

Collier's

NOVEMBER 23, 1946

TEN CENTS

DETROIT'S TIME BOMB

And a NEW SERIAL By
OCTAVUS ROY COHEN



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THE WEEK'S MAIL

HEELS AND HEROES

SIRS: Heels Among the Heroes (Oct. 19th) is quite an invective—almost 100%—about what sinners Uncle Sam's troops are. Sounds like a regular "Pussyfoot Johnson" broadside in the days of Prohibition. The world—especially America—was going straight to hell because of liquor.

Give the other side of our American impact on the present disillusioned German mind. I've got a son in the 14th Constabulary Squadron. He's no "heel."

DONALD MCCASKEY, W. Arcadia, Calif.

... May I thank you for Heels Among the Heroes. It isn't something to be proud of. As an American soldier I was disgusted with it. There must be a solution to the problem and I hope it's found.

CPL. EDWARD J. KELLEY

RIGHT JAB

DEAR EDITOR: Please, oh, please, tell me how to pass meat through a skewer as instructed in the recipes in Tidbits from Turkey (Oct. 5th).

I always pass the skewer through the meat. Have I been wrong?

MRS. W. E. LAUGHLIN, Tulsa, Okla.

Be old-fashioned if you wish. More modern cooks drive the skewer into the wall, point out. Then they back up with the meat and rush forward, impaling the meat on the skewer. It is advisable to avoid harpooning one's self, as the author of Tidbits from Turkey has obviously done.

LIGHT ON ACCIDENTS

WALTER DAVENPORT: REGRETTABLE STOP, LOOK AND LIVE (OCT. 19TH) GAVE NO CREDIT FOR TRAFFIC ACCIDENT CURB IN DETROIT TO AGGRESSIVE WORK OF PUBLIC LIGHTING COMMISSION STOP ADEQUATE LIGHTING ON 31 MILES OF DETROIT STREETS REDUCED TRAFFIC DEATHS FROM 58 TO 13

ED C POWERS, STREET & SAFETY LIGHTING BUREAU

ALSO RAN

SIRS: How's about your Kyle Crichton and the Oklahoma Aggies? He said they're great and Arkansas ties them, Texas murders them, and Southern Methodist pulverizes them.

ARTHUR PETERS, El Paso, Texas

When last seen Mr. Crichton was standing on the top girder of the George Washington Bridge in New York preparing to jump. In a statement left for the police, he mentioned he had been double-crossed.

(Continued on page 93)

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You would have thought that, in a peculiar way, she was proud of the curse upon her family and herself

MAGNOLIA

BY DONALD HAMILTON

ILLUSTRATED BY MICHAEL

I caught Alison halfway down the hill. "Don't be silly, kid. He's all right," I yelled. "Honey, you don't understand," she gasped

AT THE age of sixteen, Alison Fletcher jibbed her Comet racing sloop in a squall on Poquamo Sound. We picked her up from the swamped boat three hours later, but the other girl wasn't found until she came ashore below Gull Point the following day. It was very distressing and we were all very sorry about it, as sorry as sixteen-year-olds are about things like that. Stuart Monroe stayed away from the Yacht Club dance that Saturday out of respect for the memory of the girl who was to have gone with him; and Alison was home with a bad cold.

Perhaps nobody would have thought any more about it if Alison had not from then on flatly refused to go out in a boat of any description; or perhaps somebody would. Being a damn Yankee myself, I never venture to predict what people are going to think in Lawrenceville. At any rate the Fletcher legend was disinterred and my sister and I heard, for the first time, about Alison's Greataunt Isabelle. Isabelle, some years before the event that Lawrenceville refers to as the War Between the States, had put her horse over a jump and landed it accurately and lethally on top of another girl; and subsequently had married the dead girl's husband. "Wasn't it dreadful," people said, "the accidents that kept happening to the Fletchers?"

