# **A Long Spoon**

# John Wyndham

‘I say,’ Stephen announced, with an air of satisfaction, ‘do you know that if I lace up the tape this way round I can hear myself talking backwards!’

Dilys laid down her book, and regarded her husband. Before him, on the table, stood the tape-recorder, an amplifier, and small sundries. A wandering network of leads connected them to one another, to the mains, to a big loudspeaker in the corner, and to the pair of phones on his head. Lengths and snippets of tape littered half the floor.

‘Another triumph of science,’ she said, coolly. ‘As I understood it, you were just going to do a bit of editing so that we could send a record of the party to Myra. I’m quite sure she’d prefer it the right way round.’

‘Yes, but this idea just came to me —’

‘And what a mess! It looks as if we’d been giving someone a ticker-tape reception. What is it all?’

Stephen glanced down at the strips and coils of tape.

‘Oh, those are just the parts where everybody was talking at once, and bits of that very unfunny story Charles would keep trying to tell everyone — and a few indiscretions, and so on.’

Dilys eyed the litter, as she stood up.

‘It must have been a much more indiscreet party than it seemed at the time,’ she said. ‘Well, you clear it up while I go and put on the kettle.’

‘But you must hear this,’ he protested.

She paused at the door.

‘Give me,’ she suggested, ‘give me one good reason — just one — why I ought to hear you talk backwards ...’ And she departed.

Left alone, Stephen made no attempt to gather the debris; instead, he pressed the playback key and listened with interest to the curious gabbeldigook that was his backwards voice. Then he stopped the machine, took off the headphones, and switched over to the loudspeaker. He was interested to find that though the voice still had a European quality it seemed to rattle through its incomprehensible sounds at great speed. Experimentally, he halved the speed, and turned up the volume. The voice, now an octave lower, drawled out deep, ponderous, impossible-sounding syllables in a very impressive way indeed. He nodded to himself and leant his head back, listening to it rolling sonorously around the room.

Suddenly there was a rushing sound, not unlike a reduced facsimile of a locomotive blowing off steam, also a gust of warm air reminiscent of a stokehole ...

It took Stephen by surprise so that he jumped, and almost overturned his chair. Recovering, he reached forward, hastily pressing keys and turning knobs. The voice from the loudspeaker cut off abruptly. He peered anxiously into the items of his apparatus, looking for sparks, or smoke. There was neither, but it was while he was in the act of sighing his relief over this that he became, in some way, aware that he was no longer alone in the room. He jerked his head round. His jaw dropped fully an inch, and he sat staring at the figure standing some four feet to his rear right.

The man stood perfectly straight, with his arms pressed closely to his sides. He was tall, quite six feet, and made to look taller still by his hat — a narrow-brimmed, entirely cylindrical object of quite remarkable height. For the rest, he wore a high starched collar with spread points, a grey silk cravat, a long, dark frock-coat with silk facings, and lavender-grey trousers, with the points of black, shiny boots jutting out beneath them. Stephen had to tilt back his head to get a foreshortened view of the face. It was good-looking, bronzed, as if by Mediterranean sun. The eyes were large and dark. A luxuriant moustache swept out to join with well-tended whiskers at the points of the jaw. The chin, and lower parts of the cheeks were closely shaved. The features themselves stirred vague memories of Assyrian sculptures.

Even in the first astonished moment it was borne in upon Stephen that, inappropriate as the ensemble might be to the circumstances, there could be no doubt of its quality, nor, in the proper time and place, of its elegance. He continued to stare.

The man’s mouth moved.

‘I have come,’ he announced, with a pontifical air.

‘Er — yes,’ said Stephen. ‘I — er — I see that, but, well, I don’t quite ...’

‘You called upon me. I have come,’ the man repeated, with an air of explaining everything.

Stephen added a frown to his bewilderment.

‘But I didn’t say a thing,’ he protested. ‘I was just sitting here, and —’

‘There is no need for alarm. I am sure you will not regret it,’ said the man.

‘I am not alarmed. I’m baffled,’ said Stephen. ‘I don’t see —’

The pontifical quality was reduced by a touch of impatience as the man inquired:

‘Did you not construct the Iron Pentacle?’ — Without moving his arms, he contracted three fingers of his right hand so that the lavender-gloved forefinger remained pointing downwards. ‘Did you not also utter the Word of Power?’ he added.

