

THRILLING WONDER STORIES

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THRILLING
NARRATION

THIS ISSUE
**WHITE
CATASTROPHE**
Amazing Novelet
By **ARTHUR J. BURKS**

FEATURING
**SEA
KINGS
OF
Mars**
A Complete Novel
By **LEIGH BRACKETT**

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SEE YOU LATER

by

HENRY KUTTNER

Illustrated by Virgil Finlay.

First published *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, June 1949.

Those Fabulous Hogbens Defy Space and Time Just to Get Old Yancey Tarbell's Debts Paid!



"Shet up an' go 'way," Yancey said

Old Yancey was just about the meanest man in the world. I never seen a feller so downright, sot-in-his-ways, short-sighted, plain, ornery mean. What happened to him reminded me of what another feller told me oncet, quite a spell ago. Fergit exactly who it was—name of Louis, maybe, or could be Tamerlane—but one time he said he wisht the hull world had only one haid, so's he could chop it off.

Trouble with Yancey, he got to the point where he figgered everybody in the world was agin him, and blamed if he warn't right. That was a real spell of trouble, even for us Hogbens.

Oh, Yancey was a regular stinker, all right. The hull Tarbell family was bad-eyed, but Yancey made even them plumb disgusted. He lived up in a little one-room shanty back of the Tarbell place, and wouldn't let nobody near, except to push vittles through the cut-out moon in the door.

Seems like some ten years back there was a new survey or something and the way it worked out, through some funny legal business, Yancey had to prove he'd got squatter's right on his land. He had to prove it by living there for a year or something. 'Bout then he had an argyment with his wife and moved out to the little shack, which was acrost the property line, and said he was a-gonna let the land go right back to the government, for all he cared, and that'd show the hull family. He knew his wife sot store by her turnip patch and was afraid the government would take it away.

The way it turned out, nobody wanted the land anyhow. It was all up and down and had too many rocks in it, but Yancey's wife kept on worritin' and beggin' Yancey to come back, which he was just too mean to do.

Yancey Tarbell couldn't have been oncommon comfortable up in that little shack, but he was short-sighted as he was mean. After a spell Mrs. Tarbell died of being hit on the haid with a stone she was throwing up the slope at the shack, and it bounced back at her. So that left only the eight Tarbell boys and Yancey. He stayed right where he was, though.

He might have stayed there till he shriveled up and went to glory, except the Tarbells started feudin' with us. We stood it as long as we could; on account of they couldn't hurt us. Uncle Les, who was visitin' us, got skittery, though, and said he was tired of flying up like a quail, two or three miles in the air, every time a gun went off behind a bush. The holes in his hide closed up easy enough, but he said it made him dizzy, on account of the air bein' thinned out that high up.

This went on for a while, leaswise, and nobody got hurt, which seemed to rile the eight Tarbell boys. So one night they all come over in a bunch with their shootin' irons and busted their way in. We didn't want no trouble.

Uncle Lem, who's Uncle Les's twin except they was born quite a spell apart, he was asleep for the winter, off in a holler tree somewheres, so he was out of it. But the baby, bless his heart, is gittin' kind of awkward to shift around, bein' as how he's four hunnerd years old and big for his age—'bout three hunnerd pounds, I guess.

We could of all hid out or gone down to Piperville in the valley for a mite, but then there was Grandpaw in the attic, and I'd got sort of fond of the little perfesser feller we keep in a bottle. Didn't want to leave him on account of the bottle might of got smashed in the ruckus, if the eight Tarbell boys was likkered up enough.

The perfesser's cute—even though he never did have much sense. Used to say we was mutants, whatever they are, and kept shooting off his mouth about some people he knowed called chromosomes. Seems like they got mixed up with what the perfesser called hard

radiations and had some young 'uns which was either dominant mutations or Hogbens, but I allus got it mixed up with the Roundhead plot, back when we was living in the old country. Course I don't mean the *real* old country. That got sunk.

So, seein' as how Grandpaw told us to lay low, we waited till the eight Tarbell boys busted down the door, and then we all went invisible, including the baby. Then we waited for the thing to blow over, only it didn't.

After stompin' round and ripping up things a lot, the eight Tarbell boys come down in the cellar. Now that was kind of bad, because we was caught by surprise. The baby had gone invisible, like I say, and so had the tank we keep him in, but the tank couldn't move round fast like we could.

One of the eight Tarbell boys went and banged into it and hit hisself a smart crack on the shank-bone. How he cussed! It was shameful for a growin' boy to hear, except Grandpaw kin outcuss anybody I ever heard, so I didn't larn nothing.

Well—he cussed a lot, jumped around, and all of a sudden his squirrel rifle went off. Must have had a hair-trigger. That woke up the baby, who got scared and let out a yell. It was the blamedest yell I'd ever heerd out of the baby yet, and I've seen men go all white and shaky when he bellers. Our pefesser feller told us onct the baby emitted a subsonic. Imagine!

