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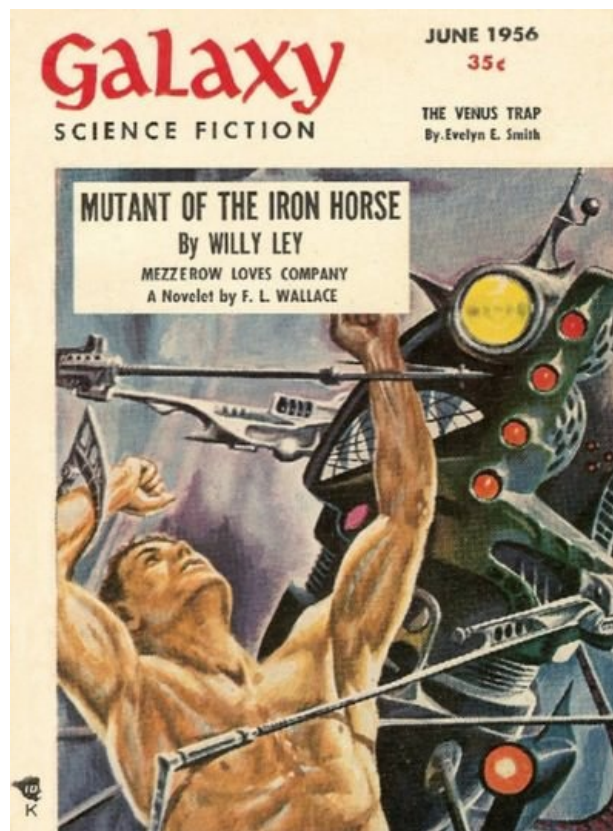
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE SCAPEGOAT ***



Cover

THE SCAPEGOAT

By RICHARD MAPLES

Who would not have pity for a poor, helpless victim? Nobody —except another poor victim!

Illustrated by WEISS

THE OLD GUY didn't have a chance. All he could do was shield his head with limp arms and moan, while this other fellow—a young, husky six-footer—gave him a vicious, cold-blooded beating.

"Hey, there!" I yelled indignantly. "Cut it out!"

But the kid kept belting away, as if he were methodically working out on a fifty-pound training bag. Finally, the old man sagged to the pavement. Then this hoodlum began to kick him.

I'm not a hero. I'm a newspaper man whose job it is to look at things objectively. But I know right from wrong.

My one punch caught the young bruiser back of the ear and spilled him on the ground. He lay there for a moment, then rolled over. Even by the street light, it was easy to see his eyes were glassy.

[63]

It gave me lots of satisfaction. I'm not a big man—just compact—but I take care of myself. I don't drink or smoke and I exercise regularly. The result is I can handle myself in the clinches.

The kid sat up and pushed himself unsteadily to his feet. I could see now that he was a college boy. The red sweater with the terrycloth border and the white pants with a shortened left leg were a dead giveaway.

"Listen here," I said roughly, "you nuts? Beating up an old man!"

He appeared to be desperately searching for an explanation—something to say. Then, abruptly, without having uttered a sound, he reeled away and shambled hurriedly down the street.

My first inclination was to give chase. But the old man groaned and I turned to help him. That was when I had it—a virtual brain storm.

This whole episode, I could see, was a perfect answer to the damnable criticisms leveled at my series on juvenile delinquency. More than that, it was an absolute vindication!

BARELY AN hour ago, I'd had to sit at a meeting and take it on the chin from twenty of the town's leading lights who designated themselves The Committee for the Protection of Youth. The outfit was, of course, politically inspired. It had obviously been started by the Mayor and his gang as a means of torpedoing Jones, the publisher of my paper. Jones, you see, had become politically ambitious himself.

Since I was the star on Jones' team, they piled on me. Some of the nicer things said about my articles were that they constituted filthy muckraking, were a pattern of irresponsible lies, and were designed principally to smear the incumbent politicians. The children of the town, they cried, were being sacrificed to ruthless ambition.

It wouldn't have been so bad if Jones had stuck by me. But he cut and ran. Discretion, he had whispered to me from behind a pudgy hand, was the better part of valor. Then he told them he would discontinue the articles.

Now I had first-hand proof of a particularly brutal bit of delinquency. A cruel assault on a poor, helpless old man! Furthermore, I was the hero of the incident!

