### He Travels the Fastest

Isaac Asimov

I had just returned from a trip to Williamsburg, Virginia, and my relief at getting back to my beloved typewriter and word processor was mingled with a residue of faint resentment at my having had to go in the first place.

George did not consider the fact that he had just ravened his way through the offerings of a fine restaurant at my hard-earned expense, an adequate reason for offering me sympathy.

He said, after he had dislodged a fiber of steak from between two teeth, “I do not really understand, old fellow, why you should find fault over the fact that otherwise respectable organi­zations seem to be willing to pay you thousands of dollars to listen to you talk for an hour. Having heard you speak now and then, I would think it far more likely that you speak without charge and refuse to stop unless they pay you thousands of dol­lars. Surely, the latter is the more likely way of squeezing money out of people — though I have no wish to hurt your feelings, assuming you have any.”

“When did you ever hear me speak?” I asked. “The interstices in your own maunderings allow no one more than two dozen words at a time.” (Naturally I was careful to make my point in just twenty-four words.)

George ignored me, as I was sure he would. “It shows a par­ticularly unlovely side of your soul,” he said, “that in your mad lust for the dross called ‘money’ you should so freely and fre­quently consent to undergo the pains of the travel you claim to hate. It reminds me a bit of the tale of Sophocles Moskowitz who had a similar lazy disinclination to stir from his armchair except when the further swelling of his already gross bank ac­count was in view. This disinclination he also euphemized by calling it ‘an aversion to travel.’ It took my friend Azazel to change *that.*

“Don't you get your two-centimeter disaster-demon after me,” I said in alarm, an alarm that was just as real as it would have been if I had actual cause to think that that figment of George's diseased imagination really existed.

George again ignored me.

It was actually [George said] one of the first times I ever called upon Azazel for help. It was almost thirty years ago, you see. I had only recently learned how to draw the little creature from his own plane, and I had not yet learned to understand his powers.

He boasted of them, to be sure, but where is the living crea­ture, other than myself, who does not consistently overstate his or her own powers and abilities?

I was much more familiar at that time with a magnificent young woman named Fifi who had, a year earlier, decided that Sophocles Moskowitz would not, in person, sufficiently detract from the kind of husband his large fortune would make for her.

Even after they married, she remained a surreptitious, though inexplicably virtuous, friend of mine. Despite her virtue, I was always glad to see her, however, something you will understand when I tell you that her figure was one thing that could *not* be overstated. In her presence I always remembered, with austere satisfaction, certain amiable indelicacies in which we had partici­pated in the past.

“Boom-Boom,” I said, for I had never gotten out of the habit of using her stage name, given her by the common consent of the awed observers of her interesting act, “you are looking well.” This I had no hesitation in saying, for so was I.

“Oh yeah?” she said, in the insouciant manner that always recalled the streets of New York in all their brassy splendor. “Well, I ain't feeling good.”

I could not believe that for a moment, for if my memory could be trusted, she must have felt very good indeed from early ado­lescence, but I said, “What is the trouble, my resilient dear?”

“It's Sophocles, that creep.”

“Surely you're not annoyed with your husband, Boom-Boom. It is impossible for so wealthy a man to be annoying.”

“That's all *you* know. What a four-flusher! Listen, you re­member you told me Sophocles was as rich as some guy named Croesus, which is a guy I never heard of? Well, how come you never told me this guy named Croesus must have been a cham­pion tightwad.”

“Sophocles is a tightwad?”

“Champion! Can you beat it? What's the use of marrying a rich guy who's a tightwad?”

“Surely, Boom-Boom, you can manage to wheedle a little money out of him by the elusive promise of nocturnal Elysium.”

Fifi's forehead crinkled a bit. “I'm not sure what that means, but I know you, so don't talk dirty. Besides, I promised him he *wouldn't* get it, whatever it was you said, if he didn't loosen up, but he would rather squeeze his wallet than me and, if you think of it, that's pretty darned insulting.” The poor thing whimpered softly.

I patted her hand in as unbrotherly a fashion as I could man­age on short notice.

She burst out passionately, “When I married that bum, I thought, ‘Well, Fifi, here's where you get to go to Paris and the Riveera and Bonus Airs and Casablanca and like that.’ 幽uh! Not a chance!

“Don't tell me that hound won't take you to Paris.”

“He won't go *nowhere.* He says he don't want to leave Man­hattan. He says he don't like it out there. He says he don't like plants and trees and animals and grass and dirt and foreigners and any buildings except New York buildings. I say, \*How about some nice shopping mall?' but he don't like that neither.” “Why don't you go without him, Boom-Boom?” “That would be more fun than with him, you can bet. But with what? That guy's got his pants pockets sewed up with all his credit cards inside. I've got to do all my shopping at Macy's.” Her voice rose to a near shriek. “I didn't marry that bozo to shop at Macy's.”

