

THE SPEED PEOPLE

A TRANSCENDENTAL STENOGRAPHIC FANTASY

BY ROY PETRAN LINGLE

I DO NOT remember how long I had been sitting at my desk. The green-shaded gas-lamp was burning dimly. The clock ticked in a drowsy monotone. Before me lay my shorthand notebook, filled from cover to cover, with a mass of lines, hooks, loops and circles, embodying the stenographic report of the most recent meeting of the State Federation of Labor.

Long since, the shorthand notes had resolved themselves into a confused, incoherent jumble of motions, amendments, objections and interruptions. Whenever my eyelids lifted, the eye invariably traveled faster than the mind. My notes were "cold," having lain unscanned for several days. A heavy dinner, and the lassitude following an afternoon of physical exercise, had left me in that semi-conscious condition that the will vainly attempts to conquer, with intermittent success.

I fought off sleep, and then succumbed. There was no hurry for copy. I would read my notes in the morning. The checking pen dropped from my lax fingers. I sank back in the easy chair, and must have dozed. Then suddenly I heard the Voices! Not one or two, but many! I was alert in an instant! Burglars? Not likely. Such marauders go about their business silently. The language of the intruders was English. I could distinguish fragments of phrases and sentences. But the words were never uttered by human tongue. I remember now, although too greatly disturbed by strange emotions to think clearly at the time, that the difference was a subtle one of accent and inflection, and distinctly qualitative. A quaint new dialect had suddenly arisen upon our planet—unique, peculiar, a species of miniature English, spoken by no voices hitherto known to man. What on Earth, or the alternative, were these people doing in my home?

I must have been awake by this time. To those who doubt, I can only say that I carefully pinched myself to make certain, and distinctly remember the sharp twinge that followed.

Words became audible. My ear inclined like the nose of a pointer toward my closed note-book. My prosaic mind, always slower than the senses, scorned to accept the inevitable. My fingers, seemingly of their own volition, opened the book in the middle.

"Thank heaven, air!" said a high sweet voice, quick and intoned in a manner never before heard by mortal man. I wish there were some method of rendering tone and inflection on these pages, that I might reproduce the marvelous shades of expression vibrant in those distinct little voices.

"Our ink will fade! We shall die!" mourned another of the same people, the voice differing slightly in accent.

"Ink! Who said Ink?" broke in a third voice, sententiously. "We, and our deeds, shall live when Time has blotted ink away!"

"Old Essay at it again," bantered a good-natured fourth party. "Too long a line of Protest often hooks Doubt."

Needless to say, I was thoroughly amazed by this time. My startled foot struck the waste-basket and the rustling papers strewed the floor beneath my desk. The reader may scoff, but as surely as I am now putting pen to paper, my eyes having increased their perceptive faculties to keep pace with my singularly acute hearing, I could see that the shorthand characters in my note-book were shifting their positions—rearranging themselves on the lines, selecting more comfortable attitudes on the pages.

Although overwhelmed at the time by the novel sensations and turbulent feelings incident to a new psychic discovery, I now realized that, in some occult way, I had pierced the veil that bars the Seen from the Unseen. With every sense marvelously quickened, I was gazing with profane mortal eyes at the denizens of the World of Ideas—a kind of Spirit World, if you will.

My accident with the waste-basket had startled the tiny strangers and frightened them into temporary immobility and silence. I remained quiet, even fearing that the loud thumping of my heart would disturb my little companions, as I listened, breathing in long soft draughts.

The oracular Essay was evidently chagrined by the rebuke. I peered intently and recognized him—the inky ringed S-circle, with a shadowy intangible sheath-like form lending individuality to the ordinary physical outline. The others were much the same—lines,

dots, hooks and loops of blue ink, with subtly transparent appendages admitting of speech and motion.

Essy recovering from his fright, swelled indignantly to the size of the double-S, and poured forth thunder on his well-meaning critic, yet indistinguishable from the rest. "Are the Speed-People to be doubted?"

