



TERRY PRATCHETT

A BLINK OF THE SCREEN

COLLECTED SHORTER FICTION

WITH A FOREWORD BY
A.S. BYATT

About the Book

In the four decades since his first book appeared in print, Terry Pratchett has become one of the world's bestselling and best-loved authors. Here for the first time are his short stories and other short-form fiction collected into one volume. *A Blink of the Screen* charts the course of Pratchett's long writing career: from his schooldays through to his first writing job on the *Bucks Free Press*; to the origins of his debut novel, *The Carpet People*; and on again to the dizzy mastery of the phenomenally successful Discworld® series.

Here are characters both familiar and yet to be discovered; abandoned worlds and others still expanding; adventure, chickens, death, disco and, actually, some quite disturbing ideas about Christmas, all of it shot through with his inimitable brand of humour.

With an introduction by Booker Prize-winning author A.S. Byatt, illustrations by the late Josh Kirby and drawings by the author himself, this is a book to treasure.

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About the Author

Also by Terry Pratchett

Copyright

A Blink of the Screen
Collected Shorter Fiction

Terry Pratchett

My thanks to my old friend and agent Colin Smythe who
spent a lot of time sieving through a lot of dusty old
newspapers to find my tracks. Amazingly, he really likes
doing this kind of thing ...

FOREWORD BY A. S. BYATT

I remember buying my first Pratchett – it was *Men at Arms* – in a bookshop in Sloane Square. I badly needed to be psychologically elsewhere and the bright heap of Discworld novels looked like a possible retreat. I turned them over. At first glance Josh Kirby's covers with pink and bosomy cartoon women as well as energetic dragons did not seem to be my kind of thing. I think what persuaded me was the word Ankh-Morpork. Anyone who could think that up was a real writer. And a discworld had been part of my childhood – there was an illustration in the book of Norse myths I had, of an Indian myth of a world balanced on four elephants on a giant turtle surrounded by a snake.

I took the book home, read it without stopping, and was hooked. I bought all the books and read them in order. Every summer, whilst thinking out my writing, I read them again. There is always a joke I hadn't quite got. There is always the quite extraordinary narrative pull of a great storyteller. Later I came to appreciate Josh Kirby's art too. His creatures have a gleeful wild energy and intricacy – both brash and sophisticated – which is exactly right for these tales.

Terry Pratchett says his readers are people who work with computers. But my literary friends are often addicted as I am – I once had a very polite tug-of-war over a new book (I think it was *Thief of Time*) with my scholarly and brilliant editor in a bookshop where I was giving a reading.

Last week I had a good talk with a philosopher at a high table about imaginary worlds in general and Pratchett in particular. Also, people who don't read, read Pratchett. Boys of twelve who hate books. I hope he is never taught in schools – his biography on the back of the books used once to claim that 'some people had accused him of literature', and of course he is literature, but best enjoyed in solitude and retreat.

J. R. R. Tolkien used the term 'secondary worlds' to describe fictive, invented worlds with their own creatures, geography, history, people. Human beings have always needed the existence of the other, the unreal – imaginary people and things that are other than ourselves – from fairy tales to myths to urban legends. A maker of secondary worlds needs great resources of inventiveness – both on the large scale and in the fine detail. Pratchett's world is wonderful because he has the sheer energy of the great storyteller: you think you know all it is possible to know about a dragon, or a policeman, or a plot or a landscape, and he tells you more, a lot more than you had any right to expect, and this is exhilarating.

From book to book he gets better and his world gets more intricate. He gets more and more attached to his own characters, who become more complicated – consider the way in which Captain Vimes grows from being a drunk in charge of a dysfunctional Night Watch to a commander who can arrest two armies for a breach of the peace. He finds it hard to go on disliking characters. He can invent irritating minor forms of life: an imp that operates a Gooseberry – or Disorganizer – belonging to Vimes, which is redeemed by the discovery that it can do the office accounts; an accountant called A. E. Pessimall, sent to inspect the Watchmen, who turns out to be a hero. (Wikipedia constantly illuminates Pratchett. I didn't know that the word 'pessimall' means 'bad to a maximal extent' or 'most wanting in quality or value'.) But he can do real evil too:

take Mr Pin, the villain in *The Truth*, or the Chief Quisitor, Vorbis, in *Small Gods* – both with the ferocious single-mindedness, true cruelty, and narrow vision which can't change.

