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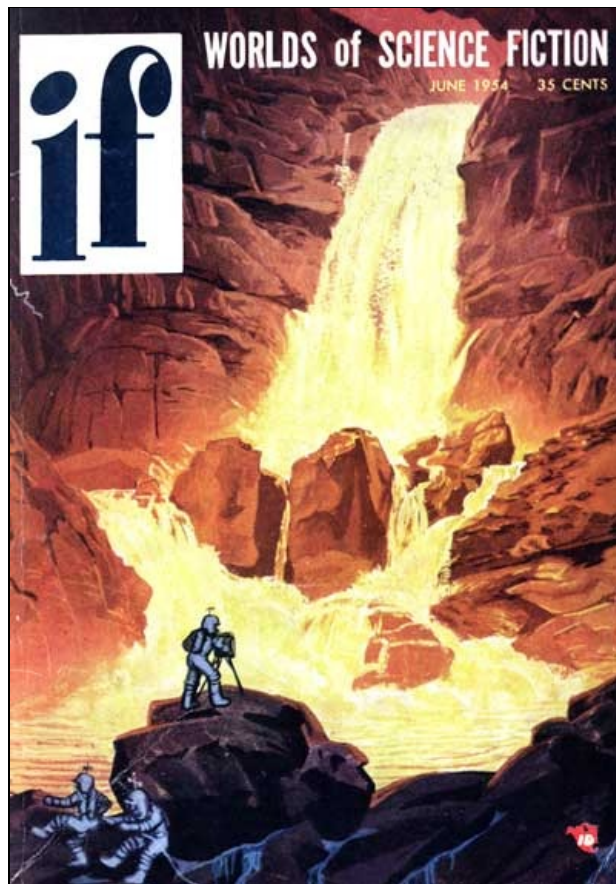
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No Strings Attached

By Lester del Rey

Illustrated by Kelly Freas

Poor Henry was an unhappy husband whose wife had a habit of using bad clichés. Alféar was a genii who was, quite like most humans, a creature of habit. Their murder compact was absolutely perfect, with—

Committing a perfect murder is a simple matter. Drive out some night to a lonely road, find a single person walking along out of sight of anyone else, offer him a ride, knife him, and go home. In such a crime, there's no reason to connect killer and victim—no motive, no clue, no suspect.

To achieve the perfect murder of a man's own wife, however, is a different matter. For obvious reasons, husbands are always high on the suspect list. Who has a better reason for such a crime?

Henry Aimsforth had been pondering the problem with more than academic interest for some time. It wasn't that he hated his wife. He simply couldn't stand the sight or sound of her; even thinking about her made his flesh crawl. If she had been willing to give him a divorce, he'd have been content to wish her all the happiness she was capable of discovering. But Emma, unfortunately, was fond of being his wife; perhaps she was even fond of him. Worse, she was too

rigidly bound to trite morality to give him grounds to sue.

There was no hope of her straying. What had been good enough for her mother was good enough for her, and saved all need of thinking; a woman needed a husband, her place was in the home, marriage was forever, and what would the neighbors think? Anyhow, she'd have had difficulty being unfaithful, even if she tried. She'd been gaining some ten pounds every year for the eleven years they had been married, and she'd long since stopped worrying about taking care of her appearance.

He looked up at her now, letting the book drop to his lap. She sat watching the television screen with a vacant look on her face, while some comic went through a tired routine. If she enjoyed it, there was no sign, though she spent half her life in front of the screen. Then the comic went off, and dancers came on. She went back to darning a pair of his socks, as seriously as if she didn't know that he had always refused to wear the lumpy results. Her stockings had runs, and she still wore the faded apron in which she'd cooked supper.

He contrasted her with Shirley unconsciously, and shuddered. In the year since Shirley Bates had come to work in his rare book store, he'd done a lot of such shuddering, and never because of the slim blonde warmth of his assistant. Since that hot day in August when they'd closed the shop early and he'd suggested a ride in the country to cool off, he and Shirley....

