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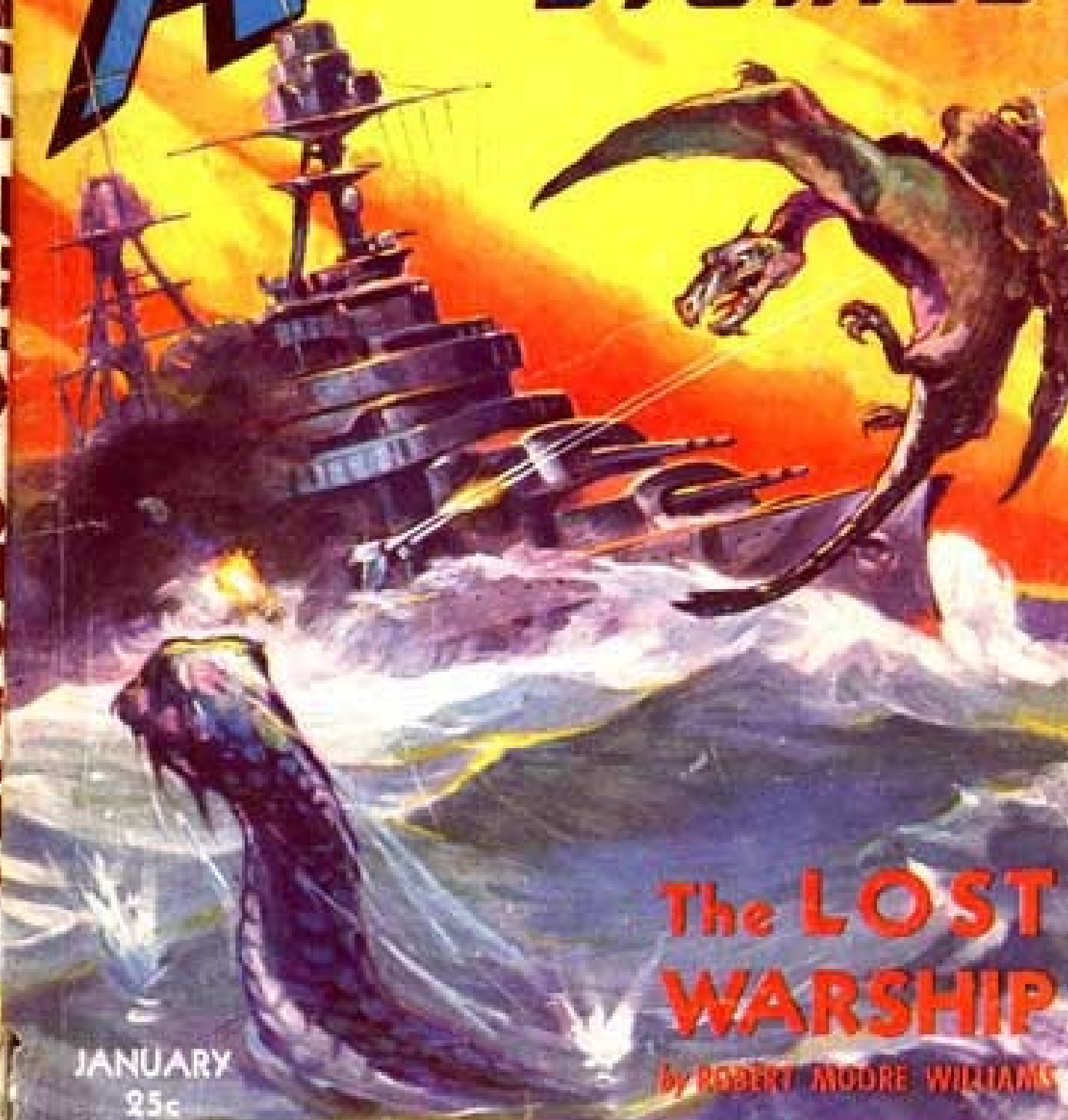
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The LOST
WARSHIP

by ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS



The Project Gutenberg eBook of The Chameleon Man, by William P. McGivern

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The Chameleon Man

By WILLIAM P. MCGIVERN

Perfect adaptation, that's what it was. When a human being can blend with his surroundings, funny things can happen!

