

WHAT IT ALL GOES TO SHOW

“Do you know a Harold Blackburn at work?”

He straightened in the easy chair. Slowly, slowly, he rose up from the bottom of his mind where he’d been pondering a problem. He’d heard what she said, but had not quite understood. “Huh?”

From the sofa, where she was half-lying on her back, one leg up, a bare foot on the carpet, her nightgown partly pulled up to reveal a naked hip, a book open across her breast, she repeated her question.

“Yeah, sure, I know him. He’s an engineer. Why?”

“Oh nothing much.” She closed the book and straightened her nightgown, smoothing it over the prominences of breasts and hips.

He silently cursed her. But she now continued “We had a substitute yesterday at our bridge club, Leticia Blackburn. She was just talking about how hard her husband works.”

“He’s so damn’ dumb he has to work hard...what else did she say?”

“Only that since he came to work for Astrospace he’s there till all hours of the night. She said he didn’t come home yesterday till after midnight.. Saturday morning, of all things. She wanted to know if our husbands worked so hard.” She sat up and with both hands flipped her long blonde hair back over her shoulders, tossing her head. “I had to say that you may as well be there that much, for all the company you are at home. Honestly, I think you don’t even see me when you’re sitting with that abstracted look.”

The problem pulled at him, but his wife’s face held warning. He decided to ignore her last remark. “She give any reason why he’s working so hard?”

She smiled, evidently pleased he was still listening. “Well, she didn’t actually *say*, but I gathered he’s worried about his job. He’s forty-six, you know. I guess he had a hard time finding this one. She said he was among those thousands of engineers laid off when that big aircraft company lost its government contract....She says he’s scared to death – well, she didn’t use those words, but I certainly got that impression. Why? Isn’t he very good?”

“No. Too old – hasn’t learned a thing since he got out of college. Just getting along on his ‘twenty years of experience’.” He snorted. “Big deal. He’ll be fired one of these days, I bet.” And the sooner the better. Harry was a pain.

“Oh *no!* That would be terrible...” She added, he thought irrelevantly, “She’s such a nice woman. And a man forty-six years old would have a hard time finding another job after being fired.”

He shrugged. It was not that he lacked sympathy, but damn it, when a man was incompetent... he wanted to sink back down into the problem, but Carol was speaking again.

“Jim, do you think you’d ever have...trouble, like Mr. Blackburn, when you get older? I mean, you do have just a master’s in engineering; and nowadays they seem to be insisting on PhDs more and more...”

For the first time that evening he was aware of feeling an emotion. “Carol!” he snapped, “After two years of marriage you should know the damned difference between me and an engineer. My major was mathematical physics, *not* engineering. I solve problems with mathematics, *not* with drawing instruments and handbooks!” He paused, surprised himself by his outburst over something, he now thought, she couldn’t be expected to understand.

She flushed. “All right, all right, you’re a physicist, not an—*ugh!*—engineer. But you still don’t have a PhD. And you said yourself that your big friend Stan makes a salary twice yours, though he’s only three years older than you. That certainly means *something!*”

“Okay Carol. Who was in such a great damned hurry to get married? If you’d been willing to wait, I’d have stayed on for my doctor’s—but no, *you* had to get married! So I got my master’s and got out. So don’t blame me if I don’t make the salary Stan does.”

She cast her eyes down. He felt that he wasn't being fair: he'd been sick of studying when he met her. He'd been looking for an excuse to quit. But he might have kept on – he now shifted the blame back to its proper place – if she hadn't been so hot to get married.

“Anyway,” he continued, calmer now, “Harry's made his own trouble: he hasn't kept up in his field, like he should have.”

A sudden vision he had, of his copies of the *Phys Rev* stacked in the bookcase, many still in their mailing envelopes. He made a mental note to study them more conscientiously.

Abruptly weary of the argument he walked over to kiss his wife on the forehead. He idly noted that she had puckered her lips. “Oh, I'm sorry Jim. It's just that when you hear something like poor Mr. Blackburn's trouble, it bothers you. I know you haven't anything really to worry about – and anyway you'll go back to school one of these days – I know that.”

“Sure.” He mussed her hair, thinking that she knew more than he did. Carol pressed his hand, looked at him, picked up the book, sighed, put it down, then yawned and turned on the TV. He went back to his chair and sat, half-aware of Perry Mason, his intention to go on thinking about the problem Stan had given him Friday. But his thoughts wandered to Harry Blackburn.

“Don't get wet!”

Poor Harry. It was by now a standard joke between him and Stan: whenever one of them went to talk with Harry the other said “Don't get wet!”, referring to the tears they'd often noted in his eyes. As if he hadn't quite understood what they were getting at and was ready to cry. Poor bastard. It was really more pathetic than funny: a man twenty years older, so terrified over his job that he nearly wept..

