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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A BOTTLE OF OLD WINE ***



A grim tale of a future in which everyone is desperate to escape reality, and a hero who wants to have his wine and drink it, too.

A BOTTLE OF *Old* *Wine*

By Richard O. Lewis

Illustrated by KELLY FREAS

HERBERT HYREL settled himself more comfortably in his easy chair, extended his short legs further toward the fireplace, and let his eyes travel cautiously in the general direction of his wife.

She was in her chair as usual, her long legs curled up beneath her, the upper half of her face hidden in the bulk of her personalized, three-dimensional telovis. The telovis, of a stereoscopic nature, seemingly brought the performers with all their tinsel and color directly into the room of the watcher.

Hyrel had no way of seeing into the plastic affair she wore, but he guessed from the expression on the lower half of her face that she was watching one of the newer black-market sex-operas. In any event, there would be no sound, movement, or sign of life from her for the next three hours. To break the thread of the play for even a moment would ruin all the previous emotional build-up.

There had been a time when he hated her for those long and silent evenings, lonely hours during which he was completely ignored. It was different now, however, for those hours furnished him with time for an escape of his own.

His lips curled into a tight smile and his right hand fondled the unobtrusive switch beneath his trouser leg. He did not press the switch. He would wait a few minutes longer. But it was comforting to know that it was there, exhilarating to know that he could escape for a few hours by a mere flick of his finger.

He let his eyes stray to the dim light of the artificial flames in the fireplace. His hate for her was not bounded merely by those lonely hours she had forced upon him. No, it was far more encompassing.

He hated her with a deep, burning savagery that was deadly in its passion. He hated her for her

money, the money she kept securely from him. He hated her for the paltry allowance she doled out to him, as if he were an irresponsible child. It was as if she were constantly reminding him in every glance and gesture, "I made a bad bargain when I married you. You wanted me, my money, everything, and had nothing to give in return except your own doltish self. You set a trap for me, baited with lies and a false front. Now you are caught in your own trap and will remain there like a mouse to eat from my hand whatever crumbs I stoop to give you."

But some day his hate would be appeased. Yes, some day soon he would kill her!

He shot a sideways glance at her, wondering if by chance she suspected.... She hadn't moved. Her lips were pouted into a half smile; the sex-opera had probably reached one of its more pleasurable moments.

Hyrel let his eyes shift back to the fireplace again. Yes, he would kill her. Then he would claim a rightful share of her money, be rid of her debasing dominance.

HE LET THE thought run around through his head, savoring it with mental taste buds. He would not kill her tonight. No, nor the next night. He would wait, wait until he had sucked the last measure of pleasure from the thought.

It was like having a bottle of rare old wine on a shelf where it could be viewed daily. It was like being able to pause again and again before the bottle, hold it up to the light, and say to it, "Some day, when my desire for you has reached the ultimate, I shall unstopper you quietly and sip you slowly to the last soul-satisfying drop." As long as the bottle remained there upon the shelf it was symbolic of that pleasurable moment....

He snapped out of his reverie and realized he had been wasting precious moments. There would be time enough tomorrow for gloating. Tonight, there were other things to do. Pleasurable things. He remembered the girl he had met the night before, and smiled smugly. Perhaps she would be awaiting him even now. If not, there would be another one....

He settled himself deeper into the chair, glanced once more at his wife, then let his head lean comfortably back against the chair's headrest. His hand upon his thigh felt the thin mesh that cloaked his body beneath his clothing like a sheer stocking. His fingers went again to the tiny switch. Again he hesitated.

Herbert Hyrel knew no more about the telporter suit he wore than he did about the radio in the corner, the TV set against the wall, or the personalized telovis his wife was wearing. You pressed one of the buttons on the radio; music came out. You pressed a button and clicked a dial on the TV; music and pictures came out. You pressed a button and made an adjustment on the telovis; three-dimensional, emotion-colored pictures leaped into the room. You pressed a tiny switch on the telporter suit; you were whisked away to a receiving set you had previously set up in secret.

He knew that the music and the images of the performers on the TV and telovis were brought to his room by some form of electrical impulse or wave while the actual musicians and performers remained in the studio. He knew that when he pressed the switch on his thigh something within him—his ectoplasm, higher self, the thing spirits use for materialization, whatever its real name—streamed out of him along an invisible channel, leaving his body behind in the chair in a conscious but dream-like state. His other self materialized in a small cabin in a hidden nook between a highway and a river where he had installed the receiving set a month ago.