As Tolkien says, secondary worlds must be coherent. There is a risk of the creator being romantic, or being seen to have designs – didactic or sentimental – on the reader. I reread Tolkien for the landscape and the persistent sense of danger. I have problems with stories of real children who find themselves in secondary worlds – rather as though their reading had engulfed them. J. K. Rowling is a brilliant inventor of details of magic, but her world has its origin in a boarding school, a place to which I do not want to return. I never enjoyed C. S. Lewis, because I felt he was morally manipulating me as well as his characters. Philip Pullman writes beautifully and dramatically but he is writing against Lewis, and again runs the risk of becoming didactic and controlling. Pratchett, despite the slapstick, the terrible jokes and the very clever complicated jokes, is somehow wise and grown up. As a reader I trust him.

I was once asked by a television interviewer, 'Isn't all this simply really about us?' and I indignantly replied, 'No', because I needed my secondary world to be other, separate and coherent. But he is of course writing about us. He is good at policemen, businessmen, fraudsters, murderers, banks and shares, and at music with rocks in it besides, as well as at goblins, witches, dragons, trolls and dwarfs. And of course, computers. But he writes neither satire nor allegory. What gets into his world is *in* his world, with its own energy and logic.

The shorter stories collected in *A Blink of the Screen* often consist of incursions from the secondary world into our world. A fantasy writer kills off his barbarian hero only to find him on his doorstep, come to 'meet his maker'. Death dances in a disco. The first story, 'The Hades Business', was

written when Pratchett was thirteen. It concerns the irruption of the Devil into an advertiser's flat. Pratchett is apologetic about it but it has a gleeful pace and a very satisfactory ending. All his stories have satisfactory endings. I particularly like the one based on a real incident in 1973 when a lorry overturned in Hollywood let out some crates of chickens, who settled in a shrubbed verge. I like the weird one in which desperate travellers are trapped inside the world of Victorian Christmas cards, with snow covered with 'tiny tinselly shards', monstrous robins, and a 'dreadful oblong slot'. There are tales about computers, including one, written in 1990, which is told by 'an amiable repairman, not very bright but good with machines' who works on machines inside which people create their own reality. (Again with a good ending.)

There is also a collection of stories from the Discworld – including a long and wicked one about Granny Weatherwax and a hilarious version of the national anthem of Ankh-Morpork.

And there is a grim little poem about how

They don't teach you the facts of death,
Your mum and dad. They give you pets.

Pratchett comments, 'I tried to write this as though I was thirteen years old, with that earnest brand of serious amateurishness. This is possibly not a long way from how I write at the best of times ...' I can see what he means. What his teacher understood when he was thirteen, and what we all, thirteen-year-olds, nerds and geeks, reading writers and university teachers, recognize with glee is that he is a born writer, a maker, inimitable.

Non-Discworld Shorter Writings

THE HADES BUSINESS



SCIENCE FANTASY MAGAZINE, ED. JOHN CARNELL, NO. 60, VOL. 20,
AUGUST 1963. AN EARLIER VERSION WAS PUBLISHED IN THE
TECHNICAL CYGNET, THE HIGH WYCOMBE TECHNICAL HIGH
SCHOOL MAGAZINE

Argh, argh, argh ... if I put my fingers in my ears and go 'lalalala' loudly I won't hear you read this story.

It's juvenile. Mind you, so was I, being thirteen at the time. It's the first thing I ever wrote that got published. In fact it's the first thing I ever wrote with the feeling that I was writing a real story.

It began as a piece of homework. The English teacher gave me twenty marks out of twenty for it, and put it in the school magazine. The kids liked it. I was a writer.

And this was a big deal, because I hadn't really been anything up until then. I was good at English. At everything else I was middling, one of those kids that don't catch the teacher's eye and are very glad of it. I was even bad at sports, except for the one wonderful term when they let us play hockey, when I was bad and very dangerous.

