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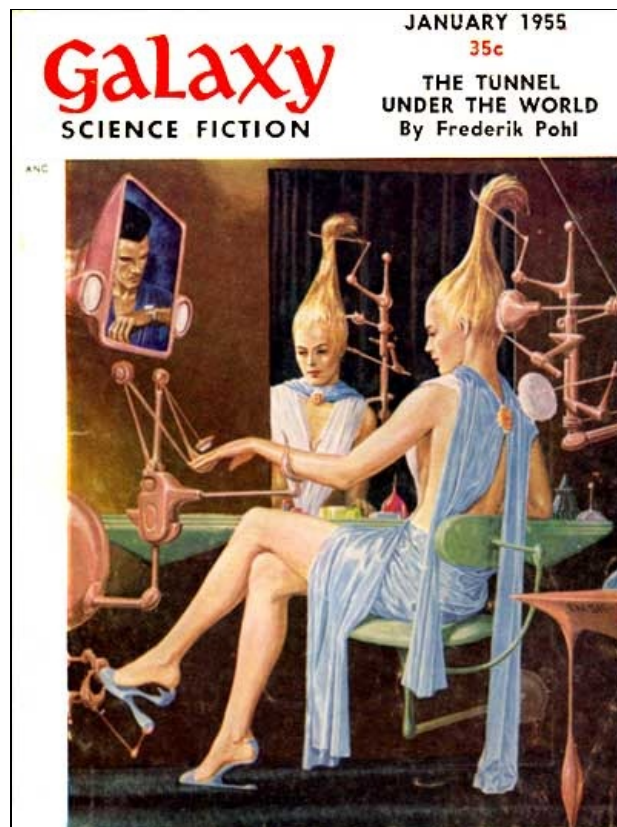
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BRKNK'S BOUNTY ***

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BRKNK'S BOUNTY

By

JERRY SOHL

Illustrated by KOSSIN

From a feature writer to feature attraction—now there's a real booze-to-riches success story!

I never thought I'd like circus life, but a year of it has changed me. It's in my blood now and I suppose I'll never give it up—even if they'd let me.

This job is better than anything I could get in the newspaper racket. I work all summer, it's true, but I get the winter off, though some of the offers for winter work are mighty tempting. Maybe if I hadn't been kicked off the paper, I'd be city editor now, knocking my brains out. Who knows? But maybe I'd just be a rewrite man, or in the slot, writing heads, or copyreading. But the thought of newspaper work after all this appalls me.

Trlk, the Sybillian, should be thanked for the whole thing, I suppose, though it would be a grudging thank-you I'd give him, considering all the trouble he caused. Still....

I first saw him on a July morning at the beginning of the vacation schedule, when four of us on the local side were trying to do five people's work.

My first inkling anything was wrong came when I returned from the courthouse beat and stuck a sheet of paper in the typewriter to write the probate court notes.

I struck the keys. They wouldn't go all the way down. I opened the cover plate, looked in to see what was wrong. I saw nothing, so I tried again. Oscar Phipps, the city editor, was giving me the eye. I figured maybe he was pulling a trick on me. But then I knew *he* hadn't. He wasn't the type.

The back space, tabular, margin release, shift and shift lock worked perfectly. But the keys only went down a short way before they stopped. All except one key. The cap *D*.

I hit the *D*. It worked fine the first time, but not the second. I tried all the keys again. This time only the *i* worked. Now I had *Di*. I went ahead testing. Pretty soon I had

Dimly

Then came a space. A few letters more and it was

Dimly drouse the dreary droves

Phipps had one eyebrow raised. I lifted the cover plate again. Quickly.

There I saw a fuzzy thing. It whisked out of sight. I snapped the plate down and held it down. The party I had been on the night before hadn't been that good and I had had at least three hours' sleep.

I tried typing again. I got nothing until I started a new line. Then out came

Primly prides the privy prose

I banged up the plate, saw a blur of something slinking down between the type bar levers again. Whatever it was, it managed to squeeze itself out of sight in a most amazing way.

"Hey!" I said. "I know you're down there. What's the big idea?"

