



The Untouchable

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Published: 1960

Categorie(s): Fiction, Science Fiction, Short Stories

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"You can see it—you can watch it—but mustn't touch!" And what could possibly be more frustrating ... when you need, most violently, to get your hands on it for just one second... .

The man finally entered the office of General George Garvers. As the door closed behind him, he saw the general, who sprang from his chair to greet him.

"Max! You finally came."

"Got here as soon as I could. I wager half my time was taken up by the security check points. You are certainly isolated in here."

"All of that," agreed the general. "Have a seat, won't you?" he asked, indicating a chair.

His friend sank into it gratefully. "Now, what's this vital problem you called me about? You weren't too specific."

"No," said Garvers, "I wasn't. This is a security matter, after a fashion. It's vitally important that we get technical help on this thing, and since you and I are friends, I was asked to call you in."

"Well?"

"I'm afraid I'll have to make a story of it."

"Quite all right by me, but don't mind if I interject a question now and then. Mind if I smoke?"

"Go right ahead," said Garvers, fumbling out a lighter. "Just don't spill ashes on the rug."

"This all began on the Third of May. I was working here on some top-security stuff. I had suddenly got the feeling of being watched. I know it seems silly, what with all the check points that a potential spy would have to go through to get here, but that's just how I felt."

"Several times I glanced around the office, but of course it was empty. Then I began to think that it was my nerves."

"You always were a bit of a hypochondriac," observed his friend.

"Be that as it may," continued Garvers, "it was the only explanation I had at the time. Either someone was watching me, which seemed impossible, or I was beginning to crack under the strain."

"Well, I put my papers away and tried to take a short break. I was reaching into my drawer where I keep magazines when, so help me, a man stepped out of the wall into my office."

"What? It seems as if you just said a guy stepped out of the wall."

"That's just what I did say. It sounds crazy, but let me finish, will you? I'm not kidding, and I'll show you proof later if necessary."

"Anyway, this bird stepped straight out of the wall as if it had been a waterfall or something, but the wall itself was undamaged. The only

proof I had that he had actually done it was the fact that he was in my office, but that was proof enough.

"To put it mildly, I was thunderstruck. After jumping to my feet, I could only stand there like an idiot. I was so shaken that I couldn't speak a word. But he spoke first.

"General Garvers?" he asked, just as if he had run into me at a cocktail party or on the street.

"I told him he was correct, and asked him who *he* was and what he wanted. And how he got into my office.

"He identified himself as a Henry Busch and explained that he was acting in behalf of a good friend of his, the late Dr. Hymann Duvall. Have you ever heard of Duvall, Max?"

His friend twisted his face in thought. "Can't say that I have, off-hand. But the name seems to ring a bell somewhere."

"Well, anyway, he said that Duvall had perfected an invention of great national importance shortly before his death and asked Busch to deliver it to the government if anything should happen to him. Then Duvall died suddenly of a heart attack."

"And what was this invention?"

"Isn't it obvious? A machine that would enable a man to walk through walls. And Busch has no idea how the thing works, other than the general explanation that Duvall gave him. And Busch was poles apart from Duvall. They were friends from college, but not because of professional interests. It seems they were both doublecrossed by the same girl.

"Duvall was a brilliant but obscure nuclear and radiation physicist. He was one of those once-in-a-lifetime fellows like Tesla. He was so shy that he didn't bring himself to anybody's attention, save for a few papers he published in the smaller physical societies' magazines. It was only because he had inherited a considerable amount of money that he could do any research whatsoever."

"Hm-m-m. I seem to remember a paper about wave propagation in one of the quarterlies. Quite unorthodox, as I recall," said Max.

"Could be. But anyway, about Busch.

"Busch majored in psychology at college, but took special courses after he graduated and took a Master's in English. He has written two novels and three collections of poems under various pen names. At the time of Duvall's death, he was working on the libretto of an opera. He has had no technical training, unless you want to count a year of high school general science. So he wasn't too much help in explaining how Duvall's instrument works.

"And, just to make matters more juicy, Duvall kept no notes. He had total recall and a childlike fear of putting anything into writing that had not been experimentally verified."

"And this machine, how is it supposed to work?"

