Rod Serling's THE TWILIGHT ZONE Magazine

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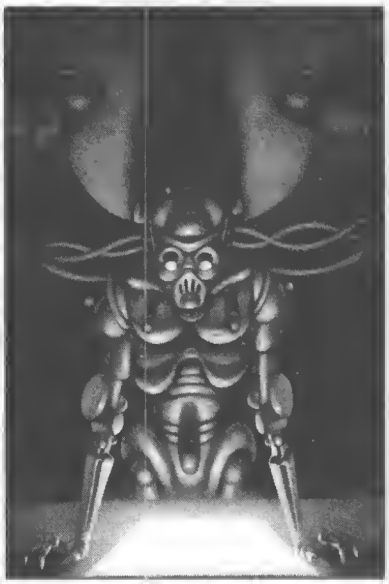

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Unkno Things

Andreas Hoogstraten's obsession with odd objects seemed just the eccentricity of a wealthy man. But as Mr. Dennison is about to discover, that obsession is far stranger than he imagines. . . .

by REGINALD BRETNOR

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JAMES STONEBRAKER

I have met any number of collectors during my thirty years in the antique trade, greedy ones (though of course they're all greedy one way or another,) and some with superb taste and a deep understanding of their fields, some with book knowledge and no taste at all, others who collect status symbols or security blankets, rare people with whom it is a joy to converse and many more utter bores, and others still so unbelievably eccentric that they defy classification. But Andreas Hoogstraten was strangest of them all. Always polite, almost always smiling, he still seemed to carry with him that eerie coldness you find in haunted houses. Neither his obvious wealth nor his perfect tailoring, neither his patrician nose, sleek blond hair, and thick, impossibly yellow eyebrows, nor a voice as soft and gentle as a wooing dove's could conceal it, at least from me.

I met him first in a Glastonbury pub. Every year, I'd go to England, buy an ancient van, and spend two months at least driving around and about, through Scotland and back down to Wales and Cornwall, buying big antiques and filling them with little antiques, then for the last third of my time crossing over to the continent and doing the same thing in France and the Low Countries. When the van was full, I'd ship it back as deckload on a freighter—this was in the days when you could do that—and drive it home to Saybrook from wherever it landed. It was a lot of fun, and I enjoyed every bit of it.

The Glastonbury pub was called the Weeping Nun—after some local ghost story—with an eighteenth-century sign that showed its dismal subject against a background of ancient tombstones and a silver moon—but inside it was the essence of English country hospitality, with all the dark wood and pewter and hunting prints you might expect, a great fireplace fit for roasting haunches of beef but cold now in the summertime, and neither a jukebox nor a telly to ruin the atmosphere. I went there with a local dealer, Tod Bardsley, with whom I had done business for several years, and we were just about to have lunch when Hoogstraten came in. He waved. He strode over to our table, carrying his cold aura with him.

"Mr. Bardsley, they said you'd be here, but I see you're with a friend?"

Bardsley nudged my foot under the table. He moved over. "Ah, do sit down, Mr. Hoogstraten," he invited. "Charles here won't mind. He's a fellow dealer—" he chuckled, "—always happy to meet another customer, like all of us." ▶

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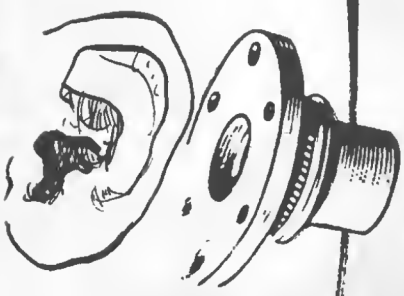


Unknown

We were introduced. I shook Hoogstraten's tense, cold hand. I was, I said, pleased to meet him. I was indeed a dealer, but I was a long way from home.

Briefly, Bardsley told him about my yearly trips, while the girl brought us two half-and-halfs and took his order for a whiskey and soda.

"You really must get around," he commented, looking at me intently. "I imagine you see a far greater variety of things than the average dealer, don't you?"

"Rather!" laughed Bardsley. "There's not a shop from Land's End to John o' Groat's Charlie's not been in, to say nothing of across Channel. I daresay he's probably seen a thing or two that'd strike your fancy."

"What do you collect?" I asked.

He turned his head, and I found myself looking directly into his lashless eyes. They were almost a matte blue, reminding me of Wedgwood Parian ware, and they looked dry, as though they'd never known tears. "What do I collect?" he said, "As our friend here will tell you, I buy anything I do not understand. I do not mean the expert's understanding of antiques and works of art. If I do not know what a thing is, if I cannot imagine what it was made for, it intrigues me, and if it's for sale I buy it. You see, if I do not know, and if nobody can tell me, it makes me determined to find out, to solve the problem. Where is your shop?"