Fuzzy squeezed his head up from the levers. The head looked like that of a mouse, but it had teeth like a chipmunk and bright little black beads for eyes. They looked right at me.

"You go right ahead," he said in a shrill voice. "This is going to be a great poem. Did you get all that alliteration there in those two lines?"

"Listen, will you get out of there? I've got work to do!"

"Yes, I think I've hit it at last. It was that four-stress iambic that did it. It was iambic, wasn't it?"

"Go away," I said miserably.

Fuzzy pulled the rest of himself out of the bars and stood on hind feet. He crossed his forepaws in front of him, vibrated his long, furry tail, and said defiantly, "No."

"Look," I pleaded, "I'm not Don Marquis and you're not Archie and I have work to do. Now will you *please* get out of this typewriter?"

His tiny ears swiveled upward. "Who's Don Marquis? And Archie?"

"Go to hell," I said. I slammed the cover down and looked up into the cold eyes of Oscar Phipps who was standing next to my desk.

"Who, may I ask," he said ominously, "do you think you're talking to?"

"Take a look." I lifted the plate once again. Fuzzy was there on his back, his legs crossed, his tail twitching.

"I don't see anything," Phipps said.

"You mean you can't see Fuzzy here?" I pointed to him, the end of my finger an inch from his head. "Ouch!" I drew my hand away. "The little devil bit me."

"You're fired, Mr. Weaver," Phipps said in a tired voice. "Fired as of right now. I'll arrange for two weeks' severance pay. And my advice to you is to stay off the bottle or see a psychiatrist—or both. Not that it'll do you any good. You never amounted to anything and you never will."

I would have taken a swipe at Fuzzy, but he had slunk out of sight.

During the two erratic years I had been on the newspaper, I had passed the city park every morning on my way to work, feeling an envy for those who had nothing better to do than sit on the benches and contemplate the nature of the Universe. Now I took myself there and sat as I had seen others do, hoping to feel a kinship with these unfortunates.

But all I did was feel alone, frustrated and angry at Phipps. Maybe I had been too convivial, maybe I had enjoyed night life too much, maybe I hadn't given the paper my all. But I wasn't ready for the booby hatch even if I had seen a fuzzy little thing that could talk.

I drew a copy of *Editor and Publisher* from my pocket and was scanning the "Help Wanted: Editorial" columns when out of the corner of my eye I saw a blob of black moving along the walk.

Turning handsprings, balancing himself precariously on the end of his vibrating tail, running and waving his forepaws to get my attention was Fuzzy.

I groaned. "Please go away!" I covered my eyes so I wouldn't have to look at him.

"Why?" he piped.

"Because you're a hallucination."

"I'm not a hallucination," he said indignantly. "I'm real flesh and blood. See?" He vibrated his tail so fast, I could hardly see it. Then it stopped and stood straight out. "Lovely, isn't it?"

"Look," I said, leaning far off the bench to speak to him, "I can prove you're a hallucination."

"You *can*?" he quavered. "How?"

"Because Phipps couldn't see you."

"That square? Hah! He would not have believed it if he had seen me."

"You mean you—"

He disappeared and reappeared like a flashing neon sign. "There!" he said triumphantly.

"Why didn't you let him see you then?" I asked, a little angry, but pleased nonetheless with his opinion of Phipps. "Because you didn't, you cost me my job."

He waved a forepaw deprecatingly. "You didn't want to stay on that hick sheet anyway."
"It was a job."

"Now you've got a better one."

"Who's kidding whom?"

"Together we'll write real literature."

"I don't know anything about literature. My job is writing the news."

"You'll be famous. With my help, of course."

"Not with that 'dimly drouse' stuff."

"Oh, that!"

"Where did you come from, Fuzzy?"

"Do I ask you where you come from?"

"Well, no—"

"And my name's not Fuzzy. It's Trlk, pronounced Turlick and spelled T-r-l-k."

"My name's Larry Weaver, pronounced Lar-ree—"

"I know. Look, you got a typewriter?"

"A portable. At the apartment."

"That will do."

"Aren't you taking things for granted? I haven't said yet whether I liked the idea."

