving chest. "Do you know what they're saying in every clubroom in the city? They're saying, 'All's well that ends Welles.'" He turned to the cowering secretary. "Miss Haran—good night."

With that he followed his wife and daughter to their room.

Welles stood motionless. I retreated from the window and went up to the pilothouse. "What was that about?" the man on duty asked.

"Mr. Welles just hit an iceberg. Don't worry. We're not sinking."

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"Rosebud" is the same in German as in English.

My mother fancied herself an artist. She was involved in *Les Cent Lieux*, the network of public salons sponsored by Brussels, and so I grew up in a shabby gallery in Schwabing where she exhibited her tired virtualities. I remember one of them was a sculpture of a vagina, in the heart of which a holographic projector presented images that switched whenever a new person happened by. One was of a man's mouth, a mustache above his lip, whispering the word "rosebud."

I could tell that this was some archival image, and that the man speaking wasn't German, but I didn't know who he was. It wasn't until I left Munich for NYU film school that I saw *Citizen Kane*.

I was going to be the artist my mother never was, in no way wedded to old Europe or the godforsaken twentieth century. I was fast and smart and persuasive. I could spin a vision of Art and Commerce to

potential backers until they fainted with desire to give me money. By the time I was twenty-six I had made two independent films, *The Fortress of Solitude* and *Words of Christ in Red*. *Words* even won the best original screenplay award in the 2037 Trieste Film Festival. I was a minor name—but I never made a dime. Outside of a coterie, nobody ever saw my movies.

I told myself that it was because the audience were fools, and after all, the world was a mess, what chance did art have in a world in flames, and the only people who made money were the ones who purveyed pretty distractions. Then time travel came in and whatever else it helped, it was a disaster for films; making commercial movies came to be about who could get Elizabeth Taylor or John Wayne to sign up. I got tired of cruising around below the radar. When I was thirty I took a good hard look in the mirror and found the job with Metro as a talent scout.

That sounds plausible, doesn't it? But there's another version of my career. Consider this story: I used to be a good tennis player. But my backhand was weak, and no matter how much I worked on it, it never got to be first rate. In a key moment in every match my opponent would drive the ball to my backhand side, and that damn tape at the top of the net would rise up to snare my return. I could only go so far: I couldn't pull genius out of thin air. And so the films and disks and the Trieste trophy sat in the back of my closet.

I was transferring the contents of that closet into boxes when the call came from DAA. I had a headache like someone driving spikes into my brain, and Moira the landlord hectoring me from the doorway. The only personal possessions I had that were worth auctioning online had already been auctioned, and I was six months in arrears.

My spex, on the bedside table, started beeping. The signal on the temple was flashing.

"I thought your service was cancelled," Moira said.

"It is."

I fumbled for the spex, sat spraddle-legged on the floor, and slipped them on. My stomach lurched. The wall of my apartment faded into a vision of Gwenda, my PDA. I had Gwenda programmed to look like Louise Brooks. "You've got a call from Vannicom, Ltd.," she said. "Rosethrush Vannice wants to speak with you."

I pulled off the spex. "Moira, dear, give me five minutes alone, would you?"

She smirked. "Whoever she is better owe you money." But she went away.

I pawed through the refuse on the bedside table until I found an unused hypo and shot it into my arm. My heart slammed in my chest and my eyes snapped fully open. I put the spex back on. "Okay," I said.

Gwenda faded and Vannice's beautiful face took her place. "Det? Are you there?"

"I'm here. How did you get me?"

"I had to pay your phone bill for you. How about giving me a look at you?"

The bedroom was a testimony to my imminent eviction, and I didn't want her to see what I looked like. "No can do—I'm using spex. How can I help you?"

"I want to throw some work your way."

After I had helped Sturges desert the studio, Vannice had told me that I would never work for her again.

Her speech might be peppered with lines from Nicholas Ray or Quentin Tarrantino, but her movie lust was a simulation over a ruthless commercial mind, and I had cost the company money. For the last six months it looked like I wouldn't work for anyone. "I'm pretty busy, Rosethrush."

