

The Principle
by A. Bertram Chandler

People have talked about the innate perversity of inanimate objects for years but has anyone tried to figure out whether there are any laws about it?

A. Bertram Chandler is well known for his provoking little short stories about loopholes in science. Here's one which may make you wonder, why not?

GORDON, whom beer always made philosophical, said that it was a great pity that Einstein was dead. Hibbert, whose favorite tippie, whiskey, made him argumentative, asked why.

"In any case," said Hibbert, not waiting for an answer, "he did quite enough damage for one man in his lifetime with that equation of his. You know the one I mean..."

"I do," said Gordon.

"You know the one I mean," repeated Hibbert, glaring at the other. "E over MC2. That's what gave them the idea for the atomic bomb. That's why we had no summer last year, and why we're not going to get any this. It's a great pity, in my opinion, that Einstein ever lived."

Gordon sipped his beer slowly. He was only a little man, and it seemed at first that he was almost afraid of Hibbert's bulk. But we knew that this was not the case. Philosophical he might be—but he was the sort of philosopher who would go on peddling his brand of philosophy in the face of any and all adverse criticism. He finished what was in his glass, then rapped it gently on the counter to attract the attention of the barmaid. When it was refilled he took a careful swallow, then drew up to his insignificant full height.

"THE TROUBLE with you, Hibbert," he said slowly and distinctly, "is that you just don't think. You take all your opinions ready-made from the newspapers—and from the cheapest and nastiest newspapers at that. To you, atomic power means nothing but bombs—fission bombs, fusion bombe, cobalt bombs and anything else that may have been cooked up since yesterday morning." He raised a hand. "Now, Hibbert, let me finish; we heard you out. My point is this—atomic power *had* to come. We are nearing the time when we shall have exhausted the oil and coal reserves—and, bear this in mind, ours is essentially a power-wasting civilisation. For example—just compare the consumption of power by the average household *now* with the same household's consumption twenty years ago. So—we just had to have the new power source and the sooner the better..."

"So Einstein gave it to us," laughed Hibbert. "According to you, he's played his part."

"No, Hibbert; there was plenty of work to be, done. Einstein never had a chance to finish his Unified Field Theory..."

"And what was that?" I asked.

"Mathematics—a formula—to account for every physical phenomenon. With those equations we could, perhaps, have drawn enough power from a grain of sand to light a city. We could have flown to the stars; we could..."

". . . have blown the world up," finished Hibbert. "But cheer up Gordon boy, we'll do it yet. We'll do it that is, unless we really went to do it. And then Hibbert's Law will take over and stop us from doing it..."

"HIBBERT'S LAW? Never heard of it. Come to that—I've never heard of a scientist or a philosopher with your name."

"But you've heard of *me*," said Hibbert softy. "And you said just now that I couldn't think. Well, Gordon—I can think. I can think, for myself, too, and don't have to rely upon writers in the highbrow weeklies to supply my thoughts for me. Furthermore, Gordon, Hibbert's Law is just as valid as Einstein's famous equation; and, furthermore, I can prove it."

Gordon was on the point of saying something cutting. I knew what this might quite well mean. Hibbert—especially after a few whiskies—had a very nasty temper and I didn't want him to get us thrown out of the pub. It lacked at least twenty minutes to closing time. Accidently-on-purpose I shifted my weight from one foot to the other, jostling Gordon as I did so, spilling his beer.

Gordon, as he wiped down the front of his suit with his handkerchief, was not pleased. "You *are* a clumsy oaf, Whitley."

"But Whitley's not a clumsy oaf," almost shouted Hibbert. "He's just like all of us—a victim of the inexorable workings of Hibbert's Law..."

"Gordon's the victim," I said.

"Shut up, let me finish. One of the axioms of my Law is this: If any involuntary motion can possibly cause discomfort or inconvenience, it will do so."

"What *is* this drivel?" demanded Gordon.

"It's not drivel. It's a law of nature, just as valid as any ever formulated by Einstein, Newton, Archimedes or anybody else you care to mention. It's really amazing that nobody else has ever stumbled upon it—but then, the scientists and philosophers aren't, as a rule very practical people." He laid money on the wet counter, motioned to the barmaid to refill our three glasses. He raised his own. "Gentlemen, let *us* drink to Hibbert's Law, the Principle of General Cussedness!"

