

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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THE LATE



FRED!" yelled old man C. J. Hotchkiss. "Fred, bring me that file on the Dooley property!"

I'm Fred. J. Fred, Leffingwell, assistant cashier of the People's Bank and Trust Company of Hawkinston. To look at me I suppose the majority of people would think—if they thought about me at all—that there goes an insig-

There is always something absurd in the spectacle of the eternal rake who refuses to grow old, whether gracefully or otherwise; absurd, and also rather pathetic, for in the last analysis, they, too, must make their peace with the inevitable.

nificant, colorless man. I've got no illusions about myself. At forty-six I have only a small halo of tannish hair, my eyes are magnified comically by the thick lenses I find it necessary to wear. My nose is a bizarre adornment concerning which I waged many a losing battle in my youth. Over my five foot four inch frame is distributed, more or less unevenly, a hundred and seventeen pounds. A fondness for beer has tended to concentrate this weight about the waistline so that my general silhouette is about that of a bowling pin.

But what is the physical man? It is the mind, the wit, the *psyche* that is the real man, and in this regard I, J. Fred Leffingwell—

"I want this file and I want it now, Leffingwell!" boomed the old man.

"I'm getting it, Mr. Hotchkiss." Now, that was an example of what I go through day after day. It's never 'Fred, would you please do this?' or 'Fred, would you mind getting that?', it's always a command, always as imperious as Captain Bligh on the poopdeck.

As I was saying, though, I am really far from being the insignificant little fellow you see standing back of the bars of the assistant cashier window. Behind this outwardly diffident countenance burns

the brain of a classic *roué*, a veritable Cyprian who, but for the lack of means at his disposal would put Don Juan to shame.

I got the papers Mr. Hotchkiss wanted and took them over to his desk where I was rewarded with a hot glare. As I was going back to my cage I heard the toot of a horn in front of the bank and I looked out to see Uncle Fargo sitting behind the wheel of his flashy little foreign car, grinning and waving at me. Sitting beside him, as close as the bucket seats would permit, was a beautiful blonde whom I'd seen once or twice at Uncle Fargo's parties but whose name escaped me at the moment.

Now, there was a man who knew how to live! Fargo Leffingwell, the uncle I had idolized since my childhood. Uncle Fargo laughed in the face of convention, he went his merry way unfettered by conformity, revelling in the ways of the libertine. So-called polite society in Hawkins-ton would have none of Fargo Leffingwell, and Uncle Fargo, to their chagrin, looked on that as a compliment rather than a slight.

This isn't to say he was a wastrel. Not at all. He had a positive genius for doing the one thing that made possible all his other endeavors. Uncle Fargo

could make money. He had an absolute Midas touch without the drawbacks the good king ran into. Uncle Fargo was always flush; he drove only the finest automobiles, travelled extensively, smoked the most costly cigars, and drank scotch whiskey as though it came from the tap—but only if it was more than twenty years old. The young blonde, who could hardly have been much older than Uncle Fargo's beloved scotch whiskey, was evidence to the amazing fact that Uncle Fargo gave no concessions to time, for he was past seventy-five.

As I watched, Uncle Fargo leaned over and said something to the girl. She threw back her head and laughed, the rich contralto ringing enticingly in through the open door of the bank. The traffic light changed to green, and with another cavalier wave of his hand Uncle Fargo and his latest paramour roared away down Main Street.

"I swear, I think the old man's made a pact with the devil!"

I looked around and saw Cousin Fanny Leffingwell standing in the bank lobby. She, like most of us Leffingwells, was a mousy little creature, her face hardened by a life of flowing frustration. And, like the rest of us, this frustration was centered in our shining

hope, Uncle Fargo. It was a stark fact that Fargo Leffingwell represented our future. He had never married, thus he had no direct descendants. His blood kin consisted of eleven nieces and nephews, the offspring of his two brothers, both of whom had long since passed away. We—myself, Cousin Fanny, Cousin Elton, the twins Bart and Mart, in fact all eleven of us—were waiting for the avuncular departure from this vale of tears, leaving behind, of course, all his worldly goods. We were waiting as patiently as we could, but I'm sure they all felt as I did, that Uncle Fargo had somehow stumbled onto the secret to immortality.

Cousin Fanny turned to me. "Fred, you don't suppose he'll—he'll *marry* one of them, do you!"

I went around the corner of the counter and back into my cage. "He's past seventy-five, Fanny. He's been single this long, he'll stay single."

She edged over to the cage. "Fred. Fred, you're in financial things. How much do you think he's worth?"

