

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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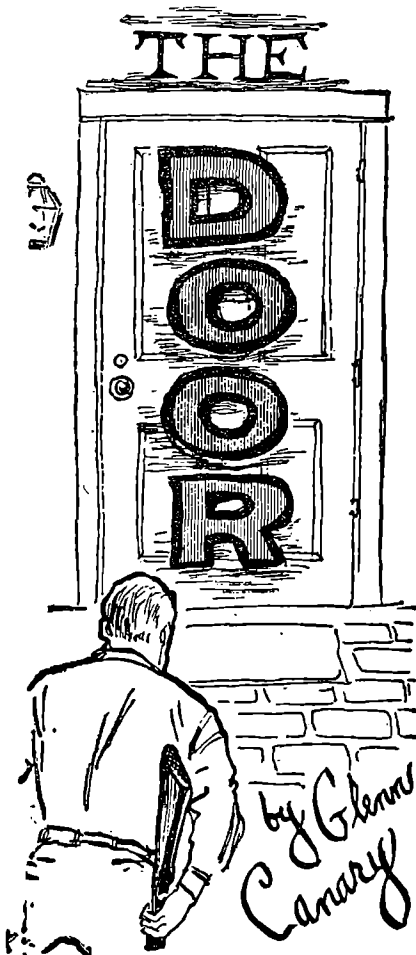
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No one will dispute the fact that there are several varieties of courage . . . physical, moral, and last but not least, just plain downright foolhardy. I myself have always believed in cautious behaviour, and in letting sleeping dogs lie.



I SUSPECTED that the cold beer would only be lukewarm, but the interior of the bar was dark and cool and the sun outside made the sidewalk hot enough to burn my feet through the army shoes I was wearing, so I went inside and perched on a stool and ordered a glass of draft.

I lit a cigarette while I waited for the bartender to get my drink. Reflected in the mirror behind the bar was Sergeant Ben Davis. He was sitting at a table near the pin-ball machine in the corner. There was a glass of beer in front of him and he was fingering some coins that lay on the table.

I took my beer and went over to sit with him. He looked up at me and nodded. "Corporal," he said.

"Sergeant."

"It's a hot day."

"Very."

He looked at me. "You're a sloppy soldier, Corporal."

"I wouldn't doubt it."

"You are a sloppy soldier," he said slowly.

"I am a hot soldier on a three

day pass," I said. "It also is too hot to look for girls and I'm too broke to go home. Therefore, I intend to get even sloppier as I get drunk on warm beer in this damn ugly town."

"Button your tie."

"Go to hell."

He leaned back and looked at me. It seemed he was peering out the bottoms of his eyeballs. "You may make a sergeant yet," he said. "You know when to disregard an order." He took a long swallow from his glass of beer. "A good soldier always knows when to disregard an order."

"You think that's what a good soldier should know, do you?"

"I know it."

"Buy me another beer."

He waved to the bartender and held up two thick fingers. I could see beads of sweat on his forehead and by that I knew he had been drinking for a long time before I arrived.

The bartender brought two fresh glasses and took away the empty ones. Davis took a swallow and held it in his mouth for a few seconds before letting it go down his throat.

"I want to ask you something," he said.

"Go ahead."

"You went to college, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"And you read a lot of stuff like philosophy. I mean, if there was some question, you could answer it."

"I don't know. It depends on the question."

"I mean a philosophical question about something a man did once."

"I still don't know. I'd have to hear the question."

He leaned over toward me. "I think I'm a coward," he said.

I laughed. "Sure," I said. "That's why you have the Silver Star."

"I mean it. I think I'm a coward and I want you to tell me."

"No," I said. "I don't think you're a coward."

"You haven't heard the story. Wait till you hear what happened and then tell me."

"I was just a guy," he said. "You know, just an ordinary kid who grew up in a town called Massillon in Ohio. I graduated from Washington High School there and I played some football because all the guys there did who were as big as me. After I graduated, I got some college offers to play ball, but I didn't want to go to college. What would I have done there? All my life I wanted to be a mechanic. I'm not a guy who thinks you got to go to college to make something."

of yourself. I wanted to get my own garage and work with cars. I always liked machines.

Anyway, that's what I started out to do. After I got out of school, I got a job in a garage in Massillon so I could really learn my trade.

I used to be down to that damn garage at six in the morning and I wasn't supposed to start to work until eight, but I wanted to learn. I did everything they told me to do and then I would hang around the older guys, just watching, until they started letting me do things that a kid wasn't supposed to be doing. But I could handle it. When I put a car back together, it was better than ever. I could really make an engine sound nice.