Stephen looked where the finger pointed. He perceived that some of the discarded scraps of tape did make a crude geometrical figure on the floor, just permissibly, perhaps, a kind of pentacle form. But iron pentacle, the man had said ... Oh, the iron-oxide coating, of course ... H’m, pretty near the border of permissibility, too, one would think ...

‘Word of Power,’ though ... Well, it was conceivable that a voice talking backwards might stumble upon a Word of practically anything ...

‘It rather looks,’ he said, ‘as if there had been a slight mistake — a coincidence ...’

‘A strange coincidence,’ remarked the man, sceptically.

‘But isn’t that really the thing about coincidences? That they are, I mean,’ Stephen pointed out.

‘I have never heard of it happening before — never,’ said the man. ‘Whenever I, or any of my friends, have been summoned in this way, it has been to do business: and business has invariably been done.’

‘Business ...?’ Stephen inquired.

‘Business,’ the man repeated. ‘You have certain needs we can supply. You have a certain object we should like to add to our collection. All that is necessary is that we could come to terms. Then you sign the pact, with your blood, of course, and there it is.’

It was the word ‘pact’ that touched the spot. Stephen recalled the slight smell of hot clinkers that had pervaded the room.

‘Ah, I begin to see,’ he said. ‘This is a visitation — a raising. You mean that you are Old —’

The man cut in, with a quick frown:

‘My name is Batruel. I am one of the fully accredited representatives of my Master; his plenipotentiary, holding his authority to arrange pacts. Now, if you would be so good as to release me from this pentacle which I find an extremely tight fit, we could discuss the terms of the pact much more comfortably.’

Stephen regarded the man for some moments, and then shook his head.

‘Ha-ha!’ he said. ‘Ha-ha! Ha-ha!’

The man’s eyes widened. He looked huffed.

‘I beg your pardon!’

‘Look,’ Stephen said. ‘I apologize for the accident that brought you here. But let us have it clearly understood that you have come to the wrong place to do any business — the wrong place entirely.’

Batruel studied him thoughtfully. He lifted his head, and his nostrils twitched slightly.

‘Very curious,’ he remarked. ‘I detect no odour of sanctity.’

‘Oh, it isn’t that,’ Stephen assured him. ‘It simply is that quite a number of your deals have been pretty well documented by now — and one of the really consistent things about them is that the party of the second part has never failed to regret the deal, in due course.’

‘Oh, come! Think what I can offer you —’

Stephen cut him short by shaking his head again.

‘Save yourself the trouble,’ he advised. ‘I have to deal with up-to-date high-pressure salesmen every day.’

Batruel regarded him with a saddened eye.

‘I am more used to dealing with the high-pressure customer,’ he admitted. ‘Well, if you are quite sure that there has been no more than a genuine mistake, I suppose there is nothing to be done but for me to go back and explain. This has not, to my knowledge, ever happened before — though, of course, by the laws of chance it had to happen some time. Just my bad luck. Very well, then. Good-bye — oh, dear, what have I said? — I mean vale, my friend. I am ready!’

His stance was already rigid; now, as he closed his eyes, his face became wooden, too.

Nothing happened.

Batruel’s jaw relaxed.

‘Well, say it!’ he exclaimed, testily.

‘Say what?’ Stephen inquired.

‘The other Word of Power, of course. The Dismissal.’

‘But I don’t know it. I don’t know anything about Words of Power,’ Stephen protested.

Batruel’s brows came lower, and approached one another.

‘Are you telling me you cannot send me back?’ he inquired.

‘If it needs a Word of Power I certainly can’t,’ Stephen told him.

An expression of dismay came over Batruel’s face.

‘But this is unheard of ... What am I to do? I must have either a completed pact, or the Word of Dismissal.’

‘All right, you tell me the Word, and I’ll say it,’ Stephen offered.

‘But I don’t know it,’ said Batruel. ‘I have never heard it. Everyone who has summoned me until now has been anxious to do business and sign the pact ...’ He paused. ‘It really would simplify matters very greatly if you could see your way to — No? Oh, dear, this is most awkward. I really don’t see what we are going to do ...’

There was a sound at the door followed by a couple of taps on it from Dilys’s toe, to indicate that she was carrying a tray. Stephen crossed to the door and opened it a preliminary chink.

‘We have a visitor,’ he warned her. He did not want to see the tray dropped out of sheer surprise.

‘But how —?’ she began, and then, as he held the door open more widely, she almost did drop the tray. Stephen took it from her while she stood staring, and set it down safely.

‘Darling, this is Mr Batruel — my wife,’ he said.

