

The Speck On The Lens

By John Kendrick Bangs

“Talking about inventions,” said the oculist, as he very dexterously pocketed two of the pool balls, the handsome ringer, more familiarly known as the fifteen ball, and the white ball itself, thereby adding somewhat to the minus side of his string—“talking about inventions, I had a curious experience last August. It was an experience which was not only interesting from an inventive point of view, but it had likewise a moral, which will become more or less obvious as I unfold the story.

“You know I rented and occupied a place in Yonkers last summer. It was situated on the high lands to the north of the city, a little this side of Greystone, overlooking that magnificent stream, the Hudson, the ever-varying beauties of which so few of the residents along its banks really appreciate. It was a comfortable spot, with a few trees about it, a decent-sized garden—large enough to raise a tomato or two for a Sunday-night salad—and a lawn which was a cure for sore eyes, its soft, sheeny surface affording a most restful object upon which to feast the tired optic. I believe it was that lawn that first attracted me as I drove by the place with a patient I had in tow. It was just after a heavy shower, and the sun breaking through the clouds and lighting up the rain-soaked grass gave to it a glistening golden greenness that to my eyes was one of the most beautiful and soul-satisfying bits of color I had seen in a long time. ‘Oh, for a summer of that!’ I said to myself, little thinking that the beginning of a summer thereof *was* to fall to my lot before many days—for on May 1st I signed papers which made me to all intents and purposes proprietor of the place for the ensuing six months.

“At one corner of the grounds stood, I should say, a dozen apple-trees, the spreading branches of which seemed to form a roof for a sort of enchanted bower, in which, you may be sure, I passed many of my leisure hours, swinging idly in a hammock, the cool breezes from the Hudson, concerning which so many people are sceptical, but which nevertheless exist, bringing delight to the ear and nostril as well as to the ‘fevered brow,’ which is so fashionable in the neighborhood of New York in the summer, making the leaves rustle in a tuneful sort of fashion, and laden heavily with the sweet odors of many a garden close over which they passed before they got to me.”

Put that in rhyme, doctor, and there’s your poem,” said the lieutenant, as he, made a combination scratch involving every ball on the table.

“I’ll do it,” said the doctor; “and then I’ll have it printed as Appendix J to the third edition of my work on *Sixty Astigmatisms, and How to Acquire Them*. But to get back to my story,” he continued. “I was lying there in my hammock one afternoon trying to take a census of the butterflies in sight, when I thought I heard some one back of me call me by name. Instantly the butterfly census was forgotten, and I was on the alert; but—whether there was something the matter with my eyes or not, I do not know—despite all my alertness, there wasn’t a soul in sight that I could see. Of course, I was slightly mystified at first, and then I attributed the interruption either to imagination or to some passer-by, whose voice, wafted on the breeze, might have reached my ears. I threw myself back into the hammock once more, and was just about dozing off to the lullaby sung by a bee to the accompaniment of the rustling leaves, when I again heard my name distinctly spoken.

This time there was no mistake about it, for as I sprang to my feet and looked about, I saw coming towards me a man of unpleasantly cadaverous aspect, whose years, I should judge, were at least eighty in number. His beard was so long and scant that, to keep the beezees from blowing it about to his discomfort, he had tucked the ends of it into his vest pocket; his eyes, black as coals, were piercing as gimlets, their sharpness equalled by nothing that I had ever seen, excepting perhaps the point of this same person's nose, which was long and thin, suggesting a razor with a bowie point; his slight body was clad in sombre garb, and at first glance he appeared to me so disquietingly like a visitor from the supernatural world that I shuddered; but when he spoke, his voice was all gentleness, and whatever of fear I had experienced was in a moment dissipated.

“ ‘You are Doctor Carey?’ he said, in a timid sort of fashion.

“ ‘Yes,’ I replied; ‘I am. What can I do for you?’

“ ‘The distinguished oculist?’ he added, as if not hearing my question.

“ ‘Well, I'm a sort of notorious eye-doctor,’ I answered, my well-known modesty preventing my entire acquiescence in his manner of putting it.

“He smiled pleasantly as I said this, and then drew out of his coat-tail pocket a small tin box, which, until he opened it, I supposed contained a drinking-cup—one of those folding tin cups.

“ ‘Doctor Carey,’ said he, sitting down in the hammock which I had vacated, and toying with the tin box—a proceeding that was so extraordinarily cool that it made me shiver—‘I have been looking for you for just sixty-three mortal years.’

“ ‘Excuse me,’ I returned, as nonchalantly as I could, considering the fact that I was beginning to be annoyed—‘excuse me, but that statement seems to indicate that I was born famous, which I'm inclined to doubt. Inasmuch as I am not yet fifty years old, I cannot understand how it has come to pass that you have been looking for me for sixty-three years.’

