

Gunter's Chain

By GEORGE B. BRINGMANN

The wind, chill from the north-east, was like a squealing litter of hungry sucklings squeezing under a fence rail. It souged through the tops of trees out of sight in the dark with the restless sob of a mad woman. It whined around casement and pane, stabbed its dank fingers through keyholes and struggled with mats near the sills. November was a bad month in London. And that night its worst.

Across the drear, whitecapped Channel two great armies in the fourth year of the Thirty Years War were laying waste much of a continent in the name of religion. Even now England's first James was vacillating between taking either side. Shiploads of Puritans already had found a new and freer land, for the foul breath of the intolerant mainland had settled as a miasmatic blanket over England. Merrie England. The England of Shakespeare but recently dead. The England of Bacon and Spenser.

In a bleak room high in the pile of the damp masonry of Gresham College labored Gunter, mathematician, master intellect. Rumpled and torn bits of foolscap littered the table at which he sat. His feet, numb with the damp, were unmoving in another heap of discarded paper. His hands were cramped and blue and the quill one held was waving erratically. He cursed softly, blew upon his hand a stream of hoar-whitened breath and again fell to scribbling. The candle in the storm lantern at his elbow sputtered and threw a black greasy smoke over the mica in the lantern window. To all this discomfort Gunter paid no heed, but brought his eyes nearer his work. Great was his purpose and great was his intellect, for Gunter, erstwhile student of Christ Church, Oxford, was a Professor of Astronomy at Gresham, though still a young man.

His back straightened. He sighed, exultant, pushed his chair away from the table and attempted to stand.

His insensate feet refused to bear the weight, but by good fortune he managed to grasp the edges of the table. For five long minutes he shuffled to restore a semblance of proper circulation, while his eyes grew feverish with the light of a success plainly seen. Gunter clutched a scrap of foolscap in his hand. "This I shall give to the world!" he told the jumping shadows in the grey room. "This I shall give the world!" he repeated, chuckling. "It will make man more certain and more pleased with what is his because of its infallible accuracy."

He experimented with his feet, found they would support him, and tottered gingerly to the wall. Taking a six foot woolen muffler from a peg near the door he wrapped its warm folds about his throat and carefully overlapped the ends before buttoning his great coat. A tall gray hat, replete with spots from London window jettisons, he pulled tightly down to the back of his ears. "Now to Eric of Malmo." He opened the door and the draft from the stairs with a mighty puff blew out the storm lantern. Gunter groped his way through the dark and down to the door.

The wind blew his breath back into his lungs and made him gasp. Lowering his head he stepped out, leaning against the storm. Hard pellets, half hail half snow, rattled on his tall hat ere he had walked five minutes. He shrugged and became more dogged.

Few were the wayfarers of London's street at that hour. Once he stepped hurriedly into a doorway and held his breath while a band of homeless urchins in pursuit of a skinny dog raced past his hideaway. They were ravenously hungry he knew. Better they pursue the dog for food than molest him for alms or batter him the better to rob him of his purse. He made a wry mouth when he found his heart had followed them. He heard the shouts of the band announcing their success

and the final howls of the dog. He imagined he heard the gurgle of the beast and was compassionate, at the same time glad the gamins now would eat.

Boldly he took up his way. A window protested at its opening. Instinctively he stepped into a doorway until the sounds of a pan being emptied on the walk and the refastening of the window indicated at least temporary security.

For a full hour the squalor of his surroundings increased with each stride. When but another pace would be toward lesser poverty, he stopped before a door and knocked.

"Eric!" he called, and kicked at the door with his frosted toes.

"Yah? Who calls Eric at this hour?" came the thick-voiced answer.

"I, Professor Gunter. Open up and let me in!"

"Yah."

Gunter heard the sound of a bar being lifted from its socket and a thump as it was set against the wall. The door swung half open.

"Come in. It is cold. Yah?" The huge frame of Eric of Malmo stepped aside.

"Of course it is cold. Why bar a door? You have nothing to steal. Ridiculous!" Gunter complained.

"I have clothes. Some clothes. And it is cold and other people freeze." Eric's voice was harsh. "I am an outlander and fair game to my neighbors."

"Then you should have stayed in Sweden." Gunter was impatient.

"Yah. I wonder. But the war, it is reaching there. I do not like war."

"Nor do you care to freeze, in England. Nor starve. Well, you need not. That is why I have come."

"You have work for me?" The wasted frame of Eric straightened. Hope snatched fear from his heart. "Does the college want more hinges or some locks as only Eric, master armorer, can devise?"

