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IMAGINATION

Stories of

SCIENCE and FANTASY

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**MEET ME IN
TOMORROW**

By GUY ARCHETTE

MACK REYNOLDS • DAY KEENE
JOHN BEYNON • BETSY CURTIS

IMAGINATION

*Stories of
SCIENCE
and FANTASY*

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TECHNICAL SLIP

By John Beynon

Just as he was about to die he received a chance to live his life over again. It was an oversight of course—with a few complications!

“Prendergast” said the Departmental Director, briskly, “there’ll be that Contract XB2832 business arising today. Look after it, will you?”

“Very good, sir.”

Robert Finnerson lay dying. Two or three times before he had been under the impression that he might be dying. He had been frightened, and blusterously opposed to the idea; but this time it was different, he did not bluster, for he had no doubt that the time had come. Even so, he was still opposed; it was under marked protest that he acknowledged the imminence of the nonsensical arrangement.

It was absurd to die at sixty, anyway, and, as he saw it, it would be even more wasteful to die at eighty. A scheme of things in which the wisdom acquired in living was simply scrapped in this way was, to say the least, grossly inefficient. What did it mean?—That somebody else would now have to go through the process of learning all that life had already taken sixty years to teach him; and then be similarly scrapped in the end. No wonder the race was slow in getting anywhere—if, indeed, it were getting anywhere—with this cat-and-mouse, ten-forward-and-nine-back system.

Lying back on one’s pillows and waiting for the end in the quiet, dim room, the whole ground plan of existence appeared to suffer from a basic futility of conception. It was a matter to which some of these illustrious scientists might well pay more attention—only, of course, they were always too busy fiddling with less important matters, until they came to his present pass, when they would find it was too late to do anything about it.

Since his reflections had revolved thus purposelessly, and several times, upon somewhat elliptical orbits, it was not possible for him to determine at what stage of them he became aware that he was no longer alone in the room. The feeling simply grew that there was someone else there, and he

turned his head on the pillow to see who it might be. The thin clerkly man whom he found himself regarding, was unknown to him, and yet, somehow, unsurprising.

“Who are you?” Robert Finnerson asked him.

The man did not reply immediately. He looked about Robert’s own age, with a face, kindly but undistinguished, beneath hair that had thinned and grayed. His manner was diffident, but the eyes which regarded Robert through modest gold-rimmed spectacles were observant.

“Pray do not be alarmed, Mr. Finnerson,” he requested.

“I’m not at all alarmed,” Robert told him testily. “I simply asked who you are.”

“My name is Prendergast—not, of course, that that matters—.”

“Never heard of you. What do you want?” Robert said.

Prendergast told him modestly:

“My employers wish to lay a proposition before you, Mr. Finnerson.”

“Too late now for propositions,” Robert replied shortly.

“Ah, yes, for most propositions, of course, but I think this one may interest you.”

“I don’t see how—all right, what is it?”

“Well, Mr. Finnerson, we—that is, my employers—find that you are—er—scheduled for demise on April 20th, 1963. That is, of course, tomorrow.”

Indeed,” said Robert calmly, and with a feeling that he should have been more surprised than he felt. “I had come to much the same conclusion myself.”

“Quite, sir,” agreed the other. “But our information also is that you are opposed to this—er—schedule.”

“Indeed!” repeated Mr. Finnerson “How subtle! If that’s all you have to tell me, Mr. Pendlebuss—.”

“Prendergast, sir. No, that is just by way of assuring you of our grasp of the situation. We are also aware that you are a man of considerable means, and, well, there’s an old saying that ‘you can’t take it with you’, Mr. Finnerson.”

Robert Finnerson looked at his visitor more closely.

“Just what are you getting at?” he inquired.

“Simply this, Mr. Finnerson. My firm is in a position to offer a revision of schedule—for a consideration.”

Robert was already far enough from his normal for the improbable to have shed its improbability. It did not occur to him to question its possibility. He said:

“What revision—and what consideration?”

“Well, there are several alternative forms,” explained Prendergast, “but the one we recommend for your consideration is our Reversion Policy. It is quite our most comprehensive benefit—introduced originally on account of the large numbers of persons in positions similar to yours who were noticed to express the wish ‘if only I had my life to live over again’.”

“I see,” said Robert, and indeed he did. The fact that he had read somewhere or other of legendary bargains of the kind went a long way to disperse the unreality of the situation. “And the catch is?” he added.

Prendergast allowed a trace of disapproval to show.