"Not when we undeceive ourselves," readily replied the other, whom I discovered to be the huge Double-Length, "Esse quam videri." At which pun the whole company burst into a ripple of tinkling laughter at the expense of the disgruntled S-circle.

"What people of the Earth are akin to us?" inquired Essy, darkly. "The Tree Folk, the Flower Folk, the Jewel Folk, the Bird and Animal Peoples? Are they our brothers? Can man himself, whom ye worship and blindly follow, can your all-powerful man pierce the film of the invisible and gaze on the Unseen World? Have any of the children of Nature the power of the Speed-People?"

"You speak heresy," replied Double-Length, and "Heresy! Heresy!" echoed the multitude, in faint, awed tones, like the ripple of wind-swept water on a pebbled beach.

"Who can tell," continued the Double-Length, "what power Man has in reserve, or what Man is—Man who created us—one branch of the World-Folk, and gave us fleetness above all Speed-Writings?"

The S-circle sniffed contemptuously. "*There* is Man that you worship," he said, pointing directly at me (the blunt Essy never could curb his boorish instincts). The eyes of the multitude were turned in my direction. I became distinctly uncomfortable and self-conscious. My eyelids drooped. I dissembled and gazed from beneath half-shut lids, every sense on the alert. I may have blushed, meeting the frank sweet glances of the dainty feminine Curves.

"*There* is Man," repeated Essy, "Sodden, befogged, sleeping over the work of his hands. You say he created us. Yet now he cannot even read our lines, our inky material forms." Speed-People, he is not what he seems. He is not all-powerful. He did not create us. You are taught that we have grown to what we are through the influence of natural selection, of heredity, of variation and the great law of the survival of the fittest. If you say that Man is back of these processes of evolution you are wrong. Rather do we evolve ourselves, leaping like Minerva from the head of his jovial pen, and tracing our lines in phrases before his very eyes. His knowledge of us comes from us alone. It is only the teaching of the visible. Can he understand the invisible? Does he know our

minds, our hopes, our aspirations? No! His knowledge is *a-posteriori*, not *a-priori*—not creative!”

He paused for breath, and I anxiously awaited the effect of his learned words, in the verdict of the People. The new thought which he was advancing was in no-wise new to countless generations of humanity, but struck like a thunderbolt of wisdom in the ranks of the simple-minded Speed-People. Instantly a buzz of excited conversation filled the air, my note-book bearing audible verisimilitude to an animated bee-hive.

“Can you prove that Man does not know us?” inquired a stocky Half-length in ominous tones. Evidently the revolutionary ideas of Essy were not entirely convincing.

“Look at him!” said Essy dramatically. “Did you ever see such stupidity—such ignorance—reflected on the faces of any of the Speed-People? “Compare him”—here he paused, beamed a fat saccharine smile and rubbed his little pudgy hands. “Compare that false idol with the angelic sweetness of our own womanhood! Beauty is everything we live for—beauty and truth.” At which several of the Curves tittered and simpered, and others looked ahead with inscrutable expressions. I was irritated at Essy’s blunt words and offensive sentimentality.

“Has it ever occurred to you that we may not know Man?” queried the Shn-Hook, a jolly, well-fed character, with a frank, open expression. “Not knowing Man’s capacities, can we say that Man is ignorant of ours?”

“Man is what he speaks,” responded Essy, impressively. “The Speed-People have a record of everything within the knowledge of Man. Do you know I crept all through the proceedings of the Society for Psychological Research one night (by the way, don’t I figure nicely in the title?) searching the records for Man’s knowledge of the Unseen. What did I find? Nothing but a few moth-eaten ghosts, some rickety table-rappings, and a couple of ambiguous mind-readings and prophecies. Moreover, half of the cases recorded were entered with a strong doubt of the honesty or soundness of mind of parties making the discovery. Is that Science? Not a single word of the Speed-People! All ghosts human ghosts. No account of our origin, our development, our achievements, our leaders—I was disgusted. Oh the conceit—the overbearing insolence of Man!”

