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THE VACATION

By KARL STANLEY

Martha had not had a vacation for a long time. And she certainly rated one. So she packed her bags and and got together all the stuff she would need and kissed her husband goodbye. Then did she take a cab to the station or the airport? Of course not. She went down into the basement and closed the door.

MR. JABLONSKI always put aside a *World-Telegram* for John Chalmers. When Chalmers got off the Woodside stop of the I. B. T. he was always able to get a *News* on the stand in front of Mr. Jablonski's confectionary store, but there seldom was a *World-Telegram* to be had, so Mr. Jablonski saved that paper for him.

Mr. Jablonski was a short fat man with a constant smile and harassed eyes. He saw the tall lean figure of Chalmers darken the entrance. "How you like the weather?" he asked as he got the paper from under the counter and extended it.

Chalmers counted out the correct change and gave it to Mr. Jablonski, who tossed the coins into the cigar box he

kept for that purpose. "I don't," Chalmers said.

"Who does?" said the other. "October, and it feels like July. Let it rain or get hot or something, already. But this muggy stuff I don't like."

"Well," Chalmers said, "the boss doesn't like it either. About all we've sold the last few days have been short-sleeved sport shirts."

Mr. Jablonski said: "At least the ice cream business has been good by me. Well, see you tomorrow, Mr. Chalmers."

Chalmers walked up Roosevelt Avenue to Sixty-fourth Street, and turned left. The six-room frame house he lived in with his wife, Martha, was midway in the block. A small boy wearing a regulation-size fielder's mitt on his left hand

was coming toward Chalmers in erratic bursts of speed. The boy would run a short distance, stop, turn his head toward his left shoulder, slam his right hand into the pocket of the baseball glove and yell, "Say hey!" each time he stopped.

"Hello there, Willie Mays." Chalmers said as they came even.

"Say hey!" said the boy. "Gee, Mr. Chalmers! Wasn't that *some* catch Willie made, huhh?"

"Yes, it was, Bobby."

"I don't like those old Indians, I like the Giants, don't you?" The boy kept pounding a dirty fist into the pocket of the glove.

"Well, I'm a Yankee fan myself, Bobby. But we've got to stick with the New York teams. A matter of civic loyalty and all that, you know."

"Yeah. 'Specially a team what's got Willie Mays. Betcha I know something you don't . . ."

"H'm . . ."

"I was watching television at your house today an' I saw Mrs. Chalmers go to the kitchen an' I sneaked in an' saw . . ."

"Bobby . . . I was just thinking of Willie Mays. I wonder if when he was a little boy and went visiting people

he told everybody what he saw?"

The small boy cocked his head at the man in a sidewise look, then turned away. He kept hammering lightly at the glove. Suddenly he said, "Say hey" loudly, and ran down the street.

The man watched him for a second, smiling, then turned and continued walking toward his house. The boy turned and grinned back at him.

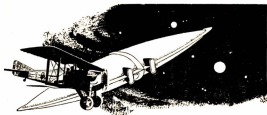
He closed the outside door behind him and called: "Martha? . . ."

He heard her reply though the words were just a blur of sound, and knew she was in the kitchen. He hung his coat neatly in the hall closet, and went into the living room. He tossed the two newspapers on the cocktail table in front of the sofa, and looked at his strap-watch. The six o'clock television newscast from Channel 4 would be on in five minutes.

His wife came into the room and he greeted her with a light yet tender kiss. The top of her head came level with his eyes.

"Hello, dear," she said, moving a step away from him. "How'd it go today?"

"Oh, the store wasn't bad—



the air-conditioning was on—but the street was a *steam* bath. And the *subway* . . .”

“I know. Louise Noren and I went shopping this morning. Even then . . . Why don't you go up and take a shower and put on some fresh clean clothes? Dinner won't be ready for twenty minutes or so.”

He looked at the combination radio-phono-TV set.

She gently shoved him toward the stairs which led to the upper floor where the two bedrooms and the bathroom were. “I'll turn the newscast on and set the tape recorder going,” she said.