“The *consideration*,” he said with some slight stress upon the word. “The consideration in respect of a Reversion is a downpayment to us of seventy-five per cent of your present capital.”

“Seventy-five per cent! What is this firm of yours?”

Prendergast shook his head.

“You would not recall it, but it is a very old-established concern. We have had—and do have—numbers of notable clients. In the old days we used to work on a basis of—well—I suppose you would call it barter. But with the rise of commerce we changed our methods. We have found it much more convenient to have investable capital than to accumulate souls—especially at their present depressed market value. It is a great improvement in all ways. We benefit considerably, and it costs you nothing but money you must lose anyway—and you are still entitled to call your soul your own; as far, that is, as the law of the land permits. Your heirs will be a trifle disappointed, that’s all.”

The last was not a consideration to distress Robert Finnerson.

“My heirs are around the house like vultures already,” he said. “I don’t in the least mind their having a little shock. Let’s get down to details, Mr.

Snodgrass.”

“Prendergast,” said the visitor, patiently. “Well now, the usual method of payment is this . . .”

It was a whim, or what appeared to be a whim, which impelled Mr. Finnerson to visit Sands Square. Many years had passed since he had seen it, and though the thought of a visit had risen from time to time there had seemed never to be the leisure. But now in the convalescence which followed the remarkable, indeed, miraculous recovery which had given such disappointment to his relatives, he found himself for the first time in years with an abundance of spare hours on his hands.

He dismissed the taxi at the corner of the Square, and stood for some minutes surveying the scene with mixed feelings. It was both smaller and shabbier than his memory of it. Smaller, partly because most things seem smaller when revisited after a stretch of years, and partly because the whole of the south side including the house which had been his home was now occupied by an overbearing block of offices: shabbier because the new block emphasized the decrepitude of those Georgian terraces which had survived the bombs and had therefore had to outlast their expected span by twenty or thirty years.

But if most things had shrunk, the trees now freshly in leaf had grown considerably, seeming to crowd the sky with their branches, though there were fewer of them. A change was the bright banks of color from tulips in well tended beds which had grown nothing but tired looking laurels before. Greatest change of all, the garden was no longer forbidden to all but the residents, for the iron railings so long employed in protecting the privileged had gone for scrap in 1941, and never been replaced.

In a recollective mood and with a trace of melancholy, Mr. Finnerson crossed the road and began to stroll again along the once familiar paths. It pleased and yet saddened him to discover the semi-concealed gardener’s shed looking just as it had looked fifty years ago. It displeased him to notice the absence of the circular seat which used to surround the trunk of a familiar tree. He wandered on, noting this and remembering that, but in general remembering too much, and beginning to regret that he had come. The garden was pleasant—better looked after than it had been—but, for him, too full of ghosts. Overall there was a sadness of glory lost, with a surrounding shabbiness.

On the east side a well remembered knoll survived. It was, he recalled as he walked slowly up it, improbably reputed to be a last fragment of the earthworks which London had prepared against the threat of Royalist attack.

In the circle of bushes which crowned it, a hard, slatted chair rested in seclusion. The fancy took him to hide in this spot as he had been wont to hide there half a century before. With his handkerchief he dusted away the pigeon droppings and the looser grime. The relief he found in the relaxation of sitting down made him wonder if he had not been overestimating his recuperation. He felt quite unusually weary. . . .

Pace was splintered by a girl's insistent voice.

"Bobby!" she called. "Master Bobby, where are you?"

Mr. Finnerson was irritated. The voice jarred on him. He tried to disregard it as it called again.

Presently a head appeared among the surrounding bushes. The face was a girl's; above it a bonnet of dark blue straw; around it navy blue ribbons, joining in a bow on the left cheek. It was a pretty face, though at the moment it wore a professional frown.

"Oh, there you are, you naughty boy. Why didn't you answer when I called?"

Mr. Finnerson looked behind him to find the child addressed. There was none. As he turned back he became aware that the chair had gone. He was sitting on the ground, and the bushes seemed taller than he had thought.

"Come along now. You'll be late for your tea," added the girl. She seemed to be looking at Mr. Finnerson himself.

He lowered his eyes, and received a shock. His gaze instead of encountering a length of neatly striped trouser, rested upon blue serge shorts, a chubby knee, white socks and a childish shoe. He waggled his foot, and that in the childish shoe responded. Forgetting everything else in this discovery, he looked down his front at a fawn coat with large, flat brass buttons. At the same moment he became aware that he was viewing everything from beneath the curving brim of a yellow straw hat.

