

A CURE FOR BALDNESS

RON GOULART

*

In an issue filled with terrorists, ghosts, and Martians, we need a bit of levity. Fortunately, we had this story by Ron Goulart on hand. “A Cure for Baldness,” according to Ron, “explains the various aspects of growing older.” Hmm. Would that aging could be so interesting for everyone.

It was about a half hour after the second bomb scare that his real trouble got going. Roger Snow had hidden in a closet the second time the fifteen story Tandem Brothers Publishing Building on Park Avenue South was evacuated. Trooping out into the hot, glaring Manhattan street once a day was sufficient. The building never blew up anyway.

Roger had sneaked back into his office after five minutes or so, sat again at his drawing board and started working on thumbnail sketches for the latest paperback cover in the Lizardworld series.

“Swordsmen of Lizardworld,” he’d said aloud, allowing himself to sigh some. “Can you fall from grace if you never had any in the first place?”

After awhile he noticed that his hand kept sticking to the layout paper, which meant the air conditioning was on the fritz again. Sighing once more, he leaned back in his chair. The chair produced the usual resentful groaning.

Roger was a plump, moderately tall man in his middle forties and his hair was thinning. Well, actually he was going to be forty-seven next month and he was just a shade under five foot eight. He was at least thirty pounds overweight and there was extremely little of his brindle-colored hair left on his head at all.

“I’m starting to sound like a resume when I describe myself,” he reflected. “But

you can’t romance the fact that I’m going to seed. As a person, as an artist,

and—“

“Just where’s your damn loyalty, Rog?”

“I had it when I came in this—“

“Enough wiseass stuff. How do you explain this?”

While Roger had been woolgathering at his board, everybody in the Fiction Division of Tandem Brothers had returned. Lex Tandem himself was in the doorway of the small office, holding a partially crumpled fax message in his tanned hand.

“You have some words written in reverse across the front of your suit,” mentioned Roger. “What does it say? ‘Down with the Colonel! Tobacco means . . . ‘ Can’t make out the next word.”

“Death,” supplied Lex. “I got whacked with a placard. You’d think those halfwits would wait until the paint dried before they started marching around with the damn things.”

“Another protest march in front of the building, huh?”

“Didn’t you notice it? Over a hundred wild-eyed loons waving—“

“Wasn’t paying attention.”

“I tried to explain to this woman—large hefty critter, probably lifts weights -- that the Colonel Lightfoot Tobacco Company sold its interest in Tandem over a month ago to Worldwide Pesticide. But she wrapped me anyway.”

“Protestors usually have a narrow view of—“

“I’m happy to say it sounded like the cops broke her arm when they tossed her in

the wagon. So I got some gratification out of—“

“They the ones who planted the latest bomb?”

“No, no. Ordek Yumurta is claiming credit again.”

“The Turkish terrorist group?”

“How many Ordek Yumurtas do you think there are? Yes, of course, stupid, the damn Turkish terrorists.” Lex shook his handsome head. “They continue, apparently, to be ticked off because we published Dr. Uzon Boylu’s book last month. It’s a shame because that book—what the bloody hell is that?” He was pointing a tanned finger at a cover painting that leaned against the far wall.

“Cover for Dr. Suicide novel #46. Slit Throats in Singapore . Why?”

“It’s godawful.”

“Yep, which is exactly the style you said to use, commencing with #40.”

“I thought I suggested wretched.”

“It’s that, too.”

“I’m straying from the point.”

“About Dr. Boylu, you mean?”

“No, not exactly. Although it is a fact that Think Tall has helped me one hell of a lot. And how many other publishers can say they actually get anything from any of the dimwit books they publish?”

“The correct answer is fourteen.”

“What did I tell you about the wiseass stuff?”

“To stop.”

“Exactly. Before I read Boylu’s wonderful book I suffered from not being especially tall.”

“You’re short, Lex.”

“No, five foot two is not technically short.”

