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THE ITCHING HOUR *by* Damon Knight

Mind you, I don't believe the story, myself. It was obvious, from the start, that the old man was mad. Besides, I was stinko at the time, and I may not have got some of the details right. But in its essentials, the story still sticks in my mind...I can see the old man now, with a pair of my best socks around his neck, moaning and wheezing and spitting on the floor, and in between times telling his strange, strange story. Of course, the whole thing was fantastic; the old loon had probably escaped from some nut factory.... and yet...No, no, the old man was booby. And yet... And yet...

The night it happened I was sitting in my study in my white silk Russian lounging robe, smoking a narghile or Indian water-pipe and throwing darts at a signed photograph of Sally Rand. I'd just pinked her neatly in the gluteus maximus, when I was startled by a crash of glass, and turned around to see an aged man tottering carelessly thru the remains of my French windows.

At once the chill of horror gripped me. Oops, I mean gripped!! Unable to move, I stared speechlessly as the old man went directly to my chest of drawers and fumbled within, the overhead light throwing his face into sombre shadow.

Blowing his nose on one of my dress shirts he grumbled to himself about the starch and selected a pair of lamb's wool socks and tied them around his neck. This done, he hobbled over to a chair facing mine, sat down, pulled his tattered undershirt, which for some reason he was wearing as a shawl, more closely around his thin shoulders, stared reproachfully at me, shivering at the icy blast that came in thru the shattered windows. "There's a draft in here, and you know what you can do about it," he complained.

"Yes, there is," I managed to get out.

He nodded, satisfied. "I thought there was," he said. Then, dragging his chair closer, he leaned over and, grasping me firmly by the lapels, said pleasantly, "Ipswitch on the amscray, don't you think?"

Half stifled with terror, I gasped, "Uh, yes." At once his manner was transformed. Drawing himself up indignantly he sneered "That's a lie! That's what they all say, the sniveling hypocrites! They know it's a lie!"

Then he drew nearer once again. "But," he said, "I'm going to tell you my story anyway. You have a kind face. And I - I, just don't have any at all." He raised the rim of his hat and I saw it was true! He had no face! Gibbering, I tried to get away, to flee or scream, but it was too late. Taking a firmer grip on my lapels, and standing heavily on my feet, the old man began his story.

"You may not believe it (he began) but I, too, was once a care-free young fan like yourself. From morning til night I thot of nothing but eating, sleeping, sex, and my fan-mag, PUKE. In the evening I would stay up til morning, splashing happily in my hecto inks, and turning out pages and pages of material like mad. And at last I'd go to bed, tired by happy, knowing I had done my duty as an honest fan.

"And then, one day, it happened. By some unfortunate chance, I got a little double-strength purple hectograph ink on my face. Noticing it in the mirror the next morning, as I was trying to decide whether to shave this week or not, I took a washcloth and tried to rub off the stain. Alas, poor foo that I was, I recked not of the consequences!

"With hard rubbing, I managed to get some of the ink off, but when I went on rubbing, to remove the rest, the ink I had rubbed off was transferred back to my face. And so it went, the adamant ink going from washrag to face and from face back to washrag.

"The ink, as I have said, was double-strength purple undiluted, and suffered nothing in the process. But something had to give way. The washrag, by an unhappy coincidence, was a brand-new one, and my face was some years old. Only one thing could have happened. It did.

Thus, shedding a tear on the carpet, the old stranger ended his weird tale. Getting slowly to his feet, he drew his hat down over his eyes once more, tied his socks around his neck more tightly, and shuffled off toward the shattered windows. At the sill, he turned, faced the room, and made one last parting shot, ere he vanished in the gloom. "Dogs have fleas!" he screamed.

But sometimes I wonder.