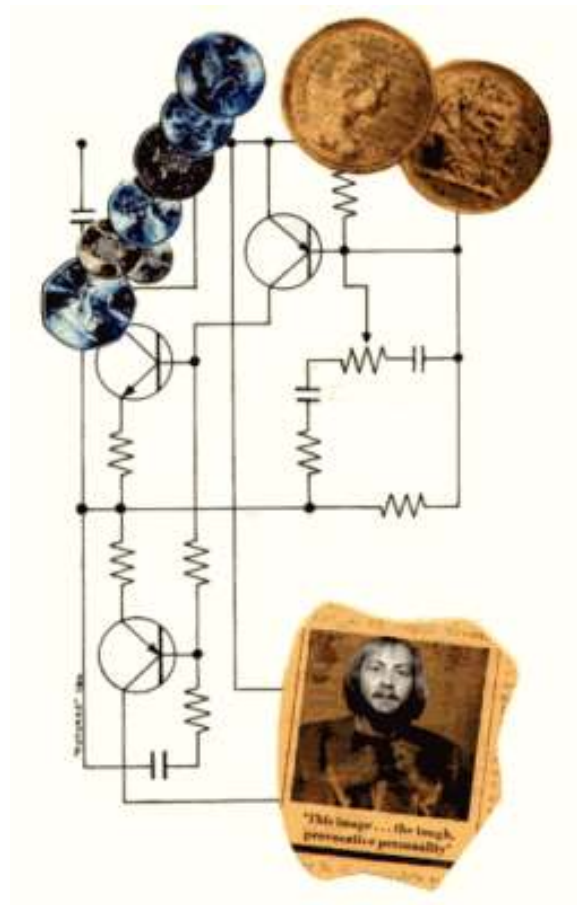


FUTURES



by Philip Turner

1: Pressure

Michael Darnby was really feeling the pinch. The forces of inflation were overtaking him relentlessly and there was very little that he could do to improve his position in life. He had just about enough money coming in for bare survival, but none for luxuries and reckless living – the frills that make life really worth living.

The problem of replacements was looming darkly on the horizon. He had been wearing the same clothes for years. They were starting to wear out. Everything had become thin, patched and frayed. He needed a new pair of shoes and two pairs of jeans right away. But he would be lucky if his budget could be stretched to one new item.

His main leisure activity was now reading a pastime with the unbeatable advantage of costing nothing. He had acquired a respectable library during long-gone affluent days. Overflowing from assorted book-cases and improvised shelves around the house were more than two thousand paperbacks and five yards of hardbacks. He had reached the happy position of being able to dip into his library and produce something that time had wiped from his memory. In fact, he had no real need ever to buy another book.

He did, however, buy a glossy fortnightly magazine and pass it off as an essential aid to sanity rather than a luxury. Futures came out on the second Friday of every month and reviewed new developments in science and technology. It was while scanning a new issue after an unexciting dinner at the end of an unexciting week that he found the article on psionic amplifiers. The light-hearted piece offered an alternative to treasure-hunting with an expensive metal-detector.

This method's main advantage was that the exploration phase could be carried out in the comfort of the treasure hunter's own home. It was also cheap and energy-saving. The device in the article needed no batteries and the operator did not have to waste money on petrol or train fares to transport it to a likely treasure site.

Psionics, as Darnby knew, and as the introduction to the article reminded him, is a para-science that deals with the use of mental powers. The field includes such phenomena as telepathy (thought-reading), telekinesis (moving objects without using physical contact, magnetism, electricity, etc.) and clairvoyance.

The author maintained that these talents are latent in most people, as dowsing is claimed to be, but too underdeveloped to be of any actual use. The purpose of his amplifier was to boost mental energies to a practical level, thus creating a power source for a Treasure Trawler.

Darnby interrupted his reading to look at a diagram of the psionic amplifier. He recognized conventional electronic bits – resistors, capacitors, transistors – set out in a baffling array.

The author had not thought fit to include one of the mighty micro-

chips, the latest bright idea in the electronics industry for cramming more and more into less and less space, but he did have a very fine line in pseudo-scientific jargon to lend an air of spurious authenticity to his piece.

Michael Darnby read through the rest of the article and concluded that the general idea was interesting as well as amusing. He turned the page and he was just about to begin yet another article on what NASA's Space Shuttle would do when it eventually got off the ground when he was interrupted . . .

There are TWO possible routes on from this point:

| Option A | Option B |

Alternatively, you can Give up and go to the end credits.

2A: Deflection

The phone began to ring. Darnby went out into the hall. It was just a wrong number. He headed back to the living room. Just as he was closing the door, the phone rang again. The same voice asked for Reg. Darnby provided his local code and the number. The man on the other end of the line confirmed that he wanted that number and read out an address in Liverpool. That was when they discovered that he had been dialling 051 for the Liverpool area but getting connected somehow to the 061 Manchester area.

Darnby left him to sort the problem out with the phone company and went back to his magazine and the trials and tribulations of the much delayed Space Shuttle.

Later, he found himself unable to shake off the impression that he had come across something interesting, something worth trying out because it wouldn't cost him anything. But the idea had drifted too far away for him to retrieve.

