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The Moon and Nonsense

by William P. McGivern

Probably the only thing around no confidence man could ever hope to sell is the Moon. There are always customers for the Brooklyn Bridge or the jewels in the handkerchief. But nobody would be stupid enough to buy the Moon.

Oh no? Did you ever hear of a man-named Reggie Van Ameringen?

THE MOOD of the new day was rather peculiar, and it warned Reggie van Ameringen that this particular day was somewhat different from the usual parcels of time in which he thrived like a happy vegetable. Clive was smiling slightly for one thing, and there was a certain expansiveness in his manner as he went about the business of setting up breakfast by the sunny windows.

Reggie sat up in bed and studied Clive with a shrewd eye. Smiling, not a doubt of it, Reggie thought. The old lips twisted upward, a definite jolliness in the usually glassy eyes. It was damned odd. A smile on Clive's face was as shocking as a mustache on the Mona Lisa. For Clive was a gentlemen's gentleman in the heroic tradition, a bravura anachroism from a sterner age. He had the figure of a Guardsman,

the manner of a Duke, and a sense of propriety that would have awed a director of the Bank of England.

"I say!" Reggie said.

"Ah, good morning, sir. You slept well, I trust?"

"Top hole," Reggie said, still vainly attempting to analyze Clive's air of incongruous *bonhomie*. There was, he knew, little hope of finding out. For Reggie's was not an analytical mind; in fact he secretly wondered if it was a mind at all. Obviously, it was *something*, but what he was not sure. And it was a subject he didn't enjoy 'peering into. He had come to grips with his mind and settle the matter. To hell with it, had been his final conclusion. Let sleeping minds lie, and all the rest of it.

"I say!" he said once more.

"Yes, sir?" Clive paused in the

act of putting down a fork.

"You're in good form, what?" Reggie said, attacking the puzzle obliquely.

"Why thank you, sir," Clive said, and placed the fork exactly one-and-one-eighth inch from the plate.

"Bounded out of the right side of the old bed, eh?"

"Quite, sir."

"Always do, don't you? I mean, bound of the right side of the old downy."

"Oh yes, sir. The bed, you see, is against the wall."

Reggie frowned, peering into the remark for significance. Finding none, he sighed and climbed out of bed. Then he got the joke. It was quite a time before he could bring himself to stop laughing. And by then he had shaved, showered and finished his breakfast.

But over his second cup of coffee he remembered what had been bothering him before Clive's uproarious sally had knocked him completely out of control.

"I say!" he said for the third time, and pointed a fork accusingly at Clive's chest.

"Yes, sir?"

"You were smiling this morning."

"Perhaps I was, sir. It's a rather special day, I think. Or have you forgotten?"

"Forgotten what? Don't beat

about the old bush."

"The lawyers are coming this morning, sir. It's your twenty-sixth birthday, and today you will inherit the money which has been held in trust for you by the firm of Godpenny, Overreach, Hensdrake and Wellington. It is a day that calls for a certain levity, sir."

"Yes, of course, of course," Reggie said peevishly. He *had* forgotten the whole business, and remembering it was enough to envelop his spirits in a vast dank pall. Lawyers! Godpenny, Overreach, Hensdrake and Wellington — the names were a litany of disaster, an awesome echo of past flubs and foibles. Every bit of unpleasantness in his life had been connected with lawyers. They were always lecturing him, treating him as if he didn't have enough sense to come in out of the rain. As a matter of fact, Reggie recalled, they *did* have a point in that particular instance. He and his boon friend Ferdy Myrtlehead had been involved in that business — actually it had all been Ferdy's fault. But the lawyers for all their talk of justice couldn't see it that way. It had started with a cheery talk at the club bar about coming in out of the rain. Ferdy had scored a smashing stroke by saying that the remark made no sense, because whether or not people came *in* out of the rain it always *stopped*



raining eventually and therefore the end results were identical. Come *in* or stay *out* was all the same. You got dry either way. Reggie hadn't agreed. And so they had packed a lunch containing two thermos bottles of Martinis and repaired to the park to wait for rain. On the first try Ferdy's theory was completely vindicated. They sat in the rain for four hours while Reggie grew increasingly giddy with the prospect of showing Ferdy up as cotton-headed young ass. But then, humiliatingly, the rain stopped, and Ferdy's point was proven.

"You see, old man," Ferdy had said, in a nauseatingly sympathetic manner, "You aren't grounded in good old logic. But observe: the rain has stopped, the sun is out, in a matter of an hour or so we will be dry. Therefore, the remark, about not having enough sense to come out of the rain is just a lot of empty nonsense. Handed down from father to son like stories about kind fairies and pots of gold under rainbows. Just a fake, that's all."

"I don't know about fairies," Reggie said, stung.

"*Kind* fairies," Ferdy said sharply. "Everyone knows about fairies. But no kind ones. Not one bloody kind fairy in the whole world."