But after what he'd overheard between Harry and Dr. Milgrim Friday, Harry had good reason to be afraid. James hadn't meant to overhear, but it had been Harry's own doing. He'd hardly walked in the office Friday morning when Harry had telephoned, saying he had yet another problem with the drawings assigned to Drafting weeks before.

So he'd left their office to go to Harry's. As usual, Stan called after him “Don't get wet!” and he smiled, thinking that this time he was really going to light into Harry...

As he walked through the great bay of the drafting room he saw Harry's office door ajar; he'd almost entered before he heard Milgrim's low deep voice. Moving from the large one-way window through which Harry could view the drafting room from his desk, James hesitated near the threshold, not wanting to interrupt the big boss yet unwilling to return to his own office. The voice he recognized as Milgrim's was growling "...of no value to me...full of errors—nicely detailed, but...if everything else is wrong? ...get a grip on things Harry...happening too often..."

Milgrim's voice dropped lower and as James stood wondering what to do he heard Harry's: "I just don't—I don't understand how that could have happened, Dr. Milgrim. I did that one myself, to make sure. I've been very tired these past few days—Drafting has an awful lot of work—but I'll see it doesn't happen again..." His voice broke. After a silence, he finished "I—I don't know what else to say, Dr. Milgrim..."

Milgrim's answering rumble held a note of finality and James stepped away from the door, vaguely awed as Milgrim swept from the room, hardly nodding to his greeting.

Smiling to himself, pleased he was not in Harry's shoes, he entered the office. The older man, wearing a draftsman's smock over his suit, looked up from his desk. Even though Harry was nearing fifty, to James he was not yet old-looking, though his hair was thinning and his face was haggard and very pale. He felt almost sorry for Harry.

"Hullo Harry, how's it going?" He stepped around the drafting table that occupied half the room and took Harry's drafting stool. "Company treating you right?" He spoke ironically, but Harry seemed not to notice.

"Hullo Jim, hullo. Oh, uh, yes...pretty well. There's an awful lot of work to do, though. Seems like I can't trust anyone but myself and—" He stopped abruptly.

James comfortably felt his smile patronizing. "You've got to learn to delegate work, Harry. Can't do it all yourself."

The older man appeared to think he was being friendly and said "I know, I know. Dr. Milgrim was just in here, saying, uh, the same thing. I told him I'd been working nights on his project and he just said I ought to have my

draftsmen doing things like that. Of course he's right, but these important jobs I feel I ought to do myself..."

James had listened impatiently, then interrupted to ask what his problem was *this* time. As usual, it had been a triviality: Harry had confused his units again and James became angry. In icy tones he explained that only engineers used English units and that since he, James, was a physicist, Harry should know he would use only Metric units. When he finished, moisture was shining in Harry's eyes. James had felt dimly ashamed of himself.

It struck him that he'd only allowed himself the luxury of anger because he knew that Harry never fought back. He blushed, telling himself he'd acted inexcusably, especially toward a man almost old enough to be his father. He promised himself to try, at least, to be more patient with Harry in future.

But you couldn't *help* getting mad at the guy; he was so *damned* dumb. The afternoon of that very same Friday Harry had knocked at their office with *another* problem...

"Oh...come on in, Harry..." Stan greeted him, slowly removing his feet from the desk, where he placed them when thinking. James turned from his work to stare at the older man.

"What's the problem now, Harry?"

The older man had a roll of drawings under his arm and he spread one out on Stan's desk, saying "Before we get to that, let me show you one of the drawings I've completed for you..."

Meticulously detailed it was, a plan of a piece of complex experimental equipment. In one part where a collapsed section of large-diameter rubber tubing was shown, each fold in the tubing was drafted with fastidious precision. James gazed at it, admiration welling in him in spite of himself. Whatever else, Harry took enormous pains with the art of his drafting. He glanced at Stan. The older man stood, looking at Stan too, clearly awaiting a word of approval.

"Yeah. Well, I guess that'll do..." Stan said. "But tell me, Harry – why the hell did you show each fold in the tubing here? You wasted too much time fooling with that – it's unnecessary. We don't need a work of art, just an engineering drawing."

The older man did not reply. He simply unrolled another drawing and began explaining a point he thought needed improving. He finished with

“...and *here* I think you ought to increase the shield thickness.” He looked expectantly to Stan.

Stan turned. “What d’you think, Jim?”

After a moment’s apprehension, James shrugged: who was Harry to doubt his calculations? “The thickness as shown is what we’ve calculated to be adequate. What else is there to say? I don’t think any greater is needed. But then, I’m not an engineer.” He emphasized the last word as if flinging out an obscenity.

