

*This Story Will Seem Impossible
To Anybody Except a Newspaper Man*

The Fine Art of Suicide

By HOWARD ROCKEY

"I CAN'T see why some of these nuts who kill themselves, don't devise an original way," Harry Judson complained, as he puffed away at his pipe and began to lay out a sensational page for the Sunday supplement.

Judson was blonde and blue eyed, and as heavy as he was happy by natural disposition. He smoked an odoriferous brier which greatly disturbed the olfactory nerves of the rest of the staff, and his principal vice was the playing of harmless practical jokes. Yet every Sunday issue of the *Times-Gazette* was a keen disappointment to the genial editor. In his fertile imagination he could always find a more interesting way of doing things than the average mortal seemed able to perform in actual life. And, as a result, the thrillers his fancy conjured up were read from coast to coast.

Divorce suits were his meat—debütantes and their difficulties were his delight. Jewel robberies tickled his soul, and the elopement of the Maharajah of Goopholee with a common kitchen mechanic, sent him into uncontrollable ecstasies. Usually the "news" stories he printed as fiction were conceived almost entirely from a longing for the bizarre rather than having any basis of fact. But Judson lived and growled in the fond and undying hope that, some day, *someone* would give him a real feature story.

It was a vain hope, perhaps, but one that persisted stubbornly. This in spite of the unvarying monotony of lovers' death pacts and the routine, sordid suicides of morbid Teutons during the dog days.

"Some day," he would muse in his lighter moments, "an inspired genius will actually live or die a real story for me—with all the trimmings that even a Poe could desire—and I won't have to fake a single detail! In the meantime, the lack of romance in the daily crop of horrors almost drives me nutty. You'd at least think that a man who'd made up his mind to shuffle off this mortal coil would try to make his departure dramatic. A little intelligent thought might make such an exit unique—dis-

tinctively individual," as the snappy clothing ads say. I've been running the magazine section of this sheet for almost a dozen years, yet I can count on my fingers the stale and conventional methods of committing suicide. Let's see—there's gas, hanging, poison, pistols, artery severing, drowning, and the utterly unnecessary unpleasantness of leaping in front of trains. There are, of course, variations and occasional improvements on the stereotyped form of procedure—but I've never known a modern suicide to show real constructive genius. The ancients did it much better—Petronius, and then Cleopatra, for instance. That girl had a nose for news! If she'd lived today, she'd have been the highest paid feature writer in the whole darned newspaper game, and the scenario sharks would have gone insane bidding for her services. Some babe, I'll say—but they don't grow like that any more."

He sighed, and his assistant chuckled as he looked up from the proofs of a "murder-syndicate" serial.

"How about the chaps who make away with themselves and never leave a trace?" suggested little Sam Roberts. "Maybe they're more clever than you give 'em credit for."

"Yeh?" begrudged Judson. "Maybe so, but fellows like that furnish no stories. Damn it all, you can't expect me to go on inventing stunts all by myself indefinitely. If some bird would only come through with a real idea in real life once in a while, this job wouldn't be such a grind. They ought to give a Carnegie medal to the guy who can think out a really novel, bang-up, A-Number-One method of taking his own life. You can put me down for a ten spot toward a fund to build him a monument right now!

"Kind of look good, wouldn't it?" he went on, letting his fancy wander. "Big marble shaft, with a replica of the death, done in heroic size. Nice bronze tablet on the base, giving the details and the date. Then a scream-head cut in the stone, with this crowning tribute: 'HIS DEATH MADE A DAMN GOOD STORY!' Some epitaph, I'll say!"

"Why don't you try it yourself?" his assistant suggested, with a mischievous grin.

"Too busy!" growled the editor, and went back to his layout. "The thing has big possibilities, just the same. And one of these days, when I get tired of standing for your fool mistakes and all the bulls the composing room makes, I may take a shot at it."

But the assistant felt in a kidding mood, and he let him have some more. "Why don't you invent a brand new idea—get it patented—and then, through the collection of royalties, gather in a fortune?"