"Too busy to pay your phone bill?"

I gave up. "What do you need?"

"I want you to end this Welles runaround," she said.

I might be on the outs, but the story of the wild goose chase for Orson Welles was all around town. Four times talent scouts had been sent back to recruit versions of Welles, and four times they had failed. "No," said Welles at the age of 42, despite being barred from the lot at Universal after *Touch of Evil*. They tried him in 1972, when he was 57, after Pauline Kael trashed his reputation; "No," he said. Metro even sent Darla Rashnamurti to seduce him in 1938, when he was the 23-year-old wunderkind. Darla and that version of Welles had a pretty torrid affair, but she came back with nothing more than a sex video that drew a lot of hits on the net and some clippings for her book of memories. I knew all this, and Rosethrush knew I knew it, and it didn't make a damn bit of difference. I needed the work.

"Can you send me some e-cash?" I asked.

"How much?"

I considered Moira. "Ah—how about ten thousand for now?"

"You'll have it in an hour. By which time you'll be in my office. Right?"

"I'll be there."

A week later, shaved and briefed and buffed to a high luster, I stood in the center of the time travel stage at DAA. I set down the kit bag that held my 1942 clothes and the portable time travel unit, and nodded to Norm Page up in the control booth. Vannice stood outside the burnished rail of the stage. "No screw-ups this time, right, Det?"

"When have I ever let you down?"

"I could give a list . . ."

"Ten seconds," said Norm from the booth.

Vannice pointed her finger at me like a gun, dropped her thumb as if shooting it, and spoke out of the corner of her mouth, doing a passable imitation of a man's voice.

"Rosebud—dead or alive," she said, and the world disappeared.

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The thing that separates me from the run-of-the-mill scout is that I can both plan and improvise. Planning comes first. You must know your mark. You are asking him to abandon his life, and no one is going to

do that lightly. You need to approach him at his lowest ebb. But you also want to take him at a time when his talents are undiminished.

This situation had fallen together rather nicely. I went down to the afterdeck and smoked another cigarette. Tobacco, one of the lost luxuries of the twentieth century. Through a slight nicotine buzz I listened to Welles shouting at Haran in the salon, and to the sounds of the demolition of what was left of the projector. I heard her tell him to go to hell. The moon was high now, and the surface of the sea was rippled in long, low swells that slapped gently against the hull as we bore south. Behind us, the lights of San Pedro reflected off our subsiding wake.

A few minutes later Welles came up onto the deck lugging the film canister, which he hefted onto the table. He sat down and stared at it. He picked up the brandy bottle and poured a glass, gulped it down, then poured himself another. If he was aware of my presence, he gave no sign.

After a while I said, quietly, "That might have gone better."

Welles lifted his big head. His face was shadowed; for a moment he looked like Harry Lime in *The Third Man*. "I have nothing to say to you."

"But I have something to say to you, Orson." I moved to the table.

"Go away. I'm not about to be lectured by one of Vidor's lackeys."

"I don't work for Mr. Vidor. I don't work for anyone you know. I'm here to talk to you."

He put down his glass. "Do I know you?"

"My name is Detlev Gruber."

He snorted. "If I were you, I'd change my name."

"I do—frequently."

For the first time since he'd come aboard the yacht, he really looked at me. "So speak your piece and leave me alone."

"First, let me show you something."

I took my bandana from my pocket and spread it flat on the table between us. I tugged the corners that turned it rigid, then thumbed the controls to switch it on. The blue and white pattern of the fabric disappeared, and the screen lit.

Welles was watching now. "What is this?"

"A demonstration." I hit play, the screen went black, and words appeared:

And then the title:

Ominous music rose. Fade in, night, on a chain-link fence with a metal sign that reads "No Trespassing."

"What the hell ...?" Welles said.

I paused the image.

