

All Laced Up

BERTRAM CHANDLER

To the science fiction writer, anything is grist to the mill. Even the simplest object can be made the basis of a story; sf is, after all, a tool rather than a literary form. In "All Laced Up", Bertram Chandler takes as the subject of a story the cast iron "lace" so common around Sydney's older suburbs and currently much admired by decorators. His approach to the story is witty and imaginative, and at its centre there is the same glow of insight which motivates the best sf. From now on, we can never take iron lace for granted—nor, for that matter, anything else, no matter how prosaic it may seem.

Though born in Britain, Bertram Chandler has adopted Australia and been adopted by it. Captain of a freighter plying Australian coastal waters, he is undoubtedly the most successful writer of science fiction working in the country at the moment, with some dozens of novels to his credit and a career extending back to the early forties.

Source: New Worlds, November 1961.

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She said, "We must get some iron lace ..."

I looked up from the Sunday paper, regarded her. She was wearing the rather rapt expression that I have come to associate with inspiration. It becomes her—but it is an expression that I have learned almost to dread.

"Iron lace?" I asked cautiously.

"Yes. Iron lace. You know—or don't you? That ancient cast-iron railing stuff that you see around the balconies of old terrace houses . . ."

"Hearts and flowers and whatever," I amplified resignedly. "But what for? We haven't got a balcony . . ."

"For interior decoration."

"Interior decoration?"

"A space divider."

"A space divider!"

"Don't be so dim," she told me. "This room—now that we've knocked three rooms, including the kitchen, into one— is rather long . . ."

"Like a railway carriage," I agreed. "Or a railway tunnel..."

"Don't be so funny!" she snapped. Then the rapt expression returned to her face. "I can see it. From the wall there, to about two thirds of the way across. Iron lace, painted black . . ."

"And picked out in gold . . ."

She looked at me suspiciously, then relaxed. "Yes, you're right. Just a hint of gold. A sort of . . . shadowing . . ."

I began to catch her enthusiasm. "Subtle," I contributed.

"Yes. Subtle. But dramatic." She scooped the Sunday paper off my lap, substituted for it the Saturday one. A slim finger indicated a classified advertisement that she had already ringed with pencil. I read the ad. It had been inserted by the owner of a junkyard, his premises being situated on the outskirts of Parramatta. He had iron lace—sandblasted and ready for installation—for sale. He was open on Sunday.

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It wasn't a bad day for a drive—a little on the chilly side, perhaps, but sunny. Swiftly and efficiently Sally piloted the Volkswagen through the city and the suburbs, out on to the Parramatta Road. I was acting as navigator, although at first the job was a sinecure. Instead of studying the road map I was able to keep a keen look-out to port and to starboard, to point out fine examples of the iron lacemaker's art decorating the balconies of some of the old terrace houses that we passed.

And then I had to stop sight-seeing and start navigating. The junkyard was stuck away at the back of beyond, in the middle of a maze of dirt roads that nobody had yet got around to labelling. Sally was worrying about the springs of the car and I, who had given the brute its weekly wash that morning, was concerned about the paintwork and polish as we shuddered over the ruts, ploughed through the dust. But we found the place eventually. It looked like what it was. There was a ragged fence and beyond it were stacks of doors, heaps of old furniture, sad clusters of archaic baths and gas stoves. There was a neat enough fibreboard office from which, as soon as we stopped the car, the proprietor emerged.

He bade us good-day affably and asked what he could do for us. We said that we were just browsing. He left us to our own devices and, picking our gingerly way through the assorted debris, we browsed.

What was on display outside was just the rubbish. It was in a shed that we found the treasure. It was stacked high, panel after panel of the old iron lace, its delicacy of design revealed by the sandblasting, gleaming with the dull yet pleasant sheen of good cast iron.

The proprietor followed us into the shed.

"And would you be interested?" he asked.

I said that we should be interested.

Sally, fingering an intricate filigree of harps and shamrocks, asked, "How much?"

"Two pounds ten a panel, madam," he replied.

"Two pounds ten?" she flared.

"Yes," she was told firmly. "There's the cost of the sandblasting. And one

coat of primer . . .”