END of this route through the story.

| Go back to the start of the story |

| Go back to the previous decision point |

| Go on to the end credits |

2B: Amplification

Let's just have another look at that article. The thought dragged Michael Darnby away from the Space Shuttle back to psionic amplifiers.

He turned the page and re-read the article. Then he looked out a sheet of centimetre graph paper. Calling himself a gullible idiot, he copied the circuit of the psionic amplifier, scaling it up to the recommended working size, using a ruler and a pencil to make a sketch that could be inked in when it was correct.

He completed the diagram by making six large dots at the ends of three open connections, which the author termed *gates*. The one at the bottom labelled *INPUT* was the Power Input Gate. The operator had to touch its terminals (the large dots) with his index fingers when he attempted to use the amplifier.

Up at the top on the left was *COMP*, the Comparator Gate, a second, optional input, where the operator could place an example of the desired treasure to reinforce his own input signal. If everything went according to plan, untold riches would appear at the Output Gate in the top right corner, which was labelled *OUT*.

This is strictly for fun, Darnby told himself when the ink was dry on the final version. *But I've got to admit, the idea's daft enough to work.*

He folded his one and only £5 note twice and placed it across the big-dot terminals of the Comparator Gate. He unplugged his headphones from the hi-fi and put them on. Then he touched the dots of the Input Gate with his index fingers and closed his eyes.

The article had told him that the body is dominated by the logical, reasoning, conscious mind, which inhabits the left-hand lobe of the brain. Artistic talent and psionic abilities come from the dark realms of the subconscious, which lurks in the right-hand lobe of the brain. In order to use the psionic amplifier, he would have, somehow, to open a channel of communication between these two normally separate entities.

In practice, that meant slowing everything down to the leisurely crawl of his subconscious. He had to prevent the conscious from over-loading the blend with a torrent of information from his senses. Wearing headphones to exclude external sounds and closing his eyes would take him some way in that direction.

Getting the idea of placing the £5 note across the comparator gate was a stroke of genius, in Darnby's humble opinion. People lose money every day of the week. They drop coins, which vanish almost before they hit the ground. Other coins sneak out of pockets and search out dark crevices for their disappearing act. Banknotes also vanish into thin air. It was this rich vein of hidden treasure that Darnby hoped to tap.

As he pressed his index fingers to the terminals of the Input Gate, he thought of pound notes slipping out of careless fingers, fivers flying away on grabbing breezes, tenners and twenties tunnelling down grids, and fifty-pence pieces burrowing busily into the sands of holiday beaches.

Just like the ink-on-graph-paper circuit diagram of the psionic amplifier, the £5 note at the comparator gate was just a symbol, a suggestion. Michael Darnby concentrated on the thought of lost money and willed it to appear at the Output Gate. The form - note or coin - didn't matter. If he could open a channel to the nation's vanished riches, sheer quantity would make up for low value. If necessary, he was willing to take treasure-trawled ten-pence pieces to his bank by wheel-barrow.

He concentrated for about ten minutes, aware that he had not the slightest idea how to go about teleporting lost money from its hiding places to his home. More or less as expected, nothing happened. His Output Gate remained visible and uncluttered by piles of tarnished coins or a mound of wrinkled banknotes.

The author of the article had warned that success with his Treasure Trawler might require patience and practice. One half of Darnby told him optimistically that, if he kept trying for long enough, he might make a breakthrough. His pessimistic left-brain called him a deluded idiot.

Feeling dry, he took the headphones off and retired to the kitchen to make himself a mug of tea. The psionic amplifier, resting in lonely state on the dining table, re-captured his attention when he returned with a steaming mug . . .

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| [Give up and go to the end credits](#) |

There are TWO possible routes forward from this point:

| [Go on to Level 3, Option A](#) |
| [Go on to Level 3, Option B](#) |

3A: Burial

This isn't the sort of thing a sensible person leaves lying around, Darnby told himself. If anyone else sees it, they'll start casting doubt on my sanity.

He tucked the diagram away in a handy cupboard, in the middle of a pile of old magazines, which had remained undisturbed for longer than he could remember.

About six months later, he decided to have one of his periodic clear-outs. Strict rules governed such occasions. Anything that he had not used since the last clear-out, anything that seemed unlikely to be needed again in the immediate future, had to go. The magazines were an exception to the rule.

He was hoping that they would acquire scarcity value eventually and that he would be able to sell them for an unreasonable price to a collector sometime in the future. It was an unreasonable sort of dream, but everyone should be allowed at least one such ambition.

While sorting through the pile, arranging the magazines in date order and looking for gaps in the sequence, he came across a circuit diagram. He puzzled over it for a while. It had no title and there was nothing to explain what the circuit did. He had not even bothered to add values for resistance and capacitance beside the components, or the code numbers of the transistors.

With a shrug, he crumpled the sheet of graph paper and threw it into the fire. Whatever it was, the circuit diagram was clearly redundant, and probably duplicated elsewhere in a more intelligible form. He assumed that it was some gadget that sounded essential on paper but which he had decided against building after proper thought.

