

## WHO'LL GIMME FIFTY?

I do not blame the affair totally on my rival Strangway. He was a crook, but only a glitzy one, and I do not believe he had the intelligence to achieve the stunt by himself. I do not even know whether to call it a comedy or a tragedy. But Strangway was never found.

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The mood in the auction room that evening was more party-like than business-like. Only the auctioneer appeared sober, as his rolled r's reverberated off the crystal glasses of the complimentary liquor that lubricated the tongues and wallets of the crowd. He was selling something which looked to me like a purple jellyfish in a tank of liquid, and my nose wrinkled as a strangely-perfumed mist cascaded from the container and oozed across the thick carpet.

I did not understand his rapid speech, and was wondering if I could not find a better way to spend the evening when my attention was fastened by the *smack!* of an old-fashioned wooden hammer on the metal surface of the podium. "Sold!" announced the auctioneer. "For forty-five. To the madam in the back row."

I turned slightly in my plush chair, nearly knocking off the drink which had appeared on its arm rest. In the back row, an overweight woman with carefully coiffed hair sat smirking over her purchase. Puzzled, I turned back, and noticed that in the seat beside me was an aristocratic-looking man in a black suit who was studying a list. "What is it?" I asked.

The man turned blank blue eyes on me. He had the world-weary gaze of the super-rich; but could not have been super-clever, because there was a noticeable pause before my question registered. He sniffed, and pointed with a manicured finger to the right-hand column of his list, where I read by an entry: *I.Q. 270*.

Struggling to comprehend just what kind of auction this could be, I covered my ignorance by asking "Is it worth forty-five?"

The man's thin lips quirked downwards in a deprecating smile. "Well, my dear," he murmured in a school-masterish manner, "*I* wouldn't pay forty-five *thousand* for a used brain."

My own brain seemed to seize up. What the heck kind of place had I gotten myself into?

It had been the idea of my arch-rival, Strangway, that I attend the auction. He had risen to the top of his company by being duplicitous, and had more enemies than friends. I had arrived at the top of my outfit by being honestly clever, or so I believed. Our paths had crossed

repeatedly; but that afternoon I had beaten out my male rival in the deal of the century. Neither of us knew anybody in the City, and I was not interested in having him do an autopsy on my deal – and paw over my living body – at our hotel. I therefore decided to go to the auction when I learned that he had found something else to occupy his Machiavellian mind.

It was sunset by the time I found the address. I had decided to walk, because it was a clear day and the City was built on a series of hills which offered repeated vistas: jammed-together old buildings in brown and yellow stone, which now housed businesses of all kinds, with the sea and sky as a remote blue backdrop. It was the kind of place you could easily imagine in a bygone era, when the business was import/export, the harbour was full of ships, and the sidewalks were packed with sailors on their way between bars. The last were still there, and I had stopped at one to celebrate my deal of earlier in the day with a couple of stiff drinks. I had not changed, and still wore my gold pants with the matching top and the epaulettes that sported my two dark-green zircons. I always wear my zircons to business meetings: they are pretty and make a calm statement about my monetary status. They also conceal my subether contact to the office, where my android secretary Ajax can supply me instantly with any data I may need to close a business deal. In the bar where I celebrated my coup over Strangway, there were the usual inquiring glances that follow an attractive, successful female who is on her own. But the place was polite, and none of the males at the bar made an overture. (Why is that you get unwanted attention on the way home after an exhausting day at the office, whereas nothing happens when you are happily unattached in a strange city?) I paid for my drinks using the subether system, and felt even more content when I saw that the hefty commission for the last deal had already been paid into my account. Now I was rich enough to pay for any item that might come up at any auction.

Except that I was not in the ordinary kind of auction. After removing the purple jellyfish, the two assistants to the auctioneer pushed in a new tank containing a fresh offering. It was a human head.

Actually it was very well presented, and the bidding went on briskly as I stared at the thing: a good-looking woman, with full lips and (closed) deep-set eyes, a forehead that was only slightly lined, and a pile of blonde hair. As I looked at it, I found myself hoping that the eyes would open, and that I would be able to ask how it came to be here for sale.

Apparently, I was not the only one who wanted more information. The bidding stalled at 33,000, pending a request by somebody in the crowd to have the eyes of the head come open for inspection.