The girl gave a sound of impatience. She pushed through the bushes and emerged as a slender figure in a long, navy blue cape. She bent down. A hand, formalized at the wrist by a stiff cuff, emerged from the folds of the cape and fastened upon his upper arm. He was dragged to his feet.

“Come along now,” she repeated. “Don’t know what’s come over you this afternoon, I’m sure.”

Clear of the bushes, she shifted her hold to his hand, and called again.

“Barbara. Come along.”

Robert tried not to look. Something always cried out in him as if it had been hurt when he looked at Barbara. But in spite of his will his head turned. He saw the little figure in a white frock turn its head, then it came tearing across the grass looking like a large doll. He stared. He had almost forgotten that she had once been like that: as well able to run as any other child, and forgotten, too, what a pretty, happy little thing she had been.

It was quite the most vivid dream he had ever had. Nothing in it was distorted or absurd. The houses sat with an air of respectability around the quiet square. On all four sides they were of a pattern, with variety only in the colors of the Spring painting that most of them had received. The composite sounds of life about him were in a pattern, too, that he had forgotten; no rising whine of gears, no revving of engines, no squeal of tires; instead, a background with an utterly different cast blended from the clopping of innumerable hooves, light and heavy, and the creak and rattle of carts. Among it was the jingle of chains and bridles, and somewhere in a nearby street a hurdy-gurdy played a once familiar tune. The beds of tulips had vanished, the wooden seat encircled the old tree as before, the spiked railings stood as he remembered them, stoutly preserving the garden’s privacy. He would have liked to pause and taste the flavor of it all again, but that was not permissible.

“Don’t drag, now,” admonished the voice above him. “We’re late for your tea now, and Cook won’t like it.”

There was a pause while she unlocked the gate and let them out. Then with their hands in hers they crossed the road toward a familiar front door, magnificent with new shiny green paint and bright brass knocker. It was a little disconcerting to find that their way in lay by the basement steps and not through this impressive portal.

In the nursery everything was just as it had been, and he stared around him, remembering.

“No time for mooning, if you want your tea,” said the voice above.

He went to the table, but he continued to look around, recognizing old friends. The rocking-horse with its lower lip missing. The tall wire fire-guard, and the rug in front of it. The three bars across the window. The dado procession of farmyard animals. The gas lamp purring gently above the table. A calendar showing a group of three very woolly kittens, and below, in red and black, the month—May, 1910. 1910, he reflected; that would mean he was just seven.

At the end of the meal—a somewhat dull meal, perhaps, but doubtless wholesome—Barbara asked:

“Are we going to see Mummy now?”

Nurse shook her head.

“Not now. She’s out. So’s your Daddy. I expect they’ll look in at you when they get back—if you’re good.”

The whole thing was unnaturally clear and detailed: the bathing, the putting to bed. Forgotten things came back to him with an uncanny reality which be-mused him. Nurse checked her operations once to look at him searchingly and say:

“Well, you’re a quiet one tonight, aren’t you? I hope you’re not sickening for something.”

There was still no fading of the sharp impressions when he lay in bed with only the flickering night-light to show the familiar room. The dream was going on for a long time—but then dreams could do that, they could pack a whole sequence into a few seconds. Perhaps this was a special kind of dream, a sort of finale while he sat out there in the garden on that seat: it might be part of the process of dying—the kind of thing people meant when they said ‘his whole life flashed before him’, only it was a precious slow flash. Quite likely he had overtired himself: after all he was still only convalescent and . . .

At that moment the thought of that clerkly little man, Pendlesomething—no, Prendergast—recurred to him. It struck him with such abrupt force that he sat up in bed, looking wildly around. He pinched himself—people always did that to make sure they were awake, though he had never understood why they should not dream they were pinching themselves. It certainly felt as if he were awake. He got out of bed and stood looking about him. The floor was hard and solid under his feet, the chill in the air quite perceptible, the regular breathing of Barbara, asleep in her cot, perfectly audible. After a few moments of bewilderment he got slowly back into bed.

People who wish: “If only I had my life over again.” That was what that fellow Prendergast had said . . .

Ridiculous . . . utterly absurd, of course—and, anyway, life did not begin at seven years of age—such a preposterous thing could not happen, it was against all the laws of Nature. And yet suppose . . . just suppose . . . that once, by some multi-millionth chance . . .