END of this route through the story.

| Go back to the start of the story |
 | Go back to the start of the *Second Level* |
 | Go back to the previous decision point |
 | Go on to the end credits |

3B: Breakthrough

I'll leave this out, Darnby thought, looking down at the diagram of his psionic amplifier. *I'll have a go at it in a while.*

He was half hoping to produce out of thin air enough money to buy himself an extra pint when he went out to his local pub. This was sole concession to the urge for riotous living shelling out a small fortune on a Friday night for a pint of liquid that was mainly good old water brightened with a little over-taxed alcohol.

He returned home at closing time feeling as skint as ever. He had made a late start to his drinking, and he had bought a pint and a half of bitter out of his own money. There was a half-way decent film on BBC 2 as that channel's late-night rubbish offering. It finished at half-past twelve, just as Michael Darnby's eyelids were starting to droop at the

end of a long day. He switched off the television at the wall socket; taking his routine fire-prevention measures. He had never heard of a plugged-in television actually starting a fire, but there was no point in taking unnecessary chances.

You'd better do your stuff, mate, he told the psionic amplifier on the dining table. *Before I have to spend that fiver on the Comparator Gate. Perhaps I'll have more luck in the morning after a night's sleep.*

He switched the light off and plodded up the stairs, putting all doubts aside. He felt that it was important to maintain an unshakable belief in the amplifier's powers if he were to stand any chance of success with it.

Keep the faith, he told himself. *Maintain an unsupported belief in the unreasonable. That's the basis for things like religions, faith-healing and Voodoo assassinations. Anything that you believe is possible can actually happen - if you believe strongly enough and you're a good enough liar to yourself.*

He wriggled into a comfortable position in bed, thinking about the amplifier and wondering whether he could operate it by remote control. Perhaps he could connect himself to the Input Gate with immaterial beams of pure thought. Trying to imagine how many millions of pounds had been lost over the years, and how he would spend them if he could trawl them up, he drifted off to sleep.

He woke up, unassisted by artificial aids, at eight o'clock the following morning. A hollow gurgling in his digestive system hurried him through his ablutions and sent him leaping down the stairs two at a time in search of breakfast. He crossed the gloomy living room, drew the curtains with their abstract printed design, looked unenthusiastically out at a grey day and then reached for the kitchen doorknob.

His hand stopped in mid-air, two inches short of the doorknob. The spectacle on the dining table turned his head and drew his eyes like a magnet. The incredible had happened . . .

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There are THREE possible routes forward from this point.

| Go on to Level 4, Option A |
 | Go on to Level 4, Option B |
 | Go on to Level 4, Option C |

4A: Counterpart

There were two £5 notes on his psionic amplifier; one quite new and neatly folded at the Comparator Gate, the other old and limply open at the Output Gate. He stared down at them for a long time, thinking about bizarre optical illusions and people seeing things that weren't there because they wanted to see them.

At last, he reached out a wary finger and touched the £5 note at the Output Gate. It felt real enough. He picked it up to examine it more closely. The note had received a lot of use and it had a faintly sour smell, as if it had been lurking somewhere damp and not too pleasant for a long time.

Encouraged by his success, Darnby set the note to one side and sat down at the table. Wearing his headphones and eyes closed, he placed his index fingers on the Output Gate of his psionic amplifier and willed more money to appear at the Output Gate. At intervals, he opened his eyes a crack to check on his progress.

Nothing happened. After another ten minutes, he abandoned the experiment. Breakfast had a higher priority than wasting time. But as he sliced bread to make toast, he resolved to attempt at intervals throughout the day to recover more lost fivers.

If the unlikely gadget had worked once, it could do so again . . .

Michael Darnby trawled one more £5 note during a day of intermittent attempts. It was as old and as smelly as the first one, and he summoned it under similar circumstances. The time was early evening; around half past six. He felt drained of energy for no particular reason. He found himself yawning. His eyes felt gritty and their lids were starting to droop.

The internal fires need stoking, he decided. Food equals energy. He would be wide awake again after his evening meal, but he could hear a timer ticking away in the kitchen. His re-heated dinner of odds and ends would not be hot enough until the timer rang.

He decided to continue his efforts to recreate his grand achievement for the moment. Wearing his stereo headphones, unplugged, and touching the Input Gate of his psionic amplifier with his index fingers, he allowed his eyes to fall shut.

A loud ringing ripped him from a light doze. And there it was, just waiting for him to notice it: another sad, old fiver, treasure-trawled to boost Michael Darnby's shattered local economy.

Over dinner, he started to lay a foundation of theory for the mode of operation of his psionic amplifier. The very best time to operate it, paradoxically, seemed to be on the edge of sleep, or perhaps during

light doze, when the paranormal forces of his subconscious were liberated.

And if the amplifier itself was a symbol, just ink lines on a sheet of graph paper, perhaps he could take that concept a step further. One of the clearing banks had advertised its services in the paper that day. He cut out a picture of an impossible sum in notes and coins. Somewhere among his souvenirs was a fairly recent photograph of himself. He had needed one for an identity card and the photo-booth had supplied a strip of four.