Batruel, still standing rigidly straight, now looked embarrassed as well as constrained. He turned his head in her direction, and nodded it slightly.

‘Charmed, Ma’am,’ he said. ‘I would have you excuse my style, but my movements are unhappily constricted. If your husband would do me the courtesy of breaking this pentacle ...’

Dilys went on staring at him, and running an appraising eye over his clothes.

‘I — I’m afraid I don’t understand,’ she complained.

Stephen did his best to explain the situation. At the end, she said:

‘Well, I really don’t know ... We shall have to see what can be done, shan’t we? It’s so difficult — not as if he were just an ordinary D.P., I mean.’ She went on regarding Batruel thoughtfully, and then added: ‘Steve, if you have made it really clear to him that we’re not signing anything, don’t you think you might let him out of it? He does look so uncomfortable there.’

‘I thank you, Ma’am. I am indeed uncomfortable,’ Batruel said, gratefully.

Stephen considered.

‘Well, since he is here anyway, and we know where we stand, perhaps it won’t do any harm,’ he conceded. He bent down, and brushed aside some of the tape on the floor.

Batruel stepped out of the disrupted pentacle. With his right hand he removed his hat; with his left, he gave a touch to his cravat. He turned to sweep Dilys a bow, doing it beautifully, too; toe pointed, left hand on a non-existent hilt, hat held over his heart.

‘Your servant, Ma’am.’

He repeated the exercise in Stephen’s direction.

‘Your servant, Sir.’

Stephen’s response was well-intentioned, but he was aware that it showed inadequately against his visitor’s style. There followed an awkward pause. Dilys broke it by saying:

‘I’d better fetch another cup.’

She went out, returned, and presided.

‘You — er — you’ve not visited England lately, Mr Batruel?’ she suggested, socially.

Batruel looked mildly astonished.

‘What makes you think that, Mrs Tramon?’ he asked.

‘Oh, I — I just thought ...’ Dilys said, vaguely.

‘My wife is thinking of your clothes,’ Stephen told him. ‘Furthermore, if you will excuse my mentioning it, you get your periods somewhat mixed. The style of your bow, for instance, precedes that of your clothes by, well, at least two generations, I should say.’

Batruel looked a little taken aback. He glanced down at himself. ‘I paid particular note to the fashion last time I was here,’ he said, with disappointment. Dilys broke in.

‘Don’t let him upset you, Mr Batruel. They are beautiful clothes — and such quality of material.’

‘But not quite in the current ton?’ said Batruel, acutely.

‘Well, not quite,’ Dilys admitted. ‘I expect you get a bit out of touch in — where you live.’

‘Perhaps we do,’ Batruel confessed. ‘We used to do quite a deal of business in these parts up to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but during the nineteenth it fell off badly. There’s always a little, of course, but it is a matter of chance who is on call for different districts, and it so happens that I myself visited here only once during the nineteenth century, and not at all during the present century, until now. So you can imagine what a pleasure it was to me to receive your husband’s summons; with what high hopes of a mutually beneficial transaction I presented myself —’

‘Now, now! That’s enough of that ...’ Stephen broke in.

‘Oh, yes, of course. My apologies. The old war-horse scenting battle, you understand.’

There was a pause. Dilys regarded the visitor pensively. To one who knew her as well as her husband did, it was clear that there was a half-hearted struggle going on, and that curiosity was being allowed to pile up the points. At last she said:

‘I hope your English assignments have not always been a disappointment to you, Mr Batruel?’

‘Oh, by no means, Ma’am. I have the happiest recollections of visits to your country. I remember calling upon an Adept who lived near Winchester — it would be somewhere in the middle of the sixteenth century, I think — he wanted a prosperous estate, a title, and a beautiful, well-born wife. We were able to fix him up with a very nice place not far from Dorchester — his descendants hold it to this day, I believe. Then there was another, quite a young man, early in the eighteenth century, who was set upon a nice income, and the opportunity to marry into court circles. We gave satisfaction there, and his blood now runs in some very surprising places. And just a few years later there was another young man, a rather dull fellow who simply wanted to become a famous playwright and wit. That’s more difficult, but we managed it. I shouldn’t be surprised to find his name remembered still. He was —’

‘That’s all very well,’ Stephen broke in. ‘Nice enough for the descendants, but what happened to the protagonists?’

Batruel lifted his shoulders slightly.