I've got an office in the *Daily Standard* building and sometimes when things are slow in my line—theatrical bookings—I drift upstairs and talk to the guy who writes the column, The Soldier's Friend, for the *Standard*.

On this particular morning I walked into his office and found it empty so I sat down and waited, figuring he was downstairs getting a mug of coffee. After I cleaned my nails and glanced through Jake's mail I propped my feet up on the desk and relaxed.

Things in my line were strictly stinkeroo. With the army taking an option on every available hunk of male flesh, it made it pretty tough to get acts together. Of course, I still had a few dollies to peddle, but the situation don't look too good there, what with the WAVES and the WAACS and the demand from factories for powder-puff riveters.

I sighed and moodily contemplated my uncreased trouser legs and thought of my non-existent bank balance. Whoever said war was hell, sure hit the nail on the head.

The door opened and I heard a shuffle of footsteps on the floor. I tipped my derby back and looked up, expecting to see Jake, but the office was empty.

The door was standing open and I scratched my head. Maybe it had blown open. Then I remembered the sound of footsteps I'd heard and my bewilderment increased.

"Hello," a voice said.

My feet came down from the desk with a crash. I sat up straight and stared about the small room.

"Who said that?" I demanded.

"I did. I'm right here." It was the same voice and I jerked my head in the direction of the sound.

For an instant I didn't see a thing. But then, my eyes seemed suddenly to focus, and I saw a tall, lanky young man standing a few feet from me. He had a shock of straw colored hair and mild blue eyes. He wore a light suit.

"Can you see me now?" he asked, and his voice sounded strained, as if he were exerting himself in some manner.

"Yes, I can see you," I said. I was a little nettled. "What do you mean coming in and scaring people that way?"

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to scare you. I just can't help it. I'll have to relax now."

"You'll have to what? Are you—"

I broke off and goggled. The young man had completely disappeared. My forehead was suddenly damp with nervous perspiration. I closed my eyes and forced myself to think calmly. This was some trick of my imagination. I'd been working too hard. My nerves were shot. I'd have to take a rest.

I opened my eyes cautiously. The room was empty. I drew a relieved breath.

"I'm sorry if I frightened you," a familiar voice said apologetically. "But, you see, I can't help it."

I stood up warily and peered about the room.

"Where are you?" I whispered.

"Right here in front of you."

"If you're a mahout for pink elephants, I don't want to see you," I said. "Go away."

"Please," the young man's voice was plaintive, "I need your advice. I'm in trouble."

"That's too bad," I said, edging toward the door.

"Please listen to me. There's nothing to be afraid of."

"From your viewpoint, no," I said.

"If you'll look carefully you can see me," the voice said. "That's what bothers most people. I mean not being able to see me."

"How stupid of them to be bothered by a little thing like that," I said, trying not to gibber. But in spite of my common sense I did peer closely at the area the young man had occupied and I saw a very remarkable thing.

I

saw the vague, indistinct shape of the straw-haired, blue-eyed young man standing exactly where I had seen him the first time. But the effect was so uncertain and shadowy that I was hardly able to trust my eyes.

The young man seemed to blend into the background, which happened to be a desk, water cooler and wall, so evenly and completely that it was impossible to see him at all.

But even so, seeing him, however fuzzily, was a relief.

"It's a good trick," I said cautiously.

"It's not a trick," the young man said, aggrieved. "It's something I can't help."

"Oh yeah? Well how does it happen that I was able to see you when you came in?"

"I was exerting my will power," the young man said. "But that's awfully tiring. I had to relax a moment or so and when I did you weren't able to see me quite so distinctly."

I found my curiosity stirring. Maybe the guy was a crackpot or phony, but it wouldn't hurt to hear his story. In my line, with things as lean as they are, you can't afford to miss any bets.

"What makes you pop on and off like an electric light?" I asked. "Must be a

tiring way to go through life."