But Reggie hadn't taken the

experiment in the park as conclusive, and for several years he had worked diligently to prove that Ferdy was wrong. The two of them had travelled quite a bit — particularly in India — trying to find a place where it never stopped raining. And Reggie, hating himself for a sneak, even got mixed-up with some rainmakers in various countries. He had been on the verge of exposing Ferdy as an arrant, un-schooled pop-off when the lawyers — *all* of them — had caught him in a market in Port Said. What followed was a nightmarish business, full of name-calling and recrimination. It had left Reggie moody for hours. And now they were upon him once more, trapping him here in his own sanctum.

"You don't seem pleased, if I may say so, sir," Clive remarked.

"Say it a hundred times," Reggie said, gnawing at his lip. "What're they up to now?"

"They merely require your signature on a few forms," Clive said. "And then, until noon, you will be a millionaire. May I congratulate you, sir."

"Until noon?"

"Quite, sir. Another firm of lawyers — Muddle, Shackhead, Toobottom, Egbert, Clarkson, Lessfit and Neverplay — will be in charge of your finances."

"Why the old switcheroo?"

Clive cleared his throat elegantly. "Taking an advantage of

a technicality, Godpenny, Overreach, Hensdrake and Wellington are resigning as your legal custodians."

"Dropping me, eh?" Reggie muttered. For some reason he didn't feel as elated as he should have; it wasn't cheery to be thrown away by a pack of lawyers. "I suppose they think I'm not good enough for them," he said, gesturing moodily with a piece of buttered toast.

"I shouldn't put it that way, sir," Clive said kindly. "However, as an old and respectable firm, I feel they may not be spiritually equipped to manage the — ah — livelier aspects of your affairs."

"Of course," Reggie said. He hadn't the foggiest notion of what Clive was talking about, but the cadence of Clive's prose and the melifluous tone of his voice soothed him like the strains of beautiful music.

"I think a glass of champagne might be in order, sir," Clive went on. "If that is agreeable to you, I'll chill a bottle now."

"Fine, grand," Reggie said. The morning was picking up, he thought, returning to his usual state of bland and mindless good humor. "I'll pop into the old threads meanwhile."

"Very well, sir."

When he had dressed himself Reggie strolled into the drawing room. Everything looked top-hole;

the sun was shining smartly through the terrace windows and Clive had brought all the bric-a-brac up to a state of high gloss. It was a grand room really, he thought. View of the park, comfortable chairs, all the rest of it. Strolling about he patted a table and sofa affectionately. Good old friends, he was thinking. Stout and true. Like Ferdy. Like — He paused, a small frown gathering on his pleasantly vacant features. Like whom? The name — whose ever it had been — had just popped out of his mind. Who was it? Reggie felt a twinge of dismay. Hardly a way to treat a stout and true friend. Forget all about him. A chap didn't have *that* many friends. Devil of a note. Losing friends as if they were carkeys or postage stamps. Reggie put a hand to his forehead, weighted down by a sudden and definite sense of loss. "I may have lost my stoutest friend," he muttered to the floor. "Good old whoever-it-was, gone forever." Sighing he threw both hands in the air. "Well, farewell old bean, nothing to do but carry on, bite the bullet," he said, making an effort to dismiss the gloomy business.

It was then the doorbell rang. Reggie hurried to answer it and found his fiance, Sari, standing in the corridor. And when he saw her a dazzling light broke on him. *She* was the stout old friend he'd

forgot, *she* was the true-blue buddy he'd thought he'd lost.

"Ah, welcome back," he said, embracing her fondly.

Sari kissed him on the cheek and then drew back and looked at him with a small but sceptical smile. "Am I supposed to have been away?" she said.

"Yes, it was all very tragic," Reggie said, taking her by the arm and leading her to a chair. "You see, I forgot your name. Silly of me, but there it is."

"How droll," Sari said lightly. "Has it come back to you now?"

"But of course," Reggie said, highly pleased with himself. "I was thinking of these stout old chairs and tables in this room, and that made me think of my best friends. Well, Ferdy came first, naturally, and —"

"Naturally Ferdy was first," Sari said, nodding pleasantly.

"Of course. Then I thought of another great old friend, but the name just wouldn't come. But it was *you!* Hilarious, what?"

Sari drummed her fingers on the arms of the chair and studied Reggie with an Inquisitor's smile. "I am going to count up to ten," she said slowly and distinctly.

"That's an awfully good trick," Reggie said and sighed. "I've tried it, but six and seven get me all tangled up."

Sari was a small, and elegantly curved young woman with vivid red hair and green eyes. In spite of

her pocket-sized specifications she had a temper and intelligence that could lend her the stature of a female Goliath. And now, as she crossed her slim, exquisitely, molded legs and looked up at Reggie, he had the odd sensation that she was looking *down* on him.

"You couldn't remember my name," she said thoughtfully. "Ferdy's yes, mine no. You forgot old true-blue Sari, Eh?"

"Just for a few minutes," Reggie said scratching his head. He had a vague feeling that something was wrong. "It's not serious, really. Sometimes I forget *my* name. Damned nuisance. It always happened in the army. At roll call."

