

Rules of the Duel (opening chapter)

1: *yes, we have no bananas*

Jack Beauregard the Eater of Cities is a marked man and he knows it.

The wires tell him the Famous Ear tells him. All around, on posters and signboards, the words come that Jack Beauregard is a marked man. Everybody knows and they stay clear of him. He doesn't talk to anybody any more – just paces the streets of London with the whites of his eyes roaming and his hands in his raincoat pockets.

And you can see him anywhere, a suburb in his pocket and a city on his leg, picking his teeth with a factory chimney. He sits in the dingy formica coffee bars of Brixton and Streatham with his hard eyes hidden by his hair, sipping carefully a cup of cold tea. He is a tall, stooped man, and they're after him. His eyes are sunk into his bony, indeterminable face. He is wearing his old demob suit, and is permanently high on cardboard.

(You can smell him, Jack Beauregard. He smells of dust and burning cardboard, with a dying hint of mothballs.)

They're after him and they'll have him by 4:00 PM. Everybody knows and already he's as good as finished.

Charlie Bowdre rings me up and says: 'They're after Beauregard. He's wearing his old exploding pavements and the smell of wires. Dying hint of suburbs – his eyes are sunk into mothballs.'

'I know,' I tell him, swivelling round in my newspaper office chair. 'I phoned Tin Type Hall this morning, but there was no reply.'

No reply no reply for Jack Beauregard. He's on the corner of Cromwell Road and Cornwall Gardens. He's moving East. He stops to look at a weighing machine. The trees pass the traffic passes.

He drops a penny into the weighing machine and it tells him in a cold, electrode voice: 'You weigh 11 stone 13 pounds and they'll get you by 4.00 PM.'

He moves on. He doesn't bother to look round any longer. He's so transparent you can see the red of the passing buses through his raincoat. He lights another factory chimney and puffs nervous industrial fumes into the fading day.

He's been around longer than anyone can remember, Jack Beauregard. His name first became known in connection with the Lethal Postmen Scandal in 1938 – and since then he has somehow been tied with every major disaster in the world. There are still persistent rumours that he was entirely responsible for the second world war.

He denies these saying: 'It was an accident. A few people are bound to get hurt in every accident.'

But even for a man like Jack time runs out. There are few natural deaths for the envoys of Tin Type Hall. He doesn't bother to look round any longer. You weigh the city and there are still persistent postmen. He moves on into nervous industrial accident. 'A few people are bound to see the red of passing electrode.'

Ron Holland, our industrial reporter, is following Beauregard closely. He phones in progress reports every few minutes from call boxes all over London. I take them where I sit in my smoky office overlooking the Holborn Viaduct.

'He's moving towards Knightsbridge now. The streets are almost empty. He's staying out in the open but that won't stop them. He's trying to keep within sight of policemen as he goes.'

Elimination on tracks for Jack Beauregard. The sky is dark for this time of day. Strange electric buzzings shift through the office. Down in the concrete basement the muffled beating of the presses, printing the Late Extra of The Evening Standard.

'Ron, is that you?'

'Où se trouve Dick Tracey? Où se trouve Flash Gordon?'

Mothball elimination for this time of day. He's moving into Green Park. He's moving into Piccadilly Circus. He's keeping out in the open. Strange electric policemen phone in smoky basements. Is that you? Remember the late extra Tin Type Hall.

It's 3:58 PM. There are two minutes to go. Ron doesn't phone any more but stays a few yards away from Beauregard as he walks into Haymarket. The day is grainy and photographic. There's the scent of rain in the air. Jack in his tired old overcoat keeps walking among the crowds. Could almost feel cold sun. The noise of traffic is

blurred in strange electric film. He paces the eyeballs with elimination on tracks. There are two minutes to go.

The phone rings and I scoop it up. It's Rufus Shack, ringing from a callbox in Leicester Square. He says hurriedly: 'A large car – suspect it belongs to Tin Type Hall – moving toward Haymarket. Keep on alert.'

