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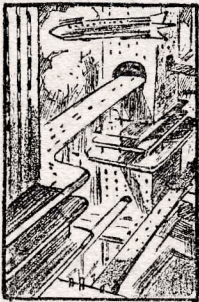
STARTLING STORIES

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By ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS

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Thumbnail Sketches of Great Men and Achievements

By MORT WEISINGER

THE LAST THEOREM

PROFESSOR PAUL WOLFSKEHL knew how to use chalk. He wrote hurriedly for several minutes on the two blackboard rectangles in the University classroom while his students watched in curious fascination. When he had finished, the paneled surfaces were sprinkled liberally with mathematical figures, algebraic symbols, and various equations.

Professor Wolfskehl put away the shrunken stub of chalk, exercised his stiffened fingers, and faced his class.

"So," he sputtered, "I will make a prediction. Mathematicians will never be able to square the circle! They will never be able to trisect the angle! And they will never be able to offer a proof for Pierre de Fermat's Last Theorem!"

Not a student in the classroom at the University of Gottingen stirred. Throughout the deep silence Professor Wolfskehl glared blackly, as if waiting to annihilate the first scholar who dared challenge his prophecy.

Finally one student, bolder than the rest, or perhaps less sleepy, opened his mouth.

"I have studied Fermat's Last Theorem, sir," the pupil ventured timidly. "While Fermat offered no proof for his Last Theorem, isn't it true that mathematicians to this day have failed to disprove Fermat's proposition?"

"*Dumkopf!*" roared the German professor. "Let us suppose that a man says that the world will end in two thousand years. Because we can't prove that it will not end at that time, does that mean the original statement is correct? *Nein!* Fermat was a genius. But he was hopelessly wrong about his Last Theorem."

The student persisted. "But, Herr Professor, since 1637, when Fermat advanced his theorem, only one mathematician, the famous Carl Friedrich Gauss, has stated that a proof for Fermat's Last Theorem will never be found. He—"

The professor interrupted. "And I am not a mathematician?" he bellowed. "Fool, today I am depositing one hundred thousand marks with the trustees of this University, to be

awarded to the first person offering this impossible proof. One hundred thousand marks!"

As Professor Wolfskehl concluded his startling announcement the bell rang, signifying the end of the lecture. The students rose ex-



Pierre de Fermat

citedly to their feet, collected their books and scattered over the campus, to report the news

of the hundred thousand mark prize to their fellows.

Alone in the classroom, the mathematics instructor turned wearily to the blackboard. As the x 's and n 's of the algebraic formulae and equations used to explain Fermat's Last Theorem met his gaze, Professor Wolfskehl's thoughts whirled him back into time some two hundred and seventy-one years, the day of such eminent mathematicians as Descartes, Newton—and Fermat. . . .

Pierre de Fermat looked stonily into space. Intricate calculations flooded his mind, caused his forehead to furrow in deep concentration. He was on the track of a new theorem! Mentally, he reviewed the proof in his mind, went over each step of reasoning. Yes, it all checked! His theorem was correct! Once again he would dazzle the mathematical world with a new proposition. A world that already respected and admired him for his numerous contributions in the field of mathematics, his many new theorems.

Fermat reached for his notebook, in which he always recorded the results of his meditations. He glanced wryly at the narrow margins on the paper, then wrote as follows:

"It is impossible to separate a cube into two cubes, a fourth power into two fourth powers, or generally any power above the second into two powers of the same degree: I have discov-

ered a truly marvelous proof of this theorem which this margin is too narrow to contain. . . ."

The afternoon sun poured its molten heat into the classroom and roused Professor Wolfskehl from his reveries.

"Ach," sighed the professor to himself, "we know that Fermat was a scrupulously honest man. Whenever Fermat stated that he had proved something, the statement has always been proved. He was a brilliant man. And we know that Fermat always used to write his proofs in the margins of his papers. Maybe . . . maybe he was right. Maybe he did have the proof in his mind, and for more than two hundred years mathematicians have not been clever enough to find the missing solution."

The professor shrugged to himself as conviction dispelled doubt. "*Nein*," he told himself. "I am convinced that Fermat was mistaken, that he had deceived himself. I will leave one hundred thousand marks to anyone who can find me a proof. Who will come to claim it?"

It is now more than three centuries since Fermat announced his Last Theorem. It still remains unsolved. And Professor Wolfskehl's prize? It is doubtful if anyone will ever want to claim it. The inflation after the World War has reduced the value of this prize to a fraction of a cent. Which may be all the proof is worth.

Or is it?