“It is, yeah. Besides, you’re only four foot eleven.”

“I was, but after reading Boylu’s book and applying his teachings—well, I shot up to five two. Any dimbulb can see I look much taller.”

“That’s only because you’ve taken to walking funny.”

“What do you mean?”

“You go around on tiptoe now and sort of stretch your neck.”

“Sure, that’s all part of the Boylu System. In order to think tall, you have to stand tall,” explained the publisher. “But actually—I came here to talk about the new assignment I have for you.”

“I’ve got sufficient assignments, what with recruiting artists for Dr. Suicide

covers and Lizardworld and the new Lethal Injector series and—“

“This involves not art but travel.” He took, on tiptoe, a step back and cocked

his head to the right. “It’d be nice if you had more hair and less chins, but

maybe Olive Bunce has different tastes than—“

“Whoa, no. Wait.” He pushed back from his board. “I don’t intend to go anywhere

near Olive Bunce or—“

“On the contrary, Rog, you are. You’re going out to California, in just three weeks,” said the publisher.

“Otherwise . . .” Shrugging, he glanced over his shoulder at the door.

“You can’t fire me. I have tenure, not to mention—“

“Tenure is for academics. But, don’t fret, if you can bring off this simple task, you’re set for life.”

“Any chore that remotely involves Olive Bunce cannot be classified as simple.”

“Follow along with me as I explain things to you.” His boss smoothed out the fax

he’d been clutching. “For the past two years, lord only knows why, Olive Bunce

has been the top mystery thriller writer in the nation. Her latest compilation

of tripe, *Red Blood Reigns*, has been on the lamebrained Times best-seller list

for untold eons. The paperback of her *Blood upon the Rose* is already #2 on the

--“

“It jumped to #1 this past weekend. But, be that as it may, Lex, I won’t be—“

“Let me make two very important points. Firstly, Olive Bunce’s contract with Blitzkrieg Books is about to expire. She is now being courted by just about every major publisher.”

“I hear Barson & Sons offered her \$42,000,000 for her next three—“

“We can match any offer those nitwits make. In fact, we’ll top anybody’s offer,” the publisher assured him as he came inching forward. “And we have an ace in the hole in you.”

“Nope, not an ace. A Jack or a Queen, maybe a ten, but—“

“She loves you, doesn’t she?”

“Loved. Years in the past. Maybe.”

“I’m betting she still does. Those college romances are intense and never forgotten.”

“We only dated for about one semester, Lex, and I’m sorry now I ever mentioned it to you. The thing is, we weren’t exactly Scott and Zelda or—“

“But you slept with her, didn’t you?”

“I don’t feel like discussing my long ago sex life with you. I’ve been married for better than fifteen years and—“

“And damn lucky you are. If it wasn’t for Natalie I wouldn’t even have found out about this terrific opportunity for us to beat all the opposition.”

“Natalie? What does my wife have to do with this?”

“Natalie. bless her pretty blonde head, sent me this.” He fluttered the fax.

“What is it?”

“It’s the final notice from the Class of ‘68 Committee of the Bayshore College Alumni Association. If you don’t send your money in by this Friday, Rog, you’ll miss the 25th Reunion. It’s being held at the palatial Hotel Fairview, nestled high in the Bayshore hills and overlooking beautiful San Francisco Bay .”

“I’m not attending that. I’ve never been to a damn class reunion and I’m not starting now. I haven’t even set foot in California for sixteen years.”

“Note this line—‘Keynote Speaker at the Reunion Banquet will be Olive Bunce.’”

“Noted.”

“You’re fortunate that your wife thinks more of the company than you do.”

“Natalie really sent that to you?”

“The original came in today’s mail and once Natalie spotted it, she knew what to do.”

“She opened my personal mail and shared it with a stranger, huh?”

“It’s an invitation, not anything confidential. And I’m far from being a stranger,” countered the publisher. “Natalie happens to be aware that we’re anxious to get Olive Bunce in our stable.”