He was interrupted in his more pleasant thoughts by the crash of scissors onto the floor, and his eyes focussed on the deepening folds of fat as Emma bent to retrieve them. "Company coming," she said, before he could think of anything to prevent the mistaken cliché. Then she became aware that he was staring at her. "Did you take the garbage out, Henry?"

"Yes, dear," he answered woodenly. Then, because he knew it was coming anyhow, he filled in the inevitable. "Cleanliness is next to godliness."

She nodded solemnly, and began putting aside her darning. "That's finished. Mama always said a stitch in time saves nine. If you'd cut your toenails, Henry...."

He could feel his skin begin to tingle with irritation. But there was no escape. If he went upstairs to his bedroom, she'd be up at once, puttering about. If he went to the basement, she'd find the canned food needed checking. A woman's place was with her husband, as she'd repeatedly told him. Probably she couldn't stand her own company, either.

Then he remembered something he'd stored away. "There's a new picture at the Metro," he said as quietly as he could. "Taylor's starred, I think. I was going to take you, before this extra work came up."

He could see her take the bait and nibble at it. She had some vague crush left for Taylor. She stared at the television set, shifted her bulk, and then shook her head reluctantly. "It'd be nice, Henry. But going at night costs so much, and—well, a penny saved is a penny earned."

"Exactly. That's what I meant to say." He even relaxed enough to overlook the platitude, now that there was some hope. "I saved the price of lunch today. The nut who wanted *King in Yellow* was so tickled to get the copy finally, he insisted on treating. You can even take a cab home afterwards."

"That's nice. It'll probably rain, the way my bunion's been aching." She considered it a second more, before cutting off the television. He watched as she drew off the apron and went for her coat and hat, making a pretense of dabbing on make-up. She might as well have worn the apron, he decided, as she came over to kiss him a damp good-bye.

He considered calling Shirley, but her mother was visiting her, and the conversation would have to be too guarded at her end. If he could find some way of getting rid of Emma....

It wouldn't even be murder, really. More like destroying a vegetable—certainly no worse than ending the life of a dumb cow to make man's life more worth living. It wasn't as if she had anything to live for or to contribute. It would almost be a kindness, since she lived in a perpetual state of vague discontent and unhappiness, as if somehow aware that she had lost herself. But unfortunately, the law wouldn't look at it in such a light.

He'd only been thinking actively of getting her out of the way since August, however; and somehow, with time, there must be some fool-proof scheme. There was that alcohol-injection system—but it required someone who would drink pretty freely first, and Emma was a teetotaler. Maybe, though, if he could get her to taking some of those tonics for women....

He dropped it for the moment and turned back to the book. It was an odd old volume he'd received with a shipment for appraisal. There was no title or date, but the strange leather binding showed it was old. Apparently it had been hand-set and printed on some tiny press by the writer, whose name was omitted. It seemed to be a mixture of instructions on how to work spells, conjure demons, and practice witchcraft, along with bitter tirades against the group who had driven the writer out and forced him, as he put it, to enter a compact with the devil for to be a wizard, which is like to a male witch. Henry had been reading it idly, slowly deciding the book was authentic enough, however crazy the writer was. The book had no particular value as a

collector's item, but he could probably get a fine price from some of the local cultists, particularly since there were constant promises in it that the writer was going to give a surefire, positive and simple recipe for conjuring up a demon without need of virgin blood, graveyard earth or unicorn horn.

He skimmed through it, looking for the formula. It turned up on the fifth page from the end, and was everything the writer had claimed. A five-sided figure drawn on the floor with ordinary candle wax, a pinch of sugar inside, a bit of something bitter outside, two odd but simple finger gestures, and a string of words in bad Latin and worse Greek. There was a warning that it would work without the pentagram, sugar and bitters, but at parlous risk to the conjurer without such protection.