Bobby Finnerson lay still, quietly contemplating an incredible vista of possibilities. He had done pretty well for himself last time merely by intelligent perception, but now, armed with foreknowledge, what might he not achieve! In on the ground floor with radio, plastics, synthetics of all kinds—with prescience of the coming wars, of the boom following the first—and of the 1929 slump. Aware of the trends. Knowing the weapons of the second war before it came, ready for the advent of the atomic age. Recalling endless oddments of useful information acquired haphazardly in fifty years. Where was the catch? Uneasily, he felt sure that there must be a catch: something to stop him from communicating or using his knowledge. You couldn’t disorganize history, but what was it that could prevent him telling, say, the Americans about Pearl Harbor, or the French about the German plans? There must be something to stop that, but what was it?

There was a theory he had read somewhere—something about parallel universes . . . ?

No. There was just one explanation for it all; in spite of seeming reality—in spite of pinching himself, it was a dream—just a dream . . . or was it?

* * *

Some hours later a board creaked outside. The quietly opened door let in a wedge of brighter light from the passage, and then shut it off. Lying still and pretending sleep, he heard careful footsteps approach. He opened his eyes to see his mother bending over him. For some moments he stared unbelievably at her. She looked lovely in evening dress, with her eyes shining. It was with astonishment that he realized she was still barely more than a girl. She gazed down at him steadily, a little smile around her mouth. He reached up with one hand to touch her smooth cheek. Then, like a piercing bolt came the recollection of what was going to happen to her. He choked.

She leaned over and gathered him to her, speaking softly not to disturb Barbara.

“There, there, Bobby boy. There’s nothing to cry about. Did I wake you suddenly? Was there a horrid dream?”

He snuffled, but said nothing.

“Never mind, darling. Dreams can’t hurt you, you know. Just you forget it now, and go to sleep.”

She tucked him up, kissed him lightly, and turned to the cot where Barbara lay undisturbed. A minute later she had gone.

Bobby Finnerson lay quiet but awake, gazing up at the ceiling, puzzling, and, tentatively, planning.

The following morning, being a Saturday, involved the formality of going to the morning-room to ask for one’s pocket-money. Bobby was a little shocked by the sight of his father. Not just by the absurd appearance of the tall choking collar and the high-buttoned jacket with mean lapels, but on account of his lack of distinction; he seemed a very much more ordinary young man than he had liked to remember. Uncle George was there, too, apparently as a week-end guest. He greeted Bobby heartily:

“Hullo, young man. By jingo, you’ve grown since I last saw you. Won’t be long before you’ll be helping us with the business, at this rate. How’ll you like that?”

Bobby did not answer. One could not say: “That won’t happen because my father’s going to be killed in the war, and you are going to ruin the business through your own stupidity.” So he smiled back vaguely at Uncle George, and said nothing at all.

“Do you go to school now?” his uncle added.

Bobby wondered if he did. His father came to the rescue.

“Just a kindergarten in the morning, so far,” he explained.

“What do they teach you? Do you know the Kings of England?” Uncle George persisted.

“Draw it mild, George,” protested Bobby’s father. “Did you know ’em when you were just seven—do you now, for that matter?”

“Well, anyway, he knows who’s king now, don’t you, old man?” asked Uncle George.

Bobby hesitated. He had a nasty feeling that there was a trick about the question, but he had to take a chance.

“Edward the Seventh,” he said, and promptly knew from their faces that it had been the wrong chance.

“I mean, George the Fifth,” he amended hastily.

Uncle George nodded.

“Still sounds queer, doesn’t it? I suppose they’ll be putting G.R. on things soon instead of E.R.”

Bobby got away from the room with his Saturday sixpence, and a feeling that it was going to be less easy than he had supposed to act his part correctly.

He had a self-protective determination not to reveal himself until he was pretty sure of his ground, particularly until he had some kind of answer to his chief perplexity:—was the knowledge he had that of the things which *must* happen, or was it of those that *ought* to happen? If it were only the former, then he would appear to be restricted to a Cassandra-like role: but if it were the latter, the possibilities were—well, was there any limit?

* * *

In the afternoon they were to play in the Square garden. They left the house by the basement door, and he helped the small Barbara with the laborious business of climbing the steps while Nurse turned back for a word with Cook. They walked across the pavement and stood waiting at the curb. The road was empty save for a high-wheeled butcher’s trap bowling swiftly towards them. Bobby looked at it, and suddenly a whole horrifying scene jumped back into his memory like a vivid photograph.

