

“SERVANT PROBLEM”

Prologue

When I came up with *SuperHuman Times*, I was determined to make it an anthology with all types of stories — action, romance, mystery and comedy. “Servant Problem” grew directly out of that. I wanted to write a screwball comedy for this universe in the mold of “My Man Godfrey” and “His Girl Friday”. I’ve rarely seen the genre attempted in worlds full of superhumans and, truth be told, I always wanted to write a screwball comedy.

The end result turned out to be a highlight of the podcast-so-far, one of which I am extremely proud. I hope you’ll check it out after reading this adaptation. (Hey, that’s why I started doing this.)

Oh, and if you find yourself envisioning it as you read, try to do so in black-&-white. I think it’s funnier that way.

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SuperHuman TimesTM

“SERVANT PROBLEM”

A Short Story by

Lance Woods

To: Ms. Anita Densmore

From: Nigel Cabot

Subject: Notice of Resignation

Madam:

This letter is to give notice that I formally resign my position as your butler, effective immediately.

I know that standard protocol in these matters is to give a minimum of two weeks’ notice, but I felt that expediency would be of mutual benefit. Also, while standard protocol does not require a detailed explanation for a resignation, the circumstances surrounding it are quite unique and I wish to offer a complete account of the events that transpired.

Indeed, when one’s home is used to conceal the corpse of a notorious supercriminal in the middle of one’s dinner party, one is, in my humble opinion, entitled to an explanation.

I am confident that this approach is the correct one, since our employer-employee relationship has always been an open one. Your habitually disdainful attitude toward me as I, “the help”, attempted to run your household efficiently usually fell within the confines of the Geneva Conventions. I often attributed this to the stresses of your job in the financial sector. Many times I overheard you speaking on your phone to friends and confidants about the sexist treatment you received throughout your career, even after becoming a vice president of Fletcher, Parker & Swanson Investments. For the record, I typically believed your fears to be baseless, not because you were necessarily a gifted stockbroker and financial analyst, but because if your position truly came with a glass ceiling, you would have ordered me to come downtown to clean it.

Nevertheless, I understood why you decided to leave the firm and open your own brokerage, and I fully supported your announcement of this event by coordinating memorable evening for you and your prospective clients.

Although I’m sure you’ll agree with me that an evening with fewer corpses would have been memorable enough.

The incident began the week before the aforementioned dinner party, on my day off. While I was not obligated to provide any services on your behalf that day, I felt compelled to do so because the affair was important to you and your career. More importantly, I’d already invested a considerable amount of time in its planning and I wanted to make it a success to maintain my reputation.

To that end, I spent a significant portion of my day off at Jensen’s Catering, finalizing arrangements with Mrs. Jensen in accordance with your exacting specifications. I wish to note at this point that Mrs. Jensen is completely blameless in the disruption to your party, and it is my hope that you will continue to engage her for future occasions. (Indeed, since most of the larger caterers in the city have had the “pleasure” of working with you, and have told me quite plainly that they do not wish to do so again, I respectfully suggest that you pay Mrs. Jensen whatever she charges for her services.)

On this particular day (off), I ordered additional organic vegetables for the hors d’oeuvres and a few extra bottles of wine for the party. I also ordered two bottles of Cabernet Sauvignon for myself; enclosed please find a check to compensate you for the amount I charged to your account. Upon checkout, Mrs. Jensen advised me that the contracted food and drinks would arrive in your home at the pre-arranged time in her new, portable, high-capacity cooler. I’m sure you remember it: quiet refrigeration system; faux wood shell; lovely, neutral finish to help it blend in with virtually any décor. I remind you of these details simply because they will play an important role later in the story.

I left Jensen’s Catering in hopes of salvaging the remainder of my free time for the week, only to be greeted by a small man that I can describe only as toad-like. He rudely called me by name, promptly seized me by the lapels with one hand and easily lifted me several feet off the

pavement, over his head. I quickly deduced that this blackguard must be a superhuman, so I did not attempt resistance, out of fear for my life.

This troublesome near-dwarf in a three-piece suit proceeded to inform me that his boss was ready to collect something from my boss. Despite what I may have thought about you privately, Madam, I can assure you that I never imagined you would ever associate with such a low person. Thus, when I informed him that I had no idea what he wanted, he informed me that his boss wanted to get paid, and that if this did not occur before our next encounter, he would — and I believe I am quoting him accurately — “just throw [me] straight up through the atmosphere and let gravity bring you down.” With that, he let me fall to the pavement in a most undignified way, then departed.

