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Franklin
Bardin



The Deadly
Percheron

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JOHN FRANKLIN BARDIN

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The Deadly Percheron

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To my wife, Rhea

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I

Easy Money

Jacob Blunt was my last patient. He came into my office wearing a scarlet hibiscus in his curly blond hair. He sat down in the easy chair across from my desk, and said, 'Doctor, I think I'm losing my mind.'

He was a handsome young man and apparently a healthy one. There were certainly no surface manifestations of neuroses. He did not seem nervous – nor did he seem to be suppressing a tendency to be nervous – his blue eyes were steady, his suit neat. The features of his face were strong, his shoulders were nicely made and except for a slight limp he carried himself well. I would not have believed he belonged in my consultation room if it hadn't been for the outrageous flower in his hair.

'Most of us have similar apprehensions at some time or other,' I said. 'During an emotional crisis, or after periods of sustained overwork, I, too, have been uncertain of my sanity.'

'Crazy people see things, don't they?' he asked. 'Things that really aren't there?' He leaned forward as if he were afraid he might miss my answer if he did not get closer to me.

'Hallucinations are a common symptom of mental disorder,' I agreed.

'And when you don't only see things – but things happen to you – crazy things, I mean – that's having hallucinations, isn't it?'

'Yes,' I said, 'a person who is mentally ill often lives in a world

of his own imagining, an unreal world. He withdraws completely from reality.'

Jacob leaned back and sighed happily. 'That's me!' he said. 'I am nuts, thank God! It isn't really happening!'

He seemed wholly at ease. His face had relaxed into a crooked grin that was rather nice. My information had obviously relieved him. This was unusual; I had never before met a neurotic who admitted wanting to lose his mind. Nor had I seen one who felt happy about it.

'That's a pretty flower you have in your hair,' I said. 'Tropical, isn't it?' I had to begin somewhere to find out what was wrong with him, and the flower was the only unnatural thing I could find.

He fingered it. 'Yeah,' he said, 'it's a hibiscus. I had a devil of a time getting it, too! Had to run all over town this morning before I found a place that had one!'

'Are you so fond of them?' I asked. 'Why not a rose or a gardenia? They're cheaper, and surely easier to buy.'

He shook his head. 'Nope. I've worn them at times, but it had to be a hibiscus today. Joe said it had to be a hibiscus today.'

It began to look as if he might be insane. His conversation seemed incoherent and he was entirely too happy about the whole affair. I began to be interested.

'Who is Joe?' I asked.

Blunt had taken a cigarette out of the box on my desk and was now fumbling with the lighter. He looked up in surprise. 'Joe? Oh, he's one of my little men. The one in the purple suit. He gives me ten dollars a day for wearing a flower in my hair. Only he picks the flowers and that's where it gets tough! He can pick the screwiest flowers!'

He gave me some more of that crooked grin. It was almost as if he were saying 'I know this sounds silly, but it's the way my mind works. I can't really help it.'

‘Joe is only the one who gives you flowers, is that right?’ I asked him. ‘There are others?’

‘Oh, sure there are others. I do things for a lot of little guys, that’s what has me worried! Only you’re mixed up about Joe. He doesn’t give me the flowers. I have to go out and buy them myself. He only pays me for wearing them.’

‘You say that there are other “little guys” – who are they and what do they do?’

‘Oh, there’s Harry,’ he said. ‘He’s the one who wears green suits and pays me to whistle at Carnegie Hall. And there’s Eustace – he wears tattersall waistcoats and pays me to give quarters away.’

‘Your quarters?’

‘No, his. He gives me twenty quarters every day. I get another ten dollars for giving them away.’

‘Why not keep them?’

He frowned. ‘Oh, no! I couldn’t do that! I wouldn’t get the ten dollars if I kept them. Eustace only pays me when I succeed in giving them all away.’