“Too much,” she said.

We turned to go.

He said, “Perhaps you might be interested in this . . .”

“No,” said Sally firmly just as I said, “Perhaps.”

The junkman lifted a rag of tarpaulin in a dim corner of the shed. Beneath it was a small stack of panels, of metal railing. It gleamed—but it wasn’t the gleam of cast iron, neither was it that of aluminium. There was something odd about it.

“I can let you have this cheaper,” said the proprietor. “A pound a panel.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“Iron lace.”

“It’s not,” said Sally.

“It looks ... interesting,” I said.

I went to the corner, lifted one of the panels. It was heavy, but not as heavy as it would have been had it been iron. The metal felt strangely warm to my fingers. I stood it on its edge, propping it against the stack and the wall, stepped back to get the full effect.

The design was intricate enough—but there were no hearts and flowers, no harps and shamrocks. It was abstract—and yet it was vaguely familiar. I tried to decide what it was that it reminded me of. There were interlocking circles—but they were more than mere circles. There was that odd twist to them . . . I got it then. Mobius Strips.

“It ... It has something,” admitted Sally reluctantly.

“Most people don’t like it,” confessed the junkman, “but perhaps you . . .”

“I didn’t say that I liked it,” said Sally firmly. “Not at that price.”

“Fifteen shillings?”

“Ten.”

“All right. To you—twelve and six.”

“What do you think, Peter?” she asked me.

“It’s . . . It’s different,” I told her cautiously.

“All right. We’ll take six panels.”

“Now?” asked the junkman with a rather strange eagerness.

“No. You said in your advertisement that you delivered. My husband will give you the address.”

And that was that.

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We sat in our chairs and looked at our space divider. It had taken the coating of black matt paint well enough and we had decided that its design was sufficiently dramatic to make the use of gold trimming unnecessary. Dramatic? It was that all right. It was . . . disturbing.

I said, between sips of my drink, "I had a couple of beers with Fred at lunchtime today."

"Oh? What's new with him?"

"He's settling down at the Courier. They've got him doing features now."

"What sort of features?"

"Haunts. Poltergeists and such. The Courier always has been keen on the supernatural or the paranormal or whatever you care to call it."

"Anything to build up circulation among the credulous."

"They sent him out to investigate and write up a haunted junkyard, Parramatta way ..."

"A haunted junkyard?" she asked, with awakening interest.

"Was the junkman flogging old tombstones?"

"No. The haunting was in the shed where he kept his iron lace. It appears that every morning he'd find it flung all over the place."

"What junkman was it?" she demanded sharply.

"He didn't say . . ."

"And you didn't ask. Of course."

I was startled by the expression on her face. "What's all the flap about, Sally?"

"But you don't believe . . ."

"I'm an agnostic. I neither believe nor disbelieve."

"Then why . . .?"

"Why was the junkman, our junkman, so keen to get rid of this iron lace?" she said, pointing.

"But you wanted it."

"I didn't really. It was just the price."

I attempted to reason with her. "I've never heard of haunted iron lace. Besides, this stuff isn't old. The design is . . . contemporary. Modern..."

"Too modern," she said.

I began to get what she was driving at. That delicately wrought metal had an alien quality—but it was alien, somehow, in a temporal sense. I got up, refilled our glasses and then, when I was seated again, began to play with ideas, ludicrous ideas, hoping thereby to laugh Sally out of her disturbingly fey mood.

"I see it now," I told her. "I can visualize those panels back where they belong—in the engine-room of a ship, an interstellar ship. They're all part of the Interstellar Drive, the Space Warp. The ship must have crashed near here, and parts of her found their way into the junkyard. And even though there's no power source, there's enough residual energy for the wreckage of the Drive to try to warp Space, to try to sling us from here to Alpha Centauri in three seconds flat ..."

She grinned. "You read too much science fiction, Peter," she told me.

"There's no such thing as too much—not if it's good stuff. And, anyhow, Interstellar Drives are far more credible than ghosts and hauntings."

"They are not," she stated firmly.

"They are" I stated more firmly.

And the resultant, quite enjoyable argument, lasted us through dinner and until bedtime.

