



THIS GOON FOR HIRE

BY
JOHN BERRY

Illustrated by Arthur Thomson

Duplicated by Chuck Harris

Postmailed to fapans in a frantic attempt to get the Harris neck out from under that axe that's due to hit it 30 days after the May mailing. Ghod be with you, -- and me too for at least another 12 months, and hurrah for me and Elmer Purdue.

INTRODUCTION

Goon Berry is a tough cop. Over the hot-bed of iniquity of the Belfast underworld, there stands a tall brooding figure in eternal vigilance. In the alleys and back streets of this wide-open, hell-roaring seaport, one phrase is enough to bring even the roughest character to heel. "This is the Goon. Heh heh."

Unobtrusive, stealthy, he pounces like an avenging Nemesis upon those who pit their wits against the law. Never, as they creep upon their horrid business, do they know when they will hear that harsh, gritty cackle of the voice of doom. Those words, embodying all of the awful majesty of the Law, enough to strike fear into the vilest heart, -- "Madam, are you in possession of a current licence for that dog?"

Yes, Goon Berry is a tough cop.

Published by Chuck Harris, "Carolyn" Lake Ave Rainham Essex England for FAPA, OMPA, and the International Ghodminton Association.



I ripped open the buff coloured envelope, and read the telegram. It said:-
URGENT. QUICK. COME IMMEDIATELY. CAN'T
WAIT. HURRY. SERIOUS.
WALTER ALEXANDER WILLIS.

I glanced at my watch. Mmm. 10.20.p.m. It was rather late, but the boss seemed to want to see me. Better go. I patted my hip-pocket, yeah, my notebook was there. Feeling under my armpit, I withdrew my automatic, aimed at a fly on the window, and pressed the trigger. It was loaded. Poor crittur. I guess drowning is a pretty horrible death.

Rushing to the garage, I pulled open the sliding doors. I looked at the heap, checked it for oil and tried the gears. O.K. I backed out my trusty conveyance, and cycled over to Oblique House.

It was dark, but light gleamed from the third floor windows. I walked up to the front door and preseed the bell. I waited, hands thrust deep into overcoat pockets.

Madeleine opened the door.

"What gives, sister?" I growled.

She looked at me. She was pale, apprehensive.

"Upstairs," she breathed.

I pushed past her, then halted. I thought I heard machine gun fire. I tiptoed to a door on my left.... listened. The staccato noise stopped.

"Page ninety-two of my new story just completed," I heard a tired voice gasp.

"Oh Bob, you are a darling,"

That guy BoSh has sure got himself a good woman.

"....it's only three minutes to midnight," she said. "Try to type a dozen more pages before we retire."

Considerate, too.

I crept past the door, and tripped over the Willis cat. A red mist clouded my eyes. I felt sorta brutal, kinda sadistic. Something came over me: I drew: I fired. The cat started to lap it up. Heck.

I climbed the stairs, and aimed a kick at Carol's bedroom door as I passed. The devil was in me.

I reached the fan room, kicked the door open, and leapt inside. Walt lay back

in a chair, a cigarette drooping from the corner of his mouth. A flask stood on the table near his elbow. He looked in a bad way.

"Hiya," he croaked. "Grab a chair, sit down, and have a swig."

"O.K." I said. I grabbed a chair and sat down. What Walt says, goes. I tilted the flask, took a deep gulp. It almost burnt two layers of skin off my tongue. "Ghod," I thought. "How can Willis drink that stuff neat?" Personally, I like a little water with my orange cordial.

"I got your telegram," I said, sorta husky. "Sounded serious."

I looked at the hollow rings under his eyes.

"I've got a job for you, son," he said, sweat beading his forehead. "Secret and confidential, see."

"I get it," I said. "You know me."

"Yeah, he repeated. "It's secret and confidential, see."

I snarled. For two cents I would have extinguished the end of his cigarette... it was within range.

"Quiet," he shouted. "This thing is bigger than both of us."

"No," I cried. "Not that....."

"Yeah," he said. "Someone has stolen my autographed copy of STAR ROCKETS."

This was terrible. Catastrophic. I pulled out my notebook.

"I get it," I said. "You want me to discover who has stolen it."

"That's right," he said. "You're needle-sharp tonight."

"Yeah," I grinned. "I'm in the groove."

Walt raised a finger.

"I hope that's off the record," he whispered.

We both stood up.....shook hands. The great moment passed all too quickly.

I flipped over a page and poised my pencil.

"I wanna ask you a few questions," I said.

"O.K." he growled, "O.K."

"When did you last see STAR ROCKETS?"

"Last night," Walt said soberly. "I remember the incident distinctly. I couldn't stop laughing at one of my puns, and I picked up STAR ROCKETS to bring me back to sordid reality." He shuddered. "It worked."

I scribbled a few words. "We were all here last night," I pointed out, as I checked off the names.....Walt, Madeleine, Bob, Sadie, James, Peggy, George and myself.

"I cannot believe there is a thief amongst us," said Walt, reaching again for the flask. "Make sure the investigation is secret and confidential."

"Yeah, like you said."

"Yeah, I want it secret and confidential."

I kicked back my chair, and crouched in front of Walt, trigger finger itching. Some guys can go too far. I leered.

"I know what you want," I growled, my voice oozing with menace.

Walt reached across, plucked the Marilyn Monroe calendar off the wall, and began to tear it in two.

"What do I want?" said Walt, sorta casual.

"You want the investigation secret and confidential," I panted.

That was a near thing. No wonder Walt is the brains of this outfit.

He grinned and replaced Marilyn. I watched him carefully. For a few moments I was deep in contemplation as I gazed at the calendar.... only three more days before the Vargo Statten Magazine was published.