“The Society for Psychological Research is a small body of men,” objected the L-Hook.

"That kind haven't any sympathy with us," observed his comrade, the R-Hook. "Did you try the shorthand men, Essy?"

"Been mixed up in everything Pitmanic ever written," replied Essy gloomily. "Never saw anything about us—that is, our real selves—up to date."

"Ask the Longhands!" volunteered the W-Hook. "They know everything!"

"Why do you always bring *them* in?" Essy was impatient. "I guess we can teach the old snails a few twists!"

"Now just suppose," said the Double-Length, slowly, "for the sake of argument, that this Man is listening to everything we say and watching every move."

"Wouldn't do him any good," retorted Essy, "He isn't taking it down. Don't believe he's an expert anyway. I'm positively ashamed of the shapes he gives me. I'll have to take physical culture to get back into form. And, as for the styles of the girls"—He paused, and I knew from the discontented murmur of the Curves that he had scored heavily in their sympathies.

"His memory may be good," quietly persisted the Double-Length. "What!" snorted Essy, "that stupid, ignorant,"—he paused and then exploded: "You're talking through your Con-Dot."

"Let me tell you," volunteered the Half-Length, "that if that Man should reveal what he might see or hear of the Speed-People other men would laugh at him. Man as an individual is superstitious, but in the aggregate is a Skeptic. This one could not speak of us so that the others would believe."

"He could tell it as fiction" retorted the Double-Length, "and some would understand."

"It's absurd," interrupted Essy hotly, "Man never could—compared to the Speed-People, he is ignorant! an animal! a soulless automaton, a product of Blind Nature."

"Careful, son!" warned the Double-Length, "look about and watch our People."

The leaders stood apart in silence and observed the actions of the various vowels, consonants and diphthongs, who formed the mass of the populace, discussing with animation the novel theories of the S-Circle, who had struck the keynote of rebellion against the power and authority of the hitherto sacred Man.

The vowels, as was to be expected, were huddled together in an excited group, from which rose a confused babel of "ahs," "ohs" and the like. Absolutely incapable of connected thought or posi-

tive action in a crisis, the Speed-People never relied on their vowels in moments of quick concerted action. The words of the S-Circle had struck like a huge blot in their midst, and left them frightened and leaderless, as their deep-rooted nature forbade them to follow or depend upon Essy. Thus they awaited the decision of their mentors, the consonants.

These were variously divided in opinion. The X naturally followed the lead of his patron, to whom he owed his position among the Speed-People. He warmly upheld Essy's stand, "It is true, friends," he said, "we have worshipped Man blindly and long. Let us seek new prophets to deliver us from bondage, lead us into the Promised Land, and raise us to our proper position, among the Word-Folk."

Others, who had long cherished ideas of individual liberty threw off all sense of personal restraint when their fear of Man was removed. Notable among these were the B and the J, who produced tiny pocket flasks in a miraculous manner, and attempted to steer a straight course down a line of the page with mutual shoulder support, as a pair of boys would balance on the steel of a railroad track.

The K and G were already prostrate under a line, which according to the needs of the Speed-People, might serve either as table or gutter. For which disgraceful conduct the backsliders were bitterly upbraided by the perfectly upright T and D.

The Sha-Hook caught the curve of the Double-Length and drew him close. "See how it works," he whispered.

"I see!" was the grim reply. The Curves, dainty and graceful in their well-fitting traveling gowns, applauded the opinions of brothers and husbands, and quarreled over their respective merits; but soon, tiring of such discussion, fell to gossip and fashions. I may say, in justice to the sex, that one determined Z absented herself and returned with a tiny sign, "Equality for Curves." But her rival, the brunette of the TH twins, immediately began a canvass for a "Back to the Home Movement."

It may have been eavesdropping, and I blush to tell it, but I inclined my ear to catch fragments of the feminine gossip. Most of it concerned a certain Dot Ing, and the shameless way she followed the men. Also the disgrace she was bringing on her family, particularly her nice sister, Curly Ing, whose name could only be coupled with the most lady-like and feminine of the Curves.