"You don't know the half of it," the young man said mournfully. "I've only been this way for a few months, but it seems like it's been years."

"Well, go on," I said. "Spill your troubles. Why should Mr. Anthony have all the fun?"

"What?"

"Never mind. Shoot."

"I'm not sure what causes me to fade-out like this. I've been to a half dozen doctors and psychiatrists and they aren't sure either. But it has something to do with personality development, they think. The last psychiatrist I visited told me that I had a very colorless personality and abnormal inhibitions and frustrations. He said that my present condition was a physical manifestation of my colorless personality."

I shook my head disgustedly.

"That sounds about as asinine as the droolings of the average psychiatrist," I muttered. "He didn't know and spent an hour saying so, I'll bet."

"It's awful," the young man sighed disconsolately. "I can make myself visible for a little while but it's awfully tiring. The rest of the time I go around like a ghost. I blend into the background so completely that people just don't notice me at all. It's just like not being alive."^[1]

^[1] The young man's peculiar physical condition is not as fantastic and unprecedented as one might at first believe. Everyone has had the experience of meeting a person who makes almost no impression whatsoever on them. People with such anemia of the personality are constantly being forgotten, overlooked even by friends who know them well. Their presence in a room will be unobserved for several minutes and, frequently, such people will be completely ignored, even when they are sitting or standing in plain view. In nature, the chameleon has similar properties but for a definite reason, namely that of defense against its stronger enemies. The chameleon blends perfectly into the brown and green foliage of its native habitat and even the marvelously keen eyes of its natural enemies are unable to detect its presence. It is not impossible to conceive that the same camouflaging property could develop in a human being. Nature might appreciate the difficulty of a retiring, sensitive person to mingle with his more vivid fellow creatures, and so clothe him with a defensive armor of practical invisibility to insulate him against the attacks of those with stronger personalities. Readers of *Fantastic Adventures* will remember John York Cabot's classic, "The Man the World Forgot," as an exposition of this theme. Unexplained instances of men and women "disappearing" from normal environments might be

simply cases of submerged personalities which did not "disappear" but were simply and tragically forgotten.—ED.

I studied the vague shape of the young man carefully. I could see him, but only by straining my eyes. The whole thing was amazing. Looking carefully, I realized that the young man was *not* invisible; he was just easy to miss because he was so inconspicuously blended into the background of the office.

"You'd probably have a fine time on a patch work quilt," I said.

The young man shuddered.

"Please don't joke," he said imploringly. "I'm in real trouble. I need help."

"I'll say you do," I said. "But I don't see what I can do for you."

"It's this," the young man said. "My draft board just deferred me with a 4-F classification. They told me I wouldn't be any good in my present shape. So there."

I looked at the young phantom.

"Well—go on!"

"Go on? That's all there is to it. They've rejected me. They won't take me."

"And that's your problem?"

"Naturally."

I

shook my head. It takes all kinds, I guess.

"Now listen to me," I said. "If the army doesn't want you, consider yourself lucky."

"But I want to get in," the young man protested. "I won't feel right until I am in service."

"You left that psychiatrist too soon," I muttered. "Anyway, what do you expect me to do?"

"Why, I was sure you could help me," the young man said. "You're the Soldier's Friend, aren't you? You write the column of advice to the Yanks in the *Standard*, don't you?"

I got it then. This wraith thought I was the Soldier's Friend. That's why he was spilling himself to me.

He continued. "You know all the angles of the various branches of the Service, and I hoped you'd be able to recommend some branch that could use me. I'm willing to do anything or go anywhere. If you'll help me I'll put myself completely in your hands."

"Now just a minute," I said. "You've got the wrong idea. The guy you want to see—"

I closed my big mouth with a snap. What was wrong with me? Were my brains on a permanent vacation? Here was opportunity hammering and banging at my door and I was too deaf to hear a sound.

This hard-to-see young man was a natural for show business. I already had an act lined up that he would fit as neatly as five fingers in a glove. And he was practically begging me to take him under my wing.

"Young man," I said. "You impress me as being sincere and earnest. And for that reason I am going to try and help you."