When he came down, twenty minutes later, and stepped into the dining room, he found her setting a steaming bowl of food on the table. He sniffed loudly. “Smells good. What is it?”

“Goulash. That recipe from

Better Homes and Gardens I've been wanting to try. Mr. Hegel, the butcher, had some lovely stew meat, and I got some. Louise got steak for Walter.”

He sat down, still sniffing. “Sure smells good, Say, doesn't Walter ever eat anything besides steak?”

She ladled out a plate of the goulash for him. “Maybe this is salad weather,” she said as she went to her chair opposite him, “but I can't see feeding a working man greens.”

“I asked you something, dear.”

Her eyes were blank for a second. “Oh! About Walter . . . Guess not. That's all Louise ever gets for him. Different kinds, of course.”

He said, “H'm” and began to eat. He asked for a second helping, bringing a pleased smile to her face. She served

him coffee with the second plate of goulash.

She talked to him while she cleared the table of dishes and brought them into the kitchen to the electric dishwasher. "I had company this afternoon . . . Bobby came in to watch the World Series . . . He got so excited when this Willie Mays did something . . . Oh, by the way, Louise said something about Walter wanting to go to the fights tomorrow night and whether you'd like to go. And guess what? She bought another pair of shoes . . . Walter will be furious. But she laughs even while she's talking about it. They're a crazy couple, but I like them." She came back to the dining room and settled into her chair. "Well," she sighed. "That's done. May I have a cigarette, John?"

He gave her one, lit it for her, then leaned back in his chair. "I just don't know where you get the energy," he said. "After a day at the store in this weather I feel like a wet rag."

"How was business?"

"In this weather? Old Man Inersen walks around with that 'why should this happen to me' expression on his face, and snarls if you miss a sale." He swallowed the last of the coffee and lit a cigarette for

himself. "But," he continued, "the weather will change and business will pick up and he'll feel better." He was silent for a few seconds, then said, "Want anything at the store before I go in to work on my report?"

"No, dear. You go ahead, and I'll go to the Norens and keep Louise company for a while. I'll be back in time to turn *Dagnat* on."

"Say, that's right! You won't forget?"

She smiled. "No, I won't forget. Walter'll probably want to come over."

"Then you won't have to come back if he does. But not before nine . . ."

Walter Noren said, "Those Giants are the luckiest team. Chinese homers, yet."

"They're playing heads-up ball," Chalmers said.

"I suppose," Noren said. He gave Chalmers a blank look for a second, then came to life. "Hey, John! Like to go to the fights tomorrow night?"

"I think I'll buy that idea, Walt," Chalmers said. "Get ringside tickets. Maybe there will be a knockout and there's a chance I'll be able to get a picture of it."

"Gonna take the camera, huh?" Walter asked. He

went to the TV set and fiddled with the dials. He continued talking with his back to Chalmers: "I swear! I don't know where you get the time or the energy for all those hobbies? Cameras, tape recorders, do-it-yourself stuff, Man! Now me, when I get through wrestling that semi-trailer for eight hours all I want's a steak and eight hours of relaxation."

"Well," Chalmers said, smiling. "That's my relaxation."

Noren switched the TV off and returned to the sofa. "Nothing on that's good. Might as well wait for *Dagnel*." He settled his bulk into a comfortable position. "Relaxation? Is that what you call that masonry work you did on the patio wall? And that carpentry you went through in the basement? I get tired just thinking about it!"

"How about a beer to freshen up, then?" Chalmers asked.

"Now you're talkin' my language," Noren said.

They were finishing the second of the two cans of beer when Martha Chalmers returned. She looked at the TV set, then turned to the two men on the sofa. "Aren't you going to watch *Dagnel*?"

"You mean it's on?" Walter asked.

She went up to the set and switched it on. The screen came alive with movement and Jack Webb's voice came out at them. Martha said, "I said good-bye to Louise. Might as well tell Walter also, don't you think, John? Or have you told him already?"

"No, I haven't," Chalmers said, "Slipped——"

"What's this?" Noren broke in. "Martha going away?"

"—my mind entirely. Yes, she's going to visit some relatives. Be back in April, sometime. She got the invitation a while back and I thought the change would do her good."