"In Saybrook, in Connecticut."

"Well, that's certainly near enough to me. My apartment's in New York."

We exchanged cards, and he said he'd take a run up one of these days and have a look around and made me promise to keep my eyes peeled for any of his mysterious objects. He was, he told me, on his way to Istanbul and the Near East generally, and perhaps to Nepal and, now that the Chinese were letting down the barriers, to Tibet.

Shortly after our lunch arrived, he rose to go, saying he'd see Bardsley later at the shop, and once more he made me promise to look out for him.

He left, and I asked Tod about him.

"He's a rum one, Charlie. Buys anything if you can't tell him what it is, and pays well too. Last time in my place, he saw a weird cast-iron tool with a lot of cogs and a twisty handle that somehow didn't seem to connect with anything. He peered at it and peered at it, and finally took it with him looking like the cat fresh from the cream jug. A year or so back, too, I found him a painting—a dark thing like something seventeenth-century Dutch—but not like any you ever saw. The more you tried to make out what the subject was, the odder it looked. But it was done by a real artist, you could tell that. He paid me seven hundred without a quiver. And the real beauty of it is, he buys things that otherwise you'd have on hand forever—so what if he is strange looking, with those crazy eyebrows and blue-blue eyes?"

I told him then about the coldness, but he said the man had never affected him that way, so I put the thought aside as a quirk of my own.

Now I know that it was not.

"What do I collect?" Hoogstraten said. "I buy anything I do not understand. If I cannot imagine what it was made for, it intrigues me, and if it's for sale I buy it."

ACTUALLY, HOOGSTRATEN NEVER DID take the trouble to come up to Saybrook and visit my shop, and for three or four months I almost forgot about him. Then, at a flea market, I found a gadget I couldn't make head or tail of—one which ordinarily I'd have passed by without a second look. It was beautifully made of brass and polished steel, and its fitted mahogany box clearly went back to the last decade of the nineteenth century. Cased with it were eight or ten brass wheels, the rim of each serrated with geometrical neatness and with its individual pattern. It had a central axis to which these might have been affixed, a plunger like a date-stamp's, a spirit level, and two calibrated dials the purpose of which I couldn't even guess at. The man who had it thought it might have been a check-writing device, but he couldn't tell me how it possibly could have worked.

I bought the thing for less than twenty dollars, and that night I phoned Hoogstraten and was pleased to find him back from his journeyings. I described it to him, and instantly his voice came alive with interest. No, he couldn't possibly come up to Saybrook, not then, but would I bring it to New York?

I hesitated, for it seemed like quite an expedition for what I assumed would be a pretty petty deal, and at once he answered my unspoken question. "You needn't worry about the money part, Mr. Dennison—it is Dennison, isn't it? I am accustomed to paying well for anything that meets my criteria—at least in three figures—unless, of course, the seller has already set a lower price. In this case, even if I do not buy it, I'll make the trip worth your while."

So I agreed to bring it to him on the Sunday, and he gave me an address near Sutton Place—his card had carried only his phone number. The cab dropped me off at two in the afternoon in front of a several-story, obviously very expensively converted brownstone, with a martial doorman mounting guard at the entrance. I waited humbly while he made his phone call, and saw that there was only a single flat on each floor.

"Mr. Hoogstraten is waiting for you," he told me finally, giving my shoes and sports coat a supercilious farewell appraisal. "Take the elevator to the third floor."

The elevator was smooth and swift and new, and I was whisked to my destination in an instant. There a manservant was waiting for me—I won't say a butler. He was short and muscular and massive, with a pale square face and huge hands. I judged him to be some sort of general factotum—chauffeur perhaps? Guard? He looked

more like a hit-man. But he was polite enough, bowing me through the hall and opening the door for me.

I don't know exactly what I had expected, but it was not the Museum of Modern Art decor that greeted me, spare and stark and rectilinear, self-consciously manipulating mass and light and shadow in grays and blacks, startling whites, intrusive yellows, solid reds, some of the furniture echoing it, some tortured, twisted, with a thin scattering of anomalous ornaments. Of the objects he collected, there was no sign.

My face, I know, must have mirrored my astonishment, but he did not notice. He had eyes only for the package I was carrying, and I saw how hard his small black pupils were in their Wedgwood settings. He did not ask me to sit down. Dressed like something from a *Vanity Fair* men's fashions ad, he seized it without a word, opened it. His lips now drawn back from his almost too-even teeth, he plucked the gadget from its box, hastily put the box down on a table, seated himself. For several minutes, he examined it, testing this, trying that, while I stood there uncomfortably.