"I won't be side-tracked," Sari said.

"Not side-tracking you. Just telling you I couldn't remember my name at roll call."

"Well, what in Heaven's name did you do?"

"I yelled 'Here' to every name. Only thing to do. Couldn't take a chance." Reggie chuckled and sat down on the arm of Sari's chair. "Funniest thing was my outfit didn't have an AWOL all the time I was there. Fellows were over the hill for days, weeks, but there was old Reggie shouting out a 'Here' for them. Ran up a perfect record. Company Commander got a citation. Ill wind and the rest of it, what?"

Sari tried very hard not to

laugh, but she gave up the struggle after a few seconds. "I don't know what it is," she said, patting his cheek. "I really don't know. Sometimes I think to myself, 'You are nuttier than he is if you marry him,' but I can't take myself seriously. How do you do it, Reggie? Do you drop some kind of pills in my cocktails?"

Reggie didn't know what she was talking about, but this was one of the things he liked about Sari, and all girls for that matter — their dear, bubbling little feminine minds. "Come, come now," he said, which was a phrase he had been using successfully for years in moments of confusion.

"All right, we won't quibble," Sari said. "When are the lawyers arriving, by the way? That's why I'm here, you know. I want to look at a millionaire in the flesh, even if he's going to disappear at noon sharp, like a daytime Cinderella."

"Oh, they'll be along pretty soon, I suppose. Look, Sari, you've got a good head for figures. Counting up to ten is no mean trick, eh? Well, how about this? *Why* won't they let me keep my million dollars?"

Sari smiled at him. "I wouldn't worry about it. They'll probably explain all that to you, in any case."

Sari's words were prophetic. The Messrs. Godpenny, Over-

reach, Hensdrake and Wellington arrived ten minutes later, and five minutes after Clive had taken their black Homburgs and black overcoats, the president of the firm — Darius Godpenny — was providing clues to Reggie's query.

"Your worthy grandfather did not think that you should be intrusted with the sum of one million dollars," Godpenny said, waggling his spectacles at Reggie. Darius Godpenny was a small, compactly built man in his middle-fifties, with neat gray hair, a high unfurrowed forehead, and a look about the eyes that is peculiar to financial Peeping Toms. "In truth, your grandfather did not feel that you were equipped to manage *one* dollar, let alone one million," he went on with relish. "In his opinion you were *non compos mentis*."

"Is that a direct quote?" Sari asked coldly. "Did the old boy usually chat with you in Latin?"

Godpenny gave her a severe glance. "I took the liberty, the poetic license, you might away, of putting his words in an older and more succinct tongue."

"You're liable to get your poetic license revoked," Sari muttered.

"To continue," Godpenny said, clearing his throat. "I must say that our firm has found your grandfather's estimate of you, rather temperate. In the thirteen years we have managed your af-

fairs there has been nothing but one crisis after another, and all of them have been precipitated by your appalling lack of responsibility and judgment. Short of theft, I can think of no fiscal impropriety you have not committed."

"That must worry the old boy," Reggie said moodily. "That theft business, I mean. He was a great old thief. Mines, railroads, whole states, he slipped 'em into his pocket when no one was looking. Great old boy. Wonderful touch for larceny. He's probably stewing about bad blood in the family. No more thieves. Whole line going to pot."

Godpenny drew himself up to his full and unimpressive height. "Your grandfather was one of the pioneers who built this country, young man."

"That's right," Reggie said, shaking his head. "Great old boy. You know, he once stole a hot stove from the Union League club, because he heard someone say he'd stolen everything *but* a hot stove. Full of pride. That was grandfather."

"I think it best to terminate our business," Godpenny said, after gnawing at his lips for a few seconds in silence. "Sign this form here, here and here, if you please."

"Righto," Reggie said.

When the lawyers had filed out Reggie turned and patted Sari on the cheek. "Thank goodness that's

over," he said. "Terrible strain."

"You were just wonderful, and I hated those nasty little men," Sari said.

Clive entered the room with a tray of glasses and a definitely gay smile on his noble face. "Champagne, sir," he announced in tones of pure gold . . .

"Well, you've still got ten minutes left," Sari said, a good bit later. "The new lawyers will take over at noon."

"I wish I could buy you one little present first," Reggie said.

"Never mind, I only want the moon with a fence around it," Sari said fondly. "You can pick that up anytime."

They were sitting on the sofa before the fire, cosily holding hands. Sari's red head rested against Reggie's shoulder, and her expression was dreaming and peaceful.

"You know, money doesn't make any difference," Reggie said.

"Not to me it doesn't," Sari said, hugging his arm.

"But look," Reggie said. "I always live the same way. But sometimes Clive says we're stony, and other times he's actually cheerful about the old ready. But nothing ever changes. So how does he *know*?"

"Clive's a genius," Sari said cheerfully. "He just knows."

"No doubt of that. Supposing I go find another bottle of the old

bubbly? Thirsty business, talking."

"What an unexpected but heavenly thought!"