Bending down to see how seriously the old man had been hurt, I asked, "What happened, Pop? Was he trying to rob you or something?" He didn't answer.

[64]



I looked around for help, but the street was deserted. The best thing, I decided, was to take him home. There Nan, my wife, could patch him up while I found out what had happened. I bent down again and pulled him to his feet. He staggered. I put one steadying hand on his shoulder and gripped his wrist with the other. My spine went cold. [65]

It was his flesh. Not so much that it felt like rubber—but the chill. Here we were in the middle of a heat wave, the thermometer nudging ninety, and the old guy's wrist is like an icicle!

For a second, it threw me. Then I thought of shock. That might explain it. And Nan, having been a nurse, would be the one to know.

I started the old man walking. "See if you can make it to my house," I urged. "It's just around the corner."

Nan switched on the porch light when she heard us on the steps. Opening the door, she drew back with a little shriek. The old man was pretty gruesome-looking at that. But it wasn't just his blood-covered face and matted white beard.

There was something spiderish about him. He was angular, and dark, and skeletal. His eyes, deep-set and brooding, seemed to crouch under his shaggy, jutting brows.

"Take it easy, honey," I said. "The old guy just needs some patching up."

SHE RECOVERED quickly and helped him into the house. After we'd eased him into the easy chair by the fireplace in the living room, she turned to me, worried. "Were you in an accident?"

I gave her the story and she looked at me sharply, but didn't speak. She went into the bedroom and came back with blankets and medicine bottles. Tucking the blankets around the old man's legs, she said, "But I don't understand why you were walking. You went to the meeting in Jones' car. Why didn't he bring you back?"

I didn't answer. The old man had closed his eyes and his breathing was becoming very shallow. "Look at him," I said. "Is he all right?"

"He's sleeping. Why don't you answer my question?"

"Jones didn't bring me home because I had words with him and walked away in a huff."

"Over the meeting?"

"Partly." I explained about the meeting and how Jones had back-tracked when the going got rough. "After all, it was his idea to build circulation with sensational articles and to use them to attack the present administration. But when there's a showdown, he acts like a scared rabbit. And that's what I told him."

"I'm glad," Nan said, her face brightening. "What did he say to that?" [66]

"He gave me a lot of bull about it being a mistake to pick on people's children and how we should stick to old standbys like red-light districts and dope trafficking."

Nan slapped the iodine on the table. "Some nerve! What did you tell him?"

"I told him he was jerking the rug from under me and that I'd be damned if I'd write a bunch of warmed-over tripe. Then I walked away."

"You finally quit!"

Until then, I don't think I'd ever realized just how much Nan hated my work. Of course, off and on, we'd really had some knock-down drag-outs, but I'd never considered them serious. Oh, we often talked about my going into teaching physical ed. It had been my intention ever since college. Some day I'd actually do it.

I shook my head. "No, honey, I didn't quit."

"But you're going to?"

I shrugged in a gesture of helplessness. "How can I? An unprovoked attack against a poor old man is dynamite. It puts me in the driver's seat. I can write an article that will make every mealy-mouthed hypocrite who spoke against me tonight eat his words."

THE FIRE in her eyes died. "It's always something," she said wearily. "Year after year, you've come up with one reason or another to stay in the rotten business. And what does it amount to? Mud-slinging! I'm beginning to think you like it!"

She'd never come out so bluntly and, deep down, I felt my resentment pressing like the sharp edge of a coiled spring. Originally, getting into the newspaper game had been a sort of fluke. Majoring in physical ed at college, I often covered the various sports events for the campus

paper. One day, a big-time scandal broke, involving gamblers and one of the teams, and I found myself in a perfect spot to do an exclusive for a city paper. My stuff was run verbatim under a by-line and afterward picked up by the wire services.

Later, with a trick knee keeping me out of the war, I managed to talk myself into a job with the newspaper that had run my expose. I was goaded by a feeling that I ought to be doing something bigger than teaching children how to play games.

From the very start, I discovered I had a peculiar talent. If I found myself anywhere near a skeleton in a closet, I could plainly hear its rattle. Before long, my reputation was firmly established.

[67]

Nan, whom I'd met at college, knew of my ambition to teach and began planning toward that end as soon as we married. She started what she called a quitting fund. This was to stake a move to a small town where her uncle was principal of the high school. He was supposed to help me get a foothold in the new career.