* * * *

It was at three in the morning that I was awakened.

There was that odd, grating noise coming from the living room. It was too loud to be made by a mouse or a rat and, so far as we knew, there were no possums in this inner suburb. Sally was still sleeping. She liked her sleep and hated to be disturbed. So, carefully, I slid out from between the sheets on my side of the bed, thrust my feet into my slippers, picked up my dressing gown from the chair and got into it. Somehow the thought of human intruders did not cross my mind. There was nothing in the house to tempt a burglar. All evidence to the contrary notwithstanding I was sure that I should find a possum in the living room. Or a family of possums.

I walked softly to the door, opened it.

There was moonlight coming through the front window, but its illumination was not necessary. The metal panels were glowing with their own light—a cold, blue luminescence. And they had torn themselves loose from their fastenings—that had been the noise that had disturbed me—and were moving, slowly, purposively.

I was afraid.

I was too afraid to cry out. All I could do was to stand there and watch the inanimate shockingly become animate, watch the panels slide and shift, stare as they arranged themselves into a hexagonal.

And then, immediately, the whining started—thin, high, almost supersonic at first. Thin and high it was and then, as it became louder, its tone deepened, and as it deepened so the colour of the moonlight changed, became more and more ruddy until the room was filled with rose-tinted shadows.

Inside the hexagon the shadows shifted and stirred, coalesced, took form.

There was a woman there.

Tall she was, breasts high and proud under the loosely fitting sweater, legs long and slim in their tight jeans. Her pale golden hair was pulled back in a pony tail. There was a glittering, complex bracelet on her left wrist and with her right hand she did something to it, made some adjustment. The humming died to a barely audible murmur. She stooped gracefully, slid one of the panels aside and stepped into the room.

"Made the scene, Dad," she announced.

I gaped at her.

"Don'tcha dig, man?" she demanded.

"I do not," I managed to say.

"A square," she stated rather than asked.

"You could call me that," I admitted.

Her wide, generous mouth displayed perfect teeth as she smiled. She said, "I was told that squares were a dying race in this period. It would seem that they are not."

"Far from it," I agreed.

She smiled again. "Let me introduce myself. I am Lorn Verrill. Doctor Lorn Verrill. The Time Warp is my invention." She waved a hand airily towards the panels. "I had to send the cage back first, of course, but it was broken up before I could follow it. I have been trying to reassemble it by remote control. At last I succeeded." She stood with her hands on her hips, surveying the room. "And so this is a typical twentieth century pad," she remarked.

"Not so typical!" snapped a sharp female voice.

I turned, saw that Sally had come out of the bedroom. She had put on her robe, but since it was transparent rather than translucent and worn over nothing at all the effect was decorative but far from modest.

She demanded, "Peter, who is this woman?"

"Her name," I said carefully, "seems to be Lorn Verrill. Doctor Lorn Verrill." I babbled on. "A doctorate in physics, maybe, or philosophy . . ."

Lorn Verrill laughed pleasantly. "You assume too much, Peter. My degree is in one of the arts. D.I.D., if you must know."

I said, "But you must be a scientist. That . . . That . . ." I gestured towards the broken hexagon. "That Time Warp ..."

"Just a flair for the higher mathematics," she said modestly.

"Then what the hell does D.I.D. stand for?" demanded Sally crossly.

"Doctor of Interior Decorating, of course, duckie," said Lorn.

Sally swore softly and then went to the bookcase that afforded stowage for all sorts of things in addition to books. She opened the bottle locker door, poured herself a stiff whisky. She strode to the nearest chair, plumped down into it, regarded us balefully over the rim of her glass.

She said, "This is rather much. This is rather too much. I am woken up at half past three in the bloody morning and I find my husband entertaining a blonde beatnik who says that she's a D.D. . . ."

"Not D.D.," I corrected her. "D.I.D."

"So you're on her side. You would be." She lowered the level of the whisky in her glass appreciably. "How do you know she's not a ghost? Or something worse? Like . . . Like a succubus ..."

"Whoever heard of a succubus wearing jeans?" I asked reasonably enough.