‘Well, a bargain is a bargain. A contract freely entered into ...’ he said, reprovingly. ‘Although I have not been here myself lately,’ he went on, ‘I understand from my fellow representatives that requirements, though they differ in details, are much the same in principle. Titles are still popular, particularly with the wives of clients. So, too, the entrée to society — such as it has become. So is a fine country house, and nowadays, of course, we supply it with all mod. con., also a pied-à-terre in Mayfair. Where we used to provide a full stable we now offer a Bent-Rollsley saloon, a private aircraft perhaps ...’ he continued with a dreamy air.

Stephen felt it time to break in.

‘Bent-Rollsley, indeed! You’d better read your Consumer Research handbook more carefully next time. And now I’ll be obliged if you will leave off tempting my wife. She’s not the one who would have to pay for it.’

‘No,’ Batruel agreed. ‘That’s a feature of woman’s life. She always has to pay something, but the more she gets the less it costs her. Now your wife would have a much easier life, no work to do, servants to —’

‘Will you please stop it!’ Stephen told him. ‘It should be clear to you by now that your system is old-fashioned. We’ve got wise to it. It’s lost its appeal.’

Batruel looked doubtful.

‘According to our bulletins the world is still a very wicked place,’ he objected.

‘I dare say, but the wickeder part of it hasn’t any use for your old-fashioned terms. It greatly prefers to get a lot for a little if it can’t get something for nothing.’

‘Scarcely ethical,’ murmured Batruel. ‘One should have standards.’

‘That may be, but there it is. Besides, we are much more closely knit now. How do you think I’d be able to square a sudden title with Debrett, or sudden affluence with the Income Tax inspectors, or even a sudden mansion with the Planning Authority. One must face facts.’

‘Oh, I expect all that could be managed all right,’ Batruel said.

‘Well, it isn’t going to be. There is only one way nowadays that a man can safely become suddenly rich. It’s — by Jove ... !’ He broke off abruptly, and plunged into thought.

Batruel said to Dilys:

‘It is such a pity your husband is not doing himself justice. He has great potentialities. One can see that at a glance. Now, with some capital behind him there would be such opportunities, such scope ... And the world still has so much to offer to a rich man — and to his wife, of course — respect, authority, ocean-going yachts ... One can’t help feeling he is being wasted at present ...’

Dilys glanced at her abstracted husband.

‘You feel that about him, too? I’ve often thought that they don’t appreciate him properly in the business ...’

‘Office politics, very likely,’ said Batruel. ‘Many a young man’s gifts are stunted by them. But with independence and a helpful wife — if I may say so, a clever and beautiful young wife — to help him, I see no reason why he should not —’

Stephen’s attention had returned.

‘Straight out of the Tempter’s Manual; Chapter One, I should think,’ he remarked scornfully. ‘Now just lay off it, will you, and try to look facts in the face. Once you have grasped them, I am prepared to consider doing business with you.’

Batruel’s expression brightened a little.

‘Ah,’ he said, ‘I thought that when you had had a little time to consider the advantages of our offer —’

Stephen interrupted.

‘Look,’ he said. ‘The first fact you have to face is that I have no use whatever for your usual terms — so you might as well stop trying to form a pressure-group with my wife.

‘The second fact is this: you’re the one who is in a jam, not me. How do you propose ever to get back to — er — well, wherever you come from, if I don’t help you?’

‘All I’m suggesting is that you help yourself at the same time that you help me,’ Batruel pointed out.

‘Got only one angle about this, haven’t you? Now, listen to me. I can see three possible courses before us. One: we find someone who can give us this Word of Power for your dismissal. Do you know how we set about that? — No? Well, nor do I.

‘Then, two: I could ask the Vicar round here to have a shot at exorcizing you. I expect he’d be quite glad to oblige. It might even lead to his being canonized later on for resisting temptation ...’

Batruel shuddered.

‘Certainly not,’ he objected. ‘A friend of mine was once exorcized back in the fifteenth century. He found it excruciatingly painful at the time, and he hasn’t fully regained confidence in himself yet.’

‘Very well, then, there’s still a third possibility. In consideration of a nice round sum of money, with no strings attached, I will undertake to find someone willing to make a pact with you. Then when you have it safely signed, you will be able to report back with your mission honourably completed. How does that strike you?’

‘No good at all,’ Batruel replied promptly. ‘You are simply trying to get two concessions out of us for the price of one. Our accountants would never sanction it.’

Stephen shook his head sadly.

‘It’s no wonder to me that your practice is slipping. In all the thousands of years you’ve been in business, you don’t seem to have got a step beyond the idea of a first mortgage. And you’re even prepared to employ your own capital when you should be using somebody else’s. That’s no way to get ahead. Now, under my scheme, I get some money, you get your pact, and the only capital laid out is a few shillings from me.’