I gazed speculatively at various portions of the damsel and regretted that I could not afford them. Before she married, she was occasionally willing to make a contribution to the cause in an art-for-art's sake manner, but I had a feeling that her nobler status as a married woman had hardened her professional view of the matter. In those days, you must understand, I was even more vigorous than I am now in my present prime of life, but I was as unacquainted with the coin of the realm then as now. I said, “Suppose I could talk him into liking to travel?” “Oh, boy, I sure wish someone could.” “Suppose *I* could. I suppose you would be grateful.” Her eye rested on me reminiscently. “George,” she said, “the day he tells me he's taking me to Paris, you and I do an Asbury Park number. Remember Asbury Park?”

Did I remember that New Jersey coastal resort? Could I for­get my aching muscles? Every part of me, almost, was stiff for two days afterward.

I discussed the matter with Azazel over some beer, a stein for me and a drop for him. He found the hops delightfully stimulat­ing. Cautiously I said to him, “Azazel, can those magical powers of yours really do things that would amaze me?”

He looked at me with a soused expression. “Just tell me what you want. Just tell me what you want. I'll show you whether I'm ‘old fumble-hands’ or not. I'll show them all.

Once, in a moment of stupefaction over some lemon-scented furniture polish (he found the peel extract mind-expanding, he said) he told me that he had once been insulted in that fashion on his own world.

I let him have another drop of beer, and said carelessly, “I have a friend who does not like to travel. I suppose it would be as nothing for a person as skilled and advanced as yourself to change that dislike into an absolute fever to travel.”

I must admit some of his eagerness vanished at once. “What I meant,” he said, in his whistling voice and odd accent, “was for you to ask something sensible — like making that ugly picture on the wall hang straight by the power of my mind alone.” The picture moved as he spoke, and hung crookedly in the other direction.

“Yes, but why should I want my pictures straightened?” I said. “I go to great trouble to get them to hang at a precisely correct nonrectilinear angle. What I do want is to have you imbue Sophocles Moskowitz with a travel mania, one that would lead him to travel, if necessary, even without his wife.” I added that because it occurred to me that there might be advantages to having Fifi in town, on occasion, with Sophocles out of town.

Azazel said, “That is not easy. An ingrained dislike for travel may well depend on various brain-deforming childhood experi­ences. It would require mental engineering of the most advanced sort to make up for that. I don't say it can't be done, since the crude minds of your people are not easily damaged, but I would have to have the person pointed out to me, so that I could iden­tify his mind and study it.”

That was easy enough. I had Fifi invite me to dinner as an old college classmate. (She had spent some time on a college campus a few years back, though I don't think she attended classes. She was very extracurricular.)

I brought Azazel with me in my jacket pocket and could occa­sionally hear him squeaking elaborate mathematical formulas under his breath. I assumed he was analyzing Sophocles Mos-kowitz's mind, and if so that was an impressive feat, for it did not take much conversation for me to appreciate the fact that his mind was not large enough to allow much scope for analysis.

Once home, I said to Azazel, “Well?”

With an airy wave of his scaly little arm he said, “I can do it. Do you have a multiphase, mento-dynamic synaptometer handy?”

“Not handy,” I said. “I lent mine out yesterday to a friend of mine who was leaving for Australia.”

“That was stupid of you,” grumbled Azazel. “That means I'll have to work by tablecloth calculations.”

He remained querulous, too, even after he had finished (as he maintained) successfully.

“It was almost impossible,” he said. “Only a person of my own magnificent attainments could have done it and I had to pin down his mind into its present adjusted form with huge spikes.”

I took it he was speaking metaphorically, and said so.

To which Azazel replied, “Well, it might as well be huge spikes. No one will be able to budge his mind after this. He's just going to want to travel with such overwhelming firmness that he could almost shake the universe if that was what would be re­quired to make the travel possible. *That* will show those —”

He burst out into a long string of strident syllables in his native language. I didn't understand what he said, of course, but it was quite clear from the fact that the ice cubes in the refrigera­tor in the next room had all melted that what he said was un­complimentary. I suspected he was casting some animadversions on those on his native world who had accused him of lack of deftness.

It was not more than three days later that Fifi phoned me. She is not as effective on the phone as in person for reasons that are quite obvious, although, perhaps, not to you with your congeni­tal inability to take note of the finer things of life. One is more aware of the slight hardness in her voice, you see, when one is not able to be directly reminded of a counterbalancing softness elsewhere.

“George,” she cackled, “you must be magic. I don't know what you did at that dinner but it worked. Sophocles is going to take me to Paris. It's his own idea and he's awful excited about it. Ain't that great?”

“It's more than great,” I said with natural enthusiasm. “It is earth-shaking. We can now indulge in that little promise you made. We can do a repeat of Asbury Park and shake the earth.”

Women, however, as even you may have noticed from time to time, lack the feeling that a bargain is sacred. They are quite dif­ferent from men in this respect. They seem to have no concep­tion of the importance of keeping their word, no feeling for honor.

She said, “We're leaving tomorrow, George, so I ain't got time right now. I'll call you when I get back.”

She hung up and that was that. The woman had twenty-four hours to spare and I would scarcely have used half of them — but off she went.

I *did* hear from her when she returned, but that was six months later. She phoned me again, and at first I didn't recognize her voice.

There was something haggard and worn-out about it. “To whom am I speaking?” I asked with my usual dignity.

