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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK CHARLEY DE MILO ***



CHARLEY de MILO

By LARRY M. HARRIS

Illustrated by Emsh

***It isn't at all obvious—at first
thought—that having two
perfectly good, usable arms
could be a real handicap to a
man....***

"To be, or not to be—that is the
question.
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to
suffer

The slings and arrows of outrageous
fortune,
Or to take arms ..."

Hamlet, Act III, Scene I



HE rocket was on the way up, but Professor Lightning didn't seem to care. Outside the cooktent Wrount flapped his arms and, on that signal, Seaman started up the big electric band, whooping it up with John Philip Sousa for openers, while all over the midway the lights snapped on, big whites and yellows, reds, greens, purples and dusky violets framing, in a titillating dimness, the front flap of the girlie tent. The outside talkers were busy outside the spectacle tents like Wicks' Hell Drivers, Biggest Auto Show in Fifty States—outside the grind shows, the eats, the rides: "Here and now, for the fourth part of one single dollar bill, the most amazing ..." "... Terrifying and strange beings from the farthest reaches of the Earth who will exhibit ..." "... Dances learned at the Court of the Sultan, Ay-rab dances right here, right on the inside, for only—"

And the crowd, filing in, laughed and chattered and shrieked on swooping rides, the Great Crane, the Space Race, the Merry-Go-Round and the Horses, threw down money to win a kewpie doll, a Hawaiian lei, a real life-size imitation scale model of Luna in three real dimensions ... living it up on the first show, while the rocket climbed on and out, and bubbled excitement in the blood.

The rocket was up: the carnival was open. But Professor Lightning didn't seem to care. He sat in the cooktent with his eyes hooded and hidden under the unshaded glow of a hundred-and-fifty-watt Forever bulb, while Charley de Milo fidgeted his feet, and listened, and tried to cut the old man off.

"Look, professor," he said nervously, "why don't we talk about it later? Table it, till after the show?" He scratched the side of his head with his left foot. "I got to go on in a couple of minutes," he said. "I can hear the talker going now. I got to—"

"Forget the show," Professor Lightning said. His voice was flatter and harsher, and his face more tense, than Charley ever remembered seeing it. "The show isn't important."

Charley blinked, trying to understand. "But, Professor—"

"Listen to me," Professor Lightning said. "The world is at the beginning of a new cultural revolution. Since the Cold War melted, and freedom of inquiry and research began to live again on both sides of the old Iron Curtain, science has begun a new Renaissance. The cultural interflow has—"

"Please, professor," Charley said miserably, rubbing his toes together. "There isn't much time before I got to go on. And you ought to be inside the Science tent, too, because any minute—"

"If I am not in the tent," Professor Lightning said calmly, "I will not appear in the show. It does not matter."

"But they'll fire you," Charley said. He grabbed for a cigarette with his right foot and got it into his mouth. Striking a match with his left foot, he lit the cigarette and blew out a long, ragged plume of smoke. "If you're not there on time," he said in strained tones, "they'll fire you. And what about me?"

Professor Lightning gestured with both big hands. It was the same movement he used every night, when he showed the crowd there were no wires or batteries secreted on his person. Charley half-expected him to grab hold of a couple of light bulbs and show them glowing in his fists. But the gesture was meant, this time, as an aid to relaxation. "Don't worry," Professor Lightning said, in a grating sort of caricature of a soothing tone. "If they fire me ... well, then, they save me the trouble of quitting. And as for you, my boy, a carnival job should be the furthest thing from your thoughts."

"Well, it isn't," Charley said sourly. "And if you'll excuse me, professor, I care how I get the money to eat, even if you don't. I got a good job—"

"You won't need your job," Professor Lightning said, "if you'll listen to me."

Charley made up his mind. Much as he hated to be impolite, there were some things more important than social forms, he decided. He stood up. "After the show, professor," he said with firmness, and went out of the cooktent, heading at a rapid dogtrot for the big tent at the other side of the midway. As he reached it he could see Dave Lungs, the outside talker, climb up on the front platform to begin his spiel.

"Marvels of the world!" Dave announced without preliminary. "Wonders of the natural universe! Surprises and startling sights for every member of the family!" By the time he had got that far, a crowd was beginning to collect in front of the platform. "For the fourth part of a single dollar bill—" Dave went on, but Charley didn't have the time to listen; he was in the bally.

He lifted the backflap of the tent with one foot, and wriggled inside.

As he made his way to the cluster of people near the front flap, past the booths and stands, he felt an enormous sense of relief. He had made it—with all of fifty seconds to spare.

Ned and Ed stood next to him. "Where you been?" Ed said in a nasal whisper.

"I got held up," Charley explained. "Professor Lightning, he was talking to me, and—"

"Later," Ned said. His voice was lower and throatier than Ed's; it was the only way Charley could tell them apart, but then, he thought, nobody ever had to tell them apart. They were, like all Siamese twins, always together. "We're going on," Ned said, and he and his twin moved forward.

Charley moved into place behind them, and came out blinking in the glare of the front platform.

"Siamese twins," Dave was shouting. "A contemporary marvel of science, ladies and gentlemen—and here we have ..."

Charley stepped forward as Ned and Ed stepped back into the shadows again.

"... Charley de Milo! Ladies and gentlemen, the world-wide fame of this brave and talented boy is stupendous! His feats of skill will amaze you! Watch him thread a needle! Watch him comb his hair! And all for one thin quarter, ladies and gentlemen, only the fourth part—"

The electronic band choked on Sousa, coughed and began again with Kabalevsky. Charley watched the audience below, staring up at him, hundreds of faces. He heard their gasp as he flexed his shoulders and turned. He grinned down, taking a second longer than usual, and then stepped back, still grinning.

"Charley de Milo, the Armless Wonder!" Dave said. "And many more sights inside, ladies and gentlemen, sights to amaze you, sights to chill your very blood, sights ..."

