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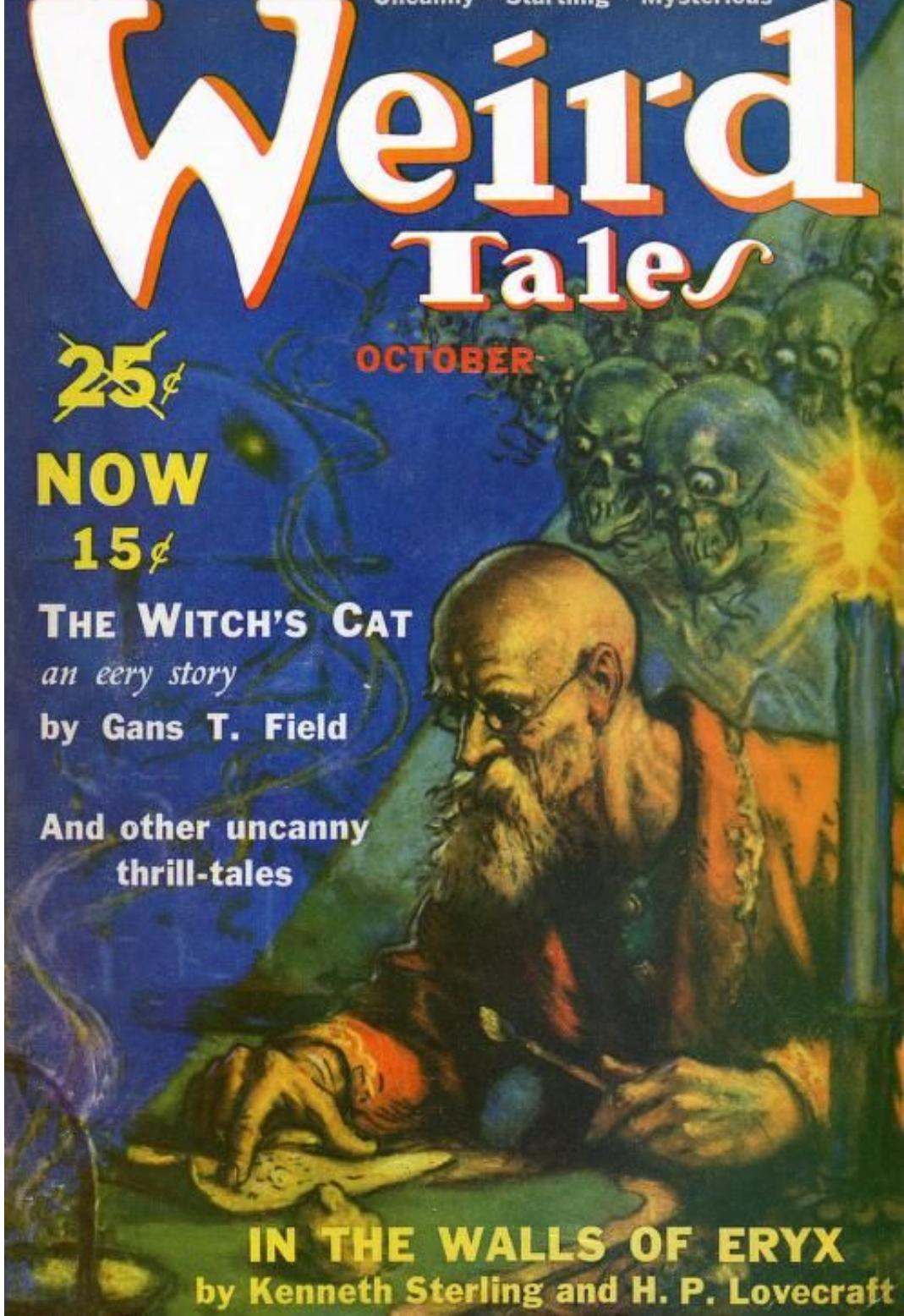
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# Mystery of the Missing Magnate

By  
RALPH MILNE FARLEY

First published *Weird Tales*, October 1939.

*A curious tale about a businessman who found himself in two cities at the same time*

“Hooley!” was an inelegant word for the dignified Milwaukee financier, Eric Vogel, to use. But, in the first place, the movie which he was watching was certainly absurd enough to tax his patience and his credulity. In the second place, he was saying the word to himself, under his breath. And, in the third place, it was not likely that anyone in this little theater in Mobile, Alabama, knew him.

“Hooley!”

