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REDBOOK'S NOVEL OF THE MONTH

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REDBOOK'S NOVELETTE OF THE MONTH

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Posed by Miss Jinx Falkenburg Riding habit from Paddock Riding and Sports Shop—Los Angeles
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The Redbook School Directory will be found on pages 102 through 108



All joined in the sinister chorus—"Pretty Soft!"

PRETTY

The confession of a man who used to think he could fill any of his friends' jobs with his eyes closed.

THE other fellow's job is always much easier than our own. We believe, while we are working our fingers and brains to the bone, that all our friends are sitting around in jobs which require nothing more than plenty of nerve and a good-looking receptionist.

An artist nourishes the notion that a business executive's only justification for his high rating in the income-tax brackets is a trick talent for looking important. And a business man believes that an artist is a weird creature who leisurely tosses gobs of paint at a canvas with a lazy thoughtlessness and indirection.

While I was still in a delirium of youthful ambition, and working at the rate of eighteen hours a day, the two words I heard most frequently were "Pretty soft!" There seemed to be a continual parade of leering banshees passing my desk all day pouring those two words into my ear—"Pretty soft!" Janitors, insurance men, reporters, advertising-solicitors, prize-fighters, politicians—all joined that sinister chorus—"Pretty soft." I seemed to be the only one in the whole world holding down a soft job. Anybody could sit down at my drawing-board and do what I was doing. The only credit they gave me was that I got there first.

The truth of the matter was that I was working so hard I did not have the energy or the inclination to explain how much of myself I had to put into my work: How the actual drawing was the least part of the job. How I lay awake half the night thinking of ideas. How I had to seek out all sorts of people—dopes, bores, egomaniacs, hypochondriacs, nuts—to get a line on human nature to give a note of authenticity to my crazy humor. All this, to say nothing of the number of references I had to consult so as not to be at the mercy of ruthless readers who were always looking for a slip-up in facts.

Members of the Pretty-Soft Club hadn't the vaguest notion of the elements that went into the creation of a cartoon. And I saw no reason to enlighten them. In fact, I felt somewhat superior myself. To me, *their* "work" looked like some childish task that is given to inmates of a home for mentally deficient during their hours of recreation. I could fill their jobs with my eyes closed and one hand tied behind my back. A short course in a night school for morons, and I'd be ready for *their* battle of life. . . .

When my oldest son, Tommy, awoke at noon last Christmas day and inspected his new portable phonograph and squash racket, his mother was shocked at the scabrous state of his hair. It was growing thickly over his collarbone, giving the back of his neck a weedy appearance. She had been after him for a week to get a haircut. He was going to a dance with a very special date this Christmas night, and it became suddenly urgent that he look his best. He realized the overgrown state of his neck when Mother held up a mirror. "Gee," he said, "I look like a bad lie on a golf course!"

He dressed quickly and announced that he was going out to get a haircut. The futility of this resolution did not dawn on us until he was already out in the hall waiting for the elevator. Barber-shops were not open on Sundays or holidays. I called him back and told him that getting a haircut on Christmas day was something like getting an honest statement from Goebbels. It was next to impossible.

But Mother suggested that we try, anyway—we could call up our regular barber on the chance that he might have come into the shop to give one of the other barbers a shampoo. "Barbers can do anything they want to other barbers on Sundays and holidays," she said, "provided they do not break any of the union rules." We dialed our barber's number, but there was no answer. Then we started to think of all the barbers in New York. There was Mother's hairdresser, Peter. There were shops in the Grand Central and Pennsylvania depots—also in all the large hotels and clubs. We even thought of a barber we once saw shaving a sick friend in Lenox Hill Hospital. We began to call them up.

It was a forbidding list, but Mother, fortunately, loves to telephone. She goes to sleep at night with the receiver on her pillow. She calls up her friends at six in the morning and awakens them with a smile (her smile, not theirs). In all the years we have been married I have never gotten anything but a busy signal when I tried to call my home. If during the day I felt a sudden craving for split-pea soup for dinner, I had to send the cook a telegram.

Well, Mother phoned exactly twenty-seven barbers without rounding up a single one. As you can imagine, this took some time, and as the number of failures continued to pile up, an atmosphere of panic developed. Tommy took another look in the mirror and said he now looked like a Yorkshire poodle.