I turned to Walt. His brow was furrowed. He was looking at a large book. I edged round behind him and saw a ledger, a book of logarithms, a pair of dice, and an ouija board.

"What gives?" I asked, as he wiped the sweat from his forehead.

"I'm balancing the Transfanfund," he whispered hoarsely.

I kicked the table away, and pointed an accusing finger at Walt as he cringed in the chair.

"I get it," I rasped. "You steal the fanzine, then claim the insurance in order to balance the Transfanfund."

Don't let my looks fool ya, folks. I'm smart.

Walt winced.

"You silly twisted boy," he said. "You know I only insure my copies of "-"."

"Sorry, boss," I said. That long shot didn't pay off. But there was a motive. I scribbled for a moment.

Then my razor-sharp ears (I never wear a hat), detected a faint noise. I tiptoed over to the door, suddenly yanked it open.

Madeleine was staggering on the threshold, heavily laden with a large tray, a vast teapot, knives, forks, spoons, plates, salt, mustard and pepper, cakes, tarts and biscuits.

"Eavesdropping, eh" I gritted. I dragged her into the room.

"No, no," she cried. She turned to Walt. "You'll have to get a lift. I can't keep carrying all this food up ninety-three steps every time we have fans here."

I had to resort to bluff. I picked up a buttered crumpet, and slapped her across the face with it.

"So that's the game, sister," I snarled. "You steal the fanzine and then...."

"Drop the whole thing," ordered Walt.

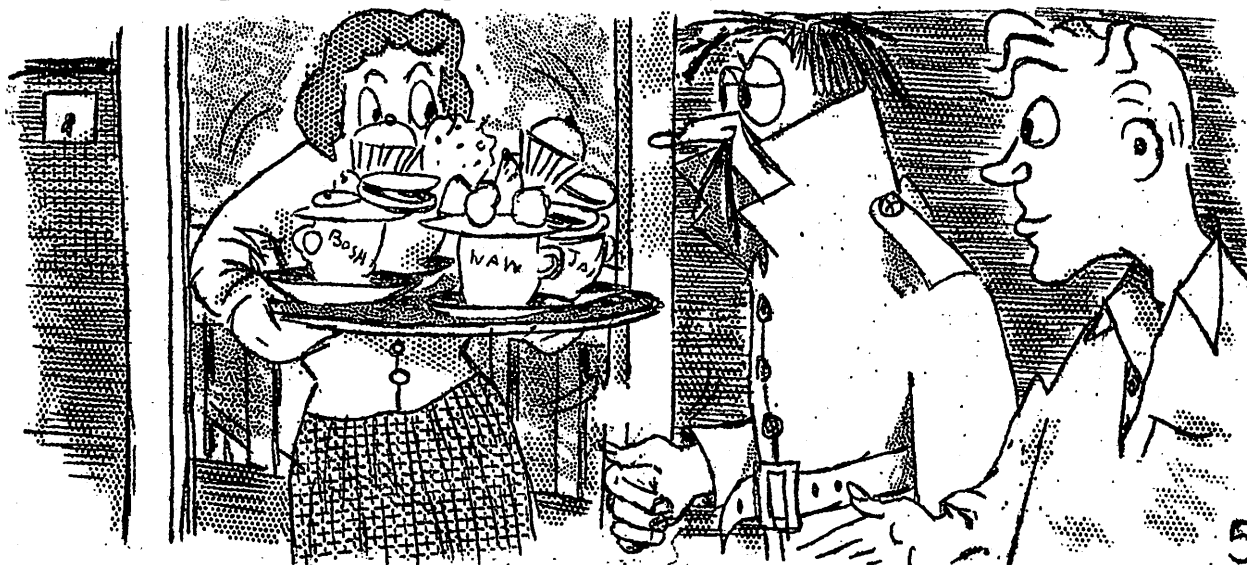
I hopped to the armchair. What is there about Willis that makes people obey him so literally? I wrung hot tea out of my socks.

Walt surveyed the pile of refreshments. "There is only one man who has the capacity to clear up this mess," he said. "That man is Bob Shaw."

He turned to me. "You must go. I don't want Bob to see you here. It might embarrass your work. We will all meet here next Sunday. That gives you four days to clear the matter up. Goodbye."

I leered at Madeleine, slammed the door, and tripped down the stairs. I picked myself up, cycled home, and lay in bed wondering about the job I had landed.

Then I thought about George Charters. He had a certain motive. He wanted



inspiration for his sixth column, and what better place to find it than browsing through STAR ROCKETS?

I decided to see him the following night.

* * * * *

George Charters lives in Bangor, -- a one-eyed seaside town a few miles away from Belfast. His address is #3, Lancaster Avenue. Some dump.

On the evening of my visit, I kept the place under observation for some time, but there was no sign of movement. I had to get George out of the way, so I resorted to cunning. I went to a telephone kiosk and dialled his number.

"Hello," I heard. A sort of aristocratic voice.

I stretched my handkerchief over the mouthpiece. "This is a friend," I said. "I just wanted to tell you that a Max Brand hard cover has been washed up on the beach."

I dropped the receiver back into its cradle, and glanced across the road. Sure enough, a figure that I recognised as the venerable Charters came punding down the path, vaulted the gate, and disappeared down the road.

It had worked. I was pleased with my knowledge of human nature. I should have been a psychologist, then I could treat myself for nothing.

Silently, I opened the gate and walked up the gravelled approach to No.3. I worked round to the side of the building, and found the French windows slightly ajar. I nipped inside, closed the curtains, and switched on the light.