It was a profoundly humiliating experience, worse than any I ever wished upon you during your more temperamental displays while I was in your service — including the eruptions that tempted me to purchase a substantial amount of quick lime or hydrochloric acid for, shall we say, “cleaning supplies”.

Of course, had I ever acted upon those impulses, I might have ended up as a resident at my next destination for that day.

My exchange with the enigmatic pygmy resulted in my being only slightly tardy for my arrival at Hamilton Maximum Security Penitentiary.

At this point in my narrative — assuming that you or the person reading it to you have reached this point — I should point out my connection to this particular institution. Assuming that you vetted my credentials before engaging me through the agency, you may recall that one of my previous situations involved an organization that the agency called “The Macnee Group”

on my résumé. In fact, despite the agency’s well-meaning attempt to whitewash the fact, it was not exactly a group, but a gang, specifically a gang of supercriminals, and I was directly employed by its leader, Mister Charles Macnee.

You would probably know him better as “Knuckles” Macnee, the infamous safecracker. Actually, “safecracker” is not entirely accurate. As you may have read in news reports, he had the superhuman ability to generate energy bursts whenever he brought his hands together. Many times, he used those bursts not to open safes, but to utterly destroy their doors. I was never present for his criminal activities; indeed, even though the staff and I knew of his power and reputation, he never told us about them in order to protect us — and ultimately himself — from police harassment. It spared us from prosecution as accessories and from being compelled to testify against a very thoughtful employer.

One could learn from his example.

My employment with Mr. Macnee ended when he was apprehended, tried and convicted for his many crimes. The value of the items he stole and the property damaged by his energy blasts — not to mention the collateral damage in the form of security guards, law enforcement officers and by-standers — earned him a thirty-year sentence in the aforementioned facility commonly referred to as “HamMax”.

This brings us back to my arrival there on the day in question. This year, my day off coincided with Mr. Macnee’s birthday, on which I have faithfully visited him to bring him a basket of his favorite delicacies. I momentarily regretted my decision to do so when he joined me in the visitation area. He was ten years into his sentence, and I’d seen him age and change drastically during that time. Mister Macnee reminded me of the filmmaker Orson Welles (you may Google him) in that he often seemed larger than life. Now, he seemed larger than most

furniture, and was adorned with wild, white hair, a thick beard, a cane to support his weighty frame and a pair of what are called “repulsor-cuffs” to prevent him from bringing his hands together, triggering his ability and escaping — not that he could get very far.

This year’s visit did not last long, as he appeared to be unwell. He coughed frequently and I did not wish to tax him. After graciously accepting my gift basket, he confided that he had been making final arrangements in anticipation of his demise and asked me to execute one final task on his behalf. “A *legal* task,” he assured me, one he felt he could not entrust to anyone else.

It sounded simple enough, if a bit mysterious: He was going to have an “asset” delivered to me at your penthouse. I was to deliver it, in turn, to a representative who would come by to collect it and compensate me with a token of Mr. Macnee’s gratitude.

I agreed to facilitate the odd exchange and we parted ways.

One week later, in the prison hospital, Mr. Macnee passed away. However, while he was gone, he would not be forgotten.

Especially by you, Madam, as it would turn out.

Thus was the stage set for the final act of our *comédie d’erreurs*. While you spent most of your days — and evenings — that week at your office finalizing your escape plans, I prepared your household for the affair. I should like to take this opportunity to thank you for altering your schedule. Had you kept your normal hours, I undoubtedly would have constantly been following behind you, picking up spreadsheet printouts, financial journals and other remains of the day that you tend to leave around the penthouse, all while listening to you second-guess my choices on everything from the canapes to the bathroom tissue. Your absence contributed greatly to my efficiency. Indeed, I was sorry you would need to be on hand to host the event.

Unfortunately, not everything went according to plan. Last night, as I awaited Mrs. Jensen and her impressive cooler, an unexpected delivery arrived. It was a refrigerated cabinet on wheels that matched Mrs. Jensen’s description of her cooler, except that I didn’t recall it being so large, nor did I remember the four brass handles attached to either side. I assumed that she’d sent it ahead of her so as to better wrangle other components of the evening’s meal. The delivery man assured me that it was designed to move smoothly, even with a great deal of weight inside, and that the temperature was already set so that, even when opened, the instrument would keep the contents fresh. He seemed to have trouble referring to those contents as “fresh” for reasons that were unknown to me. After I signed for receipt of the cooler, he also offered me condolences on my “loss”.

Before I could inquire further, the delivery man exited his next assignment, and Mrs. Jensen entered — with her cooler.

