

# SOMETHING FOR NOTHING

by

**Robert Sheckley**

But had he heard a voice? He couldn't be sure. Reconstructing it a moment later, Joe Collins knew he had been lying on his bed, too tired even to take his waterlogged shoes off the blanket. He had been staring at the network of cracks in the muddy yellow ceiling, watching water drip slowly and mournfully through.

It must have happened then. Collins caught a glimpse of metal beside his bed. He sat up. There was a machine on the floor, where no machine had been.

In that first moment of surprise, Collins thought he heard a very distant voice say, "There! *That* does it!"

He couldn't be sure of the voice. But the machine was undeniably there.

Collins knelt to examine it. The machine was about three feet square and it was humming softly. The crackle-grey surface was featureless, except for a red button in one corner and a brass plate in the centre. The plate said, CLASS-A UTILIZER, SERIES AA-1256432. And underneath, WARNING! THIS MACHINE SHOULD BE USED ONLY BY CLASS-A RATINGS!

That was all.

There were no knobs, dials, switches or any of the other attachments Collins associated with machines. Just the brass plate, the red button and the hum.

"Where did you come from?" Collins asked. The Class-A Utilizer continued to hum. He hadn't really expected an answer. Sitting on the edge of his bed, he stared thoughtfully at the Utilizer. The question now was – what to do with it?

He touched the red button warily, aware of his lack of experience with machines that fell from nowhere. When he turned it on, would the floor open up? Would little green men drop from the ceiling?

But he had slightly less than nothing to lose. He pressed the button lightly.

Nothing happened.

"All right – *do* something," Collins said, feeling definitely let down. The Utilizer only continued to hum softly.

Well, he could always pawn it. Honest Charlie would give him at least a dollar for the metal. He tried to lift the Utilizer. It wouldn't lift. He tried again, exerting all his strength, and succeeded in raising one corner an inch from the floor. He released it and sat down on the bed, breathing heavily.

"You should have sent a couple of men to help me," Collins told the Utilizer. Immediately, the hum grew louder and the machine started to vibrate.

Collins watched, but still nothing happened. On a hunch, he reached out and stabbed the red button.

Immediately, two bulky men appeared, dressed in rough work-clothes. They looked at the Utilizer appraisingly. One of them said, "Thank God, it's the small model. The big ones is brutes to get a grip on."

The other man said, "It beats the marble quarry, don't it?"

They looked at Collins, who stared back. Finally the first man said, "Okay, Mac, we ain't got all day. Where you want it?"

"Who are you?" Collins managed to croak.

"The moving men. Do we look like the Vanizaggi Sisters?"

"But where do you come from?" Collins asked. "And why?"

"We come from the Powha Minnile Movers, Incorporated," the man said. "And we came because you wanted movers, that's why. Now, where you want it?"

"Go away," Collins said. "I'll call for you later."

The moving men shrugged their shoulders and vanished. For several minutes, Collins stared at the spot where they had been. Then he stared at the Class-A Utilizer, which was humming softly again.

Utilizer? He could give it a better name.

A Wishing Machine.

Collins was not particularly shocked. When the miraculous occurs, only dull, workaday mentalities are unable to accept it. Collins was certainly not one of those. He had an excellent background for acceptance.

Most of his life had been spent wishing, hoping, praying that something marvellous would happen to him. In high school, he had dreamed of waking up some morning with an ability to know his homework without the tedious necessity of studying it. In the army, he had wished for some witch or jinn to change his orders, putting him in charge of the day room, instead of forcing him to do close-order drill like everyone else.

Out of the army, Collins had avoided work, for which he was psychologically unsuited. He had drifted around, hoping that some fabulously wealthy person would be induced to change his will, leaving him Everything.

He had never really expected anything to happen. But he was prepared when it did.

"I'd like a thousand dollars in small unmarked bills," Collins said cautiously. When the hum grew louder, he pressed the button. In front of him appeared a large mound of soiled singles, five and ten dollar bills. They were not

crisp, but they certainly were money.

Collins threw a handful in the air and watched it settle beautifully to the floor. He lay on his bed and began making plans.

First, he would get the machine out of New York – upstate, perhaps – some place where he wouldn't be bothered by nosy neighbours. The income tax would be tricky on this sort of thing. Perhaps, after he got organised, he should go to Central America, or ...