Welles picked up the flatscreen. He shook it, rigid as a piece of pasteboard, turned it over and examined its back. "This is amazing. Where did you get it?"

"It's a common artifact—in the year 2048."

Welles laid the screen down. With the light of "No Trespassing" shining up into his face, he looked like no more than a boy. He was twenty-seven years old.

"Go on," he said. "I like a tall tale."

"I got it because I come from the future. I've come here just to see you, because I want you to come back with me."

Welles looked at me. Then he laughed his deep, booming laugh. He pulled a cigar out of his jacket pocket and lit it. "What does ... the future ... want with me?" he said between puffs.

"I represent an entertainment company. We want you to do one thing: make movies. We have technology that you don't have and resources you can't imagine. This screen is only the most trivial example. You think that optical printing is a neat trick? We can create whole landscapes out of nothing, turn three extras into an army, do for a fraction of the cost what it takes millions to do here, and do it better. The movie technology of the future is the best toy train set a boy ever had.

"More to the point, Orson, is this: you can fool these people around you, but you can't fool me. I know every mistake you've made since you came to Hollywood. I know every person you've alienated. Koerner's hostility is only the tip of the iceberg."

"I won't argue with you about that. But I have possibilities yet. I'm certainly not ready to fly off with you like Buck Rogers. Give me a couple of years—come back in 1950, and we'll see."

"You forget, what's the future for you is history to me. I know your entire life, Orson. I know what will happen to you from this moment on, until you die of a heart attack, completely alone, in a shabby house in Los Angeles in 1985. It's not a pretty life."

The notion of Welles' death hung in the air for a moment like the cigar smoke. He held the cigar sideways between his thumb and fingers, examining it. "An ill-favored thing, sir, but mine own," he said, as if addressing the cigar—and then his eyes, cold sober, met mine.

"You can joke," I said, "but you will never make another movie as unfettered as you were for *Kane*. The butchery RKO performed on *Ambersons* is only the beginning. No studio will let you direct again until 1946, and that's just a potboiler completely under the thumb of the system. When you try for something more ambitious in *The Lady from Shanghai*, the film gets taken from you and an hour chopped out of it. Hollywood exiles you; you escape to Europe. You spend the last forty years of your life begging for cash, acting small parts in increasingly terrible films as you struggle to make movies on your own. Your entire career? Eleven films—and that includes *Kane* and *Ambersons*."

"Sounds like I'm a flop. Why do you want me?"

"Because, despite fools nipping at your ankles and a complete lack of support, a couple of those films are brilliant. Think what you could do if you had the support of a major studio!"

"Don't you care that if I come with you, I'll never make these works of genius you tell me about?"

"On the contrary, I can show them to you right now. What I'm doing is plucking you from an alternate version of our history. In our world you will have gone on to live exactly the life I've been telling you about. So we will still have all of those movies, but you won't have to struggle to make them. Instead, you can make the dozens of other projects that you never could find backing for in this history. Before you shot Kane, you wanted to do *Heart of Darkness*. In 2048, still nobody has made a decent film of that book. It's as if the world has been waiting for you.

"In 2048 you will be celebrated instead of mocked. If you stay here, you will spend the rest of your life as an exile. If you must be an exile, be one in a place and time that will enable you to do the work that you love."

Welles moved a coffee cup, tapped ash into the saucer, and rested his cigar on the edge. "I have friends. I have family. What about them?"

"You have no family: your parents are dead, your brother estranged; you're divorced from your wife and, frankly, not interested in your daughter. Most of your friends have abandoned you."

"Joe Cotten hasn't."

"You want Joseph Cotten? Look." I called up the clip on the flatscreen, then slid it back in front of Welles. The screen showed a café patio. Street noises, pedestrians with UV hats, futuristic cars passing by. A man and a woman sat at table under a palm tree. The camera closed in on the couple: Joseph Cotten, wearing white trousers and an open-necked shirt, and his wife, Lenore. "Hello, Orson," they said, grinning. Cotten spoke directly into the camera. "Orson, Detlev tells me he's going to show you this clip. Listen to what the man is saying—he's telling the truth. It's much nicer here than you can imagine. In fact, my biggest regret about coming to the future is that you're not here. I miss you."

