

THE SWITCHEROO

By Fredric Brown & Mack Reynolds

The switcheroo did a wonderful thing—it sent you into the body you were thinking of at the time. Yeah, we know who you're thinking of!

McGEE barely glanced at the story I'd just put before him on his desk before he roared and tore it across twice and threw it into his wastebasket. "Who told you you were a reporter, Price?" he howled. "The *Globe* doesn't print tripe like that and you know it."

McGee is the toughest city editor I've ever encountered and the worst of it is that his bite is worse than his bark. I was teetering on the ragged edge of my job, and it was a job I needed. I'd been fired from both of the other papers in Springfield and if McGee fired me, too, I'd have to go out of town for a job. And there were reasons why I couldn't do that.

So, much as I hated McGee's guts, I bottled my wrath and said mildly, "I thought it had human interest. Okay, sorry if it missed the boat. Got any other assignment?"

He looked at his calendar pad and growled, "Go see Tarkington Perkins. Maybe he's ripe."

I said, "I'm afraid I don't remember—"

"You wouldn't even remember your own name, you nitwit. He's the nut inventor we ran a squib on four months ago. He was working on a cheap substitute for water. I made a note for a follow-up to see how he did on it, or what he's doing now. Get a story."

"Sure," I said, and backed out. You don't argue with McGee.

I got Tarkington Perkins' address out of the morgue and took the streetcar there, thinking happily all through the long ride of a thousand unpleasant things that might happen to McGee. Of late that had been almost my only happy line of thought. Unfortunately, none of the things I thought of ever happened.

I rang the bell of the house whose address I'd obtained from the morgue files. The door opened and I stepped back. The female who opened the door was the most repellent specimen I'd ever seen. She

weighed at least two-fifty and looked like a battleship of an unfriendly foreign power spoiling for a fight. She looked tougher than McGee, and she glowered at me in the same way he does.

I tried not to retreat any farther. I asked, "Is this the home of Tarkington Perkins?"

"What do you want with him?"

I said hastily, "I'm from the *Globe*. I'd like to discuss his latest invention with him. Uh—if I may."

She looked at me as though I'd said I'd come to infest the house with bedbugs, but she stepped aside and let me in. "That worm is down in the basement," she said, as nastily as though it was my fault.

She stuck her hideous head through a doorway and screamed, "Tark! There's some fool wants to see you."

She turned back and snarled at me, "Other men are plumbers or bank robbers or something. I had to marry an *inventor*." And from the way she glared at me, I got the idea that that was almost as bad as being a newspaperman.

I edged around her, shuddering as soon as I was out of her sight, and made my way down the cellar steps.

The little man bending over the bench looked like a man who'd been married for a long time to the woman I'd just escaped from. He didn't look up as I came toward him. "Got a dime?" he asked me plaintively.

"Huh?" I said.

"Or a quarter. I need a piece of silver."

I felt in my pocket and found a dime. He took it without even looking at me, but I looked at him. Tarkington Perkins, if he'd had an overcoat on and a suitcase in his hand, might have weighed half as much as his wife. He had a face that looked as though it had been used, figuratively if not literally, as a doormat. He turned his head and blinked tired, owlsh eyes at me.

"Hello," he said. "Uh—I hope you'll forgive—" He didn't dare go any farther, and I knew he was referring to the Sherman Tank upstairs. Somehow, my heart went out to him. I wanted to tell him that I had a city editor almost—not quite—as bad, but it didn't seem the right thing to say.

So I just smiled at him and said, "Not at all," whatever I meant by that. "I'm Jake Price from the *Globe*. My editor says you're working on something that might have a story in it. A—a substitute for water, I believe."

"Oh, that. I quit working on that two months ago. I got a substitute all right, but I'm afraid it wasn't cheaper. I've spent most of my time since then working on cilohocla beverages."

"I'm sorry," I said. "Would you mind repeating—?"

"Cilohocla," he repeated. "That's *alcoholic* spelled backward. The effect is the other way around."

"You mean—" I said, not even

guessing what he *could* mean.

"Works the other way. I mean, you get the hangover first and the next morning you feel wonderful. As high as a—a—"

"A kite?"

"Thank you. Would you care for a drink?"