He frowned. Too simple for the cultists, he realized—unless he could somehow persuade them that the trick lay in some exact phrasing or gesturing pattern which took experiment. They liked things made difficult, so they'd have a good alibi for their faith when the tricks failed. If he could show them in advance that it didn't work, but hint that a good occultist might figure out the right rhythm, or whatever....

He read it through again, trying to memorize the whole thing. The gestures were—so—and the words—umm....

There was no flash of fire, no smell of sulphur, and no clap of thunder. There was simply a tall creature with yellowish skin and flashing yellow eyes standing in front of the television set. His head was completely hairless, and he was so tall that he had to duck slightly to keep from crashing into the ceiling. His features were too sharp for any human face. There were no scales, however; his gold cape and black tights were spangled, and he wore green shoes with turned up toes. But generally, he wasn't bad looking.

"Mind if I sit down?" the creature asked. He took Henry's assent for granted and dropped into Emma's chair, folding his cape over one arm and reaching for an apple on the side table. "Glad to see you're not superstitious enough to keep me locked up in one of those damned pentagrams. Drat it, I thought the last copy of that book was burned and I was free. Your signal caught me in the middle of dinner."

Henry swallowed thickly, feeling the sweat trickle down his nose. The book had warned against summoning the demon without the protective devices! But the thing seemed peaceful enough for the moment. He cleared his voice. "You mean—you mean magic works?"

"Magic—shmagic!" the creature snorted. He jerked his thumb toward the television. "To old Ephriam—the crackpot who wrote the book before he went completely crazy—that set would have been more magic than I am. I thought this age knew about dimensions, planes of vibrations, and simultaneous universes. You humans always were a backward race, but you seemed to be learning the basic facts. Hell, I suppose that means you'll lay a geas on me, after I was hoping it was just an experimental summons!"

Henry puzzled it over, with some of the fright leaving him. The scientific sounding terms somehow took some of the magic off the appearance of the thing. "You mean those passes and words set up some sort of vibrational pattern...."

The hairless fellow snorted again, and began attacking the grapes. "Bunk, Henry! Oh, my name's Alféar, by the way. I mean I was a fool. I should have gone to my psychiatrist and taken the fifty year course, as he advised. But I thought the books were all burned and nobody knew the summons. So here I am, stuck with the habit. Because that's all it is—a conditioned reflex. Pure compulsory behavior. I'm sensitized to receive the summons, and when it comes, I teleport into your plane just the way you pull your hand off a hot stove. You read the whole book, I suppose? Yeah, just my luck. Then you know I'm stuck with any job you give me—practically your slave. I can't even get back without dismissal or finishing your task! That's what comes of saving money by not going to my psychiatrist."

He muttered unhappily, reaching for more grapes, while Henry began to decide nothing was going to happen to him, at least physically. Souls were things he wasn't quite sure of, but he couldn't see how just talking to Alféar could endanger his.

"Still," the creature said thoughtfully, "it could be worse. No pentagram. I never did get mixed up with some of the foul odors and messes some of my friends had to take. And I've developed quite a taste for sugar; tobacco, too." He reached out and plucked a cigarette out of Henry's pack, then a book of matches. He lighted it, inhaled, and rubbed the flame out on his other palm. "Kind of weak tobacco, but not bad. Any more questions while I smoke this? There's no free oxygen where I come from, so I can't smoke there."

"But if you demons answer such—such summons, why don't people know about it now?" Henry asked. "I'd think more and more people would be going in for this sort of thing. If the wizards were right all along...."

"They weren't, and we're not demons. It didn't get started until your Middle Ages. And if it hadn't been for old Apalon...." Alféar lighted another cigarette off the butt, which he proceeded to extinguish on the tip of his sharp tongue. He scratched his head thoughtfully, and then went on.

