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THE THOUGHT MACHINE

By RAY CUMMINGS

Author of "Coming of the Giant Germs," etc.

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The Realm of Unthought Things, was Dr. Jenks' goal with his Thought-Machine, but all Butch and Red and Willie wanted from it was a million bucks!

Butch Conners, with Red and Willie at his elbow, crouched in the alley peering through the window into the dim eerie laboratory. The two men in there were standing before a weird-looking apparatus that glistened blue-green in the light.

"Where's the safe?" Willie murmured.

The safe of the wealthy Dr. Jenks didn't seem to be here; or if it was Conners couldn't see it. The window was up a little at the bottom; the voices of the two men inside were audible.

"I call it a Thought-machine," Dr. Jenks was saying. "I've been working on it many years, and it's perfected now—just tonight. There's nothing new, as you know, John, in the scientific theory that thought is actually a tangible vibration. Infinitely tiny, infinitely rapid vibration of the ether, perhaps. That idea was scientifically postulated, back around 1900."

"To account for thought-transference," the other man said. "Someone whose brain happens to be a receiving station for your own particular thought-vibrations—"

"Exactly," Dr. Jenks said warmly. "But I haven't been working on that angle of it. I am convinced, John, that somewhere—call it in a Fourth Dimension if you like—there exists what might be termed a Realm of Unthought Things. A vast storehouse of energy—mental energy. A realm co-existing with ours—unperceived by us because it has a different basic vibration-rate. The great Creator's storehouse. We fatuous humans believe that when we think a thing out—solve some knotty problem—devise something new—discover something—invent a new process or machine—we believe, John, that we have created something. What nonsense! Everything has been created by Omnipotence. All we are doing, scientifically, is sending our questing vibrations of thought out into what, to us, is the Unknown. They reach that realm—that storehouse—derive a new energy there. And come back to us, amplified, and our brain receives them, translates them into what we call Knowledge. We have brought something out of the Realm of Unthought Things—"

"The place where everything is waiting to be thought of," the other man murmured with awe. "If only you could prove—"

"I have, John. A year ago, I saw it. My little apparatus—it was so delicate that its own energy burned it up in a moment. But I caught the radiations of that storehouse. They bathe our realm constantly. They stimulate our brains—our quest for knowledge, we call it. But, scientifically, it's only the physical impact of vibrations against our brain—stimulating our own thought-waves. I made those incoming vibrations visible, for just an instant, John—as

one makes visible the bombardment of a cathode-ray tube, to get a television image. I saw the realm of Unthought Things! And now this machine I've just finished will take me there!"

In the alley outside the laboratory window, Willie murmured impatiently, "Butch, listen, I don't see no safe in there. Hadn't we better—"

Conners silenced him with a muttered oath. By what these men were saying, that Thought-machine might be pretty valuable—more valuable than what was supposed to be in Dr. Jenks' safe. And then a weird idea came to the squat, beetle-browed Butch Conners. It was so weird it gave him the creeps. But he clung to it because it might be possible. My Gawd what a stake to play for! A million dollars? Why, that would be nothing compared to what they could rake in if they pulled off a stunt like this! . . .

Within the laboratory, with the lurid blue-green sheen of light glistening on the weird little apparatus, the two men went on talking. Dr. Jenks was explaining to his friend now how the Thought-machine worked. So simple. Conners, with the lanky young Red and the weazel-faced little Willie beside him, listened intently, eagerly, to what the men inside were saying. So simple to work; Conners was memorizing it now. My Gawd what a haul they'd make! . . .

Luck is a wonderful thing. Conners had always had it; and it stayed with him now. Within half an hour—it was midnight now—Dr. Jenks and his friend left the laboratory; within another hour they planned to use the little Thought-machine, starting upon their weird trip.

"Now's our chance," Conners whispered. "Red, stand down there at the end of the alley. Get inside, Willie—hand that damned thing out to me."

In every job it was the agile Willie who went up the waterpipe or through the window. He handed out the Thought-machine silently and skillfully. Red made sure that nobody saw them as they hoisted it over the alley wall, and ran to their parked car at the edge of the empty lot.

"Well, we got it," Red said dubiously. "What in the hell will we do with it? You think Sam'll pay anything for it? Listen, there ain't a fence in the city who'll touch that fool thing with a ten foot pole. If there ever was a piece of hot goods—"

They were safely in Conner's lodging house room.

"We're not gonna sell it," Conners declared. "Not for a million. Now listen, you mugs—"

Patiently, he explained. The Realm of Unthought Things. Where it was, Conners had no very clear idea. But it was a hidden place, somewhere near here because Dr. Jenks had said this machine would take you to it in what would seem maybe only half an hour. A place where unthought things were hidden. Things like the world's first locomotive, for instance. That had been there and it was here now.