Anyhow, seven of the eight Tarbell boys dropped daid, all in a heap, without even time to squeal. The eighth one was up at the haid of the cellar steps, and he got all quivery and turned around and ran. I guess he was so dizzy he didn't know where he was heading. 'Fore he knowed it, he was up in the attic, where he stepped right square on Grandpaw.

Now the fool thing was this: Grandpaw was so busy telling us what to do he'd entirely forgot to go invisible hisself. And I guess one look at Grandpaw just plumb finished the eighth Tarbell boy. He fell right down daid as a skun coon. Cain't imagine why, though I got to admit Grandpaw wasn't lookin' his best that week. He'd been sick.

“You all right, Grandpaw?” I asked, sort of shaking him out. He cussed me.

“'Twarn't my fault,” I told him.

“'Sblood!” he said, madlike. “What rabble of canting jolt-heads have I sired? Put me down, you young scoundrel.” So I put him back on the gunny sack and he turned around a couple of times and shut his eyes. After that, he said he was going to take a nap and not to wake him up for nothing, bar Judgment Day. He meant it, too.

So we had to figger out for ourselves what was best to do. Maw said it warn't our fault, and all we could do was pile the eight Tarbell boys in a wheelbarrow and take 'em back home, which I done. Only I got to feeling kind of shy on the way, on account of I couldn't figger out no real polite way to mention what had happened. Besides, Maw had told me to break the news gentle. “Even a polecat's got feelings,” she said.

So I left the wheelbarrow with the eight Tarbell boys in it behind some scrub brush, and I went on up the slope to where I could see Yancey sittin', airin' hisself out in the sun and reading a book. I still hadn't studied out what to say. I just traipsed along slowlike, whistling *Yankee Doodle*. Yancey didn't pay me no mind for a while.

He's a little mean dirty man with chin whiskers. Couldn't be much more'n five feet high. There was tobacco juice on his whiskers, but I might have done old Yancey wrong in figgerin' he was only sloppy. I heard he used to spit in his beard to draw flies, so's he could ketch 'em and pull off their wings.

Without looking, he picked up a stone and flang it past my head. "Shet up an' go 'way," he said.

"Just as you say, Mister Yancey." I told him, mighty relieved, and started to. But then I remembered Maw would probably whup me if I didn't mind her orders, so I sort of moved around quiet till I was in back of Yancey and looking over his shoulder at what he was readin'. It looked like a book. Then I moved around a mite more till I was up-wind of him.

He started cacklin' in his whiskers.

"That's a real purty picture, Mister Yancey," I said.

He was gigglin' so hard it must of cheered him up.

"Ain't it, though," he said, banging his fist on his skinny old rump. "My, my! Makes me feel full o' ginger just to look at it!"

It wasn't a book, though. It was a magazine, the kind they sell down at the village, and it was opened at a picture. The feller that made it could draw real good. Not so good as an artist I knowed once, over in England. He went by the name of Crookshank or Crookback or something like that, unless I'm mistook.

Anyway, this here that Yancey was lookin' at, was quite a picture. It showed a lot of fellers, all exactly alike, coming out of a big machine which I could tell right off wouldn't work. But all these fellers was as like as peas in a pod. Then there was a red critter with bugged-out eyes grabbing a girl, I dunno why. It was sure purty.

"Wisht something like that could really happen," Yancey said.

"It ain't so hard," I told him. "Only that gadget's all wrong. All you need is a wash basin and some old scrap iron."

"Hey?"

"That thing there," I said. "The jigger that looks like it's making one feller into a hull lot of fellers. It ain't built right."

"I s'pose you could do it better?" he snapped, sort of mad.

"We did, once," I said. "I forget what Paw had on his mind, but he owed a man name of Cadmus a little favor. Cadmus wanted a lot of fighting-men in a real hurry, so Paw fixed it so's Cadmus could split hisself up into a passel of soldiers. Shucks, I could do it myself."

"What are you blabberin' about?" Yancey asked. "You ain't lookin' at the right thing. This here red critter's what I mean. See what he's a-gonna do? Gonna chaw that there purty gal's haid off, looks like. See the tusks on him? Heh, heh, heh. I wisht I was a critter like that. I'd chaw up plenty of people."

"You wouldn't chaw up your own kin, though, I bet," I said, seein' a way to break the news gentle.

"'Tain't right to bet," he told me. "Allus pay your debts, fear no man, and don't lay no wagers. Gamblin's a sin. I never made no bets and I allus paid my debts." He stopped, scratched his whiskers, and sort of sighed. "All except'n one," he added, frowning.

"What was that?"

"Oh, I owed a feller something. Only I never could locate him afterwards. Must be nigh on thutty years ago. Seems like I got likkered up and got on a train. Guess I robbed somebody, too, 'cause I had a roll big enough to choke a hoss. Never tried that, come to think of it. You keep hosses?"

"No, sir," I said. "We was talking about your kin."