But the other kids had liked it. I'd sniffed blood.

There were three, yes, three professional sf and fantasy magazines published in the UK in those days. Unbelievable, but true. I persuaded my aunt, who had a typewriter, to

type it out for me, and I sent it to John Carnell, who edited all three. The nerve of the kid.

He accepted it.

Oh boy.

The £14 he paid was enough to buy a second-hand Imperial 58 typewriter from my typing teacher (my mother had decided that I ought to be able to do my own typing, what with being a writer and everything) and, as I write, it seems to me that it was a very good machine for fourteen quid and I just wonder if Mum and Dad didn't make up the difference on the quiet.

Fortunately, before I could do too much damage with the thing, study and exams swept me up and threw me out into a job on the local paper, where I learned to write properly or, at least, journalistically.

I've re-read the story and my fingers have itched to strip it down, give it some pacing, scramble those clichés, and, in short, rewrite it from the bottom up. But that would be silly, so I'm going to grit my teeth instead.

Go ahead, read.

I can't hear you! Lalalalalalala!

Crucible opened his front door and stood rooted to the doormat.

Imagine the interior of a storm cloud. Sprinkle liberally with ash and garnish with sulphur to taste. You now have a rough idea as to what Crucible's front hall resembled.

The smoke was coming from under the study door. Dimly remembering a film he had once seen, Crucible clapped a handkerchief to his nose and staggered to the kitchen. One bucket of water later, he returned. The door would not budge. The phone was in the study, so as to be handy in an emergency. Putting down the pail, Crucible applied his shoulder to the door, which remained closed. He retreated to the opposite wall of the hall, his eyes streaming. Gritting his teeth, he charged.

The door opened of its own accord. Crucible described a graceful arc across the room, ending in the fireplace, then everything went black, literally and figuratively, and he knew no more.

A herd of elephants were doing the square dance, in clogs, on Crucible's head. He could see a hazy figure kneeling over him.

'Here, drink this.'

Ah, health-giving joy-juice! Ah, invigorating stagger-soup! Those elephants, having changed into slippers, were now dancing a sedate waltz: the whisky was having the desired effect. Crucible opened his eyes again and regarded the visitor.

'Who the devil are you?'

'That's right!'

Crucible's head hit the grate with a hollow 'clang!'

The Devil picked him up and sat him in an armchair. Crucible opened one eye.

The Devil was wearing a sober black suit, with a red carnation in the buttonhole. His thin waxed moustachios, combined with the minute beard, gave him a dignified air. A cloak and collapsible top hat were on the table.

Crucible had known it would happen. After ten years of prising cash from the unsuspecting businessman, one was bound to be caught by Nemesis. He rose to his feet, brushing the soot from his clothes.

'Shall we be going?' he asked mournfully.

'Going? Where to?'

'The Other Place, I suppose.'

'The Other Pl—? Oh, you mean home! Good Heav—oops! pardon me - Hell! no! No one's come Down There for nearly two thousand years. Can't think why. No, I have come to you because I need some help Down There; the Hell business is just not paying - no more lost souls. Only chap that's come Down There for the last two thousand

years was a raving nit called Dante; went away with quite the wrong impression. You ought to have heard what he said about me!’

‘I did read something about it somewhere.’

‘Indeed? Bad publicity for me, that. That’s where you come in.’

‘Oh?’ Crucible pricked up his ears.

‘Yes, I want you to advertise Hell. Clumsy! You’ve spilt your drink all over the carpet.’

‘W-why me?’ croaked Crucible.

‘You are the owner of the Square Deal Advertising Company, are you not? We want you to make the public conscious, Hell-wise. Not for eternal damnation, of course. Just day trips, etcetera, Grand Tour of Hell, and all that.’

‘And if I refuse?’

‘What would you say to ten thousand pounds?’

‘Goodbye.’

‘Twenty thousand?’

‘Hmm. Aren’t I supposed to give you some tasks; sand-ropes and all that?’

The Devil looked angry.