"There has to be a first time for everything. Anyhow, those jeans are so tight they might as well have been painted on."

"I wore what I thought would be an appropriate costume for this century," Lorn Verrill told her stiffly.

"It could be appropriate at that," said Sally nastily.

"Your own attire," snapped the time traveller, "is hardly decent."

"This is my home," said Sally, "and I wear what I damn' well please inside these four walls. And if you don't like it— there's the door."

I decided that it was time to pour oil—or alcohol—on the troubled waters. And I wanted a drink myself. I asked our visitor, "Whisky? Rum?"

"In that rig," suggested Sally, "a glass of thick, treacly muscat might be the shot."

"We haven't got any," I said shortly. Then, "Brandy? Sherry? Port?"

"Brandy, if I may," said Lorn Verrill politely.

I poured two generous dollops into two snifters, handed one to Lorn Verrill. I refilled Sally's glass. I said, "Here's mud in your eye," but the two women ignored me.

"And now," said Sally, when gullets had been wetted, "perhaps you will favour us with an explanation. It had better be a good one."

"But it's all so simple," said the other. "My name is Lorn Verrill. I am a

Doctor of Interior Decorating, but my hobby is the study of mathematics. I stumbled upon the principle of the Time Warp and, naturally, decided to use the device for my own professional ends . . .”

“Which are?” demanded Sally suspiciously.

“In my century there is a craze for old things. Really old. Period stuff. And I thought that I might be able to pick up such items cheaply in the Past. My Past.”

Sally is a shrewd businesswoman. She said, “And how would you pay for your purchases?”

“Barter, of course. I shall have to operate through contacts who will give me what I want in return for what I give them. And they will be able to sell the merchandise from my century.”

“What sort of merchandise?” I asked.

She extended her left hand. On her wrist, above that intricate bracelet which we now recognized as a control panel in miniature, was a beautiful watch, a piece of personal machinery that was obviously of the highest quality.

“These timepieces,” she told us. “Atomic powered. Virtually everlasting.”

“What about something really good?” I asked her—although nobody could possibly have said that the watch was not good. “Anti-gravity, or the interstellar drive?”

“And shunt the world on to a different Time Track?” she countered. “No thanks. I like my world the way it is. I like me the way I am. But small luxury items will not influence the course of history.”

“They will,” I said, “if anybody opens `em up to see what makes `em tick.”

“They will never go wrong,” she assured me. “And they cannot be opened. And if anybody should try to break one open he will get no more than a blob of fused metal for his pains.”

“Miss Verrill has something,” said Sally thoughtfully.

“If she comes from the Future,” I said, suddenly dubious.

“Switch on all the lights, Peter,” ordered Sally. I obeyed her. “Look at that sweater,” she said. “Look at those jeans ...”

“What about them?”

“Men” said Sally scornfully. “It’s obvious to the trained eye that those fabrics are far superior to any that we have. Superior—and different. Very different. That sweater, for example . . .”

“Venusian spider silk,” Lorn Verrill told us.

“And the jeans?”

"Multicron."

"You see? Or don't you? Not that it matters." She turned again to our visitor. "Now, Miss Verrill, we're willing to go into business with you. Perhaps if you can give us some idea of what you want . . ."

"This is an exploratory trip, Mrs . . ."

"You can call me Sally."

"This is an exploratory trip, Sally, and my time is limited." She glanced either at the watch or the control panel on the bracelet, or at both. "But I have two hours in hand ..."

"Get dressed, Peter!" Sally snapped. "You'll excuse us a few minutes, Lorn, won't you?"

"Help yourself to another drink if you like," I added.

* * * *

"This is the chance of a lifetime!" Sally whispered fiercely, inserting a shapely leg into one leg of her own jeans.

"It could be," I agreed. "But what will she want?"

"Just what everybody is wanting now. Hurry up, you clot!"

I hurried, Sally hurried. Together we almost ran back into the living room, were relieved to find Lorn Verrill still there. We swept her out of the back of the house and into the car. I ran to open the driveway gate—and then had to run to get aboard the vehicle as it charged out into the street. Then there was delay, for which I was cursed, when Lorn Verrill was obliged to get out of the front seat to allow me to get into the back. But we got under way and in a very short time had embarked upon a moonlight tour of Paddington.

