

The Pink Caterpillar
Anthony Boucher
From “The Compleat Boucher”

“And their medicine men can do time travel, too,” Norm Harker said. “At least, that’s the firm belief everywhere on the island: a *tualala* can go forward in time and bring you back any single item you specify, for a price. We used to spend the night watches speculating on what would be the one best thing to order.”

Norman hadn’t told us the name of the island. The stripe and a half on his sleeve lent him discretion, and Tokyo hadn’t learned yet what secret installations the Navy had been busy with on that minute portion of the South Pacific. He couldn’t talk about the installations, of course; but the island had provided him with plenty of other matters to keep us entertained, sitting up there in the Top of the Mark.

“What would you order, Tony,” he asked, “with a *carte blanche* like that on the future?”

“How far future?”

“They say a *tualala* goes to one hundred years from date: no more, no less.”

“Money wouldn’t work,” I mused. “Jewels maybe. Or a gadget—any gad-get—and you could invent it as of now and make a fortune. But then it might depend on principles not yet worked out...Or the *Gone with the Wind* of the twenty-first century—but publish it now and it might lay an egg. Can you imagine today’s best sellers trying to compete with Dickens? No...it’s a tricky question. What did you try?”

“We finally settled on Hitler’s tombstone. Think of the admission tickets we could sell to see that!”

“And—?”

“And nothing. We couldn’t pay the *tualala*’s price. For each article fetched through time he wanted one virgin from the neighboring island. We felt the staff somehow might not understand if we went collecting them. There’s always a catch to magic,” Norman concluded lightly.

Fergus said “Uh-huh” and nodded gravely. He hadn’t been saying much all evening—just sitting there and looking out over the panorama of the bay by night, a glistening joy now that the dimout was over, and listening. I still don’t know the sort of work he’s been doing, but it’s changing him, toning him down.

But even a toned-down Irishman can stand only so much silence, and there was obviously a story on his lips. Norm asked, “You’ve been running into magic too?”

“Not lately.” He held his glass up to the light and watched his drink. “Damned if I know why writers call a highball an amber liquid,” he observed. “Start a cliché and it sticks...Like about detectives being hardheaded realists. Didn’t you ever stop to think that there’s hardly another profession outside the clergy that’s so apt to run up against the things beyond realism? Why do you call in a detective? Because something screwy’s going on and you need an explanation. And if there isn’t an explanation...”

“This was back a ways. Back when I didn’t have anything worse to deal with than murderers and, once, a werewolf. But he was a hell of a swell guy. The mur-derers I used to think were pretty thorough low-lifes, but now...Anyway, this was back then. I was down in Mexico putting the finishing touches on that wacky business of the Aztec Calendar when I heard from Dan Rafetti. I think you know him, Tony; he’s an investigator for Southwest National Life Insurance, and he’s thrown some business my way now and then, like the Solid Key case.

“This one sounded interesting. Nothing spectacular, you understand, and prob-ably no money to speak of. But the kind of crazy unexplained little detail that stirs up the O’Breen curiosity. Very simple: Southwest gets a claim from a beneficiary. One of their customers died down in Mexico and his sister wants the cash. They send to the Mexican authorities for a report on his death and it was heart failure and that’s that. Only the policy is made out to Mr. Frank Miller and the Mexican report refers to him as *Dr. F. Miller*. They ask the sister and she’s certain he hasn’t any right to such a title. So I happen to be right near Tlichotl, where he died, and would I please kind of nose around and see was there anything phony, like maybe an imposture. Photographs and fingerprints, from a Civil Service application he once made, enclosed.”

“Nice businesslike beginning,” Norman said.

Fergus nodded. “That’s the way it started: all very routine, yours-of-the-27th-ult. Prosaic, like. And Tlichotl was prosaic enough too. Maybe to a tourist it’d be picturesque, but I’d been kicking around these Mexican mountain towns long enough so one seemed as commonplace as another. Sort of a montage of flat houses and white trousers and dogs and children and an old church and an al-most-as-old pulqueria and one guy who plays a hell of a guitar on Saturday nights.

“Tlichotl wasn’t much different. There was a mine near it, and just out of town was a bunch of drab new frame houses for the American engineers. Everybody in town worked in the mine—all pure Indians, with those

chaste profiles straight off of the Aztec murals that begin to seem like the only right and normal human face when you've seen 'em long enough.

"I went to the doctor first. He was the government sanitation agent and health instructor, and the town looked like he was doing a good job. His English was better than my Spanish, and he was glad I liked tequila. Yes, he remembered Dr. Miller. He checked up his records and announced that Dr. M. died on November 2. It was January when I talked to him. Simple death: heart failure. He'd had several attacks in past weeks, and the doctor had expected him to go any day. All of a sudden a friend he hadn't seen in years showed up in town unannounced, and the shock did it. Any little thing might have.