“ ‘Nevertheless, my statement was correct,’ said he. ‘I have been looking for you for sixty-three years, but not for you as you.’

“This made me laugh, although it added slightly to my nervousness, which was now beginning to return. To have a man with a tin box in his hand tell me he had been looking for me for thirteen years longer than I had lived, and then to have him add that it was not, however, me as myself that he wanted, was amusing in a sense, and yet I could not help feeling that it would be a relief to know that the tin box did hold a drinking-cup, and not dynamite.

“ ‘You seem to speak English,’ I said, in answer to this remark, ‘and I have always thought I understood that language pretty well, but you'll excuse me if I say that I don't see your point.’

“ ‘Why is it that great men are so frequently obtuse?’ he said, languidly, giving the ground such a push with his toe that it set the hammock swinging furiously. ‘When I say that I have searched for you all these years, but not for you as you, I mean not for you as Dr. Carey, not for you as an individual, but for you as the possessor of a very rare eye.’

“ ‘Go on,’ I said, feebly, and rubbed my forehead, thinking perhaps my brains had got into a tangle, and were responsible for this extraordinary affair. ‘What is the peculiar quality which makes my eye so rare?’

“ ‘There is only one pair of eyes like them in the world, that I know of,’ said the stranger, ‘and I have visited all lands in search of them and experimented with all kinds of eyes.’

“ ‘And I am the proud possessor of that pair?’ I queried, becoming slightly more interested.

“ ‘Not you,’ said he. ‘You and I together possess that pair, however.’

“ ‘You and I?’ I cried.

“ ‘Yes,’ said he. ‘Your left eye and my right have the honor of being the only two unique eyes in the world.’

“ ‘That’s queer too,’ I observed, a mixture of sarcasm and flippancy in my tones, I fear. ‘You mean twonique, don’t you?’

“The old gentleman drew himself up with dignity, made a gesture of impatience, and remarked that if I intended to be flippant he would leave me. Of course I would not hear of this, now that my curiosity had been aroused, and so I apologized.

“ ‘Don’t mention it,’ he said. ‘ But, my dear doctor, you cannot imagine my sensations when I found your eye yesterday.’

“ ‘Oh You found it yesterday, did you?’ I put in.

“ ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘On Forty-third Street.’

“ ‘I was on Forty-third Street yesterday,’ I replied, ‘but really I was not conscious of the loss of my eye.’

“ ‘ Nobody said you had lost it,’ said my visitor. ‘I only said I had found it. I mean by that that I found it as Columbus found America. America was not necessarily lost before it was found. I had the good fortune to be passing through the street as you left your club. I glanced into your face as I passed, caught sight of your eye, and my heart stood still. There at last was that for which I had so long and so earnestly searched, and so overcome was I with joy at my discovery that I seemed to lose all power of speech, of locomotion, or of sane thought, and not until you had passed entirely out of sight did I return really to my senses. Then I rushed madly into the club-house I had seen you leave a few moments before, described you to the man at the door, learned your name and address, and—well, here I am.’

And what does all this extraordinary nonsense lead up to?’ I asked. ‘What do you intend to do about my eye? Do you wish to borrow it, buy it, or steal it?’

“ ‘Doctor Carey,’ said my visitor, sadly, ‘I shall not live very long. I have reason to believe that another summer will find me in my grave, and I do not want to die without imparting to the world the news of a marvellous discovery I have made—the details of a wonderful invention that I have not only conceived, but have actually put into working order. I, an unknown man—too old to be able to refute the charge of senility were any one disposed to question the value of my statements—could announce to the world my great discovery a thousand times a day, and very properly the world would decline to believe in me. The world would cry humbug, and I should have been unable, had I failed to find you, to convince the world that I was not a humbug. With the discovery of your eye, all that is changed. I shall have an ally in you, and that is valuable for the reason that your statements, whatever they may be, will always be entitled to and will receive respectful attention. Here in this box is my invention. I shall let you discover its marvellous power for yourself, hoping that when you have discovered its power, you will tell the world of it, and of its inventor.’

“ ‘With that,’ said the doctor, “the old fellow handed me the tin box, which I opened with considerable misgivings as to possible results. There was no explosion, however. The cover came off easily enough, and on the inside was a curiously shaped telescope, not a drinking-cup, as I had at first surmised.

“ ‘Why, it’s a telescope, isn’t it?’ I said.

“ ‘Yes. What did you suppose it was?’ he asked.

“ ‘I hadn’t an idea,’ I replied, not exactly truthfully. “But it can’t be good for much in this shape,’ I added, for, as I pulled the parts out and got it to its full length, I found that each section

was curved, and that the whole formed an arc, which, though scarcely perceptible, nevertheless should, it seemed to me, have interfered with the utility of the instrument.