"Listen," Conners was saying earnestly, "maybe you don't get the science of this, but it's simple enough. In this Realm of Unthought Things all the great inventions of the future are lyin' stored. Any one of 'em's worth a million bucks."

"Inventions—such as what?" Willie demanded.

Conners gave him a withering look. "Don't be an idiot. They haven't been thought of yet. How can I describe 'em to you?"

"I get you," the lanky Red put in. "We go there an' get 'em an' bring 'em back—and sell 'em."

It was an amazing idea, but how simple, once you thought of it. "You see," Conners explained, "like he said, this here Thought-machine bathes you in its rays—vibrations or somethin'. Then you get changed, and you go there an' the machine goes with you."

All the intricacies of science, no doubt, might be reduced like that to naked essentials. Dr. Jenks had talked, with considerable detail, concerning the transmutation of the human body atoms—and the atoms of the Thought-machine itself—into a different state of matter. The scientific state, of which thoughts are composed. We call the state, mental—because it is different from what we know as physical. But it has an existence; as tangible as our physical world, to do anything of its own vibration-rate.

Dr. Jenks expounded with a wealth of incontrovertible detail—but all Butch Conners got was the naked, practical fact that here was some place to which you could go, get something valuable and bring it back. (Most of us accept life's scientific wonders with exactly that stark realism. We talk over the telephone; listen to the radio; view the television. And we press a button when we want electric light. Butch Conners was equally practical; it is results that count.)

"I got it all memorized," Conners was saying. "Stand away—give me room an' I'll hook it up. We might's well get goin'."

In their squalid lodging house room, the weird little Thought-machine stood dark and inert, glum and stolid. It was a box-like affair, some two feet cube, mounted on a small wheeled chassis. All its six square faces were plastered with dials, levers and little intricate wire grids. It carried its own batteries, Conners explained. Three wire belts were fastened to it. Conners unhooked them. He put one around his waist; and each of his companions did the same. Then they each selected two wires, and hooked them to their belt. The wires came out of the Thought-machine with a springlike tension.

"We wheel the damned little thing between us," Conners was explaining. "The wires give us about six feet to move around in."

A little knowledge is such a dangerous thing! The Thought-machine stood glum and inert; but presently Conners was fumbling at its starting lever.

"Give it a good shove," Willie urged.

There was a buzz down in the vitals of the weird dark cube, and abruptly it sprang into life—whirring, clicking with a blue-green, violet, red and orange radiance coming to it. The light bathed Conners' room with an eerie glare; bathed the three men who stood with their feet braced. And it permeated the Thought-machine itself so that now, for just a second Conners seemed to see it as a thing alive, monstrously expanding, turning ghost-like . . .

Then Conners was aware of a shock that sent him to the floor in darkness, with Willie and Red on top of him. And then everything went black. Had he fainted?

"Butch, where are you?" It was Willie's frightened voice. He found Willie gripping him in the darkness. Red was here, floating, futilely kicking. Where was the Thought-machine? Conners couldn't see it, but he could seem to feel that he was attached to it and that it was floating here with them.

"My Gawd," Red was faintly murmuring. "I didn't know you felt like this when you were dead."

For just a moment it occurred to Butch Conners that he was sorry to have committed suicide like this. They were in a vast abyss of blackness. But there was movement here—gigantic movement of the blackness rushing forward at them, passing to the sides and closing in behind. And then he realized that they were speeding forward. Rushing with the speed of thought. That was it! Dr. Jenks had said it would be something like that. This was the journey; they were on their way!

“What the hell are you scared of?” Conners murmured contemptuously to his two companions. “Everything’s okay. Sit tight an’ watch—we ought to be gettin’ there pretty soon.”

One may get used to anything. They seemed presently to be aware that they were standing together, wheeling the little machine beside them. They could see it vaguely; it looked inert and dark now; but Conners thought that he could vaguely hear it humming. He touched it and found that it was solid. Willie was solid and so was Red. But the abyss was a rushing shadow.

“Wonder what this Realm of Unthought Things will look like?” Conners muttered. “I should think it oughter be pretty big?”

Was there something in Conners’ mind then—his thoughts of what he would see—making a reality here in this mental darkness? He murmured his ideas excitedly to Willie and Red and presently they all saw the tiny grey, luminous patch, infinitely far ahead of them in the giant distance. An expanding patch as it rushed forward at them, so that all in a moment it was widening out to the sides, above and below, and closing in behind them.