"The doctor wasn't a stupid man, or a careless one. I was willing to take his word that the death had been natural. And maybe I ought to put in here, before your devious minds start getting ahead of me, that as far as I ever learned he was absolutely right. Common-or-garden heart failure, and that didn't fit into any picture of insurance fraud. But there was still the inconsistency of the title, and I went on, 'Must've been kind of nice for you to have a colleague here to talk with?'

"The doctor frowned a little at that. It seemed he'd been sort of hurt by Dr. Miller's attitude. Had tried to interest him in some researches he was doing with an endemic variant of undulant fever, which he'd practically succeeded in wiping out. But the North American 'doctor' just didn't give a damn. No fraternal spirit; no scientific curiosity; nothing.

"I gathered they hadn't been very friendly, my doctor and 'Dr.' Miller. In fact, Miller hadn't been intimate with anybody, not even the other North Americans at the mine. He liked the Indians and they liked him, though they were a little scared of him on account of the skeleton—apparently an anatomical specimen and the first thing I'd heard of to go with his assumed doctorate. He had a good short-wave radio, and he listened to music on that and sketched a little and read and went for short hikes. It sounded like a good life, if you like a lonely one. They might know a little more about him at the pulqueria; he stopped there for a drink sometimes. And the widow Sanchez had kept house for him; she might know something.

"I tried the widow first. She wore a shapeless black dress that looked as though she'd started mourning Mr. Sanchez ten years before, but her youngest child wasn't quite walking yet. She'd liked her late employer, might he rest in peace. He had been a good man, and so little trouble. No, he never gave medicine to anybody; that was the job of the señor medico from Mexico City. No, he never did anything with bottles. No, he never received much mail and surely not with money in it, for she had often seen him open his few letters. But yes, indeed he was a medico; did he not have the bones, the *esqueleto*, to prove it?

"And if the señor interested himself so much for el doctor Miller, perhaps the señor would care to see his house? It was untouched, as he'd left it. No one lived there now. No, it was not haunted—at least, not that anyone knew, though no man knows such things. It was only that no one new ever comes to live in Tlichotl, and an empty house stays empty.

"I looked the house over. It had two rooms and a kitchen and a tiny patio. 'Dr.' Miller's things were undisturbed; no one had claimed them and it was up to time and heat and insects to take care of them. There was the radio and beside it the sketching materials. One wall was a bookcase, well filled, mostly with sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature in English and Spanish. The books had been faithfully read. There were a few recent volumes, mostly on travel or on Mexican Indian culture, and a few magazines. No medical books or periodicals.

"Food, cooking utensils, clothing, a pile of sketches (good enough so you'd feel all right when you'd done them and bad enough so you wouldn't feel urged to exhibit them), pipes and tobacco—these just about made up the inventory. No papers to speak of, just a few personal letters, mostly from his sister (and beneficiary). No instruments or medicines of any kind. Nothing whatsoever out of the way—not even the skeleton.

"I'd heard about that twice, so I asked what had become of it. The sons of the mining engineers, the young demons, had stolen it to celebrate a gringo holiday, which I gathered had been Halloween. They had built an enormous bonfire, and the skeleton had fallen in and been consumed. The doctor Miller had been very angry; he had suffered one of his attacks then, almost as bad as the one that gave him death, may the Lord hold him in His kindness. But now it was time for a mother to return and feed her brood; and her house was mine, and would the señor join in her poor supper?

"The beans were good and the tortillas wonderful; and the youngest children hadn't ever seen red hair before and had some pointed questions to ask me about mine. And in the middle of the meal something suddenly went *click* in my brain and I knew why Frank Miller had called himself 'doctor.'"

Fergus paused and beckoned to a waiter.

Norman said, "Is that all?"

"For the moment. I'm giving you boys a chance to scintillate. There you have all the factors up to that point. All right: Why was Miller calling himself 'doc-tor'?"

"He wasn't practicing," Norman said slowly. "And he wasn't even running a fake medical racket by mail, as

people have done from Mexico to avoid the U.S. Post Office Department.”

“And,” I added, “he hadn’t assumed the tide to impress people, to attain so-cial standing, because he had nothing to do with his neighbors. And he wasn’t carrying on any experiments or research which he might have needed the title in writing up. So he gained nothing in cash or prestige. All right, what other reason is there for posing as a doctor?”

“Answer,” said Fergus leisurely: “he wasn’t posing as a doctor. Look; you might pose as a doctor with no props at all, thinking no one would come in your house but the housekeeper. Or you might stage an elaborate front complete with instrument cabinets and five-pound books. But you wouldn’t try it with just one prop, an anatomical skeleton.”

Norman and I looked at each other and nodded. It made sense. “Well then?” I asked.

