

FANTASTIC

STORIES OF IMAGINATION

JANUARY

1963

Volume 12

Number 1

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF

ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY

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Cover: Vernon Kramer

Illustrating *Neither Stairs nor Door*

SUBSCRIPTION SERVICE: All subscription correspondence should be addressed to FANTASTIC, Circulation Department, 434 South Wabash Avenue, Chicago, Illinois. Please allow at least six weeks for change of address. Include your old address, as well as new—enclosing if possible an address label from a recent issue.

EDITORIAL CONTRIBUTIONS must be accompanied by return postage and will be handled with reasonable care; however publisher assumes no responsibility for return or safety of art work, photographs or manuscripts.

THE LEECH

By JACK SHARKEY

Illustrator SUMMERS



*A man can go to jail for practicing medicine without
a license. But Klaber had no such intention . . .
not when there were lives to be saved.*

THE fat man in the white suit stepped ponderously along the dusty plank sidewalk along the single block of commercial buildings in the small Texas town. Each step had a pause in it, as though every time his foot came down he half-determined to remain in that position forever. The sunlight lay heavily everywhere, warm sticky yellow paint sprayed lavishly from a sky like the electric blue mouth of a kiln.

The fat man was unfortunately fair-skinned, and the folds at the back of his neck were a hot, painful pink from the sun, while the backs of his soft hands glowed a purple-red as the thinner skin there cooked partially through to the bone. When he raised a hand to shade his eyes momentarily, the underarm area of his white jacket stood out wet grey against the cloth, and a close look at his thick-featured face showed pearls and sequins of sweat glistening and runneling through every quarter inch of flesh. His eyelashes were pale blond, though not so pale as his rapidly greying hair, and his pastel blue eyes—when he dared

open them fully against the glare—stared out from his face like two hints of mold on a large white wet cheese.

The large white hat he wore protected his face better than the back of his neck, perhaps because he slouched when he stood up, letting his heavy chin be borne by his fat neck. Beneath the thin fabric of his clothing, pockets and pouches of flesh entrapped trickles of sweat, grew steadily salty and raw, and developed almost maddening itches which the fat man was wise enough not to scratch into flaming infection. His feet he tried his best to ignore; walking the dusty road and stark wooden pavements, the leather binding them had become like the lid of a cast-iron stove. If a muddy pool of cool water had lain anywhere between himself and his destination, he would have shorn his clothes with his responsibilities and wallowed there until the slight relief of sunset.

A BLOCK beyond the town crossroad, where the feed store, gas station, pharmacy and

unkempt park faced each other with sullen animosity, he came to the address he sought, made his way gratefully through the black screen door and the open door beyond it into the lobby of the hotel.

Behind the desk, across the darkness of the lobby—lights made too much heat—the clerk lay back limply in a wooden chair, shirtless, fanning himself with a rolled-up newspaper and breathing as little as possible in the muggy air of the place. The fat man, squinting against the undulating waves of color that formed within his eye after stepping from yellow glare into humid gloom, finally saw his quarry and moved slowly across the room to the desk.

The clerk, without either changing position or opening his eyes, said listlessly, "Single room and bath, two bucks a night. Doubles three-fifty. Payment in advance."

"I don't want a room," said the fat man. "I'm looking for a person called Klaber. Eric Klaber. Is he rooming here?"

The clerk sighed, grateful not to have to get out the heavy registry book, and nodded, still eyeshut and limp. "Room 202," he said, before relapsing back into his semi-comatose state. "Upstairs, back."

The fat man turned without thanking the clerk, eyed the long

oak stairway with distaste, then moved slowly to it, braced one hand on the varnished newel post, and started his laborious ascent, ignoring the hair that fell in his eyes with the effort. At the door of the room he removed his hat for the first time since going out that morning, and pressed down the wet gray strands into a semblance of neatness before rapping. His knuckles had barely left the paneling when the door swung open, and a short stocky man was looking at him with a shrewd, speculative air.

"Dr. Klaber?" said the fat man.

Something flickered in the other man's eyes, then he replied carefully. "My name is Klaber, yes. But I'm not a doctor." He made no move to let the fat man pass.

"Perhaps," the fat man said, with a brief twitch of humor, "that's what all the hollering's about."