There was a suspicious noise in the room.

Collins leaped to his feet. A hole was opening in the wall, and someone was forcing his way through.

“Hey, I didn't ask you anything!” Collins told the machine.

The hole grew larger, and a large, red-faced man was half-way through, pushing angrily at the hole.

At that moment, Collins remembered that machines usually have owners. Anyone who owned a wishing machine wouldn't take kindly to having it gone. He would go to any lengths to recover it. Probably, he wouldn't stop short of

–  
“Protect me!” Collins shouted at the Utilizer, and stabbed the red button.

A small, bald man in loud pyjamas appeared, yawning sleepily. “Sanisa Leek, Temporal Wall Protection Service,” he said, rubbing his eyes. “I'm Leek. What can I do for you?”

“Get him out of here!” Collins screamed. The red-faced man, waving his arms wildly, was almost through the hole.

Leek found a bit of bright metal in his pyjamas pocket. The red-faced man shouted, “Wait! You don't understand! That man –”

Leek pointed his piece of metal. The red-faced man screamed and vanished. In another moment the hole had vanished too.

“Did you kill him?” Collins asked.

“Of course not,” Leek said, putting away the bit of metal. “I just veered him back through his glommatch. He won't try *that* way again.”

“You mean he'll try some other way?” Collins asked.

“It's possible,” Leek said. “He could attempt a micro-transfer, or even an animation.” He looked sharply at Collins. “This is your Utilizer, isn't it?”

“Of course,” Collins said, starting to perspire.

“And you're an A-rating?”

“Naturally,” Collins told him. “If I wasn't, what would I be doing with a Utilizer?”

“No offence,” Leek said drowsily, “just being friendly.” He shook his head slowly. “How you A's get around! I suppose you've come back here to do a history book?”

Collins just smiled enigmatically.

“I'll be on my way,” Leek said, yawning copiously. “On the go, night and day. I'd be better off in a quarry.”

And he vanished in the middle of a yawn.

Rain was still beating against the ceiling. Across the airshaft, the snoring continued, undisturbed. Collins was alone again, with the machine.

And with a thousand dollars in small bills scattered around the floor.

He patted the Utilizer affectionately. Those A-ratings had it pretty good. Want something? Just ask for it and press a button. Undoubtedly, the real owner missed it.

Leek had said that the man might try to get in some other way. What way?

What did it matter? Collins gathered up the bills, whistling softly. As long as he had the wishing machine, he could take care of himself.

The next few days marked a great change in Collins's fortunes. With the aid of the Powha Minnile Movers he took the Utilizer to upstate New York. There, he bought a medium-sized mountain in a neglected corner of the Adirondacks. Once the papers were in his hands, he walked to the centre of his property, several miles from the highway. The two movers, sweating profusely, lugged the Utilizer behind him, cursing monotonously as they broke through the dense underbrush.

“Set it down here and scram,” Collins said. The last few days had done a lot for his confidence.

The moving men sighed wearily and vanished. Collins looked around. On all sides, as far as he could see, was closely spaced forest of birch and pine. The air was sweet and damp. Birds were chirping merrily in the treetops, and an occasional squirrel darted by.

Nature! He had always loved nature. This would be the perfect spot to build a large, impressive house with a swimming pool, tennis courts and, possibly, a small airport.

“I want a house,” Collins stated firmly, and pushed the red button.

A man in a neat grey business suit and pince-nez appeared. “Yes, sir,” he said, squinting at the trees, “but you really must be more specific. Do you want something classic, like a bungalow, ranch, split-level, mansion, castle or palace? Or primitive, like an igloo or hut? Since you are an A, you could have something up-to-the-minute, like a semi face, an Extended New or a Sunken Miniature.”

“Huh?” Collins said. “I don't know. What would you suggest?”

“Small mansion,” the man said promptly. “They usually start with that.”

“They do?”

“Oh, yes. Later, they move to a warm climate and build a palace.”

Collins wanted to ask more questions, but he decided against it. Everything was going smoothly. These people thought he was an A, and the true owner of the Utilizer. There was no sense in disenchanting them.

"You take care of it all," he told the man.