“Listen, Lex, I have absolutely no influence on Olive. We haven’t even exchanged Christmas cards for over ten years at least.”

“She’s divorced.”

“So?”

“Well, the loves of our youth are the deepest and truest.”

“I know, that was the blurb on the jacket of Sins of the Flesh. Even so, I—“

“Here’s something else I want you to think over, Rog. Either get ready for a trip out to California—or put all your crap in a cardboard box and vacate this office by sundown.”

Roger took another look out his window. “Will you pay all my expenses for the reunion?” he asked finally.

“Within reason, sure.”

He said, “Okay, I’ll go. I can’t, though, promise—“

“I don’t want promises, I want results.” Tandem moved to the doorway. “And see if you can, somehow, improve your overall looks before you head West.”

Roger finished his Saturday list, weekly errands Natalie assigned him, an hour earlier than he’d expected. When he realized that, he was driving his six-year-old Toyota through a rural section of Brimstone, Connecticut that he hadn’t been in lately. It was ten minutes shy of three and the afternoon was warm and somewhat hazy.

On his left he passed an abandoned roadside produce stand, an empty field and then a freshly painted cottage. Attached to a post in front of the house was a rustic sign—Samson Institute: We Can Grow Hair Anywhere.

Roger slowed, then braked. He swung the car across the lane and onto the white gravel driveway. He parked in front of the cottage and sat for a moment in his car, robbing at his nearly hairless head. “Guy’s probably a quack,” he murmured. “But I am going to need hair in California.”

Sighing, he eased out into the humid afternoon. While still three paces from the bright red front door, he heard an enormous rumble of thunder. He was aware, too, of the crackling sizzle of lightning. But it all seemed to come from inside the Samson Institute.

Deciding this could be an emergency, he sprinted to the door. He ignored the brass horseshoe knocker and tried the handle.

The door opened and he stepped into a cluttered parlor. The smell of smoke was thick all around and there was also a sulfurous odor. Sprawled in the exact center of a large shaky pentagram that had been sketched on the bare hardwood floor in pale blue chalk was a suit of clothes. A brown tweedy suit of clothes, with a frayed blue shirt inside the coat and a mended black sock dangling out of one of the trouser legs.

A pair of rimless spectacles lay just outside the farthest point of the pentagram. Near the sock was steepled a thick book bound in pinkish leather.

Squatting, Roger read the title, “The Compleat & Dreadful Magikal Writings of the Notorious Count Monstrodamus. Not too catchy, even for a hardcover.” Standing up, he glanced around. “Mr. Samson—are you about anywhere?”

“You know, he got the incantation just about right. But hey, in black magic—as in most things, come to

think of it—almost doesn't win you the cigar.”

Roger noticed now that someone was seated in a bentwood rocker in the far corner. The chair was ticking slowly back and forth, its high back hitting against a tall book case that was crammed not only with fat ancient books but with lolling stuffed toys, rusty miniature cars, dusty glass animals, clouded crystals and dirt-smeared chunks of rock.

“Mr. Samson?” Roger squinted, but still couldn't make out the figure in the chair. That section of the parlor seemed unusually shadowy.

The person in the chair chuckled. “No, nope. Samson is . . . well, he's elsewhere. He's, yeah, about as elsewhere as you can get. Sad in a way, you know. Here he summoned me up, but in futzing up that ancient spell—and granted, reciting Latin backward can be tricky—by futzing up that one word, he blew the whole deal.” He chuckled again. “Maybe I can help you?”

“Well, unless you can grow hair, I don't think—“

“Hey, no problem. What kind of hair do you want ? And what do you want to grow it on?”

“My head.” He was about to pat his scalp, but he had a sudden feeling that he'd like to be outside of this cottage and inside his car once again. “That's all right, though. I can drop in sometime later on, when Mr. Samson is back.” He began a few careful steps backward.

