



With No Strings Attached, by

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With No Strings Attached

A man will always be willing to buy something he wants, and believes in,
even if it is impossible, rather than something he believes is impossible. So
... sell him what he thinks he wants!

David Gordon

Illustrated by Schelling

[Illustration]

The United States Submarine *Ambitious Brill* slid smoothly into her berth
in the Brooklyn Navy Yard after far too many weeks at sea, as far as her
crew were concerned. After all the necessary preliminaries had been waded
through, the majority of that happy crew went ashore to enjoy a well-earned
and long-anticipated leave in the depths of the brick-and-glass canyons of
Gomorrah-on-the-Hudson.

The trip had been uneventful, in so far as nothing really dangerous or
exciting had happened. Nothing, indeed, that could even be called
out-of-the-way--except that there was more brass aboard than usual, and
that the entire trip had been made underwater with the exception of one
surfacing for a careful position check, in order to make sure that the ship's
instruments gave the same position as the stars gave. They had. All was

well.

That is not to say that the crew of the *Ambitious Brill* were entirely satisfied in their own minds about certain questions that had been puzzling them. They weren't. But they knew better than to ask questions, even among themselves. And they said nothing whatever when they got ashore. But even the novices among submarine crews know that while the nuclear-powered subs like *George Washington*, *Patrick Henry*, or *Benjamin Franklin* are perfectly capable of circumnavigating the globe without coming up for air, such performances are decidedly rare in a presumably Diesel-electric vessel such as the U.S.S. *Ambitious Brill*. And those few members of the crew who had seen what went on in the battery room were the most secretive and the most puzzled of all. They, and they alone, knew that some of the cells of the big battery that drove the ship's electric motors had been removed to make room for a big, steel-clad box hardly bigger than a foot locker, and that the rest of the battery hadn't been used at all.

With no one aboard but the duty watch, and no one in the battery room at all, Captain Dean Lacey felt no compunction whatever in saying, as he gazed at the steel-clad, sealed box: "What a battery!"

The vessel's captain, Lieutenant Commander Newton Wayne, looked up from the box into the Pentagon representative's face. "Yes, sir, it is." His voice sounded as though his brain were trying to catch up with it and hadn't quite succeeded. "This certainly puts us well ahead of the Russians."

Captain Lacey returned the look. "How right you are, commander. This means we can convert every ship in the Navy in a tenth the time we had figured."

Then they both looked at the third man, a civilian.

He nodded complacently. "And at a tenth the cost, gentlemen," he said mildly. "North American Carbide & Metals can produce these units cheaply, and at a rate that will enable us to convert every ship in the Navy within the year."

Captain Lacey shot a glance at Lieutenant Commander Wayne. "All this is strictly Top Secret you understand."

"Yes, sir; I understand," said Wayne.

"Very well." He looked back at the civilian. "Are we ready, Mr. Thorn?"

"Anytime you are, captain," the civilian said.

"Fine. You have your instructions, commander. Carry on."

"Aye, aye, sir," said Lieutenant Commander Wayne.

* * * * *

A little less than an hour later, Captain Lacey and Mr. Thorn were in the dining room of one of the most exclusive clubs in New York. Most clubs in New York are labeled as "exclusive" because they exclude certain people who do not measure up to their standards of wealth. A man who makes less than, say, one hundred thousand dollars a year would not even qualify for scrutiny by the Executive Committee. There is one club in Manhattan which reaches what is probably close to the limit on that kind of exclusiveness: Members must be white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant Americans who can trace their ancestry as white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant Americans back at least as far as the American Revolution *without exception*, and who are worth at least ten millions, and who can show that the fortune came into the family at least four generations back. No others need apply. It is said that this club is not a very congenial one because the two members hate each other.

The club in which Lacey and Thorn ate their dinner is not of that sort. It is composed of military and naval officers and certain civilian career men in the United States Government. These men are professionals. Not one of them would ever resign from government service. They are dedicated, heart, body, and soul to the United States of America. The life, public and private, of every man Jack of them is an open book to every other member.

Of the three living men who have held--and the one who at present holds--the title of President of the United States, only one was a member of the club before he held that high office.

As an exclusive club, they rank well above England's House of Peers and just a shade below the College of Cardinals of the Roman Catholic Church.