This time, the short stocky man stepped back. "Come in," he said, moving ahead of the other into the room, and half-throwing himself into a chair in the darkened corner. The fat man paused on the threshold, then closed the door behind himself and moved quietly to a chair facing the other's. It was a deep, padded armchair he chose, but a fat man is much more comfort-

able in a soft chair than on a hard. He let his thick buttocks find the cushion, depress it, and then with a grunt allowed the chair arms to rise up about his gelatinous sides and hold him in a snug horsehair grip. The occupant of the room had not moved during this operation, but there was a look in his gaze that couldn't make up its mind whether to be amusement or pity.

"You have the advantage of me," he said, seeing his guest was through settling down. "You know who I am, but—" He stopped speaking and waited.

"My name is Hoxie," he said. "From the sheriff's office, McCulloch County. Followed you up here from Brady." As if hoping the other man would simply come quietly, the man called Hoxie let his mouth fall shut, and sat, waiting.

WHEN Klaber spoke, it was with carefully chosen words. "I have broken no law," he said.

"That remains to be seen," said Hoxie. Every word cost his gross body an effort, and he unconsciously determined that the more talking he had to do to this man Klaber, the worse would be his own testimony on the stand when describing the process of Klaber's arrest. There are more than physical ways of resisting arrest. Loquacity can gum up the wheels of justice, too.

Klaber got to his feet, suddenly, and Hoxie had a short thrill of fear for his own person, knowing he was helpless to get from the chair without an effort. But Klaber simply said, "It's hot in here. You must be exhausted. Would you like a gin and tonic? I have no ice."

Hoxie relaxed. "That *would* be nice," he admitted. "My engine boiled over a mile outside town. Had to walk the rest of the way in."

Klaber nodded and went into the bathroom. Hoxie listened to the clinking of glass and gurgling of liquid, and then Klaber came back with two tall bubbly drinks. He held out both toward his guest.

"Take either," he said, "and I'll drink part of mine while you watch." Hoxie stared, then grinned briefly. He'd been too warm to consider being doped or poisoned by Klaber, but he appreciated the other's gesture.

"Thanks," he said, selecting the nearest glass to his right hand. "But we're not after you for *hurting* folks."

Klaber nodded his gratitude, and resumed his seat. For a few minutes, the men just sat and sipped their drinks. Hoxie found his good. Warm, but good. For the moment, it slaked the dusty feeling from his gullet, even though he knew it would make him even warmer in a few min-

utes. He drained his glass and set it on the floor beside the chair. His limp white fingers had to drop it the last inch, but it did not tip over.

Klaber, with half a drink to go, said, "Don't you have any questions to ask me? Or am I simply supposed to come quietly?"

Hoxie managed the approximation of a shrug. "Nothing official, Doc—Mister Klaber," he amended hastily, giving the other the benefit of the doubt he'd withheld at their meeting. "Being a human man, I'm curious, of course. But I have to warn you that anything you tell me can be used in your trial. So, suit yourself."

"I—I'd *like* to talk to someone," said Klaber, suddenly earnest and frank. "This line of, well, work that I'm in is a kind of lonely business. No one, only myself, knows just what I do. I'll blow my top if I *don't* talk to someone"

"Maybe," said Hoxie, "if I told you exactly what you're charged with, you could tell me about *that*. No point in adding to your offenses by spilling some beans we didn't know were in the pot."

Klaber thought this over, then nodded. "Go ahead."

MAIN charge is practicing medicine without a license. We *think*. Your 'patient' said

she'd never say a word against you if we set fire to her shimmy. Can't really blame her, none, but— Well, law is law. You—" he said, almost wistfully, "You don't happen to *have* a license, maybe?"

Klaber shook his head. The sun was past meridian, now, and the orange light filtering through the drawn shade showed Hoxie a head of hair grayer than his own.

"Too bad," he said, with genuine regret. "Means I got to take you in. Hate to, under the circumstances."

"Gettin' so's a man can't do a good deed 'thout steppin' on someone's toes," said Klaber, with a wry one-sided twist of his mouth that nearly passed for a grin.

Hoxie tried a shrug again, and failed. "Gov'ment's got good-deed-doin' sewed up tighter'n a drum," he agreed. "You wanna tell me just what it was you did t' Miss Perkle?"