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of shiny new quarters. ‘That reminds me,’ he said. ‘I’m meeting Eustace at six, and I have all these to give away yet. Take one of them, will you please?’

And he flipped a quarter on to my desk. I picked it up and put it in my pocket. I did not want to antagonize him.

He watched me closely. ‘It’s real, isn’t it?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ I said. It was real.

‘Do me a favour. Bite it.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘I don’t have to bite it. I know a genuine coin when I see one.’

‘Go ahead and bite it,’ he said. ‘So you know it isn’t counterfeit.’

I took the quarter out of my pocket, placed it in my mouth and bit it. I wanted to humour him. ‘It’s real enough,’ I said.

His grin sagged, then disappeared. ‘That’s what worries me,’ he said.

‘What?’

‘If I’m crazy, doc, then you can cure me. But if I’m not crazy, and these little men are real, why then there are such things as leprechauns and they are giving away a tremendous treasure – and then we’d all have to begin to believe in fairies, and there’s simply no telling where that would lead to!’

At that point I thought I was on the verge of uncovering his neuroses. He seemed very excited, almost frantic – and he had thrown a great deal of new information at me suddenly. I decided to ignore his reference to ‘leprechauns’ and ‘fairies’ for the time being, while continuing to question him about the one tangible piece of evidence: the quarter.

‘What has this to do with Eustace and the quarters?’ I asked him.

‘Can’t you see, doc? If I’m crazy – if I just imagine Eustace – what about the quarters? They’re real enough, aren’t they?’

‘Perhaps they belong to you,’ I suggested. ‘Couldn’t you have gone to your bank and withdrawn them, and then forgotten about it?’

He shook his head. ‘Nope. It’s not that easy. I haven’t been to my bank in months.’

‘Why not?’

‘Don’t have to. Why go to the bank and draw money if you’re making thirty to forty dollars a day? I haven’t spent any of my own money since last Christmas.’

‘Since last Christmas?’

‘Yeah. I met Joe on Christmas day. In an Automat. He didn’t know how to get coffee out of the gadget there, and I showed him. We fell to talking and he asked me if I wanted to make some easy money. I said, “Sure, why not?” I didn’t know then what a silly job it would turn out to be. But I was bored with the

job I had – I was clerking in a haberdashery – and anxious to do something more interesting. I really don't have to work, you know. I have a steady income from a trust fund. But the trustee is a cranky old guy who always lectures me about the virtues of having a job. He says, "Doing a task well builds character."

'I started to work for Joe that very day and after a couple of weeks I met Eustace and then Harry through Joe. Joe was pleased with my work. He said I was trustworthy. He said the little men always had trouble finding guys they could trust.'

I was fascinated. This promised to be one of the more curious cases of my career. Most abnormalities adhere closely to a few, well-established patterns. It is not often that you find a man so imaginatively insane as Jacob Blunt seemed to be.

'Tell me, Mr Blunt,' I asked, 'just what exactly is your trouble? It seems to me that you lead an excellent life – you certainly make enough money. What is the matter?'

Once again I saw him discomfited. He looked away from me, and his grin came and went before he answered.

'There's nothing wrong, I guess,' he said. 'That is, if you're sure that Joe and Harry and Eustace are hallucinations?'

'That is what I would say they probably are.'

He smiled again. 'Well, if you're right, I'm just nuts and that's fine. But what worries me is the dough! If those quarters are real, how can Eustace be imaginary?'

'Perhaps, as I suggested before, you get them from your bank, and then forget you have made a withdrawal.'

His smile broadened. He reached into his breast-pocket and pulled out his bankbook. He handed it across the desk to me. 'What about this then, doc?' he asked.

I looked at the figures in the book. There had been regular, quarterly deposits of a thousand dollars each for the past two years, but there had not been a withdrawal since 20 December 1942. I handed the bankbook back to him.

'I tell you I haven't been to the bank since before last Christmas,' he repeated.

'What about the deposits?' I asked.