Captain Lacey was a member. Mr. Richard Thorn was not, but he was among those few who qualify to be invited as guests. The carefully guarded precincts of the club were among the very few in which these two men could talk openly and at ease.

After the duck came the brandy, both men having declined dessert. And over the brandy--that ultra-rare Five Star Hennessy which is procurable only by certain people and is believed by many not to exist at all--Captain Lacey finally asked the question that had been bothering him for so long.

"Thorn," he said, "three months ago that battery didn't exist. I know it and you know it. Who was the genius who invented it?"

Thorn smiled, and there was a subtle wryness in the smile. "Genius is the word, I suppose. Now that the contracts with the Navy have been signed, I can give you the straight story. But you're wrong in saying that the thing didn't exist three months ago. It did. We just didn't know about it, that's all."

Lacey raised his bushy, iron-gray eyebrows. "Oh? And how did it come to the attention of North American Carbide & Metals?"

Thorn puffed out his cheeks and blew out his breath softly before he began talking, as though he were composing his beginning sentences in his mind. Then he said: "The first I heard about it was four months ago. Considering what's happened since then, it seems a lot longer." He inhaled deeply from his brandy snifter before continuing. "As head of the development labs for NAC&M, I was asked to take part as a witness to a demonstration that had been arranged through some of the other officers of the company. It was to

take place out on Salt Lake Flats, where--"

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It was to take place out on Salt Lake Flats, where there was no chance of hanky-panky. Richard Thorn--who held a Ph.D. from one of the finest technological colleges in the East, but who preferred to be addressed as "Mister"--was in a bad mood. He had flown all the way out to Salt Lake City after being given only a few hours notice, and then had been bundled into a jeep furnished by the local sales office of NAC&M and scooted off to the blinding gray-white glare of the Salt Flats. It was hot and it was much too sunshiny for Thorn. But he had made the arrangements for the test himself, so he couldn't argue or complain too loudly. He could only complain mildly to himself that the business office of the company, which had made the final arrangements, had, in his opinion, been a little too much in a hurry to get the thing over with. Thorn himself felt that the test could have at least waited until the weather cooled off. The only consolation he had was that, out here, the humidity was so low that he could stay fairly comfortable in spite of the heat as long as there was plenty of drinking water. He had made sure to bring plenty.

The cavalcade of vehicles arrived at the appointed spot--umpteen miles from nowhere--and pulled up in a circle.

Thorn climbed out wearily and saw the man who called himself Sorensen climb out of the second jeep.

From the first time he had seen him, Thorn had tagged Sorensen as an Angry Old Man. Not that he was really getting old; he was still somewhere on the brisk side of fifty. But he wore a perpetual scowl on his face that looked as though it had been etched there by too many years of frustration, and his voice always seemed to have an acid edge to it, like that of an old man who has decided, after decades of observation, that all men are fools. And yet Thorn thought he occasionally caught a glimpse of mocking humor in the pale blue eyes. He was lean and rather tall, with white hair that still showed traces of blond, and he looked as Scandinavian as his name

sounded. His accent was pure Minnesota American.

As he climbed out of the jeep, Sorensen brought with him the Black Suitcase.

Ever since he had first seen it, Thorn had thought of it as "the Black Suitcase," and after he had seen some of the preliminary tests, he had subconsciously put capitals to the words. But Richard Thorn was no fool. Too many men had been suckered before, and he, Richard Thorn, did not intend to be another sucker, no matter how impressed he might be by the performance of an invention.

If this was a con game, it was going to have to be a good one to get by Richard Thorn, Ph.D.

He walked across the few feet of hard, salt-white ground that separated him from Sorensen standing beside the second jeep with the Black Suitcase in his hand. It was obvious to anyone who watched the way Sorensen handled the thing that it was heavy--seventy-five pounds or better.

"Need any help?" Thorn asked, knowing what the answer would be.

"Nope," Sorensen said. "I can handle it."

The suitcase wasn't really black. It was a dark cordovan brown, made even darker by long usage, which had added oily stains to the well-used leather. But Thorn thought of it as the Black Suitcase simply because it was the perfect example of the proverbial Little Black Box--the box that Did Things. As a test question in an examination, the Little Black Box performs a useful function. The examiner draws a symbolic electronic circuit. Somewhere in the circuit, instead of drawing the component that is supposed to be there, he draws a Little Black Box. Then he defines the wave-form, voltage, and amperage entering the circuit and defines whatever is coming out. Question: What is in the Little Black Box?