"Do you have any choice?"

I looked at him, a couple of ounces of harmless-looking fur that had already cost me my immediate future in the newspaper business.

"I guess not," I said, hoping I could find a way to get rid of him if things didn't work out right.

And so began a strange collaboration, with Trlk perched on my shoulder dictating stories into my ear while I typed them. He had definite ideas about writing and I let him have his way. After all, I didn't know anything about literature.

Sometimes, when he'd get stuck, he'd get down and pace the living room rug. Other times he'd massage his tail, which was as long as he, smoothing it with his tongue and meticulously arranging every hair on it.

"It's lovely, don't you think?" he often asked.

And I'd say, "If you spent as much time working on this story as you do admiring your tail, we'd get something done."



"Sorry," he'd say, hopping on my shoulder again. "Where were we?"

I'd read the last page and we'd be off again.

One day, Trlk crawled on a shelf to watch me shave, whiffed the shaving lotion bottle, became excited and demanded I put a drop of it in front of him. He lapped it up, sank blissfully back on his tail and sighed.

"Wonnerful," he squeaked. "Shimply wonnerful." He hiccupped.

I let him sleep it off, but was always careful with the lotion after that.

Days stretched into weeks, my money was running low and the apartment superintendent was pressing me for payment of the month's rent. I kept telling him I'd pay as soon as the first checks came in.

But only rejection slips came. First one, then two, then half a dozen.

"They don't even read them!" Trlk wailed.

"Of course they read them," I said. I showed him the sheets. They were wrinkled from handling.

"The post office did that," he countered.

I showed him coffee spots on one page, cigarette burns on another.

"Well, maybe—" he said, but I don't think anything would have convinced him.

When the last story came back, Trlk was so depressed, I felt sorrier for him than I did for myself.

It was time. We had been working hard. I got out a bottle.

I poured a little lotion for Trlk.

The next afternoon, we tackled the problem in earnest. We went to the library, got a book on writing and took it home. After reading it from cover to cover, I said, "Trlk, I think I've found the trouble with your stories."

"What is it?"

"You don't write about things you know, things that happened to you, that you have observed." I showed him where it advised this in the book.

His eyes brightened. We went right to work.

This time the stories glowed, but so did my cheeks. The narratives all involved a man who lived in a hotel room. They recounted the seemingly endless love affairs with his female visitors.

"Why, Trlk!" I exclaimed. "How come you know about things like this?"

He confessed he had lived with such a man, a freelance writer who never made the grade with his writing, but who had plenty of girl friends who paid the freight.

"He had a way with women," Trlk explained.

"He certainly had," I said, reading again the last page he had dictated.

"He finally married an older woman with money. Then he gave up trying to write."

"I don't blame him," I said wistfully.

"I had to find another writer. This time I decided to try a newspaper. That's where I ran into you."

"Don't remind me."

Things got better after that. We began to get a few checks from magazines. They were small checks, but they paid a few bills.

The big blow fell, however, when Mr. Aldenrood, the superintendent, came roaring upstairs one day clutching a sheaf of papers.

"This stuff!" he screamed, waving the sheets before me. "The kids found it in the waste paper. They're selling them a dime a sheet around the neighborhood."

"They're worth more than that," I said, regretting that Trlk and I hadn't burned our rough drafts.

"You're going to move," Mr. Aldenrood said, "at the earliest possible instant." His face was apoplectic. "I'm giving you notice right now—thirty days!" He turned and went out, muttering, "The idea of anybody committing to paper—" and slammed the door.

Two days later, I was seated at the typewriter, smoking a cigarette and waiting for Trlk as he paced back and forth on the rug, tiny paws clasped behind his back, talking to himself and working out a story angle at the same time, when suddenly there appeared on the carpet next to him a whole host of creatures just like him.

I nearly gulped down my cigarette.

Trlk let out a high-pitched screech of joy and ran over to them. They wound their long tails around each other, clasped and unclasped them, twined them together. It seemed a sort of greeting. Meanwhile, they kept up a jabber that sounded like a 33-1/3 rpm record being played 78 rpm.