Reggie patted her silken knee. "Wait right here. I want to explore this money thing." He patted her knee absently. "Or *something*. Funny. Slipped my mind. But I'll try to remember."

"I'll help you," Sari said. "Go get the old bubbly, to use your fine and noble phrase."

Reggie found a bottle of champagne waiting for him in an ice bucket. He was loosening the stopper when an anxious knock sounded on the back door. Reggie hesitated, then sighed and opened the door. Ferdie Myrtlehead stood in the corridor, a tipsy little smile on his round and foolish face.

"Reggie, old bean," he said.

"What ho!" Reggie said. He wasn't surprised to find Ferdie at the rear door. Ferdie had a quirk about front doors, he knew. The idiosyncrasy dated to his youth; as a teen-ager he had read of a trapper who was killed by a shotgun that was rigged up to the front door of a cabin. That had done it for Ferdie. No more barging through front doors.

Ferdie smiled at the bottle of champagne. "I say, the old bubbly," he murmured. "Saving it for anything special?"

Reggie thought a moment. "Well, no," he said.

"Grand. Let's have a touch."

"Righto."

They sat down at the kitchen table and had a pleasant, ruminative drink. "Well, well," Ferdie said.

"Quite," Reggie nodded.

Ferdie scratched his head. "I had something to tell you," he said. "Hurried over from the club. But it's gone."

"Well, have a drink. Sometimes a boost like that helps."

"Righto."

After the second drink Ferdie snapped his fingers. His pink and plump face relaxed into a smile. "Ah, yes," he said. "You remember my Uncle Algernon?"

"Well, no."

"I've told you about him anyway. A rare old crackpot. Thinks horses are plotting to overthrow society. Really! Mad as a loon. Always attacking poor old nags pulling milk wagons. Filthy rows with judges all over the country for trying to run horses down in his car. Goes to western movies and cheers when horses are shot." Ferdie chuckled and slapped Reggie on the shoulder. "Quite a peppy old character."

"Sounds great," Reggie said approvingly.

"Well, he just popped into the club. That's why I came over here. Thought you'd like to meet him."

"I say, that was decent of you," Reggie said, touched by Ferdie's generosity.

"Well, let's be off then."

At twelve o'clock the six lawyers from the new firm arrived at Reggie's front door. Clive let them in, took their hats and coats, and then glanced inquiringly at Sari, who was still seated on the sofa before the fire.

"Excuse me, but have you seen the master?" he asked her.

"Reggie? He went out to the kitchen a while ago to get a bottle of champagne. Didn't you see him?"

"I was in my room doing the accounts," Clive said. His voice was even and deep, but its timbre suggested the battlefield rather than the drawingroom. "Excuse me, I'll tell him the lawyers are here."

In twenty seconds he re-entered the room. "Won't you sit down?" he said to the attorneys. "There may be a slight delay."

Sari sat up abruptly. She stared at Clive and shook her head slowly, incredulously. "No, it's not true," she said. "Tell me it's a joke, Clive."

Clive raised his eyebrows a quarter-of-an-inch, which was sufficient to indicate what he thought of the propriety of a gentleman's gentleman "joking." "The Master has gone out it appears," he said.

Sari swallowed a vast apprehension. "And he's worth — I mean, he can spend — it's *all* his to do with as he wants?"

"Precisely," Clive said calmly.

Reggie and Ferdie decided that it would require a few stiff pegs of liquor to ease their disappointment, and they promptly began to utilize that therapy. Their disappointment stemmed from the fact that Uncle Algernon had left the club several minutes before they arrived. A neighing horse in the street had sent him charging out to the sidewalk, blackthorn staff raised to strike, and the last that was seen of him (according to the doorman) was his coattails flapping out of sight around a corner.

"Next time better luck," Ferdie said moodily.

"Dashed bitter let down," Reggie said. Then his spirits lifted. "Well, things aren't too bad. I mean, long quiet afternoon facing us. Nothing to do but chat, have a drink, all the rest of it. Not too bad, eh?"

It was several minutes later that two substantial looking gentlemen stepped up to the bar alongside Reggie and ordered Scotch and sodas. Without meaning to eavesdrop, Reggie heard some of their conversation, which revolved about money in large and impressive amounts.

Finally the man nearest him — a large and handsomely tailored chap with white hair and benignly sharp eyes — put a hand on Reggie's arm, and said, "Excuse me, but my friend has just told me a story that's too good to

confine to a limited audience. I'd like to give it the circulation it deserves if you don't mind."

"Not at all," Reggie said. He waved to the bartender for a round of drinks, immensely flattered that the man had spoken to him; usually the respectable members of the club treated him with a toleration which he found very depressing.

"Well, it's like this," the man said, fingering his glass. "I'm in the investment business by the way. Names Harrington. My friend here is Dr. Iseminger, of whom you've probably heard."

There was a general handshaking at this point, and a muttering of names and how-are-you's. Ferdie crowded in shamelessly, to Reggie's annoyance. But his annoyance faded very quickly, particularly when he recalled how sporting Ferdie had been about Uncle Algernon.