"Oh, gosh, thanks."

"It's the least I can do," I said. "But," I added sternly, "you've got to put yourself completely in my hands. You mustn't question a thing I tell you to do. You see, this isn't going to be easy. I'll have to go about it in a rather roundabout way. And it may take a little while."

"Oh, I don't care," the young man said happily. "Anything you say is all right with me."

"Fine." I glanced at my watch. "We've got to go now. You follow me."

"Sure, Mr.—"

"Flannigan," I said automatically.

"But, Mr. Flannigan, that isn't the name you use on your column."

"Naturally," I said. "Very sharp of you to catch that. I might get you into Intelligence, even if only as a decoy. The name I use on the column is a pseudonym."

"Oh!"

"Now come along with me."

I hurriedly got my young phantom out of the Soldier's Friend office before anyone could butt in and ruin everything. When we were safely ensconced in my own office, I waved the young man to a chair.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Horatio Heely," he replied.

I

was becoming more enthused every minute. Looking at him, or *trying* to look at him, seated in a chair, convinced me of his enormous potentialities. The chair was brown leather and, at first glance, the only thing that indicated that it was occupied, was a slight indentation in the seat and back of the chair. Horatio blended in perfectly with the deep brown of the chair and his face, which stuck up six or eight inches, was invisible against the grayness of the wall.

"Maybe you could get me into the Coast Guard," he said.

I frowned. "I hardly think so," I said. "I know the Commander over there but I don't think I could swing it. Now, remember, you're going to leave everything in my hands."

The door of my office opened then and a slim, stunning blonde walked in, followed by a tall, gaunt, sober individual with a gloomy face and deep black eyes. He wore a turban with an imitation jewel set in the center folds, squarely over his high forehead.

"Hah!" this character cried. "I suppose again you will tell me there is nothing for Mystiffio The Great, today."

"Ix-nay," I snapped. "Ut-shay up-yay!"

The blonde looked at me, eyebrows raising.

"What gives, mastermind?"

This was the act I had in mind for Horatio. Mystiffio was a fair magician and his line of patter wasn't bad. The blonde, whose name was Alice, acted as a prop, and with her looks and Mystiffio's line they didn't do badly. But with Horatio in the act it would be tremendous.

He would blend perfectly into the stage background. Invisible, he could assist Mystiffio with the hocus-pocus and really produce some wonderful effects.

Alice was still looking at me as if I'd gone batty.

"Just trust Uncle," I said hastily. "I got a great new angle for your act."

"You act as if you've been out in the sun too long," Alice murmured. "But don't mind me."

With a weary sigh she sank into the brown leather chair. And one-tenth of a second later she leaped to her feet with a scream. She wheeled about, hand raised to slap, and then as she stared at the seemingly empty chair, an expression of wonderment stole over her pretty face.

"Oh!" she screamed, and leaped from the chair

"Oh!" she screamed, and leaped from the chair

"What—I could have sworn I—" She turned to me pleadingly. "What is it? Am I going screwy or is there somebody sitting in that chair?"

"Horatio," I said. "Exert a little willpower and show yourself."

"All right, Mr. Flannigan," Horatio's voice from the chair answered.

Mystiffio moved nervously toward the door.

"I don't believe it," he said. His broad dark face was an unhappy mixture of fear and surprise.

"Well, I'll be darned!" Alice cried. She was staring at the chair, or rather at Horatio, who had suddenly become visible.



I

made the introductions quickly.

"Now that's enough, Horatio," I said. "You can turn yourself off again. I don't want you to wear out."

"Thanks," Horatio said gratefully. He smiled faintly at Alice. "Pleased to have met you," he said. Then he vanished into the brown background of the chair.

"Get me a drink!" Mystiffio said. He grasped the edge of the desk and stared solemnly at the empty brown chair. "Get me two drinks."

"What is it?" Alice demanded. "How do you do it? Mirrors? Lighting? It's terrific."