‘Forty thousand and that’s my last offer. Besides,’ the Devil pressed the tips of his fingers together and smiled at the ceiling, ‘there are some rather incriminating facts about the Payne-Smith Products case, which we could make public?’

‘Now you’re speaking my language. Forty thousand pounds and hush about the P and S case?’

‘Yes.’

‘Done.’

‘I’m so glad you see it my way,’ said the Devil. Crucible seated himself behind his mahogany desk and took out a pad. He indicated a polished silver box.

‘Cigarette?’

‘Thanks.’

Crucible took a cigarette himself and felt for his lighter. Suddenly, a thought struck him.

‘How do I know you are Old Nick?’

The Devil shuddered. ‘Please! Nicholas Lucifer to you. Well, I know about the P and S case, don’t I?’

Crucible’s eyes gleamed.

‘You may be some smart-alec Dick. Convince me. Go on, convince me!’

‘Okay, you asked for it. By the way, that gun in your left-hand pocket would be useless against me.’ The Devil leaned nonchalantly, extending a finger towards Crucible.

‘See? You’re a phoney, a low do—’

Crack!

A bolt of lightning shot across the room. The end of Crucible’s cigarette glowed.

‘I – I – I’m convinced!’

‘So glad.’

Crucible became his old self.

‘Let’s get down to business. I take it you want Hell to be exploited in every possible way?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, I’m afraid I can’t do much until I have seen the place – from the living point of view, you understand.’

‘Quite. Well, I could take you back with me, but that might be a hair-raising experience for you. Tell you what, if you wait at the corner of this street, at – shall we say, eight o’clock this evening? – I could pick you up and we could walk there. Okay?’

‘Right.’

‘I’ll be seeing you, then. Cheerio!’

Poomf!

He was gone. The room was again filled with sulphurous smoke. Crucible opened the windows and then closed them again. If some busybody saw the smoke, he would have a hard time explaining to the Fire Brigade just why there was

no fire. He strolled into the kitchen and sat down thoughtfully; he wished he had read more fantasy.

In wishing the Devil would mind his own business, Crucible was thinking along the same lines as certain other beings. Where they differed was the reason. Crucible opened the fridge and took out a can of beer.

Having someone running around loose, who knows about things one would prefer to keep to oneself, is dangerous. Crucible's love of money warred with his love of freedom. He wanted that forty thousand pounds, but he did not want Lucifer running around loose.

Suddenly, the perfect solution struck him. Of course! Why not! He grabbed his hat, and hurried out to the local church.

Crucible stood in the pouring rain at the corner of the street. A small stream of water was coursing down his back and flooding his suedes. He looked at his watch. One minute to eight o'clock. He shivered.

'Psst!'

Crucible looked round.

'Down here.'

He saw that a man-hole in the middle of the pavement was raised. The Devil poked his head out.

'Come on!'

'Through there?'

'Yes.'

He edged himself through the narrow hole.

Splash!

He would have to put his shoes on 'Expenses'.

'Well, let's be off,' said the Devil.

'I didn't know one could get to Down There along the sewers!'

'Easiest thing there is, old man. Left here.'

There was no sound but the echoes of their footsteps: Crucible's suedes and the Devil's hooves.

‘How much further?’

They had been walking for several hours. Crucible’s feet were damp and he was sneezing.

‘We’re there, old man.’

They had come to the end of the tunnel. Before them stretched a dark valley. In the distance, Crucible could see a giant wall, with a tiny door. Across the valley ran a black river; the air was tainted with sulphur.

The Devil removed a tarpaulin from a hump by the tunnel mouth.

‘May I present Geryon II!’

Crucible blinked. Geryon II was a Model-T Ford crossed with an Austin 7, tastefully decorated in sulphurous yellow.

The Devil wrenched at the offside door, which fell off.

They climbed in. Surprisingly, the car started after only a few swings of the starting handle.

They chugged across the sulphur plain.

‘Nice car.’

