

The Living End

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There are three things one should never do in life:

- 1. Never count your chickens before they're hatched.*
- 2. Never consider the eggshell smashed before you see the pieces.*
- 3. Never trust a soothsayer.*

NORM HERBERT belonged to four clubs: the Book of the Month, the Record of the Month, the Fruit of the Month, and the Aqua Velva After Shave. This was the extent of his social life. For eight years, he had been employed as a junior in the stock brokerage firm of Bilpert, Rauss, and Robertson. At the end of his working day, he would journey to an apartment just off Brooklyn Heights, read his Book of the Month, listen to his Record of the Month, eat his Fruit of the Month, and then go to sleep. In the morning, after a bracing dash of Aqua Velva, he would return to Bilpert, Rauss, and Robertson and wait for the phone to ring.

It wasn't that Norm didn't

have friends. For instance, there was Paris Porter, the misty, stunning blonde who lived in the apartment beneath his. She wasn't a friend, exactly, but she was a *neighbor*, and Norm considered that close enough. Some mornings, when Norm was overstimulated by his after shave lotion, he even speculated on the possibility of asking Paris Porter for an evening of her company. Usually, the alcohol evaporated in time to bring him to his senses, and he would look at his bland, narrow face and recognize the idea as preposterous.

Norm Herbert had few strengths, but he had an unlimited number of weaknesses. One of these was a weakness for auctions. He could never resist

the sound of the auctioneer's gavel, the murmur of bids, the old crockery and table lamps and Grecian urns that paraded across an auction platform. One day, he wandered into a mid-town gallery near his office, and watched the dissolution of a rich man's estate. He had no intention of buying, of course, but when No. 1342, Box of Rare Old Books, Uncatalogued, was placed on the auctioneer's table, he found himself lifting a tentative hand.

"Five dollars, I have five dollars," the man crooned into his microphone. "Do I hear seven-fifty, seven-fifty, seven-fifty?" He heard it, and Norm cleared his throat. "I have ten dollars, ten dollars," the auctioneer said, and Norm, realizing that he had made a mistake, shook his head at the man. "I have twelve dollars," the auctioneer said, smiling gratefully at Norm, who shook his hand wildly to indicate that he was out of the bidding, "Fifteen, fifteen," the man said, "going once at fifteen, going twice, *sold* to the man in the straw hat."

So Norm went home that night with a box of Rare Old Books, Uncatalogued.

THAT night, Norm looked at the dusty collection in the cardboard box and sighed. He picked the first book from the stack and admired the binding.

It was obviously very ancient, probably fifteenth century, made of wooden boards covered with gold tooled brown leather. The elaborate embossing consisted of four raised-brass ornamental corners, with intricate floral patterns. The title was in Gothic letters in the center boss:

DE PATRICUS

He turned to the first page, and caught his breath at the surpassing beauty of the bookplate, a coat of arms whose chief feature was a pair of remarkably realistic and disturbing eyes. He was interested to see that the manuscript was in English, and went so far as to read the first few pages. It was excruciatingly dull, and he was about to put it down when he realized what the dull sentences had been about. De Patricus was some kind of soothsayer. His book pretended to predict mankind's future.

Norm ventured more diligently into the book, and found De Patricus' first prognostication. It was in verse, and for a moment, Norm thought it would be as obscure, and as capable of multiple interpretations, as the verses of Nostradamus. Then he read it again, and realized that there was only one way to decipher the message.

In thirte years, the Italian
Madmanne
With Spanish golde and
rogues galore



In tynder Galleys, three in
number
Sailes to God's forgotten
shore.

Excitedly, Norm flipped back
to the title page.

The date was clearly marked,
in Roman numerals. It took him
some time to translate it to a con-
temporary number. 1462.

In thirty years!

There were almost fifty pages
of dull and almost incomprehen-
sible text before he found the
next verse, but it was worth the
hunt.