"Fixed her," said Klaber. "That's all. No different than if I'd found her hobblin' around with a nail in her foot and pulled it out. That don't bust no law."

"No," Hoxie admitted. "That don't. But this is more medical."

"Who says so?" demanded Klaber, with a stubborn out-thrust of his lower lip. "I *can't* see the difference."

"A nail in the foot is a nail in

the foot," said Hoxie. "And cancer is cancer."

"Phooey," said Klaber. "Same thing, to my mind. Person gets a foreign body in 'em, causin' discomfort, and you take it out. Can't see any difference at all, nohow."

"There are certain medical-type ways of doin' things," said Hoxie. "You didn't use even an accepted method, we hear tell. And that's bad."

"You ain't serious!" said Klaber, aghast. "You can't be serious! You mean t'tell me the medical profession can get a guy in bad for the law on *both* them counts? How can a guy infringe their territory enough to get called on practicin' medicine without a license if the guy also gets called on for not doin' what they do anyways?"

Hoxie blinked. This aspect had not occurred to him. "Well, hold on, now . . ." he said thoughtfully. "What you're really gettin' called on is a kind of in-between them two laws. Practicin' medicine *badly* without a license."

Klaber guffawed, and Hoxie reddened as he realized the idiocy of the charge. Trying to hold onto his court-appointed dignity, he went on, "You know what I mean, Klaber! There's a right way t' fix folks, and you claim to fix folks, but you don't do it right."

Klaber shrugged. "What if

they don't give no license to do it my way? What if there ain't no such license, nohow? 'Pears to me a man can't get put in jail for not gettin' a license that can't be got."

"That," Hoxie suddenly pontificated, taking the last final refuge of all out-maneuvered sheriff's men, "is for a court 'f law t' decide."

"You mean you're stumped!" said Klaber, with more accuracy. Hoxie did not reply. His host got up, and once again Hoxie felt that peculiar thrill of fear for his own person, but Klaber simply went to the bureau, opened the drawer, and came back with a small matchbox that had a rubber band holding its sliding drawer shut. He jabbed this thing in front of Hoxie's eyes, and snapped, "The whole secret's in this box. The whole durned secret! And it seems t' me it ain't the kind o' thing a guy gets arrested for."

HOXIE attempted to reach for the box, but Klaber returned to his chair and set the box almost absent-mindedly upon the small writing table near the window. "I ain't going t' let myself get arrested," he said abruptly. "It ain't fair, a man's time being in the hands of the courts. What if I'm proved innocent? While I'm wastin' time in court, there may be lots of folks

dyin' who I coulda helped. The court can't repay them their lives, can they?" All at once, a peculiar expression washed over his face, and he looked sharply at Hoxie. "Say, look now—Don't somebody have t' sign a complaint for me to get picked up? You sure you ain't just funnin' me, Mister? 'Cause I *know* that old Miss Perkle wouldna signed nothing, and she's the only soul I helped in this county."

"Wasn't her signed it," said Hoxie. "Her nephew, Tim Perkle, did the signing. He was right mad."

"Well, of all the—! *Sure* he was mad!" Klaber exploded. "Him comin' down here all the way from Denver, t' get poor Annie Perkle's money when she died, her havin' just three-four weeks t' live—And then I fix her up fine and healthy again! Sure he was mad. An' I'll bet it wasn't 'cause his sense of medical rights felt violated, either!"

Hoxie, who had thought the same thing when Tim Perkle had burst into the sheriff's office, said nothing. But when it seemed Klaber was going to do nothing but sit and fume some more in silence, Hoxie spoke up.

"If I *knew* a little thing or two—I mean, if it's not too complicated, or nothing—I could maybe put in a good word for you at the trial, Klaber. As it is, all I know is you're a right stub-

born man who don't seem to hold much with obeyin' the law."

"I'm obeyin' a higher law!" said Klaber, so coldly that Hoxie's three-hundred-thirty-five pounds felt a momentary comfortable thrill of frost.

"Ain't no higher law in McCulloch County than the one you busted," said Hoxie, "except killin' a person."

"And that don't sound screwy to you?!" Klaber exploded. "The two top laws are for killin' and curin'? What's *left*, anyhow!?"

"Now, look—" said Hoxie, wishing he was not so tightly jammed in the armchair. Klaber had a shimmery look of violence about his face.