I stopped the image. "Another scout brought him to the future four years ago," I said.

Welles took another sip of brandy and set his glass down on Cotten's nose. "If Joe had stood by me, the studio wouldn't have been able to reshoot the ending of *Ambersons*."

I could see why my predecessors had all failed. For every argument I gave, Welles had a counter-argument. It wasn't about reason; he was too smart, and the reasons he offered for declining were not reasonable. He needed convincing on some visceral level. I had a brutal way to get there, and would have to use it.

I moved the brandy glass off the screen. "We're not quite done with the movies yet," I said. "You have trouble controlling your weight? Well, let me show you some pictures."

First, an image of Welles from *The Stranger*, slender enough that you could even see his Adam's apple. "Here you are in 1946. You still look something like yourself. Now here's *Touch of Evil*, ten years later." A bloated hulk, unshaven and sweating. The photos cycled, a dismal progression of sagging jaws, puffy cheeks, a face turned from boyishly handsome to suet, a body from imposing size to an obese nightmare. I had film clips of him waddling across a room, of his jowls quivering as he orated in some bad mid-sixties European epic. Numerous clips of him seated on talk show sets, belly swelling past his knees, a cigar clutched between the fingers of his right hand, full beard failing to disguise his multiple chins.

"By the end of your life you weigh somewhere between three hundred and four hundred pounds. No one knows for sure. Here's a photo of an actress named Angie Dickinson trying to sit on your lap. But you have no lap. See how she has to hold her arm around your neck to keep from sliding off. You can't breathe, you can't move, your back is in agony, your kidneys are failing. In the 1980s you get stuck in an automobile, which must be taken apart for you to be able to get out. You spend the last years of your life

doing commercials for cheap wine that you are unable to drink because of your abysmal health."

Welles stared at the images. "Turn it off," he whispered.

He sat silently for a moment. His brow furrowed, his dark eyes became pits of self-loathing. But some slant of his eyebrows indicated that he took some satisfaction in this humiliation, as if what I had shown him was only the fulfillment of a prophecy spoken over his cradle.

"You've gone to a lot of trouble, I can see," he said quietly.

I felt I was close now. I leaned forward. "This doesn't have to happen. Our medical science will see that you never become that gross parody of yourself. We'll keep you young and handsome for the rest of your life."

Welles stirred himself. "I'm dazzled by your generosity. What's in it for you?"

"Very good. I don't deny it—we're no charitable organization. You don't realize the esteem in which your works are held in the future. A hundred years from now, *Citizen Kane* is considered the greatest movie ever made. The publicity alone of your return is worth millions. People want to see your work."

"You sound exactly like George Schaefer persuading me to come out to Hollywood after *The War of the Worlds*. I'm a genius, unlimited support, people love my work. And the knives were sharpened for me before I even stepped off the plane. Three years later Schaefer is out on the street, I'm a pariah, and his replacement won't even watch my movie with me. So, have studio executives in the future become saints?"

"Of course not, Orson. But the future has the perspective of time. RKO's cuts to *Ambersons* did nothing to protect their investment. Your instincts were better than theirs, not just artistically, but even from the point of view of making money."

"Tell it to Charles Koerner."

"I don't have to. It's considered the greatest tragedy of cinema history. In 2048, nobody's ever seen your movie. This print"—I touched the film canister—"is the only existing copy of your version. When it goes missing, and the negatives of the excised footage are destroyed, all that's left is the botched studio version."

"This is the only print?"

"The only print."

Welles ran his long-fingered hand through his hair. He heaved himself to his feet, went to the rail of the schooner, grabbed a shroud to steady himself, and looked up at the night sky. It was a dramatic gesture, as he undoubtedly knew. Without looking back at me, he said, "And your time machine? Where do you keep that?"