It had been a hard morning for Mr. Vogel, but at last he had put the big cotton deal across. The papers were all signed. The Southern magnates couldn't back out now.

Vogel had felt let down and exhausted. So after wiring the good news to partners in Milwaukee and snatching a brief lunch, he had gone to the nearest movie for an hour or so of amusement.

The signs on the outside of the theater, in addition to bank-nite and all that sort of rot, had advertised a “travelog,” and Mr. Vogel liked travelogs. Quite dignified and educational they were, entirely different from silly cartoon comics and equally silly Westerns. So Mr. Vogel had paid his quarter, and had entered and taken his seat.

But he had not been prepared for this sort of a travelog at all! Scenes of India. Hindoo fakirs performing the outmoded and discredited mango trick, and rope trick, and swords-through-the-basket trick.

“Hooley!” snorted Mr. Vogel. “Every intelligent person knows that no one has ever seen one of these tricks performed. It's always that someone knows a man who knows a man who has seen it. The information is never first-hand.”

Yet here were actual motion-photographs of the tricks. The lecturer and the cameraman must then have been eye-witnesses. Mr. Vogel watched, fascinated, and his muttered hooleys did not sound very convincing, or even convinced.

The swami on the screen then produced a crystal globe on a short black pedestal. One of his helpers stared at the globe as the swami made passes over it. The man disappeared. Further passes by the swami, and the man rematerialized.

Hooley! Trick photography, probably. And yet—perhaps——

The shining globe, with the black-bearded beturbaned face of the Hindoo leering at the audience across the top of it, and his skinny talons making mystic passes over it, now grew and grew until the globe occupied the whole foreground. Then the words “THE END” flashed upon its rounded surface, and the educational film was over.

The next film—worse luck—was a Western. Mr. Vogel got heavily to his feet and left the theater, turning over in his common-sense business-like mind the marvels which he had just seen portrayed, wondering if by any chance they had really occurred as photographed, instead of being merely faked.

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Hooley! The very idea of such thoughts! Especially the part about the dematerialization and rematerialization of the young man who had stared into the crystal ball as the swami made passes over it. Hooley!

Mr. Vogel stared up and down the familiar street.

“Yes, this is Milwaukee, all right. I wonder how I happened to go to the movies this afternoon. Let me think. What day is this?”

He glanced at a paper on a newsstand.

“June 19. Uh!” Some thought, dimly connected with that date, struggled for recognition. “Good grief! I ought to be in Mobile to-day, putting across that cotton deal! It just *can't* be the nineteenth!”

With slow ponderous dignity he bought a paper, and verified the date. Yes, it was the nineteenth all right. But, if so, then why hadn't he gone to Mobile?

His jaw dropped, and he rubbed his bewildered eyes. Then noticing a cop staring intently at him, he shook himself together, and with some pretense at his habitual dignity, hurried off up the avenue.

Entering the Schroeder, he sat down heavily in the lobby, took his head in his hands, and tried to piece things together.

He was almost sure that he had gone to Mobile. Certainly he had! This conviction was reinforced by his recollection of some of the minor events of the trip: the mix-up over his reservations at Chicago; the hot night in the sleeper, and the man who had snored so; the undignified red auto, like a fire-chief's, in which his Southern representative had met him at the Mobile station; the tiring all-morning conference in his room in the Hotel Bienville; and his final triumph and the signing of the papers.

Could it be that his advance worries about the cotton deal which meant so much to his firm, had so preyed upon his mind that he had merely dreamed all this? Incredible! And yet here he was in Milwaukee, on the very day on which he ought to be negotiating that cotton deal down in Mobile!

He dared not return to his office, lest his partners question him as to why he was still in town. Yet it was absolutely essential that he go to the office, to find out what had happened when he failed to show up at the conference. His Southern representative Henderson must be frantic!

“I could swear I was in Mobile this morning,” he moaned. “Where on earth *have* I been these last two days? Am I losing my mind? That cotton deal! That cotton deal! I mustn't let it fall through.”

Absent-mindedly he pulled out his big gold watch and looked at it. Five minutes past one. For some subconscious reason, the hour reassured him. Getting up, he squared his broad shoulders, and set his firm jaw determinedly.

“Maybe *I have* lost my mind, but I haven't yet lost my punch,” he stoutly asserted.

So with springy step he strode out of the hotel and over to the building which housed his office. Avoiding the elevator, lest the elevator-boy see him, he puffed up the four flights of stairs.