What a queer set-up. This guy Charters sure hates himself. The first things I noticed were large hand-coloured copies of his first five columns bracketed to the wall, and illuminated by a battery of arc-lamps. Over the door was a board stating:-

449 TIMES UP TO 5.37 pm TODAY.

Some guy. Modest too. You'd never believe it just by looking at him.

I could have stopped all night to admire George's furnishings, but I had to get down to work. "Where," I asked myself, "would old George hide a copy of STAR ROCKETS?" I started to rummage through his desk. Was surprised to find that he has artistic leanings. He must have..... it said on the back of the photographs "For Art Students only."

Suddenly I heard footsteps, and the door handle started to turn. I drew my automatic, and slipped behind a curtain conveniently hung at the rear of George's desk.

Charters sauntered in, and took down the board over the door. He worked on it for a moment, and then replaced it. It now read:-

451 TIMES UP TO 7.14 pm TODAY.

Heck, I thought, this guy sure knows some hot numbers.

George smirked. He came over to the desk, and started to type. I peered out of the curtain, and looked over his shoulder.

Dear Mr Willis,

I have read the last few issues of HYPHEN, and, although I wish to remain anonymous, I feel that I must bring to your notice my appreciation of the superb literary talents of one of your previous contributors. I am, naturally, referring to Mr. George Charters. No doubt you will make a point of allowing this undoubted genius to appear in your pages far more frequently,etc.

He started to type another letter....

Dear Messrs Collins,

I note that you recently published a hard cover edition of Max Brand stories without mentioning my name.

This is contrary to usual practice, and I trust that you will make the necessary arrangements in future editions.....

Mmm. It seems that George is suffering from an inferiority complex.

I pulled the curtains to one side, and as George turned his face towards me, I raised my gat and sprayed his glasses to show I wasn't fooling.

"I'm a special investigator for HYPHEN," I gritted. I'm on the trail of the missing fanzine. Where is it?"

Bluff, see.

He looked kinda indignant.

"A fan of my reputation," he said loftily, "would not stoop so low as to swipe STAR ROCKETS."

My shrewd brain clicked into top gear. By a superb piece of reasoning, an unrivalled example of intellectual deduction, I discovered a significant fact. I pointed it out to George.

"How did you know it was STAR ROCKETS that was missing?" I barked. "I didn't say so."

He grinned weakly. I sprayed his glasses again, and during his temporary blindness, I altered the name on his letter to HYPHEN to my own. Then I emptied the rest of my ammunition into the mechanism of his typer. I'm vicious when I'm roused.

"Start talking," I said.

"I must get that leaky roof fixed," he said as he wiped his glasses on the corner of his handkerchief.

Listen. I'm even tempered. But I can only take so much. This guy was stalling, and I had Willis behind me. I decided to get rough.

"If you don't co-operate," I scowled, "I'll get Walt to make a new rule banning your sneaky Ghoddminton service."

This was too much for George. He broke down. "O.K." he sobbed, "I'll tell you all I know."

"Get going," I said. I reloaded my automatic carefully in a vase of flowers.

"The other night we were playing Ghoddminton," he said in a strained sort of voice. "Remember when Sadie misjudged the flight of the shuttlecock, and smashed the electric light globe instead?"

I nodded.

"James was umpire," he continued, "and just before the light went out, I saw him pick up the copy of STAR ROCKETS. When the light came on again, James was sitting on the floor with a bewildered expression on his face. That's all I can tell you."

"O.K." I grinned. "Thanks a lot, George." I crossed to the doorway, and then stopped and pointed at the board. "That's the idea of the scoreboard?" I asked, "You can tell me, -- I'm broadminded."

He beamed.

"That indicates the number of times my name has appeared in fanzines," he explained proudly.

I felt disappointed. It spoiled my theory about where George got the feminine outlook for his articles in FEMIZINE.

I slammed the door behind me.

I was on holiday the day following the Charters episode, and as I wanted to question James next, I decided to go to his place of employment. But, in disguise.

I put on an old coat, baggy trousers, spectacles and a bowler hat. I looked like a refugee from a silent film. People wouldn't sit next to me on the trolley bus.

James works at a tailors shop. I pushed open the doors and hobbled over to the immaculate, freshly-pressed and shined, White.

He looked at me. "This is a Gentlemen's Outfitters, dad," he scowled.

"Don't speak to a faan in that manner," I whined in a senile voice.

He turned pale. "You.....a faan?" he whispered.

"Yes," I said. "I published my first fanzine in 1910. I called it BALLOON TIMES."

"What's your name?" he said, pulling the tape measure from around his neck and shaping it into a noose.

"Ebenezer Roundhill," I croaked, -- I was lulling him into a false sense of security, see.

"And what can I do for you?" he said. His friends and workmates were grinning. I presumed he had told them how exciting and futuristic Irish Fandom was.

"I want to buy a beanie," I shouted loudly.

James turned red. He held his nose and waved me away. "Let's go to the fitting room," he said. "I'm sure I can fix you up there."

I didn't like the way he seemed to be estimating my collar size.

Once in the fitting room, I drew my gat and watered James' carnation with a long, steady blast.

"What have you done with STAR ROCKETS?" I shouted.

I'm dead cunning, see.

"I knew you all the time, Goerge," he said.

"I'm not George," I growled.

"Sorry Walt," he whispered.

"I'm not Walt," I said.

"You've lost weight, Bob," he tried.

"I'm not Shaw," I shouted.

"Make up your mind, then," he grinned.

I felt sorta baffled. I decided to try the technique that had worked so well on George. I sprayed James' glasses.

"That's not fair, Madeleine," he said. "You know there is a law about going around wearing clothing of the opposite sex."

"How did you know it was me?" I said in a squeaky falsetto.

"I noticed your crooked ghoddminton finger," he said.

"Well, I'm not Madeleine," I replied.