"Okay!" said Klaber, shutting his eyes and regaining control. "Okay, Hoxie, I'll tell it calm and simple. When you were a kid, didn't you ever stick a leech on a shiner t' get the black out from around your eye?"

"Well, sure," said Hoxie.

"Ain't that medical?" asked Klaber.

"Not—Not 'zactly. I mean, everybody does it!"

"Okay, then, how about the Indians. They got a swell cure for a torn-up knee, when the ligaments is all busted. They take a prairie dog, slit open its belly and pull the guts out, and strap the warm, hollow body around the knee for a week. Fixes it fine."

"I never done that," said Hoxie, slowly, "but I have heard tell of it . . ."

"That bust any law?"

"I don't rightly know. Maybe not for an Injun."

"Okay, then," said Klaber. "Then what's wrong with this?" He pointed to the banded matchbox. "I got me a little crittur in there does the same thing for cancer that prairie dog bodies does for knees, or leeches for shiners. Sucks out the hurt and poison. Fixes folks fine. What's the harm in it?"

IF that's the truth of the thing," said Hoxie, "there don't seem t' be no harm in it. But you ought t' tell somebody 'bout it. Let the world know. Pretty soon, everybody gets cured, and we're all happy about it."

"Unh-uh," said Klaber, shaking his head. "Pretty soon, once one of them bug-study fellers figures out what kind o' bug this is, they start breedin' em, raisin' em. And at first, there'll be lotsa folks needin' help but not enough bugs t' go around. So they'll charge plenty, plen-ty, to come around with the bug. And the rich folks'll get fixed before the poor ones, and some folks who oughta die anyhow will live, and it won't be right at all."

"You mean," said Hoxie, "you can decide who's gonna—who's

gonna live or die, but you don't want nobody else's ideas along that line crowdin' you?"

"Right," said Klaber. "Besides, I don't charge nothin'. I go around, from town to town, find out who's sick, get t' meet 'em, and if they strikes me as the right sort, I—I fix 'em. If they don't, I say 'Nice meetin' you,' and move on. Depends on the person. Nice folks ought t' live, bad folks ought t' die. The medical people try and save all the folks, and that ain't right. Why, do you know, if a man is s'posed t' go to the gas chamber, or get hung, an' he gets sick, they call off the execution till the medics make him well again, 'stead o' lettin' him die by himself?"

"Well," said Hoxie, "I knowed that, o' course, but I never paid much mind to it before now."

"Okay, so now that you're payin' some, ain't it the stupidest thing you ever did hear of?"

"That ain't for me t' say," said Hoxie, suddenly realizing that Klaber could testify to the conversation at time of arrest just as damagingly to him as he could to Klaber.

"In other words, you're takin' me in!" said Klaber. "After all I said, you're takin' me in!"

"Got to," said Hoxie. "It's the law."

"And what if the law's wrong?" said Klaber. "It can be,

you know. That's why the Constitution's got amendments."

"This law ain't been amended yet," said Hoxie. "I got to take you in."

"You got a gun or somethin'?" asked Klaber.

"Had a rifle in the car. Too hot t' carry it. Besides, you being a do-gooder, we didn't figure you'd give trouble."

"You figured wrong," said Klaber. "There's a boy in this town, not more'n fifteen years old, got stomach cancer. I was fixin' t' do something about it. He's a good kid, helps his maw around the house, studies good in school, an' all. By the time I go with you an' come back, he'll be dead. And that's only if I get off. He's 'bout due t' die in two weeks. I fixed Miss Perkle a week ago. That means the bug's just ripe to draw someone again. Takes a week to work itself up an appetite."

"You got two weeks," said Hoxie. "Maybe we can get back here in a week, and you can still fix him."

"N if we don't?" said Klaber, and Hoxie did not answer. "Nope," Klaber went on. "I can't see coming with you. You just gotta go back an' tell the sheriff I ain't coming."

"I do that, and he'll horsewhip me. Besides which, he'll come here himself, with a posse of armed men, and get you, good.

He didn't figure you'd give so much talk-back, or he'd-a sent 'em the first place."

Klaber shrugged. "Well, I ain't going. So that's that."

HOXIE, moving carefully, pried himself out of the chair until he towered in all his enormity over the other man. He smiled a little. "I don't wanna make no ruckus, Klaber, but I will if I hafta."