He thought once more of the girl who might be waiting for him, smiled, and pressed the switch.

THE DANK AIR of the cabin was chill to Herbert Hyrel's naked flesh. He fumbled through the darkness for the clothing he kept there, found his shorts and trousers, got hurriedly into them, then flicked on a pocket lighter and ignited a stub of candle upon the table. By the wavering light, he finished dressing in the black satin clothing, the white shirt, the flowing necktie and tam. He invoiced the contents of his billfold. Not much. And his monthly pittance was still two weeks away....

He had skimped for six months to salvage enough money from his allowance to make a down payment on the telporter suit. Since then, his expenses—monthly payments for the suit, cabin rent, costly liquor—had forced him to place his nights of escape on strict ration. He could not go on this way, he realized. Not now. Not since he had met the girl. He had to have more money. Perhaps he could not afford the luxury of leaving the wine bottle longer upon the shelf....

Riverside Club, where Hyrel arrived by bus and a hundred yards of walking, was exclusive. It catered to a clientele that had but three things in common: money, a desire for utter self-abandonment, and a sales slip indicating ownership of a telporter suit. The club was of necessity expensive, for self-telportation was strictly illegal, and police protection came high.

Herbert Hyrel adjusted his white, silken mask carefully at the door and shoved his sales slip through a small aperture where it was thoroughly scanned by unseen eyes. A buzzer sounded an instant later, the lock on the door clicked, and Hyrel pushed through into the exhilarating

warmth of music and laughter.

The main room was large. Hidden lights along the walls sent slow beams of red, blue, vermilion, green, yellow and pink trailing across the domed ceiling in a heterogeneous pattern. The colored beams mingled, diffused, spread, were caught up by mirrors of various tints which diffused and mingled the lights once more until the whole effect was an ever-changing panorama of softly-melting shades.

The gay and bizarre costumes of the masked revelers on the dance floor and at the tables, unearthly in themselves, were made even more so by the altering light. Music flooded the room from unseen sources. Laughter—hysterical, drunken, filled with utter abandonment—came from the dance floor, the tables, and the private booths and rooms hidden cleverly within the walls.

Hyrel pushed himself to an unoccupied table, sat down and ordered a bottle of cheap whiskey. He would have preferred champagne, but his depleted finances forbade the more discriminate taste.

When his order arrived, he poured a glass tumbler half full and consumed it eagerly while his eyes scanned the room in search of the girl. He couldn't see her in the dim swirl of color. Had she arrived? Perhaps she was wearing a different costume than she had the night before. If so, recognition might prove difficult.

He poured himself another drink, promising himself he would go in search of her when the liquor began to take effect.

A woman clad in the revealing garb of a Persian dancer threw an arm about him from behind and kissed him on the cheek through the veil which covered the lower part of her face.

"Hi, honey," she giggled into his ear. "Havin' a time?"

He reached for the white arm to pull her to him, but she eluded his grasp and reeled away into the waiting arms of a tall toreador. Hyrel gulped his whiskey and watched her nestle into the arms of her partner and begin with him a sinuous, suggestive dance. The whiskey had begun its warming effect, and he laughed.

This was the land of the lotus eaters, the sanctuary of the escapists, the haven of all who wished to cast off their shell of inhibition and become the thing they dreamed themselves to be. Here one could be among his own kind, an actor upon a gay stage, a gaudy butterfly metamorphosed from the slug, a knight of old.

The Persian dancing girl was probably the wife of a boorish oaf whose idea of romance was spending an evening telling his wife how he came to be a successful bank president. But she had found her means of escape. Perhaps she had pleaded a sick headache and had retired to her room. And there upon the bed now reposed her shell of reality while her inner self, the shadowy one, completely materialized, became an exotic thing from the East in this never-never land.

The man, the toreador, had probably closeted himself within his library with a set of account books and had left strict orders not to be disturbed until he had finished with them.

Both would have terrific hangovers in the morning. But that, of course, would be fully compensated for by the memories of the evening.

Hyrel chuckled. The situation struck him as being funny: the shadowy self got drunk and had a good time, and the outer husk suffered the hangover in the morning. Strange. Strange how a device such as the telporter suit could cause the shadow of each bodily cell to leave the body, materialize, and become a reality in its own right. And yet ...