‘Isn’t it! Forty dragon-power. Built her myself from a few bits and pieces from Earth. Trouble with springing out of the floor near a junk-yard,’ said the Devil, gritting his fangs as they cornered at speed in a cloud of sulphur, ‘is the fact one often surfaces under a pile of old iron.’ He rubbed his head. Crucible noticed that one of his horns was bandaged.

They skidded to a halt by the river. The car emitted clouds of steam.

A battered punt was moored by the river. The Devil helped Crucible in and picked up the skulls – pardon me – skulls.

‘What happened to what’s-his-name – Charon?’

‘We don’t like to talk about it.’

‘Oh.’

Silence, except for the creaking of the oars.

‘Of course, you’ll have to replace this by a bridge.’

‘Oh, yes.’

Crucible looked thoughtful.

'A ha'penny for them.'

'I am thinking,' said Crucible, 'about the water that is lapping about my ankles.'

The Devil did not look up.

'Here.'

He handed Crucible a battered mug, on which the initials 'B.R.' were just discernible. And so they continued.

They stood in front of the gate. Crucible looked up and read the inscription:

ALL HOPE ABANDON, YE WHO ENTER HERE.

'No good.'

'No?'

'Neon lights.'

'Oh, yes?'

'Red ones.'

'Oh, yes?'

'Flashing.'

'Oh, yes?'

They entered.

'Down, boy; get off Crucible.'

Three tongues licked Crucible simultaneously.

'Back to your kennel, boy.'

Whining, Cerberus slunk off.

'You must excuse him,' said the Devil, as he picked Crucible up and dusted him down. 'He has never been the same since he took a lump out of Orpheus's leg.'

'It didn't say that in the story.'

'I know. Pity, because the real story was much more - er, interesting. But that's neither here nor there.'

Crucible took stock of his surroundings. They appeared to be standing in a hotel lobby. In one wall was a small alcove containing a desk, on which a huge Residents' book, covered in dust, lay open.

The Devil opened a small wooden door.

'This way.'

‘What?’

‘My office.’

Crucible followed him up the narrow stairway, the boards creaking under his feet.

The Devil’s office, perched precariously on the walls of Hell, was rather dilapidated. There was a patch of damp in one corner, where the Styx had overflowed, and the paper was peeling off the wooden walls. A rusty stove in the corner glowed red hot. Crucible noticed that the floor seemed to be covered with old newspapers, bills, and recipes for various spells.

The Devil dropped into a commodious armchair while Crucible sat down in a tortuous cane chair, which all but collapsed under his weight.

‘Drink?’ said the Devil.

‘Don’t mind if I do,’ said Crucible.

‘Very nice drink, this,’ said Crucible. ‘Your own recipe?’

‘Yes. Quite simple – two pints bats’ blood, one— I say! You’ve gone a funny colour! Feel all right?’

‘Ulp! Ghack! Um – quite all right, thanks. Er – shall we get down to business?’

‘Okay.’

‘Well, as I see it, our main difficulty will be to make the public take Hell – and you for that matter – seriously. I mean, the generally accepted theory of Hell is a sort of fiery furnace, with you prodding lost souls with a pitchfork and hordes of demons and what-not running around yelling — Hey, that reminds me, where is everybody – er, soul?’

‘Who?’

‘Lost souls and demons and banshees and what-not?’

‘Oh, them. Well, like I said, no one has been down here for two thousand years, except that nit, Dante. And all the souls down here gradually worked their way up to Purgatory, and thence to – yes, well, the demons all got jobs elsewhere.’

‘Tax collectors,’ murmured Crucible.

‘Quite so. As for fiery furnaces, the only one still in working order is the Mark IV, over there in the corner. Very useful for my culinary efforts but not for much else.’

‘Hm. I see. Have you a map of Hell handy?’

‘I think so.’ The Devil rummaged in an old oak desk behind him and produced a roll of yellow parchment.

‘This is the newest map I have.’

‘It’ll do. Now let me see. Hum. I take it this is where we came in.’

‘Yes! That shading is the Sulphur Plain.’

‘That’s good. I’m sure the Acme Mining Company would give a lot to have the mining rights –’

‘Oh, yes?’