I saved my money, too. There was just me and my mother then and I lived at home. I didn't mess with girls much so I didn't have to spend money there. All I did was pay Mom for my room and board and save out a little for a movie once in a while. I didn't even own a car because I didn't want to spend the money. I wanted to get enough together as soon as I could to open my own place. I figured it was going to take a while, but it was going to take a while before I'd learn enough to run my own place. So it would have worked out about even, I thought.

Then I met Sandra. I was barely

nineteen and she was only eighteen. She was little, small bones, and blonde, and pretty. I met her when she brought her father's car in to get it serviced. He was an insurance salesman in town and he owned a big fancy car. She looked like she belonged in that car.

She smiled at me when I went over to her and I smiled back without even thinking about what I was doing. We talked about the car and she asked me my name. I told her and she said she had seen me play football a couple years back.

When she left, she said, "Why don't you call me up sometime?"

"I'd like that," I said.

"So would I." Then she took off in that big car. I stood at the doors and watched her go. At the corner, she stopped at a red light and she turned and looked back at me and waved.

I called her the next night. I figured maybe she was just being nice, but I thought the worst that could happen would be she would say she wouldn't go out with me. So I called her up. She said she would go out with me that night even.

I borrowed a car from Sam down at the garage and went to pick her up. When she came out, she was wearing a white dress and

her hair was down around her shoulders.

I took her to the Stark Drive-In Theater because that was where she said she wanted to go, but I was determined that I was going to be a gentleman.

I was a gentleman, too, only she was closer to tigercat than lady. Halfway through the picture, she curled up beside me and turned up her face so that I didn't have a choice but to kiss her.

By the time I got her home that night, I had decided that this was a girl I had to have.

But it wasn't that easy. She was willing to go out with me any time I called her, provided she didn't have another date. But she wouldn't stop going out with other guys for me. I didn't date any other girls. Hell, there weren't any other girls as far as I was concerned.

There was one night when I tried to tell her how I felt about her, but words like that don't come natural to me and I got all embarrassed.

"What are you trying to say?" she asked me.

"I want you to go steady."

She began to laugh. "I like you, Ben baby, but don't try to tie me down," she said. But her hands were shaking.

That's the way she was, skittish,

as if she were afraid to let me think I was important to her. I used to get so frustrated my stomach would turn over and one night I broke a bone in my hand pounding the wall in my room. That's the way it was.

But I was so afraid of losing her altogether that I never did hunt up some of her other boy friends and punch them in the mouth. I wanted to. God, how I wanted to. I don't blame them now, but then I had to have somebody to hate and I loved her, so I hated them, all the other guys she went out with. But I never did do anything. I was afraid she wouldn't see me anymore if I got rough.

But I didn't give up. I called her every day. I took her out as often as my pay would allow. I bought her things. She was smarter than me so I even tried to read some books so I could talk to her about things.

And somewhere, maybe I came up with the idea myself, maybe I read it somewhere—I don't remember—but someplace I got the idea that loving someone is wanting the other person to love you.

You understand that? Love is that simple. You want the other person to love you. Naturally, if she loves you, then she wants you to love her too. That's why lovers are so good to each other. That's

where jealousy comes from. You want the other person to love you so she will want you to love her.

It sounds funny maybe to hear a man like me talking about love that way. I'm a rough guy. But I loved her with tenderness. I only wanted to be good to her and to take care of her.

So I proposed to her. We had been swimming on a Saturday afternoon and then we were driving around, just cruising because she seemed to like to do that, and all of a sudden I said, "Hey, let's go and get married tonight."

"We can't," she said.

"Why not?"

"We'd have to wait three days."

"If she had said she didn't want to get married, I'd have tried to pass it off as a joke, but she only made me think she didn't want to wait.

I kicked that car up and we crossed the state line just before midnight. We were married there at one in the morning and we spent our wedding night in the fanciest motel I could find.

The next morning I called the garage and told them what I had done and the boss gave me three days off for a honeymoon. We didn't go anywhere special in that three days, we just drove around, but she seemed happy, quiet and contented.

We had a little trouble with her parents when we got back. Her mother was screaming and yelling about getting it annulled, but I talked to Sandra's father and told him what I did for a living and about how I was saving for my own place and I guess I convinced him I wasn't too bad a guy. At least he calmed his wife down. They let us alone after that.