One-thirty, and the last show over. The rocket had come down for the night; all over the midway lights were blinking off and silence was creeping, like a stain, over the ground. Professor Lightning was sitting on his bunk, in the small tent he shared with Erma the Fish Girl. Erma was out drinking with Dave Lungs and some of the others, and only the professor and Charley de Milo were in the room. Charley was sitting on Erma's bunk, looking resigned.

"Well, if you still want to talk to me," he said, "now's your chance. O.K.?"

"I certainly want to talk to you," Professor Lightning said firmly. "I want to tell you of the most important moment of your life."

Charley tried to think of something to say to this, but there wasn't anything. He shifted on the bunk, scratched at his nose with his left foot, and grinned spastically. "Sure," he said at random. "And, by the way, I'm sorry about before, professor. But the show was going on, and—"

"The show," Professor Lightning said, in tones of the utmost contempt. "Forget about the show—now, and tomorrow, and forever."

"But—"

"No words," Professor Lightning said, raising a hand delicately. "Please. Allow me to tell you of my invention."

Charley sighed and lay back on the bed. "Invention, professor?" he said. "You mean sort of a machine?"

For some reason, Professor Lightning looked irritated. "It's not a machine," he said flatly. Then he sighed and his tone changed. "Charley, my boy," he said, "do you remember what I was telling you before? About how the world has entered a new Age of Science? How new inventions, new discoveries, are coming along every day?"

"Well, sure," Charley said. "The papers talk about it every once in a while. You know, I see the papers, or the *Chicago American*, anyhow. My mother sends it to me. She likes the columns."

"Why," Professor Lightning went on, as if he hadn't been listening at all, "right here in Wrout's Carnival Shows, we have things that just didn't exist ten or fifteen years ago. The electronic band. The Forever bulb."

"That's right," Charley put in. "And look at Joe Wicks. Why, he can do tricks with all those new things they got on cars, tricks nobody ever did before or even thought about in the old days."

"And more fundamental discoveries," the professor said. "Chadwick's Law of Dimensionality, Dvedkin and the Ontological Mean ... oh, I keep up with the literature. No matter what's happened to me, I keep up with the literature."

Charley sighed, very softly so as not to injure the professor's feelings. But he did hope the old man wasn't going to start on all those stories about his lost career again. Charley knew—everybody in the Wrout show did—that Professor Lightning had been a real professor once, at some college or other. Biology, or Biological Physics, or something else—he'd taught classes about it, and done research. And then there had been something about a girl, a student the professor had got himself involved with. Though it was pretty hard to imagine the professor, white-haired and thin the way he was now, chasing after a girl.

He'd been fired, or something, and he'd drifted for a while and then got himself an act and come with a Carnival. Charley knew the whole story. He didn't want to hear it again.

But the professor said: "I'm as good as I ever was—better than I ever was, my boy. I've been

keeping up, doing experiments. I've been quiet about it."

Everybody, Charley thought, knew about Professor Lightning and his experiments. If they kept the old man happy, kept him contented and doing shows, why not? After all, the old guy didn't drink or anything really serious; if he wanted to play around with test tubes and even Bunsen burners, people figured, why, let him.

But Professor Lightning thought nobody knew. Well, he had been a real professor once, which is to say a square. Some people never really adjusted to carny life—where everybody knows everything.

Charley figured maybe it was better to act surprised. "Really?" he said. "Experiments?"

Professor Lightning looked pleased, which satisfied Charley. "I've been on the track of something big," he said. He seemed to be talking more to himself than to Charley. "Something new," he said. "And at last ... at last, my boy, I've found it. I'll be famous, Charley, famous—and so will you!"

"That's nice," Charley said politely. Then he blinked. "But what do you mean," he added, "me?"

"I want you to help me," the professor said. He leaned forward, and in the dim light of the tent's single lamp, his eyes glittered. "I want you to come with me."

"Come with you?" Charley said, and swallowed hard. He'd never thought, the way some did, that the old man was crazy. But it did look as if he'd slipped a couple of cogs for sure and for real. "Where?" Charley said.

"Washington," the professor said instantly. "New York. London, Paris. Rome. The world, Charley. The world that's going to do us homage."

Charley shifted a little in the bed. "Look, professor," he said, "I've got a job, right here in the carny. I couldn't leave here. So suppose we just—"

"Your job?" the professor said. "Your job's gone, my boy. Wait. Let me tell you what I've discovered. Let me tell you what has happened—happened to you, my boy. To you, and to me."

Charley sat upright, slowly. "Well," he said, "all right, professor."

Professor Lightning beamed, and his eyes glittered brighter and brighter. "Limb regeneration," he said, and his voice was as soft and quiet as if he'd been talking about the most beautiful woman in the world. "Limb regeneration."

Charley waited a long minute before he admitted to himself that he didn't have the faintest idea what the professor was talking about. "What?" he said at last.

Professor Lightning shook his head slightly. "Charley," he said softly, "you're an Armless Wonder. That's right, isn't it?"

"Sure it is, professor," Charley said. "You know that. I was born that way. Made a pretty good thing out of it, too."

"Well," Professor Lightning said, "you don't have to be one. Can you realize that?"

Charley nodded slowly. "Sure I don't," he said. "Only it's pretty good money, you know? And there's no sense in sitting around back home and feeling sorry for myself, is there? I mean, this way I can make money and have a job and—"

"No," Professor Lightning said emphatically.

Charley blinked. "No?" he said.

Professor Lightning shook his head, meaningfully. "Charley, my boy," he said, "I don't mean that you should go home and mope. But think about this: suppose you had your arms? Suppose you had two arms, just like everybody else."

"Why think about anything like that?" Charley said. "I mean, I am what I am. That's the way things are. Right?"

"Wrong," Professor Lightning said. "I can give you arms, Charley. I can make you normal. Just like everybody else."

"Well," Charley said. After a few seconds he said: "Gee." Then he said: "You're kidding me, professor."

"I'm perfectly serious," Professor Lightning said.