In Fifteen Hundred and Sev-
enteen

The date Octobere Thirty-
One

Ninety-five Questiones must
be Answered

Before the New Kingdome is
Begunne

Norm's knowledge of history
was scant enough, but the Book
of the Month had taken care of
that. Not long ago, he had re-
ceived a Dividend Book about
Martin Luther, and had read it
faithfully. De Patricus had not
only predicted the Ninety-Five
Theses of Luther, but had named
the year and *the very day* of
their posting on the door of the
Wittenburg church!

The very day!

The next few verses were
meaningless to Norm, but a few
pages later he found:

On the Fourthe Daye of July

In the yeare of Three Sev-
enes

They will pull the Lion's
Taile

Its roar will stirre the Heav-
ennes

What else? Norm thought ex-
citedly. What else but the Ameri-
can Revolution? To the very day
of the signing of the *Declaration?*

OVERWHELMED by his discov-
ery, Norm slammed the
heavy book shut. He was too fa-
tigated to read further: it was
like an overdose of some rich,
heady liquor.

He was awake all night. He
read verses predicting the begin-
ning of the French Revolution,
the rise and fall of Bonaparte,
the Monroe Doctrine, the Indus-
trial Revolution. He read about
"The Anti-Bible, the Booke which
wooded, the Hungere of the Multi-
tude," and, believing the refer-
ence was to Marx's *Das Kapital*,
looked up the publication date
and found that De Patricus had
named it *exactly*. He read pre-
dictions about Darwin's research,
about the outbreak of the Ameri-
can Civil War (again, the date
was exact) about the invention
of the airplane, and even . . .

In the Hearte of atomes
deepe

The mighte Thundre lies
asleepe

Then wakenes and creates a
Cloude

The very Earthe itself to
shroude.

Trembling, Norm Herbert
could barely lift the thick pages
at the back of De Patricus' amaz-
ing book. Not once had the sooth-
sayer called the shots wrong,
not one date had been in error by
even a few days, not one future
event had escaped his incredible,
all-seeing eye.

Finally, he reached the last
page.

There was only one verse.

In 1960, all alyve

Will see the Judgmente Daye
arryve

Septembere Thirde the Daye,
the Houre

The final Acte of Heavenne's
pow're

The ende of It, the ende of
All

The saunde of Gabrielle's
trumpette call

In sudden wrathe, in angry
Fyre

This tyred Globe doth then
expyre.

The rest was blank.

Norm closed the book, with a
final sound. There was no mis-
taking what it had said. *In 1960
all alive . . .* He squeezed his
eyes shut, and tried to remember
the date. It was August 24th.

Ten days to Doomsday!

He stood up, and the heavy
book dropped to the uncarpeted
floor with such a thud that the
windows rattled. A few minutes

later, there was a knock on the
door. Norm, moving in a trance,
opened it. Even the sight of Paris
Porter, more shimmery and pro-
vocative than ever in a housecoat,
didn't rouse him from the semi-
coma.

"All right!" she said, a pretty
fist on a pretty hip. "When are
you gonna drop the other one?"

"Huh?" said Norm.

"Look, buster, I work in a
night club and I need my sleep.
I thought the house was falling
down. Look at the plaster in my
hair!"

NORM looked at Paris Porter's
hair. It was bright gold,
cascading in luxuriant waves
around her lovely face. It was the
closest he had ever come to the
girl, and for a moment, he forgot
the revelations of De Patricus
and thought about other things.
Then he remembered again.

Ten days!

Without thinking, he reached
out and grabbed her by the waist.
"I love you!" he blurted. "I've
been in love with you for a year!"

"Hey!"

"Please! We have so little
time! It's later than you think—"

"It sure is," she said, squirm-
ing out of his grasp. "It's four in
the morning. Get your hands off
me or I'll scream!"

"You don't understand—"

"I understand, brother." She
backed off from him, and then

smiled strangely. "Say, I didn't know you were such a fast-worker. You always looked like such a mouse."

"Even the mice are doomed," Norm muttered.