The older man flushed and turned to Stan, “Perhaps theoretical calculations say it’s sufficient, Stan, but you can’t always rely on them. Sometimes experience is a better guide. Now I’ve had twenty years of experience in de—“

Stan cut him off. “We have to trust calculations, Harry, not feelings. Anyway, your experience isn’t valid here: these are new shapes and new materials... don’t forget, one year repeated twenty times is not twenty years of experience.” He grinned. “What *else* have you found wrong – out of your ‘experience’?”

Speechless for a moment, the older man found voice to say hoarsely “Stan, I realize you younger men know a lot -- these are the sixties, your education is newer, and you learn things in school that weren’t even thought of when I went...” His voice trembled. “But that doesn’t give you a right to laugh at me! I’m still a good engineer.” James noted with wonder that Harry was almost angry. “You have no right at all to laugh at me!”

In the silence that followed he gathered up the drawings, to carefully roll them into a tube. He turned and walked rigidly out the door. James fancied he heard a muffled sob from the hallway,.

He forced a laugh. “Boy, I think you really got to him that time, Stan – I thought I heard him crying.”

His friend chuckled. “Hope he doesn’t get the drawings wet – those he’s finished aren’t badly done. But look at the time he wastes: he must be hyperthyroid or something to spend hours drawing each crinkle in that damned rubber tubing.” He snorted. “But that’s all he’s good for, I guess. Anyone without a doctor’s might as well draw crinkles in rubber tubing as anything else.”

James had glanced up, stung. Probably, he'd told himself, Stan had forgot he didn't have one either.

Stan had meant, probably, anyone without a graduate degree, James now thought more comfortably. He looked at his watch. Almost two in the morning—a whole evening wasted and he still hadn't solved that damned problem. Perhaps it would come while he slept.

He rose, stretched, and noted with surprise that Carol had fallen asleep on the sofa. The TV set was casting black and white shadows on her face and he turned it off. He carried her to their bedroom.

Between the covers, James lay wide awake, the problem still present to mind. He fleetingly wondered if he had skill enough to solve it but dismissed the doubt at once. Even without a PhD he could solve any problem they could throw at him, he told himself.

Whistling, James walked up the steps of the main research building the next morning. He had awakened with the approach to the problem in mind, and he looked forward to the pleasant chore of writing its solution down. It was, he thought comfortably, a good way to begin the week. He glanced at the Pacific, sparkling in the distance, then up at the sky. He felt the warm sunshine, and smiled. A *very* good way!

Another man was ascending the steps behind him, and at the entrance James courteously held the door open for him, to follow him in. He and the other flashed their badges at the receptionist. "Good morning Dr. Phillips... Good morning, Mr. Driscoll." Smiling, she waved them by the guard.

He winced and studied the other as they walked down the corridor. He did not look, James thought, any older than himself. He stopped whistling to speculate on the man's salary. Mechanically he walked, glancing out the windows but not noticing, now, the sunny day nor the blue band of the Pacific. At least twelve thousand dollars a year anyway. And he made only nine. He sighed and turned down an interior corridor, looking as he did so into the two-man offices opening on it, examining their occupants as they, careless of scrutiny, sat with feet on desks or read the morning papers.

The drafting room's open door caught his eye and he paused to gaze in. At its rear was Harry's office, its door closed. James hesitated: uneasily he remembered having given Harry a deadline a week early on the drawings, and pondered telling him that the deadline had slipped. He decided not, but remained, almost against his will, staring at the draftsmen..

For a reason he did not examine, they fascinated him. He almost never passed Drafting without stopping to peer in. He glanced up at the bare steel-frame ceiling and the batteries of fluorescent lights hanging from it, and then down at the white drafting tables that filled the enormous room. Ten abreast in theodolite-straight rows, the space between them just allowed a man to pass crab-fashion. His gaze shifted to the room's occupants. Bent over their work, all were clad in blue smocks. The only noise was the the muted *whirr* of motor-driven erasers, the click of plastic instruments.

They do this every day, eight hours a day, he thought. *My God!* Stan's comment rose to mind and he smiled: "...the modern equivalent of galley slaves, plying pencils instead of oars." He tried to concentrate his gaze on one of them, but his eye kept skipping to face after intent face. They seemed men without personality or humanity.

A master's degree in physics was a long step up the ladder from them. He turned and walked down the corridor. Presently, he was again whistling.

Arrived at his office he noted without surprise that Stan was not yet there, and glanced at his watch. Only a half-hour late. After hanging up his jacket and loosening his tie he unlocked his desk and twirled the dial of the combination lock on the secret file. He sat down and, still whistling, drew a pencil and a tablet of blue-lined yellow legal paper toward him. Presently he was concentrating so intently that he forgot to whistle as he filled pages with the hermetic symbols of mathematical notation.