There were now two mystified people standing in the foyer of the penthouse, looking at two large coolers that vaguely resembled each other, except that Mrs. Jensen’s was, as I correctly recalled, considerably smaller. Her logical assumption was that the first cooler had been sent by another caterer in error, and she endeavored to locate some kind of identification. The only thing she found was a plate for “Preservation Systems” beside a latch in the lid, which I opened. A cold mist issued forth, momentarily clouding the contents of the cooler.

When it cleared, we discovered those contents to be none other than the late Mister Charles “Knuckles” Macnee, who was on neither the guest list nor the menu. The prison — which, I assumed, was the sender — saw fit to ship him only in his underwear; to my surprise, the prison arranged him with his arms at his sides, free at last from those repulsor-cuffs. I’m sure that pleased him; he looked quite serene.

Mrs. Jensen and I were anything but that. As the hour was growing late and we had no time to recall the prison’s delivery driver, Mrs. Jensen returned to her catering truck for additional table linens so that we could try to disguise Mister Macnee’s conveyance. While she tended to that, and I tried to figure out why this madness was happening, there was another knock at the door. It was the thuggish young man who accosted me outside of Jensen’s Catering the week before. When I opened the door, he shoved his way into the penthouse insisting that he knew my boss was here, and that it was time to pay the debt that I somehow owed.

Thankfully, I’d spent the days since our first encounter brushing up on my judo. It was relatively simple to dispatch him before he could use his superhuman abilities. Of course, I then had to figure out what to do with the unconscious oaf. Thankfully, the collector was small, and Mister Macnee did not take up all of the available space in his cryogenic casket, so I was able to fit him inside and adjust the temperature slightly to ensure he didn’t freeze to death before I could transfer him — and Mister Macnee — to the police after the dinner party.

To my amazement, the affair I’d planned so meticulously for you still managed to come off without any problems. Mostly. Mrs. Jensen and I did what I considered to be an admirable job of serving your guests while you announced your decision to “go rogue” from Fletcher, Parker & Swanson Investments. And I was very surprised that you took time from trying to spirit your guests away from your former firm to openly congratulate Mrs. Jensen for bringing “a much-needed touch of class to the festivities”. (She later told me that she believed your praise would be for me. Silly woman.) Your praise for her as an independent businesswoman was extremely gracious. Going on to compare her to yourself was, if I may be permitted to say, utter

codswallop, but your guests were suitably impressed and seemed ready to place their money at your disposal.

Until one of the coolers groaned. Softly at first, rapidly growing in volume as Mr. Macnee’s roommate awakened, wondered where he was and rudely demanded to get out of the preservation unit by banging on the lid. In his desperation to escape, he didn’t realize that he was disturbing Mister Macnee’s corpse, which was no longer completely frozen because I’d adjusted the cooler temperature. So, during the thrashing, the miscreant managed to bring Mister Macnee’s hands together.

I had no idea that some superhuman abilities remained active after a superhuman perished, much like skin cells continuing to grow on a human corpse.

This is why an energy blast erupted through the top of Mr. Macnee’s cooler and continued through the ceiling of your drawing room. As we were in a penthouse atop the building, and no aircraft were flying overhead at the time, I am sure that no one was inconvenienced.

Outside of yourself, that is.

The rest, I believe, you were present to hear, but I will briefly summarize: Once the police and firefighters arrived to gather the facts of the incident and tend to any wounded (unnecessary, as there were none), we received a visitor: Doctor Arnold Walbrook, an official of the federal government entrusted with taking charge of Mr. Macnee’s body. He attributed the unfortunate energy discharge to a necessary burst following years of incarceration in the repulsor-cuffs. The ill-bred thug who dogged me turned out to be an aide to Dr. Walbrook. The man was new to the job upon his recent parole. (Alas, he suffered only minor burns from the

blast.) All of this occurred because my former employer arranged to donate his body to the government for research purposes upon his death — and instructed Dr. Walbrook to bestow any compensation unto me, which he did.

That compensation, as Mrs. Jensen said upon seeing the check, had a “helluva lot of zeroes.”

At last, Madam, we arrive at the true nature of this letter. While it does, indeed, serve as formal notice of my resignation — since witnesses will attest that you were too distraught from last night’s events to fire me at that time — it also serves as a business proposition.

If you will drop all of the civil and criminal charges you threatened me with between your colorful obscenities last night, I will gladly pay for all damages to your penthouse and engage you as my financial advisor to launch your new company. By accepting, you would be responsible for investing and dispersing the bulk of my newfound wealth.

You may be wondering why, given our history together, I would want to continue our association, rather than, to coin a phrase, “take the money and run”. Having never managed finances that involve a hell of a lot of zeroes, it simply dawned upon me that I may require the services of a competent financial professional.

For, as you know, it is so hard to find good help these days.