But then Tommy was born and there were bills to pay. After that there were other reasons, like car payments. By the end of the war, the teaching plans were no longer discussed, and Nan and I had drawn so far apart that even the bickering between us had ceased.

Finally, when Tommy was about ten, she suddenly let me have it.

It seems the kid was running around with a tough crowd. She wanted to get him away from the city. He needed the fresh air and the decent, normal home-life of a small town, she said. And she meant every word of it.

Luckily, Jones had come along right about then and offered me a job on his newspaper, back in the old home town. He had an idea he could drive the opposition paper out of business by featuring yellow journalism at the local level. That's where I came in. With my ability to make the news bleed, he figured he could cinch it. For that reason, he was willing to double my present salary. So I accepted.

Nan, of course, was furious, even though I pointed out the extra dough meant we could start planning again. She didn't calm down until I promised to quit the job after six months.

YES, IT WAS always something. She was right enough about that. But she had no right to make such an issue of things. I started to tell her that, then stopped. Maybe she was picking a quarrel to make me forget about the old man and the story. I threw a fast block into my resentment.

"Honey," I said, "don't be unreasonable. Remember this job with Jones was supposed to get Tommy away from the city, and the extra dough was all part of that big plan for the teaching business."

"What plan?" she flared. "There never was a plan except to pamper your vanity! Big-shot Potter, the whiz-bang newspaperman! That's all you've ever been interested in!"

I had to take a deep breath to keep from yelling back at her. "You're not being very fair about this. I did it all with you and Tommy in mind."

Her voice lowered. "Is that so? Well, how about the promise to quit in six months? We've saved the money. What marvelous thing do you have in mind for me and Tommy now?"

[68]

That *hurt*. As a matter of fact, I'd been quite enjoying the stint with Jones. My series on juvenile delinquency had just about doubled circulation and that gave me a deep sense of accomplishment. Then, too, writing the stuff against the Mayor and the rest of the town's big-wigs—in keeping with Jones' political ambitions—nurtured a feeling of power that was very satisfying.

Frankly, the meeting earlier that evening had set me down harder than I cared to admit. Now, with every chance for a comeback, Nan wanted me to pass!

"Listen," I snarled, "so it's hot. So don't take it out on me!"

Her fists bunched and the color drained from her face. Knowing the signs, I could tell this was going to be a lulu.

But the door flew open and Tommy came clomping through the hallway and into the front room. He's a big kid for his age, mentally and physically. He spotted the old man right away.

"Gol/ee!" he breathed excitedly. "Who's the creep?"

"Never mind," Nan said, quickly recovering her composure. "He's had an accident. Just get some money from your father and go to the drugstore for more bandages. I'll need them."

I gave him a buck and he ran out the kitchen way, slamming the back door so hard, the whole house shook.

The old man's eyes flickered open. He looked at me first, then at Nan. "Well," he said in a

peculiar muffled tone that suggested he was speaking through an obstruction like a fencing mask, "isn't this cozy!"

I immediately threw a lot of questions at him. His name, he said, was Ashe—just plain Ashe. He couldn't remember any other name. He couldn't remember why he'd been beaten up, nor what had led up to it. He was very confused. He thought maybe it would all come back to him later. However, he did remember my rescuing him and he appreciated that very much. Hearing him say so gave me a nice, tingling glow. I invited him to stay for dinner and he accepted.

NAN objected. "There's only salad," she wailed. "It was too hot to cook."
"Salad's fine," I told her.

"Oh, Ted, please!"

"Listen here," I said coldly, "I've invited Ashe to stay and he's accepted. Why all the fuss?"

She gave me a hurt look, turned, flounced into the kitchen. I started to follow, thinking I'd made a mistake in being so brusque. Then I thought, the heck with it. Let her take it any way she wanted. [69]

Sweat was plastering my shirt and pants to me like a skindiver's outfit. I needed a shower. I told Ashe to rest easy and went into the bathroom.

When I came out, Tommy had returned. He and the old man were busily gabbing. Nan, standing by the kitchen door, frantically signaled me to join her. In the kitchen, she backed me against the sink. "Get him out of here!"

"Why?" I asked, startled.

"There's something wrong with him."

"Wrong?"

"He gives me the willies."