Except in the simplest of cases, there is never an absolute answer. The question is counted as correct if the student puts into the Little Black Box a component or subcircuit which will produce the effect desired. The value of the answer depends on the simplicity and relative controllability of the component drawn in the place of the Little Black Box.

Sorensen's Black Suitcase was still a problem to Thorn. He couldn't quite figure out what was in it.

"Hotter'n Billy Blue Blazes!" Sorensen said as he put the Black Suitcase down on the gleaming white ground. He grinned a little, which dispelled for a moment his Angry Old Man expression, and said: "You ready to go, Mr. Thorn?"

"I'm ready any time you are," Thorn said grumpily.

Sorensen looked at the NAC&M scientist sideways. "You don't sound any happier'n I am, Mr. Thorn."

Thorn looked at him and thought he could see that flash of odd humor in his light blue eyes. Thorn exhaled a heavy breath. "I'm no happier than you are to be out in this heat. Let's get on with it."

Sorensen's chuckle sounded so out of place that Thorn was almost startled. "You know the difference between you and me, Mr. Thorn?" Sorensen asked. He didn't wait for an answer. "You think this test is probably a waste of time. Me, on the other hand, I *know* it is."

"Let's get on with it," Thorn repeated.

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It took two hours to set up the equipment, in spite of the fact that a lot of the circuits had been prefabricated before the caravan had come out from Salt Lake City. But Richard Thorn wanted to make certain that all his data was both correct and recorded. Sorensen had nothing to do but watch. He

had no hand in setting up the equipment. He had brought the Black Suitcase, and that was all he was going to be allowed to do.

From the top of the Black Suitcase projected two one-inch copper electrodes, fourteen inches apart. The North American Carbide & Metals technicians set up the circuits that were connected to the electrodes without any help from Sorensen.

But just before they started to work, Sorensen said: "There's just one thing I think you ought to warn those men about, Mr. Thorn."

"What's that?" Thorn asked.

"If any of 'em tries to open that suitcase, they're likely to get blown sky high. And I don't want 'em getting funny with me, either."

He had his hand in his trouser pocket, and Thorn was suddenly quite certain that the man was holding a revolver. He could see the outlines against the cloth.

Thorn sighed. "Don't worry, Mr. Sorensen. We don't have any ulterior designs on your invention." He did not add that the investigators of NAC&M had already assumed that anyone who was asking one million dollars for an invention which was, in effect, a pig in a poke, would be expected to take drastic methods to protect his gadget. But there would be no point in telling Sorensen that his protective efforts had already been anticipated and that the technicians had already been warned against touching the Black Suitcase any more than necessary to connect the leads. Giving Sorensen that information might make him even more touchy.

Thorn only hoped that the bomb, or whatever it was that Sorensen had put in the suitcase, was well built, properly fused, and provided with adequate safeties.

When everything was set up, Sorensen walked over to his device and turned it on by shoving the blade of a heavy-duty switch into place. "O.K.,"

he said.

One of the technicians began flipping other switches, and a bank of ordinary incandescent light bulbs came on, four at a time. Finally there were one hundred of them burning, each one a hundred-watt bulb that glowed brightly but did not appear to be contributing much to the general brightness of the Utah sun. The technicians checked their recording voltmeters and ammeters and reported that, sure enough, some ten kilowatts of power at a little less than one hundred fifteen volts D.C. was coming from the Black Suitcase.

Sorensen and Thorn sat in the tent which had been erected to ward off the sun's rays. They watched the lights shine.

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One of the technicians came in, wiping his forehead with a big blue bandana. "Well, there she goes. Mr. Sorensen, if that thing is dangerous, hadn't we better back off a little way from it?"

"It isn't dangerous," Sorensen said. "Nothing's going to happen."

The technician looked unhappy. "Then I don't see why we couldn't've tested the thing back in the shop. Would've been a lot easier there. To say nothing of more comfortable."

Thorn lit a cigarette in silence.

Sorensen nodded and said, "Yes, Mr. Siegel, it would've been."

Siegel sat down on one of the camp stools and lit a cigarette. "Mr. Sorensen," he asked in all innocence, "have you got a patent on that battery?"

The humorous glint returned to Sorensen's eyes as he said, "Nope. I didn't patent the battery in that suitcase. That's why I don't want anybody fooling

around with it."