"But—"

"Let me show you," Professor Lightning said. He stood up and went to the flap of the tent. "Come with me," he said, and Charley got up, dumbly, and followed him out into the cool darkness outside.

Later, Charley couldn't remember all that Professor Lightning had showed him or told him. There were some strange-looking animals called salamanders; Professor Lightning had cut their tails off

and they'd grown new tails. That, he said, happened in nature. But he had gone a step farther. He had isolated the particular factor that made such regrowth possible.

Charley remembered something about a molecular lattice, but it didn't make any sense to him, and was only a puzzle. But the professor told him all about the technique, in a very earnest and scientific voice that was convincing to listen to, and showed him mice that he'd cut the tails off of, and the mice had brand-new tails, and even feet in one or two cases. There were a whole lot of small animals in cages, all together in back of the professor's tent, and Charley looked at all of them. The professor had a flashlight, and everything was very clear and bright.

When the demonstration was over, Charley had no doubts at all. It was obvious to him that the professor could do just what he said he could do: grow limbs on things. Charley scratched his head with his left foot, nervously.

"That's why I came to you," the professor said. "I need a human being—just to show the scientific world that my technique works on human beings. And I've worked with you for a number of years now, Charley."

"Five," Charley said. "Five since you came with Wrout."

"I like you," the professor said. "I want to make you the first, the very first, person to be helped by my technique."

Charley shifted his feet. "You mean you want to give me arms," he said.

"That's right," the professor said.

"No," Charley said.

Professor Lightning nodded. "Now, then," he said. "We'll get right to work on ... Charley, my boy, what did you say?"

Charley licked his lips. "I said no," he said.

Professor Lightning waited a long minute. "You mean you don't believe me," he said at last. "You think I'm some sort of a crackpot."

"Not at all," Charley said politely. "I guess if you say you can do this ... well, I see all the animals, and everything, and I guess you can do it. That's O.K."

"But you're doubtful," Professor Lightning said.

Charley shook his head. "No," he said. "You can do it, all right. I guess I'm sure of that, professor."

"Then," the professor said, in a tenser voice, "you think it might be dangerous. You think you might be hurt, or that things might not work out right, or—"

"Gee," Charley said, "I never thought of anything like that, professor. I know you wouldn't want to hurt me."

"I certainly wouldn't," Professor Lightning said. "I want to help you. I want to make you normal. Like everybody else."

"Sure," Charley said uncomfortably.

"Then you'll do it," Professor Lightning said. "I knew you would, Charley. It's a great opportunity. And I offered it to you because you—"

"Gee, I know," Charley said, feeling more uncomfortable than ever. "And don't think I don't appreciate it. But look at it my way, professor." He paused. "Suppose I had two arms—just like everybody else, the way you tell me. What would happen to me?"

"Happen?" Professor Lightning blinked. "Why, Charley ... why, you could do anything you liked. Anything. You'd have the same opportunities as anybody else. You could be ... well, my boy, you could be anything."

"Could I?" Charley said. "Excuse me for talking about this, professor, but I've had a lot of time to think about it. And it's all sort of new to you. I mean, you weren't born the way I was, and so you just don't understand it."

Professor Lightning said: "But, my boy—"

"No." Charley said. "Let me explain this. Because it's important." He cleared his throat, sat down on the ground and fumbled for a cigarette. He found one in his shirt pocket, carried it to his lips with his right foot, and lit a match with his left. When he was smoking easily, he went on.

"Professor, do you know how old I am?" he said. "I'm forty-two years old. Maybe I don't look it, but that's how old I am. Now, I've spent all my life learning to do one thing, and I do a pretty



good job of it. Anyhow, good enough to get me a spot with Wroust's show, and probably with anybody else I wanted to work for."

"But your arms—?" the professor said.

"That's what I mean," Charley said. "I don't have any arms. I never had any. Maybe I miss 'em, a little—but everything I do is based on the fact that I don't have 'em. Now, professor, do you know what I am?"

Professor Lightning frowned. "What you are?" he said.

"I'm an Armless Wonder," Charley said. "That's a pretty good thing to be. In a carnny, they look up to an Armless Wonder—he's a freak, a born freak, and that's as high as you can go, in a carnny. I get a good salary—I send enough to my mother and my sister, in Chicago, for them to live on. And I have what I need myself. I've got a job, professor, and standing, and respect." He paused. "Now, suppose I had arms. I'd have to start from scratch, all over again. I'd have to start from the bottom up, just learning the basic elements of any job I signed on for. I'd be a forty-two-year-old man doing the work of an eighteen-year-old. And not making much money. And not having much standing, or respect."

Charley took the cigarette out of his mouth with his right foot, held it for a second and put it back.

"I'd be normal," he said. "I'd be just like everybody else, professor. And what do I want anything like *that* for?"

Professor Lightning tried everything, but it wasn't any good. "Fame," he said, and Charley pointed out, calmly and reasonably, that the kind of fame he'd get from being an experimental subject was just like being a freak, all over again—except that it would wear off, and then, he asked, where would he be? Professor Lightning talked about Man's Duty to Science, and Charley countered with Science's Duty to Man. Professor Lightning tried friendship, and argument, and even force—but nothing worked. Incredible as it seemed to the professor, Charley was content to remain a freak, an Armless Wonder. More, he seemed to be proud and happy about it.

It was too bad that the professor didn't think of the one argument that might have worked. In the long run, it wouldn't have made any difference, perhaps—but it would have cleared matters up, right there and then. Because the one workable argument had a good chance of succeeding.

But, then, Professor Lightning really didn't understand carnny. He never thought of the one good argument, and after a while he gave up, and went away.

Of course, that was several days later. Professor Lightning told Charley that he was leaving for New York, and Charley said: "What? In the middle of the season?" Then he told Wroust, and Wroust screamed and ranted and swore that Professor Lightning would never work in carnny again. "I'll have you blacklisted!" he roared.