Everything was fine for the first six months we were married. Sandra seemed to like the little house I rented for us and she made a real good wife, you know? She didn't cook very well, but she tried and she was getting better all the time. We were happy.

Then she started getting restless at night. I'd come home from work and she would want to go out some place or she'd want to call up some people and have a party. I didn't like that. I didn't mind some of that kind of life, but I didn't want it all the time.

She started going out at night, too. I don't mean she was hanging around bars or anything, but she started going to movies and stuff and she always seemed to have a girl friend to go with.

You know how long it takes a man to get the idea that maybe his wife is going out with another man? It took me almost a year. I don't remember what gave me the

idea in the first place, but once it started it wouldn't let go. I got so I couldn't think about anything else. She'd be gone and I would sit by the window and look out, watching for the car, thinking, and by the time she got home I'd be ready to kill someone. Only I didn't know who he was.

But that last night, I remember that one. She asked me at dinner if I'd mind if she went to a movie. I didn't want her to go, but I couldn't say that to her any more than I could ask her if she was playing around. I guess I was still afraid to find out the answer still scared she would leave me. I said I didn't mind if she went out. I told her I was tired and would just take a nap until she got back.

But I watched her. She made some mistakes. When she took a bath to get ready, she shaved her legs. A woman doesn't do that to go to a movie with another woman. She took all of her makeup with her in a special little bag which she stuck in her purse. She didn't usually do that either.

And she made one big mistake. She didn't know what the movie was about and I did. I had made a pot of coffee while I waited for her and I had her sit down and I had her tell me what she saw at the movies.

I had read a review of that movie

and she, of course, had not seen it.

"All right," I said, "tell me who he is."

She looked scared for a minute and then she laughed. "I always told you not to try to tie me down," she said.

"Tell me."

"Sam Garner."

I knew him. I had gone to high school with him. "Why did you marry me?" I asked.

"Because I loved you."

"I suppose you still do?"

"Yes."

"And what about Garner?"

She looked down at the table and then she looked up with a twisted, 'funny kind' of smile on her face. "I told you not to try to tie me down," she said.

I walked back to the bedroom and got my shotgun out of the closet. I loaded it and went back into the kitchen. When she saw the gun, she laughed out loud.

"You don't have guts enough to use that on me," she said.

"Not on you, on Sam."

"You don't have guts enough for that either."

"Yes, I do."

She got real still and then she said, "Ben, I love you."

"Sure," I said. "I'll be back to talk about it just as soon as I kill your lover."

"I can't let you kill him."

"Why? Do you love him, too?"

"I don't know," she said. "I don't know. Ben."

I passed her and went to the door. I turned there and looked back at her. She was standing, stiff, staring at me. "Listen," I said. "Just in case you haven't thought of it. You can call him and tell him I'm coming. He's better with guns than I am. He's a better shot and it would be self defense if he killed me. I can go up there and I can kill him and I can come back and no one will ever know. Or you can call him and he'll kill me."

I turned around and walked out. I got in my car and I drove to Sam Garner's house.

I drove to the back and stopped. There was a light on in the front of the house, but the back was dark. I got out of the car, holding my gun.

I walked up to the door of the house, just an ordinary door. I looked at it and then I walked away. I put my gun in the back of the car.

I sold the car in the morning in Cleveland. And I enlisted in the Army that afternoon. I never went back to see Sandra. I guess she's divorced me a long time ago."

The sergeant stopped talking. I waved for two more beers. "That's

all?" I said, sensing an omission.

"That's all. It's been bothering me ever since."

"What?"

"I didn't have guts enough to knock on that door. I wasn't afraid of getting shot. But I didn't have courage enough to take a chance that I might live for just a few seconds knowing that she thought so little of me she called Sam Garner and got me killed."

"Maybe she didn't call him," I said.

"Maybe." He looked down at the table and shook his head. "I didn't have guts enough to find out." He stretched one hand out flat on the table and stared at it. "Am I a coward?" he said.

"I don't know," I answered. "But maybe Sandra's still waiting for you to come back."

"Maybe," he said. "But I'm afraid to find out."

"Well, you might as well forget it then."

"I can't," he said. "But you know something funny? I ran into Sam Garner about a year ago in San Francisco and I told him about it. I told him I wasn't mad any more, but I had to know whether she had called. And you know what? That was the night of the week he always went bowling, so he wasn't even home that night. Isn't that a hell of a thing?"