"Apolon was studying your worship. You see, we've been studying your race the way you study white rats, using lower races to explain our own behavior. Anyhow, he got curious and figured out a way to mentalize himself into your plane. He was sort of a practical joker, you might say. So he picked a time when some half-crazy witch was trying to call up the being you worship as Satan to make some kind of a deal. Just as she finished, he popped up in front of her, spitting out a bunch of phosphorus to make a nice smoke and fire effect, and agreed with all her mumbo-jumbo about having to do what she wanted. She wanted her heart fixed up then, so he showed her how to use belladonna and went back, figuring it was a fine joke.

"Only he made a mistake. There's something about moving between planes that lowers the resistance to conditioning. Some of our people can take five or six trips, but Apolon was one of those who was so conditioning-prone that he had the habit fixed after the first trip. The next time she did the rigamarole, back he popped. He had to dig up gold for her, hypnotize a local baron into marrying her, and generally keep on the constant *qui vive*, until she got sloppy and forgot the pentagram she thought protected her and which he was conditioned to. But after he disintegrated her, he found she'd passed on the word to a couple of other witches. And he knew somebody at the Institute was bound to find what a fool he'd made of himself.

"So he began taking members aside and telling them about the trick of getting into your world. Excellent chance for study. Have to humor the humans by sticking to their superstitions, of course. One by one, they went over on little trips. It wasn't hard to find some superstitious dolt trying to summon something, since word had got around in your world. One of us would pop up, and that spread the word further. Anyhow, when Apolon was sure each member had made enough trips to be conditioned, he'd tell him the sad truth, and swear him to secrecy on penalty of being laughed out of the Institute. The old blaggard wound up with all of us conditioned. There was quite a flurry of witchcraft here, until we finally found a psychiatrist who could break the habit for us. Even then, it was tough going. We'd never have made it without the inquisitions and witch-burnings one of our experimental sociologists managed to stir up."

Alféar put out the third cigarette butt and stood up slowly. "Look, I don't mind a chat now and then, but my wives are waiting dinner. How about dismissing me?"

"Umm." Henry had been thinking while he listened. It had sounded like a reasonable explanation on the whole, except for the bit about Apolon's disintegrating the witch. Apparently as long as a man wasn't too unreasonable, there was a certain usefulness to having such friends on call. "What about the price for your help? I mean—well, about souls...."

Alféar twitched his ears disgustedly. "What the deuce would I do with your soul, Henry? Eat it? Wear it? Don't be a shnook!"

"Well, then—well, I've heard about wishes that were granted, but they all had a trick attached. If I asked for immortality, you'd give it, say; but then I'd get some horrible disease and beg and plead for death. Or ask for money, and then find the money was recorded as being paid to a kidnapper, or something."

"In the first place, I couldn't give you immortality," Alféar said, as patiently as he apparently could. "Your metabolism's not like ours. In the second place, why should I look for tainted money? It's enough nuisance doing what you ask, without looking for tricks to pull. Anyhow, I told you I half-enjoy visiting here. As long as you're reasonable about it, I don't mind keeping my end of the compulsion going. If you've got something to ask, ask away. There are no strings attached."

The creature seemed to be quite sincere. Henry considered it briefly, staring at a large tinted picture of Emma, and took the plunge. "Suppose I asked you to kill my wife for me—say by what looked like a stroke, so nobody would blame me?"

"That seems reasonable enough," Alféar agreed easily. "I could break a few blood vessels inside her skull.... Sure, why not? Only the picture in your mind is so distorted, I wouldn't know her. If she's like that, why'd you ever marry her?"

"Because she seemed different from other women, I guess," Henry admitted. "When I tipped the canoe over, and I figured she'd be mad because her dress was ruined, all she said was something about not being sugar, so she wouldn't melt." He shuddered, remembering all the times she'd said it since. "You won't have any trouble. Look, can you really read my mind?"

"Naturally. But it's all disorganized."