"How come you don't patent it?" Siegel asked. "Nobody could steal it if you patented it."

"Couldn't they?" Sorensen asked with a touch of acid in his voice. "Do you know anything about batteries, Mr. Siegel?"

"A little. I'm not an expert on 'em, or anything like that. I'm an electrician. But I know a little bit about 'em."

Sorensen nodded. "Then you should know, Mr. Siegel, that battery-making is an art, not a science. You don't just stick a couple of electrodes into a solution of electrolyte and consider that your work is done. With the same two metals and the same electrolyte, you could make batteries that would run the gamut from terrible to excellent. Some of 'em, maybe, wouldn't hold a charge more than an hour, while others would have a shelf-life, fully charged, of as much as a year. Batteries don't work according to theory. If they did, potassium chlorate would be a better depolarizer than manganese dioxide, instead of the other way around. What you get out of a voltaic cell depends on the composition and strength of the electrolyte, the kind of depolarizer used, the shape of the electrodes, the kind of surface they have, their arrangement and spacing, and a hundred other little things."

"I've heard that," Siegel said.

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[Illustration]

Thorn smoked in silence. He had heard Sorensen's arguments before. Sorensen didn't mind discussing his battery in the abstract, but he was awfully close-mouthed when it came to talking about it in concrete terms. He would talk about batteries-in-general, but not about this-battery-in-particular.

Not that Thorn blamed him in the least. Sorensen was absolutely correct in his statements about the state of the art of making voltaic cells. If Sorensen had something new--and Thorn was almost totally convinced that he did--then he was playing it smart by not trying to patent it.

"Now then," Sorensen went on, "let's suppose that my battery is made up of lead and lead dioxide plates in a sulfuric acid solution, except that I've added a couple of trifling things and made a few small changes in the physical structure of the plates. I'm not saying that's what the battery is, mind you; I'm saying 'suppose'."

"O.K., suppose," said Siegel. "Couldn't you patent it?"

"What's to patent? The Pb-PbO₂-H₂SO₄ cell is about half as old as the United States Patent Office itself. Can't patent that. Copper oxide, maybe, as a depolarizer? Old hat; can't patent that. Laminated plates, maybe? Nope. Can't patent that, either."

Siegel looked out at the hundred glowing light bulbs. "You mean you can't patent it, even if it works a hundred times better than an ordinary battery?"

"Hell, man," Sorensen said, "you can't patent performance! You've got to patent something solid and concrete! Oh, I'll grant that a top-notch patent attorney might be able to get me some kind of patent on it, but I wouldn't trust its standing up in court if I had to try to quash an infringement.

"Besides, even if I had an iron-bound patent, what good would it do me? Ever hear of a patent pool?"

"No," said Siegel. "What's a patent pool?"

"I'll give you an example. If all the manufacturers of a single product get together and agree to form a patent pool, it means that if one company buys a patent, all of them can use it. Say the automobile companies have one. That means that if you invent a radical new design for an engine--one, maybe that would save them millions of dollars--you'll be offered a few

measly thousand for it. Why should they offer more? Where else are you going to sell it? If one company gets it, they all get it. There's no competition, and if you refuse to sell it at all, they just wait a few years until the patent runs out and use it for free. That may take a little time, but a big industry has plenty of time. They have a longer life span than human beings."

"North American Carbide & Metals," said Thorn quietly, "is not a member of any patent pool, Mr. Sorensen."

"I know," Sorensen said agreeably. "Battery patents are trickier than automotive machinery patents. That's why I'm doing this my way. I'm not selling the gadget as such. I'm selling results. For one million dollars, tax paid, I will agree to show your company how to build a device that will turn out electric power at such-and-such a rate and that will have so-and-so characteristics, just like it says in the contract you read. I guarantee that it can be made at the price I quote. That's all."

He looked back out at the bank of light bulbs. They were still burning. They kept burning--

"... They kept burning for ten solid hours," said Thorn. "Then he went out and shut off his battery."

Captain Lacey was scowling. "That's damned funny," he muttered.

"What is?" asked Thorn, wondering why the naval officer had interrupted his story.

"What you've been telling me," Lacey said. "I'll swear I've heard--" He stopped and snapped his fingers suddenly. "Sure! By golly!" He stood up from the table. "Would you excuse me for a minute? I want to see if a friend of mine is here. If he is, he has a story you ought to hear. Damned funny coincidence." And he was off in a hurry, leaving Thorn staring somewhat blankly after him.