Before climbing into bed that night, he set out his psionic amplifier on the bedroom carpet. He placed the newspaper picture of a vast fortune across the Comparator Gate, then he decided to glue it down to ensure a good contact between the picture and the big-dot terminals. He did the same with his own photograph at the Input Gate. The pseudo-scientific symbology was complete now.

He attempted to go to sleep thinking about his experiment in order to direct his dreams to the right area. With any luck, he told himself, there would be a few thousand ancient fivers waiting for him in the morning . . .

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There are TWO possible routes forward from this point:

| Go on to Level 5A, Option 1 |
 | Go on to Level 5A, Option 2 |

4B: Abundance

Michael Darnby could see the white corners of his sheet of graph paper. The rest was hidden under a veritable blue mountain. He had hit the jackpot.

At some moment during his slide into sleep, he told himself, trying to rationalize the incredible, his conscious and subconscious minds had joined forces with the psionic amplifier. The weird trio had hit on the exact frequency necessary to trawl the best part of one hundred lost five-pound notes out of their hiding places.

It was a daft sort of explanation, but who cared? The reality of the heap of paper on his dining table was a slap in the eye for the sceptical

part of him that still considered the idea of psionic treasure-trawling to be ridiculous nonsense.

Bubbling with endless, gloating glee, Darnby sat down to count his trawled haul . . .

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There are FIVE possible routes forward from this point:

| Go on to Level 5B, Option 1 |
 | Go on to Level 5B, Option 2 |
 | Go on to Level 5B, Option 3 |
 | Go on to Level 5B, Option 4 |
 | Go on to Level 5B, Option 5 |

4C: Equivalence

Ten fifty-pence pieces were stacked precisely one on top of the other with their sides aligned at his Output Gate. Success brought a measure of clarification. He had been expecting to conjure up one or more £5 notes, but the sum of money placed across the Comparator Gate was indeed just a symbol.

The presence of ten fifty-pence pieces at the Output Gate had to be significant and it looked as though the proper time to use his psionic amplifier was last thing at night, when his conscious mind was tired out and less likely to clutter up a communicating blend of left and right brain hemispheres with irrelevant observations.

Later in the day, while swatting an annoying fly, he noticed a curious hole in the window pane. It was more of a slot, really neat and clean with perfectly straight edges. It looked as though it had been formed as part of a manufacturing process. He looked out a ruler and measured it. The slot was about an eighth of an inch wide and an inch and a quarter high. Curiously, the slot wasn't quite vertical.

A protractor, which had been gathering dust for years, told him that the slot was inclined at an angle of about seventeen degrees to the vertical. For want of a better solution, he stuck a strip of clear plastic tape over the slot to keep out draughts.

The idea of replacing the entire pane of glass just for the sake of such a small, clean hole seemed outrageous. He made a mental note to see

if he could find a suitable transparent filling material the next time he went shopping. As to what had made the hole, or when it had been made, that was a baffling and annoying puzzle, and a distraction.

No solution to the problem of a permanent repair for his slotted window popped into Michael Darnby's subconscious during the day. As he drew the abstract-patterned curtains on the blackness of another night, complete replacement seemed the only answer.

The psionic amplifier and his headphones were set out on the table, ready for his next experiment. Following the routine, he placed a folded £10 note on the Comparator Gate, touched the Input Gate with his index fingers and concentrated on trawling with closed eyes and blocked ears.

A muffled, ringing, plinking noise penetrated his ear-muffs. He opened his eyes abruptly; to see a stack of fifty-pence pieces on the Output Gate of the amplifier.

Success! he thought, forgetting about the headphone-muffled plinking noise. *On with Phase Two!*

He had used his credit card to draw one-hundred pounds from his bank that morning. He had been sensible enough to join a bank that had opted for Saturday-morning opening at selected branches. Offering a vote of thanks to an enlightened bank, he placed the wad of notes across the Comparator Gate.

He handled the money with exaggerated care, knowing that it was not his to spend. It was his emergency reserve and it had to go back into the savings account as quickly as possible. Wondering how much one-hundred pounds in fifty-pees weighed, Darnby prepared to find out . . .

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There are TWO possible routes forward from this point:

| Go on to Level 5C, Option 1 |
| Go on to Level 5C, Option 2 |

5A1: Rationed

Michael Darnby woke into a new day to the sound of heavy rain lashing against his window. The world seemed a cold and unwelcoming place. He stepped on paper when he slid out of bed into cold air but only with one foot. From that brief contact, he knew that he had not stepped onto a carpet of money. There was just one £5 note stuck to the sole of his right foot. It was not the untold riches of the newspaper picture, but it was better than a slap in the eye with a wet fish.

Darnby persevered with the Treasure Trawler at intervals through the day. He was no richer when he went to bed, leaving the circuit diagram with its glued-on accessories on the dining table.

He found a fairly new fiver at the Output Gate the following morning. The same thing happened the next day and the next. Some cosmic rationing system for luck had decided that he was worth £5 per day.