And Professor Lightning shrugged and smiled and went away to pack. He took all his notebooks, and all the cages with little animals in them, and he didn't seem at all disturbed. "I'll find another subject," he told Charley, when he left. "When they find out what I've got, in New York, they'll provide me with subjects by the hundred. I did want to help you ..."

"Thanks," Charley said honestly.

"... But that's the way things are, I suppose," Professor Lightning said. "Maybe some day you'll realize."

Charley shook his head. "I'm afraid not, professor," he said, and Professor Lightning shook Charley's foot, and left, and Charley went back to work in the freak show, and for a while he didn't even think about Professor Lightning. Then, of course, the news began to show up in the Chicago *American*, which Charley got two or three days late because his mother sent it to him by mail.

At first Charley didn't realize that Dr. Edmund Charles Schinsake was Professor Lightning, but then the *American* ran his picture; that was the day Professor Lightning was awarded a medal by the AMA, and Charley felt pleased and happy for the old man. It looked as if he'd got what he wanted.

Charley, of course, didn't think much about the professor's "limb regeneration"; he didn't need it, he thought, and he didn't want it, and that was that.

And then, one night, he was dropped from the bally, and he asked Dave Lungs about it, and Dave said: "Well, we want the biggest draw we can get, out there before the show," and put Erma, the Fish Girl, out in his place. And Charley started to wonder about that, and after a few days had gone by he found himself talking about it, to Ed Baylis, over in the cooktent while they were having lunch.

Baylis was a little man of sixty or so, with a wrinkled face like a walnut and a powerful set of lungs; he was Wroust's outside talker for the girlie show. "Because I'm old," he said, grinning. "I don't have trouble with the girls. And if I got to take one off the bally or out of the show there's no personal stuff that would make it tough, see what I mean?"

"That's what I'm worried about," Charley said.

"What?" Ed asked. He speared a group of string beans with his fork and conveyed them to his mouth. Charley, using his right foot, did the same.

"The bally," Charley said. "The way things are, Dave took me off, and I'm worrying about it."

"Maybe some kind of a change," Ed said.

Charley shook his head. "He said ... he said he wanted the biggest draw out there. Now, you know I'm a big draw, Ed. I always have been."

"Sure," Ed said. He chewed another mouthful and swallowed. "Still, people want a change now and then. Doesn't have to mean anything."

"Maybe not," Charley said uncomfortably. But he wasn't convinced.

The season drew to a close, and Charley went off to the Florida Keys, where he spent a month living with some friends before holing up with his mother and sister for the winter. He was offered a job in New York, at a year-round flea museum in Times Square, but after some thought he decided against it. He'd never had to work winters, and he wasn't going to start.

After all, he was still doing well, wasn't he? He told himself emphatically that he was. He was an Armless Wonder, a born freak, the top of the carny ladder, with a good job wherever he cared to look for one.

He had to tell himself that quite a few times before he began to believe it.

Spring came, and then summer, and Charley kissed his mother and his sister good-by and joined Wrout's Carnival Shows in Summit, Idaho, three days before their opening. He didn't notice much change from previous years, but it took an effort not to notice some things.

Not like the new man who'd taken Professor Lightning's place—a tall thin youngster who had an Electric Chair act. Or like the periodic quarrels between Ned and Ed; it seemed they'd met a girl over the winter season, and disagreed about her. Ed thought she was perfectly wonderful; Ned couldn't see her for beans.

No, things like that were a part of carny; you got used to them, as the show rolled along year after year, and paid no more attention to them than a housewife pays to rather uninteresting back-fence gossip.

It was something else that had changed, something important.

His contract, for instance. It was made out for the same pay as he'd been getting, but the option periods were shortened up; suddenly, Charley was living from season to season, with almost no assurance of continuous, steady work. Old man Wrout had looked a little less than happy when he'd given Charley the contract; he'd almost seemed ashamed, and he hadn't really looked Charley in the eye once. But when Charley asked what was wrong, he got no answer.

Or none that meant anything. "It's just the way things are," Wrout muttered. "Don't make no difference, kid."

But it did make a difference. Charley wasn't out in the bally any more, either; he was backstage among the second-rate acts, the tattooed man and the fire-eater and the rest, while Erma and Ned and Ed and the top-liners took their bows out before the crowd, pulling them in, and got the gasps and the applause.

The crowds in front of his own platform, inside during the show, were smaller, too. At first Charley thought that was due to the bally itself, but as the season began and wore on, the crowds continued to shrink beyond all expectation. Counting as he worked, combing his hair with one foot, drawing little sketches for the customers ("Take one home for only one extra dime, a treasured souvenir especially personalized for you by Charley de Milo")—counting the house, he discovered one evening that he was the smallest draw in the tent. The tattooed man did better than Charley de Milo, which was enough of a disgrace; the rest were so far ahead that Charley didn't even want to think about it.

His first idea was that somebody was out to get him. He could feel the muscles of his shoulders and back bunching up when he tried thinking what to do about the sabotage that had struck him; but an Armless Wonder has one very real disadvantage. He can comb his own hair and brush his own teeth; he can feed himself and—with proper clothing—dress himself; he can open doors and shut windows and turn the pages of books. But he can't engage in a free-for-all fight, not without long and careful training in that style of battle known as *savate*, or boxing with the feet. Charley had never learned *savate*; he had never needed it.

For the first time since he could remember, he felt helpless. He wasn't normal; he couldn't do what any normal man could do. He wanted to find the man who was sabotaging his show, and beat him into a confession, and throw him off the lot—

And he couldn't.

The muscles of his back pulled and pulled at him. He clenched his jaw. Then Dave Lungs came

over to his platform and he forced himself to relax, sweating. There were four or five people behind Dave, ordinary marks with soft, soft faces and round eyes. While Dave talked Charley went through his act; perhaps ten other marks were scattered in the tent, standing at other platforms, watching other acts even without Dave there to guide them and talk them up.