At first there was just a vast greyness, rushing past at railroad speed. And then the grey was taking form; blurred outlines, like mountains of fog in a foggy sky. They were everywhere now, rushing, hurtling in a vast tumbling cataclysm. Then Conners could see valleys between them; and then he realized that the Thought-machine was hurling them into just one valley. Its canyon-like walls were moving more slowly now. Other valleys were visible; and as the speed of everything gradually slackened, there were rifts; pits, and grey cave-mouths.

Avenues into which each of us may probe with his thoughts . . . But Butch Conners knew nothing of that. He was aware only that Red and Willie seemed tugging at him now, as though trying to go a little in some other direction so that he turned upon them angrily:

“Hey, listen, you two—stay with me, dammit.”

“I don’t see no inventions,” Willie muttered. He had his feet planted wide, for a brake against the backward-rushing greyness beneath them. He was staring into the greyness of a shadowy grotto that drifted slowly past. “Say, that’s funny,” he muttered. “That looks like the back room of Mike’s Bar an’ Grill. Damn if it doesn’t.”

Now that should have warned Butch Conners, but it didn’t. Red was silently staring into a little window-like cave-mouth. A foolish grin came to his handsome, slack-jawed face; and he sucked in his breath as though with pleasure at something he thought he saw.

But Conners was thinking only of fabulously valuable inventions. The idea would be to pick some small ones. Good goods come in small packages. That crack was true enough. You couldn’t tell the value by the size. Pick small ones and you could carry a lot.

“Well, we’re here,” Conners said suddenly. There was no doubt of it. The movement had ceased. Everything was solid here now—solid grey ground under them; grey rocks, grey walls of this vast grotto in which now Conners could see that they were standing.

The Realm of Unthought Things! What an amazing place! Everywhere he looked, vast dim corridors stretched off into the grey distance. And every corridor had others branching from it—a million corridors and yet other millions . . . And every corridor had rooms where shadowy things were piled. Vast rooms with millions upon millions of things in each of them. No, that was wrong. Some of the rooms were empty, where things had been taken out. Everything in the world was here once, and people had gotten some of it out . . .

But certainly there was enough left. Maybe more than half. And no cops here to guard it. What a cinch! You just stepped up and took what you liked.

Into Conners' vague but eager contemplation of a loot, unguarded here, that could run into billions of dollars, came Willie's voice:

"Don't seem to be nothin' much here, does there?"

Queer how anybody could say that, when everything that ever would be in the world, was right here!

"You're nuts," Conners muttered. "Everything's here. Let's take a look in this room—see what we want an' grab it."

He wheeled the little Thought-machine forward and dragged Willie and Red along with him. Shadowy things were piled in the gigantic room. Conners could see vast shelves on which grey things were stacked. Millions of things, all standing in neat rows—endless rows one over the other, extending in every direction back into an endless shadowy distance. He went up to one shelf. He stared at just one thing on the shelf. Here was something that might be valuable.

Queer. The thing lay right here before him. When he glanced at it casually it seemed to be a little mechanism of some valuable invention. But now, as he gazed at it to see its details, at once it seemed to be formless, elusive, almost as though nothing was there at all.

Butch Conners stood tense, puzzled, baffled. Damn the thing. And then he reached out to touch it. That was queer too. The thing was here, but as though it was only a vague grey mist—or something not even that solid—his hand went through it, feeling nothing. Wasn't the Thought-machine working? What the devil was the matter?

"Hey lookit! My Gawd, there's Whitey O'Neill!" Conners felt Willie gripping him; and Willie's voice was an excited squeal of fear. "He sees us, Butch! My Gawd, he's pulled his gat on us!"

Red gasped out an oath; and he too was gripping Conners. All three of them tensely stared; and they all saw it. The shadowy recess here was quite obviously the little back room of Mike's Bar and Grill, heavy as always with dangling layers of grey-blue tobacco smoke. The window was open at the bottom. Whitey O'Neill, his tight-lipped mouth grim, his eyes blazing with menace, was there staring at them. And his hand at his hip held his automatic leveled!

"Duck!" Willie hissed in terror. "He's gonna let us have it now, like he always said he would!"

To anyone who conceivably is in the Fourth Dimension, everything else there must of necessity be real. To a shadow, another shadow must of necessity be a thing of substance, perhaps the most substantial thing existing in all the universe. And who shall say it is not also so in our own three-dimensional world—the very existence of which is only conjured by the blended impressions of our five mortal senses? Who can know, apart from our conjuring thoughts, that anything exists at all? To Butch Conners, Willie and Red in that startling moment, there could be no question of the reality of that window of Mike's Bar and Grill; no question of the reality of the murderous Whitey O'Neill, with his three henchmen of the Downtown Mob behind him.