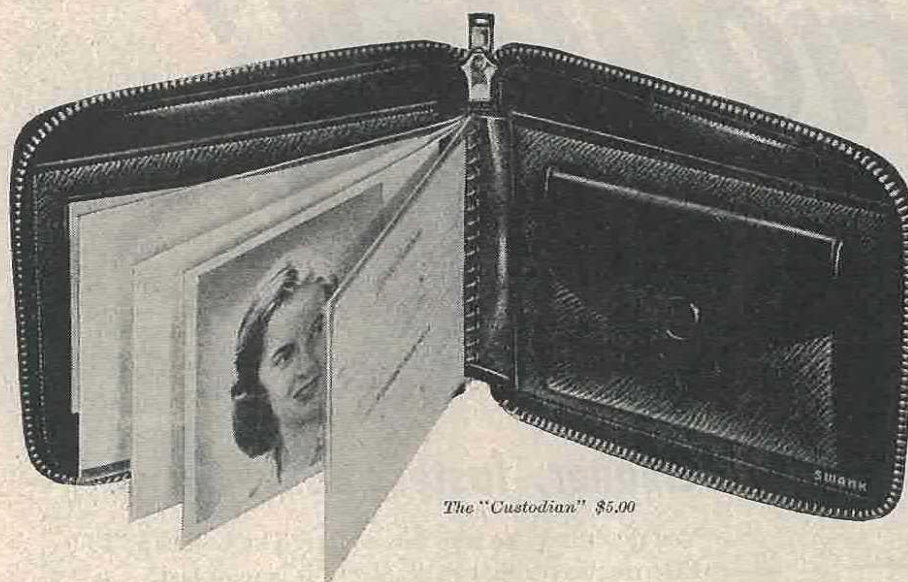
Nobody came right out and suggested that Alison had killed Connie France for the sake of Stuart Monroe,

because that would have sounded too damn silly. They just talked around the possibility, and Alison helped them with the finest impersonation of Lady Macbeth you would care to see. Living alone in that big house on Harlan Street with the Major and the heirlooms and the family portraits had given Alison a lot of funny ideas and they all came out after the accident. You would have thought nobody ever capsized a boat before; you would have thought that in a gruesome sort of way she was even a little proud of it. I mean, she was a swell kid and it was a tough thing, all right, but there were times when you wanted to shake her.

I mean, she got so bad that even my folks noticed it, although generally the finer points of Lawrenceville life just went by them. They had never understood Lawrenceville in the seven years we had lived there. They thought it was nice and a little peculiar. Mother loved the magnolias in the spring and the mountain laurel that grew along the roads where we used to drive Sundays before the war; and she liked the colored people. Jim Crow bothered her, but she had become reconciled to it, as you become reconciled to impetigo on a friend's face: you hope he'll be cured soon and maybe you recommend a doctor, meanwhile you pretend it isn't there.

And Dad sometimes said the whole town was a little screwy, but he did not know how right he was. And
(Continued on page 102)





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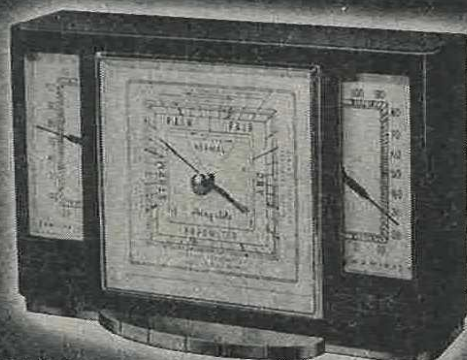
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MAGNOLIA

Continued from page 97

neither of them knew about Geiger Street or what went on there or who went there, but I suppose there are Geiger Streets in the North also. They refused to see that Lawrenceville was a town that thought it was something it was not. Alison Fletcher typified the town in a way—the girl she thought she was did not exist.

I mean Lawrenceville was a small, hot, dirty town, half a mile up the river from Poquamo Sound; and Alison was a nice-looking tall kid, who played a mean game of tennis but would never crash the movies. But to hear people talk you would think Lawrenceville was the fairy city of the Old South, and Alison a dead ringer for Scarlett O'Hara. What the people didn't understand was that this way they had of kidding themselves was harmful. They started out by thinking, perhaps, that it would be romantic if Alison Fletcher had done what the legend claimed Isabelle Fletcher had done a hundred years ago; and by the time they got through they not only believed the idea themselves, but they had Alison believing it.

"I don't know, honey," she said to me once. "I swear I just don't know, sugar. All that rain and everything. . . . And I didn't like her. . . ."

"My God, kid," I said. "That's nuts. For Stu?"

"Earl, you can't understand," she said.

ONE day when we were leaving our house I went back to get Alison's coat and heard Mother say to Dad that it was about time for the child to be getting over it and if she were Major Fletcher she would be getting a little worried. I think they were actually relieved when Alison started going with Stu and didn't come around any more. Dad said something about our being too young to be going steady; and they were very nice to the other girls I brought around.

By the time we had been two years in college, Alison and Stu were engaged. Everybody in Lawrenceville said it would be a beautiful match and I had to admit they were right. Whatever you thought of Stuart Monroe you had to admit that appearances were for him. Watching Alison and Stu at the Christmas dances that last winter was like a page from *Gone With the Wind*. Then Stu went overseas and married an English girl. Like that. So of course we began to hear all about the Mad Monroes. Traditions grow on trees around Lawrenceville.

"I declare you must think I'm a fool, Earl," Alison said to me one day. "It wouldn't surprise me a bit, honey, if you picked me up and spanked me."