"No. This work is for me."

"Oh. Perhaps a fine mesh waist-

coat to turn the knives of people starving in the streets? Or a sword to slay them? A dirk?"

Gunter looked sharply at his questioner. He had caught the bitterness in the man's words. More and more of the common people were talking like that. "No. Go light a fire and I will show you." Gunter took his precious sheet from a pocket.

"Show me," Eric demanded. "If I do work I must save fuel. The fire must wait."

"Light it anyway." Gunter placed a coin on the table. "That for fuel, work for me or no. I am cold."

"And I. But no, no fire. No alms. I only ask to work."

"Hmpt! Independent. Very well. Make this for me." He thrust the paper into Eric's hands. "It is a chain."

"I do not like to make chains. I have felt them." Eric stuck out his wrists. Great scars purple from cold circled them. "That is mine for working for the side which lost. No chains. Not Eric."

"Damn it, man. This chain is of a different kind. It is for the good or humankind," Gunter exploded.

"No chain is good for men." Eric's head shook stubbornly. "What is its purpose that men could not use it against each other?"

"You wouldn't understand. This chain must be of one hundred links, each link exactly 7.92 inches long. Exactly."

"Enough to hold a ship against the tide, enough to anchor it in the roughest sea. Strong enough to manacle three score men along its length." Eric snorted. "And you will use it for the good of man. A chain!"

"Eric, were there another man in all of London who could do as well as you, I would leave you to your opinions and your destitution. But you must make this chain for me, Eric," Gunter wheedled. "You must." A tantalizing stream of gold poured from Gunter's left hand into the open palm of his right. He counted out six coins and put them on the table. In the yellow light of the candle

stubb they shone orange red and added to the warmth of the illumination. Eric's gaze was fastened upon them. Shrewdly Gunter chinked more coins in his cupped hands.

"I will not do it." Eric hung his head and bit his blue lips. "I tell you I will not make your damned chain. No one can tell me that it will not bind men!"

"I promise it will not. Why not leave ethics to your betters. All you are interested in, or should be interested in, is when and how you will eat."

"To my betters! Have I not? Have my neighbors not? And do we not starve and freeze and bury our babies when the ground is soft enough for toolless hands to dig!"

"Eric, I promise this chain of mine will hurt no man."

"You promise. You! Yet you would give it to mankind. Will you live forever? Will not someone put your chain to different purpose. A chain! I hate chains. No chain will serve all people, or be just. It cannot."

"Chains are your unfortunate obsession. You are being foolish." Gunter assumed a paternal air. "This chain is a linear measure."

The Swede's eyelids flickered. "Measure?"

"Yes. More accurate than any method we have yet used." Gunter added one more coin to the growing pile. He could have saved it, for the wail of a child issued from the other room of the hovel. Eric's grandson, son of his daughter. He heard his daughter murmur to the child, heard her wracking cough. How sorry he felt that his loud speech had disturbed them in the only escape they had—sleep. He shrank in stature. Once more he was stooped and weary.

"I will make this chain." And Eric cursed as he swept the little pile of gold into his palm. Cursed at his want and his necessity. He glared at Gunter. "Chains, chains. I hate chains. They widowed my daughter; they crippled me. They have held down men and made them

slaves. Now I, Eric of Malmo, master armorer, make one. I, who love freedom!"

"This chain—man, how often should I say my chain is different. It is but a measure, a more accurate means of measuring."

"Measuring what?"

"Land. By this chain a man will know exactly what land is his and what belongs to another. I shall call it the surveyor's chain. New countries will be apportioned by it. And accurately."

"Chains," Eric cursed, this time in his native tongue. "I cannot see the evil of this I make for you, yet somewhere I smell injustice. Chains. I hate them. I know this one will hurt some, will kill many, destroy millions while doing its measuring. I know it. Know it because I feel."

"Twaddle!" Gunter scoffed. "One of your Norse fairies is prattling. Feelings like that are for fishwives, not for Eric, armorer for warriors even now in Valhalla. I shall call in a week to see how you are getting on. Good night." He swung out the door and Eric barred it behind him. More reason now to bar the door:

With his back to the bite of the wind and snow, Gunter hastened to Gresham. In his soul that wind sang a paean of commendation for what he, Gunter, had done. But to Eric sitting by his newly made fire with his whimpering grandchild it howled mockery, and he was desolate.

"Chains, chains, chains," he muttered to the flames and shivered.

And the raw wind climbed an octave in its wail. To Eric like a million children, like ten million children entering the world at one great birth. Entering in chains.

Bleak was November in London. That November.