"It's just the heat," I scoffed.

"If you must know, he—he leered at me! While you were in the shower. It was awful!"

"Nan, do you think that kind of yarn is going to stop me from writing about what happened tonight? It won't. And you can make up your mind I'm keeping the job. When I get through with the people in this town, they'll know they've been dealing with Edward Potter!"

Tight-lipped, she went to the refrigerator for the supper.

As soon as we'd sat down, Ashe began to talk. He kept it up through the entire meal. He'd been everywhere and done everything, to hear him tell it. Tommy, listening bug-eyed, kept asking questions. It sort of got me. The hero of the affair, to my own son, was Ashe!

It was Nan who finally blew the whistle.

"Mr. Ashe," she said, her voice honed to a razor-edge, "I'm sure Ted would be much more interested in knowing what led up to the fight tonight—or are you still confused?"

There was a beat of three while he studied Nan carefully. Then he said, "It's quite apparent, Mrs. Potter, that you've absolutely no use for me. This shows discernment. Most likely, with a woman's instinct, you've hit upon at least part of the truth. Because of that, it might be wise to lay all my cards on the table. But I warn you, it will be hard to believe."

"That," said Nan, leaning back with a gleam of triumph in her eyes, "I'll bet on!"

IT WAS hard to believe, all right. So hard, in fact, that I thought he was just pulling Nan's leg.

He said he'd come from another world, outside our solar system, where people existed in a kind of liquid state, bouncing about, for the most part, like large water-filled bladders. They were, however, capable of taking almost any shape their superior minds willed. They could flatten and drift about in the water, or they could inflate and rise in the air. They could even become facsimiles of other living things, taking on the shape, texture and coloration, a capability which aided greatly in their main function of traveling as missionaries of goodness amongst the peoples of the Galaxy. For they were perfect—as perfect as angels. [70]

As he talked, Nan's face got redder and redder. Finally, when I couldn't keep from snickering, she jumped up, grabbed her empty plate and headed for the kitchen.

"Don't rush off, honey," I said innocently.

She stopped at the kitchen door and glared at me. "I guess I know when I'm being kidded!"

"But," said Ashe in his cold, dry purr, "I'm not kidding."

It seemed to me the joke had gone far enough. "Don't tell me," I said sarcastically, "that you're a missionary to Earth!"

"No," he admitted. "I'm here because I was banished."

"Oh. A sort of fallen angel!"

"Exactly."

Another chill scurried along my spine. It was his tone of voice more than anything. But then, too, his eyes had a dull, black humorlessness about them.

Nan returned to the table and sat down. I noticed a band of perspiration mustaching her upper lip. Indeed, I seemed to have grown much hotter myself.

Irritably, I said, "Ashe, it's too damn warm for games. If you don't want to explain what happened this evening, that's your privilege. But, as you know, the story means a lot to me. And I did stick my neck out for you!"

He held up a gnarled hand. "One moment, my boy. Let me finish."

So he finished. And the rest of the story was even nuttier.

He was a throwback, he said with quiet pride. The perfection which had taken his people countless years to attain was wiped out the moment he came into being. They'd tried to reform him, but there was something fundamental about his evil—as if it were an essence.

As a last resort, they'd put him into one of their wonderful machines and thrown the switch. At that agonizing instant, he'd imagined himself to be water scraping over the edge of a sharp rock. Then he'd come to, drifting through space. And, much later, he'd touched Earth. Once landed, he'd taken on many shapes, through the years—mainly, however, of people who'd died.

EVEN AS HE talked, I was carefully sliding my chair back. If I could reach the phone in the hallway without being noticed, it would be fairly simple to get help. But he saw what I was doing and laughed. [71]

"Edward," he said, "I know you don't believe me, but stick around until I prove it."

What happened next almost made me sick to my stomach. His face, which had been as wrinkled as a fielder's mitt, all of a sudden took on the appearance of a disturbed reflection in a pool of water. His flesh began to writhe like a tangled mass of earthworms. Thirty seconds after it began, he'd sloughed off thirty years. Even his beard, which had been as white as shower-room tiling, became a fierce, dead black.

I heard Tommy pipe, "Gol/æe!" and Nan sigh—only it sounded more like a groan. I shook away the dazed feeling and it was immediately replaced by a great excitement.