“Hard to tell, Mr. Snow, when he'll turn up again. Considering where Samson is, you know, if he ever does get back, he may, really, have lost all interest in hair.”

“Okay, then I'll just—How come you know my name?”

“Simple trick. My name, by the way, is Ford Madox Ford.”

“No, it's not. Ford Madox Ford was some kind of British novelist who had a book of his done on Masterpiece Theater once. He's dead.”

“That's true. Actually Ford Madox Ford, is an assumed monicker. My real handle is . . . “ A huge roaring sound, accompanied by a crimson gust of flame, came out of the shadows. “For occasions such as this, however, I prefer to use Ford.”

Roger lowered himself down into a plump armchair. “Nice meeting you, Mr. Ford.”

“So why do you want hair?”

“Oh, it's sort of complicated.”

“Hold it. I'll read your mind. Faster.”

Nodding, Roger pointed at the sprawl of empty clothes with his shoe toe. “Was Samson inside those earlier?”

“Eh?”

“Samson of the Samson Institute. Was he wearing those up until—“

“Yep, you just missed the guy. Whoosh! Right out of his attire and off to elsewhere. They won’t mind his being jaybird naked over there.”

“He dabbled in magic?”

“Black magic, ancient sorcery, stuff like that.”

“Was he using black magic and such to grow hair for people?”

“I’d guess, since his business wasn’t going all that well, that he was hoping to get some supernatural help.”

“You mentioned earlier that he’d summoned you. What exactly are—“

“A demon.”

“Oh.”

“Don’t, though, get the notion that my abilities are limited to dull crap like growing hair. Nope, I happen to be a full service, all purpose demon,” explained Ford Madox Ford. “I could, for example, guarantee that Olive Bunce signs with Tandem.”

Roger frowned at the shadows. “You read about that in my mind, huh?”

“Right, nothing to it. Carny trick.”

“And you say you could actually make sure that she—“

“Are we maybe talking a deal here, Rog?”

“Could you, and I don’t mean to offend you, but could you call me Roger? Only that putz Lex Tandem calls me—“

“Roger. You got it.”

“The thing that occurs to me, Mr. Ford, is—“

“You can just call me Ford.”

“I’m wondering, Ford, if this is one of those setups where I have to sell you my soul to get what I want. Or where I end up going off to elsewhere for all eternity. If so, a new head of hair and a contract with Olive isn’t worth—“

“Eternity’s not all that long, but not to worry,” said the demon amiably. “Let me explain, Roger, what I have in mind. Oh, but first perhaps I ought to decide on a persona.”

“Meaning what?”

“Right now I’m clouding your mind so you can’t see me clearly,” he explained.

“Normally I look like a cross between a cocker spaniel and a Komodo dragon.”

“Cockers can be cute.”

“Not when blended with a huge lizard. Anyway, Roger, if we’re going to have dealings, then eventually I’ll need a human form. Lately I’ve been using an appealing mix of Mick ey Rooney and Harlan Ellison, but maybe there’s—“

“Before we go into what you’re going to look like,” cut in Roger, “I want more details about this deal you have in mind.”

The chair ceased to rock. “I want twenty-five percent of your income.”

“For the year?”

“Oh, no. For your entire lifetime.”

“Twenty-five percent is kind of steep. Fifteen percent would be—“

“How many previous deals have you made with demons?”

“Well, none, but I’ve been publishing for most of my adult life and I know—“

“Twenty percent is as low as I go.”

“That’s still not exactly fair.”

“Who said demons had to be fair?”

“Okay, twenty percent, then. But, and again I don’t want to annoy you, Ford, but wouldn’t it be easier for you to simply make money with sorcery? Turn lead into gold with a—“

“Have you ever seen that done? The old transmuting base metals dodge?”

“No, but it shouldn’t be too difficult for you.”

“It’s a snap, but very dull. No fun at all,” explained the demon. “Do we have a deal?”

“I’m assuming that I’ll be making at least twenty percent more than I am now.