Still, it was tax-free and it was an apparently guaranteed income that required no special effort on his behalf. Thirty-five pounds per week would buy quite a few luxuries until inflation turned a fiver into small change.

Life could be worse, he told himself as he wondered whether to dash out and spend his accumulated £25 or save up for something decent.

Decisions, decisions, he thought with a grin. *Money brings you nothing but trouble.*

END of this route through the story.

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5A2: Deluge

At first, the inhabitants of Priory Street thought that there had been an earthquake or an airliner crashed on their town.

The terrible, grinding crash during the night had been just one of the semi-detached houses collapsing internally and taking a large chunk of its neighbour with it. The noise, confusion, fear and morbid interest roused the whole street. And then the riot began. It took three dozen baffled policemen to restore order. When a uniformed police inspector managed to get close enough to inspect the scene of the catastrophe, he found his torch beam lighting a bizarre spectacle.

According to the fire brigade's chief officer, who was supervised recovering bodies and survivors from the pair of houses, the floor of one of the bedrooms had collapsed, spilling a bed, its occupant, chests of drawers, bookcases and hundreds of paperback books into the living room below.

And there was the money. It was everywhere. Bronze and silver coins threw back his torchlight. Notes of all denominations were growing soggy with the books in light drizzle. Scavenging neighbours had depleted the fortune somewhat, gathering up notes that had been blown into the street, but the coins filled the spaces between larger debris to a depth of at least three feet.

It was no wonder the floor had collapsed with all that weight of metal on it, the inspector reflected.

Where all the money had come from and how the occupant of the house had managed to store it until the moment of collapse were to remain mysteries. When they dug him out of the wreckage, Michael Darnby had no further use for his funeral fortune.

END of this route through the story.

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5B1: Delusion

With trembling hands, Michael Darnby scooped the untidy heap of £5 notes into a wad and began to count. His venture into the realms of the para-normal had yielded the magnificent total of eighty-nine notes. He counted them four times, planning a major spending spree.

Breakfast forgotten, he thrust his trawled treasure into the inside pocket of his jacket and left the house. There were one or two cars about, but very few people. Then he noticed that all the shops were shut.

With cheerful sarcasm, he reminded himself that he was out rather early on a Saturday morning.

He spotted a newsagent's across the road. At least he could buy a paper. Feeling rich, he stopped at the paperback rack and selected the first brand-new addition to his library for a long, long time. He took two fivers from his inside pocket and placed them on top of his usual newspaper and the book. Then he turned back to the rack to select another paperback.

He had noticed that one of the notes had been folded into four recently. It was the one that he had placed across the Comparator Gate of his psionic amplifier. The young assistant moved the book off the newspaper and gave the paper to another customer. One of the trawled £5 notes disappeared as she folded it.

"Just a minute," Darnby protested, "my money's in that."

The man with his newspaper unfolded it. "Nothing there, mate," he said with a shrug, even though the trawled £5 note was lying in plain view.

"What's this, then?" Darnby demanded, picking it up.

The man and the shop assistant exchanged puzzled glances, then looked back at his hand. With an expression of impatient pity, the man shrugged and headed for the door. The assistant gave Darnby a dirty look and turned to another customer.

"Is this what you're looking for?" The newsagent showed Darnby the folded fiver. He checked the price of the book, slipped it into a paper bag and handed it over along with a penny coin as his change. Darnby accepted the bag awkwardly with the hand that held the rejected fiver.

He left the shop feeling embarrassed and a little shaken, having forgotten about buying a newspaper, which he could no longer afford anyway. As he was transferring the bag containing the budget-wrecking paperback book to his pocket, the £5 note made a bid for freedom. Darnby watched it drift to the pavement. No one walking past the fiver even glanced at it.

There was a low wall enclosing a raised bed of grass and a ring of flowers near the newsagent's. A youngster with a paint-splashed toolkit was sitting on it, waiting for a lift to work. Darnby joined him, keeping an eye on the £5 note on the pavement. It could have been invisible.

The scattering of people out before the main shops opened, or on their way to a Saturday job, walked past it or even stepped on it.

Darnby lit a cigarette and tried to collect his thoughts. He slipped another note out of his inside pocket and examined it while seeming to read the blurb on the back of his book. It looked all right. He allowed a gust of wind to waft the rectangle of tired paper out of reach.

The people passing by continued on their courses undeflected. There were two £5 notes on the pavement for anyone cheeky enough to walk off with them. Nobody did.

It's faith, Darnby thought in disgust. An unsupported belief in the unreasonable. I've got myself believing in a mirage, in four hundred and forty-five quid's worth of wishful thinking.

He took the rest of the trawled treasure out of his pocket. It still looked and felt real enough to him. Pieces of blue paper took to the air, driven by the breeze along the main street. Darnby watched for a while

as the town's early risers ignored a small fortune blowing around their ankles. Then he went home to tear up his psionic amplifier.

END of this route through the story.

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5B2: Doubt

Michael Darnby lifted a limp sheet of paper off the mound, placed it on an area of table about a foot from the psionic amplifier and said: "One!" in a clear, ringing tone. He reached slowly for another fiver.