I shuffled through some papers and shrugged my shoulders.

Cousin Fanny threw a glance around the bank and then leaned a little closer. "How much money does he have in the bank?" she

whispered, hand cupping mouth.

"For heaven's sake, Fanny! You know information like that is confidential. Now, if you've got any business in here, get on with it!"

What I didn't tell Cousin Fanny, of course, was that I watched Uncle Fargo's account like it was my own. I knew to the penny at all times what his balance was. It averaged somewhere in the neighborhood of ten thousand dollars, though this was simply Uncle Fargo's pocket money, so to speak. He owned a number of valuable parcels of real estate around town, in fact he owned the building that housed the bank where I worked. He also had half a dozen good farms scattered over a three county area. I had calculated Uncle Fargo's worth to be between two and three hundred thousand dollars. I had also—more than once—divided those sums by eleven. I was assuming in this that he would divide his estate equally among his living kin, which was a reasonable assumption as Uncle Fargo did not seem to favor any one of his nieces or nephews over any other.

Thus, I was counting on something like twenty-five thousand, give or take a couple of thousand. I was counting on it very hard. Though I was extremely fond of Uncle Fargo, I must in all honesty

admit I was looking forward to his funeral with the same anticipation I had felt as a child for the annual visit of Santa Claus.

My business career had reached its apogee. In the bank there were two people over me. Old man C. J. Hotchkiss, the president, and his son Abner, vice-president and cashier. Just below me, prepared to step around me when the time came, stood young C. J. II, Abner's boy. So, boxed in as I was by Hotchkisses I knew well enough that assistant cashier was the highest title I'd ever see before my name. A pencil and paper and five minutes time and I could figure the total income for the entire remainder of my working life. Needless to say, it was hardly sufficient to carry out my dreams of emulating my Uncle Fargo.

There was one thing of Uncle Fargo's that held particular interest for me, and that was his safe deposit box in the bank. I suppose it was simply a matter of propinquity that fostered this curiosity, but it had existed ever since Uncle Fargo engaged the box four years before. To my knowledge, since I am in charge of the safe deposit boxes in addition to my other duties, Uncle Fargo had never sought access to his box since that first day. In it perhaps were stock certificates,

savings bonds, deeds to his various holdings, life insurance policies, and the like. Still, it held the mystery associated with the unknown, and I often found myself glancing at the locked compartment whenever my work took me into the vault.

This more or less dormant interest bore fruit through a curious mating of events. It was on a Friday just before closing time. Uncle Fargo dropped by the bank and asked me to come out and have supper with him. It was obvious that he'd already had more than a few shots of his scotch whiskey and he was in his usual high spirits. I told him I'd be out as soon as I finished work.

Uncle Fargo's place was out on the river, a low rambling ranch-style house at the end of a long winding drive. When I pulled up behind his sports car in my eight year old sedan I heard the strains of *Gaité Parisienne* blaring from the stereo set inside the house. It was music that fitted Uncle Fargo perfectly. You could almost see the nymphs flinging themselves about in the *Can-Can*, with the old satyr himself, Uncle Fargo, gyrating around with them and laughing boisterously at the top of his lungs.

"Come on in, Fred!" he called from the front door. "I thought

me and you would just have a peaceful evening together listening to a few records and drinking a little whiskey!"

I grinned back at him. "Slowing down, Uncle Fargo?"

That got a big laugh from him. "No such luck, nephew! You buzzards got a long wait before you pick these old bones!" He clapped me on the shoulder. "Meantime, you can't say your Uncle Fargo's stingy, can you?"

What he said was certainly true. Whatever else could be attributed to Uncle Fargo, no one could ever accuse him of being tight-fisted. His door was always open, and inside the house nothing was held back. At Uncle Fargo's I could assume the temporary status of the epicurean. The trouble was, all too soon I'd find myself back in my own miserable flat on Murphy Street, and the bitterness of accepting myself as I was then became all too palpable.

Uncle Fargo charcoaled a couple of steaks for us and regaled me with tales of his travels. After we ate he broke out another bottle of scotch and we sat out on the verandah and watched the river meander past. By eight-thirty Uncle Fargo was slouched back in his chair, snoring.

The thing I did then was somewhat impulsive, though it was

probably prompted in some measure by the scotch whiskey. I began to prowl through Uncle Fargo's house, and it was in that way that I came upon the key to Uncle Fargo's mysterious safe deposit box. The key was tucked away in the back of a drawer in his desk, and judging by its location and the accumulation of old papers over it Uncle Fargo had no immediate plans for its use.