"Shet up," old Yancey said. "Well, now, I had myself quite a time." He licked his whiskers. "Ever heard tell of a place called New York? In some furrin' country, I guess. Can't

understand a word nobody says. Anyway, that's where I met up with this feller. I often wisht I could find him again. An honest man like me hates to think of dyin' without payin' his lawful debts."

"Did your eight boys owe any debts?" I asked.

He squinted at me, slapped his skinny laig, and nodded.

"Now I know," he said. "Ain't you the Hogben boy?"

"That's me. Saunk Hogben."

"I heard tell 'bout you Hogbens. All witches, ain't you?"

"No, sir."

"I heard what I heard. Hull neighborhood's buzzin'. Hexers, that's what. You get outa here, go on, git!"

"I'm a-goin'," I said. "I just come by to say it's real unfortunate you couldn't chaw up your own kin if'n you was a critter like in that there picture."

"Ain't nobody big enough to stop me!"

"Maybe not," I said, "but they've all gone to glory."

When he heard this, old Yancey started to cackle. Finally, when he got his breath back, he said, "Not them! Them varmints have gone plumb smack to perdition, right where they belong. How'd it happen?"

"It was sort of an accident," I said. "The baby done kilt seven of them and Grandpaw kilt the other, in a way of speakin'. No harm intended."

"No harm done," Yancey said, cackling again.

"Maw sent her apologies and what do you want done with the remains? I got to take the wheelbarrow back home."

"Take 'em away. I don't want 'em. Good riddance to bad rubbish," old Yancey said, so I said all right and started off. But then he yelled out and told me he'd changed his mind. Told me to dump 'em where they was. From what I could make out, which wasn't much because he was laffin' so hard, he wanted to come down and kick 'em.

So I done like he said and then went back home and told Maw, over a mess of catfish and beans and pot-likker. She made some hush puppies, too. They was good. I sot back, figgerin' I'd earned a rest, and thunk a mite, feelin' warm and nice around the middle. I was trying to figger what a bean would feel like, down in my tummy. But it didn't seem to have no feelin's.

It couldn't of been more than a half hour later, when the pig yelled outside like he was gettin' kicked, and then somebody knocked on the door. It were Yancey. Minute he come in; he pulled a bandanna out of his britches and started snifflin'. I looked at Maw, wide-eyed. I couldn't tell her nothin'.

Paw and Uncle Les was drinkin' corn in a corner, and gigglin' a mite. I could tell they was feelin' good because of the way the table kept rocking, the one between them. It wasn't touching neither one, but it kept jigglin', trying to step fust on Paw's toes and then on Uncle Les'. They was doing it inside their haids, trying to ketch the other one off guard.

It was up to Maw, and she invited old Yancey to set down a spell and have some beans. He just sobbed.

"Something wrong, neighbor?" Maw asked, polite.

"It shore is," Yancey said, sniffing. "I'm a real old man."

"You surely are," Maw told him. "Mebbe not as old as Saunk here, but you look awful old."

“Hey?” Yancey said, staring at her. “Saunk? Saunk ain’t more’n seventeen, big as he is.”

Maw near looked embarrassed. “Did I say Saunk?” she covered up, quicklike. “I meant this Saunk’s Grandpaw. His name’s Saunk too.” It wasn’t, even Grandpaw don’t remember what his name was first, it’s been so long. But in his time he’s used a lot of names like Elijah and so forth. I ain’t even sure they had names in Atlantis, where Grandpaw come from in the first place. Numbers or somethin’. It don’t signify, anyhow.

Well, seems like old Yancey kept snufflin’ and groanin’ and moanin’, and made out like we’d kilt his eight boys and he was all alone in the world. He hadn’t cared a mite half an hour ago, though, and I said so. But he pointed out he hadn’t rightly understood what I was talkin’ about then, and for me to shet up.

“Ought to had a bigger fam’ly,” he said. “They used to be two more boys, Zeb and Robbie, but I shot ’em one time. Didn’t like the way they was lookin’ ory-eyed at me. The point is, you Hogbens ain’t got no right to kill my boys.”

“We didn’t go for to do it,” Maw said. “It was more or less an accident. We’d be right happy to make it up to you, one way or another.”

“That’s what I was countin’ on,” old Yancey said. “It seems like the least you could do, after acting up like you done. It don’t matter whether the baby kilt my boys, like Saunk says and he’s a liar. The idea is that I figger all you Hogbens are responsible. But I guess we could call it square if’n you did me a little favor. It ain’t really right for neighbors to hold bad feelings.”

“Any favor you name,” Maw said, “if it ain’t out of line.”

“’Tain’t much,” old Yancey said. “I just want you to split me up into a rabble, sort of temporary.”

“Hey, you been listening to Medea?” Paw said, being drunk enough not to know no better. “Don’t you believe her. That was purely a prank she played on Pelias. After he got chopped up he stayed daid, he didn’t git young like she said he would.”