Otherwise, going in with you will only mean—“

“Think about what befell friend Samson just for futzing up one word. It’s not smart to rile supernatural

forces, Roger.”

Roger coughed. “Sorry. What about the hair?”

“You got it” A finger snapping sound came out of the shadows.

His scalp turned suddenly very warm, felt like it was going to sizzle soon. Tiny popping noises commenced all across the top of his head. Jumping up, Roger touched at his steaming scalp. There seemed to be hair up there. “Mirror around here any place?”

“In the john. Down the hall, second door on your left.”

Excusing himself, Roger rushed down to the mirror. He gave a pleased laugh when he saw himself. His head was covered with hair the color and texture of the hair he’d started to lose way back in his twenties. “This is great, Ford,” he called out. “Except you’ve got it parted on the wrong side: Could you fix that? Only if it’s not too much trouble.”

The demon didn’t reply.

Back in the parlor Roger found that both the shadows and Ford Madox Ford were gone from the far side of the room.

“I’m still going to have to explain all this hair to Natalie,” he said as he left the cottage.

He was 24,000 feet in the air when he next encountered the demon. Roger had a window seat in the jet, but he was frowning at the notebook open on his tray and paying no attention to the fields of clouds outside. He was making notes on what he intended to do once he hit the reunion.

“So what do you think?” inquired the middle-aged man who was sitting next to him.

“Beg pardon?”

“Do I make a convincing human?”

Swallowing, Roger dropped his pencil on the tray. “Ford?”

The man chuckled a familiar chuckle. “I based my looks on Gene Hackman this time -- only younger. Do you like his movies?”

“You got the nose wrong.”

“It’s a Karl Malden nose. He was great in *On the Waterfront*.”

“Speaking of appearances, I’ve been losing a lot of weight. Is that because of you ?”

“Yep, all part of the service. We’re getting you in fighting trim.”

“Natalie’s been worried. She accepted the hair finally, but she wanted me to see our doctor before taking off on this damn trip.”

“She’s not really worried.”

“What do you mean?”

“The concern is feigned. Now, let’s talk about—“

“Listen, I ought to know if my own wife is concerned about me or not.”

“Not important, sorry I brought it up.”

“At least she sticks by me, she’s there day after day. Whereas you I haven’t seen for weeks. Not since we met at the Samson—“

“I have other clients, other interests,” reminded the demon. “Sometime ask the missus where she goes on Thursday nights.”

“She goes to the St. Norbert Vestry Committee Meetings.”

Ford Madox Ford chuckled. “Okay, now here’s what I have in mind for you when we arrive in—“

“What the hell are you hinting at? That Natalie is—“

“Nothing not a dam thing. Just clowning around. You know how evil spirits are, always needling.” He tapped the open notebook. “Mapping out your assault on Olive, I see.”

“Who’s my wife fooling around with?”

“I’ll fix it so you lose another ten pounds and we’ll get rid of those pouches under your eyes and the extra chin might as well—“

“You’re supposed to know everything aren’t you? So you must know who it is that Natalie is—“

“She’s a charming lady, pretty as a picture. That is my final comment on her.”

Roger picked up the pencil, tapped at his chin with the eraser end. He stared out into the afternoon sky. “Okay, all right,” he said finally. “We’ll concentrate on business.”

There were at least four hundred people at the reunion cocktail party in the Gold Rush Ballroom of the Hotel Fairview. Thus far something like fifty of them had come up to Roger, squinted at his name tag done a take and said something along the lines of, “Damn, you look better now than you did then. What’s your secret, Rog?”

“Black magic and sorcery,” he’d reply, chuckling.

After awhile he dropped the chuckling. It reminded him of Ford Madox Ford.

The demon didn't seem to be in attendance, at least not in his Gene Hackman/Karl Malden mode. Even more unsettling was the fact that Olive Bunce wasn't present.

"Wig?" Someone dealt him a sudden poke in the back.

He took a surprised jump forward, then, slowly, turned. "Nate? Are you Nate Karnofsky?"