"I have a portable unit in my bag. We can't use it on the ship, but as soon as we are back on land—"

"—we're off to 2048!" Welles laughed. "It seems I dramatized the wrong H.G. Wells novel." He turned back to me. "Or maybe not, Mr. ...?"

"Gruber."

"Mr. Gruber. I'm afraid that you'll have to return to the future without me."

Rosethrush had spent a lot of money sending me here. She wasn't going to let me try another moment universe if this attempt failed. "Why? Everything I've told you is the simple truth."

"Which gives me a big advantage in facing the next forty years, doesn't it?"

"Don't be a fool. Your situation here is no better tomorrow than it was yesterday." One of the rules is never to get involved, but I was into it now, and I cared about whether he listened to me or not. I could say it was because of my bank balance. I gestured toward the cabins, where Koerner and his family slept. "Worse, after tonight. You're throwing away your only chance to change your fate. Do you want to mortgage your talent to people like Charles Koerner? Sell yourself for the approval of people who will never understand you?"

Welles seemed amused. "You seem a little exercised about this—Detlev, is it? Detlev, why should this mean so much to you?" He was speculating as much as asking me. "This is just your job, right? You don't really know me. But you seem to care a lot more than any job would warrant.

"What that suggests to me is that you must really like my movies—I'm flattered, of course—or you are particularly engaged with the problem of the director in the world of business. Yet you must work in the world of business every day.

"So let me make a counter-proposition: You don't take me back to the future; you stay here with me. I question whether any artist can succeed outside of his own time. I was born in 1915. How am I even going to understand 2048, let alone make art that it wants to see?"

"On the other hand, you seem quite familiar with today. You say you know all the pitfalls I'm going to face. And I'll bet you know your twentieth century history pretty well. Think of the advantage that gives you here! A few savvy investments and you'll be rich! You want to make movies—we'll do it together! You can be my partner! With your knowledge of the future we can finance our own studio!"

"I'm a talent scout, not a financier."

"A talent scout—we'll use that, too. You must know who the great actors and actresses of the next thirty years are going to be—we'll approach them before anyone else does. Sign them to exclusive contracts. In ten years we'll dominate the business!"

He paced the deck to the table, put a brandy glass in front of me, and filled it. "You know, if you hadn't told me, I would never have thought you were anything other than a servant. You're something of an actor yourself, aren't you? A manipulator of appearances. Iago pouring words into my ear? Good, we can definitely use that, too. But don't tell me, Detlev, there aren't aspects of the future you wouldn't like to escape from. Here's your chance. We can both kiss the Charles Koerners of the world goodbye, or better yet, succeed in their world and rub their faces in it!"

This was a new one. I had been resisted before, I had been told to get lost, I had faced panic and disbelief. But never had a target tried to seduce me.

The thing was, what Welles was saying made a lot of sense. Maybe if I could bring him back I would come out okay, but that didn't look like it was going to happen. Everything I had told him about himself—his lack of family connections, his troubles with the industry, his bleak prospects—applied to me in 2048. And since I had burned this moment universe by coming here, there was no way anyone from the future was going to come to retrieve me, even if they wanted to. I could make movies with Orson Welles—and eventually, I could make them without him.

I stared at the *Ambersons* film canister on the table in front of me and got hold of myself. I knew his

biography. Welles hadn't just been abandoned by others. When necessary, he had seduced and abandoned even his most trusted friends. It was always love on his terms.

"Thank you for the offer," I said. "But I must go back. Are you coming with me?"

Welles sat down in the chair beside me. He smiled. "I guess you'll have to tell your studio head, or whoever sent you, that I was more difficult than he imagined."

"You'll live to regret this."

"We shall see."

"I already know. I showed you."

Welles's face darkened. When he spoke his voice was distant. "Yes, that was pleasant. But now, it seems our business is finished."