Finally, "What do you suppose it is?" he said.

"I haven't the foggiest," I answered. "The man I bought it from thought it might have been intended as some sort of check protector."

He said that this was nonsense, and went back to his examination for several more long, silent minutes.

Then he looked up at me. He smiled, and again I felt wrapped in coldness. "It is satisfactory," he told me. "Yes, it is completely satisfactory. I shall derive pleasure from it." He nodded. "Indeed yes. Will five hundred be adequate?"

"You are very generous," I said, accepting the five hundred-dollar bills.

And at that point, a door opened and a woman entered. The effect was unbelievable. She paused, regarding us—and suddenly, as far as I was concerned, no one else was in the room. Her presence dominated it. She was tall, her hair coal black, as were her eyes. Her cheekbones were high. But the physical details were nothing compared with the totality. Suddenly I knew why men had imagined goddesses, and sacrificed to them, why there had been tilting in the lists and knightly quests, why late Victorian artists like Burne-Jones had so idealized the beauty of womankind. And simultaneously there was another surge, one I still feel when I remember her, that very natural one that sets your loins afire.

She turned toward us, and against all reason I was quite sure that she did not walk, but flowed, floated. Nor was she gowned for any such effect. She was dressed simply, in a tailored suit with white lace at the throat, and almost no jewelry; a brooch, a wedding ring.

Hoogstraten looked up, frowning slightly. "You're going out?" he asked.

"Yes, dear," she answered—and at the word irrational jealousy flamed in me. "Only for a—how do you say it?—for an hour or two perhaps? You do not need me here?"

She had the strangest accent I've ever heard, one I was quite unable to identify. All I can say is that somehow, to my ear, it sounded archaic.

He didn't even answer, his attention once more on the thing I'd sold him.

"Goodbye," she said, smiled very slightly at me, and left.

I had to interrupt him. "Mrs. Hoogstraten?" I asked.

"Yes, yes," he replied, a hint of irritation in his voice. "Pretty, isn't she?"

She's magnificent! I thought. But I had sense enough not to say it. It took him a moment more to remember I was there, but with a sigh he put the object down again. "Thank you, Dennison," he said. "You will call me if you find anything else, won't you? Yes, yes. Now Varig will show you out."

He must have pressed a button, because immediately the servant was at the door. Hoogstraten did not say goodbye.

THAT NIGHT I DREAMED OF HER, A DREAM which Tennyson might have written for me, or one of the Cavalier poets, and I had a hard time explaining my abstraction to the sweet girl I was going with. *She* was in my mind, and would not leave, and I began to hope I'd never find another object for her husband, no matter how profitable the find might be.

As it turned out, during the next several months I found three things that seemed to have been made especially for him, and on each occasion he demanded that I bring them to him in New York. I justified it by telling myself that, after all, I was a dealer and could not forego such easy money, but I know now that it was far more the hope of seeing her even for a moment, of hearing her speak a few casual words. I dreamed of her time and again, and tormented myself with the thought of her embraced in her husband's coldness.

"Mrs. Hoogstraten?" I asked. "Yes, yes," he replied. "Pretty, isn't she?" *She's magnificent!* I thought. But I had sense enough not to say it.

My second visit went much like the first, except that she was in the room when I arrived, again attired very simply in—but what she wore is of no moment. She stood up when I walked into her presence, and though again Hoogstraten did not introduce us, she thanked me for the machine—was it not a machine?—I had sold Andreas, which had pleased him. He was a genius. His mind, it demanded problems.... It was very nice of....

I stood there tongue-tied, trapped by the magic radiating from her. Hoogstraten was already opening what I had brought him—a clock but not a clock. A thing with complicated clockwork in a case which could have been made by some exotic Fabergé, which told something, but not time—at least not any time that might make sense to us. After

a moment, his voice still soft, he told her to leave the room, and without demur, as I stood there grinning at her foolishly, she left. For that I hated him, and almost for spite I asked him seven thousand for the thing. He paid me seventy-five hundred, again in cash, and sent me on my way.

Two months passed before I went again, two months during which I still dreamed of her, still thought of her, wondered at whatever power she had over me, at what her life might have been before she married Hoogstraten and, indeed, why she had married him.

This time, again, she was in the room when I arrived, and again she spoke to me, nothing memorable, comments about the season possibly, or how very good I was to find another treasure for Andreas. Then, once more, he sent her out; and the performance was repeated. He first became wholly absorbed in what I'd brought—what was it? Half book, half Byzantine icon?—but written in a script completely alien to me, resembling none I'd seen before, which seemed to change as its pages turned, momentarily revealing illustrations that vanished almost instantly. He was delighted with it, and paid me far more than I would have dared to ask. Then, for the first time, he became almost friendly.