To be honest with you, I was getting mixed up. I felt I had lost the initiative. Things were getting too confused.

8 Then James shuffled forward, grinning endearingly. "It's....it's not you, is it, Peggy?" he breathed heavily.

I gulped, and sprayed James once more. Clouds of steam rose from him.

"I'm not Peggy," I shouted. For one horrible moment, I couldn't remember who I really was.

"Let's start all over again," I said, waving my rod menacingly. "What do you know about Walt's STAR ROCKETS? I'm investigating its disappearance for him."

"Oh, that's different, John," he said. "We were playing ghoddminton the other night, and I saw the corner of the fanzine sticking out from a pile of others. I pulled it out, -- just out of curiosity, -- and was just going to open it when that typical ghoddminton accident occurred. Just after the lights went out, I felt the fanzine pulled out of my hand, and I was pushed to the floor."

"Who do you think it was?" I asked, as I scribbled notes into my book.

"Dunno, somebody strong, anyway," he replied.

I frowned. That added another suspect.....I had originally discounted Madeline, but that last remark put her high on the list. She is not known as Muscular Madeleine for nothing. Walter should never have allowed her to start than correspondence with Charles Atlas.

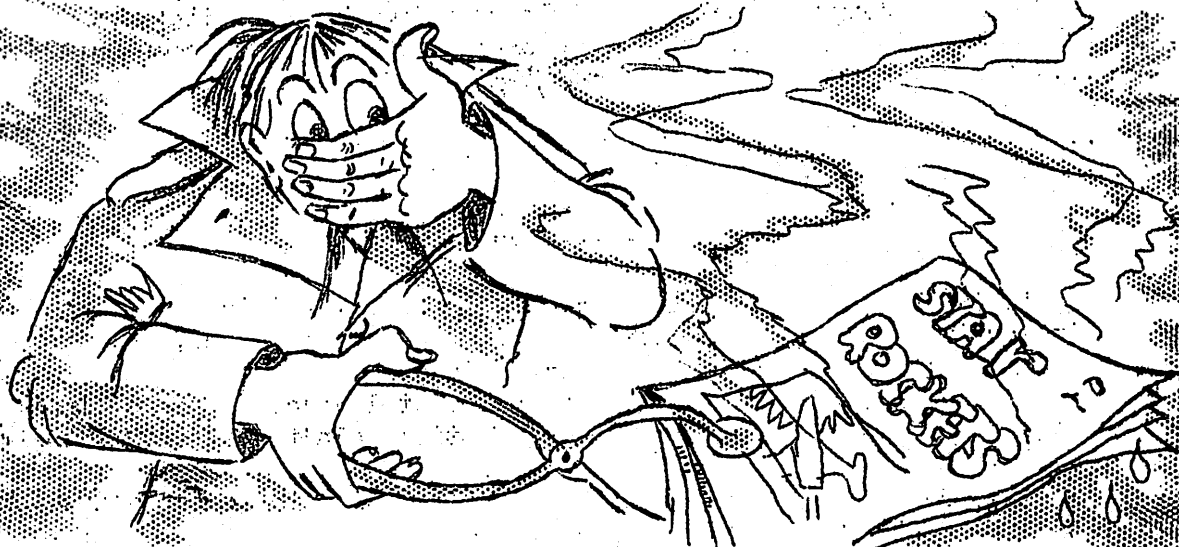
"O.K. Thanks, James. 'Bye." I said.

"'Bye, Sadie," he shouted as I passed through the doorway.

Heck.

Later that same afternoon, I was sprawled across an armchair, trying to formulate a theory without any clues, when I heard a noise in the hallway. I rushed to the window and saw the postman just closing the gate. In the hallway, I found a thick manilla envelope. Inside it was a copy of STAR ROCKETS.

I examined the fanzine carefully. Previously, I couldn't understand why Walt had been so shaken to discover that STAR ROCKETS had been stolen. Now I could appreciate his feelings. It was incredible.



I rested for a few moments, took two aspirins, and felt slightly better.

On the bacover, I noticed something strange. There was a series of faint black hand-prints, seemingly made by a deformed person. They didn't convey anything, but they seemed to have been made quite recently.

The next person I had to interview was Bob Shaw. As you probably realise, this guy Shaw is nobody's fool. He is clever, shrewd, capable, and strong. Very strong. For this reason, I decided to curb my itchy trigger finger and resort to psychology. Only by receiving a severe mental jolt could Bob be shaken out of his rigid composure.

However, time was short. I had only two days left to get an answer to the problem, and I still had at least five suspects.

Suddenly the answer came to me..... the one way, the only way, to get the truth out of Bob. I rushed into Town and bought the following:- one square yard of black fabric, a spool of fuse wire, a packet of benzedrine tablets, half a pound of ground nuts, and a bottle of lemonade. I also looked up the telephone number of the nearest mental institution, -- I was taking a great risk, and, the way I planned it, one of us might easily need that number. It could be me. The brain is a funny thing.....mine is.

Only one more thing remained to be done. I telephoned Bob at his office.

"Robert Shaw speaking," he said.

"John here, I answered. "How would you like a strawberry flan, two dozen vanilla trifles, a raspberry tart, three apple dumplings, and a gingerbread cake?"

I'm subtle, see.

All I could hear over the phone was a sort of prolonged whistle, followed by a tortured gulp.

"I'll be there in ten seconds," he gasped.

"No," I answered.

"Five," he screamed.

"No," I said. "My house tomorrow night, at six o'clock."

"I'll be there," he said. There was a kind of earnest pleading in his voice. A lump came into my throat. Heck, it's agin my nature to be sadistic.

I raced home again, and told my wife to prepare for a visit from Bob Shaw.