"Umm. Well." It gave him a queasy feeling to think of anyone seeing his secret thoughts. But this fellow apparently didn't work by human attitudes, anyhow. He groped about, and then smiled grimly. "All right, then. You can tell I think of her as my wife. And just to make sure, she'll be sure to say something about early to bed and early to rise; she says that every single damned night, Alféar! She never misses."

Alféar grunted. "Sounds more reasonable every minute, Henry. All right, when your wife says that, I pop out and give her a stroke that will kill her. How about dismissing me now?"

"No strings?" Henry asked. He watched carefully as Alféar nodded assent, and he could see no sign of cunning or trickery. He caught his breath, nodded, and closed his eyes. Seeing something vanish was nothing he wanted. "Dismissed."

The fruit was still gone when he opened his eyes, but there was no other sign of the thing. He found some fruit still in the refrigerator and restocked the bowl. Then he closed the strange book and put it away. He'd have to buy it himself, and burn it to make sure no one else found the trick, of course. For a moment, uneasiness pricked at him. Yet he was sure Alféar hadn't been lying, and the story the creature had told made more sense than the older superstitions. Henry adjusted his mind to having a well-conditioned demon on tap and then began the harder job of bracing himself for Emma's incoherent but detailed account of the movie when she came back.

Unfortunately, it was a more complicated plot than usual, and she went on and on, from the moment she entered the door. He tried to close his ears, but he'd never succeeded in that. He yawned, and she yawned back, but went on until the last final morsel was covered for the second or third time.

"He was wonderful," she finally concluded. "Just wonderful. Only I wished you'd come with me. You'd have liked it. Henry, did you take the garbage out?"

"Yes, dear," he answered. "Hours ago."

He yawned elaborately again. She mumbled something about having to keep the kitchen clean because cleanliness was next to godliness, but her automatic yawn muffled the words. Then she glanced at the clock. "Heavens, it's almost one! And early to bed and early to rise...."

Henry jerked his eyes away, just as he caught the first glimpse of Alféar popping into existence beside her. He heard the beginning of a shriek change to a horrible gargling and then become a dying moan. Something soft and heavy hit the floor with a dull thud. Henry turned around slowly.

"Dead," Alféar said calmly, rubbing one of his fingers. "This business of getting just one finger through the planes into her head cuts off the circulation. There, that's better. Satisfied?"

Henry dropped beside the corpse. She was dead, according to the mirror test, and there wasn't a mark on her. He stared at the puffy, relaxed features; he'd expected an expression of horror, but she seemed simply asleep. His initial feeling of pity and contrition vanished; after all, it had been quick and nearly painless. Now he was free!

"Thanks, Alféar," he said. "It's fine—fine. Do I dismiss you now?"

"No need this time. I'm free as soon as the job's done. Unless you'd like to talk awhile...."

Henry shook his head quickly. He had to telephone a doctor. Then he could call Shirley—her mother would be gone by now. "Not now. Maybe I'll summon you sometime for a smoke or something. But not now!"

"Okay," Alféar said, and vanished. Surprisingly, seeing him disappear wasn't unpleasant, after all. He just wasn't there.

Waiting for the doctor was the worst part of it. All the legends Henry knew ran through his mind. Alféar could have given her a stroke and then added some violent poison that would show up in an autopsy. He could be sitting wherever he was, chuckling because Henry hadn't restricted his wish enough to be safe. Or any of a hundred things could happen. There was the first witch, who had thought she had Apalon under control, only to be turned to dust.

But the doctor took it calmly enough. "Stroke, all right," he decided. "I warned her last year that she was putting on too much weight and getting high blood pressure. Too bad, Mr. Aimsworth, but there was nothing you could do. I'll turn in a certificate. Want me to contact a mortician for you?"

Henry nodded, trying to appear properly grief-stricken. "I—I'd appreciate it."

"Too late now," the doctor said. "But I'll be glad to send Mr. Glazier around in the morning." He pulled the sheet up over Emma's body, leaving it on the backroom couch to which they had carried it. "You'd better go to a hotel for the night. And I'll give you something that will make you sleep."