'My trustee makes those,' he said. 'From my father's estate. It's in trust until I'm twenty-five.'

I thought for a moment. If I could only get him to give me a coherent account of what had been happening to him, I might be able to inquire a little more deeply into the nature of his trouble. 'Suppose you go back to the beginning and tell me all about it,' I proposed.

He looked steadily at me, and his look made me feel uncomfortable. I had an idea that he knew how puzzled I was, and that my confusion disturbed him.

'It's as I told you,' he said. 'I met Joe in the Automat. He said he'd give me a trial at flower-wearing and, if I was good at it, I could do it regular. He was so pleased with what he called my "earnestness" that he recommended me to Harry and Eustace. I've been whistling for Harry and giving quarters away for Eustace ever since . . .'

This was getting us no place. Absurd as his fantasies were, they were consistent. 'What do you do for Harry? Did you say whistle?' I asked wearily.

'Sure. At Carnegie Hall. At Town Hall. Sometimes in the balcony. Sometimes downstairs. I don't have to do it loud, and I may sit off by myself so I don't annoy anybody. It's a lot of fun. Last night I whistled "Pistol-Packin' Mama" all through Beethoven's "Eighth". You oughtta try it sometime! It does you good!'

I smothered a smile. I had begun to like the boy, and I did not want him to think I was laughing at him.

'These "little men" – why did you say they hire you to do all these peculiar things?'

He reached for another cigarette and fumbled again with my

lighter. Most of my patients smoke – I encourage them to because it makes them feel at ease – and it gives me an opportunity to watch their reactions to a petty annoyance if my cigar-lighter is balky. Often a man or woman who is superficially calm will reveal an inner nervousness by getting disproportionately aggravated at the futile spark. But not Jacob Blunt, he spun the tiny wheel patiently and phlegmatically until the unwilling flame appeared. Then he answered me.

‘They’re leprechauns. Came originally from Ireland, but now they’re all over the world. They’ve had a tremendous treasure for all eternity and until recently they guarded it jealously. Now, for reasons of their own that I can’t get Eustace to tell me, they’ve started to distribute it. Joe says they’ve got hundreds of men working for them all over the country. Some pretty big men, too, Joe says. People you’d never guess.’

‘You mean they are fairies, like gnomes or elves?’ Sometimes if you can show a patient the infantile level of his obsession, you can give him a jolt that will start him back on the road to reality. ‘Don’t tell me you believe in fairies!’ I scoffed.

‘They’re not fairies,’ he protested. ‘They’re little men in green and purple suits. You’ve probably passed them on the street!’

I was getting nowhere. Soon I would be arguing with my patient on his terms. I had to find a way to change the direction of the conversation. As it was, he was leading it, not I.

‘Suppose you aren’t mentally ill, Mr Blunt, what then?’

He grew serious. For the first time he seemed sick, anxious.

‘That’s what has me worried, doc! What if I’m not crazy?’

‘Then the “little men” are real,’ I said. ‘Then there are such things as leprechauns. You don’t really believe that, do you?’

He was silent, undecided. Then he shook his head violently, ‘No, I won’t believe it! It couldn’t be! I must be crazy!’

I thought it was about time to reassure him. ‘Let me decide

that,' I said. 'That's my job. People who suffer from hallucinations such as yours usually defend them rigorously. They never entertain the possibility of a doubt as to the reality of their imagined experiences. But you do. That is encouraging.'

'But what about the money, doc? The quarters? They're real enough, aren't they?'

'Let's not consider that part of it now. Suppose you tell me a little about yourself. Talk to me about your childhood, your youth, your girl – you have a girl, haven't you? – whatever comes first to your mind.'