I must admit that the auctioneer did his job well. He was a thin man, slightly stooped, so that he gave the impression of being solicitous about the items he was selling. He twisted his gavel between long, bony fingers; while his narrow and artificially-pink lips kept up a patter of information. (“This head comes from a patrician family which rarely donates to the public market; and as you can see is in *perfect* condition, including strawberry-blond hair which is guaranteed natural.”) The auctioneer’s own hair was patently dyed an ominous shade of ochre, and swept backwards from temples which showed pleasing symmetric splotches of silver. The hair was long at the back, drooping over the collar of an old-fashioned coat with artificially-wide shoulders, and lapels that resembled the wings of a pterodactyl. The net effect was of an auction overseen by a business-like Dracula.

The crowd gasped as the eyes of the head sprang open under the action of one of the auctioneer’s assistants. The eyes were deep grey – penetrating and deeply human, but disturbing as if they held some locked-in grief. The bidding immediately resumed with new fervour.

“Who’ll gimme thirty-five?” the auctioneer asked, and was answered almost straight away. “I *have* thirty-five! How about forty, forty?...*forty?*”

The voice rattled on, the auctioneer racking up the price and thereby his own ten-percent earnings. To me, the crowd in the room was of greater interest. There were about thirty people present, most of them ostentatiously well-off. Over half were women, whose jewels flashed in the subdued light of the dimly-lit room. The spotlight over the podium also reflected off the white shirtfronts of several older men, who were dressed in very conservative fashion. The neighbour to my right was one of these, and I noticed that the protruding cuffs of his shirt were held together by platinum crosses. On reappraisal, I saw that the fit of his suit was uncannily perfect. This crowd was special, I realized. These people were not only perverse, but rich enough to indulge their weird tastes.

The bidding on the stately woman’s head was reaching an asymptotic value of 47,000, when I made a mental connection. It was not only my gold outfit and green zircons which had gained me admission to this one-of-a-kind auction. There had been a polite but no-nonsense guy at the door, who checked identification and documented the clientele. And I suddenly realized

that I was here because my bank balance was at an exceptional high. They seemed to think I would bid on something.

I started to laugh, but ceased as my neighbour turned his blue eyes on me, topped with a slight frown. But I continued to giggle. Did this outfit really think I was so maladjusted that I would spend my money on (say) a super-handsome male body (or part thereof)? Really! To help stop the giggles, I picked up the drink from the arm rest of my chair. It had a pleasant limey smell, with the nostril-bite of real alcohol, and I took a swig.

Shortly thereafter, I was no longer in a laughing mood. Whether the drink was spiked – or whether it reacted with what I had drunk earlier – I do not know. All I was aware of was a rapid kind of creeping paralysis – something like a shiver that leaves you stiff. Even as I opened my mouth to cry out, it froze.

I was not completely rigid, however. My body settled into a kind of stasis, with the limited flexibility of a kid's toy made of stiff rubber. I forced my neck muscles to respond, and eventually managed to turn my head part way towards my aristocratic companion. He, though, continued to ignore me, intent on the list of items coming up for auction. I tried to scream, but only a faint gargling noise came from my throat. My ears detected two sounds: the rasp of air from my super-slow breathing, and the internal thudding from my suppressed heart. At least I would not die straight away. Rather, it was like being in the drawn-out death of a slow-moving nightmare.

My eyes started to itch, since I could not blink and there was dust in the room from the thick carpet and the plush chairs. Tears began to creep from the inner corners of my eyes – an automatic response which made sense but caused my vision to become watery and surreal. I focussed my strength on the muscles around my eye socket, willing my line of sight towards my companion in the dark suit. But I could not force my vision all the way, and gave up. My field of view became stuck, showing only the auctioneer's podium and my companion's hands. Neither was in sharp focus, but I soon cared little about that. For the last item – the stately female head – had been sold and removed. To be replaced by a new object, which filled me with horror.

It was me. Or, more exactly: a hologram of my head, with my brain in three-dimensional cutaway, accompanied at the side by a list of data.

They had my I.Q. listed as only 230!

Furious, I poured all the energy I possessed into my real head, turning it more towards my companion, and forcing a roar of displeasure from my frozen throat. This emerged as a croak, and barely caught the attention of the man seated beside me. He glanced in my direction, frowned, and said: “You really shouldn’t drink so much, my dear.”

I clenched my teeth – very slowly – at this patronizing reply. He really must have been a fool, because he failed to note the resemblance between the hologram at the front of the room and the real person seated beside him. The auction list he was studying also showed a miniature of my face; but what they were actually selling was my brain, with the restriction that it was *in-situ*. Maybe this was a weight on the transaction, because the bidding became bogged down at an unacceptably low level.

“Who’ll gimme thirty?” asked the Dracula auctioneer, though without enthusiasm.

No response.

“So le’me try twenty-five!”

Still no response.

