

Bluebook

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ARTICLES

Football Fans Are Crazy	Bill Nicholas	6
New Cure for Alcoholics?	William Brown Hartley	10
Cars: Even the Cops Don't Know Traffic Laws	David Dressler	14
My Neighbors Put Me in a Mental Hospital	Charles H. Terry	20
Mixed Bag	Ralph W. Slone	26
We Can Build a Spaceship—Should We?	Lloyd Mallan	30
Language of Freedom	Jerry Klein	50

STORIES

The Price of a Tin Star	Richard Wormser	8
A Panther for My Bride	Zachary Ball	12
Eight Minutes of Magnificence	Kenneth E. Shiflet	18
Lone Survivor	Robert Shackley	24
Man on a High Ledge	John D. MacDonald	28

NOVEL

The Big Ivy	James P. McCague	51
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FEATURES

Pro and Con		2
The Head Man	Oren Arnold	4
Editor's Note		5
Read All About It: Snakes	John T. Dunlavy	17
Famous Firsts in Sports: Army vs. Navy	Bill Gottlieb	23
Land-a-Hand Dept.		33
It's Your Money	Sidney Margolius	34
What's New and Good	Carl Dreher	37
Man Outdoors	Robert C. McCormick	41
Man Around the House	John Sharnik	43
Tips on Shooting and Hunting	Irving T. Marsh	45
Wordly Wise	Webb B. Garrison	91
Crisis: Voices Through a Window	Lydel Sims	129
Bluebook's Cover	Gurney Miller	

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man

on a HIGH ledge

A Short Short Story

by
JOHN D. MacDONALD

IT WAS a few minutes after three o'clock when the dark paneled door of his office opened abruptly and he looked up, frowning, to see that Miss Ferres had burst in without knocking. Both the action and the expression on her thin face were entirely surprising to him. Her features looked sharper and more vital and her eyes were glowing.

She stopped abruptly, flushing, as she realized what she had done. "Oh . . . I'm sorry, Mr. Kelty. There's a man . . . he's across the street. We have a sort of ringside seat. I came in to tell you."

On dark November days such as this one, Norris Kelty liked to draw the heavy draperies across the wide windows and work by the yellow-orange glow of the lamp. He did not care for the sterile glare of fluorescence, nor the silvery doom of the reflected glow of an overcast Manhattan sky.

He stared at Miss Ferres for a brief moment, then stood up heavily and pulled the cord that slid the dark-blue draperies aside. He saw at once what had excited her. The tan, ugly, pigeon-streaked building across the street was much older than the building he was in. There were myriad cornices and ledges. The man was to his left, and one story higher. He stood on a narrow ledge very close to the corner of the building, far from any window. He stood with his feet apart, his hands flat against weathered stone. He seemed to be staring down at the street a hundred feet below. The ledge was so narrow that his toes protruded over the edge. He was dark-haired, hatless. He wore a two-tone windbreaker in tweed and tan. The November wind fluttered the legs of gray unpressed trousers and ruffled dark long hair. His face looked very white. Many windows were wide open in the building across the street and people leaned out and watched the man on the ledge.

Miss Ferres stood close beside Kelty watching the man. Kelty became aware of her there, and with a tone of irony and withdrawal he said, "Thank you very much, Miss Ferres."

She glanced at him and flushed again and backed away, saying, "I thought . . . you'd like to know."

She made no sound as she closed the door.

Norris Kelty turned back to his desk. He wondered if Miss Ferres had glanced at what he was doing. Even if she had, the papers would have meant little to her, despite her quick mind. Lists of securities,

bank balances, tax tables. Long years ago when he had been young and firm and agile he had relished the ability to dive into a pool so expertly there was hardly a ripple. For the past four months he had been planning his descent from life so that it could be accomplished with that same ease.

The decision had been building within him for the three previous gray years. He had had his full share of satisfactions from life. Health, love, success, money. Success was empty now because there was no more joy in accomplishment. The money was left. Love had been of the best, and had died with Edith three years ago, leaving him unfairly and forlornly alone. One son had died in a war in 1943. The other son was a successful architect in Southern California. They were on reasonably good terms now, but the years of estrangement had destroyed any chance of true closeness. His health was not good. The operation two years ago hadn't been successful. There was a possibility of recurrence and he did not want to face the pain again. From every point of view he saw himself justified. He felt a subtle un-casiness about his moral and spiritual right to take his own life, but that was all.

As with every other major undertaking of his life, he had planned this episode with great care. He had gradually shunted his work off onto the other partners. His will was up to date. His accounts and records were in perfect condition.

He was a fastidious man and he did not wish to cause any inconvenience for anyone. He planned to do it sometime before Christmas. With Edith gone, Christmas was the worst time of the year. He planned to get his car out of the mid-town garage and drive into the country and find a secluded place and take all of the sleeping tablets he had hoarded. He would pass easily from sleep into death.