"You or me neither," I said in my crude Yankee dialect.

She did not write to me very often while I was away, but it did not worry me because the girl was practically illiterate. At least it did not worry me very much. Then Mother wrote that Stu's wife had been killed by a whiz-bang somewhere in London, and Alison stopped writing. It was spring by the time I got back to Lawrenceville, and she was waiting for me at the station.

The folks could never understand why Alison Fletcher was considered beautiful. They did not understand that in Lawrenceville the Fletcher women were always beautiful, as the Monroe men were always handsome. They did not realize that when Dad said that if Alison were his daughter he would fatten her up a bit he was committing blasphemy, because Alison was a Southern belle. She was one of the Fletcher girls whose portraits hung in the large red brick house on Harlan Street as they had once hung in the larger white house at Exeter.

There might no longer be a plantation at Exeter, but the Fletcher girls went on forever, always beautiful.

"It's swell to be back," I said.

"I've missed you, sugar," Alison said. "I loved your letters."

"Yeah, I write a mean letter," I agreed. "I should carry on all my romances by correspondence."

I did not try to kiss her, because of what I could see in her face, but threw my gear into the car, and got behind the wheel, and felt her get in beside me, and heard the door close; and we drove away. I stopped the car just beyond the bridge where we could see the river fan out into the Sound in the sunshine. There were a couple of sail boats in sight, but all they did was remind me of Connie France. I don't suppose it was fair to blame Connie for letting herself drown; but you couldn't help thinking that things would have been a lot better if she hadn't. When I looked at Alison she was crying.

"I'm sorry. . . ." she gasped. "We shouldn't ever have. . . . Don't look at me like that, honey."

"Like what?" I asked.

"Like you hated me."

"Don't be silly," I said.

She found a handkerchief and touched her eyes with it and pushed at her hair, and looked at me quickly; then I was kissing her and feeling her come to me almost as if seeking shelter with me from the thing that had haunted her since that afternoon on the Sound. It was a good feeling. Neither of us was caring that we were parked on the public highway in bright sunshine. It had been a long time. But suddenly she pushed me away, turning her face away from me.

"We mustn't, Earl!"

After a moment I pushed my hand across my mouth to get the lipstick off and grabbed for the gearshift. Hell, you can't keep turning it on and off forever. You love the girl and you want to help and be noble and all that. But there's a limit to what a man can stand.

"I can't let you, too. . . ." Alison whispered. "Stuart is coming back, honey. His wife was killed. Don't you see. . . ?"

"All right," I said. "So it's Stu. Swell." You've got to draw the line somewhere; and I was getting off that merry-go-round for good.

"Don't you see, Earl?" Alison pleaded. "Don't you see? It just seems kind of like. . . ." She hesitated, ". . . like fate."

THE following week Stu called. I stood holding the phone listening to his soft cold drawl that sounded about as effeminate as a scythe going through tall grass, telling me that he would like me to come over and help him take his fiancée sailing. It seemed he had met a girl in Boston.

"Who is it, dear?" Mother asked in a slightly worried tone, puzzled, I guess by my expression.

"It's Stu," I said. "He wants me to go sailing."

"How nice of him," Mother said. "You haven't been sailing since you came back."

The folks were always very careful to be pleasant about Stuart Monroe. I guess they thought I liked him. They did not understand that Stu and I, because of Alison, had to be the best of friends no matter what we might think of each other. The only way we could keep from being set to slaughtering each other, the way the talk went around that town, was to love each other like brothers.

"We'll have Petrel rigged by the time you get here," Stu said, and hung up.

The Monroe house was a rambling brown overgrown summer cottage on

the bluff overlooking the mouth of Parsons Creek. When I got there Stu and a girl were already out on the boat. They raised the sails and then cast off the mooring as I started down the hill. Stu had on flannels and a light waterproof jacket and even at a distance his yellow hair looked very curly. He was a bright-eyed lad, Stuart Monroe, one of the smiling, reckless, Mad Monroes. You should see him ride a horse sometime. As a sailor he was a fine horseman.

The girl with him was small and dark with a neat, compact figure dressed in yellow slacks. I could not see her face at that distance. I stopped halfway down the hill and Stu waved at me and yelled something: to wait for them, probably. There was a thunderstorm coming up; they wouldn't be out long. I stood, a little annoyed at being left behind, and watched the boat gliding down the creek on a light uneven breeze. There is something very tempting about a sailboat under way, particularly when you haven't been out in one for a long time.

I climbed back to the house, and Alison came around the corner as I reached the top of the bluff. I had not seen her since the day I got back. She was wearing a coral sweater and her hair was wind-blown from the ride in the open convertible. She gave me a little breathless smile and looked quickly past me, watching the white sail below us lean to the breeze in the open river.