Three minutes later, while Thorn was busily pouring himself a second helping of Five-Star Hennessy, Captain Lacey returned to the table with an army officer wearing the insignia of a bird colonel.

"Colonel Dower," the captain said, "I'd like you to meet a friend of mine--Mr. Richard Thorn, the top research man with North American Carbide & Metals. Mr. Thorn, this is Colonel Edward Dower." The men shook hands. A third brandy snifter was brought and a gentleman's potation was poured for the colonel.

"Ed," said Captain Lacey as soon as his fellow officer had inhaled a goodly lungful of the heady fumes, "do you remember you were telling me a couple of years ago about some test you were in on out in the Mojave Desert?"

Colonel Dower frowned. "Test? Something to do with cars?"

"No, not that one. Something to do with a power supply."

"Power supply. Oh!" His frown faded and became a smile. "You mean the crackpot with his little suitcase."

Thorn looked startled, and Captain Lacey said: "That's the one."

"Sure I remember," said the colonel. "What about it?"

"Oh, nothing," Lacey said with elaborate unconcern, "I just thought Mr. Thorn, here, might like to hear the story--that is, if it isn't classified."

Colonel Dower chuckled. "Nothing classified about it. Just another crackpot inventor. Had a little suitcase that he claimed was a marvelous new power source. Wanted a million dollars cash for it, tax free, no strings attached, but he wouldn't show us what was in it. Not really very interesting."

"Go ahead, colonel," said Thorn. "I'm interested. Really I am."

"Well, as I said, there's nothing much to it," the colonel said. "He showed us a lot of impressive-looking stuff in his laboratory, but it didn't mean a thing. He had this suitcase, as I told you. There were a couple of thick copper electrodes coming out of the side of it, and he claimed that they could be tapped for tremendous amounts of power. Well, we listened, and we watched his demonstrations in the lab. He ran some heavy-duty motors off it and a few other things like that. I don't remember what all."

"And he wanted to sell it to you sight-unseen?" Thorn asked.

"That's right," said the colonel. "Well, actually, he wasn't trying to sell it to the Army. As you know, we don't buy ideas; all we buy is hardware, the equipment itself, or the components. But the company he was trying to sell his gadget to wanted me to take a look at it as an observer. I've had experience with that sort of thing, and they wanted my opinion."

"I see," Thorn said. "What happened?"

"Well," said the colonel, "we wanted him to give us a demonstration out in the Mojave Desert--"

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"... Out in the Mojave Desert?" the inventor asked. "Whatever for, Colonel Dower?"

"We just want to make sure you haven't got any hidden power sources hooked up to that suitcase of yours. We know a place out in the Mojave where there aren't any power lines for miles. We'll pick the place."

The inventor frowned at him out of pale blue eyes. "Look." He gestured at the suitcase sitting on the laboratory table. "You can see there's nothing faked about that."

Colonel Dower shook his head. "You won't tell us what's in that suitcase. All we know is that it's supposed to produce power. From what? How? You

won't tell us. Did you ever hear of the Keely Motor?"

"No. What was the Keely Motor?"

"Something along the lines of what you have here," the colonel said dryly, "except that Keely at least had an explanation for where he was getting his power. Back around 1874, a man named John Keely claimed he had invented a wonderful new power source. He called it a breakthrough in the field of perpetual motion. An undiscovered source of power, he said, controlled by harmony. He had a machine in his lab which would begin to turn a flywheel when he blew a chord on a harmonica. He could stop it by blowing a sour note. He claimed that this power was all around, but that it was easiest to get it out of water. He claimed that a pint of his charged water would run a train from Philadelphia to New York and back and only cost a tenth as much as coal."

The inventor folded his arms across his chest and looked grimly at Colonel Dower. "I see. Go on."

"Well, he got some wealthy men interested. A lot of them invested money--big money--in the Keely Motor Company. Every so often, he'd bring them down to his lab and show them what progress he was making and then tell them how much more money he needed. He always got them to shell out, and he was living pretty high on the hog. He kept at it for years. Finally, in the late nineties, The Scientific American exposed the whole hoax. Keely died, and his lab was given a thorough going over. It turned out that all his marvelous machines were run by compressed air cleverly channeled through the floor and the legs of tables."