"May do." Judson wagged his head, and his bright blue eyes twinkled. "Might start a mail order course, and advertise it in the foreign language and mail order papers. Wops would fall for it hard, and every bride and groom is a potential subscriber in the course of time. Matrimony's like mule-whiskey. You can stand a certain amount of it, and that's all."

With loving strokes, his blue pencil sketched an introduction for his opening announcement. "Why live and suffer," he wrote, "when you can earn everlasting fame and eternal peace by becoming a successful, sensational suicide?"

"That ought to knock 'em cold!" observed his assistant.

"Fair enough, I'll say," commented the art manager from his easel in the corner. "Get it going soon. I'll do the illustrations—and the Lord knows I need the money. The Ford needs new shoes and the baby's shy on dolly drakes."

"Be patient, my son," chuckled Judson. "Don't crowd me. True talent needs time to develop a knockout. But just as a nucleus of my superior suicide system—how does this little stunt strike you?"

"Shoot!" urged his assistant, "pin-heads are pining for it!"

"Nix on the rough stuff!" Judson objected. "Everything must be decorous—mysterious—baffling, as the police say—and more melodramatic than a six reel serial atrocity. This little trick I have

in mind requires no experience, and can easily be performed by anyone in any home—with the aid of an ordinary window sash, a jackknife, one small wooden plug, a common kitchen meat-cleaver, and twenty-five cents worth of toy balloons—”

“Phone for the big black wagon!” shouted Roberts in mock alarm. “Better ask the daffy house to reserve a padded cell with a sunny southern exposure.”

“You wrong me,” reproached Judson, assuming an injured air. “I have merely enumerated the materials. Now for the touch of the artist. First we throw up the window sash and take a last look upon the outer world. Then we cut the window cords with our ready little jackknife. This, dear friends, brings us to the need for the wooden wedge. Into this bit of wood we drive a tiny tack, and to it we fasten a string. Next we fasten the meat-cleaver to the lower sash of the window frame—with the sharp, or cutting edge, pointing downward. If the sash does not prove to be sufficiently heavy, so that its own weight will cause it to fall when the wooden plug is pulled out—care must be taken to load its upper portion with a few chimney bricks. These are readily obtainable without one’s leaving the house.

“Now, fellow-suicides, we are in readiness for the victim’s entrance,” he announced with mock dramatic effect. “You will observe, from my brief description of the essential properties, that without material expense or unnecessary trouble, a perfectly practical and thoroughly dependable guillotine has been constructed. Hence we pass on to the balloons. Five or six of these innocent little toys will have sufficient lifting power to carry several pounds into the air.

“This being the case, the intending suicide now attaches the little multi-colored gasbags to his head, fastening the balloon strings to his ears, and being careful to knot them neatly, so that they may not escape prematurely. This done, our resourceful hero places his head upon the window sill. The sash, mark you, is still raised and held in place by the plug. The principal’s head having been thrust into the outer air, the balloons rise to the full extent of their tethers, and quiver expectantly upon the gentle breeze. They even bob up and down restlessly—impatient as thoroughbreds to be off in a finish race!”

“Some finish, I’ll say!” broke in the art manager, but Judson frowned upon his facetiousness. Then, as he paused, with a whimsical smile on his features,

his auditors pretended to listen breathlessly. A fascinated office boy stood by the side of the editor’s desk and stared at his jovial countenance with wide open eyes.

“The kneeling suicide now pulls at the string attached by a tack to the window wedge,” Judson went on to explain. “The slightest jerk and the obstruction flies out. In a twinkling, the window falls! Result—prompt and practically painless death, after the approved French method of exterminating criminals, political prisoners, and obsolete nobility.

“But I have told you only the practical part thus far. Now comes the true dash of mystery spice! The head having been severed from the trunk by the sharp edge of the meat-cleaver, attached to the bottom of the window frame, is carried gently off into the air by the little balloons, which now begin to rise, tugging the head with them. Up and up they go, gently—as a graceful bird might fly—soaring over the housetops and swaying in the wind. Picture it, gentlemen! The amused expression of that novel death mask, as the sightless eyes gaze down upon the city, which never even guesses that the decapitated member of the suicide is, not simply another balloon which has broken its tether—perhaps from the hand of some disappointed child.