"I thought you were going along, honey," she said. Her voice was a little ragged, as if she had been running.

"I got left," I said. "Why, did he call you?"

It occurred to me that if she had not told him, Stu was probably under the impression that we were still engaged; and it was just like him to want to shove his new girl at the two of us and have a fine time watching everybody trying to be natural.

"He wanted us to meet his fiancée," Alison said without looking at me. "Honey, that sky looks downright vicious. I wish they'd turn around."

"Oh, he's all right. The worst they can get is wet." After I had said it I remembered Connie France. "All they have to do is pull down the sails and sit it out in the cabin," I said without looking at Alison.

"I thought you were going with them," she said stiffly. Her voice seemed to say that Stu couldn't take care of himself and I should have hurried a little faster to go along and see that he didn't get hurt.

It began to rain gently. Alison backed up the steps to the porch and brushed absently at her skirt. Then the white

line of the squall moved in across the river, and the rain came down like a curtain, so that in a moment we could barely see the end of the pier at the foot of the hill. Mrs. Monroe came out on the porch behind us and looked serenely at the storm.

"Stuart sure does pick the damndest times to go sailing," she said pleasantly, and went back inside to close the windows.

A gust of wind went through the trees along the bluff, and lightning flashed over the river. I reached for Alison too late. She pushed the screen door open and darted out into the downpour. I caught her halfway down the hill when her high heels slipped in the muddy path and she almost fell.

"Don't be silly," I yelled. "He's all right. My God, it's just a little thunderstorm, kid!"

Her wet face was so pale that the little freckles that I had almost forgotten stood out clearly against the white skin.

"Honey, you don't understand!" she gasped.

THE thunder crashed right over us. I jumped, slipped in the wet clay, and Alison twisted free. I ran down the hill after her. I could see the gusts come in waves up the creek, batting the dinghy around where it bobbed at the deserted mooring off the end of the pier.

Alison stopped on the streaming boards and I caught up with her. Petrel was coming in through the worst of it; and she was a mess. You know the kind of guy to whom it makes sense to go barging through all kinds of weather with full sail up. The carry-it-until-it-blows-away boy. Stu had got the main-sail fouled in the mast spreaders and the jib wound around the headstay like a window blind on its roller. He was steering with his knees and trying to clear this rat's nest by hauling at any lines he could get his hands on. The girl had presumably retired to the cabin, since she wasn't in sight.

Alison turned blindly toward me and put her face on my shoulder and began to cry. I held her, and the rain sluiced over both of us, and Monroe made his landing at six knots. He always had all kinds of luck: Everything blew clear as he came on the wind and he picked up the mooring as neat as you please. The girl stuck her head out of the cabin to watch him get the slatting sails down.

I felt Alison shudder a little and straighten up beside me.

"Earl, I think I'm going crazy," she whispered. "I keep thinking such dreadful things."

The rain went down my neck and

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COLLIER'S

REARER KELLER

chest as I said, "He's all right." She looked up at me quickly and laughed as if I had said something funny. Then she looked down at her sodden skirt blowing heavily against her and at her soaked muddy pumps. I caught her as she started to flee. "Stick it out, sweetheart," I said grimly. "They've seen you."

The rain slackened and died away as Stu and the girl came in. Alison drew a long breath and ran forward to meet them. "I just had to watch you all," she cried gaily. "It was just too exciting. I declare I must look like I was drowned."

You could have cut her accent with a knife. Stu helped the girl in the yellow slacks ashore. She had a smooth, rounded, competently pretty face and felt quite superior to the rest of us because she was relatively dry.

"You must be Penny," Alison said happily. "I'm Alison Fletcher."

The other girl smiled politely. I mean, it was all pretty grim.

I DID not hear from Alison for three days and then, on Friday, she called up and told me to try my tux on for size as she was giving a small dinner for Stu and Penny. I wanted to remind her that I was no longer riding on her merry-go-round, but the words wouldn't come.

"How small?" I asked.

"Just the four of us, sugar."

"I reckon that'll be real cozy, sho nuff," I said.

I always had been glad that the Fletcher plantation at Exeter had gone before my time, because the house on Harlan Street was bad enough. I always wanted to stick out my tongue at it to show I wasn't impressed, but the house would have known I was kidding myself. It was a great rectangular brick house set back among the trees overlooking Parsons Creek. The slate roof was truncated, as if the short ridge had been planed down, leaving a space corresponding to what on Cape Cod we used to call the Widows' Walk, surrounded by a white wooden railing, so that the house seemed to wear a coronet. From up there you could look across the sound to the far shore on clear days. The white porch pillars shone through the pale green trees in the twilight; and I walked up the graveled drive toward them and felt like Oliver Twist—or is it David Copperfield?