"Gosh, yes!" Noren said. "'Bout time, too. In the ten years you've been living in this house I don't remember either of you taking a *real* vacation. It's about time, all right."

"That's what I thought, too," Chalmers said.

Noren stood up and thrust a hand out at the woman. She took it and they shook hands gravely. "Have fun, keed," he said. Then, loering stagily, "Anyone makes a pass at you, that's what it's for, Martha, fun. A vacation ain't a vacation without it."

"Oh, you," she said. She turned to her husband. "I

might as well go up and start packing."

"Need help?" he asked.

"No, You go ahead and watch the program, I won't need you for a while. 'Bye, Walter."

" 'Bye, Mrs. Chalmers. And like I said, have fun." Mrs. Chalmers left.

John Chalmers turned the TV off after Walter Noren left. He went to the stairway and called to his wife: "I'm going down to the basement for a couple of minutes, I'll carry your bags down when I come up."

When he returned, she had changed her housedress for a suit and blouse and was watching television over a cup of coffee. Chalmers watched her for a long moment, without making his presence felt. Finally he said: "I thought I heard the set."

"Just a last look," she remarked. "And a last cup of coffee."

"Going to miss them, eh?"

She smiled. "Yes, I'm going to miss all the nice people we know, too, like the Norens and the Murphys and the Prescotts. But it'll be nice seeing the children again, and all the rest. It's been ten years . . . Maybe you'll be able to go next time? That would be

nice, taking the trip together."

"Maybe, We'll see, Might as well get the bags."

He went up to the bedroom and went directly to the stand between the twin beds and took a small pill box from the drawer of the stand. He put the box in his pocket then carried the bags into the hall and set them down and returned to the bedroom. He switched the light off and went up to the window and stood staring out into the night.

The window was partly open. A cool breeze ruffled his hair. The mugginess of the past few days was suddenly gone. He puffed lazily at his cigarette and stared into the darkness. A light suddenly came to life in the Prescotts' bedroom window directly across the street. Below, a car moved off from the curb. Somewhere a radio was turned on with startling loudness, then quickly brought under control.

The blinking red and green lights of a plane coming in low to LaGuardia moved swiftly in and out of his vision. He tapped his cigarette out in the ash tray on the bed stand, and went downstairs, carrying a bag in each hand.

He set the bags down be-

side her, took the pill box from his pocket and, opening it, gave her a large green-colored capsule.

She said, "Will you get me a glass of water, dear? Makes it go down easier."

He went to the kitchen, drew a glass of water and returned with it. She took it from him, swallowed the pill and drank some of the water. "I'm ready," she said.

He took up the bags and followed her down into the basement. He had left the lights on. She looked to the far wall where there were a pile each of half a hundred tapes from the tape recording machine, a dozen thousand-foot reels of movie film, and a great many books. He set the bags down beside the other stuff.

He pressed a hidden knob and a section of the wall slid back, revealing a room about twelve feet square. Taking up almost all the space was a circular something that looked like a musical top with flattened poles. He felt for and found the recessed handle, pulled it out, turned it and a door slid downward between the metal walls of the machine.

"Will you hand me the stuff on the floor?" he said.

He placed them in lockers

set into the walls. About the books he said, "One of each. Technical stuff." He placed her bags last in the lockers.

They looked at each other. "How long does it take? Sixty days?"

"That's right. Sixty days."

She said, "My eyes are beginning to feel heavy."

"Better go in and lie down," he said. "I'll strap you in."

She looked up at him, smiling faintly. He kissed her gently. "See you in April," he said softly.

"... In April..." Her voice sounded like from far off.

He stepped out of the machine, closed the door and pushed the handle in. The surface of the machine was unbroken in line. He circled around it and pressed another knob set in the concrete of the outside wall. Once more a section slid open revealing the patio and the darkness beyond. He stood out beyond the opening. Presently there was a humming sound and the circular object moved swiftly past him, up and out of sight.

From where he stood on Earth, John Chalmers looked up at the sky, focusing his attention on a faint reddish-colored star where, in sixty days, his wife would be landing.

THE END