"Yes, sir," the man said. "I usually do."

The rest of the day, Collins reclined on a couch and drank iced beverages while the Maxima Olph Construction Company materialised equipment and put up his house.

It was a low-slung affair of some twenty rooms, which Collins considered quite modest under the circumstances. It was built only of the best materials, from a design of Mig of Degma, interior by Towige, a Mula swimming pool and formal gardens by Vierien.

By evening, it was completed, and the small army of workmen packed up their equipment and vanished.

Collins allowed his chef to prepare a light supper for him. Afterward, he sat in his large, cool living-room to think the whole thing over. In front of him, humming gently, sat the Utilizer.

Collins lighted a cheroot and sniffed the aroma. First of all, he rejected any supernatural explanations. There were no demons or devils involved in this. His house had been built by ordinary human beings, who swore and laughed and cursed like human beings. The Utilizer was simply a scientific gadget, which worked on principles he didn't understand or care to understand.

Could it have come from another planet? Not likely. They wouldn't have learned English just for him.

The Utilizer must have come from the Earth's future. But how?

Collins leaned back and puffed his cheroot. Accidents will happen, he reminded himself. Why couldn't the Utilizer have just *slipped* into the past? After all, it could create something from nothing, and that was much more complicated.

What a wonderful future it must be, he thought. Wishing machines! How marvellously civilised! All a person had to do was think of something. Presto! There it was. In time, perhaps, they'd eliminate the red button. Then there'd be no manual labour involved.

Of course, he'd have to watch his step. There was still the owner – and the rest of the A's. They would try to take the machine from him. Probably, they were a hereditary clique ...

A movement caught the edge of his eye and he looked up. The Utilizer was quivering like a leaf in a gale.

Collins walked up to it, frowning blackly. A faint mist of steam surrounded the trembling Utilizer. It seemed to be overheating.

Could he have overworked it? Perhaps a bucket of water ...

Then he noticed that the Utilizer was perceptibly smaller. It was no more than two feet square and shrinking before his eyes.

The owner! Or perhaps the A's! This must be the micro-transfer that Leek had talked about. If he didn't do something quickly, Collins knew, his wishing machine would dwindle to nothingness and disappear.

"Leek Protection Services," Collins snapped. He punched the button and withdrew his hand quickly. The machine was very hot.

Leek appeared in a corner of the room, wearing slacks and a sports shirt, and carrying a golf club. "Must I be disturbed every time I –"

"*Do something!*" Collins shouted, pointing to the Utilizer, which was now only a foot square and glowing a dull red.

"Nothing I can do," Leek said. "Temporal wall is all I'm licensed for. You want the microcontrol people." He hefted his golf club and was gone.

"Microcontrol," Collins said, and reached for the button. He withdrew his hand hastily. The Utilizer was only about four inches on a side now and glowing a hot cherry red. He could barely see the button, which was the size of a pin.

Collins whirled around, grabbed a cushion and punched down.

A girl with horn-rimmed glasses appeared, note-book in hand, pencil poised. "With whom did you wish to make an appointment?" she asked sedately.

"Get me help fast!" Collins roared, watching his precious Utilizer grow smaller and smaller.

"Mr. Vergon is out to lunch," the girl said, biting her pencil thoughtfully. "He's de-zoned himself. I can't reach him."

"Who *can* you reach?"

She consulted her note-book. "Mr. Vis is in the Dieg Continuum and Mr. Elgis is doing field work in Paleolithic Europe. If you're really in a rush, maybe you'd better call Transferpoint Control. They're a smaller outfit, but –"

"Transferpoint Control. Okay – scram." He turned his full attention to the Utilizer and stabbed down on it with the scorched pillow. Nothing happened. The Utilizer was barely half an inch square, and Collins realised that the cushion hadn't been able to depress the almost invisible button.

For a moment Collins considered letting the Utilizer go. Maybe this was the time. He could sell the house, the furnishings, and still be pretty well off ...

No! He hadn't wished for anything important yet! No one was going to take it from him without a struggle.

He forced himself to keep his eyes open as he stabbed the white-hot button with a rigid forefinger.