‘Of course, we would have to build a proper road over it for the increased transport –’

‘Oh, yes?’

‘Get a large tunnel dug down from Earth –’

‘Coffee bar here. Dance Hall there. Race track at the far end. Bowling Alley over –’

‘We could put a Fun-fair here –’

‘Leaving room for a restaurant there –’

‘Put some ice-cream stalls here and here, and here –’

‘All-night Jazz band there. Get in touch with your demons and offer them higher wages to come back to help run the place –’

‘Get Orpheus to organize a Jazz band – I’m sure Apollo would oblige –’

And so it continued. Soon the map was covered in symbols representing everything from a dance hall to a cycle-track. Then they sat back and discussed Stage One: putting Hell in the public eye.

Of course, there were difficulties at first. The time when the Devil materialized in the middle of the pitch on Cup Final day springs to mind. Still, he got a front page splash in all the popular newspapers. A famous Brewery sued him

for loss of custom, since most of the Cup Final spectators signed the pledge after seeing him.

Telephone lines all over the world smouldered, melted, and slowly fused together as Crucible was plagued with offers from the big financial magnates. Advertising firms fought for the Devil's patronage. Work on the London-Hell tunnel was progressing fast under Crucible's supervision. The Devil moved in with him, saying that all the cranes and bulldozers and what-not were making Hell hell.

'See how Cerberus loves his Yummy-Doggy! Your dog can have that glossy coat, those glistening fangs, those three heads, if you feed him Yummy-Doggy! Yummy-Doggy in the handy two-ounce tin! Cerberus says Yummy-Doggy is scr-r-rumptious! Ask for Yummy Doggy!!'

'Men of distinction smoke Coffin-Nales!'

'Tell me, Lucifer, why do you smoke Coffin-Nales?'

'I like that cool, fresh feeling; the flavour of the superb tobacco; the fifty pounds your firm's paying me for these corny adverts -'

'Tell me, sir, what are your views on the Colour Bar?'

'Well, I - er - I mean to say - um - er well - er that is -'

'What do you think of the younger generation?'

'Well - er - um - ah - yes! Definitely!'

'Do you agree that violence on television is responsible for the deplorable increase in the Nation's crime statistics?'

'Well, ah - um - no. That is to say, er - yes. I mean, er - no - ah - um.'

'Thank you very much, sir, for coming here tonight and giving us your views on topics of immediate concern. Thank you. Well, ladies and gentlemen, tune in next week for another -'

Crucible surveyed the company dispassionately. There was the usual bevy of disgruntled back-benchers, would-be

starlets, bored reporters, and of course, the usual fatigue party of Guards, all sipping themselves horizontal on third-rate champagne. A motley and mottled crowd. Crucible, who was becoming quite an expert on crowded atmospheres of late, diagnosed this one as a particularly fruity blend of stale smoke, Fleurs de Mal, and methane, not to mention the occasional waft of carbon monoxide. He turned to the Devil, who was performing wonders with the cocktail shaker.

‘This, my friend, is what is laughingly called a party; a ritual still found in the better parts of Belgravia. It seems to consist of a—’

‘Oh, lay off it, Cru. This is the besteshed jag I’ve hadsh in five hundred yearsh, and I’m gonna make the besht of itsh—’

A muffled *crump!* indicated that the Devil had ‘made the besht of itsh’, to the best of his ability.

It was a crisp November morning, and in the secluded thoroughfare that was Cranberry Avenue the birds were singing, the leaves were falling, and Crucible was having his breakfast. Between mouthfuls of bacon and mushrooms, he gave the newspapers the swift port-to-starboard. The gossip column caught his eye and he remembered the Devil.

Throwing the paper in the waste-bin, he wiped his mouth on his napkin and padded into the spare bedroom.

Chaotic was the scene that met his eye. Paper hats, balloons, and streamers were lying around the room and there were of bottles not a few. The Devil himself, still clad in Crucible’s second-best dress-suit, was sprawled across the bed, snoring loudly.

‘Wakey-Wakey!’ shouted Crucible, heartlessly. The effect was impressive. The Devil shot a clear two feet in the air and came down clutching his head; the language he used turned Crucible’s ears bright red.