It would cause no one any deep grief.

He tried to focus his mind on the tax tabulation and blot out the scene behind him. After an intensive effort he knew he could not do it. He found that he resented the man on the ledge. He resented the lack of dignity in the threat of self-inflicted death. There was no neatness, no consideration. Just frozen animal terror on a high place, and then a splash of flesh on the hard hide of the city. He could not

... Continued on page 96

Illustrated by George Withers



Man on a High Ledge

Continued from page 28

ignore the parallel between his own plans and the man on the ledge. It seemed an invasion of his own privacy, an obscene comment on his own decision.

From his windows he could see a notch of the river. He remembered that it had been a long time since he had used the small Japanese binoculars to watch the great ships in the river. He found them in the bottom drawer of his desk.

He turned to the window and focused them on the face of the man on the ledge. The man was older than he had thought. In his mid-thirties, perhaps. There was a smudge of dark beard, acne scars on the cheeks and forehead. The eyes were pale and they were wide and seemed to look at nothing. There were small ropes of saliva at the corners of the mouth. The face was very still. The chest lifted and fell slowly and deeply.

Kelty stood at the window and focused on the police, men with wide cold-reddened faces, expressions of anger and exasperation and pleading. He saw a woman brought to the window. She was poorly dressed, with thin colorless face, dark-reddish hair, weak-looking eyes. She was crying. He saw her mouth work as she called to the man on the ledge. She called and then hit a thin fist on the window sill and called again.

Norris Kelty put the binoculars aside and raised the window. He leaned out and looked down at the street. The police had roped it off, and were directing traffic around it. Thousands of people stood closely packed, looking up at the man on the ledge, all their faces upturned. They looked silent and waiting and avid. Other men were working with pulleys and ropes on the face of the building several stories below the man, trying to rig a safety net. There were other policemen on the roof.

The man on the ledge shifted his position and there was a long rising moan from the crowd that faded away. Across the way office girls in thin blouses leaned out the windows and hugged their arms across their breasts and watched the man on the ledge. There was a flavor of holiday.

Kelty suddenly realized that he, like the others, was waiting for the man to jump. He felt both nausea and a primitive eagerness. He put the binoculars away, closed the window, drew the draperies. He put his papers away, and left his office.

Miss Ferres was at the window with another secretary. She turned and came quickly back to her desk, and glanced at his topcoat, the hat in his hand. "Will you be back today, sir?"

"No."

"Good night, Mr. Kelty."

"Good night, Miss Ferres."

When he reached the street he couldn't avoid looking up at the tiny man high on the ledge. Suddenly it came to him that this was death. A rigid psychotic on a high place, differentiated from his fellows by his madness. High there on the ledge the pump of blood through the miracle heart, squeeze of lungs, nerve tremor, gland secretion, convoluted waxy lard of the brain. Life, the ultimate miracle, in kinetic state above a pasty death on the street. He flexed his own hands and as he pushed his way through the crowd he was aware of the bulge and stretch of the muscles of the thigh, the flick and focus of the incredible lenses of the eyes.

He passed the corner and walked down the avenue, now out of sight of the man on the ledge, but still within hearing distance of the deep harsh noise of the crowd. He tried not to hear the sound. He told himself that within the eight-block walk to his club he would put that sound out of his mind.

When he was halfway down the block the sound changed suddenly. It became a sudden explosive roar and was shifted into a much higher key by the mingled screams of women. It lasted a long moment.

KELTY stood quite still and then walked on more slowly than before. Life was gone, as utterly as though it had never existed. Laborious climb from foetus to adult to ledge, then smashed not by height but by a flaw in one little area of the waxen brain. The flaw had demanded death on a heroic scale; a protest death, to ring down through centuries. A death never to be forgotten. A great brave climactic death. And, blinded by the flaw, the brain never realized that it was a dirty death, a small, shabby, forlorn and meaningless death.

His own death would not be like that. Yet—the thought came as suddenly as a door opens—was it not of the same pattern? Was not his own intense care and preparation as egocentric as the flamboyance of the man on the ledge? What did he want people to say? Norris Kelty had nothing more to live for. And was that what he was really trying to do? To show everyone the tragic extent of his loneliness?

He tried to recapture his determination but he knew that in some way he had gained an objectivity that made his plans seem melodramatic.

He stood outside his club and the first snow of November began to drift and tilt down into the streets, thick fat snowflakes that melted as they struck. He looked up at the slice of gray sky between the buildings and he did something he had not done since childhood: He stuck out the tip of his tongue and moved his head to one side and caught a snowflake on his tongue, tasted the familiar dusty icy nothingness.

A well-dressed woman grinned at him. Norris Kelty smiled back at her with irony and wisdom and self-knowledge. Then he walked quite briskly into the club.

—By JOHN D. MACDONALD