

Various savants, friends and what was politely known as “close family” had gathered round the bed of the old scientist, to share with him his last moments. It was a tight fit, even though the bedroom was twice as large as one would normally expect; but this was largely due to the large numbers of “contraptions” (as the scientist’s acerbic wife called them) which tumbled out of wardrobes, teetered upon high shelves and lay in untidy and miraculous heaps in corners. The eight would-be mourners were squashed up tight against the bed; the old scientist’s chief assistant was jammed in between a methane-powered trouser-press (patents pending) and a veritable cornucopia of switches, cables, brass things and decaying rubber tubing which cascaded from a replica Egyptian mummy, a present made by grateful tomb-robbers to the scientist and his wife on a long-forgotten trip to the Nile.

From time to time, the scientist’s wife, now in her nineties, but with no visible diminution in her ability to strike terror into the hearts of all who met her, would demand to know if anyone else wanted a cup of tea. There would be murmurs of denial, and a shifting of eyes to avoid her stare. A general negative consensus having been achieved, she would subside once more, fiddling with a roll of knitting and tutting to herself.

A crisis seemed near. One of the three doctors stirred himself, edged his way through the crowds with the familiar words “Let me through – I’m a doctor”, and felt the old scientist’s pulse, adopting his gravest face.

“Where’s my son?” wheezed the scientist, feebly scratching at his blankets. “Bring Harold to me...”

From the back of the crowd, through which now ran an echo of the demand (“Harold – where’s Harold – let Harold through – Harold...”), a thin, balding man emerged.

“Father,” he said, on finally washing up at the edge of the bed, like a pile of seaweed on a rocky promontory, “Here I am”.

“Good boy, Harold,” whispered the old man. “Who are all these people?”

Harold was about to embark on a series of introductions which threatened never to end, when his father interrupted.

“Never mind, son, just listen to what I have to say. You’ll see my Will shortly, if Doris still has it. I’ve left you the keys of my chest-of-drawers – all that they contain: socks, y-fronts, hankies, pyjamas, braces – they’re all yours, my boy. I know you always wanted them...”

Harold patted his father’s hand. “Thanks... thanks...” he said in a voice that betrayed the emotion of the day. His eyes, normally so lacking in lustre, were shining.

The old man drew his heir closer and whispered croakily: “And if you look under my pillow, you’ll find all my designs: they’re all yours now, every one. Go on, my boy, look under my pillow!”

Harold carefully slid his hand under the lowest of four pillows on the bed. After a moment of searching, his fingers touched an envelope, which he pulled out. Around him, the background noise of whispering, coughing and fidgeting had ceased. All eyes were on the large brown envelope which now emerged in Harold’s shaking hand.

“But that’s...!” exclaimed the scientist’s assistant, turning red with emotion.

“It’s his whole life’s...!” burst out an ancient colleague of the scientist, not one ever to have shared in the prizes and commendations heaped upon the illustrious one.

“Open it, Harold,” whispered the old man. “Open it, tell me what you find in there.” He closed his eyes and smiled in satisfied anticipation.

Harold’s trembling fingers pulled open the flap and extracted a pile of papers. The room was heavy with intellectual greed and suppressed excitement. Harold cleared his throat:

“This is the procedure for creating the Wallican, half-pelican half-wallet: - why, father, this is the very invention which made you rich and famous. You could put as much money as you wanted in there, and there was always room for more.”

“And once the money was in, son, it was a devil of a job to get any out,” said the scientist proudly, eyes still closed, but a beatific smile lighting up his features like a paper lantern. “A fierce bird the pelican, and not one to give up its treasures willingly.”

“Ah,” said an old man at the back of the crowd, “Many’s the person I had at the hospital needing stitched up, just because they had tried to spend their own money! I told them, leave the money alone, you’ll get rich quickly and peacefully.”

“What else, my boy, what else is in there,” asked the scientist eagerly, “Come on, I feel I haven’t got much time!”