"Listen here," I said hoarsely, "this story will set the whole country on its ear. With my by-line on it!"

"Oh, Ted," Nan cried, "don't let him take you in! It's a trick. It's—it's mass hypnotism or something."

"The trouble with you," I said, "is you don't believe even what you see with your own eyes!"

The next day, I went to see Jones. We'd decided—Ashe and I—upon a course of action. The existence of Ashe was to remain a secret, but I was to keep my job with the paper at all costs. Then we could sit back and wait for the opportune moment to spill it, a time when we had the best angle and were positive Ashe wouldn't be labeled a hoax.

Driving to the plant, I was tense enough to snap. It was not entirely from the unabated heat, either. I didn't like the way Ashe had acted during the latter part of the evening.

Naturally I had felt disappointment at not being able to reveal his presence. But what rankled most was the guy's colossal gall. Okay, so I'm childish, only I just don't like to have someone gobble up my share of the dessert.

He'd also borrowed all the cash in the house and then demanded I draw on my bank account. I quickly discouraged that. But the topper was his forcing Nan and me to sleep on the couch while he used the bed. He said his bruises still hurt, even though they weren't visible.

MY MOOD didn't improve when Jones kept me waiting for over an hour. Surprisingly enough, he was in good spirits. As I entered the office, he indicated one of the leather chairs and said with a laugh, "Sit down, Ted. I've got some good news."

My opinion of him the previous evening obviously hadn't been taken very much to heart. Sourly, I told him, "As a publisher, you should know that good news is no news." [72]

The smile left his face. Then, with a visible effort, he forced it back. "You have something there, Ted. You certainly have. But point of view is important, also. You see, they've arrested a gang of kids for shoplifting. One of them is Tommy, your son."

I jumped up. "Arrested Tommy!"

"Now wait, Ted. Don't go off half-cocked. It's a break. Don't you see? You can cover delinquency with the lid off now. You'll be writing as a parent in the same boat with other parents...."

I could still hear his frantic noises after I'd slammed the door behind me and run the length of the corridor.

At the police station, I had the distinct feeling they'd been waiting for me. I knew most of them, especially the big red-headed guy who beckoned me into a rear office. His name was Thompson—Detective Emanuel Thompson. He always looked as if he wore a football uniform under his dark blue suit. My articles had roasted him plenty. He handled juvenile delinquency cases.

"Well, Mr. Potter," he greeted me, smiling tightly, "we meet under unfortunate circumstances."

"Can the phony sympathy," I said. "You're not the type. Just let me see my boy."

He used a red-and-blue handkerchief to wipe the dampness from his beefy neck. "I think we'd better have a little talk first."

"I got no talking to do. This is a lousy frame-up against me and the paper. Get my son out here and do it fast!"

HE put the handkerchief away, sighed and reached for the phone.

It really got me when Tommy came into the room. He'd been crying; his face was streaked, and he looked scared and forlorn.

"Son," I said, finding it difficult to keep the rasp out of my voice, "if you've got a hat, put it on and let's go."

Thompson pulled out his handkerchief again and carefully lowered himself into the chair behind the desk. "You don't seem to understand, Mr. Potter. Your boy is in trouble. He's been identified as leading a gang of kids who spent most of the morning shoplifting in stores all over town."

"That's bull," I said. "How could my boy do a thing like that? He's only twelve. Who identified him, anyway?"

"The shopkeepers and the other members of the gang."

[73]

FOR ONE awful moment, I felt a great cavity of doubt. "Son," I asked, "what's this all about?"

Tommy's face creased with fear and tears brimmed his eyes. "It was Ashe," he quavered.

"Ashe?"

"Yes. I told him about the gang."

"Gang?"

"The Red Skulls."

"What the heck are you talking about?"

"Some of the fellows got together and built a hut for a club-house over on the garbage dump. We call ourselves the Red Skulls. I was made leader. I'm called the Skull Cap."

"Why haven't I heard about this?"

"You never asked, Dad. I tried to tell you one night, but you were hurrying to get to that road-house on the turnpike. You said you had a big lead on juvenile delinquency."

"Well, you certainly didn't try very hard," I said angrily. "What was this gang's purpose?"

"Oh, different things. One of the fellows has a .22 and we hunt rats. Then—"

"Go on."

"That's all."

"You started to say something else."