I saw Alison waiting on the porch in an ice-blue evening dress, tulle, I guess. I suppose when you lose a girl, there is something about the situation that makes her look like everything you ever dreamed about.

"Sorry, if I'm late," I said.

"It was sweet of you to come, honey."

There was a kind of tightness about her face; but I didn't ask her if she had a headache. Asking Alison Fletcher if

she had a headache was sort of like, on the George Davis, asking the old man if his feet hurt. They did and maybe she had, but you didn't ask. Sometimes you only wondered a little if maybe she wouldn't like you to.

I stood looking at her and smelling honeysuckle. I could have kissed her, and she would have let me. But even if Stuart Monroe had another girl there was nothing in it for me. I mean, I'm not buying half of any woman, even Alison Fletcher. I want my girl to have hysterics about me, not about Stuart Monroe.

After a moment she smiled and shrugged her bare shoulders minutely, turning away from me. We went into the library where the others were talking to the Major.

"But that's not the point!" Stuart's fiancée was saying sharply to the Major. "You Southerners always argue like that. I keep telling Stu..."

Stuart was smiling his nasty little smile and watching the Major turn pale with anger. Then he saw us, and rose. The Major got up a little unsteadily; he was seventy-five years old and there was really no sense in arguing with him. I mean, when a man is seventy-five there isn't much you can do about his prejudices except agree with them politely.

"Will you help me upstairs, please, Earl," the Major said stiffly.

When I came back downstairs they were waiting for me, and we went into the dining room. There were candles on the table and a great deal of old crystal. I have never liked eating by candlelight; it's a jumpy sort of illumination, but Alison was in a candlelight mood that night, and there were candles in the living room too when we went in for our coffee. Alison sat erect and gracious at the end of the shining table to pour for us. She was a million miles away and Gettysburg was still just a little town where they made shoes.

"I love your house, Alison," Stuart's fiancée said sweetly. "That's a beautiful portrait behind you. Can you tell me who painted it?" You could see that Stu had told her all about it.

I said quickly, "That's Isabelle Fletcher, Miss Shaw. Painted by Allston, I think."

"Yes, Washington Allston, honey," Alison said.

"It must be very valuable," Miss Shaw said.

Alison smiled, and from the wall behind her Isabelle Fletcher looked down at us, also smiling, wearing an ice-blue gown that left her shoulders bare, very much like the dress that Alison was wearing. I had never noticed a great deal of resemblance between Alison and the portrait before. I put it down to the accidental similarity of the dresses.

"I think it is worth quite a bit of



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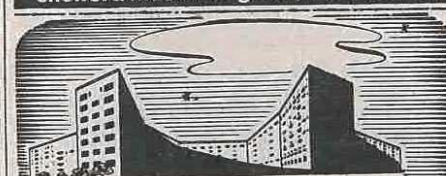
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money," Alison said pleasantly, smiling at Miss Shaw. After a moment she pushed her chair back and stood up. "I reckon you'd like to see the view from the roof, honey. The moon ought to be coming up just any minute now."

We went up through the house, four stories of it, most of it closed off and uninhabited since Alison's older half brothers and sisters had married and moved away from Lawrenceville. Her mother had been the Major's third wife and had died shortly after Alison's birth. I went ahead to open the trap and then helped Miss Shaw out to the roof. Alison and Stu came up behind her.

"Oh, there's Petrel," Miss Shaw said, walking along next to the railing to get a better view. Alison, beside her, seemed to trip over the full skirt of the blue dress. There was a sudden gasping sound, worse than a scream, from Miss Shaw, and the whole section of railing on that side fell away with a crash. You could hear it skate down the slate roof, smash over the gutter, and, seconds later, splinter on the flagstone walk.

I SAW Miss Shaw crouching with the horrible graceless awkwardness of panic at the edge of the steep roof, her white heavy dress bunched awry about her in the moonlight. Only Alison's grip on her arm prevented her from following the railing to the flagstones four stories down. You felt completely naked up there with the railing gone; you felt as if one by one the other sides would also fall away and then the sides of the steep slate roof would come together until, after balancing on the knife-edged ridge, you would eventually fall, as in a nightmare, forever.

Miss Shaw kicked minutely with the leg that had no grip on the platform, got her knee up, and rose. Her white dress was crumpled and torn, with a pattern of dust and roofing tar on the front of the heavy skirt where she had knelt on it. She stared at Alison, who still held

her arm. Miss Shaw freed herself warily and, backing and moving sideways, slid away from Alison without ever turning away from or even taking her eyes off the taller girl. She groped for Stu, found him, and at last felt safe enough to bury her face in his shoulder, still too shocked to cry.