"I'd rather not," Henry said quickly. "I mean, I'd feel better here. You know...."

"Certainly, certainly." The doctor nodded sympathetically, but as if it were an old story to him. He left the pills with instructions, said the proper things again, and finally went out.

Shirley's voice was sleepy and cross when she answered, but it grew alert as soon as he told her about Emma's stroke. He was almost beginning to believe the simple version of the story himself.

"Poor Henry," she murmured. Her voice sharpened again. "It *was* a stroke? The doctor was sure?"

"Positive," he assured her, cursing himself for having let her guess some of the thoughts that had been on his mind. "The doctor said she'd had hypertension and such before."

She considered it a second, and then a faint laugh sounded. "Then I guess there's no use in crying over spilled milk, is there, Henry? If it had to happen, it just had to. And I mean, it's like fate, almost!"

"It *is* fate!" he agreed happily. Then he dropped his voice. "And now I'm all alone here, baby lamb, and I had to call you up...."

She caught on at once, as she always did. "You can't stay there now! It's so morbid. Henry, you come right over here!"

Demons, Henry thought as he drove the car through the quiet residential streets toward her apartment, had their uses. They were a much maligned breed. Probably the people who had summoned them before had been ignorant, stupid people; they'd messed up their chances and brought trouble on themselves by not finding out the facts and putting it all down to superstitious magic. The fellows were almost people—maybe even a little superior to humans. If a man would just try to understand them, they could help him, and with no danger at all.

"No strings attached," he said to himself, and then chuckled softly. It fitted perfectly; now there were no strings attached to him. Emma was at peace, and he was free. He'd have to wait a few months to marry Shirley legally, of course. But already, she was as good as his wife. And if he played up the shock angle just enough, this could be a wonderful evening again....

Shirley was unusually lovely when she met him at the door. Her soft golden hair made a halo for her face—a face that said she'd already anticipated his ideas, and had decided he was a man who needed sympathy and understanding for what had happened.

There was even time for the idea that he was free to be brought up, tentatively at first, and then eventually as a matter of course. And the plans expanded as he considered them. There was no need to worry about things now. The quiet marriage became a trip around the world as he confessed to having money that no one knew about. They could close the shop. He could leave town almost at once, and she could follow later. Nobody would know, and they wouldn't have to wait to avoid any scandal. They could be married in two weeks!

Henry was just realizing the values of a friendly demon. With proper handling, a lot of purely friendly summoning, and a reasonable attitude, there was no reason why Alféar couldn't provide him with every worldly comfort to share with Shirley.

He caught her to him again. "My own little wife! That's what you are, lambkins! What's a mere piece of paper? I already think of you as my wife. I feel you're my wife. That's what counts, isn't it?"

"That's all that counts," she agreed with a warmth that set fire to his blood. Then she gasped. "Henry, darling, it's getting light already! You'll have to get back. What will the neighbors say if they see you coming from here now?"

He tore away reluctantly, swearing at the neighbors. But she was right, of course. He had to go back and take the sleeping medicine to be ready for the arrival of the mortician in the morning.

"It's still early," he protested, automatically trying to squeeze out a few more minutes. "Nobody's up yet."

"I'll heat up the coffee, and then you'll have to go," Shirley said firmly, heading for the kitchen. "Plenty of people get up early around here. And besides, you need some sleep. Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and—"

From the kitchen came the beginning of a shriek. It changed to a horrible gasp, and died away in a failing moan. There was the sound of a body hitting the floor.

Alféar stood over Shirley's body, rubbing one finger tenderly. His ears twitched uncertainly as he studied Henry's horror-frozen face. "I told you," he said. "I warned you some of us get conditioned to a habit the first time. And you thought of her as your wife and she said...."

Abruptly, he vanished. Henry's screams were the only sound in the apartment.

THE END

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