Harold hastily looked at another sheaf of papers. “This is the half-burglar half-policeman – the ‘AutoCollar’. It says here: ‘Slashes the crime rate at a stroke’”

The old scientist’s wife cackled. “Fine hope that was, Robert,” she laughed, addressing no one in particular. “All that happened was that entire police forces turned to a life of crime.” She laughed and laughed herself into a silent paroxysm.

“What else, Harold?” asked the scientist impatiently.

“There’s the half-rabbit half-dog,” he said, doubtfully, scanning the next set of papers. “But I don’t think we –”

“Ah, old Doggit,” said the scientist wistfully. “You won’t remember him, Harold, you were only two years old at the time. Hours of fun, we had with Doggit, hours and hours. But he was not a success – after four days of chasing himself, he disappeared down a rabbit-hole and was never seen again. What else, Harold?”

The old lady interrupted: “See if you can find the ChocLadey, Harold. That was fun, heh-heh!”

The scientist groaned, so long and painfully that it required the attentions of all three doctors. In the confusion which resulted, the scientist’s assistant could be seen talking in a low voice to the secretary. “ChocLadey was not a good one – half-woman, half-chocolate bar.”

“Ate herself away to nothing?” enquired the secretary, herself very partial to the odd half-pound of chocolate.

The assistant nodded glumly. “A terrible sight it was, terrible.”

The old lady was enjoying herself. “Go on, Harold, and what about the WartCat that Robert invented. Half-cat, half-warthog. Oh, that was a good one, Robert, wasn’t it just?” She burst out into a wheezing cackle again, which momentarily interested the attendant physicians. But she recovered sufficiently to inform the embarrassed crowd that the WartCat drove itself beyond the edge of lunacy by alternately getting filthy in the mud then spending hours licking itself clean; only to get muddy immediately and spend hours getting itself clean again. “Oh, what a treat that one was, eh, Robert?” She nudged her husband as he lay; he turned his face away from her to the window, visibly biting his lower lip.

After a few moments, the scientist had regained enough composure. “Harold,” he said firmly, “I ask you to burn that recipe, to prevent any recurrence. And now, you will find among these papers the procedure which made me the most interviewed man of science of my day. Tell us about Seb and Co., Harold. Come on, boy!”

Harold rustled feverishly among the papers, and then held one up.

“Seb and Co, the future of athletics...” he read aloud.

“Pah!” said his mother, visibly thwarted in her delight.

“Seb and Co, quarter-egg, quarter-spoon, half-athlete. Won every single track medal from 100 metres up to 5000 metres at the Dublin Olympics. No one could match his skills and ability in his chosen sport.”

There was an outburst of clapping and the odd “Hurrah” from the people crowded around the bed.

The scientist acknowledged the praise modestly. “Are there any more in there, Harold?” he asked.

“This one’s for Jacques Coustaroo, father.” Harold was puzzled. “I don’t remember that one...”

The scientist’s assistant could not contain himself. “But Jacques Coustaroo, Harold! You must remember Jacques – half-diving suit, half-kangaroo! Hollywood came to your father only a couple of years ago when they were making *Jaws 6: Terror of the Skies*. You must remember: the flying fish they had hired were simply not up to the job, not fierce enough, not high enough. But your father came up with the star of the show!”

The old scientist relaxed on his pillows. “Thank you, Harold, my boy, and now I must have a cup of tea...”

Anxious to be of some assistance, the scientist’s secretary pressed the large red button in the centre of the forehead of the person standing next to her. She knew from her whispered conversations with the assistant that this was the legendary device code-named “Artemis” – one-third tea-maker, one-third toaster, one-third nurse – to which the scientist had just put the finishing touches before he took to his bed. Unfortunately, the scientist had not had time to test all the functionality.

Efficiently, Artemis bustled to the bedside, bent solicitously over the old man, and then – whish! pop! – the in-built toast-ejector picked him up and hurled him some twenty feet through the air, straight out of the open window, never to be seen alive again.

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