A thin, shabbily dressed old man appeared, holding something that looked like a gaily coloured Easter egg. He threw it down. The egg burst and an orange smoke billowed out and was sucked into the infinitesimal Utilizer. A great

billow of smoke went up, almost choking Collins. Then the Utilizer's shape started to form again. Soon, it was normal size and apparently undamaged. The old man nodded curtly.

"We're not fancy," he said, "but we're reliable." He nodded again and disappeared.

Collins thought he could hear a distant shout of anger.

Shakily, he sat down on the floor in front of the machine. His hand was throbbing painfully.

"Fix me up," he muttered through dry lips, and punched the button with his good hand.

The Utilizer hummed louder for a moment, then was silent. The pain left his scorched finger and, looking down, Collins saw that there was no sign of a burn – not even scar tissue to mark where it had been.

Collins poured himself a long shot of brandy and went directly to bed. That night, he dreamed he was being chased by a gigantic letter A, but he didn't remember it in the morning.

Within a week, Collins found that building his mansion in the woods had been precisely the wrong thing to do. He had to hire a platoon of guards to keep away sightseers, and hunters insisted on camping in his formal gardens.

Also, the Bureau of Internal Revenue began to take a lively interest in his affairs.

But, above all, Collins discovered that he wasn't so fond of nature after all. Birds and squirrels were all very well, but they hardly ranked as conversationalists. Trees, though quite ornamental, made poor drinking companions.

Collins decided he was a city boy at heart.

Therefore, with the aid of the Powha Minnile Movers, the Maxima Olph Construction Corporation, the Jagton Instantaneous Travel Bureau and a great deal of money placed in the proper hands, Collins moved to a small Central American republic. There, since the climate was warmer and income tax non-existent, he built a large, airy, ostentatious palace.

It came equipped with the usual accessories – horses, dogs, peacocks, servants, maintenance men, guards, musicians, beviés of dancing girls and everything else a palace should have. Collins spent two weeks just exploring the place.

Everything went along nicely for a while.

One morning Collins approached the Utilizer, with the vague intention of asking for a sports car, or possibly a small herd of pedigreed cattle. He bent over the grey machine, reached for the red button ...

And the Utilizer backed away from him.

For a moment, Collins thought he was seeing things, and he almost decided to stop drinking champagne before breakfast. He took a step forward and reached for the red button.

The Utilizer sidestepped him neatly and trotted out of the room.

Collins sprinted after it, cursing the owner and the A's. This was probably the animation that Leek had spoken about – somehow, the owner had managed to imbue the machine with mobility. It didn't matter. All he had to do was catch up, punch the button and ask for the Animation Control people.

The Utilizer raced down a hall, Collins close behind. An under-butler, polishing a solid gold doorknob, stared open-mouthed.

"Stop it!" Collins shouted.

The under-butler moved clumsily into the Utilizer's path. The machine dodged him gracefully and sprinted towards the main door.

Collins pushed a switch and the door slammed shut.

The Utilizer gathered momentum and went right through it. Once in the open, it tripped over a garden hose, regained its balance and headed towards the open countryside.

Collins raced after it. If he could just get a little closer ...

The Utilizer suddenly leaped into the air. It hung there for a long moment, then fell to the ground. Collins sprang at the button.

The Utilizer rolled out of his way, took a short run and leaped again. For a moment, it hung twenty feet above his head – drifted a few feet straight up, stopped twisted wildly and fell.

Collins was afraid that, on a third jump, it would keep going up. When it drifted unwillingly back to the ground, he was ready. He fainted, then stabbed at the button. The Utilizer couldn't duck fast enough.

"Animation Control!" Collins roared triumphantly.

There was a small explosion, and the Utilizer settled down docilely. There was no hint of animation left in it.

Collins wiped his forehead and sat on the machine. Closer and closer. He'd better do some big wishing now, while he still had the chance.

In rapid succession, he asked for five million dollars, three functioning oil wells, a motion-picture studio, perfect health, twenty-five more dancing girls, immortality, a sports car and a herd of pedigreed cattle.

He thought he heard someone snicker. He looked around. No one was there.

When he turned back, the Utilizer had vanished.

He just stared. And, in another moment, *he* vanished.

When he opened his eyes, Collins found himself standing in front of a desk. On the other side was the large, red-faced man who had originally tried to break into his room. The man didn't appear angry. Rather, he appeared resigned, even melancholy.