"I am," admitted the lean, bald man as he held out his hand. "Is that your own hair?"

"More or less." He shook hands. "Nate. We used to be . . . "

"Buddies."

"Yeah, we were, but then . . . "

"We drifted apart. How are you doing? Did you become a painter?"

"In a way, I'm an art director for a publishing house."

"I went into real estate. I'm a millionaire."

"That's good."

His friend shrugged. "I'd rather be happy. And you?"

"What?"

"Are you happy? Are you rich? Does your wife cheat on you?"

"What made you ask that last one?"

"I've had three wives thus far, Rog, and every damn one of them—"

"Speaking of women, have you seen Olive Bunce?"

"I haven't, no. But I did encounter Creig Bashford. He was always threatening to deck you if you kept seeing Olive, wasn't he?"

"He did deck me. He committed several acts of violence back in college. I even lost part of a tooth."

"Young love," observed Nate. "Now, about the hair, how'd you—"

"Bashford's here?"

"Over by the bar. Huge as ever, though out of shape, and looking extremely nervous and distraught."

"I'd just as well avoid the guy."

"Transplant?"

"Hum?"

“Your hair, Rog. I’ve tried just about every—“

“You don’t, trust me, want to do what I had to do to get this head of hair.”

“Face lift, too, looks like.”

“Nope, no.”

“Then how do you manage to look—“

“Black magic and sorcery.”

“C’mon, seriously.”

“Actually, it’s based on diet and exercise. I’ll send you a couple books by Dr.

Uzon Boylu once I get back home, Nate.”

“You still living in Pennsylvania?”

“We never lived in Pennsylvania. Connecticut. It’s Connecticut.” He was scanning the milling crowd of people again, hoping for a glimpse of Olive Bunce.

“Well, well, my my. It is Roger Snow, is it not?” A distinguished elderly gentleman put a friendly arm around his shoulders. “Will you excuse us, Mr. Karnofsky, if I spirit Roger off for a little private chat. He was one of my prize pupils back then.”

“Not at all, Professor . . . “

“Terhune. Albert Payson Terhune.” The professor tugged Roger into the surrounding crowd.

Roger frowned. “I never had a Professor Terhune,” he said. “You must have me mixed up with—“

“Convincing, isn’t it?”

“Ford?” He stopped still, almost causing a cruising waiter to walk into him.

“I thought you’d recognize the persona. It’s Robert Donat.”

“Who?”

“Robert Donat in Good-bye, Mr. Chips. A sentimental film classic. Don’t you ever watch anything on—“

“From what I’m vaguely remembering of Robert Donat, he sure didn’t have a nose like yours.”

“I retained the Malden nose.”

“We have a problem,” Roger told the demon. “Olive is nowhere to be—“

“I know, yes. That’s why I’ve come for you.” Ford Madox Ford started him moving toward an exit. “We’re going to have to rescue her.”

Roger halted again. “Rescue?”

“I fear the lady has been kidnapped.”

“Then it’s a job for the police—or the FBI. Some outfit with lots of weapons.”

“Ah, but should you manage to save Olive,” the demon pointed out, getting him moving again, “consider how grateful she’ll be. She’d sign with Tandem in a jiffy.”

“Think so?”

“Foregone conclusion.”

“Just how dangerous could it be?”

“Aw, only moderately.”

Roger found himself in a wide, purple-carpeted corridor. “Okay, I’ll try it.”

Then he asked, “How come you know about this kidnapping?”

The demon answered, “I keep my ears open.”

The abandoned studio-warehouse lay at the end of a rutted street down near the Bay in a rundown section of the town of Bayshore. Perched atop the sprawling building was a giant plastic folksinger, complete with acoustic guitar. His booted left foot was planted atop the F in the large metal Folknik Records sign.

“I had a bunch of Folknik LPs when I was in college,” mentioned Roger, who was crouched in the thick brush that bordered the tumbledown wooden fence that had once protected the warehouse. “Yeah, Wayne Purebucket used to record on Folknik.