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The door of The Vogel Company was closed and locked. Of course. Everyone was out to lunch. Now he knew why his glance at his watch had given him the courage to come over here.

He fumbled in his pocket for his keys. Then he remembered that he had left them on the top of the dresser in his room in the Hotel Bienville at Mobile that morning.

A telegram had been shoved under the office door, and one yellow corner still projected. Stooping ponderously, Mr. Vogel inched it out, straightened up again, and ran his finger under the flap of the envelope. It came open without tearing, for the stickum was still damp. The wire read:

AUAB 5t 10  
MOBILE ALA JUN 19 1135A

THE VOGEL CO  
TOWER BLDG MILW

DEAL SATISFACTORILY COMPLETED AFTER VICIOUS ALL MORNING  
CONFERENCE CONGRATULATE ME

VOGEL  
1259P JUN 19

The very wire which he himself remembered having sent an hour and a half ago from Mobile! But of course the deal couldn't possibly have been completed, for he couldn't have been in Mobile that morning and back here in Milwaukee that afternoon.

There swam in front of Mr. Vogel's eyes the grinning sinister visage of a Hindoo fakir, making passes with taloned fingers above a crystal globe.

Shaking himself together, Mr. Vogel trudged down four flights to the ground floor again, solacing himself with the thought that at least he had waylaid that absurdly impossible telegram before his partners received it. Hurrying out of the building and into an adjoining one, lest one of his partners see and question him, he entered a phone booth and dialed Western Union.

"Take a wire to John Henderson, Merchants Bank Building, Mobile, Alabama. Eric Vogel."

Hold everything Period. Just find by some error my yesterday's wire announcing my delayed departure not sent Period. Leaving tonight arriving Thursday Period. Hold everything until my arrival Period.

Vogel.

"Night letter, sir?" asked the voice.

"No. Straight telegram. And rush it!"

"Yes, sir. Yes, sir. And do you want to leave in both 'Hold everythings'?"

"Make it three of them, if necessary," Mr. Vogel snapped. "Hurry!" He swayed against the inside of the booth.

"Shall I charge it to your firm, Mr. Vogel?"

"Yes, of course— No, no! Send it collect." It would never do for his partners to find out about this wire.

And then he realized that, instead of putting that other wire into his pocket as he had intended, he had absent-mindedly stuffed it under the office door again. He could go back up

there and get it. But no! Someone might have come in from lunch by now. The thing for him to do was to return to Mobile at once.

Return? What did he mean, return? How could he return to a place where he hadn't yet been?

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Mr. Vogel staggered out into the street. It was still early afternoon. Plenty of time to go home and pack. So he took a taxi to his apartment house.

No one answered his ring. That was all right, for now he remembered that his wife had gone to visit friends in the country. He had put her aboard her train himself, just before taking his own train to Chicago, en route for Mobile, two days ago. But no. That couldn't be right, for he hadn't gone to Mobile at all. He must keep that thought constantly before him, or he would go mad. And it would be most undignified for a Vogel to go mad. "I—haven't—been—to—Mobile!"

He felt in his pocket for his keys, then remembered that he had left his key-ring that morning on the dresser in his room in the Bienville Hotel at Mobile. But what foolishness was this? He hadn't been to Mobile. He must keep constantly in mind the fact that he hadn't been to Mobile. Most probably his keys were on top of the dresser in his room in his Milwaukee apartment. Yes, that was it. That *must* be it. Keys on dresser in Milwaukee, not Mobile.

Somewhat brightening, he rang for the janitor. But the janitor did not answer, nor was he to be found anywhere about the building. With a shrug of resignation, Vogel took a bus downtown, bought a few necessaries at Gimbels, and boarded the first train for Chicago.

After making his reservations for Mobile, he found that he still had an hour or so to spare before train-time. The movies at once suggested themselves. As he taxied across town to the Dearborn Street Station, he had noticed a theater quite near the station, advertising a travelog. And he doted on travelogs. So he stepped out of the station and walked back a couple of blocks to the theater.

As he took his seat, and glanced up at the screen, there leered down at him the black-bearded beturbaned face of a Hindoo swami, over the top of a gradually enlarging crystal globe. The fakir was making passes with his dark skinny hands, as his piercing black eyes caught and held the gaze of Mr. Vogel.

Where had Mr. Vogel seen that face before?

Dizzy and bemused, he stared back at it. The crystal globe swelled and neared, until it filled the whole screen. The words "THE END" appeared on it. The educational film was over.