My mind must have missed a boat somewhere. I *did* want a drink and I failed to tie in that idea with what we'd just been talking about, if anything. So I said yes and he brought out a bottle of something and a glass and told me to help myself. I remembered, then, and sniffed it before tasting, but it was whisky, merely whisky. I took a good drink.

HE said, "But that was until a few days ago. Now I'm working on something new and I'd almost finished it when you came. In fact, that bit of silver *did* finish it. It's a switcheroo."

I said, "That's nice. Uh—aren't you drinking?"

He frowned. "I'd like to, but—" Involuntarily his eyes looked at the ceiling. Words could not have been more explanatory than the look in his eyes. "But you go ahead, drink all you want. And thanks for the dime. I'll pay you back someday."

"Never mind, Mr. Perkins," I said generously. After all, that first slug of whisky I'd poured myself had been at least fifty cents worth, and I now poured myself another. "You said you had just finished

a—"

"A switcheroo. That's just my pet name for it, of course. Actually it is a psychoreversamentatron."

"Oh," I said. "This is really fine whisky, Mr. Perkins. You really don't mind if I—"

"Not at all. Drink all of it you wish. Please."

"What does it do?"

"I told you. You get the hangover first and then, tomorrow morning, you feel happily intoxicated."

"I mean the psychore — the switcheroo."

"It switches minds, of course."

I looked at him, and then I poured myself another drink of his wonderful whisky and decided I might as well string along while the bottle lasted. Funny, though, I didn't feel the effect of it at all, although that drink was my fourth, and they'd all been stiff ones. At that price I always pour myself stiff ones.

His face was working with excitement and with eagerness for me to ask him to go on. I asked him to go on, and poured myself a fifth drink. A stiff one.

"It switches minds from one brain to another. You press this little switch while you concentrate on any given person, and your mind is translated into his body. And vice versa."

"Vice versa?" I asked.

"Vice versa," he said.

I looked down, for the first time, at the object lying on the bench

before us. It wasn't big. It seemed to be made up of a flashlight, an alarm clock and some parts from an Erector set. My dime was soldered as the final connection between the flashlight and the alarm clock, just abaft the switch to which he was pointing.

I said, "You mean you can trade brains with someone just by training that gadget on him?"

He shook his head violently in protest. "Not brains, minds. Your mind takes over his brain. And vice versa. And you don't have to train it on him, just point the flashlight into your own face and pull the switch. But you have to be concentrating on whoever you want to change with. Like if I wanted to be governor, I'd just think about the governor, and I'd be in his body in his mansion and he'd be *me*. I mean, he'd have to come here and live with Martha." His eyes were wistful at the thought.

He added plaintively, "If it works. Distance shouldn't matter, but I think the first time I'll try to be near him. Just in case."

"Near who?" I asked. "I mean, near whom?"

"The governor."

I thought of Betty Grable. "You be governor," I said. "I'll be Harry James."

I poured myself another drink. Strangely, the stuff wasn't making me drunk at all. I was beginning to get a bit jittery and the air in the basement must not have been

good for I was acquiring a slight headache.

It wasn't helped when a loud bellow rolled suddenly down the basement steps. "You, Tark! Time to do the washing. Get that no-good reporter out of there and get to work."

He smiled at me apologetically and said, "I'm sorry, but—well, you see how it is."

"Sure," I said. I helped myself to one more generous drink of his whisky—almost emptying the bottle this time—to see if another shot would help my headache and the generally jittery way I felt. Then I ran the gantlet of the bug-eyed monster upstairs and beat my way back to the street.

I went back to the paper and into McGee's office.

He glowered at me, but it wasn't as bad this time. Tarkington Perkins' wife had been worse. He said, "My God, you look like the morning after. You were sober when you left here. Weren't you?"

I put my hands in my pockets so McGee wouldn't see how badly they were shaking, and I tried to blink the blariness out of my eyes and keep him from guessing about the little men who were working at the rivets in the back of my neck.

I said, "I was sober. I am sober. But tomorrow morning—"

"Forget tomorrow morning. What's this nut inventor working on?"

I thought about the switcheroo

and decided it wouldn't be safe to mention it. I told him about the cilhocla beverage that had tasted exactly like whisky. Suddenly I found that I *believed* in it and that I was still cold sober.

His roar almost blew me out of the office.

"Price," he said, when he'd calmed down enough to be understandable, "this is your last chance. That is, tomorrow's your last chance. It's almost five now. Go home and sleep it off and come in sober tomorrow or never come in again."