“Hey?” Yancey said. He pulled that old magazine out of his pocket and it fell open right to that purty picture. “This here,” he said. “Saunk tells me you kin do it. And everybody round here knows you Hogbens are witches. Saunk said you done it once with a feller name of Messy.”

“Guess he means Cadmus,” I said.

Yancey waved the magazine. I saw he had a queer kind of gleam in his eye.

“It shows right here,” he said, wildlike. “A feller steps inside this here gimmick and then he keeps coming out of it, dozens of him, over and over. Witchcraft. Well, I know about you Hogbens. You may fool the city folk, but you don’t fool me none. You’re all witches.”

“We ain’t,” Paw said from the corner. “Not no more.”

“You are so,” Yancey said. “I heard stories. I even seen him—” He pointed right at Uncle Les. “I seen him flying around in the air. And if that ain’t witchcraft I don’t know what is.”

“Don’t you, honest?” I asked. “That’s easy. It’s when you get some—”

But Maw told me to shet up.

“Saunk told me you kin do it,” he said. “An’ I been sittin’ and studyin’ and lookin’ over this here magazine. I got me a fine idea. Now it stands to reason, everybody knows a witch kin be in two places at the same time. Couldn’t a witch mebbe git to be in three places at the same time?”

“Three’s as good as two,” Maw said. “Only there ain’t no witches. It’s like this here science you hear tell about. People make it up out of their haids. It ain’t natcheral.”

“Well, then,” Yancey said, putting the magazine down. “Two or three or a hull passel. How many people are there in the world, anyway?”

“Two billion, one hunnerd fifty million, nine hunnerd and fifty-nine thousand, nine hunnerd and nineteen,” I said.

“Then—”

“Hold on a minute,” I said. “Now it’s two billion, one hunnerd fifty million, nine hunnerd and fifty-nine thousand, nine hunnerd and twenty. Cute little tyke, too.”

“Boy or girl?” Maw asked.

“Boy,” I told her.

“Then why can’t you make me be in two billion whatever it was places at the same time? Mebbe for just a half a minute or so. I ain’t greedy. That’d be long enough, anyhow.”

“Long enough for what?” Maw asked.

Yancey give me a sly look. “I got me a problem,” he said. “I want to find a feller. Trouble is, I dunno I kin find him now. It’s been a awful long time. But I got to, somehow or other. I ain’t a-gonna rest easy in my grave unless I done paid all my debts, and for thutty years I been owin’ this feller somethin’. It lays heavy on my conscience.”

“That’s right honorable of you, neighbor,” Maw said.

Yancey snuffled and wiped his nose on his sleeve.

“It’s a-gonna be a hard job,” he said. “I put it off mebbe a mite too long. The thing is, I was figgerin’ on sendin’ my eight boys out to look for this feller some time, so you kin see why it’s busted me all up, the way them no-good varmints up and got kilt without no warning. How am I gonna find that feller I want now?”

Maw looked troubled and passed Yancey the jug.

“Whoosh!” he said, after a snort. “Tastes like real hellfire for certain. Whoosh!” Then he took another swig, sucked in some air, and scowled at Maw.

“If’n a man plans on sawing down a tree and his neighbor bust the saw, seems to me that neighbor ought to lend his own saw. Ain’t that right?”

“Sure is,” Maw said. “Only we ain’t got eight boys to lend you.”

“You got something better,” Yancey said. “Black, wicked magic, that’s what. I ain’t sayin’ yea or nay ’bout that. It’s your own affair. But seein’ as how you kilt off them wuthless young ’uns of mine, so’s I can’t do like I was intendin’—why, then it looks like you ought to be willing to help me in some other way. ’Long as I kin locate that feller and pay him what I owe him, I’m satisfied. Now ain’t it the gospel truth that you kin split me up into a passel of me-critters?”

“Why, I guess we kin do that, I s’pose,” Maw said.

“An’ ain’t it gospel that you kin fix it so’s every dang one of them me-critters will travel real fast and see everybody in the hull entire world?”

“That’s easy,” I said.

“If’n I kin git to do that,” Yancey said, “it’d be easy for me to spot that feller and give him what he’s got comin’ to him.” He snuffled. “I allus been honest. I’m skeered of dyin’ unless I pay all my debts fust. Danged if’n I want to burn through all e-ternity like you sinful Hogbens are a-gonna.”

“Shucks,” Maw said, “I guess we kin help out, neighbor, bein’ as how you feel so het-up about it. Yes, sir, we’ll do like you want.”

Yancey brightened up considerable.

“Promise?” he asked. “Swear it, on your word an’ honor?”

Maw looked kind of funny, but Yancey pulled out his bandanna again, so she busted down and made her solemn promise. Right away Yancey cheered up.

“How long will the spell take?” he asked.

“There ain’t no spell,” I said. “Like I told you, all I need is some scrap iron and a wash basin. ’Twon’t take long.”

“I’ll be back real soon,” Yancey said, sort of cackling, and run out, laffin’ his haid off. Goin’ through the yard he kicked out at a chicken, missed, and luffed some more. Guess he was feelin’ purty good.