The next film was a Western. Mr. Vogel detested Westerns. So he got heavily to his feet and left the theater, turning over in his common-sense mind the marvels of Hindoo magic, which he dimly remembered having seen portrayed, wondering if by any chance they had really occurred as photographed, instead of being merely faked.

Hooley! The very idea of such thoughts! Especially the part about the dematerialization and rematerialization of the young man who had stared into the crystal ball as the swami made passes over it. Hooley!

Let's see—where was he? Oh, yes, Chicago, two blocks from the Dearborn Station, killing time while waiting for the train for Mobile.

He pulled out his large gold watch and looked at it. Four minutes after five. His train didn't leave until six. Well, he could sit in the station and read a newspaper until train time.

He looked up and down the street, but couldn't quite figure which way to go. His sense of direction had become turned around while he was in the movie. No taxies were in sight.

Finally he spotted a Negro policeman and inquired the way to the station.

“Which station, suh?” the cop asked.

“The Dearborn Street Station C. and E. I.,” Mr. Vogel replied.

“I reckon yo’ got me wrong, boss,” said the cop, scratching his head. “The on’y two stations hiah ah de L. an’ Ain, and de So’thun.”

“What!” Mr. Vogel exclaimed. Then, catching sight of a familiar park ahead. “What square is this?”

“Bienville Square, suh.”

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Shaking his head in bewilderment, Mr. Vogel threaded his way brokenly across the brightly lighted square to his hotel. On the steps he found the frantic manager of his Mobile office, John Henderson.

“Ah, there you are, sir!” Henderson exclaimed. “Where have you been all afternoon and evening, sir?”

“Movies,” Mr. Vogel replied succinctly, then shuddered at the word.

Henderson raised his eyebrows slightly at such plebeian tastes in his employer. “Well, it must have been a pretty interesting show to keep you so long, sir. How many times did you see it, if I may ask?”

“At least twice,” Mr. Vogel stated grimly. He was gradually getting back his grip on himself. “What’s all the excitement?”

“Look at this wire that came in this afternoon from Milwaukee while you were at the theater.”

Mr. Vogel took it, and read:

AUB 101 28 COLLECT  
MILWAUKEE WIS JUN 19 123P

JOHN HENDERSON  
MERCHANTS BANK BLDG MOBILE ALA

HOLD EVERYTHING. JUST FIND BY SOME ERROR MY YESTERDAYS  
WIRE ANNOUNCING MY DELAYED DEPARTURE NOT SENT. LEAVING  
TONIGHT ARRIVING THURSDAY. HOLD EVERYTHING UNTIL MY  
ARRIVAL. HOLD EVERYTHING.

ERIC VOGEL.  
201P JUN 19.

Mr. Vogel smiled grimly at that third “Hold everything.” Then he tore the telegram into little bits, and shrugged his broad shoulders.

“Somebody is probably trying to play a practical joke on us,” he said. With apparent irrelevance, he added, “Henderson, do you ever get so absorbed in a motion picture that you completely lose track of where you are? Even what city you are in, I mean.”

“I don’t think so, sir,” Henderson replied, a look of puzzled incomprehension on his matter-of-fact face. “I rarely go to the cinema, sir.”

Mr. Vogel narrowed his eyes thoughtfully, pursed up his lips, and shook his head introspectively. “Well, Henderson, I’m sorry to have kept you waiting around all afternoon for

me. Run along home now. I'll see you at the office tomorrow early, to arrange for shipping the cotton."

Then as he entered the hotel, he ruminated, "Of course, it could all have been my imagination. No one whom I know saw me in Milwaukee. The telegram I sent from Mobile is still under the door of my Milwaukee office—I mean, my partners have gotten it by now. The other wire, the one I sent—I mean, the one I *thought* I sent from Milwaukee—I *could* have phoned it clear from here to the Western Union in Milwaukee. Or it could have been a practical joke. So I guess none of this happened after all."

He sighed with relief, and smiled at his own credulity. "Hooey!" The word vividly recalled to his memory the leering face of the Hindoo swami, staring out from the screen, across the magic gazing globe. Mr. Vogel shuddered. He reached into his breast pocket, took out his billfold, opened it, and peered within.

Yes, as he feared, there lay the railroad ticket and the Pullman reservation, from Chicago to Mobile, purchased by him that very afternoon at the Dearborn Street Station in Chicago!

So his weird adventure must have happened, after all.

[The end of *Mystery of the Missing Magnate* by Ralph Milne Farley]