I came in the next morning as high as a kite. I felt wonderful, better than I'd ever felt before as far as I could remember. I was happily fuzzy and fuzzily happy, but it wasn't exactly the same kind of inebriation I was accustomed to. If I made an effort I could disguise it and act sober. When I got called into McGee's office for my assignment I disguised it and acted sober.

He glowered at me. "This Tarkington Perkins," he said. "Why didn't you recognize he was insane?"

I thought that over, and before I got anywhere with it, McGee roared at me. "Missed the story again, you halfwit. He's in the nuthouse right now—got taken there last night, only a few hours after you *interviewed* him."

He put a nasty inflection on the word *interviewed*.

I said something, I don't know what. In spite of my general state

of happiness I felt sorry that that had happened to Perkins. I'd felt sorry for the little guy and I'd liked him.

He said, "It happened last night and the morning paper beat us to it anyway, but go around and get some more on it. We got to run a story on it anyway."

"What happened?" I asked.

"They picked him up yesterday evening on the lawn of the governor's mansion, yelling that he was the governor and that somebody had stolen his body."

I closed my eyes.

WHEN I opened them I was safely outside McGee's office. First I sat down at my desk and called the morning paper. I found out who'd covered the Perkins pickup and it was a friend of mine so I got him on the phone and got the story; it was just about as McGee had told it. I asked, "What's happened to the governor?"

"Huh?" he said, "What's that got to do with it? He left for Washington early this morning to keep an appointment he had with the president."

"Oh," I said.

I didn't go to the nuthouse to interview Perkins or the people who had taken him there or were working with him.

I went to the governor's mansion and flashed my press card on the guard and got him to show me just where Tarkington Perkins had been

found and apprehended. I started making circles around the bushes and I found what I was looking for. It was a gadget made up of a flashlight and an alarm clock and some parts from an Erector set.

I looked at it and wondered whether I was crazy or whether Tarkington Perkins was crazy or whether that *gadget* was crazy.

I looked into the lens of the flashlight and it looked like any other flashlight.

I was a bit drunk, remember. Otherwise, while I was thinking about Tarkington Perkins, in the governor's body, going to interview the president, and wondering whether the president was going to guess something was wrong — in other words, while I was thinking about the president—I would not have inadvertently moved the gadget's switch.

The light blinded me; it was brighter than any flashlight should have flashed, unless it had an atomic battery. It blinded me and I was listening to music. Music that was poignant, ethereal. It moved me deeply, although generally it's not that kind of music that I go for. I prefer Harry James. And maybe, at that moment, I should have been thinking about Harry James instead of the president. But I hadn't been.

And the music moved me all right. It moved me several hundred miles in nothing flat.

I opened my eyes and there I

was sitting in an oval room. A familiar room. I'd seen it once before when I'd been in Washington. It had been empty then; the president had been out of town and they'd just let me look around the White House as a visiting newspaperman.

But the president wasn't out of town now. Not much, I wasn't.

THE president's secretary was bowing to me. He said, "Mr. President, the governor with whom you have the appointment is here to speak to you. But—ah—I'm wondering if you should see him. He seems to be acting a bit strangely."

"Aren't we all?" I asked him.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. President?"

"Not at all," I said. "Just send Governor Andressen in, please. And cancel *all* my other appointments for today."

"But, Mr. President, the envoy from Baluchistan—"

I told him what to tell the envoy from Baluchistan and he left, looking somewhat shocked. But he was back, a moment later, with Governor Andressen.

I waved the governor to a seat across from my desk and waited until the secretary had left. Then I pointed a finger at him.

"Tarkington Perkins," I said, "you can't get away with it."

I never saw a man wilt more suddenly. I felt sorry for him, all over again.

I said, "Never mind, Tark. I won't get you in trouble. I'll straighten everything out."

"But Mr. President, how could you have possibly have known—?"

"The F. B. I.," I said, "sees all, knows all, and reports to me. I feel sorry for you, Tark, but it won't wash. Something like this can get too many people into too much trouble. It could start wars, and it could even lose elections. You understand that, don't you?"

He almost whimpered his affirmative.

I picked up the telephone. To whoever it was who answered it, I said, "Charter a plane for me at once for a trip to Springfield. Two passengers."