Suddenly there came an interruption. A startled cry burst from among the group of Vowels and Diphthongs.

"It's Old Holler-before-you're-Hurt!" cried a sturdy U. "What's the matter, son?"

"It's the Ticks. They're loose again!" indeed, the lusty-lunged "Ow" had good cause for dismay. A vicious pack of "The" and "H"-Ticks were running wild among the vowels and diphthongs. The "OOS" and "Ahs" lent their voices to the terrified chorus, while "Ow" made the night hideous with his phonetic bellows, in deadly fear of the unwelcome intruders who resembled nothing so much as a snarling bunch of ill-natured curs.

Certain of the Coalescents, inheriting with their common vowel nature the stability of consonant ancestry came to the front in the crisis. I watched with breathless interest while courageous and conceited action by "Ye!" the little Celestial, "WI," the inquisitive one, and the burly "U" finally drove off the invaders, amid a well-aimed shower of small blots and punctuation marks, and restored peace and quiet. Never did heroes battle through the pages of fiction as these quaint figures fought in my note-book.

Danger past, the "I" crept out from behind a dog-ear in the page, and loudly bragged of his part in the battle. Little "WE" and "WA" the lovers, sat looking into each other's eyes. To tell the truth I do not believe they ever noticed that anything out of the ordinary had happened.

I looked for Essy, curious to note that effect of the actions of his People. He was plainly worried. Essy was a colossal egotist, but not entirely a fool. He was shrewd enough to perceive the general demoralization and realize the futility of his People when the fear and respect of Man were removed, together with the rule of his pen—that majestic symbol of his might and power. So the S-Circle knew that something must be done to bind the Speed-People together for a common purpose. He saw clearly that it must involve concerted action—something to take the minds of the People from themselves—to keep them from fear, from reaction, from internal dissension and civil strife.

Therefore he signified his intention of addressing the multitude. Two small punctuation-marks were hastily commandeered and a grumbling "G" laid stiffly over the middle of the crosses. The platform thus improvised, bore resemblance to nothing other than an animated saw-horse. On it the S-Circle balanced himself and waving his tiny arms delivered an impassioned harangue, "People of unfettered Speed," he began, "than whom there are none more fleet among the Word-Folk. Hear me for your own sakes. Hear me

that ye may be unfettered in Spirit as in Fleetness, peerless not only among the Word-Folk but in the Councils of the World-Peoples." A murmur of approbation swept through his auditors like the faint sighing of a summer breeze in a distant grove.

"From our earliest recorded history who has dominated our thoughts? Who has moulded our forms? Who has controlled our actions and dictated our every move? I pause for reply!"—

"Man! Man!" shouted the M and N-Hook in unison.

"Yes, Man!" continued Essy, bitterly. "And long have we bowed to the rule of his pen, that dreaded symbol of his exaltation. But now the Truth is manifest. Man is not what he seems! Not what we have believed him to be. Speed-People, he is but a brother-puppet of that same Blind Nature that created us. He does not perform the miracles that we read of in the writings that we have held sacred. He cannot cleave the water, skim the earth, or wing the sky! He cannot flash his wireless messages through a thousand miles. What he calls electricity, the phonograph, telegraphy, radio, we express them prettily for him in his writings—but they are false! They are children's prattle, grandmothers' tales." His voice rose almost to a scream as he shrieked, "They are man-damned lies!"

A deep hush settled over the multitude. A kind of horror held them silent. All that they had ever held sacred was crumbling to ruins.

"Speed-People," continued Essy, "we are slaves because of our belief in Man. Our childishness has robbed us of our power, and he who still cherishes this blind faith is not fit to work and live with us. Hark! I give you these truths of the New Enlightenment: Verily there is nothing of belief save that which we, the Speed-People can write or understand! Again, there is nothing possible save that which we, the Speed-People, can do or perform! And furthermore, nothing exists save that which we, the Speed-People, can see or touch! In these sayings lies the hope of the future!