Crucible busied himself in the kitchen, and returned with a cup of black coffee.

‘Here.’

‘Ouch! Not so loud.’ Slurp! ‘Oh, that’s better. What happened last night?’

‘You tried the effect of vodka and Green Chartreuse.’

‘Ouch!’

‘Quite. Now, best foot – er, hoof, forward. Hell’s opening ceremony is at twelve.’

‘I can’t go like this – ouch!’

‘Sorry. You’ll just have to drink gallons of black coffee and bear it. Now, come on.’

Jazz resounded around the walls of Hell. Pop music echoed along the dark corridors, mingling with the click of slot machines. Espresso coffee flowed in rivers. The scream of hotted-up motorcycles mingled with the screams of banshees both ghostly and human (guitar strumming, for the use of). The growth of Hell’s popularity only equalled the growth of the Devil’s bank account.

Up high in his balcony, on the wall of Hell, the Devil poured himself a drink of water and took three tranquillizer pills.

The storm raged. For the last month the Northern Hemisphere had been beset by thunderstorms unequalled in the records of mankind. The weather-men spent all their working days testing their corns, seaweed, and other oracles but had to confess themselves at a loss.

In the large study of his new country house, Crucible threw another log on the fire and settled himself deeper into his armchair. The storm continued.

His conscience, perforce the most robust and untroubled in Europe, was troubling him. Something was wrong with this Hades business. Certainly not on the monetary side, for his commission over the last three weeks had been

exceedingly generous, as his country house, two cars, five race-horses, and one yacht plainly stated.

Hell had been a great success. The Top people were going to flock there and it had had the approval of the Establishment.

But something was wrong. Something to do with those heavy storms.

Somewhere in his mind, the inner Crucible, equipped with wings, halo, and harp, was bouncing up and down on Crucible's conscience. The thunder murmured.

Poomb!

The Devil appeared, looking very agitated, and ran to Crucible's cocktail cabinet. He poured himself a Belladonna, and whirled round to Crucible.

'I can't stand any more of it!' he screamed. His hand was shaking.

'More of what?'

'Your lot! They've turned my home into Bedlam! Noise! Noise! Noise! I can't get a good night's rest! Do you realize I haven't slept for over two weeks? Nothing but yelling teen—!'

'One moment. You say they disturb you?'

'Very funny!'

'Why not close Hell for a while and take a holiday?'

'I've tried. Heaven knows—!'

Rumble!

'I've tried! Will they leave? No! A bunch of thugs threatened to "get" me if I tried to close their noisy, blaring paradise—'

RUMBLE!

'I can't move without being mobbed by savage hordes of autograph hunters! I'm famous! I can't get a bit of peace! It's Hell down there!' The Devil was now kneeling on the floor, tears streaming down his face. 'You've got to help me! Hide me! Do something! Oh God, I wish—'

The thunder split the Heavens in twain. The sky echoed and re-echoed with the sound. Crucible slumped in his chair, his hands clapped over his bursting eardrums.

Then there was silence.

The Devil lay in the middle of the floor, surrounded by light. Then the thunder spoke.

'DO YOU WISH TO RETURN?'

'Oh, yes sir! Please! I'm sorry! I apologize for everything! I'm sorry about that apple, truly I am!'

On the bookshelf, a bust of Charles Darwin shattered to fragments.

'I'm sorry! Please take me back, please -'

'COME.'

The Devil vanished. Outside, the storm subsided.

Crucible rose, shaken, from the chair. Staggering over to the window, he looked into the fast-clearing evening sky.

Then out of the sunset came a Hand and Arm of light, raised in salute.

Crucible smiled.

'Don't mention it, sir. It was a pleasure.'

He closed the window.

SOLUTION



TECHNICAL CYGNET, 1:10, JULY 1964

I really can't remember this one. There was a period, a long, long time ago, when I was dashing out ideas and concepts and half-baked bits of dialogue to see if, magically, they would catch fire and become a decent short story or novel. Those that didn't make it were dumped in the bit bucket, and if you can remember what that means then you have been around computers for as long as me. I must have written it and then danced away to try something else.