GORDON was beginning to get interested. "All right; you said you could prove it. Go on—prove it!"

"No trouble at all," laughed Hibbert. "Here's another axiom for you: When there are two or more similar keys on a key ring, you will always pick the one you need last!"

"It just *seems* that way," I started to say, but Gordon got in first.

"*You* might Hibbert, but I don't. I have to unlock when I get to work in the morning, and I have nine keys on the ring, all of them Yale type. The door that I usually open first has one little hole punched in the woodwork over the lock and there's one little notch filed on the key. And so on."

"The sort of thing *you* would do," said Hibbert disgustedly. "All right, here's another axiom. If you have an important appointment (or train to catch) and your watch or clock is wrong it is invariably slow."

"Any clocksmith could explain *that*," said Gordon.

Hibbert snorted; it was obvious that his stock of axioms was running low. "All right, here's another one. If you *insist* on doing a thing in the face of opposition, after two failures, the result of the third attempt is quite disastrous."

"Not a good one, Hibbert," I said, "not a good one at all. What about Robert Bruce and the spider? If at first you don't succeed, try, try again..."

"And what about Robert Clive?" asked Gordon. "When he was a mere clerk in the employ of the East India Company and tried to commit suicide, and the pistol kept on misfiring..."

"HOW MANY times did he try, anyhow?" demanded Hibbert. "If he *had* tried three times the third attempt would have blown his head off."

"Not necessarily. Maybe he *did* try three times—and it was the failure of the third attempt that convinced him that he was destined for great things..."

"So he went right out and conquered India," I said. "But was that a *good* thing, or a *disastrous* thing? A lot depends upon the viewpoint, you know. An ardent Indian Nationalist in the years before the war would have said that it was quite disastrous..."

"And *that*," almost shouted Hibbert, "justifies my Principle."

"Not necessarily," quibbled Gordon, looking over the tops of his spectacles in a most judicious manner. "As Whitley has pointed out, the disastrous results of Clive's third attempt at suicide—if he *did* try three times—are disastrous only when viewed in a certain, biased manner."

Any unbiased observer would agree that Clive's conquest of India was a good thing. Meanwhile, we've heard a lot of nonsense about keys and clocks, and nonsense is all that is. I'm afraid, Hibbert, that you still have to convince us that the ruling spirit of the Universe is a mere, antic malice."

"*There's your proof!*" roared Hibbert, pointing. "'Ye that have eyes, but see not!'"

WE LOOKED to the corner where a game of darts was in progress. Both players were trying for the double one. Judging by their expressions they had been in the madhouse—that is, I believe, the expression used by darts players on such occasions—for some time.

"Look at them," said Hibbert. "Until they started to double out, they were putting the darts more or less—more rather than less—where they wanted them. Once they started to double out they just *had* to get down to the double one. And can they get it? Of course not; they're throwing double twenties that they would have been glad of when the game started..."

"Psychology," Gordon stated flatly. "Just psychology. They aren't really good players—in the early stages of the game they weren't quite able to put the darts where they wanted them. Quite often, when they were trying for the twenty, they must have got number one . . .

"But that bears out Hibbert's Law," I said.

He ignored me. "It is only at this stage of the game that *real* urgency exists. Each knows that the other can end the game with one dart. Each knows, too, that it's almost closing time; and that unless the game is finished soon, the loser won't be able to buy the winner his drink—and one for himself, of course. It's a double urgency. And mixed up with it all is the Death Wish of the psychologists—after all, defeat is a little death, and so is failure to get a last drink before throwing out time..."

Just in time I paid for the last round.

RAISING his voice against the barmaid's "Time, gentlemen, *please!*" Hibbert said, "There's still one more proof. It's a mathematical one, and you can't argue with mathematics."

"Can't I?" demanded Gordon. "Well, all right, what is it?"

"We'll all walk together to Everdale Station," said Hibbert. "It's not putting anybody to any inconvenience. Whitley and I can both get trains from there, and you get your bus from there. We'll take a note of the registration numbers of every *car we see*..."

"Why?" asked Gordon.