HE LOOKED at the heel of his left hand. There was a long, irregular scar there. It was the result of a cut he had received nearly three weeks ago when he had fallen over this very table and had rammed his hand into a sliver of broken champagne glass. Later that evening, upon re-telporting back home, the pain of the cut had remained in his hand, but there was no sign of the cut itself on the hand of his outer self. The scar was peculiar to the shadowy body only. There was something about the shadowy body that carried the hurts to the outer body, but not the scars....

Sudden laughter broke out near him, and he turned quickly in that direction. A group of gaily costumed revelers was standing in a semi-circle about a small mound of clothing upon the floor. It was the costume of the toreador.

Hyrel laughed, too. It had happened many times before—a costume suddenly left empty as its owner, due to a threat of discovery at home, had had to press the switch in haste to bring his shadowy self—and complete consciousness—back to his outer self in a hurry.

A waiter picked up the clothing. He would put it safely away so that the owner could claim it upon his next visit to the club. Another waiter placed a fresh bottle of whiskey on the table before Hyrel, and Hyrel paid him for it.

The whiskey, reaching his head now in surges of warm cheerfulness, was filling him with abandonment, courage, and a desire for merriment. He pushed himself up from the table, joined

the merry throng, threw his arm about the Persian dancer, drew her close.

They began dancing slowly to the throbbing rhythm, dancing and holding on to each other tightly. Hyrel could feel her hot breath through her veil upon his neck, adding to the headiness of the liquor. His feeling of depression and inferiority flowed suddenly from him. Once again he was the all-conquering male.

His arm trembled as it drew her still closer to him and he began dancing directly and purposefully toward the shadows of a clump of artificial palms near one corner of the room. There was an exit to the garden behind the palms.

Half way there they passed a secluded booth from which protruded a long leg clad in black mesh stocking. Hyrel paused as he recognized that part of the costume. It was she! The girl! The one he had met so briefly the night before!

His arm slid away from the Persian dancer, took hold of the mesh-clad leg, and pulled. A female form followed the leg from the booth and fell into his arms. He held her tightly, kissed her white neck, let her perfume send his thoughts reeling.

"Been looking for me, honey?" she whispered, her voice deep and throaty.

"You know it!"

He began whisking her away toward the palms. The Persian girl was pulled into the booth.

Yes, she was wearing the same costume she had worn the night before, that of a can-can dancer of the 90's. The mesh hose that encased her shapely legs were held up by flowered supporters in such a manner as to leave four inches of white leg exposed between hose top and lacy panties. Her skirt, frilled to suggest innumerable petticoats, fell away at each hip, leaving the front open to expose the full length of legs. She wore a wig of platinum hair encrusted with jewels that sparkled in the lights. Her jewel-studded mask was as white as her hair and covered the upper half of her face, except for the large almond slits for her eyes. A white purse, jewel crusted, dangled from one arm.

He stopped once before reaching the palms, drew her closer, kissed her long and ardently. Then he began pulling her on again.

She drew back when they reached the shelter of the fronds. "Champagne, first," she whispered huskily into his ear.

His heart sank. He had very little money left. Well, it might buy a cheap brand....

SHE SIPPED her champagne slowly and provocatively across the table from him. Her eyes sparkled behind the almond slits of her mask, caught the color changes and cast them back. She was wearing contact lenses of a garish green.

He wished she would hurry with her drink. He had horrible visions of his wife at home taking off her telovis and coming to his chair. He would then have to press the switch that would jerk his shadowy self back along its invisible connecting cord, jerk him back and leave but a small mound of clothes upon the chair at the table.

Deep depression laid hold of him. He would not be able to see her after tonight until he received his monthly dole two weeks hence. She wouldn't wait that long. Someone else would have her.

Unless ...

Yes, he knew now that he was going to kill his wife as soon as the opportunity presented itself. It would be a simple matter. With the aid of the telporter suit, he could establish an iron-clad alibi.

He took a long drink of whiskey and looked at the dancers about him. Sight of their gay costumes heightened his depression. He was wearing a cheap suit of satin, all he could afford. But some day soon he would show them! Some time soon he would be dressed as gaily....

"Something troubling you, honey?"

His gaze shot back to her and she blurred slightly before his eyes. "No. Nothing at all!" He summoned a sickly smile and clutched her hand in his. "Come on. Let's dance."