And when he was through Dave sold exactly one of the sketches Charley had done. One. An old man bought it, a chubby little Santa Claus of a man with eyes that twinkled and a belly that undoubtedly shook like a jelly bowl when it was freed from its expensive orlon confines. Dave went off to the next platform, where Erma stood, and the marks followed him, and more drifted over. Erma had ten customers, Charley noticed, and he grabbed a handkerchief from the platform floor and wiped his damp face with one foot.

Something's wrong, he thought stupidly, and he must have said it aloud because, at his feet, a high, thin old voice said: "What was that, son? Did you say something?"

"Nothing at all," Charley mumbled, and looked down. The Santa Claus man was staring up at him. "Show's over," Charley said, more curtly than he meant. He took a deep breath and set his feet more firmly on the platform, but it didn't do any good. He was like a coiled spring, waiting for release.

"I don't expect any show," Santa Claus said. "Really I don't. But I did want to talk to you for a few minutes, if you don't mind."

"I'm not in a talking mood," Charley said. "Sorry." He was ashamed of the words as soon as he brought them out; that was no way to treat any stranger, not even a mark. But it was a long second before he could say anything else. Santa Claus stood watching him patiently, holding Charley's sketch by one corner in his left hand.

"I'm sorry," Charley said at last. "It ... must be the heat. I'm kind of on edge."

"Of course," Santa Claus said. "I understand. Really I do."

There was a little silence. Dave and the crowd trailed away from Erma and headed for Senor Alcala, the fire-eater at the end of the row. Charley barely heard Dave's spiel; he licked his lips and said: "You wanted to talk to me."

"Now," Santa Claus said, "I don't want you to be ashamed of anything. There's nothing personal in this, really there isn't. But I do want to help if I can, help anyone who needs help."

"I don't need help," Charley said. "I'm sorry." He tried to keep his voice gentle. The old man obviously meant well; there was no sense in hurting him.

"It's your ... infirmity," Santa Claus said. "Boy, have they been keeping the news from you?"

"News?" Charley said, with a sudden sick feeling.

"In New York," Santa Claus said. "There's a doctor there—a man who can help people like you. He has a new technique. I was reading in the papers just the other day—there was a man injured in a railroad accident, who lost one arm and one leg. This doctor used him as his first subject."

"He said he'd find another one," Charley put in without thinking.

"Another?"

"It doesn't matter," Charley said. "You were going to suggest that I go and see this doctor. Is that right?"

"Well," Santa Claus said, seeming oddly embarrassed, "it can't hurt, you know. And it might help. Really it might. And then ... then you might not have to ... have to be the way you are, and do what you do."

Charley took a long breath. "I'll think about it," he said, in the very politest tone he could manage.

"I only want to help," Santa Claus said.

"I'm sure you do," Charley said. "And thanks."

"If there's anything I can do—"

Charley smiled down. "That's all right," he said. "Thanks. But I guess you'd better join the rest—if you want to see the show at all."

Santa Claus said: "Oh. Of course." He turned and found the group just leaving Senor Alcala's platform, and scurried off to catch up with them. Charley stared at his retreating back, fighting to stay calm.

That was the way marks were, of course, and there wasn't anything to be done about it. It was always "the way you *have* to be," and "the things you *have* to do." It never seemed to enter their heads that pity was unnecessary baggage where a born freak was concerned, any more than it had entered Professor Lightning's head. A born freak, Charley reflected, had a pretty good life of it, all told; why, even marriage wasn't out of the question. Charley knew of some very happy ones.

But the marks pitied you, Charley thought. And maybe it wasn't especially smart to tell them anything different; pity, as much as anything else, keep them coming. Pity, and a kind of vicarious victory. When Charley threaded a needle, he was telling all the marks: "It doesn't matter what kind of accident happens to you—you can overcome it. You can go on and do anything. It's all what you make it—everything, every bad turn life hands you can be made into something better. If I can do it, you can do it."

That was what the marks felt, Charley thought. It was wrong-headed, it was stupid, and it could be a simple nuisance—but it brought in the dough. Why argue with it? Why try to change it?

Charley nearly grinned. The crowd of marks moved on down the other side of the tent, and Charley watched them. Ned and Ed drew the biggest crowd, an attentive, almost rapt crew who could be suckered into buying anything the Siamese twins wanted to sell them. Dave milked them for all they were worth, and Charley nodded quietly to himself. Dave was a good carnny man.

He worked for the good of the show. Or—did he?

Dave had taken him off the bally. Did Dave have some reason to hate him? Could Dave be out to get him?

Charley couldn't think why, but it was a lead, the only one he had. And if Dave did turn out to be behind everything that was happening, Charley knew exactly what he was going to do.

He couldn't beat Dave himself.

But he had friends—

After the show, that night, Charley went hunting for Ed Baylis. Ed had been around Wrout's a long time, and if anything were going on Ed would know about it. Charley went down to the girlie tent, and found Ed just clearing up. All over the midway, the lights were going out, and the Mars Race game gave one final roar and came to a halt. The last customers were leaving.

Ed looked up when he came over. Charley didn't ease into the subject; he couldn't. "Something's wrong," he said at once. "I'm off the bally, and the crowds are going down. I don't like it, Ed."

Baylis shrugged. "Who would?" he said.

"But—something's wrong," Charley said. "Ed, you know what's happening. You get the word. Let me in on it."

"I don't know anything about this," Ed said at once. But his face was still, his eyes shuttered in the darkness.

Charley kept after him. They went behind the girlie tent, talking softly. Overhead a rocket burned by, but neither man looked up.

At last Ed sighed. "Just forget about it," he said. "Just do your job. That's all that matters. You don't want to know anything else."

"Why don't I?" Charley said. "Sure I do. And it's no good telling me to do my job. The way things are running, Ed, I'm not going to *have* a job very long."

"There's nothing you can do about it," Ed said. "Believe me. You don't want to know because knowing wouldn't do you any good. And you wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Try me," Charley said. "Go ahead." He scratched at one shin with the other foot.