I played his Clean Air, Pure Water Talkin’ Blues all the—“

“Stow the nostalgia.” Ford Madox Ford was scanning the nearby building with a pair of night binoculars. “They’re at the back of the building.”

“You can see them with those glasses?”

“I’m also using some low level psychic powers. There are just two goons guarding Olive. She’s tied in Recording Studio A.”

“That’s probably where Wayne Purebucket once recorded.”

“We’ll make our move soon as Creig arrives. Nab the whole—“

“Creig? Are you talking about Creig Bashford?”

“The same. He’s the mastermind, if you can call him that.”

“But he had a tremendous crush on Olive.”

“The lad has fallen on hard times. He plans to net \$1,000,000 in ransom and then retire to Central America, leaving his debts and responsibilities behind,” explained the demon. “Quite a few of your contemporaries, you know, feel they’ve arrived at an age when they ought to start planning their retirement.”

“Olive will recognize him and tell the cops eventually.”

“He’ll be wearing a sack over his head and disguising his voice.”

“Don’t you think, Ford, that a phone call to some law enforcement agency would work as well as a raid by us,” he said. “Then, after they disarm and incapacitate the gang, I can go strolling in and announce, ‘Hi, I’m the concerned private citizen who blew the whistle on this plot.’”

“Here, use this.” Ford Madox Ford thrust some sort of automatic weapon into his hands.

“I’ve drawn stuff like this for the Dr. Suicide cover roughs, but I don’t really know how to operate one.”

“If the need arises, simply squeeze the trigger. I’ve rigged the gun so you can’t screw up.”

“I’m not particularly keen on shooting anybody.”

“This is like diplomacy. Most of the time just rattling the weapons is sufficient.”

“Suppose they decide to rattle their guns.”

“We’re going to have the element of surprise on our—hush, here comes Creig’s car.”

“Look at that, he’s driving a Toyota that’s two years older than mine. He really must be in bad financial shape.”

The auto stopped in front of the boarded up warehouse.

After a moment Roger observed, “He’s not getting out of the damned car.”

“He’s having trouble putting on his sack.” The demon caught hold of Roger’s arm. “Okay, there he is—let’s go. We’ll grab him before he reaches the door and use him to get ourselves safely inside.”

“I suppose you’re aware that this guy has a history of knocking me down?”

“You didn’t have a gun in those days.”

Everything worked out much better than Roger had anticipated. The kidnapers surrendered without a shot being fired and Creig Bashford didn’t even try to take a single swing at him.

When the police were loading Bashford into the wagon, though, he started claiming loudly that he was only a pawn in this caper. He maintained that a man named Henry Seton Merriman had recruited him and planned the whole thing. “The man is a master crook,” Bashford shouted. “Short guy, looks a lot like Mick ey Rooney.”

No trace of Merriman was ever found.

Roger never returned to Connecticut, never went back to work for Tandem. It turned out that Olive, who didn't look any different than she had back in college, wanted to start her own publishing firm. She hired Roger, at a salary several times larger than what he'd been earning as her Art Director and Vice President.

He moved into her new mansion near Carmel. His wife, Natalie, he learned, had run off with Lex Tandem the very day he had departed for California and the reunion.

A week before the new offices of Bunce Books were scheduled to open in San Francisco, Olive came out onto the vast mosaic tile patio of her villa.

“I hope you don't mind, Roger,” she said, smiling. “I've gone ahead and hired a marvelous man to be our Advertising Director. He's had a heck of a lot of experience, in Manhattan and London.”

He was reclining in a candy-striped deckchair, facing seaward. “Who is he?”

“His name is Brander Matthews,” she answered. “Quite handsome, except for his nose.”

“Nose?” Roger sat up.

“Yes, it's just like that actor's. What is his name?”

“Karl Malden?”

“Yes, that's the one.”