He drew her from the chair and into his arms. She melted toward him as if desiring to become a part of him. A tremor of excitement surged through him and threatened to turn his knees into quivering jelly. He could not make his feet conform to the flooding rhythm of the music. He half stumbled, half pushed her along past the booths.

In the shelter of the palms he drew her savagely to him. "Let's—let's go outside." His voice was little more than a croak.

"But, honey!" She pushed herself away, her low voice maddening him. "Don't you have a private room? A girl doesn't like to be taken outside...."

Her words bit into his brain like the blade of a hot knife.

No, he didn't have a private room at the club like the others. A private room for his telporter receiver, a private room where he could take a willing guest. No! He couldn't afford it! No! *No!* NO! His lot was a cheap suit of satin! Cheap whiskey! Cheap champagne! A cheap shack by the river....

An inarticulate cry escaped his twisted lips. He clutched her roughly to him and dragged her through the door and into the moonlight, whiskey and anger lending him brutal strength.

He pulled her through the deserted garden. *All the others had private rooms!* He pulled her to the far end, behind a clump of squatty firs. His hands clawed at her. He tried to smother her mouth with kisses.

She eluded him deftly. "But, *honey!*" Her voice had gone deeper into her throat. "I just want to be sure about things. If you can't afford one of the private rooms—if you can't afford to show me a good time—if you can't come here real often ..."

The whiskey pounded and throbbed at his brain like blows from an unseen club. His ego curled and twisted within him like a headless serpent.

"I'll have money!" he shouted, struggling to hold her. "I'll have plenty of money! After tonight!"

"Then we'll wait," she said. "We'll wait until tomorrow night."

"No!" he screamed. "You don't believe me! You're like the others! You think I'm no good! But I'll show you! I'll show all of you!"

S HE HAD GONE coldly rigid in his arms, unyielding.

Madness added to the pounding in his brain. Tears welled into his eyes.

"I'll show you! I'll kill her! Then I'll have money!" The hands clutching her shoulders shook her drunkenly. "You wait here! I'll go home and kill her now! Then I'll be back!"

"Silly boy!" Her low laughter rang hollowly in his ears. "And just who is it you are going to kill?"

"My wife!" he cried. "My wife! I'll ..."

A sudden sobering thought struck him. He was talking too much. And he wasn't making sense. He shouldn't be telling her this. Anyway, he couldn't get the money tonight even if he did kill his wife.

"And so you are going to kill your wife...."

He blinked the tears from his eyes. His chest was heaving, his heart pounding. He looked at her shimmering form. "Y-yes," he whispered.

Her eyes glinted strangely in the light of the moon. Her handbag glinted as she opened it, and something she took from it glittered coldly in her hand.

"Fool!"

The first shot tore squarely through his heart. And while he stood staring at her, mouth agape, a second shot burned its way through his bewildered brain.

MRS. HERBERT HYREL removed the telovis from her head and laid it carefully aside. She uncoiled her long legs from beneath her, walked to her husband's chair, and stood for a long moment looking down at him, her lips drawn back in contempt. Then she bent over him and reached down his thigh until her fingers contacted the small switch.

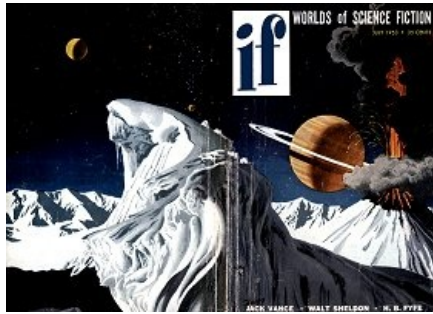
Seconds later, a slight tremor shook Hyrel's body. His eyes snapped open, air escaped his lungs, his lower jaw sagged inanely, and his head lolled to one side.

She stood a moment longer, watching his eyes become glazed and sightless. Then she walked to the telephone.

"Police?" she said. "This is Mrs. Herbert Hyrel. Something horrible has happened to my husband. Please come over immediately. Bring a doctor."

She hung up, went to her bathroom, stripped off her clothing, and slid carefully out of her telporter suit. This she folded neatly and tucked away into the false back of the medicine cabinet. She found a fresh pair of blue, plastifur pajamas and got into them.

She was just arriving back into the living room, tying the cord of her dressing gown about her slim waist, when she heard the sound of the police siren out front.



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