"It's completely on the level. Now here's the angle. I'm going to put this guy into your act. Wait'll the crowds get a load of Mystiffio's magic then. With Horatio in the background pulling the strings he'll make Thurston look like an amateur parlor entertainer."

Mystiffio turned to me stiffly.

"What," he said frigidly, "makes you think I need an invisible man to help me in my act? I am perfectly capable of astounding and amazing an audience by myself."

"You're quoting your own press notices now," I said. "I know; I wrote 'em."

"And what makes you think I'm not as good as Thurston?" Mystiffio asked in an injured voice.

"Ah, temperament!" I murmured. I turned to Alice. "You work on him. You can see that Horatio will be a good thing, can't you? You don't want your act to die, do you?"

"Mr. Flannigan." It was Horatio. His voice sounded apologetic. "I don't want to disturb you, but what has all this got to do with getting me into the army? You sound more like a booking agent than the Soldier's Friend."

Alice looked at me.

"Heel," she said. "What kind of line are you giving him?"

"Horatio," I said. "I am disappointed. I expected a little trust from you. Didn't I tell you it might be a little while before I got things set? This angle I'm working now will put you practically into the army."

"Yeah! How?"

"I'm going to line you up doing an act for the U. S. O. Does that show you my heart's in the right place?"

"There will be a short pause for cat-calls and boos," Alice murmured.

"All right," Horatio said with a sigh. "I'll go along with you."

"Fine," I said. "And just to get you used to army life I'm going to start paying you fifty bucks a month."

"You great big generous man," Alice said and I think there was a twinge of sarcasm in her voice.

"Now that's no way to talk," I said. "I'm doing the lad a favor."

"Yeah," she said. "I'm sure you are. Just like a man picking up a dollar bill is doing the street cleaners a favor."

"You don't understand my noble motives," I said, "so I will not talk about them anymore. Tomorrow we start rehearsing the new act."

W

ell, sir, it was absolutely amazing the way Horatio picked that act up. With his dexterous, invisible help Mystiffio performed like the paragon of all prestidigitators. Alice added a jolt of high-voltage eye-appeal to the ensemble, by smiling sweetly and wearing a black satin bathing suit that had been designed by some patriotic person who believed in saving material to the point of cutting down on essentials.

I was sure, for the first time in my stretch in this loony business, that I had an option on a nice private little gold mine.

And I wasn't going to let anything upset my cartful of golden apples.

"Okay," I said. They were rehearsing on the stage of an empty theater which was owned by a guy I'd done some favors for. "You look pretty good, but don't let it go to your head. The act needs a lot of work. Keep at it. I'm going out to get a sandwich."

Alice put her hands on her hips and looked down at me.

"Everything is fifty-fifty with you, isn't it?" she said. "We do the work, you get the money. Nice even split."

"Careful, beautiful," I said. "You'll die of your own poisons, if you don't look out." I waved to her and left. After I'd had a bite to eat, I went to see one of the biggest agents in the business, the guy who books all the acts into the Capitol in New York.

"Look, Morry," I said, when his secretary had ushered me into his office, which was big enough to hold the World Series in, "I've really got something terrific lined up."

Morry looked up at me and his little eyes were uninterested. He yawned and dusted a fleck of dust from the sleeve of his coat.

"What is it?" he asked.

"It's a magician's act that—"

Morry shook his head. "Magicians are dead. Who wants to see rabbits pulled out of a hat?"

"This is different. This guy is good."

"All right, he's good," Morry said. "So what? We can't use him."

"But you ought to at least see the act," I pleaded. "It's got a honey of a girl, too."

"Girl?" Morry glanced up and there was a flicker of interest in his little eyes.

"Yeah, a honey."

"Well," Morry shrugged. "I can't promise anything, but we do need an act to fill in a spot within a week or so. But whatever I get has to be good. I can't send bums to New York."

"I know. I know," I said. My heart was hammering with hope. One break on the

Stem and I'd be set. "When will you catch the act? Tomorrow be all right?"

Morry nodded.

I went back to the theatre walking about three feet from the ground. I felt I was in at last. It was a funny feeling I couldn't analyze, but I knew I was going to be in.