Presently Alison moved, walked past us, and turned to descend the stairs. "See that she gets home all right, honey," she said to me. She managed a trace of a smile. "No, don't come with me. I reckon I'm sure enough going to be ill."

Then she was gone and I looked away from the stairs to see Stu watching me; and everything was suddenly very clear, because Stuart Monroe was afraid. Stuart Monroe. Massa Stuart, of the Mad Monroes. He was afraid of her and he hated her.

"Why, she's crazy," he whispered. "She tried to kill Penny." He sounded like a surprised kid. "I never thought when I . . ."

"When you what?"

He stepped back a bit, pulling the girl with him. "Earl, I swear to God I never . . . It was just a joke. I recalled about the legend and it seemed . . . I swear I never thought anybody'd believe it. It was just a joke . . ."

I had sometimes wondered how the story got started, but around Lawrenceville you did not wonder seriously how stories got started; they seemed to come like mist off the river. I stood looking at him and toyed with some idea like killing him. Not seriously. I mean, it wouldn't have done any good, the harm was done, but it would have been pleasant.

All this because Stuart Monroe had thought it would be nice to suggest playfully that maybe one girl had killed another on account of him. But it was not necessary to kill him or even beat him up, because the gag had gone sour a long time ago. It turned into a trap for him as well as for Alison. Everything was clear

now: The English girl he had married the first chance he had to be away from Lawrenceville and, this failing, his last chance of escape, Miss Shaw, in Boston.

Miss Shaw lifted her head. There was a streak of dirt down the side of her face.

"She tried to kill me! Stuart, that girl tried to kill me!"

"Don't be silly," I said. "Don't start any more stories going. There are enough already."

"She tried to kill me! I felt her . . ."

"Listen," I said. "If she hadn't caught you we'd be sweeping you up in a dust-pan."

"Take me home, Stuart. Take me home. I hate this place." She was crying.

I turned and went down through that great deserted barn of a house, and all the empty rooms were peopled with ghosts behind the closed doors. I was running by the time I reached the second floor. I did not know why I was running, but there seemed to be a need for haste. The Major, in a dressing gown, stopped me in the hall. He seemed quite unperturbed.

"Did she . . . ?"

"No," I said savagely. "And five gets you twenty that Isabelle was just a nice girl who couldn't handle her horse."

"My daughter is in her room, sir," the Major said. "When you have seen to her perhaps you'll have the kindness to come back and inform me what took place up there."

He was old and he had no emotion, only a desiccated curiosity. I turned away from him and ran down the hall. When I pulled the door open Alison was standing in front of the dresser; and in her hand was the pistol her grandfather had brought home with a game leg from Shiloh—or was it Petersburg? The gun was at least a foot long, and it was loaded, with the percussion caps in place. She had not had time to get it from its niche downstairs; she must have had it in her room; and God only knew how many days it had been there or how often she had looked at it. I closed the door behind me.

"It's just no good, honey," Alison said quietly. "I . . . don't want to be locked up or whatever they do to people who go crazy. I don't want to get anybody else killed, sugar. When I thought you were going out in that boat I was so afraid . . ."

SHE was Alison Fletcher, the greatniece of Isabelle Fletcher, and she was going to blow her brains out with her grandfather's horse pistol because she had killed three people and was secretly a little proud of it. Connie France. The English girl. Penelope Shaw. The fact that Connie had been an accident, that she, Alison, had never been to England, and that her fundamental sanity had made her grab Miss Shaw in good time made no difference. In her mind she had killed them. I mean, there was a curse on her, and she was afraid that I would be involved, and it was very sweet of her and it was a lot of boloney just the same.