"Well," Ed began, and then stopped. He shook his head. "Look, Charley, let me tell this my way. Something like this happened before. A long while back—before the Cold War started, let alone ended."

"Go ahead," Charley said. A drop of sweat ran slowly down his forehead. He tried to ignore it.

"Did I ever tell you I used to talk for a strong-man act?" Ed said. "Not a sideshow talker, nothing like that; this guy had an act of his own, full tent and flies. Gondo, his name was, and I can still see those flies: *Eighth Wonder of the World* up on top, red on blue, and just *Gondo* underneath, pure white with red outlining. Class, but flashy, if you see what I mean. You never saw the like, kid."

Charley shook his head. "O.K.," he said. "But what does this have to do with—"

"Well," Ed cut in, "that was years ago; I was a youngster, pretty well just setting out. And Gondo drew crowds—big crowds. Lifting a wagonload of people on his back—that was one of his tricks. I think Sandow himself used to do it, but he had nothing on Gondo; the guy had style. Class. And he was a draw; I was working for J. C. Hobart Shows then, and there was nothing on the lot to top him."

Ed paused, rubbing at his chin reflectively.

"Then the crowds started to fall off," he said. "Just like with you, Charley. And nobody knew why. Gondo was doing the same act—no change there. So the change had to be some place else."

"Same with me," Charley said.

"Sure," Ed said. "The same with you. Charley, do you follow the papers?"

"I guess so," Charley said. "One, anyway. My mother sends it to me from Chicago. She likes the —"

"Sure," Ed said. "Well, did you ever hear about a Dr. Schinsake? Edmund Charles Schinsake?"

Charley snorted in surprise. "Who do you think you are?" he said. "Santa Claus?"

"What?"

"Nothing," Charley said. "It's just ... well, nothing. But sure, I know the guy. And so do you." He explained.

"Professor Lightning?" Ed said. "I never saw a picture. But it doesn't matter—except maybe it'll make the guy easier to see. Because this is it, Charley; I think you ought to go and see him."

There was a little silence.

"You, too?" Charley said. "You mean, so I can stop being a poor, poor cripple and stop making lots of money? Is that what you're talking about?"

"Listen, Charley," Ed said. "I—"

"Just give up," Charley cut in. "That's what you want me to do. Just give up and go to the good old doctor and ask him to give me some arms. Is that what you wanted to tell me about this Gondo of yours? How he just gave up and got a nice little white cottage some place and got a nice little low-paying job and lived unhappily ever after, because a carny isn't a healthy, well-adjusted life? Is that it, Ed?"

Ed Ribbed at his chin. "No, Charley," he said. "No, kid. Not at all. But I think you ought to—"

"Well, I won't," Charley said. "Look, Ed: I want you to get this straight. I don't care who's against me, or what they've got planned. I'm not going to give up. I'm going to find out what's going on, and I'm going to lick it. Have you got it?"

Ed sighed. "I've got it," he said. "But, Charley: there are some things you don't lick."

"I'll find out," Charley said. "Believe me, Ed. I'll find out."

But nobody else knew a thing—or, at least, nobody was willing to talk. Ned and Ed offered any help they could give—but said nothing that helped. Erma was puzzled, but ignorant; Senor Alcala knew nothing, and no one else was any better off, as far as Charley could discover.

After a week, Charley decided there was only one person for him to see. Ed Baylis had recommended him, and so had the little Santa Claus. Professor Lightning didn't look like much of a lead, but there was nothing else left. The audience was still dropping, little by little, and Charley knew perfectly well that something had to be done, and fast.

Getting a leave of absence was even easier than he'd expected it to be; and that was just one more proof of how far his standing with the show had dropped. People just didn't care; he wasn't a draw any more.

And his standing with the carny was all he had left. He had caught himself, lately, wondering if he would really be so badly off with two arms, like everybody else. The idea frightened him, but the way it kept coming back frightened him even more.

Leaving the carny lot, of course, he put on his sandals; outside the carnival, he had to wear shoes. They were laceless, of course, and made to be kicked off easily. Charley slipped into them and thought wryly of the professor and his "scientific Renaissance." The shoes were a new plastic, lightweight and long-lasting, but the dyeing problem hadn't quite been solved. Instead of a quiet, dull brown, they were a garish shade that almost approached olive drab.



Well, he thought, nothing's perfect. He shrugged into a harness and had his single suitcase attached to it; the harness and case were lightweight, too, and Charley headed for the station walking easily.

He climbed aboard the train and dropped his suitcase into the Automatic Porter, and then went to find a seat. The only one available was next to a middle-aged man chewing a cigar in a sour silence. Charley slipped into his seat without a word, and hoped the man would ignore him. He had a face like an overripe summer squash, and his big hands, clasped in his lap, were fat and white, covered with tiny freckles. Charley leaned back and closed his eyes.

A minute or so passed in silence.

Then a voice said: "Heading for New York?"

"That's right," Charley said tiredly. He opened his eyes. The middle-aged man was leaning toward him, smelling of his cheap cigar.

"Likewise," the man said. His voice was hoarse and unpleasant. "I thought you might be."

"That's right," Charley said. "Long trip." He hoped desperately that the man would leave him alone. He wasn't on display now; he wanted the time to think, to try and figure out what had been happening. He had to have some questions to ask Professor Lightning, and that meant that he had to have some sort of plan of action.

"Going to see that doctor," the middle-aged man said. "That right?"

"That's right," Charley said. Apparently Professor Lightning had become a nine-day wonder; anyone going to New York was presumed to be going to see him.

Then Charley corrected himself. Not anyone.

Any cripple.

"Get the arms fixed, right?" the middle-aged man said.

"That's right," Charley said for the third time. Maybe the man would take the hint.

But he had no such luck. "That's a fine thing the doctor is doing," he said. "I mean, helping all these people. Don't have to be ... well, look, bud, don't take me personally."