‘I don’t see how that can be,’ Batruel said, doubtfully.

‘I assure you it can. It may mean your having to stay for a few weeks, but we can put you up in the spare room. Now, do you play football?’

‘Football?’ Batruel repeated vaguely. ‘I don’t think so. How does it go?’

‘Well you’ll have to mug up on the principles and tactics of the game. But the important point is this: a player must kick with precision. Now, if the ball is not exactly where he calculated it will be, this precision is lost, so is the opportunity, and so, eventually, the game. Have you got that?’

‘I think so.’

‘Then you will appreciate that just a nudge of an inch or so to the ball at a critical moment could do a lot — there wouldn’t need to be any unsporting roughstuff, or mayhem. The outcome of a game could be arranged quite unsuspiciously. All it would need would be a nicely timed nudge by one of those imps you use for the practical jobs. That shouldn’t be very difficult for you to arrange.’

‘No,’ Batruel agreed. ‘It should be quite simple. But I don’t quite see —’

‘Your trouble, old man, is that you are hopelessly out of touch with modern life, in spite of your bulletins,’ Stephen told him. ‘Dilys, where is that Pools entry-form?’

Half an hour later Batruel was showing an appreciative grasp of the possibilities.

‘Yes, I see,’ he said. ‘With a little study of the technicalities it should not be difficult to produce a loss, or a draw, perhaps even a win, as required.’

‘Exactly,’ approved Stephen. ‘Well, there you are. I fill in the coupon — laying out several shillings on it to make it look better. You fix the matches. And I collect handsomely — without any awkward tax questions.’

‘That’s all very well for you,’ Batruel pointed out, ‘but I don’t see how it is going to get me my pact, unless you —’

‘Ah, now. Here we come to the next stage,’ Stephen told him. ‘In return, I undertake to find you a pact-signer in, shall we say, six weeks? in exchange for my winnings. Will that do? Good. Then let’s have an agreement about it. Dilys, bring me a sheet of writing-paper, will you, and some blood — oh, no, stupid of me, we’ve got blood ...’

Five weeks later Stephen slid his Bentley to a stop in front of the Northpark Hotel, and a moment later Batruel came down the steps. The idea of putting him up at home had had to be abandoned after a couple of days. His impulse to tempt was in the nature of an uncontrollable reflex, and proved to be incompatible with domestic tranquillity, so he had removed to a hotel where he found the results less inconvenient, and the opportunities more varied.

He emerged from the revolving door cutting a very different figure from that of his first appearance in Stephen’s sitting-room. The side-whiskers had gone, though the luxuriant moustache remained. The frock-coat had been replaced by a meticulously cut grey suit, the remarkable top-hat by a grey felt, the cravat by a tie with stripes that were discreetly not quite Guards. Indeed, he now presented the appearance of a comfortably-placed, good-looking, latter twentieth-century man of about forty.

‘Hop in,’ Stephen told him. ‘You’ve got the pact-form with you?’

Batruel patted his pocket.

‘I always carry it. You never know ...’ he said, as they set off.

The first time Stephen had picked up the treble-chance win there had been, in spite of his hope of remaining anonymous, considerable publicity. It is less easy than it might seem to hide a windfall of £220,000. He and Dilys had taken the precaution of going into hiding before the next win was due — this time for £210,000. There had been some hesitation when it came to paying him the third cheque — £225,000 — not exactly a quibbling, for there was nothing to quibble about; the forecasts were down in ink, but there was a thoughtfulness on the part of the promoters which caused them to send representatives to see him. One of these, an earnest young man in glasses, talked with some intensity about the laws of chance, and had then produced a figure with a staggering number of noughts which he claimed to represent the odds against anyone bringing off a treble-chance three times.

Stephen was interested. His system, he said, must be even better than he had thought to win against such an astronomical unlikelihood as that.

The young man wanted to know about his system. Stephen, however, had declined to talk about it — but he had indicated that he might not be unwilling to discuss some aspects of it with the head of Gripshaw’s Pools. So here they were now, on their way to an interview with Sam Gripshaw himself.

The Pools head office stood beside one of the new outer roads, set a little back behind a smooth lawn decorated with beds of salvias. Stephen was saluted by a braided porter as he slid his car into its park. A few moments later they were being shown into a spacious private office where Sam Gripshaw was on his feet to greet them. Stephen shook hands and introduced his companion.