The Realm of Unthought Things! Whatever it had been a moment ago, it was a bedlam of familiar things now . . . The shabby little street was dim; there was no traffic and only one

lone pedestrian furtively lurking at the distant corner of the avenue. One of the Downtown Mob probably.

“Well, you had it coming to you—say your prayers.” Whitey’s smooth ironic voice, dripping like ice-water with murderous menace, sounded in the stillness. His voice mingled with the tinny sound of a piano rattling out swing music which came from another window in the front room of Mike’s. Red had been staring in there a moment ago, absorbed with a girl who was swaying to the music with hands on her hips and a cigarette dangling from her rouged lips. Conners could see her now out of the tail of his eye.

“Don’t move, you’ll get it all the quicker,” Whitey’s voice was ironically saying. “Just say your prayers—”

And Conners didn’t have his gun with him; nor did Red; nor Willie! Caught like rats in a trap! But Whitey didn’t fire. The sound of a police siren split the night air. An oncoming radio car! And then another! People were at every window now. Staring down. Shouting. The lone man at the Avenue corner was running away, scurrying like a rat. From behind Whitey in the window of Mike’s Bar and Grill, one of his damfool mob fired a shot. It went wild; splintered the window glass at the top. Whitey muttered a curse and vanished from the window.

The whole place in there was a turmoil; oaths of men; the screams of women, drinking at the bar and at the tables. Then they were pouring out into the street in a panic . . . The first of the radio cars came howling around the avenue corner, almost on two wheels. Shots began coming from it; a fusillade of gunfire with yellow-red spurts of flame. The leaden slugs splattered the street.

In the midst of the chaos, Conners gripped his two companions convulsively and then shoved at them. “Come on,” he muttered. “Get away from here—”

Red was staring up to where a girl with not much on had come running out onto a fire escape, peering down at the turmoil. Then from inside Mike’s shots were coming; Conners heard the whistle of one going past his ears. He was trying to run, but something stopped him. Something was tugging at his belt. The Thought-machine! He remembered that they were all connected to it by wires. No time to disconnect them.

“Wheel the damned little thing!” he muttered to Willie. “Have to roll it between us.”

Red was still staring up at the girl on the fire escape. He had been muttering about her. Conners gave him a shove. With Willie he tried frantically to heave the little Thought-machine along. They were running away from the avenue around the corner of which the police car had arrived. It had pulled up in front of Mike’s. Coppers were pouring out; running into Mike’s. A big grey ambulance was coming now; it screamed as it pulled to a halt. White-coated internes leaped out from it.

Then from ahead of Conners a fire engine came with its siren screaming and its bell clanging.

“Can’t—go that way!” Willie panted. “Lookit—”

Ahead of them three radio cars had stopped. The whole little street there near the corner was jammed with policemen. Conners tried to duck into an areaway. He forgot Willie and Red; forgot the Thought-machine. The areaway had a flight of rickety steps down to a basement entrance under a butcher shop. Conners miscalculated the steps and catapulted down head first. There was a flash—a weird puff of soundless light all around him. He was aware that the little Thought-machine and its wheeled chassis had come tumbling down the steps

after him—and that Red and Willie had broken their wires and kept on running up the street—running for a split second until the flash enveloped them.

There might have been a split second also when Conners knew that the Thought-machine had crashed into the areaway. And then his thoughts—his human consciousness, abnormal to this realm, out of tune here, dependent upon the vibrations of the apparatus for their very existence—went black, and there was nothing left of him or his universe as he was hurled away.

Science, or fantasy? Who shall say where one ends and the other begins? Are we not all of us, awake and asleep, questing into the Realm of Unthought Things? What Butch Conners, Willie and Red found there—conjured there if you like—was undoubtedly based upon their quality of thought-vibrations. From the vast storehouse of everything, their inherent thought-energy vibrations could only pick up the vibrations of certain things to which by nature they were attuned, transmuting them into reality—a definite reality, for Conners, Red and Willie.

And if *you* went there—what would you find? Everything is there. What would that little spark of nameless Something which is you, have the power to select? To create into *your* reality? Every instant we live, we are doing just that. Conjuring with the power of our thought—perceiving with our senses—what we think is the reality of this world outside us. How different it must be, to each of us! And, Heaven or Hell, we can make it what we will.

[The end of *The Thought Machine* by Raymond King Cummings (as Ray Cummings)]