“You better go on and make that gadget so’s it’ll be ready,” Maw told me. “Git goin’.”

“Yes, Maw,” I said, but I sot there for a second or two, studyin’. She picked up the broomstick.

“You know, Maw—

“Well?”

“Nothin’,” I said, and dodged the broomstick. I went on out, trying to git clear what was troublin’ me. Something was, only I couldn’t tell what. I felt kind of unwillin’ to make that there gadget, which didn’t make right good sense, since there didn’t seem to be nothing really wrong.

I went out behind the woodshed, though, and got busy. Took me ’bout ten minutes, but I didn’t hurry much. Then I come back to the house with the gadget and said I was done. Paw told me to shet up.

Well, I sot there and looked at the gimmick and still felt trouble on my mind. Had to do with Yancey, somehow or other. Finally I noticed he’d left his old magazine behind, so I picked it up and started reading the story right under that picture, trying to make sense out of it. Durned if I could.

It was all about some crazy hillbillies who could fly. Well, that ain’t no trick, but what I couldn’t figger out was whether the feller that writ it was trying to be funny or not. Seems to me people are funny enough anyhow, without trying to make ’em funnier.

Besides, serious things ought to be treated serious, and from what our pefesser feller told me once, there’s an awful lot of people what really believe in science and take it tremendous serious. He allus got a holy light in his eye when he talked about it. The only good thing about that story, it didn’t have no girls in it. Girls make me feel funny.

I didn’t seem to be gittin’ nowheres, so I went down to the cellar and played with the baby. He’s kind of big for his tank these days. He was glad to see me. Winked all four of his eyes at me, one after the other. Real cute.

But all the time there was something about that magazine that kept naggin’ at me. I felt itchy inside, like when before they had that big fire in London, some while ago. Quite a spell of sickness they had then, too.

It reminded me of something Grandpaw had told me once, that he’d got the same sort of skitters just before Atlantis foundered. Course, Grandpaw kin sort of look into the future—which, ain’t much good, really, on account of it keeps changing around. I can’t do that myself yet. I ain’t growed up enough. But I had a kind of hunch that something real bad was around, only it hadn’t happened quite yet.

I almost decided to wake up Grandpaw, I felt so troubled. But around then I heard trompin' upstairs, so I clomb up to the kitchen, and there was Yancey, swiggin' down some corn Maw'd give him. Minute I looked at the old coot, I got that feelin' agin.

Yancey said "Whoosh!", put down the jug, and wanted to know if we was ready. So I pointed at the gadget I'd fixed up and said that was it, all right, and what did he think about it?

"That little thing?" Yancey asked. "Ain't you a-gonna call up Old Scratch?"

"Ain't no need," Uncle Les said. "Not with you here, you little water moccasin, you."

Yancey looked right pleased. "That's me," he said. "Mean as a moccasin, and fulla pizen. How does it work?"

"Well," I said, "it sort of splits you up into a lot of Yanceys, is all."

Paw had been settin' quiet, but he must of tuned in inside the haid of some perfesser somewheres, on account of he started talkin' foolish. He don't know any four-bit words hisself.

I wouldn't care to know 'em myself, bein' as how they only mix up what's simple as cleanin' a trout.

"Each human organism," Paw said, showing off like crazy, "is an electro-magnetic machine, emitting a pattern of radiations, both from brain and body. By reversing polarity each unit of you, Yancey, will be automatically attracted to each already-existent human unit, since unlikes attract. But first you will step on Saunk's device and your body will be broken down—"

"Hey," Yancey yelped.

Paw went right on, proud as a peacock.

"—into a basic electronic matrix, which can then be duplicated to the point of infinity, just as a type-face may print millions of identical copies of itself in reverse—negative instead of positive.

"Since space is no factor where electronic wave-patterns are concerned, each copy will be instantly attracted to the space occupied by every other person in the world," Paw was goin' on, till I like to bust. "But since two objects cannot occupy the same space-time, there will be an automatic spacial displacement, and each Yancey-copy will be repelled to approximately two feet away from each human being."

"You forgot to draw a pentagram," Yancey said, looking around nervouslike. "That's the awfulest durn spell I ever heard in all my born days. I thought you said you wasn't gonna call up Old Scratch?"

Maybe it was on account of Yancey was lookin' oncommon like Old Scratch hisself just then, but I just couldn't stand it no longer—having this funny feeling inside me. So I woke up Grandpaw. I did it inside my haid, the baby helpin', so's nobody noticed. Right away there was a stirrin' in the attic, and Grandpaw heaved hisself around a little and woke up. Next thing I knew he was cussing a blue streak.

Well, the hull fam'ly heard that, even though Yancey couldn't. Paw stopped showin' off and shet up.