W

hen I walked into the little office back stage I found Alice there talking to Horatio.

She was saying, "There should be *something* you could do for the Army, Horatio," as I walked into the office.

Horatio was standing by the desk, shoulders slumped. I had to look twice to make him out against the background of the desk and wall.

Alice shut up when she saw me.

"Horatio and I were just talking," she said.

"Yeah," I said. "Now Horatio and I are going to do a little talking. Make yourself scarce."

Alice left and I turned to Horatio.

"What kind of a line was she giving you?" I snapped.

"Why, gosh, Mr. Flannigan," Horatio stammered. "She was just trying to help me. She's just as interested in getting me into the Army as you are. She's a wonderful girl, Mr. Flannigan."

There was something in his voice that brought me up with a jolt. The kid had fallen for the girl as sure as I stood there.

"Now, look," I said gently. "You really want to get set with Uncle Sam, don't you?"

"Why, sure."

"Then listen to me. I'm doing everything I can for you. And I've got a deal all lined up. I was just over at the Army recruiting station and I think everything is set. Not right away, but pretty soon."

"Gosh, that's wonderful."

"Now you know who your friend is." I came over beside him and put my hand on his shoulder. "I got a little piece of advice for you that I want you to take to heart. Stay away from this kid, Alice. She's no good for you."

"Now just a minute. You can't—"

"I'm sorry, kid," I said. I let my hand fall from his shoulder. "Maybe I shouldn't tell you, but—"

"Tell me what?"

"It's only for your own good I'm doing this. That pretty little blonde is just going to play you for a sucker. She's already married."

Horatio gasped. He must have been pretty sold on the girl.

"I don't believe it," he cried.

"It's God's truth."

"Who is the man?" Horatio cried brokenly.

"Mystiffio."

"Mystiffio!"

I nodded slowly. "It's a tough break, kid, but the sooner you forget her the better." I had already decided I'd get rid of her. She wouldn't be hard to replace. Horatio was my gold mine and I didn't want anyone to do a scorched-earth job on him.

"But she never told me," he muttered.

"Naturally," I said. "She'll probably even deny she's married to him now, but don't let that fool you."

"No, sir," Horatio said. "She won't make a sucker out of me." His anger must have subconsciously affected his visibility mechanism for he was visible and his

lean jaw was hard, but there was a hurt look in his clear blue eyes.

"That's the boy," I said. "Just remember who your friends are and you won't go wrong."

"I won't, Mr. Flannigan," he promised solemnly.

T

he next afternoon Morry arrived to see the act. He was dressed in a natty pin stripe suit and he wore a big yellow carnation in the buttonhole, but his sallow face was impassive.

I escorted him down the dark empty theatre to the front row.

"Just hold your breath now," I told him. "I'll have the act on stage in a jiffy."

He yawned and glanced at his watch.

"I haven't got long," he said.

I went backstage and found Alice.

"Hurry up," I said. "Morry is waiting."

She looked at me as if I'd just crawled out from the wainscoating. "I've just talked to the kid," she said. "He thinks I'm poison. What kind of a yarn have you been feeding him?"

"Me? Why, honey, that hurts. Do you think your Uncle Patrick would breathe an unkind word about you?"

"Well, it's mighty strange," she said. "He won't even tell me what's biting him."

"I wouldn't pay any attention to him," I said. "Perhaps it's all for the best."

"Hmmm," she said, eyeing me shrewdly.

"Come on now, be a good kid and get things rolling. A lot depends on this you know."

I went back and joined Morry.

Well the act was terrific. Mystiffio had Morry's eyes sticking out inside of thirty seconds. I hadn't told Morry about Horatio. I figured I'd let that angle ride for a while.

But Morry was really impressed.

"The guy is good," he said. "The things he does don't seem humanly possible."

Of course he didn't know that most of the effects were being created by the invisible Horatio but what he didn't know wouldn't hurt him. And he didn't miss Alice, either. When she came on stage in her cute, abbreviated little costume, he straightened up and opened his eyes.

"The kid is nice," he murmured.

"Are we in?" I demanded.