Collins stood for a moment in silence, sorry that the whole thing was over. The owner and the A's had finally caught him. But it had been glorious while it lasted.

“Well,” Collins said directly, “you’ve got your machine back. Now, what else do you want?”

“My machine?” the red-faced man said, looking up incredulously. “It’s not my machine, sir. Not at all.”

Collins stared at him. “Don’t try to kid me, mister. You A-ratings want to protect your monopoly, don’t you?”

The red-faced man put down his paper. “Mr. Collins,” he said stiffly, “my name is Flign. I am an agent for the Citizens Protective Union, a non-profit organisation, whose aim is to protect individuals such as yourself from errors of judgement.”

“You mean you’re not one of the A’s?”

“You are labouring under a misapprehension, sir,” Flign said with quiet dignity. “The A-rating does not represent a social group, as you seem to believe. It is merely a credit rating.”

“A what?” Collins asked slowly.

“A credit rating.” Flign glanced at his watch. “We haven’t much time, so I’ll make this as brief as possible. Ours is a decentralised age, Mr. Collins. Our businesses, industries and services are scattered through an appreciable portion of space and time. The utilization corporation is an essential link. It provides for the transfer of goods and services from point to point. Do you understand?”

Collins nodded.

“Credit is, of course, an automatic privilege. But, eventually, everything must be paid for.”

Collins didn’t like the sound of that. *Pay?* This place wasn’t as civilised as he had thought. No one had mentioned paying. Why did they bring it up now?

“Why didn’t someone stop me?” he asked desperately. “They must have known I didn’t have a proper rating.”

Flign shook his head. “The credit ratings are suggestions, not laws. In a civilised world, an individual has the right to his own decisions. I’m very sorry, sir.” He glanced at his watch again and handed Collins the paper he had been reading. “Would you just glance at this bill and tell me whether it’s in order?”

Collins took the paper and read:

One Palace, with Accessories .....	Cr.	45,000,000
Services of Maxima Olph Movers.....		111,000
122 Dancing Girls.....		122,000,000
Perfect Health.....		888,234,031

He scanned the rest of the list quickly. The total came to slightly better than eighteen billion Credits.

“Wait a minute!” Collins shouted. “I can’t be held to this! The Utilizer just dropped into my room by accident!”

“That’s the very fact I’m going to bring to their attention,” Flign said. “Who knows? Perhaps they will be reasonable. It does no harm to try.”

Collins felt the room sway. Flign’s face began to melt before him.

“Time’s up,” Flign said. “Good luck.”

Collins closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, he was standing on a bleak plain, facing a range of stubby mountains. A cold wind lashed his face and the sky was the colour of steel.

A raggedly dressed man was standing beside him. “Here,” the man said and handed Collins a pick.

“What’s this?”

“This is a pick,” the man said patiently. “And over there is a quarry, where you and I and a number of others will cut marble.”

“Marble?”

“Sure. There’s always some idiot who wants a palace,” the man said with a wry grin. “You can call me Jang. We’ll be together for some time.”

Collins blinked stupidly. “How long?”

“You work it out,” Jang said. “The rate is fifty credits a month until your debt is paid off.”

The pick dropped from Collins’s hand. They couldn’t do this to him! The Utilization Corporation must realise its mistake by now! *They* had been at fault, letting the machine slip into the past. Didn’t they realise that?

“It’s all a mistake!” Collins said.

“No mistake,” Jang said. “They’re very short of labour. Have to go recruiting all over for it. Come on. After the first thousand years you won’t mind it.”

Collins started to follow Jang towards the quarry. He stopped.

“The first *thousand* years? I won’t live that long!”

“Sure you will,” Jang assured him. “You got immortality, didn’t you?”

Yes, he had. He had wished for it, just before they took back the machine. Or had they taken back the machine *after* he wished for it?

Collins remembered something. Strange, but he didn’t remember seeing immortality on the bill Flign had shown him.

“How much did they charge me for immortality?” he asked.

Jang looked at him and laughed. “Don’t be naïve, pal. You should have it figured out by now.”

He led Collins towards the quarry. “Naturally, they give *that* away for nothing.”