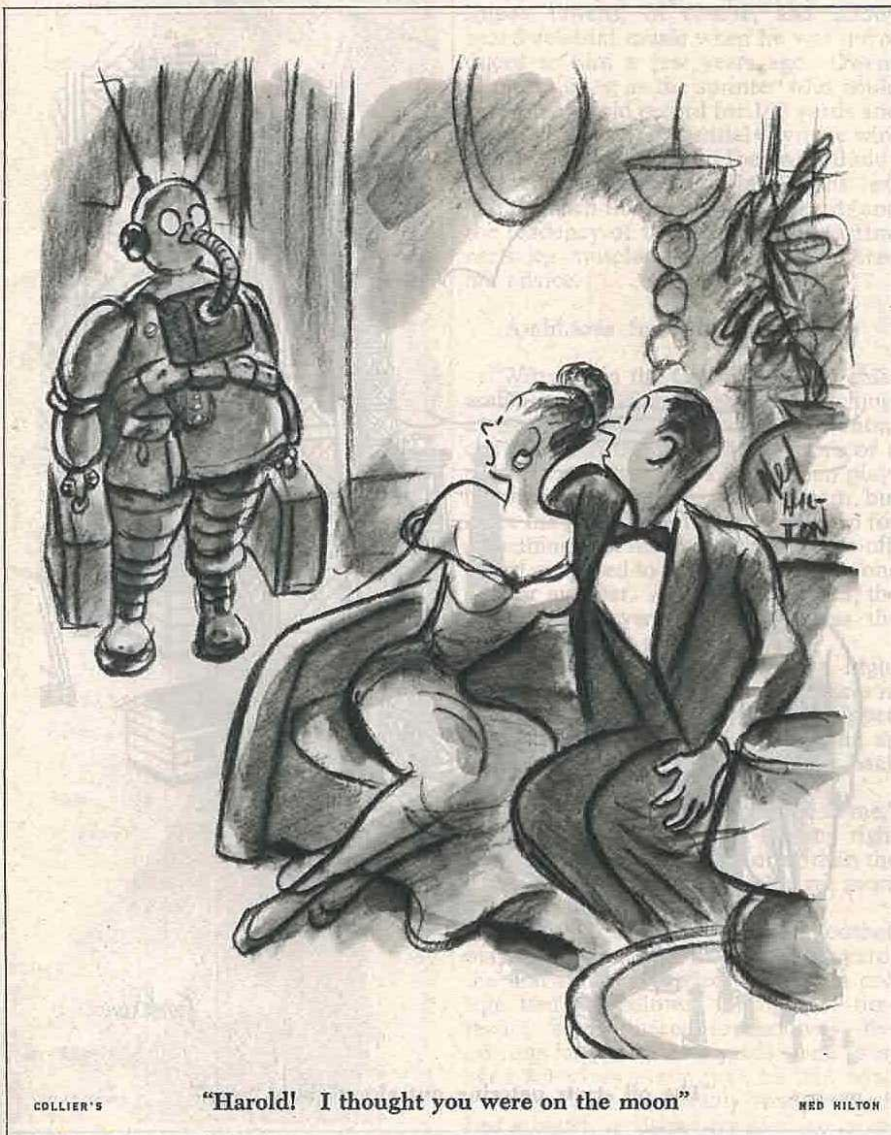
"Please, Earl," she whispered. "Don't try to . . . You might be . . . I can't bear it any longer."

I said, "Oh, put that damn' thing down," and the back of the chair I was holding came apart in my hands. I looked down at it, surprised, then looked up. Alison, startled, had backed away from me, her face frightened and indignant instead of tragic.

"Earl Baker, if you touch me I'll never speak to you again as long as I live!"

The gun dropped to the floor as she tried to slip away from me. We tusseled across the room; then I had her in the correct position. I had a stick from the chair in my hands and I laid on, but hard. I mean, there had to be an end to this nonsense and I needed to beat on somebody.

She was crying when I became aware that sometime during the action she had



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slipped right out of the bodice of her dress. I stood up so quickly that she slid to the floor. I could no more have hit her again than I could have shot her. I mean, she was the most beautiful thing in the world and I stood there red as a beet and waited for her to laugh at me. She pushed back her hair and looked up at me angrily and warily, as if wondering why I had stopped.

Slowly a funny little startled look of awareness came to her face, and she blushed furiously. After a moment I turned stiffly away and picked up the gun. I heard her get up and grab for something in the closet and take refuge in the bathroom.

There was no way of getting the powder and ball out of the gun without shooting them out; but removing the percussion caps made it harmless unless you wanted to build a fire under it.

At last I heard her come into the room behind me. She did not speak, but went to the window and lifted the shade. She had replaced the torn dress with a wine-colored house coat that reached to her ankles.

"You didn't have to hit so hard, Earl," she said when I came to stand beside her. "I declare I'm quite bruised, honey."

"Do you love him?" I asked. She shook her head minutely. "I hate him. You wouldn't understand . . . and then his wife died, and it seemed like . . ."

" . . . like fate," I said. "As if it were just meant to be that way. I was sure that something was going to happen to that girl when I heard they were going sailing and I was afraid that you . . . and then she wasn't on deck when they came in. When I saw that she was all right it seemed as if it were meant that I . . ." She turned and let me hold her and I could feel her trembling. "I did push her, honey."

"You thought you pushed her. You tripped, Alison. You caught her, didn't you?"