"I don't mind," Charley said. "I'm used to it."

"Sure," the man said. "Hey, by the way. My name's Roquefort. Al Roquefort."

"Charley de Milo," Charley said.

"Glad to know you," the man said. "So while we're traveling companions, you might say ... might as well get to be friendly."

"Sure," Charley said tiredly. He looked round the car. A great many people seemed to be heading East. There were no other seats. Charley sighed and shrugged himself deeper into the upholstery.

"You know," Roquefort said suddenly, "I can't help thinking."

"Oh?" Charley said, fidgeting his feet.

"That's right," Roquefort said. "I mean, all these people. And Dr. Schinsake. I remember once, I

went to a circus, or a sideshow."

"Carnival, probably," Charley put in, knowing exactly what was coming.

"Something like that," Roquefort said. "Anyhow, they had this sideshow, and there was a man there without any legs. Did all kinds of tricks—got along real good. But I can't help thinking now: he wouldn't have to get along that way any more. Because this doctor would fix him up."

"I guess so," Charley said wearily.

"Sure," Roquefort said. "It's a great thing, what he's doing. All these freak shows ... you understand, it's just a name for them—"

"I understand," Charley said. "Don't worry about it." He shifted his feet nervously. Shoes always felt a little uncomfortable, even lightweight sandals; he felt trapped in them. Now, if he had arms and hands ...

He choked the thought off before it got any further.

"All these shows," Roquefort said, "why, there isn't any need for them any more. I mean the people without legs, or arms, anyhow. See? Because this doctor—"

"I see," Charley said.

"Why, anybody works in a show like that, I mean without arms or legs—why, he's just crazy, that's all. When he can get help, I mean."

"Sure," Charley said uneasily. "Sure, he's just crazy."

Roquefort chomped on his cigar and looked solemn and well-informed. Charley shivered slightly, and wondered why.

"Just crazy." Was that what they thought, he wondered. Was that what they were thinking when they looked up at him?

He shivered again and slipped his shoes off quietly. Immediately, he felt a little better.

But not very much.

New York was a madhouse worse than any carnival Charley had ever seen. He made his way, harness and suitcase on his back, through the station crowds and out into the taxi ramp. A line of the new cabs stood there, and Charley managed to grab one inches ahead of a woman with a small, crying child in tow. He gestured to the driver with his head, and the door slid open. He stepped inside, released the catch that let his suitcase thump to the floor, and sat down with a sigh.

"Tough, hey?" the cabbie said. His glowing nameplate read *David Peters Wells*. He turned around, showing a face that had little in common with the official license photo, under his name. He was swarthy and short, with large yellowing teeth and tiny eyes. "Where to, Mac?" he said.

Charley licked his lips. "I really don't know," he said.

The cabbie blinked. "What?"

"I'm going to need some help," Charley said. "I want to find a Dr. Schinsake, but I don't know where he is. If you can drive me to a drugstore, where we can look him up in a phone book—"

"Dr. Schinsake?" the driver said. "That's the guy who grows things? I mean, arms and legs? Like that?"

"That's right," Charley said.

"O.K., buddy," the driver said. "Just hang on." The cab started with a cough and a roar, and shot out of the terminal like a bazooka shell. Over the noise of travel, the cabbie said: "Going to get yourself fixed up? No offense, Mac."

"No offense," Charley said. "I'm just going to talk to him."

"Oh," the cabbie said. "Sure." There was silence for a second. Then the cabbie turned around. The machine shot ahead, down a wide avenue filled with cars. Charley took a deep breath and forgot to let it go. "You know," the cabbie said, "I seen something funny the other day."

"Really?" Charley said, through clenched teeth.

The cabbie turned back casually, flicked the wheel to avoid an oncoming truck, and continued: "Funny, yeah. Went to the Flea Museum ... you know, the sideshow here, on Forty-second?"

"I know it," Charley said. He'd been offered winter work in the place several times, though he'd never accepted. Everyone in carny life knew of the place.

"And, anyhow, I went down the other day, and there was this guy ... he was like you, Mac, I mean no arms. You don't mind me talking about it?"

Apparently everybody thought he was sensitive on the subject, Charley reflected tiredly. "I don't

mind," he said.

"Sure," the cabbie said. A red light showed ahead and the cab screeched to a halt. "Anyhow, there he was, like a freak, you know? Hell, Mac, I was mad. I mean mad. The guy wants me to pay money to see him; he don't want to go get cured. He's like lazy, Mac. Lazy. Wants to sit around and let me pay money I work hard for, like some kind of a stuffed exhibit he thinks he is." The light changed; the cab shuddered and moved on. "And this doctor right here in the same city. Now, what do you think of that?"

Charley shrugged. "I wouldn't know," he said cautiously. He took out a cigarette with his left foot, lit it with his right, and slid both feet back into his shoes. "Nearly there?" he asked.

"No offense, Mac," the cabbie said, sounding obscurely troubled. "We're there in a minute." He turned and stared narrowly at Charley. The cab shot blindly on. "Say, listen. That with the cigarette. You belong to some kind of sideshow? I mean, no offense—"

"No offense," Charley said. "That's right. I'm with a carnival."

"We'll, you're doing the right thing," the cabbie said, turning back to the road again. Amazingly, there was no obstruction before them. "I mean, a guy has to be honest. With this doctor around, you can't be a no-arms guy any more; it's not fair. Right?"

Charley licked his lips. The cab stopped.

"Here we are," the driver announced.

Charley indicated his grouch-bag, still heavy with dollar bills, hanging round his neck. With scrupulous care, the driver extracted one bill. "Keep the change," Charley said. "And thanks for the conversation."

He stepped out, hooking the suitcase to his harness as he did so. And there, in front of him, was a small white-faced stone building. The cab roared away behind him, and Charley started across the sidewalk.

Now, in New York, he had found out what he was going to ask Professor Lightning. And it was the one thing he hadn't thought possible.

