

Michael Swanwick: Teller

Teller had it within him to be the premier mime of his generation. He and his loud partner, Penn Gillette, learned a few carnie routines, put an act together, and took the world by storm. They got all the way to Broadway. But then World War II intervened. Penn was drafted (he died at Anzio), and Teller was sent to work on the Manhattan Project.

Nuclear physics isn't all that different from vaudeville. You gotta show 'em what you got. You gotta give 'em that old razzmatazz. Teller went right to the top. He and Oppenheimer pretty much ran the show. They built the world's first atomic bombs. They exploded the first one in Alamogordo, New Mexico. The military exploded the next two in Japan.

It was a transforming experience for Teller. This was flashier even than swallowing a hundred needles and drawing them out of his mouth on a thread! Oppenheimer had doubts, so he had the man's security clearance taken away.

Teller devoted his life to building a hydrogen bomb, and to mastering the Strait Jacket Underwater Escape. And he succeeded! He built the one and mastered the other. Much good it did him. He lobbied Congress tirelessly for a first strike against the Soviet Union. They wouldn't listen. He tried to get his old act going again. The agency said he was too old.

Late in life, he was being interviewed by a sincere young fool. "But how could you bring the world to the brink of annihilation?" he was asked. "Didn't you *understand*?" As if he'd played his role in world history out of ignorance. As if he hadn't known the issues.

Finally, he snapped. He pulled open a drawer and handed his interrogator a bullet and a small knife. "Make a mark in the tip," he said. Then, when the young man obeyed, he got out a Magnum .357 and loaded it with a single bullet.

He put the gun in the young man's hand.

"Stand at the far end of the room."

Such was the force of his personality that the young man did so.

"Now point the gun at my face."

Again it was done.

"Now fire."

The interviewer turned pale. "I c-couldn't p-possibly—" he stammered.

"I know what I'm doing," Teller snapped. "There's not a chance in hell you can hurt me. Just do it!"

The young man fired.

For a long, still moment nothing moved. It was as if time had ceased. Then Teller spat something into his palm and handed it to the astonished youth. "Is this your bullet?"

The interviewer's eyes were like boiled eggs. He swallowed hard, and nodded.

"I could do it," Teller snarled. "Why couldn't the world?"