"I see," repeated the inventor, narrowing his eyes. "And I suppose my invention is run by compressed air?"

"I didn't say your invention was a phony," Colonel Dower said placatingly. "I merely mentioned the Keely Motor to show you why we want to test it out somewhere away from your laboratory. Are you willing to go?"

"Any time you are, colonel."

A week or so later, they went out into the Mojave and set up the test. The suitcase--

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"... The suitcase," said the colonel, "was connected up to a hundred hundred-watt light bulbs. He let the thing run for ten hours before he shut it off." He chuckled. "He never would let us look into that suitcase. Naturally, we wouldn't buy a pig in a poke, as the saying goes. We told him that any time we could be allowed to look at his invention, we'd be glad to see him again. He left in a huff, and that was the last we saw of him."

"How do you explain," Thorn said carefully, "the fact that his suitcase did run all those lights?"

The colonel chuckled again. "Hell, we had that figured out. He just had a battery of some kind in the suitcase. No fancy gimmick for deriving power from perpetual motion or anything like that. Nope. Just a battery, that's all."

Captain Dean Lacey was grinning hugely.

Thorn said: "Tell me, colonel--what was this fellow's name?"

"Oh, I don't recall. Big, blond chap. Had a Swedish name--or maybe Norwegian. Sanderson? No. Something like that, though."

"Sorensen?" Thorn asked.

"That's it! Sorensen! Do you know him?"

"We've done business with him," said Thorn dryly.

"He didn't palm his phony machine off on you, did he?" the colonel asked with a light laugh.

"No, no," Thorn said. "Nobody sold us a battery disguised as a perpetual motion device. Our relations with him have been quite profitable, thank you."

"I'd say you still ought to watch him," said Colonel Dower. "Once a con man, always a con man, is my belief."

Captain Lacey rubbed his hands together. "Ed, tell me something. Didn't it ever occur to you that a battery which would do all that--a battery which would hold a hundred kilowatt-hours of energy in a suitcase would be worth the million he was asking for it?"

Colonel Dower looked startled. "Why ... why, no. The man was obviously a phony. He wouldn't tell us what the power source was. He--" Colonel Dower stopped. Then he set his jaw and went on. "Besides, if it were a battery, why didn't he say so? A phony like that shouldn't be--" He stopped again, looking at the naval officer.

Lacey was still grinning. "We have discovered, Ed," he said in an almost sweet voice, "that Sorensen's battery will run a submarine."

"With all due respect to your rank and ability, captain," Thorn said, "I have a feeling that you'd have been skeptical about any such story, too."

"Oh, I'll admit that," Lacey said. "But I still would have been impressed by the performance." Then he looked thoughtful. "But I must admit that it lowers my opinion of your inventor to hear that he tells all these cock-and-bull stories. Why not just come out with the truth?"

"Evidently he'd learned something," Thorn said. "Let me tell you what happened after the contracts had been signed--"

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... The contracts had been signed after a week of negotiation. Thorn was, he admitted to himself, a little nervous. As soon as he had seen the test out on Salt Flats, he had realized that Sorensen had developed a battery that was worth every cent he had asked for it. Thorn himself had pushed for the negotiations to get them through without too much friction. A million bucks was a lot of loot, but there was no chance of losing it, really. As Sorensen said, the contract did not call for the delivery of a specific device, it called for a device that would produce specific results. If Sorensen's device didn't produce those results, or if they couldn't be duplicated by Thorn after having had the device explained to him, then the contract wasn't fulfilled, and the ambitious Mr. Sorensen wouldn't get any million dollars.

Now the time had come to see what was inside that mysterious Little Black Suitcase. Sorensen had obligingly brought the suitcase to the main testing and development laboratory of North American Carbide & Metals.

Sorensen put it on the lab table, but he didn't open it right away. "Now I want you to understand, Mr. Thorn," he began, "that I, myself, don't exactly know how this thing works. That is, I don't completely understand what's going on inside there. I've built several of them, and I can show you how to build them, but that doesn't mean I understand them completely."

"That's not unusual in battery work," Thorn said. "We don't completely understand what's going on in a lot of cells. As long as the thing works according to the specifications in the contract, we'll be satisfied."

"All right. Fine. But you're going to be surprised when you see what's in here."

"I probably will. I've been expecting a surprise," Thorn said.