"Well, it's this way," the man who called himself Harrington said. "My friend, the good doctor, is not a business man, but he nevertheless invests a certain part of his income in good stocks. This morning he called me at my office and, since we're old friends, I talked to him personally."

Dr. Iseminger, a neatly dressed little man with sparse gray hair and thoughtful eyes, was shaking his head and smiling sheepishly as Harrington began the story.

"It seemed," Harrington went

on, chuckling good-humoredly, "that the doctor wanted a hundred shares of Western Consolidated. He had read the prospectus of this company's assets and so forth, and thought it would make a fine investment. A touch speculative, but basically sound, you understand."

"I say!" Reggie said.

"However, *I* didn't like Western Consolidated," Harrington went on. "I know the company well, and I know the chaps who took over the reorganization two years ago. And it seemed to me that caution was indicated. A few more months to see how things shaped up, and so forth. But the good doctor was impatient. 'Buy it now!' he ordered, and I reluctantly agreed to do so."

Harrington sipped his drink and then laughed aloud, a good hearty, one-man-to-another laugh. "Well, Western Consolidated split their stock today and just about doubled the doctor's money for him. But the hilarious thing is this," Harrington went on, putting a big, beautifully manicured hand on Reggie's shoulder. "The joke is that the doctor actually wanted to buy *Eastern* Consolidated, quite another company, and got the names mixed up. So what can you do? I ask you, what can you do?"

"Hmmmm," Reggie said, understanding nothing of all this, but realizing that some issue was

being put squarely to him. He hedged cleverly. "Hmmmm," he said.

"Exactly," Harrington cried. "What can you do in the market when you make money even by accident?"

"I say, is it really that easy?" Ferdy said.

"Oh, I don't mean to be taken literally," Harrington said. But with good sound advice it's not too difficult a matter. Intelligent men are adding to their capital every day. It's an interesting time, a highly interesting time, I might say, for a man with surplus cash to invest. If I had a million dollars —"

"I have a million dollars," Reggie said conversationally. "Just got it today."

Harrington smiled at him. "Would you like to have two?"

"Well, no thanks," Reggie said.

"Sensible man," Harrington said. "You know when to stop." He glanced at his watch and shrugged. "Well, I'm stuck for an hour or so. The Governor warned me he might be late. What do you say we take a table? Might even have another round of drinks?"

They repaired to a mahogany table in the corner of the lounge and their waiter brought them fresh drinks. In the next half-hour they had quite a few drinks. Reggie and Ferdie were vastly over-stimulated by the respectability of their companions, and

went hog-wild in sheer exuberance. Ferdie at last excused him to go to the bathroom and Dr. Esiminger followed him. The doctor returned alone. He nodded to Harrington who moved his glass aside and put a firm fatherly hand on Reggie's arm.

"Your friend isn't coming back," he said. "I think he's been taken ill."

"Pity," Reggie said, blinking a bit. "Chap should watch his health, what?"

"Precisely. However, I must say I'm gratified at the chance to talk to you in private. Unless I'm way off, you're a shrewd and careful operator. Now be honest with me: is that a fair estimate?"

"Well," Reggie said, "I'm not very clever, if that's what you mean."

"Sly dog!" Harrington chuckled. "But to be serious: I have a little deal you might be interested in. Just listen a moment."

Harrington talked persuasively for at least half-an-hour, describing the potential of an oil well in southwestern Texas. Figures flowed easily and hypothetically from him, each digit blessed by the tone of benediction in his big rolling voice. Finally he paused and looked solemnly at Reggie. "Well, what do you think?"

"Preposterous," Reggie said, nodding. "Silly business, expecting to get oil out of the ground

and make buckets of money with it. Couldn't agree more."

Harrington's smile became slightly strained. He glanced quickly at the doctor and then took a handkerchief and mopped his damp forehead. "You *are* a sly one," he said, patting Reggie's shoulder. "But joking aside, I'd like your views on this matter. If a man wanted to turn a million dollars into five or even ten million dollars, this is the quickest way to do it. Don't you agree?"

"Well, I suppose so," Reggie said. He was getting very bored; what had begun as a pleasant afternoon of guzzling had turned into a lot of silly chatter about oil wells and interest rates.

Harrington leaned closer to Reggie. "I like you," he said. "I'm going to cut you in on this deal. I'm going to take your million dollars and do tricks with it. I'll make ten dollars for ever one you invest — or my name isn't George Worthington."

"Harrington," Reggie said, pleased at his alertness.

Harrington coughed strenuously. "Ah, to be sure. Harrington. George Harrington. Silly slip. Well, what do you say?"

"Oh, anything that pops into my mind as a rule," Reggie said. "No set rules about it. Just say something. Anything."

"I mean, what do you say about *this* particular deal?" Harrington said in a rising voice.