This was not going to play well when I got back to DAA. I had one chance to salvage my reputation. "Then, if you don't mind, I'll take this." I reached across the table to get the print of *Ambersons*.

Welles surged forward from his chair, startlingly quick, and snatched the canister before I could. He stood, holding it in his arms, swaying on the unsteady deck. "No."

"Come now, Orson. Why object to our having your film? In the hundred years after that botched preview in Pomona, no one has ever seen your masterpiece. It's the Holy Grail of lost films. What possible purpose could be served by keeping it from the world?"

"Because it's mine."

"But it's no less yours if you give it to us. Didn't you make it to be admired, to touch people's hearts? Think about—"

"I'll tell you what to think," Welles said. "Think about this."

He seized the canister by its wire handles, twirled on his feet as he swung it round him like a hammer thrower, and hurled it out into the air over the side of the boat. He stumbled as he let it go, catching himself on the rail. The canister arced up into the moonlight, tumbling, and fell to the ocean with only the slightest splash, disappearing instantly.

.....

I was working at my video editor when Moira came into the apartment. She didn't bother to knock; she never did. I drained the last of my gin, paused the image of Anne Baxter that stood on my screen, and swiveled my chair around toward her.

"Jesus, Det, are you ever going to unpack?" Moira surveyed the stacks of boxes that still cluttered my living room.

I headed to the kitchen to refill my glass. "That depends—are you going to throw me out again?"

"You know I didn't want to," she said. "It was Vijay. He's always looking over my shoulder." She followed me into the kitchen. "Is that twentieth century gin? Let me have some." She examined a withered lime that had been sitting on the windowsill above the sink since before my trip to 1942, then put it back down. "Besides, you're all paid up for now."

For now. But Rosethrush had not put me back on salary. She was furious when I returned without Welles, though she seemed to enjoy humiliating me so much that I wondered if that alone was worth what it had cost her. She rode me for my failure at the same time she dismissed it as no more than might be expected. Her comments combined condescension and contempt: not only was I a loser, but I served as a stand in for the loser Welles.

According to Rosethrush, Welles's turning me down showed a fatal lack of nerve. "He's a coward," she told me. "If he came with you, he'd have to be the genius he pretended to be, with no excuses. His genius was all sleight of hand."

I didn't mention Welles's offer to me. Not arguing with her was the price I paid for avoiding another blackballing.

On the editor, I was working on a restoration of *The Magnificent Ambersons*. By throwing the only existing print overboard, Welles had made my job a lot harder—but not impossible. The negatives of the discarded footage in the RKO archives hadn't been destroyed until December, 1942, so I'd had time to steal them before I came back. Of course Rosethrush didn't want *Ambersons*; she wanted Welles. Hollywood was always about the bottom line, and despite my sales job to Welles, few beyond a bunch of critics and obsessives cared about a hundred-year-old black-and-white movie. But I was banking on the possibility that a restoration would still generate enough publicity to restart my career.

Or maybe I had other reasons. I had not edited a film since the end of my directorial ambitions, twelve years before, and working on this made me realize how much I had missed the simple pleasure of shaping a piece of art with my hands. The restored *Ambersons* was brilliant, harrowing, and sad. It told the story of the long, slow decline of a great mercantile family, destroyed by progress and bad luck and willful blindness—and by the automobile. It was the first great film to address the depredations of technological progress on personal relations in society; but it was also a human tragedy and a thwarted love story. And it centered on the life of George Minafer, a spoiled rich boy who destroyed himself while bringing misery to everyone around him.

Moira gave up and took the lime off the windowsill. "Where's a knife? You got any tonic?"

I liked Moira; the very fact that she cared nothing about movies made her refreshingly attractive. But I had work to do. I went back to the editor while she poked around the kitchen. I hit play. On the screen Anne Baxter, as Lucy Morgan, was telling her father, played by Joseph Cotten, the legend of a mythical young Indian chief, Vendonah. Vendonah meant "Rides-Down-Everything."