I was hopelessly confused. Usually a psychiatrist can see the flaw in the logic of a schizoid's dream world. It is patently an irrational mechanism. The difficulty normally lies in getting the patient to talk about his inner life. Here, however, this was not the case. Jacob seemed eager to confide the details of his 'little men' and their 'easy money' to me; but, besides doing that, he had presented a certain amount of evidence that at least some of his experiences were true, and if this were so he might not be insane. All I could do was to urge him to talk some more, hoping that he would say something that would help me help him.

'What will telling you the story of my life have to do with Eustace and Joe?' he asked.

'Take my word for it that it may have a great deal of bearing on your problem,' I said.

He was reluctant to begin. Nor was he as much at ease as he had been before. He had stopped smiling, and his eyes were dull.

'I'm a Dead-End Kid,' he said, 'who was raised on Park Avenue. You probably know all about my old man, John Blunt. He had more money than was good for him. Just about the time of the First World War he sold his carriage-making business to one of the big automobile companies and from then on he was rolling in dough. He bought himself a seat on the Exchange and

kept right on making money until he died of apoplexy a few years back. He left all his dough to me, but he tied it up in a trust so I can't get at it until I'm twenty-five.'

'How old are you now?'

'I'm twenty-three. I've got two more years to go. But that isn't what worries me. I've got plenty of dough.'

'Yes,' I said, 'I know.'

'I really was a hell-raiser when I was a kid. I wore out two or three governesses a year. My mother died when I was a brat, that's why I had the governesses. My old man never paid much attention to me. I used to run wild. I made friends with all sorts of kids. I always had more money than any of the others, and I was so much trouble to have around that none of the servants minded much if I didn't come home for days at a time.'

'How old were you when you started running away from home?'

'Nine or ten.' He dug into his coat pocket and took out his wallet. From it he drew a well-thumbed photograph which he handed to me. 'That's a picture of me at about that time,' he said. 'The kid with me was a friend of mine – the ugliest little shrimp I ever did see. I called him Pruney.'

I looked at the photograph. It was the kind a strolling photographer makes. Jacob looked surprisingly the same – even as a child he had that lopsided grin. But it was the image of his small companion that held my eye. He was a small boy dressed in a dirty sailor suit, yet his face was uglier than I have ever seen on a child other than a cretin. It was an ugliness you would expect to find in a man of forty or more, not a young boy. And on the back of the photograph were scrawled the initials: E.A.B.

'What do these stand for?' I asked.

Jacob looked at them, shrugged. 'I don't know. I had even forgotten about Pruney and this old picture until – after my old

man's death – I was going through his desk one day and found this in a cubbyhole. I guess it meant something to him.'

I stuck the photograph in my pocket. I wanted to see if my patient would resent this act of possession. But he did not seem to notice it. Baffled, I tried another tack: 'Where did you sleep when you were away from home?'

'In hotels. In the Park. I spent a lot of time around Central Park. Sometimes at the houses of friends. I always had a lot of friends.'

'Hardly a normal childhood,' I said. 'Why didn't your father stop you? Didn't he know what you were doing?'

Jacob laughed. He threw back his head and laughed loudly, a harsh, cynical laugh. 'I tell you my old man didn't give a damn,' he said, 'about me, or anybody! He hired people to look after me – why should he bother?'

I said nothing. Jacob stopped laughing. He did not go on. I did not know what to think. He had obviously had an extraordinary life so far, and not a healthy one. I was not surprised that he was neurotic. He had never had a family, no one had ever loved him. Or had there been someone . . . ?

'When did you first fall in love?' I asked. Perhaps, the clue lay there . . .

'When I was fourteen. With the cigarette girl at the St Moritz. She was a blonde and she had nice legs. I remember I bought her a black silk nightgown for Christmas. Did you ever buy a girl a black silk nightgown?'

His grin was contagious. 'Why, yes, I suppose so,' I said.

'Who?'

'My wife, I guess.'

'Oh.' He was disappointed. Then he said, 'Well, I suppose we all do that at one time or another.'

'But not at fourteen. That's a rather tender age, don't you think?'

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