The fresh drinks came, and Fergus said, “My round. Well then, the skeleton was not a prop for the medical pose. Quite the reverse. Turn it around and it makes sense. He called himself a doctor *to account for the skeleton.*”

I choked on my first sip, and Norman spluttered a little, too. Fergus went on eagerly, with that keen light in his green eyes, “You can’t hide a skeleton in a tiny house. The housekeeper’s bound to see it, and word gets around. Miller liked the Indians and he liked peace. He had to account for the skeleton. So he became a ‘doctor.’”

“But that—” Norman objected. “That’s no answer. That’s just another ques-tion.”

“I know,” said Fergus. “But that’s the first step in detection: to find the right question. And that’s it: *Why does a man live with a skeleton?*”

We were silent for a bit. The Top of the Mark was full of glasses and smoke and uniforms; and despite the uniforms it seemed a room set aside that was not a part of a world at war—still less of a world in which a man might live with a skeleton.

“Of course you checked the obvious answer,” I said at last.

Fergus nodded. “He couldn’t very well have been a black magician, if that’s what you mean, or white either. Not a book or a note in the whole place dealing with the subject. No wax, chalk, incense or what-have-you. The skeleton doesn’t fit any more into a magical pattern than into a medical.”

“The Dead Beloved?” Norman suggested, hesitantly uttering the phrase in mocking capitals. “Rose-for-Emily stuff? A bit grisly, but not inconceivable.”

“The Mexican doctor saw the skeleton. It was a man’s, and not a young one.”

“Then he was planning an insurance fraud—burn the house down and let the bones be found while he vanished.”

“A, you don’t burn adobe. B, you don’t let the skeleton be seen by the doctor who’ll examine it later. C, it was that of a much shorter man than Miller.”

“A writer?” I ventured wildly. “I’ve sometimes thought myself a skeleton might be useful in the study—check where to inflict skull wounds and such.”

“With no typewriter, no manuscripts, and very little mail?”

Norman’s face lit up. “You said he sketched. Maybe he was working on a modern *Totentanz*—Dance of Death allegory. Holbein and Durer must have had a skeleton or two around.”

“I saw his sketches. Landscapes only.”

I lit my pipe and settled back. “All right. We’ve stogged and we don’t know. Now tell us why a man keeps house with a set of bones.” My tone was lighter than necessary.

Fergus said, “I won’t go into all the details of my investigation. I saw damned near every adult in Tlichotl and most of the kids. And I pieced out what I think is the answer. But I think you can gather it from the evidence of four people.

“First, Jim Reilly, mining engineer. Witness deposeth and saith he was on the main street, if you can call it that, of Tlichotl on November 2. He saw a stranger, ‘swarthy but not a Mex,’ walk up to Miller and say, ‘Frank!’ Miller looked up and was astonished. The stranger said, ‘Sorry for the delay. But it took me a little time to get here.’ And he hadn’t finished the sentence before Miller dropped dead. Queried about the stranger, witness says he gave his name as Humbert Targ; he stayed around town for a few days for the funeral and then left. Said he’d known Miller a long time ago—never quite clear where, but seemingly in the South Seas, as we used to say before we learned to call it the South Pacific. Asked for descrip-tion, witness proved pretty useless: medium height, medium age, dark complex-ion...Only helpful details: stranger wore old clothes (‘Shabby?’ ‘No, just old.’ ‘Out-of-date?’ ‘I guess so.’ ‘How long ago? What kind?’ ‘I don’t know. Just old—funny-looking’) and had only one foot (‘One leg?’ ‘No, two legs, just one foot.’ ‘Wooden peg?’ ‘No, just empty trouser cuff. Walked with crutches’).

“Second witness, Father Gonzaga, and it’s a funny sensation to be talking to a priest who wears just a plain business suit. He hadn’t known ‘Dr.’ Miller well, though he’d said a mass for his soul. But one night Miller had come from the pulqueria and insisted on talking to him. He wanted to know how you could ever get right with God and yourself if you’d done someone a great wrong and there was no conceivable way you could make it up to him.

The padre asked why, was the injured person dead? Miller hesitated and didn't answer. He's alive, then? Oh no, no! Restitution could surely be made to the next of kin if it were a money matter? No, it was...personal. Father's advice was to pray for the injured party's soul and for grace to avoid such temptation another time. I don't much see what else he could have suggested, but Miller wasn't satisfied."

I wasn't hearing the noise around us any more. Norman was leaning forward too, and I saw in his eyes that he too was beginning to feel the essential wrongness of the case the detective had stumbled on.