"Vendonah was unspeakable," Lucy said as they walked through the garden. "He was so proud he wore iron shoes and walked over people's faces. So at last the tribe decided that it wasn't a good enough excuse for him that he was young and inexperienced. He'd have to go. So they took him down to the river, put him in a canoe, and pushed him out from the shore. The current carried him on down to the ocean. And he never got back."

I had watched this scene before, but for the first time the words sent a shiver down my spine. I hit pause. I remembered the self-loathing in Welles's eyes when I had shown him the images of himself in decline, and now I saw that he had made a movie about himself—in fact, he'd made two of them. Both Kane and George Minafer were versions of Welles. Spoiled, abusive, accusing, beautiful boys, aching for their

comeuppance. Which they had gotten, all three of them, almost as if they had sought it out, directing the world and the people around them to achieve that aesthetic result. No wonder Welles abused others, pushing until they said "no"—because at some level he felt he deserved to be said "no" to. Maybe he turned down my "yes" because he needed that "no." The poor bastard.

I stared at the screen. It wasn't all sleight of hand—or if it was sleight of hand, it was brilliant sleight of hand. Welles had pulled a masterpiece out of the air the way he had pulled the key out of Barbara Koerner's ear. Yet to keep his integrity, he had thrown the last print of that masterpiece into the ocean.

Within a week I would have it back, complete, ready to give to the world, both a fulfillment of Welles's immense talent and the final betrayal of his will, sixty-three years after his death. And I would be a player again.

If I ever let anyone else see the film. If I didn't? What, then, would I do to fill my days?

Behind me, I heard Moira come back out of the kitchen, and the tinkle of ice in her glass. She was going to say something, something irrelevant, and I would have to tell her to get lost. But nothing came. Finally I turned on her, just as she spoke. "What's this?" she asked.

She was playing idly with an open box of junk. In her hands she held a trophy, a jagged lucite spike on a black base.

"That?" I said. "That's—that's the best original screenplay award from the 2037 Trieste Film Festival."

She turned it over and put it back into the box. She looked up at me and smiled.

"Anyway, Det, the reason I'm here is to ask if you want to go swimming. It's been record low UV all this week."

"Swimming."

"You know. Water? The beach? Naked women? Come with me, sweetheart, and I promise you won't get burned."

"The burn doesn't worry me," I said. "But these waters are infested with sharks."

"Really? Where'd you hear that?"

I turned off the editor and got out of my chair. "Never mind," I said. "Give me a minute and I'll find my suit."

The End

Author Biography and Bibliography

John Kessel is a professor of American literature and director of the Creative Writing program at North Carolina State University. He holds a B.A. in English and physics from the University of Rochester and an M.A. and PhD in English from the University of Kansas. His novella "Another Orphan" received the 1982 Nebula Award from the Science Fiction Writers of

America, and his short story "Buffalo" won the 1991 Theodore Sturgeon Award and the Locus Poll. His novels include *Freedom Beach*, written in collaboration with James Patrick Kelly, and *Good News from Outer Space*, a finalist for the 1989 Nebula. His story collection, *Meeting in Infinity*, was named a notable book of 1992 by the New York Times Book Review. His play *Faustfeathers* won the 1994 Paul Green Playwrights' Competition and, with sf writer Bruce Sterling, he plays a small role in the independent film *The Delicate Art of the Rifle*. His novella "Stories for Men" received the 2002 James Tiptree, Jr. Award. Writer Kim Stanley Robinson has called Kessel's most recent novel, *Corrupting Dr. Nice*, "the best time-travel novel ever written," and *Sci-Fi Weekly* has called him "quite possibly the best short-story writer working in science fiction today."

His criticism has appeared in *The Los Angeles Times Book Review*, *Science Fiction Age*, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, and other publications. With Mark L. Van Name and Richard Butner, he has run the Sycamore Hill Writers' Conference, which produced the anthology *Intersections*. He lives with his wife and daughter in Raleigh, North Carolina.

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