She said wearily, “This is Fifi Laverne Moskowitz.”

“Boom-Boom,” I cried. “You're back! Marvelous! Come on over right now, and let's —”

She said, “George, drop dead! If it's your magic, you're a miserable phony and I wouldn't Asbury Park with you if you could hang by your toes twice as long.”

I was astonished. “Didn't Sophocles take you to Paris?”

“Yes, he did. Now ask me did I get my shopping done.”

I was willing. “Did you get your shopping done?”

“Like fun! I didn't even get it begun. Sophocles never stop­ped!” Her voice shed its weariness and, under the stress of emotion, rose to a shriek.

“We reached Paris and kept right on going. He kept pointing out things as we passed at top speed. ‘That's the Eiffel Tower,’ he said, pointing to some stupid building under construction.

“ ‘That's Notre Dame’ he said. He didn't even know what he was talking about. Two football players once smuggled me into No­tre Dame and it ain't in Paris. It's in South Bend, Indiana.

“But who cares? We went on to Frankfurt and Bern and Vi­enna, which them stupid foreigners call Veen. Is there someplace called Treest?”

“Trieste,” I,said. “Yes, there is.”

“Then we went there, too. And we never stopped off at hotels. We stopped at old farmhouses. Sophocles said that was the way to travel. He said you saw the people and nature. Who wants to see people and nature? What we didn't see was showers. And plumbing. After a while you get so, you smell. And I got *things* in my hair. I just now took five showers and I'm *still* not clean.”

“Take five more showers in my place,” I urged in the most reasonable possible way, “and we can Asbury Park it.”

She didn't seem to hear me. It's amazing how deaf women are to simple reason. She said, “He's getting started again next week. He said he wants to cross the Pacific and go to Hong Kong. He's going on an oil freighter. He says that's the way to see the ocean. I said, ‘Listen, you screwball creep, you ain't going to get me on no slow boat to China so I can be all to yourself alone.’

“Very poetic,” I said.

“And you know what he said? He said, ‘Very well, my dear. I'll go without you.’ Then he said something real weird because it made no sense. He said, ‘Down to Gehenna or up to the Throne, he travels the fastest who travels alone.’ What does that mean? What's Gehenna? How did a throne get into it? Does he think he's Queen of England?

“It's Kipling,” I said.

“Don't be crazy. I never kippled so don't tell me he did. He can hardly do it missionary. I told him I'd divorce him and take him to the cleaners. And he said, ‘Suit yourself, my sub­moronic dear, but you have no grounds and will get nothing. All that is important to me is travel.’ Can you beat that? And that sub­moronic bit. Still trying to sweet-talk me.

You've got to understand, old fellow, that this was one of Azazel's first jobs for me and he hadn't learned control And I *had* asked him to have Sophocles travel without his wife on occasion.

There was still the advantage to such a situation that I had foreseen from the start “Boom-Boom,” I said, “let's talk over the divorce together between Asbury —”

“And you, you miserable wimp. Whatever magic, or whatever you did, I don't care. Just stay out of my life because I know a guy who will squash you into pancakes as soon as I give him the word. And he kipples, too, because he does everything else.”

Boom-Boom, I'm afraid, had gone Bust-Bust, though not in a way I would have wanted her to or, knowing her measurements and style, expected her to.

I called on Azazel but, though he tried, there was no way he could undo what he had done. And he flatly refused to try any­thing toward making Boom-Boom more reasonable toward me. He said that would be too much for anyone. I don't know why.

He kept track of Sophocles for me, however. The man's mania grew. He crossed the Continental Divide on his hands. He went up the Nile on water skis, all the way to Lake Victoria. He crossed Antarctica on a hang glider.

When President Kennedy announced in 1961 that we would reach the moon by the end of the decade, Azazel said, “That's my adjustment doing its work again.”

I said, “You mean that whatever you did to his brain gives him the power to influence the President and the space pro­gram?”

“He doesn't do it on purpose,” said Azazel, “but I told you the adjustment was strong enough to shake the universe.”

And he did go on to the moon, old chap. Remember *Apollo 13,* that was supposedly wrecked in space on the way to the moon in 1970, with the crew just barely getting back to Earth? Actually, Sophocles had stowed away on it and had taken a portion of it to the moon, leaving the actual crew to get back to Earth as best they could with the rest.

He's been on the moon ever since, traveling all over its sur­face. He has no air, no food, no water, but his adjustment to continual travel must somehow take care of that. In fact, some­thing may have worked out by now to take him to Mars — and elsewhere.

George shook his head sadly. “So ironic. So ironic.”

“What's ironic?” I asked.

“Don't you see? Poor Sophocles Moskowitz! He is a new and improved version of the Wandering Jew, and the irony is that he isn't even Orthodox.”

George put his left hand to his eyes and fumbled for his nap­kin with his right hand. In doing so, he accidentally picked up the ten-dollar-bill I had placed at the side of the table as a tip for the waiter. He mopped his eyes with his napkin but I didn't see what happened to the ten-dollar-bill He left the restaurant sob­bing, and the table bare.

I sighed and put out another ten-dollar-bill.