That old iron lace, on the old, reconditioned terrace houses, was good. With its bright new paint it stood out bravely in the light of our headlamps, in the light of the full moon. I could hear Lorn Verrill exclaiming, "But this is lovely! What couldn't I do with that?" And I heard Sally say, "And the annoying part of it all is that only a few years ago this iron lace was regarded as rubbish. You could get it for nothing!" And then the drive was over and we were pulling to a stop outside our house. Lorn Verrill was anxious and impatient, brushing past me as I opened the front door, running to her hexagon of metal panels. She was inside the hexagon, pulling the open panel into place, as Sally came in.

"Sorry," she called. "Time short. Can't stay. Thank you!"

The deep humming swelled in volume and the moonlight, and the light of the one lamp that we had left burning assumed a ruddy tinge. And then the humming became a thin, intolerable whine, painful to the ears, and the tall form of our visitor inside the cage flickered and faded, flickered and faded and was gone. And the lights were back to normal, and the room was normal save for the hexagonal grouping of the panels and there was an

oppressive silence broken by Sally, who said, "We're on to a good thing, Peter, a good thing."

She's a good businesswoman, is Sally.

But interior decorators, even in this day and age, are good businesswomen too, and anybody with a Doctorate in that art or science must be an exceptionally good businesswoman.

We went back to bed to try to get some sleep—and surprisingly, we did sleep. And when the alarm clock awakened us we talked for a while to convince ourselves that we had not shared a particularly vivid dream.

Sally was first out of bed. I heard her cry out from the living room. I ran to see what it was that had excited and distressed her.

Our space divider was gone.

On the carpet, where its panels had been rearranged to form a hexagon, there were two parcels—a small one and a large one. And there was a very commonplace looking envelope addressed in a neat hand, Peter and Sally.

Sally tore open the envelope. Inside it was a single sheet of thick, creamy notepaper with an embossed letter heading. I read, over Sally's shoulder, Lorn Verrill, D.I.D. Vegan Trust Building, Laurentian Square, Atlantia. Underneath the address had been written, The date doesn't matter.

The letter itself was short and to the point.

Dear Peter and Sally,

Sorry to have to do this to you, but I'm not in business for my health and must buy in the cheapest market as well as selling in the dearest. But please accept the accompanying small tokens of my regard.

Sincerely,

Lorn Verrill.

The wrapping of the parcels was a thick plastic that, once the seal was broken, vapourised into a fragrant mist. In the small one, addressed to myself, was one of the watches. In the larger one addressed to Sally, was a sweater of the Venusian spider silk and a pair of the multicron jeans.

It's a good watch. By any normal standards it's a perfect watch. And that spider silk sweater washes and wears and wears and still looks as new as it did the day it was unpacked. And multicron is indeed a miracle fabric; if the simple directions on the leaflet that came with the jeans are followed the garment can be made to change colour, as desired, with every wash, and can be shrunk to form matador pants or shorts, or lengthened to make elegant tapered slacks. (An industrial chemist of our acquaintance to whom Sally gave a snipping for analysis told us crossly, after spending a frustrating month working on it, that he was a chemist and not a nuclear physicist and pleaded with us to tell him where we had obtained the material).

But there's been no real pleasure from the gifts.

For one thing, we haven't been able to replace our space divider; iron lace is more fantastically expensive with every passing day. And it's vanishing. Have you noticed? On Thursday you might admire a terrace house with something especially elegant decorating its balcony, and on Friday that same terrace house will exhibit a glassed-in balcony, and that balcony will look as though it's been there for years. And you'll have the uneasy feeling that there's something wrong somewhere, or somewhen, and then decide that your memory is playing tricks on you.

And there seems to be a growing number of expensive-looking wristwatches—watches without winding knobs, watches whose cases, although gleaming, show the subtle signs of years of wear. And Sally tells me that she is always spotting women, middle-aged or elderly women, wearing skirts or dresses obviously made from multicron.

There's no doubt about it.

Somewhen in the Past that shrewd businesswoman from the Future has the game all laced up.