"Eighty-nine!" he said as he added the last note to a neat pile. He had drawn out the counting of his trawled treasure in a disgustingly self-satisfied fashion. He was £445 richer that morning.

I wonder if they're real? he thought suddenly.

Doubt bobbed to the surface of his mind like a cork released from the bottom of a tank of water. The fivers certainly looked and felt real enough. But what if the notes were just an illusion? A spot of wishful thinking? Hallucinations can seem solid and portable, indistinguishable from reality if they are strong enough. Sometimes, a belief can be taken dangerously too far.

What if I try and buy something with money only I can see? Darnby asked himself. There I'd be, standing in a shop, holding out an empty hand. And everyone else would be wondering if it was a joke or the ravings of some dangerous lunatic.

This boy's a fool, he told himself. *Of course, the cash is real.*

But the problem continued to worry him. He felt an irrational need to prove the existence or non-existence of his trawled treasure. All he had to do was solve the following problem: how does someone who may be hallucinating find out if a non-hallucinating observer can see a whole bunch of money without putting himself into a potentially embarrassing position?

Darnby pushed away from the table to put the kettle on. There was no need to starve to death just because his screws might, or might not, be slightly loose. When he had two slices of bread steaming nicely under the grill, he took a mug down from the rack and opened the fridge door. As he was pouring milk into the mug, ready to receive tea, the solution came to him.

His every-other-daily pinta arrived at about a quarter to eight during

the week. But on Saturday, with money to collect, the milkman called about an hour later. As Michael Darnby didn't usually drag himself out of bed before ten on a Saturday morning, he had trained the milkman to look for the money hidden under an empty bottle, and to leave any change under a full one.

All he had to do was put one of his doubtful notes under the bottle the bottle on the draining board that he had forgotten to put out the previous night. If the £5 note really existed, the milkman wouldn't ring the bell in search of payment and Michael Darnby would be as rich as he imagined himself to be. At that point, a smell of charring bread invited him to suspend his line of thought and turn his toast over.

Armed with a mug of tea and a plate of marmaladed toast, he returned to the dining table. He found himself strangely reluctant to touch his windfall in case the neat stack of rather ancient notes popped into oblivion like time-expired soap bubbles. His eyes focussed on the clock on the mantelpiece.

The milkman! he thought. *He'll be here anytime now.*

He collected the milk bottle from the draining board and hurried to the front door. An endless period of waiting followed. As a watched kettle never boils, an expected tradesman never arrives. Eventually, he heard glassy rattlings at the front door. Michael Darnby held his breath. The bell remained silent.

Darnby sneaked to the front door a few minutes later. There was a full bottle of milk beside the outside doormat. And under that milk bottle . . . His change!

The psionically trawled money was real! His ridiculous doubts had been the products of an over-active imagination. It was a beautiful day and he was rich! Feeling weak with joy, he floated back to the living room, to his cooling second cup of tea and the first instalment of a free fortune.

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5B3: Loot

With a casual flick of his wrist, a grinning Michael Darnby tossed £445 back onto the table in the manner of someone used to throwing vast amounts of money around. As he started to make his breakfast, he

decided to put half of his windfall in the bank and to blow the rest on some clothes and other essentials; like a bottle of decent Scotch.

A couple of days later, during the evening of Banking Monday, a long double-ring on his doorbell caught Darnby up to his forearms in soapy water, doing the washing up. He found two hard-eyed men on the doorstep; a detective sergeant and a detective constable, who wanted to know where he had got the money that he had paid into his bank during the morning.

Darnby asked them why they wanted to know, which failed to improve the attitude of his unwelcome visitors. They also wanted to know where he had been on the night of the 22nd of that month, when a safe had been robbed in a town less than ten miles away.

Realizing that he was on the edge of something serious, Darnby fell back on the truth. He sensed that his trawled money had been stolen and stashed, not lost. Even so, he felt confident that the detectives would have serious problems with trying to link him to the thieves or the scene of the crime.

The detectives neither laughed nor groaned in disbelief when they heard his explanation. They just invited him to think again at the police station. Darnby insisted on showing them his psionic amplifier and the article in Futures. The detectives were not impressed. He opened the bottom drawer of the sideboard and took out two bundles of notes, most of them new, the results of his efforts with the psionic amplifier on Saturday and Sunday nights.

Darnby had been planning to invest in some new hi-fi equipment at the weekend, given the same rate of recovery through the week. He had been hoping to negotiate some sort of discount if he waved a large amount of actual cash under a salesperson's nose.

The detective constable took the cash out to the radio in their car to check on the numbers. He returned looking puzzled. Darnby had trawled cash from five separate robberies between London and central Scotland.

The detectives knew that they had stumbled across either a major criminal mastermind or a very minor mad scientist. Looking at Michael Darnby, they found themselves having to settle for the latter.

They allowed him to finish his washing up, then they hauled him down to the police station to tell his story to their inspector; who didn't believe it either but he was forced to admit that it had an illogical ring of truth.