He kicked at the floor. "Aw, gee!"

"Let's have it!"

"We smoked."

"Smoked!"

He nodded.

"And what else?"

"That's all. Honest!"

Thompson said, "What about shoplifting?"

"No," sniveled Tommy. "That was Ashe. He wanted me to talk the gang into shoplifting, but I wouldn't. Then he changed himself to look like me and talked the fellows into it when I wasn't around. I only know about it because I ran into them after they'd been in a store...."

Thompson gave me a funny look. "Who's this Ashe he keeps talking about?"

I started to tell him. Then I got a sudden mental flash of how idiotic it would all sound. "The boy," I said evenly, "is beside himself because of all he's been through. It's time to call a halt to this farce. I'm going to hire myself some legal talent."

He shrugged. "Suit yourself."

Tommy grabbed my arm and cried, "Please don't leave me, Dad!"

I pulled away from him, feeling as if I'd dropped him off a cliff.

Right outside the station, I met Nan. She was pale and breathless. Jones had phoned the news. She wanted to go to Tommy immediately.

[74]

I guided her to the car and pushed her inside. "Listen here," I said tensely, "for once, don't make a fuss. Just help me find Ashe. He's the one who can free Tommy."

SHE BEGAN to laugh. "That's a hot one!" she gasped. "That's really a hot one!"

I shook her, thinking she was hysterical.

She stopped laughing and swallowed hard. "Ashe is home."

"Home?"

"Blind drunk, with a blonde on his knee."

I tramped so hard on the accelerator that it must have scraped the ground all the way home. Ashe didn't hear me pull up to the house because the radio was going full blast. I hit the light switch in the hallway and the brightness flared against the lengthening afternoon shadows, spotting him and the blonde on the living room couch.

The blonde looked as if she'd come from a burlesque runway. Ashe dumped her on the floor and staggered to his feet. He'd changed his appearance again. Now he looked a strikingly handsome twenty-five. He came forward to throw a heavy arm around my shoulder.

"Glad to see you, Ted," he mouthed. "Ran out of money. Must have more. Small loan...."

I put both hands on his chest and pushed. He stumbled back and thudded against the wall. "The police have picked up Tommy," I said flatly. "He's been charged with the shoplifting you did today."

He sobered instantly. He jerked the blonde to her feet, booted her out, slammed the door and came back to me. "Ted, I'm shocked to hear this. Tell me about it quickly. We must do something right away."

The blonde had begun to howl and scream curses. I could hear doors and windows opening all the way down the street. "You monster!" Nan spat, and hurried outside. Presently the girl quieted down.

"Ted," Ashe whispered, "I'm ashamed of myself. Here you befriended me and all I've done is get you and your family in trouble." He held a cupped hand over his eyes as if he were shading tears. "Can you possibly find it in your heart to forgive me?"

I was moved. After all, a poor, homeless alien being couldn't very well be expected to understand our manners and feelings. Yet this one did. All because he'd been touched by my friendship.

"Ashe," I said, feeling the the warmth of good will, "I'm happy to hear you say that. Bygones are bygones. The important thing is springing Tommy."

[75]

"Exactly," he said. "We'll go and explain everything to the police. But we'll do it in grand style. This is your big show. We must have Jones and the Mayor. We must have photographers, reporters, television, radio—everything!"

NAN RETURNED. "The girl will be all right. She was just upset."

"Honey," I told her excitedly, "we're about to stand the whole country on its collective ear. Ashe is going to reveal his identity!"

Nan's face pinched into a look of disgust. "You mean you're trusting this—this creature again?"

"Sure, honey. Anyone can make a mistake."

"That's right!" she exploded. "You're making one now! Oh, Ted, stop being such a fool!"

"Listen here," I said, "this is the last two minutes of the game. We're trying to score before the gun—and you start an argument!"

She began to blubber.

Why must she always be so unreasonable? Why the constant bickering and tension and unhappiness? I was sick to death of it. I grabbed Ashe's arm. "Come on," I said, "let's go."

Even outdoors, the air felt hot and clammy. I headed the car for the plant, figuring I could do my phoning from there as well as pick a crew. But on Main Street, Ashe spotted a cab and made me stop.

He said he'd better go on ahead. He thought things would work smoother that way. He could start the ball rolling on the release of Tommy, and I wouldn't be held up by having to tell people who he was.