‘This is Mr Batruel, my adviser,’ he explained.

Sam Gripshaw’s glance at Batruel suddenly turned into a careful, searching look. He appeared to become thoughtful for a moment. Then he turned back to Stephen.

‘Well, first, I should congratulate you, young man. You’re by a long way the biggest winner in the whole history of the Pools. Six hundred and fifty-five thousand pounds, they tell me — very tidy, very tidy indeed. But’ — he shook his head — ‘it can’t go on, you know. It can’t go on ...’

‘Oh, I wouldn’t say that,’ Stephen replied amiably, as they sat down.

Again Sam Gripshaw shook his head.

‘Once is good luck; twice could be extraordinarily good luck; three times gives off a pretty funny smell; four times would rock the industry; five times would just about bust it. Nobody’s going to put up even his few bob against dead certs. Stands to reason. Now you’ve got a system you say?’

‘We’ve got a system,’ Stephen corrected. ‘My friend, Mr Batruel —’

‘Ah, yes — Mr Batruel,’ said Sam Gripshaw, looking at Batruel thoughtfully again. ‘I suppose you wouldn’t like to tell me a little about your system?’

‘You can scarcely expect us to do that ...’ Stephen protested.

‘No, I suppose not,’ Sam Gripshaw admitted. ‘All the same, you might as well. You can’t go on with it —’

‘Because if we were to, we’d bust your industry? Well, we don’t want to do that, of course. In fact that is why we are here. Mr Batruel has a proposition to put to you.’

‘Let’s hear it,’ said Mr Gripshaw.

Batruel rose to his feet.

‘You have a very fine business here, Mr Gripshaw. It would be most unfortunate if it were to lose the confidence of the public — both for them, and for yourself. I don’t need to stress that, for I perceive that you have refrained from giving any publicity to my friend, Mr Tramon’s, third win. Very wise of you, Sir, if I may say so. It could initiate a subtle breath of despondency ...

‘Now, I am in the fortunate position of being able to propose a means by which the risk of such a situation occurring again can be positively eliminated. It will not cost you a penny, and yet ...’ He launched himself into his temptation with the air of an artist taking up his beloved brush. Sam Gripshaw heard him through patiently to his conclusion:

‘— and, in return for this — this mere formality, I am willing to undertake that neither our friend, Mr Stephen Tramon, here, nor anyone else will receive any further assistance in er — prognostication from me. The emergency will then be over, and you will then be able to pursue your business with the confidence that I am sure it so well merits.’

He produced his form of Pact with a flourish, and laid it on the desk.

Sam Gripshaw reached for it, and glanced through it. Rather to Stephen’s surprise, he nodded, almost without hesitation.

‘Seems straight enough,’ he said. ‘I can see I’m not well placed to argue. All right. I’ll sign.’

Batruel smiled happily. He stepped forward, with a small, convenient penknife in his hand.

When the signing was done Sam Gripshaw wrapped a clean handkerchief round his forearm. Batruel picked up the pact and took a step back, waving it gently to dry the signature. Then he inspected it with simple pleasure, folded it with care, and placed it in his pocket.

He beamed upon them both. In his elation, his sense of period slipped again. He made his elegant eighteenth-century bow.

‘Your servant, gentlemen.’

And, abruptly, he was gone, leaving nothing but the faintest trace of sulphur on the air.

It was Sam Gripshaw who broke the following silence.

‘Well, that’s got rid of him — and he can’t get back until somebody raises him,’ he added, with satisfaction. He turned to contemplate Stephen. ‘You’ve not done so badly, young man, have you? You pocket more than half a million for selling him my soul. That’s what I call business ability. Wish I’d had more of it when I was younger.’

‘Well, you, at any rate, don’t seem to be very perturbed about it,’ Stephen said, with a perceptible note of relief in his voice.

‘No. Doesn’t worry me,’ Mr Gripshaw told him. ‘He’s the one who’s going to be worried. Makes you think, doesn’t it? Thousands of years him and his lot have been in business — and still got no system into it. What you need today is organization — the whole business at your finger-tips so you know where you are, and what’s what. Too old-fashioned by half, that lot. Time they got some efficiency experts on to it.’

‘Well, not very subtle perhaps,’ agreed Stephen. ‘But then, his need is rather specialized, and he has got what he was after.’

‘Huh! You wait till he’s had time to look in the files — if they know what files are down there. How do you think I ever managed to raise enough capital to start this place ...?’