A most natural solution suddenly came to my mind. Why hadn't I thought of it before? I'd trim Tommy's hair myself! Barbers didn't have to know anything! Nobody had to know anything! Wasn't that proven to me very early in my career?

Looking at Tommy with my most paternal smile to inspire his confidence, I said: "It really doesn't look so bad on top. It's only a bit scraggly in the back. Get me the scissors. I'll fix it up."

Mother gave me that familiar look of apprehension which I had come to recognize whenever I started to open a can or hang a picture. But this did not deter me. Haircutting was different.

Mother phoned exactly twenty-seven barbers.



SOFT *by* Rube Goldberg

Tommy looked concerned. Respectfully but firmly, he said: "Don't bother, Pop. I'll go to the dance the way it is. The fellows in the movies don't have their hair clipped in the back any more."

But I couldn't be put off. I now had an uncontrollable urge to trim the hair at the back of Tommy's neck. It was like wanting to touch wet paint or taste a new drink at the Beachcomber's. I had never cut hair before. Why should I be deprived of this simple enjoyment, when idiots like barbers were allowed to do it as much as they liked?

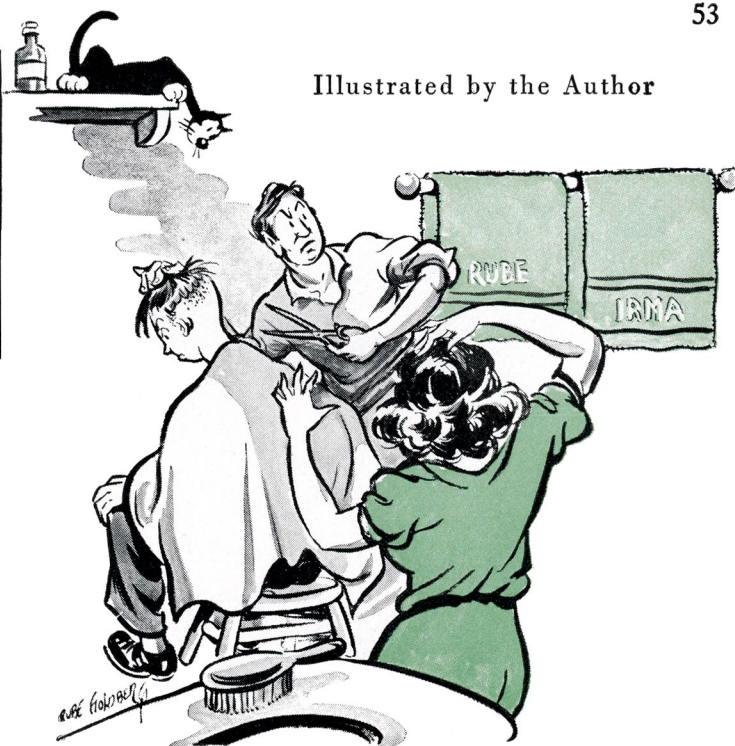
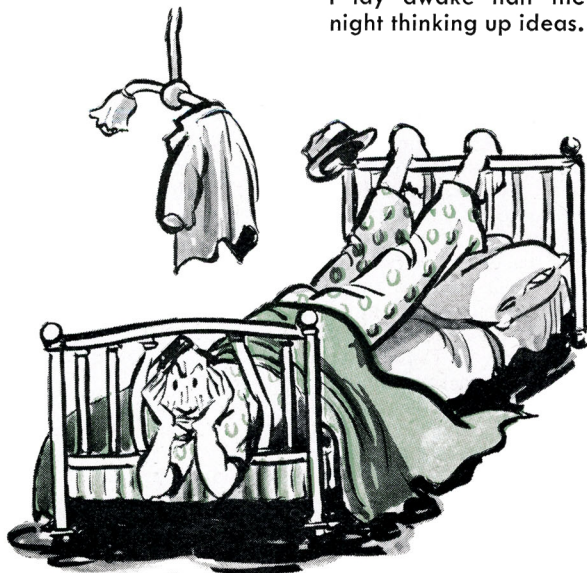
Maybe it was the gleam in my eye or the commanding note in my voice that caused Tommy to submit. But he went quietly into the bathroom with me, and I went to work with the greatest nonchalance. *Snip, snip, snip* went the scissors. I thought of the way Charley held the comb when I had watched him cutting my own hair in the barber-shop mirror. I recalled the short crisp clicks of the scissors as they glided softly over my own scruff. I hummed a few snatches of song with the joy of one in the midst of a new and thrilling experience. But this joy was all too brief. The scissors did not respond to my fingers as snappily as it did to Charley's. The wisps of hair did not float to the floor in silky wraithlike flight as they had done in the barber-shop. In fact, the immediate result seemed far from satisfactory. For some inexplicable reason the base of Tommy's skull began to take on the scalloped contour of a summer awning.