"Honey, for a moment I thought she'd fall anyway." I felt her shudder; then she looked up at me abruptly, her eyes very wide. "Why, honey, I reckon I . . . I never felt that way about Connie. When Penny sort of slipped and I didn't know if I was strong enough to hold her I knew that if she fell it was all my fault. . . . But I never felt like that about Connie. It just sort of happened. It wasn't until I heard what they were saying and started thinking about it and it started going round and round in my head and people said how I looked just like Isabelle. . . ." She was silent for a long time and at last she laughed happily. "Poor Isabelle. I wonder if she really . . ."

WHEN I kissed her it was like it had been in the car by the bridge, but she did not push me away. Then we stood looking at Parsons Creek, glowing silver in the moonlight, and at the lights of the town. There were voices in the hall outside.

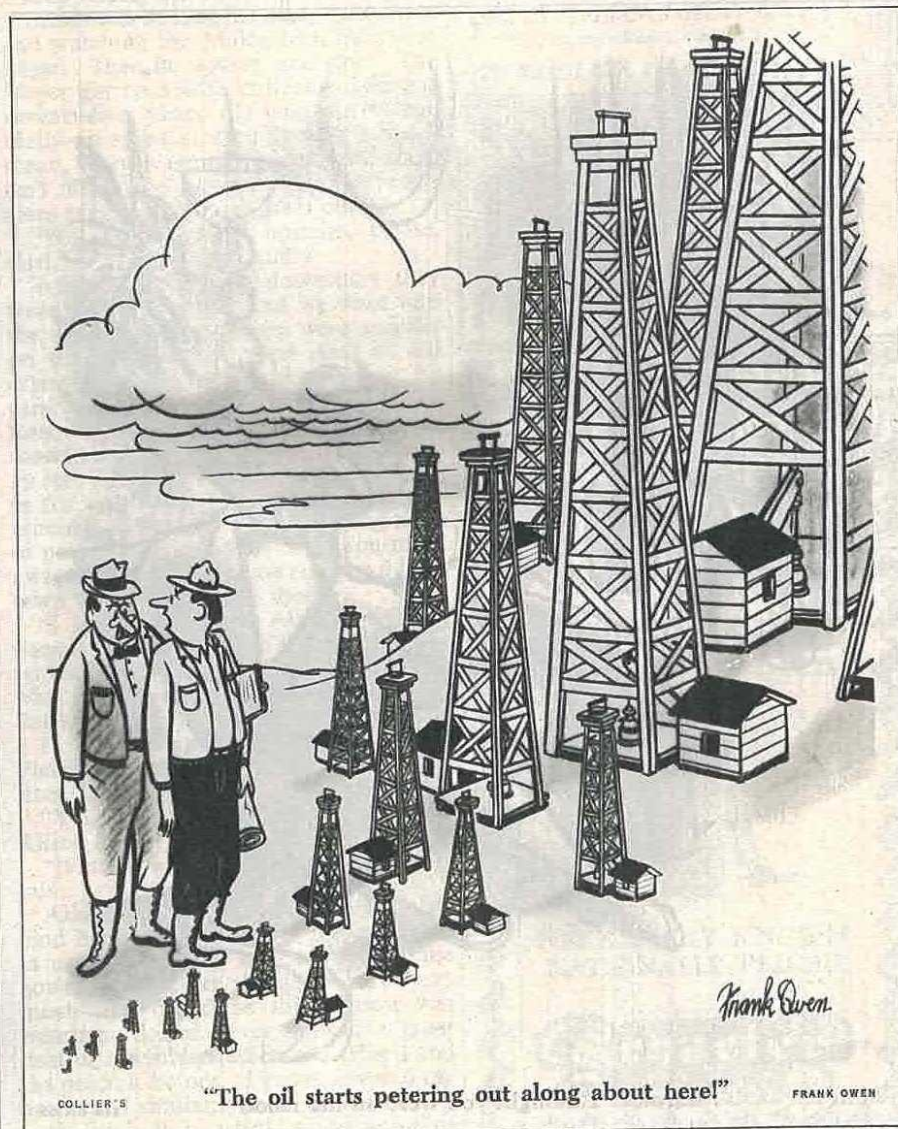
I heard the Major say, ". . . negligence on my part. It fell down a year back and I never had it repaired properly. You'll forgive me if I don't come down the stairs with you. . . ."

Then they were gone. "In the squall," I said, "I thought you were worried about him."

Alison laughed. "I know, sugar. You're just about the densest man I've known, I reckon. Honest to goodness, Earl, I swear you don't know a thing that goes on in this town. It must be because you were born up North."

But if you think the Fletcher legend died that easy you don't know Lawrenceville. When we came back from our honeymoon I learned in a roundabout way that Stuart Monroe and I were thought to have fought it out on the roof of the house on Harlan Street and I was supposed to have exacted a promise from him never to come back to Lawrenceville. He never did, either.

THE END



COLLIER'S

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