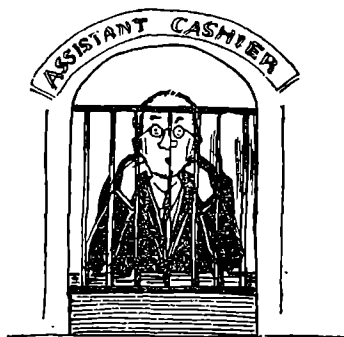
At this point my sole motivation was curiosity. It occurred to me that with this key it would be a simple matter for me to have a peek in the box. As you probably know, a safe deposit box in a bank requires the use of two keys, one in the possession of the boxholder and the other kept by the bank itself. As the officer in charge of the safe deposit department, I could use both keys. I could get my look in the box and the next time I was at Uncle Fargo's house I could slip the key back into the desk drawer.

And so I dropped the key into my pocket, and then I went out and roused Uncle Fargo sufficiently to get him to his bedroom, after which I drove back to my flat.

Monday morning I waited for my chance. When a moment arrived during which all the Hotchkisses were busy and Miss Eudo-

cia Landry, the teller, was waiting on a customer, I slipped into the vault, glanced once over my shoulder, and using the two keys opened Uncle Fargo's box.

Well, you can believe me when I say that what greeted my eyes inside positively made my remaining hair stand on end. The box was neatly packed, top to bottom,



side to side, front to back with tightly wrapped packets of *currency*! All hundreds and fifties! With the practiced eye of a banker I made a quick estimate. Assuming the bills underneath the top layer to be the same denominations, there was upwards of half a million dollars there before me! *Half a million—*

A footstep sounded just outside the vault and I pushed the box shut and extracted the keys just as Abner Hotchkiss stepped inside the vault, "Fred, have you seen that credit report on Roy Ingram? It was on my desk."

I dropped the keys into my pocket. "Have I seen . . . what . . . ?" I was still seeing the amazing inside of Uncle Fargo's deposit box, everywhere I looked. Subconsciously, I found myself already dividing five hundred thousand by eleven.

"—credit report on Ingram. What's the matter, Fred, are you ill? You look a little pasty."

Why did there have to be so damned many Leffingwells! A regular plethora of them!

"I don't think you've heard one word I said, Leffingwell!"

But wait! Why did this have to be divided? Things such as bank accounts and real estate would have to be split up; but did the contents of that deposit box? Wasn't there a way? My hand was still in my pocket and I rubbed the two keys together slowly. The box was virtually a secret. Uncle Fargo knew of it, I knew of it, and there was a card in the file that showed he had engaged the box. Once each year he paid me his rental on it, and he paid in cash. Removing all paperwork pertaining to it from the bank files would be a relatively simple task.

"Look here, Fred!" said Abner Hotchkiss. "Have you been drinking? You act like you've been drinking! You know Dad sim-

ply will not stand for that—"

I pushed past him and went back to my cage and leaned my elbows on the counter. If I got rid of the registration card and the payment credit slips, then the only records remaining lay inscribed in my brain and in Uncle Fargo's.

"Dad! Dad!" I heard Abner Hotchkiss calling. And it was at that very instant that the thought of murder came to me.

There it was, as logical and as innocent as you please. Murder. Probably the most uncompromising word in the whole language, standing alone and apart. But perhaps even harsher is the word *murderer*, and that would be the stamp I'd bear. Not being an insensitive person, this pained me.

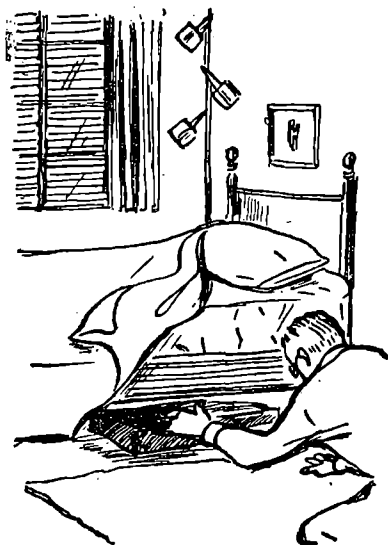
However, as I said previously, there was logic in this thing. First off, if I didn't do something about it I would only get the eleventh part of this money on Uncle Fargo's death. Secondly, it was conceivable that Uncle Fargo, seemingly indestructible, might spend part or even all of it before he died. And thirdly, I was getting no younger myself, and if I was to enjoy wealth I would have to hurry up and get wealthy.