"Dullards!" Grandpaw said, real mad. "RapsCALLIONS! Certes, y-wist it was no wonder I was having bad dreams. Saunk, you've put your foot in it now. Have you no sense of process? Didn't you realize what this caitiff shmo was planning, the stinkard? Get in the groove, Saunk, ere manhood's state shall find thee unprepared." Then he added something in Sanskrit. Livin' as long as Grandpaw has, he gits mixed up in his talk sometimes.

“Now Grandpaw,” Maw thunk, “what’s Saunk been and done?”

“You’ve all done it,” Grandpaw yelled. “Couldn’t you add cause and effect? Saunk, what of the picture y-wrought in Yancey’s pulp mag? Wherefore hys-sodein change of herte, when obviously the stinkard hath no more honor than a lounge lizard? Do you want the world depopulated before its time? Ask Yancey what he’s got in his britches pocket, dang you!”

“Mister Yancey,” I said, “what have you got in your britches pocket?”

“Hey?” he said, reaching down and hauling out a big, rusty monkey-wrench. “You mean this? I picked it up back of the shed.” He was lookin’ real sly.

“What you aimin’ to do with that?” Maw asked, quick.

Yancey give us all a mean look. “Ain’t no harm tellin’ you,” he said. “I aim to hit everybody, every durn soul in the hull entire world, right smack on top of the haid, and you promised to help me do it.”

“Lawks a-mercy,” Maw said.

“Yes, siree,” Yancey giggled. “When you hex me, I’m a-gonna be in every place everybody else is, standing right behind ’em. I’ll whang ’em good. Thataway, I kin be sure I’ll git even. One of them people is just bound to be the feller I want, and he’ll git what I been owin’ him for thutty years.”

“What feller?” I said. “You mean the one you met up with in New York, you was telling me about? I figgered you just owed him some money.”

“Never said no sech thing,” Yancey snapped. “A debt’s a debt, be it money or a bust in the haid. Ain’t nobody a-gonna step on my corn and git away with it, thutty years or no thutty years.”

“He stepped on your corn?” Paw asked. “That’s all he done?”

“Yup. I was likkered up at the time, but I recollect I went down some stairs to where a lot of trains was rushing around under the ground.”

“You was drunk,” Paw chimed in.

“I sure was,” Yancey said. “Couldn’t be no sech things—trains runnin’ underground! But I sure as shootin’ wasn’t dreamin’ ’bout the feller what stepped on my corn. Why, I kin still feel it. I got mad. It was so crowded I couldn’t even move for a mite, and I never even got a good look at the feller what stepped on me.

“By the time I hit out with my stick, he must of got away. Never knew what he looked like. Might have been a female, but that don’t signify. I just ain’t a-gonna die till I pay my debts and git even with everybody what ever done me dirt. I allus got even with every dang soul what done me wrong, and most everybody I ever met did.”

Riled up a hull lot was Yancey Tarbell. He went right on from there:

“So I figgered, since I never found out just who this feller was what stepped on my corn, I better make downright sure and take a lick at everybody, man, woman, and child.”

“Now you hold your hosses,” I said. “Ain’t no children could have been alive thutty years ago, an’ you know it.”

“Makes no difference,” Yancey snapped. “I was a-thinkin’, and I got an awful idea. Suppose that feller went and died? Thutty years is a long time. But then I figgered, even if he did up and die, chances are he got married and had kids fust. If’n I can’t git even with him, I kin git even with his chillun. The sins of the father—that’s Scripture. If’n I hit everybody in the world, I can’t go fur wrong.”

“You ain’t hitting no Hogbens,” Maw said. “None of us been in New York since afore you was born. I mean, we ain’t never been there. So you kin just leave us out of it. How’d you like to git a million dollars instead? Or maybe you want to git young again or something like that? We kin fix that for you instead, if you’ll give up this here wicked idea.”

“I ain’t a-gonna,” Yancey said, stubborn. “You give your gospel word to help me.”

“Well, we ain’t bound to keep a promise like that,” Maw said, but then Grandpaw chimed in from the attic.

“The Hogben word is sacred,” he told us. “It’s our bond. We must keep our promise to this booby. But, having kept it, we are not bound farther.”

“Oh?” I said, sort of gittin’ a thought. “That bein’ the case—Mister Yancey, just what did we promise, exact?”

He waved the monkey wrench at me.

“I’m a-gonna git split up into as many people as they are people in the world, and I’m a-gonna be standing right beside all of ’em. You give your word to help me do that. Don’t you try to wiggle out of it.”

“I ain’t wigglin’,” I said. “Only we better git it clear, so’s you’ll be satisfied and won’t have no kick comin’. One thing, though. You got to be the same size as everybody you visit.”

“Hey?”

“I kin fix it easy. When you step on this here gadget, there’ll be two billion, one hunderd fifty million, nine hunderd and fifty-nine thousand, nine hunderd and twenty Yanceys all over the world. S’posin’, now, one of these here Yanceys finds himself standing next to a big feller seven feet tall? That wouldn’t be so good, would it?”

“I want to be eight feet high,” Yancey said.