"Not....not the one who came with Walt Willis last March?" she gasped.

I nodded.

"Not....not the one they had to carry out after supper?" she groaned.

I nodded again.

She fainted. Poor kid. Gotta good memory.

The next twelve hours were really grim. There is a terrific mental strain involved in working all night, but with the aid of the benzedrine, and the lemonade, and sheer willpower, I achieved the impossible.

I snatched a few hours sleep, and got up at about 10 o'clock the following morning. One more day to go, I thought, and I still hadn't got the faintest glimmer of a clue.

Bob Shaw was due at six, which gave me sufficient time to go to Oblique House. I wanted to examine the fan room.

.....

I parked my bike against a wall on the Upper Newtownards Road and started towards 170. When I was a few yards from it, I saw Madeleine come out of the house, and walk in the opposite direction. She had a bulky parcel under one arm.

Heh, heh. Easier than I expected. That was one of 'em out of the way.

I reached 170, pushed the gate open, stepped over the slush patch, and crawled through the grass towards the front door. I rang the bell hard. When I heard footsteps approaching the door from inside, I ran around to the back of the house, intending to sneak upstairs via the back door.

Heh, heh, I laughed to myself at the thought of Sadie opening the front door while I slipped in by the rear. Sucker, I thought, as I pushed the back door open.

"Hello, John," said Sadie, a twisted smile on her lips.

"Hiya," I grinned weakly. Nothing is sacred. "I - I - I just came round to tell you that Bob will be home late... he is calling at my house on confidential business."

I'm smart, folks.....honest.

"I'm not having that typer back again," she snarled.

"No, no, Sadie," I said reassuringly. "You'll never see that again. By the way, I wonder if I might just pop upstairs....."

"Sure," she nodded understandingly, "it is rather cold."

Upstairs, I closed the door behind me, and looked around. Everything seemed quite normal. I straightened the Marilyn Monroe calender, kicked a length of stamp edging under a chair, and looked at a couple of Walt's letters.

Shucks. No clue at all.

I shouted 'thanks' to Sadie on my way out.

There was one chance left. Maybe, if my plan worked, Bob Shaw would break down, and tell me something interesting.

At the stroke of six o'clock, I heard a violent screech of brakes. Rushing to the window, I saw a "FAST TAXI" quivering outside the house. Vapour was rising from a badly overheated engine, and an exhausted-looking driver drooled out of the side window, his eyes sunk into their sockets, and his tongue hanging limply from his mouth.

"Where's the feed?" I heard behind me. Bob was sitting in an armchair in front of the fire, a handkerchief tucked into his collar, fork and spoon held at the ready.

My wife rushed in. "What's the front door doing in the back kitchen?" she asked bewilderedly.

"Bob's here," I said.

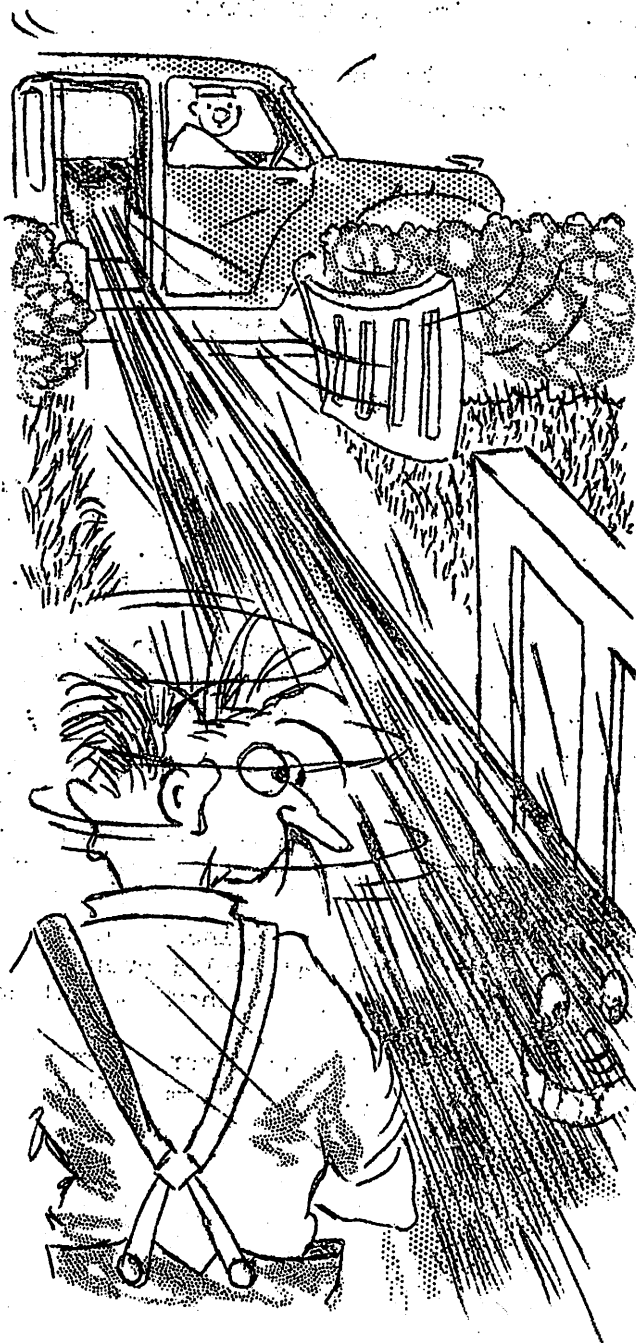
She nodded, walked out, then re-entered pushing a large sagging tea-trolley, which she guided to Bob's chair.

Moments later, Bob pushed the trolley away with his foot, and sank back into the armchair.

"I can't stop long," he said, "else my dinner will get cold."