Garvers got up and began to pace. "According to Busch, Duvall devised the instrument after stumbling into an entirely new branch of physics.

"This device of Duvall's is a special case of a new theory of matter and energy. Matter is made up of subnuclear particles—electrons, protons and the like. However, Duvall said that these particles are in turn made up of much smaller particles grouped together in aggregate clouds. The size ratio of these particles to protons is somewhat like the ratio of an individual proton to a large star. They seem to be composed of tiny clots of energy from a fantastically complex energy system, in which electromagnetism is but a small part. Each energy-segment is represented by a different facet of each particle, and the arrangement of the individual particles to each other determines what super-particle they will form, such as an electron. Duvall called these sub-particles 'lems'.

"Busch says he was told that a field of a special nature could be generated so as to make the individual lems in the particles of matter rotate in a special way that would introduce a 'polarization field', as Duvall called it. This field seems to be connected somehow with gravity, but Busch wasn't told how.

"The upshot is that matter in the *initial* presence of the field is affected so that it is able to pass through ordinary matter—"

"Hold on," interrupted Max. "If a device can do that, then the user would immediately fall towards the center of the Earth."

"Just *you* hold on. You didn't let me finish. A single plane of atoms, at the base of the treated object is the point of contact. It remains partially unaffected because it is closest to the 'gravetostatic field center', which I guess is the Earth's center of attraction. This plane of 'semi-treated' atoms can be forced through an object, if it is moved horizontally, but its 'untreated' aspect prevents the subject wearing the device from falling through the floor.

"Busch demonstrated this device to me, turning it on and strolling through various objects in this room. Think of it! No soldier could be killed or held prisoner. And—"

"Now hang on," objected Max. "Let's not run away with ourselves. He may have perfected a device that would enable a soldier to avoid capture, but there would certainly be other ways to kill him than by bullets.

Let's see now: suppose that the enemy shot a flamethrower at him. The burning materials might pass through him, but he would be cooked anyway. Or poison gas—"

"Hm-m-m. As far as gas goes, I suppose a gas mask would be necessary. Busch doesn't know about the breathing mechanism, except that he had to take breaths. But as far as fire or radiation goes, the man's protected. If the radiation is either harmful by nature or by amount, the field merely reflects it. It is something called the 'leemic stress' of the field that causes the phenomenon.

"That's why we need your help."

Max scratched his head thoughtfully. "I don't understand."

Garvers looked pained. "When Busch had finished his demonstration, he carelessly tossed the device on my desk. The thing skidded and hit my paperweight so that the switch was thrown on again. So now the device and my desk are both untouchable.

"Go over to the desk and try to touch it," said Garvers dryly.

His friend got up and ambled over to the desk. There he saw a small black box resting near a paperweight. Its toggle switch was at the "on" position, and it was lying on its side. He tried to pick the box up, but his hand slid effortlessly through it as if it were so much air.

"Well!" Max said. He passed his hand through the desk again. "Well, well. Are you sure Busch told you everything?"

"Busch! He honestly wants to help and we have taken him through the mill. Pentathol, scopolamine and the like; hypnotism and the polygraph. We've dug that man deeper than we have ever dug anybody before."

"And have you conducted any experiments of your own?"

"Certainly. That's what is so frustrating. We try to X ray the thing, and we don't get a thing. We bombarded it with every radiation we could think of, from radio to gamma and it just reflected them. We can detect no radiation coming out of it. Magnetic fields don't effect it, nor do heat and cold. Nuclear particles are ignored by it; it just *sits* there thumbing its nose at us. And we can't even wait for it to run down. According to Busch, the power requirements of the thing are funny and once the field is established, it takes no additional energy to maintain it. And the collapsing power remains indefinitely until it is time to turn the machine off, but it's unreachable by any means we have.

"It's pure frustration. There's no way we can analyze it until we can handle it, and no way we can handle it until we can turn it off. And there's no way we can turn it off until we have analyzed it. If it were alive, I'd think that it was laughing at us.

"Do *you* have any ideas?" asked Garvers hopefully.

"Nothing that would help a solution at present," said Max. "But do you remember the legend of King Tantalus?"

"Slightly. What about it?"

"Well ... if *he* were here," said Max thoughtfully, "he'd ... sympathize."

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