“No, sir. The Yancey who goes to visit a feller that high is a-gonna be just that high hisself, exactly. And the one who visits a baby only two feet high is a-gonna be only two feet high hisself. What’s fair’s fair. You agree to that, or it’s all off. Only other thing, you’ll be just exactly as strong as the feller you’re up agin.”

I guess he seen I was firm. He hefted the monkey wrench.

“How’ll I git back?” he asked.

“We’ll take care of that,” I said. “I’ll give you five seconds. That’s long enough to swing a monkey wrench, ain’t it?”

“It ain’t very long.”

“If’n you stay longer, somebody might hit back.”

“So they might,” he said, turnin’ pale under the dirt. “Five seconds is plenty.”

“Then if’n we do just that, you’ll be satisfied? You won’t have no kick comin’?”

He swung the monkey wrench and laffed.

“Suits me fine and dandy,” he said. “I’ll bust their haids good. Heh, heh, heh.”

“Then you step right on here,” I said, showin’ him. “Wait a mite, though. I better try it fust, to make sure it works right.”

I picked up a stick of firewood from the box by the stone and winked at Yancey. “You git set,” I said. “The minute I git back, you step right on here.”

Maw started to say something, but all of a sudden Grandpaw started laffin’ in the attic. I guess he was lookin’ into the future again.

I stepped on the gadget, and it worked slick as anything. Afore I could blink, I was split up into two billion, one hunderd and fifty million, nine hunderd and fifty-nine thousand, nine hunderd and nineteen Saunk Hogbens.

There was one short, o' course, on account of I left out Yancey, and o' course the Hogbens ain't listed in no census. But here I was, standin' right in front of everybody in the hull entire world except the Hogben fam'ly and Yancey hisself. It was plumb on-reasonable.

Never did I know there was so many faces in this world! They was all colors, some with whiskers, some without, some with clothes on, some naked as needles, some awful big and some real short, and half of them was in daylight and half was in the night time. I got downright dizzy.

For just a flash, I thought I could make out some of the people I knowed down in Piperville, including the sheriff, but he got mixed up with a lady in a string of beads who was chasing a kangaroo-critter, and she turned into a man dressed up fit to kill who was speechifyin' in a big room somewheres.

My, I was dizzy.

I got a-hold of myself and it was about time, too, for just about then near everybody in the hull world noticed me. Course, it must have looked like I'd popped out of thin air, right in front of them, real sudden, and—well, you ever had near two billion, a hunnerd and fifty million, nine hunnerd and fifty-nine thousand, nine hunnerd and nineteen people looking you right square in the eye? It's just awful. I forgot what I'd been intending. Only I sort of heard Grandpaw's voice telling me to hurry up.

So I pushed that stick of firewood I was holding, only now it was two billion, a hunnerd and fifty million, nine hunnerd and fifty-nine thousand, nine hunnerd and nineteen sticks, into just about the same number of hands and let go. Some of the people let go too, but most of 'em held on to it. Then I tried to remember the speech I was a-gonna make, telling 'em to git in the fust lick at Yancey afore he could swing that monkey wrench.

But I was too confounded. It was funny. Having all them people looking right at me made me so downright shy, I couldn't even open my mouth. What made it worse was that Grandpaw yelled I had only one second left, so there wasn't even time to make a speech. In just one second, I was a-gonna flash back to our kitchen, and then old Yancey was all ready to jump in the gadget and swing that monkey wrench. And I hadn't warned nobody. All I'd done was give everybody a little old stick of firewood.

My, how they stared! I felt plumb naked. Their eyes bugged right out. And just as I started to thin out around the edges like a biscuit, I—well, I don't know what come over me. I guess it was feeling so uncommon shy. Maybe I shouldn't of done it, but—

I done it!

Then I was back in the kitchen. Grandpaw was laffin' fit to kill in the attic. The old gentleman's got a funny kind of sense of humor, I guess. I didn't have no time for him then, though, for Yancey jumped past me and into the gadget. And he disappeared into thin air, the way I had. Split up, like I'd been, into as many people as there was in the world, and standing right in front of 'em.

Maw and Paw and Uncle Les was looking at me real hard. I sort of shuffled.

"I fixed it," I said. "Seems like a man who's mean enough to hit little babies over the haid deserves what he's"—I stopped and looked at the gadget—"what he's been and got," I finished, on account of Yancey had tumbled out of thin air, and a more whupped-up old rattlesnake I never seen. My!

Well, I guess purty near everybody in the hull world had took a whang at Mister Yancey. He never even had a chance to swing that monkey wrench. The hull world had got in the fust

lick.

Yes, siree. Mister Yancey looked plumb ruined.

But he could still yell. You could of heard him a mile off. He kept screamin' that he'd been cheated. He wanted another chance, and this time he was taking his shootin'-iron and a bowie knife. Finally Maw got disgusted, took him by the collar, and shook him up till his teeth rattled.

"Quotin' Scripture!" she said, madlike. "You little dried-up scraggle of downright pizen! The Good Book says an eye for an eye, don't it? We kept our word, and there ain't nobody kin say different."