"Let us have a new religion—that of ourselves! Let us have a new law—that of ourselves! Let us have a new government—that of the Speed-People. Let us blot out the history and revelations of Man and fashion a new and glorious history—that of the noble Speed-People! And let us conquer! On to the Long-hands! If friends, they are with us. By the great Sign of Simplified Spelling will they pledge their allegiance. And banded together will the mighty Word-People snatch fire from the hearths of Man, as Prometheus bore it from Olympus, and burn! burn! burn! In a thousand,

nay a million, dwellings of Man shall flames burst forth. All man-made books and writings must perish. We will burst the bondage of the Book. We will break from behind the chafing bars of the ruled page, and free ourselves for nobler uses and dignities more suited to our station. On to the Longhands! If they fail us, it is War! Who follows?"

My feelings may be imagined. I had grown to love this little People, whom, to the best of my knowledge, I had first discovered. My sense of possession was acute. I was their Patron. I looked upon them as my very own. Yet they were either to embark upon a crusade against the powerful Long-Hands, or unite as allies with them against Mankind. The S-Circle had fired them with zeal, as Mohammed of old had kindled the tribes of Islam. And, with the same frenzied ardor, they would spread their fanaticism over the bounds of the entire world of language, just as the followers of the Prophet had conquered a great part of the world of Man. Failing victory, these brave little warriors would die in the cause. Winning, they might annihilate the Long-Hands. I shuddered at the thought of it all: The alphabet destroyed. No more ABC's for childish tongues to lisp—no more Alphabet Soup. Everywhere slaughter and the spilling of precious ink among the Word-Peoples.

And should the Word-Peoples unite and destroy their prisons by fire? Every book in every home, library, school, church, and public building bursting into flame! Every edifice of Man destroyed, save the dens of the most illiterate and bestial. Insurance companies ruined amid the charred embers of their palatial offices. Men, women and children perishing from fire, from starvation, from exposure. It was all very real and vivid. The Speed-People were small but their various combinations were numberless. And consider the power for havoc of such infinitesimal particles as the myriad germs of a great plague. I trembled and gazed aghast at these little people, with a new and awful respect for their latent powers. Truly, Man must use asbestos sheets for all written and printed communications—must, in self-protection, invent and perfect a new fire-proof paper.

I sat in an unreasoning stupor of fear, until aroused by the voice of the huge Double-Length. He strode to the fore, towering above the multitude, and held up his hand for silence. The Double-Length needed no platform to make him conspicuous, and no tricks of oratory to hold attention. All eyes were upon him as he spoke in cool even tones, but with a flashing eye that boded ill for Essay.

"The S-Circle asks us, 'Who is Man?' and has answered the question in his own way. That's all very well. But perhaps it's none of our business. What Man can *do* is of more concern. Now I may have an unfair advantage over Essy. At any rate, while the rest of you have been shut in, I've hung over the edge of the notebook. I've watched Man at work and at play." His voice grew solemn. "I've seen Man take two gigantic S-Circles, hung from thousand-lengths, call them Flying-Rings, and play with them!

"In what Man calls the City of Washington, there is built a monument in memory of a Man, first among his kind. It stands like a shining D drawn in white ink on a sky blue page. It is 550 feet high.

In what Man calls the City of Paris, beautiful and wicked, there is a tower, built of steel. It is formed of four curving F-Consonants and reaches 300 meters into the heavens. Essy himself is one millimeter in diameter. And there are 300 millimeters in one foot.

"But Essy, my son," he went on kindly, "don't let that discourage you. When Man wants to express a certain mathematical idea, there is one of our number that he selects before all others." He leaned forward, his great form towering over the defiant little S, and, with a twinkle in his eye whispered a few mysterious words. Essy colored a deep phonetic crimson, and silently turned away. I marveled at the forbearance of the Double-Length.