"Third witness, the widow Sanchez. She told me about the skeleton when I came back for more beans and brought a bottle of red wine to go with them—which it did, magnificently. 'Dr.' Miller had treasured his skeleton very highly. She was supposed not even to dust it. But once she forgot, and a finger came off. This was in October. She thought he might not notice a missing finger, where she knew she'd catch it if he found a loose one, so she burned the bones in the charcoal brazier over which she fried her tortillas. Two days later she was serving the doctor his dinner when she saw a pink caterpillar crawling near his place. She'd never seen a pink caterpillar before. She flicked it away with a napkin; but not before the 'doctor' saw it. He jumped up from the table and ran to look at the skeleton and gave her a terrific bawling out. After that she saw the caterpillar several times. It was about then that Miller started having those heart attacks. Whenever she saw the caterpillar it was crawling around the 'doctor.' I looked at her a long time while she finished the wine, and then I said, Was it a caterpillar?' She crossed herself and said 'No.' She said it very softly, and that was all she said that night."

I looked down at the table. My hand lay there, and the index finger was tap-ping gently. We seemed to be sitting in quite a draft, and I shuddered.

"Fourth witness, Timmy Reilly, twelve-year-old son to Jim. He thought it was a great lark that they'd stolen the old boy's bones for Halloween. Fun and games. These dopes down here didn't know from nothin' about Halloween, but him and the gang, they sure showed 'em. But I could see he was holding something back. I made a swap. He could wear my detective badge (which I've never worn yet) for a whole day if he'd tell me what else he knew. So he showed it to me: the foot that he'd rescued when the skeleton was burned up. He'd tried to grab the bones as they toppled over and all he could reach was the heel. He had the whole foot, well articulated and lousy with tarsals and stuff. So I made a better deal: he could have the badge for keeps (with the number scratched out a little) if he'd let me burn the foot. He let me."

Fergus paused, and it all began to click into place. The pattern was clear, and it was a pattern that should not be.

"You've got it now?" Fergus asked quietly. "All I needed to make it perfect was Norm's story. There had to be such a thing as *tualala*, with such powers as theirs. I'd deduced them, but it's satisfying to have them confirmed.

"Miller had had an enemy, many years before, a man who had sworn to kill him. And Miller had known a *tualala*, back there in the South Seas. And when he'd asked himself what would be the best single item to bring back from the future, he knew the answer: *his enemy's skeleton*.

It wasn't murder. He probably had scruples about that. He sounded like a good enough guy in a way, and maybe his *tualala* asked a more possible price. The skeleton was the skeleton that would exist a hundred years from now, no matter how or when the enemy had died. But bring that skeleton back here and the enemy can no longer exist. His skeleton can't be two places at once. You've got the dry dead bones. What becomes of the live ones with flesh on them? You don't know. You don't care. You're safe. You're free to lead the peaceful life you want with Indians and mountain scenery and your scratch pad and your radio. And your skeleton.

"You've got to be careful of that skeleton. If it ceases to exist in time, the full-fleshed living skeleton might return. You mustn't even take a chance on the de-struction of a little piece. You lose a finger, and a finger returns—a pink thing that crawls, and always toward you.

"Then the skeleton itself is destroyed. You're in mortal terror, but nothing happens. Two days go by and it's November 2. You know what the Second of November is in Latin America? It's All Souls' Day in the Church, and they call it the *Día de los difuntos*—the Day of the Dead. But it isn't a sad day outside of church. You go to the cemetery and it's a picnic. There are skeletons everywhere, same like Halloween—bright, funny skeletons that never hurt anybody. And there are skulls to wear and skulls to drink out of and bright white sugar skulls with pink and green trimmings to eat. All along every street are vendors with skulls and skeletons for every purpose, and every kid you see has a sugar skull to suck. Then at night you go to the theater to see *Don Juan Tenorio* where the graves open and the skeletons dance, while back home the kids are howling themselves to sleep because death is so indigestible.

"Of course, there's no theater in Tlitchotl, but you can bet there'd be skulls and skeletons—some of them dressed up like Indian gods for the Christian feast, some of them dancing on wires, some of them vanishing down small gullets. And there you are in the midst of skeletons, skeletons everywhere, and your skeleton is gone and all your safety with it. And there on the street with all the skulls staring at you, you see him and he isn't a skull any more. He's Humbert Targ and he's ex-plaining that it took him a little time to get here.

"Wouldn't *you* drop dead?" Fergus concluded simply.

My throat felt dry as I asked, "What did you tell the insurance company?"

"Much like Norm's theory. Man was an artist, had an anatomical model, gave out he was a doctor to keep the natives from connoption fits. Collected expenses, but no bonus: the prints they sent me fitted what I found in his home, and they had to pay the sister."

Norman cleared his throat. "I'm beginning to hope they don't send me back to the island."

"Afraid you might get too tempted by a *tualala*?"

"No. But on the island we really do have pink caterpillars. I'm not sure I could face them."

"There's one thing I still wonder," Fergus said reflectively. "Where was Humbert Targ while his skeleton hung at Miller's side? Or should I say, *when* was he? He said, 'It took a little time to get here.' From where? From when? And what kind of time?"

There are some questions you don't even try to answer.