“Ladies and gentlemen”, exhorted the batwinged auctioneer, “this is a proven brain! The *face* may not be much to write home about...,”

I squirmed in silent rage.

“...but the brain behind it has been tried and proven in *many* business deals!”

A flutter of interest showed in the audience. One portly, middle-aged man in the front row suddenly seemed to wake up. Maybe he needed a thinking unit in his company. Anyway, he raised a pudgy hand.

“I have *twenee!*” announced the auctioneer in glee. “Do I hear twenee-three?”

The bidding slowly moved on, picking up a thousand or so in reluctant units. Only the fat guy in the front row seemed seriously interested in buying my brain.

Desperate, I activated my zircons and tried to contact my secretary. There was a long pause, and then the androidal voice of Ajax filled my inner ear. “Hi dearie,” said my secretary. “What’s up?”

There followed an exasperating attempt at communication; until Ajax figured out that I was drunk, and switched from voice mode to brainwave mode. Then she rapidly clued into the situation, though with some misgivings. “So you’re *not* drunk, but you still want me to buy your brain?”

“Yes!” I yelled brainwise. “And hurry up!”

The bidding was trickling to a standstill, and at any instant my brain would be sold for the insultingly low figure of 27,000 to the fat guy at the front of the room. I watched with my frozen vision, and let out a torpid sigh of relief when the auctioneer announced: “I have a remote bid of thirty thousand!”

Mister Dracula seemed to be enjoying the business; and given that he earned ten percent on every deal he closed, he got even happier as a bidding war developed between the fat financier in the room and my remote androidal secretary.

“Thirty-seven!” acknowledged the auctioneer, pointing his hammer at the fat man and using his other hand to stroke his lapel.

There was some unheard conversation, and then his thin lips bent upwards in delight. “Thirty-nine?” he demanded of the man in the front row.

The latter was stubborn. Probably he did not think my brain was worth much; but he was of the good, old disposition who cannot give up. Thinking to crush his unseen rival, he announced: “Forty-five!”

The Dracula-like auctioneer engaged in a long conversation, while the people in the room waited expectantly. They had initially fallen silent, but now were whispering among themselves as the bidding reached exorbitant levels. The auction-man pulled on the lapels of his old-fashioned coat, and said unbelievably into his microphone: “You *really* want to go that high?”

The room fell silent, sensing a denouement. Then the auctioneer called out in a loud sing-song voice: “Who’ll gimme *fifty*?”

Everybody in the room started talking at once. The racket was painful to my ears, and I would have put up my frozen hands to cut it out, if I could have done so. The high value of the bid on my brain seemed to have caught people by surprise. Even my taciturn companion, seated to my right, was upset.

“She’s not worth half of that,” he opined, “the stupid bitumen.”

I was totally furious! I would have flowed over his nasty mouth and blocked it with tar had I possessed the macadam for the act. As it was, all I could do was sit there, glaring. Mister Dracula was quieting the crowd with shushing motions of his hands.

“I am bid *fifty*”, he reminded them. Everyone looked shocked. “Is there any raise on *fifty*?”

“Going once”, he announced, looking at the overweight man in the front row. The latter stared at the floor, apparently trying to gain knowledge from the intricate design of the carpet. If some remote bidder were willing to pay so much, maybe the brain was worth that and perhaps more?

“Going twice”, intoned Mister Dracula. The corpulent front-row man squirmed with indecision. There *must* be some hidden asset to the brain; but what was it, and was it worth so much cash?

“Going third and last,” announced the auctioneer, holding his hammer in midair, and savouring the spotlight which shone lavishly on his slicked-back ochre hair and his dinosaurial lapels.

“Sold!” The gavel smacked down with finality, bringing a release of tension. People started to talk, stand up, and move.

I would have thrown up my hands in happiness if I had been able. As it was, I slipped out of my chair, and my field of view moved abruptly to being that of the floor.

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The authorities moved in as the last of the clientele dissipated into the darkened streets of the City. The scene dwindled to me, my trustworthy Ajax, a crew of truculent policemen, and the auctioneer. The last proved to be a really special individual. His eyes, up close, were penetrating and alive with humour. It turned out he was about half as old as I had assumed, and that his cadaverous appearance was the result of makeup, designed to aid his job. He also possessed a rapid mind and a sense of diplomacy. The latter he needed, because I told him bluntly that I was not going to pay his commission on the 50,000 sale price. We haggled for a time, while the police carried out a desultory examination. They found no evidence in the files of my rival Strangway. Eventually, the auctioneer and I reached a compromise: he agreed it was “tantologous” to sell my own brain to me, and I agreed to go out for dinner with him.