"Oh." Reggie frowned and drummed his fingers on the table. "Well, let me see." He stared in glassy absorption at the wall. Then he shook his head. "Sorry, old bean. Don't need more millions. Just get involved with more lawyers. Bloody mess." He shuddered and waved to a waiter. "Need a drink here. Drink all around." Then he patted Harrington's shoulder. "Good of you to think of me. Remember it all my life."

"You can't be serious!" Harrington said.

"No law against it," Reggie said. "Free country, what?"

"But isn't there *anything* you want?"

"Yes, but it's a bigish order," Reggie said, and sighed. He had suddenly thought of Sari. Grand and amazing girl. And how did he treat her? Like a cad. No other word for it. She wanted the moon with a fence around it, that was all, and he hadn't stirred a finger to see about it. The only thing she'd ever asked him for, and what had he done? Nothing. Hadn't given it a thought. "I'd like the moon," he said to Harrington, speaking crisply and decisively. "Not for myself, understand, but for a good old friend."

Harrington and the doctor stared at each other for a second in silence. Then the doctor shook his head quickly. He had become quite pale. "No," he said. "No."

But Harrington suddenly pounded the table and began to laugh. He stared at Reggie and said, "This is the most amazing coincidence! Dr. Iseminger *owns* the moon. He's got a pure and uncontestable title."

"I say," Reggie murmured. He looked at the doctor and said wistfully, "I don't suppose you'd care to sell it?" . . .

Events moved swiftly and bewildering after this. Harrington insisted they go to his hotel room to discuss the whole matter in peace and quiet. But there wasn't any peace and quiet at Harrington's hotel. Instead there were powerful drinks, and a tall brunette who looked as if she might have played fullback on some team of Amazons. She took an instant fancy to Reggie. There was nothing she wouldn't do for him, she hinted with a twist of her heroic shoulders.

There was a lot of talk about the moon, and a gala moment as Reggie signed a check and received a receipt.

After that things calmed down. The doctor left with the check, and Harrington began stuffing things into a suitcase. Reggie and the tall brunette played a game of hide-and-seek which terminated with Reggie hidden away artfully in a closet. He fooled her completely; a whole hour went by and when he finally tip-toed out

into the bedroom the silence struck him as unnatural. That was when he learned that he was alone, that Harrington, the doctor and the brunette had vanished.

Reggie felt very sad and very sleepy. Find a grand bunch of friends, lose 'em the same day. Life! And all the rest of it. Sighing, he stretched out on the sofa and fell fast asleep.

When he woke several hours later he realized that he was in possession of an epic hangover. Gloomy and depressed he stared about the strange room, at the empty glasses and overflowing ashtrays. His memory, always an antic instrument, was little help to him; he recalled missing Ferdie's uncle at the club, and a vague something about bringing Sari a drink. The last splintering thought filled him with remorse. He'd stood Sari up somewhere. Fine way to treat true-blue Sari, he mused. Well, best set things straight. Off to the old homestead in sackcloth and ashes. Bend the bloody head and beg forgiveness. Least a chap could do.

It wasn't until he was zipping homeward in a cab that he remembered the business about the moon. He began to chuckle. Yes, he'd bought the moon. For Sari. That would put a sparkle in her eye. No need for sackcloth and ashes. Hail the conquering Hero!

When he entered his apartment Sari was pacing the floor, wringing

her hands together anxiously.

"Oh dear, are you all right?" she said breathlessly. "We've been so worried. Clive's out at the police stations, and the lawyers buzzed off hours ago."

"I'm tip-top," Reggie said.

"You look hung."

"Well, a bit maybe. Nothing serious. A clacking in the old forehead."

"Where *were* you?"

"Shopping," Reggie said with a casual little wave of his hand. "Just shopping."

"Reggie, did you spend any money?"

He smiled and patted her shoulder. "No question for a dear little female to bother her head about. I brought you a present. Just a little thing. But cute."

"What did you buy me?"

Reggie took her hand and led her to the window. "Look," he said, pointing to the sky. "There! It's all yours."

"What *are* you talking about?"

"The moon. I bought it for you. That's what you wanted, right?"

"Darling, I'm in no mood for jokes."

"No joke. Girl wants the moon with a fence around it. What's a doting chap to do? Simple. Get the moon. No fence yet. Have to see about carpenters, I suppose."

Sari looked at him for a few seconds. Then she said quietly, "Reggie, *who* sold you the moon?"

"Couple of chaps. Good fellows."

"What did you pay them?"

"All I had. Moons don't come cheap. Million dollars."

A key sounded in the door and Clive entered. "Good evening, sir," he said pleasantly to Reggie. "I've been taking the liberty of trying to find you."

"Clive!" Sari cried. "Make him tell you what he did."

Reggie was feeling defensive and confused. And a little bit hurt. Sari's reaction wasn't what he'd expected. No wildly grateful hug, no flush of pride and pleasure at the gift.

Clive looked at Reggie. "What have you done, sir?" he asked politely.

"I bought her the moon," Reggie said moodily. "From a couple of chaps. Paid a million. What's all the fuss about?"