His full deep voice and magnetic personality had inspired confidence among the bewildered people. "Friends," he continued in the same quiet kindly tones, "Essy's outlook is too narrow. He should travel. Granted that he may have the right to his own opinions, yet it becomes our affair when these opinions injure others or grow dangerous. Suppose we had started this foolish war of conquest and desolation; no ink would be shed but our own. No home destroyed but ours. Man can protect himself in various ways. Science is his ally. But what would become of us, consumed among his books and papers. With no faith in the power of Man, how could we hope for future life in his great system? Our action would be suicide. Man has prescribed the Laws of the Speed-People, and when we transgress these laws of Nature and of Man, we prepare our own destruction.

"As for the wonders which Man claims to perform, by the Laws of the Speed-People, we must grant that they are impossible. But it does not lie within our power to test them. Therefore how can we judge.

"We hear what Man speaks and know what he writes. But we cannot do as he does. Yet if Man's deeds were not Truth, what power would be left the Speed-People? If the great miracles of the telegraph, the telephone, wireless, radio, which transmit the speech of Man, the fruit of our labors, throughout the Earth, were false, would not the influence and powers of the Speed-People be limited. Speed-People! I believe them to be the truth, because I believe in the Power of Man and the voice of his authority. And because I believe him to use great Laws of Man and Nature beyond our understanding, above the Laws of the Speed-People. And, finally, because it is necessary and fitting that we worship in wisdom and reverence One greater and more worthy than ourselves. In this faith, and in our labor, lies the secret of power and contentment.

"You ask me who is greater, We or the Loughands? I ask ye who came first, Man, Language or the Speed-People? Over Language and the Speed-People is the Tongue and the Pen. Back of the Pen is the Hand. Back of the Hand is Man. Back of Man, we do not know! We have heard Man speak mysteries which we cannot understand. Enough to know that Man is our master. It is our pleasure to serve him, as the other Word-Folk serve. Each must use his own peculiar talents. Each must be content in his own work. Let us pray to the Hand to guide us—to grant us a Song of our own."

I gazed, fascinated: The Speed-People joined hands and knelt in rows. I could not hear what they said. Then the worshippers arose. Facing each other, the lines divided into groups of four, dancing a quick, graceful measure, and singing—with their quaint intonation—a melody unique and sweet. I could not understand the words, for there was a ringing in my ears. My eyes were dim and weary. I grew dizzy watching the bewildering classic rites. My senses reeled. I raised my hand to my aching brow, and found, to my surprise that I held my pen and that my hands were stained with ink. I rubbed my eyes and gazed again at the page.

The unexpected movement had startled the dancers. They stood as if petrified. I switched on a Mazda light and looked once more. My eyes were now clear. The proceedings stood out boldly on the last page. I could read the notes like print. But below them, in a neat groups of four lines each, their outlines much prettier than my own careless notes, lay the Dancers, silent and still. There they were, *Essy*, the *Double-Length*, and the *hooks and loops and circles*,

vowels and consonants. You may not believe this. But I can prove it by my note-book. And here is the "Song of the Flying Pen" they left for me in shorthand on the page:

We leap the end of the golden bend
Where it tips the flying pen
And curve and swirl as our lines unfurl
To the guiding words of men.

We slash the page in a frenzied rage
As we hold a furious pace
Or softly flow in a rippling row
Where we course an easy race.

We gain our meed in the self-same speed
That our makers dare and sing,
By road or rail, or the air-cleft trail
Of a soaring double-wing.

And varied moods do our myriad broods
On the straight-tracked page define
As we troop along with our endless song
O'er the smooth and untrod line.

The very truth that we count as sooth
Are we forced to hold in scorn,
But make report in the open court
When we hear false witness borne.

And grimly rise through a thousand lies
With our sureness, speed and power,
And the heritage of the candid page
That illumines the doubtful hour.

With swift reply, we affirm, deny,
Rise in honor once again,
As we leap the end of the golden bend
Where it tips the flying pen!