"Sure, Bob, sure," I breathed. A great deal depended on the next ten seconds.

As Bob lay back, eyes partly closed, I reached down and tugged the fuse wire. 11



The wire ran around the room at the junction of the wall and ceiling, and was attached to the black fabric. As I tugged the wire, the fabric was pulled upwards revealing my budgerigar cage. Now came the climax of my night's work. Joey (the bird), was lying at the bottom of the cage. He raised himself on one claw, lifted his scrawny neck, wheezed twice, then said:-

"Bob Shaw, where is STAR ROCKETS?"

The bird collapsed, then, with a great effort, claws waving pathetically, lifted his head once again and said:-

"So help me, if ya don't hurry up and say it, I'll drown ya."

Them birds is clever.

Joey collapsed, squawked once or twice, then lay still, twitching spasmodically.

I loved that bird like a father, but, I'm telling ya, folks, no sacrifice is too great for Willis.

I looked at Bob's face. His eyes protruded like organ stops, his kisser was a pasty white.

"It spoke," he said. Just that, but it was said with great feeling.

"Did you hear what it said," I asked.

He continued to stare, his eyes filled with unutterable horror, like a young girl reading Chuck Harris's autobiography. For a moment, his mouth worked before he was able to answer.

"I I haven't got STAR ROCKETS."

I reckon he was hypnotised, the way he said it.

"Cast your mind back to that Ghoddminton game the other night," I said. "You were partnering Madeleine. What happened when the light went out? I should tell ya that I am acting for Walt."

He shook his head and ran a leathery tongue over his cracked lips. "I just laughed at Madeleine's little joke," he said, in a husky voice.

"What remark?" I growled. Heck, I was getting nowhere, fast.

"Well," he said, "When the light bulb exploded like a bullet, Madeleine said, 'Someone's shot.'"

I groaned. All that food gone and a paralysed budgerigar on my hands, just for one lousy crack. I began to search frantically for the telephone number I'd made a note of, when Bob got up, staggered to the cage, raised his beanie, and, with faltering footsteps, hobbled out of my house, shaking his head from side to side.

I felt kinda frustrated.

I thought about the following afternoon. I had to be in a position to tell Walt who had stolen STAR ROCKETS, and I still had no idea at all about who had taken the damn thing. And, unless I could produce results, I was going to have a lot of explaining to do to several angry people.

* * * * *

Sunday afternoon. All right, I was in a spot. Walt had pinned great faith in my ability, and confidently expected me to expose the criminal in our midst. And, all my prestige depended upon it.

I sighed, loaded my gat in the goldfish bowl, slipped it in an inside pocket. (The gat, natch.) I stuffed STAR ROCKETS in my hip pocket and cycled over to Oblique House. From outside, there was a sort of ominous silence about the place. A sorta expectant hush.

Drawing my rod, I ploughed my way across the lawn, reached the front door. Just then, Carol came skipping up the path, cheeks shining, fresh from Sunday school.

12 "Come here, kid," I mouthed.

She smiled sweetly and came up to me.

Look, that door was half open and for all I knew, there may have been a bucket of water suspended over it especially for me. Certain people of limited intelligence, James and George for instance, would take great delight in such a dastardly trick.

"I'll hold your hymn books, Carol," I said. "Just walk through that doorway."

In my racket, ya gotta take risks, see.

She pushed the door open wide, and stepped through. Nothing happened.

"Thanks, kid," I grinned.

I tiptoed upstairs. Jumbled words came from the fan room. There was a chance I might hear something useful. I listened. I got no scruples, see. I heard snatches of conversation.

".....and every time I press the Tab key, I get a jet of filthy water in my navel. Me, who stencilled THE ENCHANTED DUPLICATOR...."

".....and I had to buy a twenty guinea suit to soothe the General Manager..."

".....and there lay a poor innocent bird, its bloodshot eyes revolving like roulette wheels...."

I bared my teeth in a sadistic grin, drew my gat, kicked the door open, and leapt inside.

"Keep your hands where I can see them, folks," I gritted.

They looked at me, sorta bewildered. Madeleine reached for a Ghoddminton bat.

"Hold it, sister," I said, "or I'll rinse your permanent."

I'm telling ya, folks, I'd stop at nuthin'. I leered at them, and saw George move slightly.

"Put down that umbrella, George," I ordered.

Walt grinned. "I hear you've been working hard," he said.

"I get around," I said, sorta non-committal. I was out on a limb, see.

"Well," he said sarcastically, "did you find STAR ROCKETS?"

I laid my gat on the table, nonchalantly drew the fanzine from my hip-pocket, and flung it in his lap. He closed his eyes and shuddered. I think it was emotion.

"Do you know who took it?" he finally groaned.

Heck, what could I say?

"Sure I know," I bluffed. There was a sharp intake of breath. I looked at them. Walt, Madeleine, Bob, Sadie, James and George.

"Who?" they chorussed, looking at me in admiration.

"Before I tell ya, I want to reconstruct the scene of this heinous crime" I said.

Walt winced, but speedily took command. "Right," he said, like a Sergeant Major, "you all know your jobs. On the



word of command, Prepare.....Ghoodminton."

In the usual 30 seconds, tables, chairs, duffers, typers, etc., had all been stowed in their assigned corners, and the barricade erected in front of the window.

I waved my gat approvingly.

"Take up the positions you had when we played ghoodminton last Wednesday evening," I ordered.

They shuffled into position. I stood by Sadie, facing Bob and Madeleine across the net. James sat in the umpire's shock-proof chair, and George and Walt sat behind him.

I picked up STAR ROCKETS and thrust it into James' clammy fingers.

"Hold that, Jas," I grated. "George, will you please draw the curtains."