“‘That’s the point I want you to establish one way or the other,’ said my visitor, getting up out of the hammock, and pacing nervously up and down the lawn. ‘To my eye that telescope is a marvel, and is the result of years of experiment. It fulfils my expectations, and if your eye is what I think it is, I shall at last have found another to whom it will appear the treasure it appears to me to be. You have a tower on your house, I see. Let us go up on the roof of the tower, and test the glass. Then we shall see if I claim too much for it.’

“The earnestness of the old gentleman interested me hugely, and I led the way through the garden to the house, up the tower stairs to the roof, and then standing there, looking across the river at the Palisades looming up like a huge fortress before me, I put the telescope to my eye.

“‘I see absolutely nothing,’ I said, after vainly trying to fathom the depths of the instrument.

“‘Alas!’ began the old gentleman; and then he laughed, nervously. ‘You are using the wrong eye. Try the other one. It is your left eye that has the power to show the virtues of this glass.’

“I obeyed his order, and then a most singular thing happened. Strange sights met my gaze. At first I could see nothing but the Palisades opposite me, but in an instant my horizon seemed to broaden, the vista through the telescope deepened, and before I knew it my sight was speeding, now through a beautiful country, over fields, hills, and valleys; then on through great cities, out to and over a broad, gently undulating stretch which I at once recognized as the prairie lands of the west. In a minute more I began to catch the idea of this wonderful glass, for I now saw rising up before me the wonderful beauties of the Yosemite, and then, like a flash of the lightning, my vision passed over the Sierra Nevada range, my eye swept down upon San Francisco, and was soon speeding over the waters of the Pacific.

“Two minutes later I saw the strange pagodas of the Chinese rising before me. Sweeping my glass to the north, bleak Siberia met my gaze; then to the south I saw India, her jungles, her waste places. Not long after, a most awful sight met my gaze. I saw a huge ship at the moment of foundering in the Indian Ocean. Horrified, I turned my glass again to the north, and the minarets of Stamboul rose up before me; then the dome of St. Peter’s at Rome then Paris; then London then the Atlantic Ocean. I levelled my glass due west, and finally I could see nothing but one small, black speck—as like to a fleck of dust as to anything else—on the lens at the other end. With a movement of my hand, I tried to wipe it off, but it still remained, and, in answer to a chuckle at my side, I put the glass down.

“‘It is the most extraordinary thing I ever saw,’ I said.

“‘Yes, it is,’ said the other.

“‘One can almost see around the world with it,’ I cried, breathless nearly with enthusiasm.

“‘One can — quite,’ said the inventor, calmly.

“‘Nonsense!’ I said. ‘Don’t claim too much, my friend.’

“‘It is true,’ said he. ‘Did you notice a speck on the glass? I am sure you did, for you tried to remove it.’

“‘Yes,’ said I, ‘I did. But what of it? What does that signify?’

“‘It proves what I said,’ he answered. “You did see all the way around the world with that glass. The black spot on the lens that you thought was a piece of dust was the back of your own head.’

“‘Nonsense, my boy! The back of my head is bigger than that,’ I said.

“ ‘Certainly it is,’ he responded ‘but you must make some allowance for perspective. The back of your head is a trifle less than twenty-four thousand miles from the end of your nose the way you were looking at it.’ ”

“You mean to say——” began the lieutenant, as the doctor paused to chalk his cue.

“Never mind what I mean to say,” said the doctor. “Reflect upon what I have said.”

“But the man and the telescope—what became of them?” asked the lieutenant.

“I was about to tell you that. The old fellow who had made this marvellous glass, which to two eyes that he knew of, and to only two, would work as was desired, feeling that he was about to die, had come to me to offer the glass for sale on two considerations. One was a consideration of \$25. The other was that I would leave no stone unturned to discover a possible third person younger than myself with an eye similar to those we had, to whom at my death the glass should be transmitted, exacting from him the promise that he too would see that it was passed along in the same manner into the hands of posterity. I was also to acquaint the world with the story of the glass and the name of its inventor to the fullest extent possible.”

“And you, of course, accepted?”

“I did,” said the doctor; “but having no money in my pocket, I went down into the house to borrow it of my wife, and upon my return to the roof, found no trace of the glass, the old man, or the roof either.”

“What!” cried the lieutenant. “Are you crazy?”

“No,” smiled the doctor. “Not at all. For the moment I reached the roof of the house, I opened my eyes, and found myself still swinging in the hammock under the trees.”

“And the moral?” queried the lieutenant.

“You promised a moral, or I should not have listened.”

“Always have money in your pocket,” replied the doctor, pocketing the last ball, and putting up his cue. “Then you are not apt to lose great bargains such as I lost for the want of \$25.”

“It’s a good idea,” returned the lieutenant. “And you live up to it, I suppose?”

“I do,” returned the oculist, tapping his pocket significantly. “Always!”

“Then,” said the lieutenant, earnestly, “I wish you’d lend me a tenner, for really, doctor, I have gone clean broke.”