Finally, the biggest one detached himself from the group and gave Trlk a tongue-lashing that would have done justice to a Phipps. Trlk hung his head. Every time he tried to say something, the big one would start in again.

At length the leader turned to me. "My name is Brknk, pronounced burk-neck and spelled b-r-k-n-k."

"And I'm Larry Weaver," I said, hoping they weren't relatives who were going to stay. "That's pronounced Lar-ree—"

"I know. We're from Sybilla III. Tourists. We include Earth in our itinerary. It has some of the quaintest customs of all the inhabited planets we visit. We're terribly sorry for all the inconveniences our wayward Trlk here has caused you."

"It was nothing," I said with a lightness I didn't feel.

"Trlk had threatened to run off many times. He has a craze for self-expression and your literature fascinates him. He has an insatiable thirst—"

"I know."

He turned to Trlk. "It's against the rules of the Galactic Tours to make yourself visible to any of the inhabitants along the way. You know that. And it's a prime offense to interfere with their lives. Do you realize how many rules you have broken, how long we have been looking for you?"

"He did the best he could," I said hopefully. "As a matter of fact, we were having considerable success with his—a literary project."

"I understand you lost your job because of him. Is that right?"

"Yes, but I encouraged him." I hoped there was some way I could ease the sentence.

"Trlk has committed grievous wrongs, Mr. Weaver. We must make it up to you."

"Oh?" Here was an angle I hadn't expected.

"What can we do for you?"

I considered a moment. "You mean a wish or something?"

Brknk laughed. "Nothing like that. We're not magicians."

"Well, I could stand a little cash."

"I'm sorry," he said, and did look pained. "We can't interfere in business. We don't have any of your currency and we are forbidden to duplicate or steal it."

He frowned and studied me. Suddenly his face brightened. He bawled orders and several smaller Sybillians rushed forward and started scampering all over me. One of them nipped a piece of flesh out of my arm.

"Ouch!" I yelped, rubbing the spot. "What are you doing?"

"You humans are a proud race," Brknk explained. "I'll give you reason to be prouder than the rest. We'll change your metabolism, your endocrine balance, toughen your muscle fibers a thousandfold. We'll make you the strongest man on Earth!"

"Look," I said, "I don't want to be the strongest man on Earth."

"Well, how about the world's champion boxer? We can speed up your reflexes at least ten times."

I shook my head. "I don't want that, either. Sounds too much like work. Besides, I never liked getting into fights."

Brknk scowled, called a huddle. They buzzed at each other, their tails vibrating like mad. One of them finally yipped and everybody spun around.

Brknk beamed. "We've got it!"

"What is it?"

A little Sybillian I hadn't noticed jabbed something in my arm. I winced and he nearly fell off. He retreated with injured pride.

"Come along, Trlk," Brknk said.

"What's supposed to happen?" I asked.

"It will be a glorious surprise," Brknk assured me. "You'll never regret it. The only thing I ask is that you never tell anyone about us."

I promised.

Trlk looked up at me. I noticed the beginning of tears in his eyes. I reached down and patted him

gently on the head.

"So long, little fellow," I said. "It's been fun."

"Good-by," he said sorrowfully.

They vanished.

Nothing happened for several days, so I bought a copy of *Editor and Publisher* and was writing for my first job when I felt a tender spot on my tail bone. When I examined it, I saw a protuberance there.

There was no denying it. The Sybillians had given me what they treasured most.

I was growing a tail—a long, hairy tail.

As I say, I have come to like circus life.

At first I tried to get doctors to cut it off, but they were too curious for that. Then I thought of jumping in the river or putting a bullet through my head.

But after I saw what the scientists were making of it, when I viewed my picture in all the papers, and when I saw the awe with which I was regarded by everyone, I changed my mind.

Now I make a cool twenty-five thousand a year without lifting a finger.

Just my tail.

I've become rather fond of it. I've even learned how to vibrate it.

But I've never told anyone about the Sybillians. They wouldn't believe it.

Not old Phipps, anyway.

Some day I'll go and vibrate my tail right in his face. I'd never amount to anything, eh? Let's see *him* grow a tail!

—JERRY SOHL

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