"Can't say yet. I gotta talk to the act but I'd say your chances were pretty good."

I almost swooned with happiness. The break I'd been waiting for all my life was here at last. The golden apples were about ready to drop into my lap.



W

When Mystiffio finished his routine I took Morry backstage. I found Alice.

"Here she is, Morry," I said. "And she's just as nice as she looks." I shoved Alice toward him. "Be nice, baby," I hissed in her ear.

Morry took one of her little hands and his eyes were interested.

"I kinda like the act," he said. "If you could find time to be nice to me I might like it a whole lot."

Alice takes her hand back as if it had accidentally brushed something slimy.

"I'm sorry but I don't go with the act," she snapped. "There are some things worth more to me than three meals a day and a paycheck."

"Okay, sister," Morry said without expression. He turned to me. "Guess I made a mistake coming up here. The act is lousy."

"Now wait a minute," I yelled. "You said it was good. You can't walk out now." I wheeled to Alice. "Baby, baby, don't do this to me. Tell him you're sorry."

Mystiffio came up behind us while we were talking.

"What is the matter?" he asked. I noticed he put an arm around Alice's shoulders. I was too distraught to think about it.

"Nothing's wrong," I said desperately. "Alice just took offense at something Morry said. Nobody meant any harm."

Mystiffio drew himself up straight and he grabbed Morry by the lapels. Morry struggled to free himself but he was pinioned helplessly.

"You cad! You bounder!" Mystiffio roared. "Do you mean you've been making advances to my daughter?"

Daughter! How do you like that! That just goes to show you never to trust people.

Morry pulled himself loose.

"You're all crazy," he shouted. "Lemme out of here."

He wheeled and started away, but before he had taken two strides he collided with a solid, unyielding, invisible substance.

He backed away a few steps, his mouth working in terror.

"What is it?" he screamed.

"I'm sorry," Horatio's voice sounded in the air a few feet from Morry.

Morry's face went white; he stared wildly about for another instant and then charged madly out of the theatre, screaming in terror.



I

chased after him, but it was a hopeless effort. When I got to the sidewalk he was gone. Moodily I slumped back into the theatre and went backstage. My big opportunity was gone, but I still had Horatio.

I found Alice in the office and she was alone. She smiled sweetly when she saw me.

"You too, Brutus," I muttered. Then I thought about my meal ticket and looked worriedly around the room.

"Where's Horatio?" I snapped.

"Horatio," she smiled, "is gone. Too bad you missed him. He would have liked to say goodbye."

"Goodbye!" I shrieked. "Where's he going?"

"Into the Army," Alice said sweetly. "Isn't it wonderful?"

"You're crazy," I shouted. "The Army won't take him."

"I arranged a little something for him," Alice said. "I'm sure he'll be very useful in the camouflage department."

Camouflage!

I groaned and sank into a chair.

"Yes," Alice said pleasantly, "when he learned that Mystiffio was my father—not my husband as you so cleverly told him—he was quite angry for a while. But of course he felt better when he thought it over. And he was very happy to take my suggestion to apply for a commission in the camouflage. I think Horatio and I are going to get along nicely."

I groaned again.

Mystiffio stuck his head in the door.

"Goodbye," he said. "Ready, dear?"

"Yes," Alice said, moving to the door. "I'm ready."

"Now wait a minute," I cried. "Where are you two going? You're the last act I've got."

"I am enlisting!" Mystiffio said proudly.

"As what?"

"Signal corps, in charge of messenger pigeons."

Mystiffio flapped his coat tail and a lone pigeon fluttered into the air. "I've had a lot of experience with the little devils."

I groaned again and dropped my head in my hands.

What was left?

When I looked up, Mystiffio and Alice had gone.

For a moment I sat there staring about the quiet dusty office. Then I stood up and I knew what I was going to do.

I put my hat on and walked out of the building. I didn't stop walking until I reached the Marine recruiting office. A big poster said, "The Marines Promise You Action!"

I walked in. Nothing could be worse than what I'd just been through. I felt contented for the first time in sixteen years.



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