In the end, the inspector got Darnby to sign a statement, which he referred on to his superiors. The decision on whether to prosecute Darnby for being in possession of stolen money belonged to someone at a higher level. If it was up to him, the inspector felt, he would prefer

to forget the whole business. The case, if it ever came to court, could quite easily make a laughing stock of the local police force.

When a police car dropped him off at his home at last, Michael Darnby wasn't sure whether to feel relieved or terrified. The evening had been an interesting look at police procedures from the sharp end, but it could have ended with him looking at a cell door from the wrong side.

Darnby contemplated screwing up the psionic amplifier diagram and using it to light the fire after all the trouble that it had caused him. But a mercenary quivering shivered at the back of his mind. All right, so he couldn't keep the money that the psionic Treasure Trawler provided not now that the police knew about him. But there had to be a finder's fee due, a ten per cent reward on anything that he recovered.

Perhaps there were elements of a business available. His nightly take had fluctuated between two and over four hundred quid. If he could just average £300 per day over the week, his ten per cent would come to a decent £210 per week, which wasn't to be sniffed at. And he would be able to keep any trawled cash that wasn't claimed within three months.

He would be happy with that sort of a 'salary' even happier if he could develop his talent and bring in more cash at each attempt. The police and the lawful owners of the money would be happy. Only the criminals, who had carried out the robberies, would not be happy. And as long as they didn't find out his address, Michael Darnby felt able to live with that.

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5B4: Sweeper

Including the £5 note that he had draped across the Comparator Gate, Michael Darnby had £450 to spend. He had been planning a cheap, stay-at-home weekend and a trip to the bank on Monday for 'existing-on cash'. The visit to the bank was no longer necessary now. Feeling quite cheerful, he left the money in a neat pile on the table and strolled into the kitchen to get his breakfast ready.

After breakfast, he took a train into town. When he began his shopping spree with his trawled wealth, he received a few nasty shocks. He

was completely out of touch with a lot of prices. Everything seemed to have doubled since he had last bought for his wardrobe. In the end, he decided that he would have to go to the bank on Monday after all. His windfall would not stretch to luxuries plus routine expenses.

He returned home on the last train of a day that had ended with a modest dinner and a trip to the pictures. His duffle bag and a carrier bag were full and his wallet was almost empty. Three or four pounds in change clanked reassuringly in his pockets.

His neighbour ambushed him the following morning as he was bringing the milk in. She was in her mid-forties, an energetic woman who spent ages digging her garden up if she couldn't find someone to talk to. Before realizing the direction of the conversation, he admitted that he had not lost any money.

Just about everyone else in the street had. Their money had disappeared mysteriously from wallets, piggy banks and secret stashes for special occasions. All in all, the best part of £150 had disappeared up and down the street. And the really puzzling aspect of the thefts was that just £5 notes had disappeared, never tens or twenties, and that just one or two notes had been taken from places where more had been available.

Darnby made appropriate noises at infrequent breaks in the catalogue of disaster. The ringing of a timer in his neighbour's kitchen distracted her and allowed him to escape. Darnby hurried into his house. His neighbour had mentioned that the police had been up and down the street the day before and would be back to interview any people whom they had missed. It seemed a good idea to distribute his new clothing among the old rags and burn the wrappings and carrier bags before the police arrived to grill him.

He spent an uncomfortable half hour wondering what would happen when the rest of the street found out that he had not lost any money. His neighbour was sure to mention that fact in her next news bulletin.

The solution to his dilemma proved devastatingly simple when it occurred to him. All he had to do was say that his personal fortune had consisted of a couple of tenners and a pocketful of change on Friday night. If he had had no fivers in his possession, then none could have been stolen! The story sounded reasonable enough.

There remained the moral problem of his psionic amplifier. The money that it had helped him to acquire had not been entirely lost. It had included a vacuuming from his immediate surroundings. He could hardly continue to plunder his neighbours.

Perhaps he could move to a flat next door to a bank. The banks had plenty of money including their periodic windfall profits, which opposition politicians are always suggesting should be taxed out of

existence. Recycling their excess profits into the economy, after doing himself a spot of good, amounted to a public service, he told himself.

With a warm internal glow, Michael Darnby poured himself a generous measure from a windfall bottle of sherry. A brand new and untouched bottle would look suspicious to a copper, who had called to investigate a spate of local burglaries. And he hadn't even touched the whisky!

There was an empty whisky bottle gathering dust in his bedroom. It was full of water and doing duty as a bookend. Feeling very devious, Darnby poured the water away and transferred whisky until he had two half-full bottles. Some of the accumulation of dust on the older whisky bottle helped to age its newer cousins.

Right, thought Michael Darnby, pouring out more sherry when his manoeuvres were complete, *bring on the rubber hose. I have a complete answer to everything. I hope!*

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5B5: Penetration

This is going to be a real pleasure, Michael Darnby told himself.

He began to scrape the loose mound of blue paper into a wad to make counting it easier. The limp notes refused to pack together into a neat rectangle. Puzzled, he took hold of one of the fivers and tried to lift it off the heap. Another note came with it; and another; and another. The whole pile rose, joined and sagging like an ill-made, expanding Christmas decoration.