“And,” he continued, warming up as his enthusiasm waxed, “behind us remains the room where no signs of violence are seen. There is left the headless body of the recently deceased. Only the torso and limbs of my graduate pupil remain to solve the mystery of the identity of a man who was weary of the world.”

“Some stunt!” Roberts nodded his head, and lit a fresh cigarette. “I follow you perfectly. I picture the startled landlady, knocking at the door in the hope of collecting the rent. Horrified by the tragedy, even forgetting the loss of her money, she becomes hysterical and arouses the other boarders. They crowd into the apartment, followed by the bluecoat on the beat, and all of them chatter at once. Yet even the minion of the law is at loss for a solution of the murder, if murder it be. No one has been seen to go in—no one was seen to go out. Yet the head is not to be found, and it obviously has been carried away. Detectives are balked. The coroner is frantic. The public shudders. Newspapers turn handsprings of sheer delight.”

“You said it!” enthused Judson. “I tell you, man, the scheme’s fool-proof. Anyone can do it, and no one will be the wiser.”

“Just a minute,” cautioned Roberts. “You’ve forgotten the inevitable denouement. After hours, or days, perhaps, or whenever the gas gives out, the balloons sink to earth. Let’s assume that they burst or become exhausted over a lonely wood or lake—maybe even far out at sea. In that event, the head is sunk without trace, and no clue to the assumed murder ever comes to light. On the other hand, the suicide’s dome may drop in the lap of a lovely lady sitting on Riverside drive. It may fall into the open sack of a lowly picker of rags, and lead to his conviction for a crime he didn’t commit. It might, by the irony of fate, fall down the very chimney from which bricks were filched to make the window fall. Then it would come rolling home to join its former body—”

“Suppose it does?” shouted the proud inventor of the system. “Isn’t it great, whichever way it turns out? Boy, it’s worth a three-column spread on page one, with a starred diagram indicating the spot where the corpse was first lamped! Just suppose our hero has gone to his room incognito—without any trifling possession which might serve to identify him. The body itself bears no distinguishing marks—the labels have been ripped off his clothing, and there isn’t even a match in any of the pockets. In that event, dear friends, it would never be revealed what inspired genius had resorted to this instantaneous and intensely picturesque practice of self-execution.”

“You win the leather medal for sheer idiocy!” opined the art manager, and the little office boy breathed a sigh of relief.

“What d’yuh mean, leather medal?” Judson demanded resentfully. “I’m going to write that story, and do it right away. I’m going to give you some roughs so you can make the pictures—and I’m going to schedule the yarn. It’ll be the biggest Sunday sensation ever pulled on this sheet. It’ll show the world a thing or two, when it comes to suicides.”

“How do you get that way?” snickered his assistant. “You can’t run a yarn like that. You’d be laughed at in every newspaper office from here to hell and back—and even the public would know you were kidding them.”

“How come?” demanded Judson irritably.

"How come? Simply because the thing's impossible—sounds all right, and I'll grant you it might get a laugh—but the simple fact remains that it couldn't be done."

"Bet you a hundred it *can!*" Judson produced his wallet. "I'll *prove* that it can!"

"When?" grinned Sam Roberts.

"Just as soon as I finish writing the story," Judson assured him seriously. "I'm going to write up an ante-mortem diary—describe the suicide's sensations hour by hour—right up to the fatal

minute. You can leave space for a box to hold that part—and slip it in at the last moment."

"You're batty!" Roberts sniffed at him. "If I didn't know you so well, I'd believe that your love of sensations had gotten your goat to the point where you'd really be willing to do it—simply to make a good story."

"Isn't that a newspaper editor's chief usefulness in life?" Judson glared at him. "Wouldn't any dyed-in-the-wool newspaperman give his life to get a story as good as that?"

And, in due course of time, that is just what Judson did. And stranger still was the fact that the editor's grinning head dropped through the Sunday-room skylight upon Sammy Roberts' desk. Somehow it seemed to say, "I win!" and Roberts nodded his head.

Then he lifted the telephone and told a staff photographer to hurry upstairs with his camera.

"Got a knock-out picture here—just dropped down with some busted balloons—right on top of that story Judson ordered in type!"

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