"Yes, Mr. President. But—ah—your private plane. Won't it serve satisfactorily?"

"Don't bother me with details," I said. "Any plane will do. Just so a helicopter picks us up on the White House lawn to take us to the airport. Do you know the address of the White House?"

"Why—of course, Mr. President."

"Then get that helicopter helicoptering," I ordered brusquely.

I slammed down the phone and picked it up again. I said, "Get me Chief of Police Crandall at Springfield. Fast. Make it a person to person call."

I held onto the phone and had Chief Crandall in three minutes. He's a guy I hate, because he hates reporters.

I said, "Mr. Crandall, this is the President of the United States, calling from the White House." I put it all in capitals, just like that.

He sounded suitably awed.

I said, "Mr. Crandall, there have been complaints that you have been unjust to the public press, that you have failed to cooperate with the local papers — even on matters where cooperation would not have been against policy. Public policy, I mean."

He sounded as though he was going to cry.

I said, "Mr. Crandall, it happens I have a very important and very secret matter I wish to take care of in Springfield. I—and Governor Andressen will be with me—am flying there immediately; we'll be there in a few hours. And if you can take care—satisfactorily and secretly—of certain matters before our arrival, I'll overlook the matters I have mentioned and back you in the coming campaign."

"Certainly, Mr. President. *Anything.*"

"First," I said. "Make a search of the lawn of the governor's mansion. In or near the edge of a flowerbed on the north side of the grounds you will find a gadget which looks like a combination of a flashlight and an alarm clock — with trimmings, including a switch. Find that and hold it for me until I arrive. Under no circumstances try to operate it or throw the switch. Understand?"

"Certainly, Mr. President."

"Second, I want you to have two men waiting to see Governor Andressen and myself. One is named Tarkington Perkins. He is now in the insane asylum. He was picked up and sent there last night. The other is named Jake Price, a reporter for the *Globe*. He, too, may be found suffering from paranoia. It is quite probable that he has already been apprehended, for claiming that he is someone he isn't. I laughed. "Possibly the President of the United States."

"We have him here now, Mr. President. We were about to send him to—"

"Don't," I said. "Treat him kindly. Have him and Mr. Perkins placed in a suite at the Carleton Hotel and held until our arrival. Treat them with every courtesy — just so they don't escape. And have the swi—the gadget I mentioned brought there, too."

JUST four hours later, the President of the United States, the governor of our state, Tarkington Perkins and myself were alone in the presidential suite of the Carleton Hotel. And in my hand was the gadget, the switcheroo.

I explained, and I made a suggestion. It was accepted, and complete amnesty with it. The four of us left. The president to return to Washington, and the governor with him to carry out their original subject of discussion, whatever that had

been. Tarkington Perkins to his home—and to whatever explanation he could make to the Sherman Tank.

Jake Price—that's me, and recognizable again—to the office of the *Globe*. I took the gadget with me, I put it on McGee's desk.

McGee looked at it and at me. His face was turning slightly pink around the jaws. He said, "What's this?" He looked at it and then at me. He roared, "Where've you been for *seven hours* on a simple assignment like that?"

I said, "Listen, McGee—"

"I *won't* listen. You're fired. Get out of here! From my sight."

I was sober by then; I was over the only drunk of my life that would not have a hangover to follow. I was sober and I had an idea, a wonderful idea.

A soft answer turneth away rats, and McGee was the rattiest rat I'd ever known. So I answered him softly. I said, "All right, Mr. McGee. I'll leave. Would you mind if I used your phone for one short call first? I want to be sure of something."

"Okay," he growled at me.

I looked up Tarkington Perkins' number and called it. The Medusa answered. I asked for Tark and she said, "You can't talk to him. *I'm* talking to him. *I'm* telling him—"

That was what I wanted to know and I put the receiver back on the phone. I picked up the gadget and

pointed the flashlight at McGee's face. I said, "McGee, who did you send me to find out about?"

"Huh? You crazy? *Tarkington Per—*"

I pushed the switch. Once. Then I smashed the gadget, for keeps.

I explained to Tarkington Perkins, in McGee's body. And then

he and I went out together to hang on the drunk of our lives.

I'd have loved to have gone out and seen what happened between McGee and Mrs. Tarkington Perkins, but maybe someday I'll see an atomic war, whether I want to or not, and I can wait till then..

THE END