You realize by this time that I bore not the slightest ill will to-

ward Uncle Fargo. Of course, my first responsibility would have to be to myself. Precautions would have to be taken to insure that his death was not pinned on me. But after that consideration was looked after I most certainly intended making this whole thing as easy and painless as was humanly possible for Uncle Fargo.

On my way home that evening I stopped off at the delicatessen down the street from my flat and bought some cold cuts. After that I went to the liquor store next door and got myself a bottle of blend, and then I went to my room to finalize my plan.

I put the first phase into operation the following day. I began by removing the money from Uncle



Fargo's box. This I did by taking a little at a time. As it turned out, much to my delight, my original estimate had been on the low side. In the box were seventy packets of strapped bills. Fifty of them were hundreds, each packet containing a hundred bills, or ten thousand dollars. The remaining twenty packets were fifties, of five thousand dollars each, for a grand total of six hundred thousand dollars. I took them from the vault ten packs at a time, the bills stuffed down inside my belt and hidden by my coat. Once out of the vault I secreted the money in a drawer in my cage, a drawer which was never looked into except by myself. Over a period of two days (exercising the utmost in caution) I removed the money to my car and thence to my apartment, where I placed it all in a carton which I kept beneath my bed.

This was finished, then, on Tuesday. Next I methodically destroyed all paperwork that might give a clue to Uncle Fargo's having rented the deposit box, and now that left just one thing to carry the plan to completion.

I had to kill Uncle Fargo.

Surprisingly, murder is a childishly simple thing when given sufficient thought. By this I don't imply a great deal of brooding

over an extended time, but merely the straightforward approach of a fresh and inspired mind.

Uncle Fargo was crazy about sports cars. Uncle Fargo was more than seventy-five years old. *Ergo*, a fatal sports car crash involving Uncle Fargo would hardly be likely to excite suspicion.

I phoned him on Thursday and told him I'd like to drop by his house after work if he was alone. I intimated that I needed his advice on something. Affable as always, he said to come out whenever I wanted.

He met me at the door, his usual highball glass clutched in his right hand.

"What is it, Freddie-boy?" he began, then he nudged me with his elbow and chuckled, "You ain't in trouble with that little teller down there at the bank, are you!"

I walked across the living room to the fireplace and idly picked up the poker from the little stand beneath the mantle. "No, Uncle Fargo, that's not exactly what it is . . ." I turned back and faced him. He was standing only a few feet from me. He lifted his glass and took a deep swallow, waiting. He didn't have long to wait. With a quick motion I raised the poker and brought it around in a short arc, catching Uncle Fargo a glanc-

ing-blow on the temple. The highball glass fell to the floor, crashing, and Uncle Fargo followed it. His hand went to his head and his eyes, glazed with pain and amazement, were still on my face.

"Fréd . . . what . . ." he said weakly.

"Money, Uncle Fargo." I lifted the poker again and stood over him. "Believe me, I hate to do this. I really do."

I brought it down hard and true this time.

I drove Uncle Fargo's sports car out onto the long driveway, aimed it in the direction of a grove of sturdy oaks just off the drive, engaged the gear, pulled the hand throttle all the way out, and jumped clear. It was a spectacular crash, and when I installed Uncle Fargo's body in the wreckage it presented a tableau that could hardly be questioned. When I was completely satisfied as to its appearance of authenticity, I returned to the house, cleaned up the mess of the broken highball glass, washed all traces of blood from the poker, and called the police to tell them what I had found upon paying a social visit to my uncle.

In all honesty, I must admit I didn't feel too well by the time I

got to my flat that evening. Uncle Fargo's death went alright, by that I mean there were no unexpected questions nor any suspicion evinced on the part of the police, at least not outwardly. Perhaps it was conscience I felt. I could recall too well that grinning, elfin face of his, the hearty handshake, the generosity, the delight over a new joke, the real *joie de vivre* that so characterized the late Fargo Leffingwell.

But I had what I set out for. I locked the door of my flat and took the box from beneath the bed and once again counted the money. Before I was half finished with the counting I was much improved and by the time I was done I felt positively exhilarated. There before me was my life's dream. There were expensive cars, beautiful women, a sleek cabin cruiser, perhaps even my own airplane. There were trips to exotic places I had only read about, Europe, the Caribbean, Hawaii, the *Cote d'Azur*, Rio . . .

Oh, I would have to exercise care in what I did. Of course, one eleventh of Uncle Fargo's estate would also come to me, but that would not be sufficiently large to explain the extravagances I intended lavishing upon myself.