He did so.

I addressed them all. "The guilty person is in this room," I said, letting a subtle note of menace creep into my voice. Now for the bluff. "I am now going to smash the light bulb, but I must warn the culprit not to attempt to snatch STAR ROCKETS off James."

I'm crafty, folks.....honest.

There was silence in the room, except for the heavy breathing and the faint hiss from George sucking at his gums.

I felt quite excited myself. Heck, it isn't every day you can smash a Willis electric bulb.

I looked around the room once more. James sat on the chair, holding STAR ROCKETS at arm's length and trembling slightly.

I smashed the bulb with the butt of my gat.

A pause.

"Curtains, George," I yelled.

The rays of sunlight revealed James sitting on the chair, still holding STAR ROCKETS at arm's length, still trembling slightly.

"Don't try and take the fanzine, whoever is guilty," I panted from the landing, where I was removing an electric bulb. I refitted it in the fanroom.

I told George to draw the curtains, then I smashed the bulb again.

I waited five minutes.

"Curtains, George," I yelled.

The rays of sunlight revealed James sitting in the chair, holding STAR ROCKETS at arm's length, and trembling violently.

I felt kinda frustrated.

"There's a bulb in Sadie's room," said Madeleine, sarcastically.

"O.K., O.K., folks," I said weakly, trying hard to ooze confidence. "I've proved my point."

I was in a spot. I won't deny it, I was ruined. My bluff had been called. I had to admit defeat. I had tried everything, even an exact reconstruction of the crime.....or had I? Something occurred to me, -- it wasn't an exact reconstruction. Madeleine hadn't shouted her supposedly witty remark about "Someone's shot." I pondered over that.....someone's shot.... someone's shot.

Suddenly a whole series of unrelated incidents clicked into place.....the deformed hand print on the back of the fanzine.....a strip of stamp edging in the fan room.....someone's shot....the smashed bulb.

I knew who had taken the fanzine. Oh, bliss.

"Hold it, folks," I said. This time I wasn't bluffing. I guess they all realised it. Once again they all stared at me, eager to know the indirect cause of their discomforts.

I grinned delightedly. I would have kissed myself, 'cept that I blush easily.

"Your mind works quickly, Sadie," I said.

Bob swung his head round incredulously.

"Dah -ah-ah-ah-ah," he mouthed.

"It's a fact," I said sadly. "When she noticed James had picked up the fanzine, with great presence of mind, she smashed the bulb, and the fanzine was taken in the ensuing darkness, just as she had planned."

Everyone's eyes clicked to Sadie, then back to me again.

"But why did Sadie take STAR ROCKETS," gasped Walt. "That's what I can't understand. She is much too young."

"Sadie didn't take it," I grinned. I felt good.

The excitement was intense. Why, even Madeleine stopped studying Lesson Five of her Charles Atlas course. (We all know what Lesson Five develops, don't we? Heh, heh.)

"Pray excuse the vernacular," said George in his dignified Bangor accent, "but who the hell dun it?"

"Work it out for yourself," I said. I was thinking about my fee. I wondered if Walt would keep his word and give me those five banned copies of LA VIE PARISIENNE and his unexpurgated English-French dictionary.

"Why was STAR ROCKETS stolen?" I said. "Answer: because James picked it up. Why should anyone take exception to that? Answer: because the fanzine contained something. Why hide anything in STAR ROCKETS? Answer: can you think of a safer hiding place?"

But who dun it?" persisted George, changing his rocking chair into fourth gear.

It was Madeleine," I said.

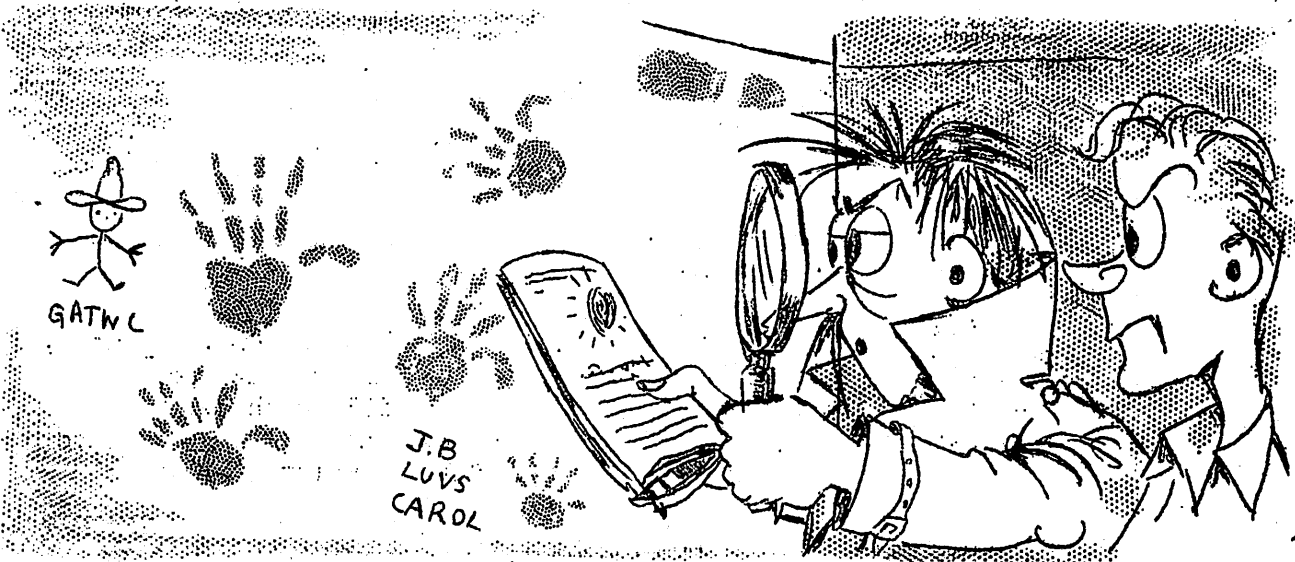
There was a deathly silence.