Clive swallowed hard. For an instant there was quite definitely an expression of horror on his face. Then he recovered himself. "Congratulations, sir," he said stiffly.

Sari began to weep. And through her tears, she said, "Reggie, I can't take anymore. I'm through. You got drunk and squandered your money. I don't care about the money, but I can't face life with a madman. Supposing we had children? You might sell them or give them away to someone at the club."

"Good bunch at the club,"

Reggie said weakly. "Take good care of the tots. Nothing to worry about."

Sari shook her head blindly and ran to the door.

"Wait," Reggie cried.

But the door slammed and Sari was gone.

The silence that followed was thick and oppressive. Reggie went to the windows and looked long and thoughtfully at the moon. Nothing wrong with it. Perfectly good moon. Fine color. Reggie rubbed his long vacant face. But you couldn't buy and sell it. Definitely not. He wasn't sure why, but he knew this to be so. Any fool should know that much.

When he turned Clive was regarding him gravely.

"Pretty silly business," Reggie said, trying for a light touch. He laughed, but the sound of it was hollow and false. "I guess I'm a bit of an ass, eh what?"

"Not a *bit*, sir," Olive said cryptically.

Several hours later the household had returned to something approaching normality; Reggie was sound asleep and Clive was doing the silver. It was then — at nine-thirty — that the front doorbell rang shrilly.

A lesser man that Clive might have been intimidated by the three men who stood in the corridor. Two of them were in military uniform, and the stars on

their shoulders indicated that their rank was but one shade below the chief of staff. The man between them wore a black Chesterfield overcoat and a black Homburg. He was in his early sixties, but his face was smoothly tanned and his cold gray eyes were sharp and alert. And something in the manner of the general officers made it plain that he was solely and completely in command of the group.

"Yes?" Clive said quietly, and in the voice he would have used with a door-to-door magazine salesman.

The man with the Homburg glanced at a card in his hand. "Is this the home of Reginald van Ameringen?"

"Yes, sir."

"We'd like to see him."

"Whom shall I say is calling?"

"Tell him Mr. Smith from the Department of State," said the man in the Homburg drily.

"Very well. Won't you come in, gentlemen?"

At the door Clive paused and glanced back at the three men. "I should like to tell you that Mr. van Ameringen has recently undergone a most upsetting experience," he said. "And, considering that, it might be wise if you gave me some inkling of your business."

"I would prefer to discuss that privately with Mr. Ameringen," Mr. Smith said.

Clive hesitated an instant. Then

he said, "Mr. van Ameringen is an — ah — unusual young man. And on occasion I have noticed that he takes information from me in a happier mood than he does from strangers. And therefore —"

"Now see here," one of the Generals said shortly, "we want to see him alone, and right away. So be good enough to tell him that please."

Clive looked at the General for an instant. "Very well, sir," he said softly, and left the room.

Reggie was in an extremely fragile mood as he met the three gentlemen in his drawing room. For one thing, his head was still throbbing ominously, and there was a distinct flutter in the region of his stomach. But more debilitating was his conviction that he had played for a limp-brained fool in the business of the moon. And on top of this Sari was gone forever. It was, all in all, enough to make a chap feel low.

"You're Mr. van Ameringen?" Mr. Smith asked him.

"That's right," Reggie said listlessly. He didn't care for the way the two blokes in the doormen's uniforms were peering at him — as if he were some dangerous freak.

"I understand you bought the moon this afternoon," Mr. Smith said.

Reggie started. Then he laughed weakly. "All a lot of nonsense. Nothing to it."

"This is a very grave business. Tell me this: do you know who I am?"

Reggie looked carefully at Mr. Smith and he shook his head.

"You've never seen me before? On television, or in the newspapers?"

"Sorry, old chap." Reggie felt relieved to have got away from the moon. "Don't have a television set, and I'm not sure I can read. Sometimes the old words make sense, other times they don't. How about a drink, eh?"

"I want you to listen most carefully to me," Mr. Smith said. "The United States has worked for three years to prepare and send a ship to the moon. That mission was completed this afternoon at two o'clock. The moon is inhabited by a gentle and gracious race of what, I suppose, we should call people. They were happy to welcome our emissaries, but they insisted that they — and their continent — had been sold to a person on Earth. How they learned of this, I'm not sure. But they are highly principled people — though naïve as children — and they refuse to allow to investigate their country until we have a title to the place from the original purchaser. Do you understand what this means?"

Reggie nodded slowly. "Means you don't want a drink, eh?"

"You bought the moon," Mr.

Smith said sharply. "We can't make any investigation there unless you sell it to us. I don't know how or why you bought it — but I know this; unless we can settle the matter tactfully the United States is going to appear as a ruthless predator in the eyes of the world. Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

"Why, of course," Reggie said. An atavistic cunning, perhaps inherited from his grandfather, had come to his aid. "Perfectly clear business," he said, nodding quickly. He knew that he must get away from these men. Nothing but trouble came from chatting with men who wanted to buy or sell the moon. He'd learned *that* much from today's lesson. "Tell you what," he said, "I need a drink. Won't be a minute. Pop into the old kitchen and mix-up something. Don't stir."