What he got was a real surprise.

There was a small pressure tank of hydrogen inside--one of the little ones that are sometimes used to fill toy balloons. There was a small batch of electronic circuitry that looked as though it might be the insides of an

FM-AM radio.

All of the rest of the space was taken up by batteries.

And every single one of the cells was a familiar little cannister. They were small, rechargeable nickel-cadmium cells, and every one bore the trademark of North American Carbide & Metals!

One of the other men in the lab said: "What kind of a joke is this?"

"Do you mean, Mr. Sorensen," Thorn asked with controlled precision, "that your million-dollar process is merely some kind of gimmickry with our own batteries?"

"No," said Sorensen. "It's--"

"Wait a minute," said one of the others, "is it some kind of hydrogen fuel cell?"

"In a way," Sorensen said. "Yes, in a way. It isn't as efficient as I'd like, but it gets its power by converting hydrogen to helium. I need those batteries to start the thing. After it gets going, these leads here from the reactor cell keep the batteries charged. The--"

He was interrupted by five different voices all trying to speak at once. He could hardly--

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"... He could hardly get a word in edgewise at first," said Thorn. He was enjoying the look of shocked amazement on Colonel Dower's face. "When Sorensen finally did get it explained, we still didn't know much. But we built another one, and it worked as well as the one he had. And the contract didn't specifically call for a battery. He had us good, he did."

"Now wait--" Colonel Dower said. "You mean to say it wasn't a battery after all?"

"Of course not."

"Then why all the folderol?"

"Colonel," Thorn said, "Sorensen patented that device nine years ago. It only has eight years to run. But he couldn't get anyone at all to believe that it would do what he said it would do. After years of beating his head against a stone wall, years of trying to convince people who wouldn't even look twice at his gadget, he decided to get smart.

"He began to realize that 'everybody knew' that hydrogen fusion wasn't that simple. It was his theory that no one would listen to. As soon as he told anyone that he had a hydrogen fusion device that could be started with a handful of batteries and could be packed into a suitcase, he was instantly dismissed as a nut.

"I did a little investigating after he gave us the full information on what he had done. (Incidentally, he signed over the patent to us, which was more than the contract called for, in return for a job with our outfit, so that he could help develop the fusion device.)

"As I said, he finally got smart. If the theory was what was making people give him the cold shoulder, he'd tell them nothing.

"You know the results of that, Colonel Dower. At least he got somebody to test the machine. He managed to get somebody to look at what it would do.

"But that wasn't enough. He didn't have, apparently, any legitimate excuse for keeping it under wraps that way, so everyone was suspicious."

"But why tell you it was a battery?" asked Captain Lacey.

"That was probably suggested by Colonel Dower's reaction to the tests he saw," Thorn said. "Somebody--I think it was George Gamow, but I'm not certain--once said that just having a theory isn't enough; the theory has to make sense.

"Well, Sorensen's theory of hydrogen fusion producing electric current didn't make sense. It was true, but it didn't make sense.

"So he came up with a theory that did make sense. If everyone wanted to think it was 'nothing but a battery', then, by Heaven, he'd sell it as a battery. And that, gentlemen, was a theory we were perfectly willing to believe. It wasn't true, but it did make sense.

"As far as I was concerned, it was perfectly natural for a man who had invented a new type of battery to keep it under wraps that way.

"Naturally, after we had invested a million dollars in the thing, we had_ to investigate it. It worked, and we had to find out why and how."

"Naturally," said Colonel Dower, looking somewhat uncomfortable. "I presume this is all under wraps, eh? What about the Russians? Couldn't they get hold of the patent papers?"

"They could have," Thorn admitted, "but they didn't. They dismissed him as a crackpot, too, if they heard about him at all. Certainly they never requested a copy of his patent. The patent number is now top secret, of course, and if anyone does write in for a copy, the Patent Office will reply that there are temporarily no copies available. And the FBI will find out who is making the request."

"Well," said Colonel Dower, "at least I'm glad to hear that I was not the only one who didn't believe him."

Captain Lacey chuckled. "And Mr. Thorn here believed a lie."

"Only because it made more sense than the truth," Thorn said. "And," he added, "you shouldn't laugh, captain. Remember, we suckered the Navy in almost the same way."

* * * * *

Errata

could talk openly and at ease. [final . missing] Question: What is in the Little Black Box? [: missing]

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