Klaber eyed his visitors bulk as though sizing up, and rejecting, his chance of outwrestling all that flabby beef, then slumped. "Ain't there nothin'—Ain't there no way of my stayin' here and savin' that boy?"

Hoxie hesitated. "Tell me about the fixin' of Miss Perkle. After all, that's the charge we got you on, not just a general one of do-goodin'. If you can talk out from under Tim Perkle's charge, I'll go an' forget I found where you were at. Just so's I got a line on shuttin' Tim up."

"Nothin' much t' tell, I told her, 'I heard you was sick,' and I offered to try a way I knew to fix her up. She said yes, because she liked me, and besides, there wasn't much anyone else could do for her. So—on accounta most refined ladies is jumpy 'bout bugs—I told her the process was secret, an' had her stick her hand through a hole in a sheet hangin' beside her bed. Then—"

"Her hand?" said Hoxie. "Miss Perkle was all right around the hands. It was in her chest that the trouble was."

"Don't make no mind," said Klaber. "This here bug, I figure, works on what they call 'affinity'. It sizes up the body it's bit into, figures out the most easily spared part, and sucks it up. At the same time, it squirts some kinda juice into the blood that lets the part its after know what's up, and all the bad stuff comes loose, flows to the tiny little hole the critter makes, and out and down its gullet."

"Don't that make the crittur grow some?" asked Hoxie.

"Considerable," nodded Klaber. "Swole up t' near a foot around, with Miss Perkle. But—" he pointed to the tiny matchbox—"like I said, it's been a week. It's empty again."

"I'd sure appreciate seein' this crittur," said Hoxie, mopping his streaming brow with a damp white handkerchief.

"Okay," said Klaber. "But look quick-like. It's hungry, now, and I wouldn't want it leapin' out and fastenin' on you."

Hoxie drew back a step. "What'd happen?" he said. "I mean, seein' as I got no cancer 'r nothin'?"

"It'd take the next best thing," said Klaber.

Hoxie scratched his head. "Such as what?"

"The last growth you had, o' course," said Klaber, as if impatient Hoxie did not see yet the manner of the bug's functioning. "When you were an unborn baby, the very last thing to develop in your body was all the fat you got. Oh, not so much's you got *now*, o' course, but that's the last thing a body grows, you know. So this here bug'd have you turned to a toothpick in no time."

Hoxie's mouth had fallen slightly open. "Lemme get this straight, Klaber—You mean t' say . . . If that crittur got holda me, I'd—I'd slim down some?"

"Some?" said Klaber, with a cackling, scornful laugh. "This here bug's an all 'r nothin' crittur. You wouldn't have no fat left a-tall!"

"Klaber—" said Hoxie, flicking out a pink tongue to lick salty-wet thick lips. "Maybe—Maybe I'd *like* t' have that crittur fasten on. You know, I don't much *'preciate* havin' this tonnage t' tote around with me. In weather like this, it can be killin' to a man, almost."

YOU'RE sayin' you want me t' do you a *favor* before you take me off t' jail?" said Klaber. "You're loco, Hoxie."

"Well, now, wait, now just hold on. I ain't said I was gonna take you definite, *yet!*" said Hoxie, desperately. "Tell you

what—I could make a kind of deal with you—”

“You mean,” said Klaber, “if I just get some of that lard off’n your carcass, you’ll forget all that high-type important *law* you been spoutin’ about, and lie t’ your sheriff?!”

“Durn tootin’ I would,” said Hoxie. “The sheriff, he don’t never pass up an opportunity t’ say something he thinks is funny about my backside or jowls. I’ll just let him lose this here case.”

“You’re gonna have a lot of ‘splainin’ t’ do if you go back thin,” said Klaber.

“I’ll say I had a faintin’ spell on the road, and woke up like this,” shrugged Hoxie, finally managing this ponderous effect. “Who’s gonna doubt me, since there ain’t no way known t’ mortal man—’ceptin’ us two—t’ lose that much weight so fast?” Klaber still looked somewhat dubious.

“That makes sense,” nodded Hoxie, eagerly, “Don’t it?”

“It’s your neck if they don’t b’lieve you—” said Klaber.

“Right,” said Hoxie. “I’ll take the risks.”