The phone rings again. It's another reporter, from Venables Street, outside entrance Tin Type Hall. 'Could almost feel cold sun. The day is strange electric Park. Suspect it belongs to demob death.'

One minute to go. Ron Holland close behind as Jack Beauregard the Eater of Cities closes towards flashpoint. Shoulders hunched, his raincoat flapping in the sooty London draught. The question of work was four to six months before. 'I have seen butchers at work in shops showing as much emotion as he did when they were cutting up sheep's ribs.'

Thirty seconds. Three large cars move into Haymarket on all sides. 'He was very calm indeed. He was not in a frenzy... no frenzy at all.' The light is failing and you can hardly see the faces of the drivers as the cold cars approach.

'This is it,' over distant electrode intercoms. The sweep second hand reads 4:00 PM. 'Did he give any indication as to how?' Panic elimination in the dark. Jack Beauregard instinctively dives for cover.

You must remember how he spoke. That was days before, a cool February afternoon with the sky the colour of pale glue. He was driving his car through Kensington – his eyes shifting from traffic to road and across to Gerald Musgrave, who was sitting beside him with his hands clasped in his lap.

'The art of good driving,' he was saying, 'is to have a louder horn than anyone else.'

The horn in his car had been specifically designed for him by Flugelhorn of Mayfair. It was a tape recording of a bull moose in heat, mingled with jet noises from London Airport and the amplified farts of a thousand fruit flies.

This was his special car. At the flick of a switch, it could be turned into a street side Oyster Stall complete with two lifelike plaster customers. From the twin exhausts, it could fire a mixture of limestone and molasses, guaranteed to incapacitate all pursuers.

The seats were fitted with high-speed electric drills, so that in a desperate situation the driver could tunnel his way under the road, and catch the nearest Underground to freedom. Beautifully finished in anodised blue, the car was capable of 150 mph, and could be driven underwater.

‘It cost a bomb,’ says the old doctor, driving it carefully into Charlotte Street and parking outside his cut-rate dentist.

This was his special farts. It was a tape recording of Jack Beauregard in heat, mingled with underwater oysters. The amplified drills of a desperate situation. From the twin flies, a mixture of pale glue and cut-rate customers. You must remember how he could tunnel his way to freedom.

‘Did he give any indication as to how?’

‘Is that you?’

Beautifully finished Jack Beauregard, the Eater of Cities. The day passes the traffic passes. Guaranteed a thousand mph.

So we wait in cold office for further news of the Mysterious Babies. There is nothing running. The few reporters left in the newsroom sit reading and smoking with cups of tea on their desks. The noise of the presses has subsided, and there is only re sound of a single typewriter clattering away down the corridor.

There is no plot. There is no news. Our front page lead today is the story of an elderly widow who killed her Pakistani lodger with a poisoned steam pudding.

‘He kept eyeing me all the time,’ she said. ‘Did he give any indication as to how...?’

I am anxious when the lines are quiet. The day is brooding slowly into a wet, miserable evening. The sodium street lights flicker pink, and gradually the rood of the city fade. It is so quiet you can hear the cleaners breathing as they polish the empty news desks. You can hear their disinterested hands over the copy like the feet of deer among leaves. Occasionally one of them coughs, or a match flares. You never see them. They come in like ghosts, clean the building and go. I sometimes think there are no cleaners.

It is 7:30 PM or 8:15 PM. The clock on the wall has tricked me. I walk over and switch on the lights and the building is like an old cavern. It is so quiet you can hear their disinterested ghosts like the feet of evening with a poisoned widow.

'Où se trouve Dick Tracey? Où se trouve Flash Gordon?'

I ring in Tin Type Hall again but the lines are blocked. There is strange electrode interference on the wire. I put the phone down and wait for the passing sky.

FLASHBACK TO HAYMARKET: Where the cars are moving in on silent wheels. Jack Beauregard the Eater of Cities dives slow motion for cover. It's an old dive, the dive of a practised gunman. The body twists to the right and the knees buckle gently. The left shoulder swings, shifting him to shop doorway cover. But it's too slow – the dying years weighing on his move.

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