"Proof," croaked Walt from under the table, tearing off his white collar and red-spotted bow tie.

"Proof," cherussed the rest of them.

"Easy," I grinned. "I want to try an experiment. I want each of you to impress your left hand on the roller of Walt's duper, and then superimpose your handprint onto the wall."

I was bringing my involved technical training into play, see.



I was quite surprised. They lined up, smeared their left hands on the sticky black drum, plastered their hands on the wall-paper, and added their initials below. They did it quite artistically too. I can recommend it for all fan-rooms. James, of course, had to ruin the effect by choosing the Marilyn Monroe calendar as his target, but I can believe his excuse that he forgot he had paint on his fingers. It cleaned up okay though, ---- it didn't take me more than four hours.

"Pick up the fanzine, Walt," I told him. "On the back page you will find a hand print. Obviously it will match one of those on the wall."

Walt crossed the room and held the bacover under Madeleine's print. It was identical, --the crooked Ghoddminton finger being finally conclusive.

"Bloody Hell," said Walt, wiping a hand across his sweating forehead. (His left hand, natch.)

"It was a conspiracy," I said. "Sadie was in it too."

"Dah -ah -ah -ah -ah," cried Bob.

"Tell 'em, Madeleine," I said. I smiled. I felt terrific.

"It's true," she sighed. "Sadie and myself decided to bring out a one-shot.."

"That's what she said, Bob," I interrupted. "One-shot, not someone's shot as you thought. Carry on sister.."

"We wanted to do it secretly, whilst Walt and Bob were at their offices," Madeleine continued. "We kept our notes in STAR ROCKETS for the reason the Goon stated. I posted the one-shot this afternoon. I also posted the fanzine back to Goon to try to put him off the track." She turned to Sadie, and nodded.

They turned to me and advanced slowly. I backed away. Hell hath no fury...

Strong arms gripped me, lifted me, and suspended me from a coat hook. George and James advanced with dripping zaps at the Firing Position. Sadie dragged forward a garden hose, and Madeleine lumbered in with two full fire buckets. Walt was the only one who showed any respect. He advanced waving my gat. I wondered when I had last cleaned out the goldfish.

As I dribbled my way down the stairs and squelched through the hall, Walt followed with a mop and bucket.

I paused at the front door.

"Er, the fee," I said, very casually, "shall I take them with me, or do you want to have another look through them?"

He produced a thin, wrapped packet from his pocket.

"You did a good, farnish job, Goon," he said, "a job meriting more, far more, than six eye-tracked copies of LA VIE PARISIENNE. I am going to give you instead something that you will treasure, something that will be the very keystone of your Collection. You, Goon, unique among the Wheels of IF, will now be the only one of us who can boast of possessing a full, complete file of STAR ROCKETS."

He pushed the parcel into my hand.

16 " 'night," he said, as he closed the door behind me.

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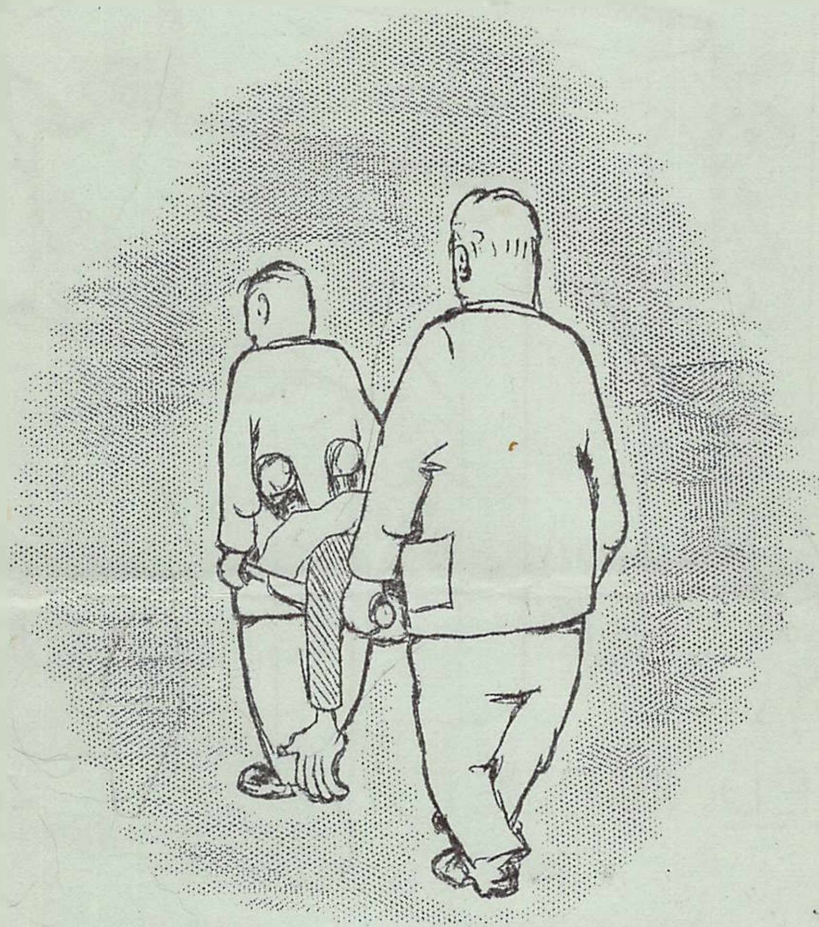


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