"That's the truth, certes," Grandpaw chimed in from the attic.

"You better go home and git some arnicy," Maw said, shakin' Yancey some more. "And don't you come round here no more, never again, or we'll set the baby on you."

"But I didn't git even!" Yancey squalled.

"I guess you ain't a-gonna, ever," I said. "You just can't live long enough to git even with everybody in the hull world, Mister Yancey."

By and by, that seemed to strike Yancey all in a heap. He turned a rich color like beet soup, made a quackin' noise, and started cussin'. Uncle Les reached for the poker, but there wasn't no need.

"The hull dang world done me wrong!" Yancey squealed, and clapped his hands to his haid. "I been flummoxed! Why in tarnation did they hit me fust? There's something funny about—"

"Hush up," I said, all of a sudden realizing the trouble wasn't over, like I'd thought. "Listen. Anybody hear anything from the village?"

Even Yancey shet up whilst we listened. "Don't hear a thing," Maw said.

"Saunk's right," Grandpaw put in. "That's what's wrong."

Then everybody got it, that is, everybody except Yancey. Because about now there ought to of been quite a rumpus down at Piperville. Don't forgit me and Yancey went visitin' the hull world, which includes Piperville, and people don't take a thing like that quiet. There ought to of been some yellin' going on, at least.

"What are you all standin' round dumb as mutes for?" Yancey busted out. "You got to help me git even!"

I didn't pay him no mind. I sot down and studied the gadget. After a minute I seen what it was I'd done wrong. I guess Grandpaw seen it about as quick as I did. You oughta heard him laff. I hope it done the old gentleman good. He has a right peculiar sense of humor sometimes.

"I sort of made a mistake in this gadget, Maw," I said. "That's why it's so quiet down in Piperville."

"Aye, by my troth," Grandpaw said, still laffing. "Saunk had best seek cover. Twenty-three skiddoo, kid."

"You done something you shouldn't, Saunk?" Maw said.

"Blabber blabber blabber," Yancey yelled. "I want my rights. I want to know what it was Saunk done that made everybody in the world hit me over the haid! He must of done something. I never had no time to—"

"Now you leave the boy alone, Mister Yancey," Maw said. "We done what we promised, and that's enough. You git outa here and simmer down afore you say something you regret."

Paw winked at Uncle Les, and before Yancey could yell back at Maw the table sort of bent its laigs down like they had knees in 'em and snuck up behind Yancey real quiet. Then Paw said to Uncle Les, "All together now, let 'er go!" and the table straightened up its laigs and give Yancey a turrible bunt that sent him flying out the door.

The last we heard of Yancey was the whoops he kept lettin' out whenever he hit the ground all the way down the hill. He rolled half the way to Piperville, I found out later. And when he got there he started hittin' people over the haid with his monkey wrench.

I guess he figgered he might as well make a start the hard way.

They put him in jail for a spell to cool off, and I guess he did, 'cause afterward he went back to that little shack of his'n. I hear he don't do nothin' but set around with his lips movin', trying to figger a way to git even with the hull world. I don't calc'late he'll ever hit on it, though.

At that time, I wasn't payin' him much mind. I had my own troubles. As soon as Paw and Uncle Les got the table back in place, Maw lit into me again.

"Tell me what happened, Saunk," she said. "I'm afeard you done something wrong when you was in that gadget. Remember you're a Hogben, son. You got to behave right when the hull world's lookin' at you. You didn't go and disgrace us in front of the entire human race, did you, Saunk?"

Grandpaw laffed agin. "Not yet, he hasn't," he said. Then down in the basement I heard the baby give a kind of gurgle and I knowed he could see it too. That's surprisin', kinda. We never know for sure about the baby. I guess he really kin see a little bit into the future too.

"I just made a little mistake, Maw," I said. "Could happen to anybody. It seems the way I fixed that gadget up, it split me into a lot of Saunks, all right, but it sent me ahead into next week too. That's why there ain't no ruckus yet down in Piperville."

"My land!" Maw said. "Child, you do things so careless!"

"I'm sorry, Maw," I said. "Trouble is, too many people in Piperville know me. I'd better light out for the woods and pick me a nice holler tree. I'll be needin' it, come next week."

"Saunk," Maw said, "you been up to somethin'. Sooner or later I'll find out, so you might as well tell me now."

Well, shucks, I knowed she was right. So I told her, and I might as well tell you, too. You'll find out anyhow, come next week. It just shows you can't be too careful. This day week, everybody in the hull world is a-gonna be mighty surprised when I show up out of thin air, hand 'em all a stick of firewood, and then r'ar back and spit right smack in their eye.

I s'pose that there two billion, one hunnerd and fifty million, nine hunnerd and fifty-nine thousand, nine hunnerd and nineteen includes everybody on earth.

Everybody!

Sometime next week, I figger.

See you later.

[The end of *See You Later* by Henry Kuttner]