Using both hands, he explored one of the joins and discovered that the notes were not stuck together as if glued. They were interwoven. Parts of one note intersected others. In places, one solid piece of paper had formed an X shape by passing through another solid sheet of paper.

Crazy as it seemed, the notes had to have gathered at the Output Gate of the psionic amplifier in a ghost-like condition and they had embraced their neighbours while solidifying.

Darnby lifted the mass all the way into the air. A much newer note hung from the lowest point of the tangle, attached only by a corner. Three creases in it told him that he had found the £5 note that he had placed across the Comparator Gate.

Well, what do I do with this lot? he asked himself. Disgusted, he rested his chin on his fists and contemplated a fair but unspendable fortune.

Maybe I can cut them apart, he thought at last. *And leave only a set of narrow slits in the notes. If I stick them up with a bit of Sellotape, no one will ever suspect there's a little bit missing. Or maybe I can get more than the face value of the notes by selling the whole mess as a work of art; or a scientific curiosity. I bet the professor of physics at the university would be fascinated by a genuine impossibility like this.*

Whatever, there's nothing much I can do before breakfast, he decided. *Perhaps I should pin the amplifier to the wall next time, so the trawled money solidifies before it hits the floor and saves me the bother of cutting and sticking it back together again.*

The edge of excitement blunted for the moment, Darnby pushed away from the table. It was time to put the kettle on and do something about his internal rumblings. Making fried-egg sandwich sounded a good idea.

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5C1: Attraction

Had he bothered to investigate the source of the plinking noise, Michael Darnby would not have been so eager to continue his psionic treasure trawling.

There were two more slots in the window; in other panes, having exactly the same dimensions but inclined at a slightly steeper angle to the vertical than the original slot.

There were also new slots, each measuring one-eighth by one and a quarter inches, in the walls and ceiling, just like another slot, which had been formed the previous night but had remained unnoticed.

The police officers, who broke into the house the next morning, reported that the place looked as if it had been machine-gunned with fifty-pence pieces. They found over two hundred of them scattered across a circuit diagram on the dining table, lying in front of the riddled corpse of a man in headphones that weren't plugged in.

The police found slots large enough to admit a fifty-pence piece cutting right through the structure of the house. Impossible as it seemed, the coins had passed cleanly through external and internal walls, win-

dows and the roof on their way to the dining table. The paths of six of the coins had taken them through the head and upper body of the late Michael Darnby.

Later, as they were measuring and making diagrams of the flight paths of the fifty-pence pieces, the eyes of two of the members of the forensic team met.

One grinned. The other responded with a slight shrug. Both knew that they were wasting their time, merely going through the motions of routine. This particular mystery was likely to remain baffling and unsolved.

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5C2: Caution

As he concentrated, Michael Darnby felt a sneeze coming on. He drew his handkerchief out of its trouser pocket to catch the explosion and found that the handkerchief was a bit damp and not suitable for a satisfying blow. He took it up to the laundry basket and helped himself to a clean one from the supply in the airing cupboard.

Going downstairs, he noticed a dark patch on the wall. It was another of the clean-edged slots like the one in his window. He could see right through it into the living room. Alarmed, Darnby turned and looked at the opposite wall. There was another slot in it, about ten feet up from the half-landing.

When he went up to the front bedroom, he found a slot in the stair wall and yet another slot in the ceiling at the front of the room, where the ceiling followed the slope of the roof.

Numbly, Darnby went downstairs and sat down in front of his psionic amplifier. In a rush of panic, he swept the £100 from the Comparator Gate. The house would look like a colander if he tried to trawl 200 lost fifty-pees! And the cost of repairing the Swiss-cheese effect already inflicted would be a lot more than the profits so far.

Darnby turned the psionic amplifier face down and toured the room, looking for slots and trying to work out just how much damage he had caused. If he had hit the hot-water tank or its header-tank, for instance! He was dismayed by his own recklessness.

His problem was that he needed to use the Treasure Trawler now to

pay for the damage to his home; unless he could sue Futures magazine and/or the author of the article. But first, he had to work out a way to use it safely.

Obviously, he would have to use it away from the house. But he also had the problem of keeping himself out of the line of fire.

Most short cuts usually take you miles out of your way, he thought bitterly. If he couldn't figure out a way to exploit his Treasure Trawler without killing himself, *Futures* magazine would have to head the list of economies to pay for repairs to his abused home. And what was he going to tell the people next door about the slots going through their half of the pair of semis?

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In Conclusion

I wrote this short story in September of 1980, before the computer technology needed to create a hypertext story was available to the home user. I used a manual portable typewriter.

Fifteen years later, in September of 1995, there were much fancier hypertext programs on the market than the one which I wrote [using QBasic 4.5, for anyone interested in that sort of thing] to display the hypertext version of the story as a DOS program, but what really counts is the content of the story, not how it looks, and the author choosing to make the effort to go all the way with his vision.

The story is featured in the second volume of my collected short stories [first edition 1997, produced using WordPerfect 6.2 for DOS]. I created an HTML version in January, 2000. This PDF version came out of WordPerfect 11 in December 2005.

This is the end

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