He was still writing when Stan walked in, hung up his jacket, loosened his tie, and sat his two hundred pounds heavily down at his desk. "Mornin', Jim"

He continued writing for a moment then turned and greeted his office partner and immediate supervisor. He noted that his friend's broad florid face looked tired. He smiled. "Well, Stan, you'll be happy to know I've solved the shock problem. Like to see it?" He half rose, about to go to the blackboard.

Stan sourly gazed at him. “Nah. I don’t want to see nothing. Do you know what happened last night?” James sat back down, chagrined. “That damned Harry called me at two this morning about another problem he’d found with those drawings for the X-hardware – you know, the stuff he wanted to improve Friday. He was at the *office*, working on those drawings. At *two o’clock* Monday morning!” Stan’s voice was wondering.

James uneasily thought that he too had been up till two in the morning thinking about a problem. He mock-groaned and put feet up on desk, ready to enjoy feeling superior to Harry. “What was his problem *this* time?”

“Ah-h, I don’t know. I couldn’t make sense out of what he was saying. I asked why the hell he wasn’t home in bed, and he said you’d told him there was a deadline for this morning. Poor bastard sounded desperate.”

James thought his gaze questioning. Defensively: “I did. You know Harry. If I’d told him the real deadline he’d have screwed around and it would really have been late. So I told him today instead of next Monday.”

Stan nodded. “I figured, so I didn’t tell him any different. But he’s in a big sweat: sometime this morning you’ll have to go down and argue with him again. I’m tired of talking to him.” He snickered. “When you do, don’t get wet.”

Stan turned away to sharpen a pencil, then begin writing. James gazed at his friend’s back for an instant, then returned to his work to check it for errors. Might as well use the time to make sure it was right, he thought.

They had been working silently for awhile when James heard Stan stretch and yawn. He turned to see his friend look at his watch. “Coffee time...Past time, in fact.” He looked to James. “Coming?” James shook his head; he’d suddenly thought of another point to check and he would be dead sure before he tried again to show it to Stan. “In a minute.”

Stan rose, straightened his tie, put on his jacket, and walked out the door. James heard other footsteps in the hall, a muffled voice, and then Stan’s voice: “He didn’t! Well I’ll be damned!” Another moment of whispered conversation and footsteps continued down the hall, followed shortly afterward by his friend’s heavier steps.

He jumped from his chair and ran to the door. Stan was just disappearing round the corner when James called to him. He paused and James reached him. “What did I just hear, Stan?”

His friend shifted his weight, then said in a low voice “It was Milgrim. He said they just found Harry’s body in his car, about a half hour ago. Dumb bastard had run a hose from the exhaust. Milgrim said it must have been early. The body was cold.” Stan hesitated. “He said not to tell anyone. Company’s trying to keep it a little quiet till the cops are done.” He smiled. “But he said there’s a bunch of gawkers there...everybody knows, I guess: this’d be too good for a hundred bored draftsmen to keep quiet about for long!”

Stan continued down the hall after coffee. James returned to his desk and sat down to stare at the blackboard.

It was absolutely impossible. People he knew did not do such things. He wondered if Stan had heard correctly and briefly considered walking to Harry’s office to see for himself, but decided not to: he would look too much like a curiosity seeker. Anyway, it had to be true – he’d heard it himself from Milgrim.

Still though, he’d heard only a whisper...he realized he was trying to deny that Harry was dead, and wondered why. After all, Harry had been nothing special to him. He reflected a moment and decided that it was one of those things that was just too shocking to believe. That was it: it was just too shocking ...he got up and paced the floor, thinking that he had to be *sure*.

As he walked to and fro his eye fell on the telephone and an idea entered his mind. He instantly rejected it, almost with revulsion. It came again and he pondered it. He would not, after all, have to give his name--whoever answered could not know who he was. Deciding, he reached for the receiver.

Dialling the number his hands shook. After several rings a low voice said “Drafting.” Keeping his voice casual, James said “Let me speak to Harry Blackburn, please.”

A moment’s stunned silence hung at the other end and the voice, now hushed, said (it must be one of the draftsmen, James thought, surprised to hear such emotion in the man’s voice) “You can not...I am sure you could not possibly know...or you would not have done such a thing...Mr. Blackburn is dead. He died this morning.”

Struck by his own sudden shame he stammered out to the anonymous draftsman that he hadn't known. There was a click and he replaced the receiver, to sit limp in his chair, waves of self-loathing pulsing his chest.

In the silence footsteps clicked in the hall. Stan entered, holding a paper cup of coffee, and sat down at his desk. James looked at his friend, irrationally fearing that Stan knew what he'd just done. He cleared his throat. "Well. What do you make of it?"

Stan dryly chuckled. "It just goes to show..." he began, drawing out a cigarette and lighting it, "...it just goes to show you shouldn't give an engineer a deadline a week early—not when there are a lot of crinkled rubber tubes to be drawn!" He chuckled again and sipped his coffee. "Now. Let's see that solution you say you've found..."