I seemed to be digging rather than cutting. I found out, much to my surprise, that once you cut off hair, you can't put it back on again. Tommy started to get nervous. I started to get nervous. The job got more botchy. Instead of having a fine upstanding boy for a son, I now had a plucked chicken. I began to realize that I myself was a dead pigeon!

Suddenly Tommy jumped out of his chair and shouted: "For God's sake, Pop, quit it!" Mother came running into the bathroom. Of course she knew what was the matter. Taking a deliberate, disgusted look at the back of Tommy's neck, she said: "A moth could have done better!"

I tried to blame it on the scissors and the light, and the fact that Tommy wiggled. But I knew in my heart it was me—me, the jerk who looked with disdain upon all other jerks. Me, the idiot who thought all barbers were idiots. Tommy was ruined.

I lay awake half the night thinking up ideas.



Taking a disgusted look at the back of Tommy's neck, she said: "A moth could have done better!"

Just then Georgie, our younger son, came crawling out of his room. He asked drowsily: "What goes on?" We explained what had happened. The condition of Tommy's neck was mute evidence of the tragedy that had entered our home on this peaceful Christmas day. Georgie was now fully awake. He suggested (either because he felt sorry for Tommy or me or both of us): "There must be a barber loose somewhere in New York today. Leave it to me. I'll find one!"

He hurried into his clothes without even looking at his own gifts under the tree, went downstairs and jumped into his runabout, which fortunately had been standing out in front of the house all night. We leaned far out the window and waved good luck to him as he drove off. I wanted to jump, but Mother grabbed me.

Georgie was gone about an hour. During that time I carefully avoided Tommy and Mother. I locked myself in the library and picked up a book. It happened to be Anton P. Chekhov's "Uncle Vanya." It was just my bad luck that *Uncle Vanya* needed a haircut. I kept staring ahead of me and listening. I heard the leering banshees saying, "Pretty soft!" and I heard myself answering them with the same two mocking words. It seemed ages. Finally the house phone rang, and I rushed out to answer it. It was Georgie, talking from the lobby downstairs. His voice sounded tired and had the unmistakable note of defeat.

"I've been all over town," he said. "I went up and down Amsterdam Avenue and Broadway and over to Madison and Lexington and Third. The shops are all closed tighter than a drum. I tried a lot of hotels, too. But they told me it was no use. There isn't a barber available in the whole of New York. Too bad."

I CRAWLED back into the library, afraid to face Tommy and Mother with the awful truth. I did not pick up a book this time. I picked up a long paper-cutter. It had a knifelike edge. It wouldn't take more than a few seconds. *Scrunch*, and it would be all over. I saw the headlines in the morning paper: "MIDDLE-AGED MAN TAKES LIFE . . . despondent . . . worked as cartoonist but wanted to be a barber."

Then the front door opened, and I heard a babble of conversation. I went out cautiously, and there was Georgie with our uniformed doorman. Georgie was shouting: "Mother, look what I found. He heard me talking on the house phone downstairs, and said he used to be a barber! He's just filling in as a doorman until he can get a job at his own trade. We're saved!"

The doorman took Tommy into the bathroom and evened up the boy's hair in the back. He trimmed it around the ears. It was beautiful. I gave him two dollars.

I thought of the doorman all the rest of the day and dreamed of him that night. Two dollars wasn't enough! There are no such words as "Pretty soft!"