"What the hell are you talking about? Are you drunk?"

"No! Maybe I should be." He laughed wildly. "Would you like a drink?"

She considered it. "What do you have?"

Norm thought. The only liquid in the house was his after-shave lotion. "Maybe we could go somewhere—"

"At this hour? You're nuts!"

"Maybe tomorrow then. Will you go out with me?"

She smiled, and patted the back of her hair. "You're kind of cute. But I have to be very selective in my business. For my career, you know. I make it a point only to be seen with celebrities and people like that. You know."

Norm looked miserable. "And I'm a nobody. I've always been a nobody. And now it's too late to do anything about it—"

"Call me in a few years," Paris Porter said amiably. "When you strike it rich." She reached over and patted his cheek. Then she pulled the door shut, and went downstairs.

NORM was awake until five that morning, not worrying

about the future but reviewing his uneventful past. He fell asleep, finally, in the easy chair by the window, and woke up at ten to a roomful of sunshine. The first thing he did upon awakening was to verify the fact that he hadn't dreamt the final verse in De Patricus' book. He hadn't.

Mr. Rauss, the only surviving member of the firm of Bilpert, Rauss, and Robertson, called him into the office when he arrived at eleven-fifteen. Mr. Rauss was seventy-two, and had the limbs of a pale spider. "You're late," he snapped. "Two hours and fifteen minutes later. In fifty years I wasn't late two hours and fifteen minutes put together."

"Yes, sir," Norm said, hopefully, thinking of the severance pay.

"But I'll give you another chance. Just one more."

"Yes, sir," Norm answered dejectedly.

Wearily, Norm went to his desk, one of fourteen in the noisy, bustling room of the brokerage house. He knew that Rauss wouldn't fire him so readily, not as long as Mr. Fisk was a client. Nathaniel Fisk, heir to the Fisk cookie empire, was a timid soul who had gravitated to Norm Herbert's own timid nature. His faith in Norm's ability as a stock market advisor was the chief reason for Norm's continued employment in the firm. Norm had

never met Nathaniel Fisk, but he heard his tremulous telephone voice in his sleep. The moment he was seated, the phone rang, and he heard it again.

"Mr. Herbert? I think I'd like to buy three hundred shares of United Copper & Smelting. What do you think?"

"I don't think it's wise, Mr. Fisk," Norm said sadly. "I don't think the time's right to do any serious buying at all. As a matter of fact, I'd advise you to be selling right now."

Fisk gasped. "You mean the market's heading for a decline?"

"Worse than that," Norm said gloomily. "I have inside information. In ten days, there'll be the worst crash in history."

"Oh, dear! How do you know? I mean, I haven't heard any rumors—

"Not many people have, Mr. Fisk, but you can take my word for it. Better convert everything you have into cash. And I mean hard cash, not even checks. Take the cash in hand and waive the rest," Norm quoted, slightly hysterically.

"What's that?"

"Omar Khayyam."

"Who's he?"

"A sort of market analyst," Norm said. "But I'm serious, Mr. Fisk, you know I wouldn't give you bad advice."

"All right," Fisk said nervously. "Sell all my holdings."

"Of course, that might not be so easy to do. You might have to take a little loss."

"But you think I should?"

"I'm *sure* you should, Mr. Fisk."

WHEN Norm hung up, he stared at the phone and chewed his lip, content in the knowledge that he had done the right thing by his customer. Then he had a second thought. What was the difference if Fisk converted his holdings into spendable cash? Fisk had plenty of money; he couldn't begin to spend it all in the ten shopping days left to doomsday. How much more *useful* that money could be, for someone who had nothing. . . .

Ten minutes later, he was in Mr. Rauss' office. The spidery old man grumbled at the interruption, but Norm forced him to listen. He told him about Fisk's order to sell for cash, even at prices below market quotations. It was a chance for the company to pick up a bargain. He saw the old man's eyes gleam with avarice; then he picked up the phone and called Fisk, offering a flat hundred thousand for Fisk's stock. Fisk asked for Norm's advice, and Norm concurred.