I looked around the miserable flat and I laughed. A few more

days and I would be out of this rat hole forever. I slid the box of money back beneath the bed and reached into my pocket for cigarettes. I extracted the pack only to find that it was empty. Likewise, there were none in the kitchenette drawer. I decided to go down to the delicatessen and get cigarettes and something for my dinner, but first I needed a drink.

The bottle of cheap blend was on the kitchen shelf. I took it down and started to pour myself a shot into a glass, but then I looked at the bottle, smiled, and upended it over the sink letting the entire contents gurgle out and down the drain. A man of means does not drink rotgut.

I pulled the box back out and took one bill from it, and then I went downstairs to the delicatessen. Mr. Gold greeted me in friendly fashion and sliced a half pound of pastrami for me. I also bought a loaf of rye bread and a few other items and when he had the order prepared I gave him the money.

He turned the hundred dollar bill this way and that and grinned at me. "The bank give you a raise, Fred?"

I hadn't anticipated his paying any particular attention to the bill, and for an instant I experienced a

sudden feeling of fear. Flustered, I said something about winning a bet. He made change and I left the store with my purchases. I made one more stop on my way back to the flat. I went into the liquor store and I bought a fifth of the finest, oldest, most expensive scotch whiskey in the place.

The good life had begun. I walked back to my apartment on winged feet.

I stepped up to Mr. C. J. Hotchkiss' desk the very first thing the following morning. "I am tendering my resignation, effective immediately," I said.

He stared at me as though his hearing had suddenly gone bad. "Eh? What was that, Leffingwell?"

"I said, I quit." I turned to go.

"Hold on there! Come back here, Leffingwell!"

I looked back at the old man. "Yes?"

"You can't just—just *quit!*" he spluttered.

"Oh, but I already have," I smiled.

"What the devil is this!" A crafty gleam suddenly came into his eye. "Well, I think I see! It's that business about Fargo getting himself killed yesterday, is it? You're one of his heirs, eh? You

think you can just retire now, perhaps be a man like your uncle was? I wouldn't do anything rash if I were you, Leffingwell. I'd give this some thought. Remember, I won't have you crawling back here for your job after you spend your little windfall. Don't come here begging for your job because it won't be here!"

I stepped back to his desk and I reached out and did something I had been wanting to do for twenty-seven years. I tweaked Mr. Hotchkiss' nose.

"That for you and your job!"

Oh, the bliss of wealth! The ineffable beauty of being able to thumb your nose at whomever you like!

I drove back to Murphy Street and climbed the stairs to my flat, thinking of the smoky taste of the scotch whiskey that awaited me. I thought to myself, it's spring now in Rio. Palm trees waving, azure waters gently rippling, hula girls going to and fro, to and fro . . . no, that was Hawaii. Well, I'd go there too! I'd become a regular cosmopolite!

When I reached my door I saw a stranger standing a ways down the hall. I looked the other way. There was a man there also. A twinge of fear caught at my

throat. In my mind the word *Robbery!* flashed urgently.

But that was absurd. Who could possibly know of the money beneath the bed, and why else would anyone want to rob a poor man such as I?

I relaxed, chiding myself for being so unreasonably fearful. I put the key in the lock and as if that were a signal the man on my left stepped forward.

"Mr. Leffingwell?" he said in a well modulated voice.

A salesman? Certainly not a bill collector with that polite manner.

"Yes, I'm Leffingwell," I said with all the brusqueness I could summon.

He flipped open a leather folder and I caught a fleeting glimpse of a badge and identification card before he put it back in his pocket. "FBI," he said.

The second man had moved up beside me and now he said, "Did you spend a hundred dollar bill in the delicatessen down the street yesterday?"

"I . . . say, what is this?"

"The owner of the delicatessen says you were the only customer

yesterday who gave him a bill of that particular denomination."

"Alright. I gave him a hundred dollar bill. So what?"

The first agent smiled without humor. "We've been waiting four years for one of these bills to turn up. Do you mind telling us where you got it?"

Perspiration, icy, clammy perspiration was trickling down my back. "I . . . don't remember . . . I have to go now . . ."

He reached into the inside of his coat and for a second I thought he was going to pull a gun and shoot me. "We'll have to take a look around your apartment. I have a search warrant here, Mr. Leffingwell. This bill was one of those taken in the robbery of the Bank Express in Atlanta four years ago."

In my mind a very vivid vision of Rio was fading, and in its place there came a vague region that seemed to smell of smoke and burning sulphur. In the midst of it, with a little pitchfork in one hand and a highball glass in the other, was Uncle Fargo.

He was doubled up, laughing.