"Did you ever play that game of Patience?" asked Hibbert. "It is a sort of Patience, although it's not played with cards. It's played with cars. You watch the number plates, and you see a number with 1 in it. All right. That's your 1. Sooner or later you see one with 2 *in* it. And 3. And so on. You get to the tens, and the twenties, and the thirties. But here's the point. You'll have been waiting a long time for, say, 13. And while you're waiting there'll be car after car with 12 and 14. Once you get your 13, however, there's no shortage of the number—it's the 14s that are in short supply..."

"Time, gentlemen, *please,*" said the barmaid.

The lights started to go out.

IT WAS cold outside, and a thin drizzle was falling. The abrupt transition from the heated room to the chilliness outside made me realise that I was not quite sober—certainly not sober enough for the playing of mathematical games. I said as much, rather hoping that Gordon would decide to save himself time and a walk by catching his bus at the stop right outside the pub. Gordon, however, was just as determined to establish the fatuity of Hibbert's Law the so-called Principle of Cussedness, as Hibbert was to prove its validity.

For a few minutes, the three of us walked along the wet footpath, watching the passing cars. We had not long to wait for our first number—the second car we saw had 501 on its plate. 234 followed it.

Gordon laughed. "What price your theory, Hibbert? Three numbers that we want, all at once."

"Wait till we get to the tens," said Hibbert.

Five cars passed, all of which displayed either 1, 2, 3 or 4, before we got out 5. By this time I was beginning to get interested, and wondering how all this fitted in with the laws of random. But we got 6, 7, 8 and 9 without waiting too long; and then, almost at once, 10.

11 was a long time coming—and while we were waiting for it we got 123, 512, 712, 012 and 129. I could hear Gordon muttering, and knew that he was doing calculations in his head. When 11 came at

last, it was an out-of-State car, with four numerals on its number plate-1112—giving us 11 and 12 simultaneously.

This, of course, pleased Gordon no end. "The Principle of Natural Cussedness," he scoffed. "In any case, Hibbert, you'd never prove any thing by observations during a single evening..."

"WE'VE BEEN doing this for a week, now," said Hibbert. "I got the idea from a magazine story—nothing to do with my Law, though—and I tried it out for my own amusement."

"A *week*," scoffed Gordon. "A week? My good man, don't you realise that you'd have to make your observations over at least a century before they had any value? For example—one night we might have a sequence of 1s, the numeral 1 at least once on every number plate. It'd be quite possible to have the same thing happening over an entire week. But, in the end, the number of 1s would even out to the right percentage."

"Not if you *wanted* them to," insisted Hibbert. "Meanwhile—hope you've realised that we're all wanting number 13 to turn up. And it's not turning up." He gestured towards a passing Renault. "Look-143-14!" He pointed at an approaching Morris. "120-12!"

"But this doesn't *prove* anything," protested Gordon.

"Yes; it does. We want number 13; according to the Laws of Random, we should have got it long before now. According to Hibbert's Law we should be getting the numbers we *did* want and the numbers *we will* want. And that's just what we *are* getting."

"And there's my bus," said Gordon.

The bus stop and the station were on the other side of the road. The traffic lights were against us, but there was a lull in traffic and Gordon, the bus service to whose suburb was not of the best, was determined to catch this one.

STILL ARGUING, we struck off across the road, against the lights. Gordon, I remember, was asking Hibbert if the alleged unluckiness of 13 had any bearing on his theory, or if his theory had any bearing upon the alleged unluckiness. Hibbert was indignant, and disassociated both himself and his precious Principle from superstition.

They didn't hear the horn of the approaching car. I did—I was walking to the right of the other two and caught Gordon's sleeve, Hibbert—still talking, still gesticulating, walked on. The driver of the car slammed on his brakes, hard—but it was too late. The road surface was greasy under the thin drizzle, and his tires were not new.

Hibbert screamed just once as the head of the car caught him. We ran to where he had been thrown—and when we reached him it was obvious, even to laymen like ourselves, that he was dead.

Yet, in a way, he lives on.

Gordon has become a convert to Hibbert's doctrines and plans, if he can find a publisher, to bring out a book expounding the Principle of Natural Cussedness. He claims that Hibbert's death—the number of the car that hit him was 014—was the one piece of proof that he, Gordon, needed.

Perhaps *I'm* old fashioned—but I still think that the license plate of that car should have had a 13 on it.