An hour later, the trembling old hands of his employer were fiddling with the knob of his wall safe, and removing the neatly-

stacked piles of green that were concealed inside. He placed them in Norm's hands reluctantly.

"See that Mr. Fisk gets his money right away," he said eagerly. "And I want those stock certificates delivered by this afternoon. Understand?"

"I understand," Norm said.

He *did* understand. He understood how meaningless his life had been up until that moment. He was almost grateful to the soothsayer who had shown him the truth.

With the money in an attache case, Norm Herbert hopped a taxi outside the office building, and gave his home address. He clumped heavily up the stairs to his apartment, anxious to look at the money in private, but decided to make a stop. He paused in front of Paris Porter's apartment door, and knocked gingerly. He wasn't discouraged by the lack of response; he knew that Paris Porter, being a night-worker, would still be in bed. He knocked harder, and she finally roused.

SAY, what's the big idea?" she asked, her voice and face heavy with sleep.

"Miss Porter? I'm sorry to wake you up, but there was something very important I had to ask you. Remember last night, when you told me to come by when I struck it rich?" He

smiled inanely. "Well, here I am."

"Would you say that slowly?"

"I have a hundred thousand dollars, and I thought we might enjoy a little holiday together. South America, or Europe, any place you say. I'd like to leave as soon as possible, since we only have ten days."

She leaned closer to him. "Say, you one of these daytime drinkers? I can't stand that type."

"I'm serious, believe me. I have a hundred thousand dollars in this suitcase, and I'd like to spend it as fast as possible. You know what Omar Khayyam says."

"Who?"

"Look," Norm said patiently. "If I could just come in for a second and *show* you." She was too surprised to stop him; he marched inside the room and swung the attache case to the rumpled bed. He snapped the lock, and swung the cover open. He turned to smile triumphantly in Paris Porter's direction, and found her eyes riveted to the pile of greenbacks. "Miss Porter?" he said gently. When she didn't answer, he said: "Miss Porter, are you all right?"

"Huh?"

"I really don't have much time, Miss Porter. I mean, we have to pack and everything, and I still don't have any reservations. Where shall it be? Europe? Mexico? The Carribean?"

"Rio," Paris Porter breathed. "Make it Rio."

"Rio, it is," Norm beamed. Then, clearing his throat, he thought he should seal the bargain. He leaned over and pecked her cheek. The touch of his lips snapped her out of the coma, and she grabbed him ferociously about the waist.

"You doll you," Paris Porter said, growling like a tiger and bending him backwards.

It was almost an hour before Norm could go about the business of calling the airport and packing his bag. The first airline he called couldn't give him a jet reservation to South America until the end of the week, and Norm wasn't in the mood to wait a single second. He tried every other line that made the trip, and finally agreed to the offer of a South American airline that had a scheduled jep-prop flight to Rio at six that evening.

He had shaved and showered that morning, but he did it all over again. Then he packed a suitcase with one suit, one shirt, one pair of socks, and a change of underwear. The rest of the space was taken up by U.S. currency. It was almost three by the time he was through, and he thumped his foot on the floor as a signal to Paris Porter below. She thumped back with the end of a broomstick, twice, to indicate that she wasn't quite ready.

He took advantage of the time to leave the apartment and go to the nearest men's shop. Their stock of tropical suits was small, since it was late autumn, but he managed to find one spectacularly white suit that fit him well enough. He took it without waiting for alterations, and returned to the apartment.

WHEN he walked in, the box under his arm, he saw Mr. Rauss sitting in the easy chair, his toothless gums chewing on the head of his cane. The old man sprung to his shaky legs as Norm entered, and he waved the cane in the air.

"So!" he said triumphantly. "You didn't get away yet!"

"Why, Mr. Rauss! What are you doing here?"