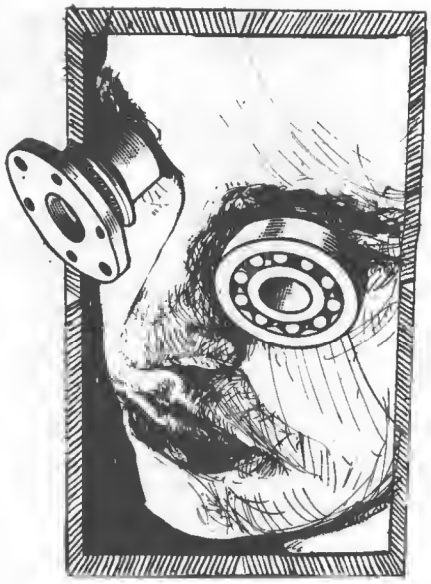
"Dennison," he said, "where do these come from? Why were they made? Was it simply as a challenge to me, to my intellect? I have no doubt that some of them came from hidden cultures, arts not permitted to the masses, lost civilizations, perhaps even other worlds! But *why?* Again, I ask you, is it deliberate? A continuing contest? To see if I, Andreas Hoogstraten, have a breaking point?" He stood. From a skeletal cabinet as convoluted as the last agony of an El Greco saint, he lifted a vessel, which I had seen before, but which I had taken simply for some far-out potter's drug-dream. He handed it to me. Perhaps a foot high, almost opaque, it was enormously heavy.

"Look at it, Dennison," he said. "Do you know what it is?"

Up close, it looked like grayish glass, but with a higher lustre, and it was much, much heavier. Like any vase, it tapered to a neck, but there the resemblance ceased, for the neck doubled back on itself to penetrate the body halfway down and emerge again in a mouth melding with the other side.

"It is a Klein bottle, Dennison. Are you familiar with the Moebius Strip?"

"You mean a strip of paper you give a sort of twist to and then join its ends so that in effect it has one side only?"



"Dennison," he said, "where do these things come from? Was it simply as a challenge to me, to my intellect? To see if I, Andreas Hoogstraten, have a breaking point?"

"Exactly. Well, a Klein bottle is like that, only in three dimensions. Its inside is its outside and vice versa. Do you understand?"

I said I understood.

He took it from me, looked at it with an expression of mixed pride and anger. "I have drilled into it, Dennison. I have used a little instrument with which surgeons look into our bodies' inmost secrets. Inside it is a complex of beautifully ground crystals, and what seem to be controls and things I cannot put a name to. So far, it is the only unknown thing that has defeated me. I have had it several years, and I know no more about it than when it came to me, but my getting it could not have been an accident. It was part of the test, the challenge."

Shocked at his megalomania, I fumbled for something innocuous to say. "I—I suppose you have a pretty large collection by this time, Mr. Hoogstraten?"

He replaced the Klein bottle in the cabinet. "A large collection?" He said it with a sneer. "Dennison, I have always two or perhaps three. They do not defeat me for very long. Indeed, this is the only one I have had to keep for several years."

"But what do you do with them?" I asked. "Do you give them away or sell them?"

"Certainly not. When I have solved them, when they have served their purpose, I destroy them. That is the only way for me perhaps to get revenge, you understand?"

Frankly, I was horrified. I started to protest that some of them were treasures, that they exhibited superb craftsmanship, that surely scientists would be interested in them.

He cut me off before I had three words out. "Never!" he cried. "When I have solved them, they are nothing! *Nothing!* They no longer have a soul!"

He paid me even more than he had previously, and exacted a promise that I'd keep hunting for him; and I left telling myself that no matter what I found, I'd never go back again.

IT WAS FIVE MONTHS BEFORE I DID, JUST after I returned from my annual trip to England, and then it was because I knew I had to see her one more time. In a sense, she had never left me. I would wake at night from my Pre-Raphaelite dreams of her, despairing, wondering how ever she could have married him—not for his money, certainly. But why, why, *why?*

So I went back. The thing I'd found was simple—a crude tool, mysterious only in the fact that it had no discernible function. This time, when the man-servant admitted me, I saw that she wasn't in the room, and all the while Hoogstraten examined what I'd brought him, I kept looking at the door through which she had come and gone, wishing, hoping.

Finally he rose. "I will take the tool," he told me, "even though it is not of so high a quality. I shall pay four hundred only."

I could control myself no longer. "I haven't seen Mrs. Hoogstraten," I said, I hoped casually.

He stopped counting money. For moments, those cold, glistening pupils stared at me. Then, "No," he said, ever so gently. "You see—" he smiled, "—I found out what she was." ■