'Gold? or is it diamonds this time?'

Pyecraft swung round. 'What the—!'

The Inspector stepped through the tiny hatchway into the cockpit, and pointed vaguely towards the small rear cabin.

'There is a very large parachute compartment back there. I had to throw out your parachute though, so it's in your own interest that you watch the controls.'

Pyecraft eased the joystick back. 'I'll have your hide for this,' he muttered. 'After the indignity of a search at Lemay, you stow away on my private plane—!'

'Why don't you shut up?' suggested the Inspector sweetly. 'There are just the two of us here, so we'll have less of the "outraged citizen" act. It doesn't suit you.' He lit

a cigarette and carefully refrained from offering one to Pyecraft. 'Johan Pyecraft, I arrest you in—'

'What for? You can't prove a thing.'

'Smuggling.'

'Smuggling what? His arm slid slowly down between the seats to the small brass fire-extinguisher.

'I don't know yet. However, you have made fifteen trips over the mountains, in these battered old aircraft, in the past three weeks; you suddenly have a lot of money; and you are a known smuggler. So I say to myself, Gustave, I say, where is he getting all this money? And I answer myself, Gustave, mon ami, he is back in his old trade.'

'You found nothing at Lemay.' Pyecraft grasped the extinguisher.

'Exactly. And so you must have brought it on to the plane since. Therefore you will please to turn the machine around and—'

He sidestepped neatly as the heavy extinguisher flew past him; Pyecraft, caught off balance, finished the swing in the centre of the instrument panel.

High on the frosty mountainside two small figures huddled round a feebly glowing fire.

The Inspector looked again at the remains of the aeroplane.

'That was good flying.'

'We might as well have crashed; if the cold doesn't get us the wolves will.'

They both gazed at the fire for a few moments.

'Come on,' coaxed the Inspector. 'You might as well tell me now. Just what was it that you were smuggling?'

Pyecraft looked at him sadly.

'Aircraft,' he said.

THE PICTURE



TECHNICAL CYGNET, 1:11, MAY 1965

Good grief! That was a long time ago! I'm quite glad I never tried to sell this one, but once again I was playing with the words to see what happens. It's a thing that authors do sometimes.

It wasn't really a superb work of art.

The artist had painted the sky the wrong colour and covered it with blotches in an attempt, seemingly, to hide his mistake; the perspective, what there was of it, was wrong; and the vegetation would not have been found in the wildest nightmare. The whole thing was a surrealistic portrait of hell.

Even the frame barely held together.

Jon kept it on the wall - one of the padded walls - of his cell. Strange and horrific though it was, it was some connection with the Outside, some reminder that there were other things besides eating, sleeping, and the occasional visit of the doctors. Sometimes they would watch him through the grille in the padded door, and shake their heads.

'No cure,' said one.

'Unless we take away that - that picture,' said the other.

'You will kill him if you do.'

‘He will kill himself if we don’t; you know that it was the cause of his – his –’

‘His madness.’

‘There is no other word for it. That picture is the centre of his life now; I believe it is the only thing that he does not doubt. Yesterday he told me that it portrays the only true world, and that this one is really false. We can do nothing against such stubbornness.’

‘Then it is either kill or cure?’

‘Yes. I will tell him when I examine him. Perhaps the shock of having his world removed will cure him.’

It didn’t seem to. Jon still sat hunched and brooding in the corner of his cell, staring at the picture, trying to remember ...

He heard the soft tread in the passage. They were coming to take away his picture; there was so little time left! He made one last, tremendous, despairing effort ...

And the cell was empty.

They never did find out where he had gone or how he had escaped. It was a nine-day mystery; and, in the course of time, it was forgotten.

But the Doctor kept the picture, and hung it up in his study. He knew his suspicions were absurd, but they stuck.

Sometimes he stares at the picture with all three of his eyes, with the green sun below the horizon, and hopes that he is wrong.

For how could anyone survive in a world of brown earth and green leaves, and a blue sky with only one sun?