And with that Reggie fled from the room. It didn't take him a minute to get out the backdoor, down the stairs, and into the welcome normality of a traffic jam. Popping into a cab he settled back against the cushions with a sigh of relief. He told the driver to take him to his only sanctuary, the club. . . .

"He seems to have gone out, sir," Clive told Mr. Smith ten minutes later.

"Out?" Mr. Smith cried. For an instant his composure deserted him completely; he paced aim-

lessly while the Generals stared at Clive with their mouths open.

"Why would he do that?" Mr. Smith demanded at last. "Why in the name of Heaven would he jeopardize the security of the most important —" Mr. Smith paused and looked at Clive. "Do you know what I'm talking about?"

"Yes, sir."

"Our voices carried?" Mr. Smith asked him with a little smile.

"You describe it euphemistically, sir."

"I daresay we should have listened to you from the start," Mr. Smith said. "Your young master is — ah — unusual. Where can we find him now?"

"He'll be in the men's bar of his club."

Mr. Smith tugged at the lobe of his ear. Then he said, "Do you know who I am?"

"Yes, sir."

"You've seen my pictures in the paper? I'm not pressing the point out of vanity, I assure you. It's merely that I want you to understand the gravity of this affair."

"I think I understand," Clive said. "And it is not from the rotogravures that I know you. I had the pleasure of meeting you at Potsdam."

"What were you doing there?" one of the generals said bluntly. Clive raised his eyebrows. "I don't think Sir Winston would

care for me to say. Not yet at any rate."

"Now listen," Mr. Smith said. "We're in a perilous mess. Our problem is to get your young master to sell us the moon. What do you suggest we do?"

"He is in a highly nervous state," Clive said thoughtfully. "I think our best chance would be to work through his erstwhile fiancee. She has a remarkably calming effect on him.

"Well, get in touch with her then."

"But another problem presents itself," Clive said judicially. "The master surely won't leave the men's bar, and his fiancee certainly can't get into the men's bar."

"Why that's nonsense," Mr. Smith said. "They'll make an exception under these circumstances. Where's your phone?"

"In the foyer, sir. But I'm not too sanguine about the matter. It would be most unusual for a woman to enter the men's bar."

"We'll see about that," Mr. Smith said grimly.

He got the club's number from Clive and was on the phone for a good ten minutes. When he returned to the drawing room he was pale and shaken. "They will not make an exception," he said hoarsely. "I explained that it was imperative to the safety of the country, but the idiot I talked with didn't give a tinker's damn. He was most courteous, but absolutely adamant. Claimed that half the members had strokes once when a female *cat* wandered accidentally into the men's bar from the kitchen."

"We'll have to call the White House," one of the generals said, wincing visibly.

"That might help," Clive said,



"No, No, Smithers! I said get me Rosenbaum!"

none too hopefully. "It's worth a try, at least. He's a member, after all."

At eight-thirty that same evening two stout members of Reggie's club were carried out the main entrance to waiting ambulances. A group of men in the main lounge stood clenching their drinks with trembling hands, and talking to one another in hoarse, incredulous voices.

When the unbelievable happened — when Sari walked lightly past them and disappeared into the men's lounge — a strong old codger burst into helpless tears and had to be escorted to a chair . . .

Sari found Reggie sipping a drink in mournful and solitary splendor.

"I say, what are you doing here?" he said.

"I wanted to talk to you."

"Have a drink? Kind of quiet here tonight. Usually a good bunch around. Slack season, I suppose?"

"Reggie, I was an absolute stinker about the moon."

"I thought you were a little grim," Reggie said. "Seemed like an awfully good idea though. Buy old Sari the moon." He shook his head sadly and sighed. "Not a good idea though."

"Really Reggie, I was a stinker. It was sweet to think of me."

Reggie brightened. "Very decent of you to say so," he said.

"Not mad anymore, eh?"

"No, I'm not mad, Reggie," Sari said, and kissed him on the cheek. "But I want you to sell it to some friends of mine. For just what you paid for it. Will you do that?"

Reggie looked at her closely. The dear girl had got madly off the tracks, he realized. Potty as a loon. "Anything you say," he said. This, he knew, was the time to strike. While she was completely out of her mind. "Marry me tonight?"

"Certainly, I will," she said, and kissed him on the lips.

"Let's go," he said happily. At the door of the lounge he paused and glanced about the empty room. "You've never been in here with me, have you?" he asked, struck by this coincidence. "Can't imagine why. It's a restful spot." Then he remembered that he hadn't signed his chit. "A moment, old girl," he said, and hurried to the bar.

"Check, please," he said.

"It's on the house, sir," the bartender said. "The *White House*."

"Queer business," Reggie muttered. He didn't even *know* the chap, he reflected. Well, that's how friendships started, probably. Bloke bought a bloke a drink, and pretty soon they were boon buddies. He and Ferdie would have to stop off at Washington one day.