I drove on alone. But it was a mistake. People simply didn't believe my story about an alien being. In various ways and tones of voice, they all suggested I go home and sleep it off. In desperation, I went up to Jones' house, even though he'd already told me on the phone that he was in the middle of a dinner party.

He came up close to me and sniffed my breath.

"Don't worry," I told him. "I never touch it. But maybe I should smell yours. Anyone who turns his back on the biggest story of all time must be drunk!"

He jerked the cigar from his mouth and gave me a narrow-eyed, searching look. "Ted, I just hope for your sake this isn't some kind of a joke."

FIFTEEN minutes later, we pulled up to the police station in a three car convoy, with a big crew from the paper. I led the group inside, feeling the excitement grow in me. I marched up to the desk sergeant. "Where is he?" [76]

The desk sergeant looked startled. "Who?"

Well, he wasn't there. He just wasn't there! It was like getting tackled two yards from a touch-down by a tackler you hadn't realized was anywhere near!

Jones pushed forward, chewing agitatedly on his cigar. "Edward, you've got some nerve, pulling a stunt like this! It's an outrage!"

"Take it easy," I said weakly. "Something's gone wrong."

"It certainly has. You must have gone insane!"

"Listen here! If you don't stick with me on this, I'm all through with the paper!"

"That suits me fine!"

I watched him leave, trailing cigar smoke. The others followed. My face burned and sweat trickled down my back and along my sides. I wanted to hit out at something....

A hand gripped my elbow. It was Sergeant Thompson. "Mr. Potter, you shouldn't let this get you down. People's kids get in scrapes all the time. Tomorrow you'll have a talk with the judge and everything will turn out okay."

I jerked my elbow away. "In other words, you think I'm batty, too!"

"No," he said, gripping my elbow again and starting me toward the door. "It's been hot and you just need some rest."

"Thompson," I said, dragging myself to a halt, "I know it sounds nuts, but this Ashe character really exists. Help me find him and you can cut yourself a slice. It'll be big time!"

The grip on my elbow increased. "Go home, Mr. Potter, and get a good night's sleep."

"But it's on the level, Thompson. Jones and I busted up. I'm playing on your team now!"

His face got all flushed. "My job isn't a game and I don't belong to any team. Get wise, will you? Stay in your own back yard for once. It could stand a lot of weeding!" He pushed me out the door then—so hard, I almost fell.

STANDING there, feeling the heat press in on me, I tried to dope out the next move. My car was still at Jones' place, so I'd need a cab. I turned toward the drugstore at the end of the block where I could phone. Walking along, I recalled Ashe had taken a cab earlier in the evening. If I could talk to the driver, I might get a lead on his whereabouts. I walked faster.

I thought of Thompson and his remark about the back yard ... and the weeds. Again, for the third time, a chill traveled the length of my spine. I began to run. I ran past the drugstore and all the way home. [77]

They were both in the bedroom. Nan stood in the far corner with her back against the wall. Her shoulders were scratched and her lip cut. She held a heavy bookend poised to strike at Ashe, who was in front of her, moving stealthily forward.

The moment I spun him around, I froze in amazement. I couldn't recognize him. Then, all at once, I realized I was looking at the spitting image of myself.

He broke from my grasp and darted to the window. Before I could follow, Nan had dropped the bookend and flung herself into my arms. "Oh, Ted," she sobbed, "I *knew* it wasn't you!"

I kissed her and gently disengaged her arms. "I've got to get Ashe," I said.

When I vaulted through the window and circled the house, I spotted him rushing down the street. I caught him around the corner at the same spot where I'd first seen him.

I slugged him. Yet I knew it was useless the instant the blow landed. He felt just like sponge rubber. But I kept hitting him. I didn't bother listening to his cries and I didn't give a damn that he'd changed himself back to an old man.

The blow on the back of my neck was so sudden, I didn't feel it. The only sensation was unbalance, as if I were walking uphill. Then I was slapped with the sidewalk.

Looking up, I could see he was young, clean-cut and well built. His long, horsy face was furious. "You crazy?" he yelled. "Beating up an old man!"

I searched desperately for an explanation—something to say. Then, abruptly, without having uttered a sound, I reeled away and shambled hurriedly down the street ... home, to Nan.

—RICHARD MAPLES

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