“But how about that boy—” said Klaber. “If I use the bug on you, he’s li’ble t’—”

“You told me a week,” said Hoxie, triumphantly. “You fix me good, and you still got a chance t’ fix the boy before his two weeks t’ live is up. Right?”

Klaber sighed and nodded despondently. “Right, Hoxie. Okay, then, you better sit down in that chair again. This’ll sting a mite. Critter’s got a sharp-edged mouth to it.”

The opened box revealed a small gray six-legged thing that vaguely resembled a chigger. It twitched one of the short furry antennae near its blind eyes, and lifted and set down a hind leg.

“It don’t smell you yet,” Klaber explained. “Here, now, just dip your finger into the box, in front of the critter.”

Hoxie hesitated, then slowly complied. As the stubby tip of his left forefinger touched the inside of the small cardboard drawer, the bug rose up on all six legs, and two needle-sharp red points appeared at either side of its transverse jaws. Then, faster than Hoxie could watch, the thing was hugging the soft pad of his forefinger with all six legs, and there was a short-lived sting as the fangs dug deep just below the end of the nail.

Klaber deftly lifted the box away, and then sat down in his chair again. “Feel anything yet?” he said.

“Just a quick pain,” said Hoxie. “But there’s an itchy feelin’ spreadin’ up my arm.”

“That’s the juice I told you of,” said Klaber. “When it gets all through you, the bug starts pullin’ it back, and all the growth

comes along with it." He shoved the writing table forward until its surface was just beneath the small round abdomen of the creature. "Like I said, it grows some. Don't want it breakin' in half from no support."

WHEN the spreading itch had become the universal focal point of Hoxie's mind, the bug began to grow. Slowly, though head and thorax remained the same size, the abdomen began to dilate and swell, larger and larger, with increasing speed. The bug was now like a small gray pimple on a large smooth white egg—on a billiard ball—an ostrich egg—a volley ball bladder—And finally, when its diameter was greater than that of an eiderdown pillow, and a uniform glossy white, the bug unhitched its fangs from Hoxie's finger and lay dormant atop the writing table, like an airtank with a six-legged nipple.

"That'll do it," said Klaber, moving the table away from the armchair, and starting to stroke the back of the bug, like a mother burping a baby. A few moments later, this action proved to be more than similar in appearance. The tiny jaws unhinged, distended, widened, and then the bug, as if made of highly elastic rubber, snapped backward and away from the globe that had filled its innards, and Klaber

caught it, held its jaws carefully clear of his fingers, and popped it back into the matchbox once more.

The huge white globe it had encircled rolled off the table and thumped and wobbled its way over to the base of Hoxie's chair. "That boy," said Klaber to the figure in the chair, "needs me bad *now*. No point in his sufferin' another week just so's you can do quick what you could do slow by dietin'. Sorry I had to trick you, Hoxie, but I gotta do things the way I feel them."

Hoxie did not reply. A fringe of wet gray hair showed crazily above the bulging shirt collar, and the one melon-shaped arm that had not vanished up a crumpled sleeve tried weakly to flex fingers the size and shape of marshmallows. A horrible humpy-dumpty of flesh lay screaming silently within Hoxie's sweat-dampened clothing, struggling for air that would no longer pull in through the collapsed windpipe, nor could be induced to enter by the loose-hanging diaphragm within his belly.

"I told you mostly true, Hoxie," said Klaber, putting on his hat. "The last thing the body grows before birth is the fat that lines it. But that's not the *last* thing it grows in its development. There's more to life than the part before birth. There's the gettin' to be a growed-up man."

Klaber slapped on his hat, said to the closed box, "Sorry to make you sick, fella. I knowed it didn't agree with you," and went out the door of the room, locking it carefully after him.

Days later, when the stench had grown intolerable, and the listless clerk had been persuaded by the other roomers to climb the stairs and investigate, they found the rotting heap of unidentifiable meat in the stained

white suit in the armchair. And beside the empty shoes on the floor, they found the smooth round globe the like of which none of them had ever seen.

"Too hard for plaster," said one of the men.

When clerk and roomers attempted to lift it, it proved to weigh hardly more than thirty pounds or so, which is about right for a single-unit lumping of a fat man's bones.

THE END

*The sheriff knew that
poor old lady was hope-
lessly ill. Why shouldn't
I have used my secret
process to cure her?*

see THE LEECH