One flight of stairs led straight up from the doorway, and Charley took it slowly. At the top was a great wooden door with a brass plate screwed to it, and on the brass plate a single name was incised: *Dr. E. C. Schinsake*. There was nothing else. Charley slipped the shoe off his right foot, and rang the bell.

A voice inside said: "Who's there? Who is it, please?"

"It's me, professor," Charley called. He slipped the sandal back on. "Charley de Milo. I came to see you."

"Charley—" There was a second of silence. "Charley de Milo?" Professor Lightning's grating voice said. "From the show?" Footsteps came across a room, and the door swung open. Professor Lightning stood inside, just as tall and white-haired as ever, and Charley blinked, looking at him, and past him at the room.

People didn't live in rooms like that, he thought. They were only for the movies, or maybe for millionaires, but not for people, real people that Charley himself knew to talk to.

The furniture—a couch, a few chairs and tables, a phonograph—was glitteringly new and expensive-looking. The walls were freshly painted in soft, bright colors, and pictures hung on them, strange-looking pictures Charley couldn't make sense out of. But they looked right, somehow, in that room.

On the floor there was a rug deeper and softer-looking than any Charley had ever seen. And, away to the right, two floor-length windows sparkled, hung with great drapes and shining in the daylight. There were flowers growing outside the sills, just visible above the window frames. Charley gulped and took a breath.

"Come in," Professor Lightning said. "Come in." In the midst of the riot of wealth, the professor didn't seem to have changed at all. He was still wearing the same ratty robe he'd worn in the carnival, his hair was still as uncombed. It was only on second glance that Charley saw the look in his eyes. Professor Lightning was Dr. Schinsake now; the eyes said that, and were proud of it. And the world agreed with Dr. Schinsake.

Charley came into the bright room and stood quietly until Dr. Schinsake asked him to sit down.

"Well, now, my boy," he said. "You haven't given me a word since you rang the bell, and I would like to know why you're here. Frankly, you're lucky to catch me in; but we were up late last night, working in the labs. I'm afraid I overslept a little." His eyes shone with the mention of his laboratories. It was a far cry from the back of the science tent, Charley supposed.

But he'd come for a definite purpose. He licked his lips, waited a second, and said: "Professor, it's about my arms. What you said you could do."

"Your arms?" The old man frowned. "Now? You've come to me ... Charley, my boy, tell me why."

Tell me why you have changed your mind now."

Charley nodded. "I ... I didn't start out here to ask you about my arms," he said. "But on the way I started putting things together. Professor, why do people come to side-shows?"

The old man shrugged. "Entertainment," he said.

"Sure, but there are all kinds of entertainment," Charley said. "Like strong men. There used to be a lot of strong men in carnivals, but there aren't any more. And now I know why. Ed Baylis started to tell me, but I ... well, never mind."

"Charley," the old man said. "What do strong men have to do with—"

"Let me tell you, professor," Charley said. "People don't care about strong men any more; there are too many gadgets around. Nobody has to be a strong man; nobody wants to watch one. They're useless. See?"

"Everyone can be his own strong man," the old man said.

"Right," Charley said. "The chain hoist—machines like that—they killed off the whole act. Years ago. And you've killed off the Armless Wonders and the Legless Wonders, professor. You've done it, all at once."

Professor Lightning shook his head. "I don't see—" he began.

"Anybody can grow new arms," Charley said. "So the man without arms—he's not an object of pity any more. He's just some guy who doesn't want to work. Nobody wants to go and see him; let him grow arms, if he doesn't want to be called a lazy bum. See?"

There was a little silence.

"I see," Professor Lightning said slowly. "Without pity, without a strong sense of identification, there is no audience."

"For me there isn't," Charley said. "Or for anybody like me."

Professor Lightning nodded. "Well," he said. "I hardly meant to ... well, Charley, you came for something else." His face seemed to lengthen. "And I must tell you ... Charley, I have been doing a lot of work. I am hardly a professional scientist; I have been away too long."

"But—"

"It is true," Professor Lightning said sadly. "Never mind; I've had my one discovery—how much an accident, no one may ever know. But I neglected to widen the scope of what I had done; I generalized too rapidly, my boy." He took a deep breath. "The method, the technique, is very complex," he said. "But imagine it this way: a man comes to New York. He explores it. Later, when he goes home, he is asked to draw a map of it—and he can do so, because he has the experience. He has the memory of New York, locked in his mind."

Charley nodded. "What does that have to do with me?" he said.

"The cells ... the cells of the body seem to have such a memory," the professor said. "It is the basis of my technique."

Charley nodded. "O.K.," he said "I don't care how it works, so long as it— It does work, doesn't it?"

The professor shook his head. Very slowly, he said: "Not for you, my boy. Not for you." He paused. "You see, you were born without arms. In such a case the cellular memory does not seem to exist—like a man who has never been to New York. He cannot draw the map. He has no memory to begin with."

The silence this time was a long one.

At last Charley said: "But somebody could tell him. I mean about New York, so he could draw the map."

"Perhaps," the professor said. "We are working on it. Some day—"

"But not today," Charley said. "Is that it?"

"I ... I'm afraid so," the professor said.

Charley sat for a long time, thinking. He pictured the carnival, and the shrinking audiences. Could he explain to them why he couldn't get arms? Would any audience stop to listen and digest the truth? Charley thought of the armless man in the Flea Museum, and decided slowly that no explanation would be good enough. People didn't stop to make small distinctions. Not in a sideshow. Not in a carnival.

No.

There was only one thing he could do; he saw that clearly. But it took him a long time to find the right words. At last he had them.

"Professor," he said, "suppose I go right back to being a sideshow exhibit—but with a limited

audience."

Professor Lightning looked puzzled. "What do you mean?" he said.

"Well," Charley said, carefully and with a sudden, surprising feeling of hope, "you don't happen to need a new guinea pig, do you?"

THE END

Transcriber's Note:

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