"I should have called the police, that's what I should have done! But I had to be sure—"

"Please, Mr. Rauss, you don't understand—"

"I don't, eh?" The old man cackled, and pointed the cane towards the suitcase on the bed. "And what's that, then? You can't fool me Herbert. I know what you're doing—"

"Listen, Mr. Rauss, you have to understand. It doesn't matter if I take that money, it doesn't matter at all. In ten days, nothing will matter to anybody."

"What are you talking about?"

Norm realized how hopeless ar-

gument would be. He sighed, and walked past the glaring eyes of his employer and into the bathroom. When he came out, there was a large roll of adhesive tape in his hands.

"What's that for?" Mr. Rauss said.

"Would you sit down, please?" Norm asked politely.

"What for?"

"Please, Mr. Rauss."

Mr. Rauss sat down. Norm took the trembling old hands and wrapped the wide white tape about the wrists.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Tying you up, Mr. Rauss. I just don't have time to *argue* with you about it. I'm very sorry, really."

There was the thump of a broom stick handle on the floor below. Norm thumped back twice with his heel.

"You can't do this," Mr. Rauss whined. "You can't get away with this, Norman."

"Is that too tight?" Norm asked solicitously. "I'll have to tape your feet, too. You don't have any circulation problems, do you, Mr. Rauss?"

"Help!" Mr. Rauss cried feebly and Norm, shaking his head regretfully, taped the old man's mouth. When he was through, he stood back and examined the job critically. It wouldn't have been sufficient for anyone with

more strength than Mr. Rauss, but it would do. He bent down and picked up the light, spidery body in his arms.

"Mmmmm," Mr. Rauss said.

"It's all right," Norm told him. "I'm not going to hurt you."

He carried Mr. Rauss into the bathroom, and placed him in the tub.

"You don't have to worry about leaks," he said. "The plumbing's excellent. You'll be all right for a while, Mr. Rauss. I'll telephone the police later and tell them where you are. All right?"

"Mmm, mmm," Mr. Rauss said.

"It's been a pleasure to work for you," Norm said. "But it's even nicer not working for you. Goodbye, Mr. Rauss."

He went back into the living room and stomped once on the floor. Then he went to the closet, got a topcoat and hat, and checked the contents of his suitcase once more. A moment later, there was a knock on the door and Paris Porter walked in. She was strikingly lovely in a tight-fitting satin suit with a feathery boa around her neck.

"All ready?" she said, giggling excitedly.

"All ready," Norm answered. He went up to her and kissed her. "You're the most wonderful girl in the world," he said. "It's really a shame that we only have ten days."

"But why only ten days, Norman? I still don't understand."

He smiled sadly. "Maybe I won't tell you. Maybe it's better that you never know—that nobody ever knows."

He walked over to the box of dusty books in the corner, and roused among the contents until he came out with the ancient, heavily embossed volume. Somehow, it felt lighter and thinner than he remembered it. He picked

it up and stared at the front cover.

"What is it?" Paris Porter said. "What's the book, Norman?"

"That's funny," he said. "It looks like the same book. Only it isn't. It's another just like it."

"Just like what?" the girl said.

He turned the book around to read the title.

It read:

DE PATRICUS: VOLUME II

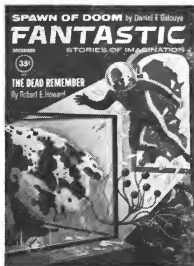
THE END

COMING NEXT MONTH

A tale of chilling terror is in store for readers of the December issue of **FANTASTIC**.

Spawn of Doom, by **Daniel F. Galouye**, grimly pictures an alien life form—the EGMite—that threatens all of Earth. It's a story that provides the thrills of fantasy combined with remarkable imaginings of pseudo-science.

There has been so much demand for more of **Robert E. Howard's** stories that the December Fantasy Reprint will be *The Dead Remember*, a classic vignette of the "curse-from-beyond-the-grave" genre.



PLUS a handful of short stories and our regular features—all in the December **FANTASTIC**, on sale at newsstands Nov. 21.