He seized his little sister’s arm, dragging her back towards the railings. At the same moment he saw the horse shy and begin to bolt. Barbara tripped and fell as it swerved towards them. With frightened strength he tugged her across the pavement. At the area gate he himself stumbled, but he did not let go of her arm. Somehow she fell through the gate after him, and together they rolled down the steps. A second later there was a clash of wild hooves above. A hub ripped into the railings, and slender shiny spokes flew in all directions. A single despairing yell broke from the driver as he flew out of his seat, and then the horse was away with the wreckage bumping and banging behind it, and Sunday joints littering the road.

There was a certain amount of scolding which Bobby took philosophically and forgave because Nurse and the others were all somewhat frightened. His silence covered considerable thought. They did not know, as he did, what *ought* to have happened. He knew how little Barbara *ought* to have been lying on the pavement screaming from the pain of a foot so badly mangled that it would cripple her and so poison the rest of her life. But instead she was just howling healthily from surprise and a few bumps.

That was the answer to one of his questions, and he felt a little shaky as he recognized it . . .

They put his ensuing ‘mooniness’ down to shock after the narrow escape, and did their best to rally him out of the mood.

Nevertheless, it was still on him at bedtime, for the more he looked at his situation, the more fraught with perplexity it became.

It had, amongst other things, occurred to him that he could only interfere with another person’s life once. Now, for instance, by saving Barbara from that crippling injury he had entirely altered her future: there was no question of his knowledge interfering with fate’s plans for her again, because he had no idea what her new future would be . . .

That caused him to reconsider the problem of his father’s future. If it were to be somehow contrived that he should not be in that particular spot in France, when a shell fell there, he might not be killed at all, and if he weren’t, then the question of preventing his mother from making that disastrous second marriage would never arise. Nor would Uncle George be left single-handed to ruin the business, and if the business weren’t ruined the whole family circumstances would be different. They’d probably send him to a more expensive school, and thus set him on an entirely new course . . . and so on . . . and so on . . .

Bobby turned restlessly in bed. This wasn’t going to be as easy as he had thought . . . it wasn’t going to be at all easy . . .

If his father were to remain alive there would be a difference at every point where it touched the lives of others, widening like a series of ripples. It might not affect the big things, the pieces of solid history—but something else might. Supposing, for instance, warning were to be given of a certain assassination due to be attempted later at Sarajevo . . . ?

Clearly one must keep well away from the big things. As much as possible one must flow with the previous course of events, taking advantage of them, but being careful always to disrupt them as little as possible. It would be tricky . . . very tricky indeed . . .

“Prendergast, we have a complaint. A serious complaint over XB2832,” announced the Department Director.

“I’m sorry to hear it, sir. I’m sure—”

“Not your fault. It’s those Psychiatric fellows again. Get on to them, will you, and give them hell for not making a proper clearance. Tell them the fellow’s dislocated one whole ganglion of lives already—and it’s lucky it’s only a minor ganglion. They’d better get busy, and quickly.”

“Very good, sir. I’ll get through at once.”

Bobby Finnerson awoke, yawned, and sat up in bed. At the back of his mind there was a feeling that this was some special kind of day, like a birthday, or Christmas—only it wasn’t really either of those. But it was a day when he had particularly meant to do something. If only he could remember what it was. He looked around the room and at the sunlight pouring in through the window; nothing suggested any specialness. His eyes fell on the cot where Barbara still slept peacefully. He slipped silently out of bed and across the floor. Stealthily he reached out to give a tug at the little plait which lay on the pillow.

It seemed as good as any other way of starting the day.

* * *

From time to time as he grew older that sense of specialness recurred, but he never could find any real explanation for it. In a way it seemed allied with a sensation that would come to him suddenly that he had been in a particular place before, that somehow he knew it already—even though that was not possible. As if life were a little less straightforward and obvious than it seemed. And there were similar sensations, too, flashes of familiarity over something he was doing, a sense felt sometimes, say during a conversation, that it was familiar, almost as though it had all happened before . . .

It was not a phenomenon confined to his youthful years. During both his early and later middle age it would still unexpectedly occur at times. Just a trick of the mind, they told him. Not even uncommon, they said.

“Prendergast, I see Contract XB2832 is due for renewal again.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Last time, I recall, there was some little technical trouble. It might be as well to remind the Psychiatric Department in advance.”

“Very good, sir.”

Robert Finnerson lay dying. Two or three times before he had been under the impression that he might be dying. He had been frightened . . .

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Technical Slip* by John Wyndham (as John Beynon)]