



DONALD A. WOLLHEIM, Editor

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Who Builds Maos Traps?

Someone left "a better mouse trap" at the City Desk—and if those reporters knew the path to the builder's door, they'd give it back to him, but fast!

By K. W. BENNETT

THE NEWSPAPER breed are reputed cynics, harder than the inner gate of Fort Knox, I've heard. But I know three who have faith. They believe in a kind of dimly seen retribution that hovers far off like summer heat lightning and strikes silently in a loaded hour of need. They saw it happen to a man named Sneeleman and Sneeleman deserved killing badly. He was a political boss with the morals of a Roman mercenary; rapacious, vengeful, a vulture of a man, that was Boss Sneeleman.

It was the middle of July and our flat was hot as Tombstone in a drought. The thermometer outside the window read a popping red 95 degrees at six o'clock in the evening. I was typewriting my hero, Griff Hol-

lingsworth, off an iceberg and past an irate polar bear in Chapter Seven of *Death Among the Icecakes*, my first stab at a newspaper fiction serial.

Singer heaved up from our spavined couch and made clogging noises with his tongue against the roof of his mouth. He'd been sleeping since noon.

"What time is it?" He tightened his tie and sighted dismally along the crease of his knee-sprung trousers.

"Eighteen hundred hours, time you were up, doing great things," I said with cheer.

"I go on duty at nine," Singer complained. He gathered strength and sat erect. "Political reporter! Never follow the life, son. They'll use you, and burn you out, and then sell you to Boss Sneeleman as a publicity hack."

"Sorrow renders me unable to speak," I said.

"It's been night shift for three

months," Singer wallowed. "Look at me. The merest husk of a man. I sleep, molelike, during the day. At night, after trying to sleep in this hagridden sweat-box, can I rest? It's back to the office to beat out crisp, bright copy."

"Sorrow renders me unable to speak," I said and reread the last page of *Death Among the Icecakes*.

"And is there sympathy?" Singer wailed. "You sit there reading about this boob Hoolingsworth—"

"Hollingsworth," I corrected.

"And when O'Doon gets back to the flat he'll talk about Agnes till I'm nearly nuts. When I get to the office I'll find out Boss Sneeleman has salted another city building contract. I hear now he's buying stock in the paper too, which means I'll be out of work and there'll be no opposition paper to fight him."

"Sorrow—" I began.

"Renders you unable to speak," Singer cut in. "What's in the icebox?"

"Well, there was a ring of salami," I baited and Singer bit with an interested look. "But it's O'Doon's day off and he took his girl on a picnic and they left with the salami," I finished.

"That girl of his. Gaah," Singer snorted. "I've never liked women named Agnes. Sneeleman's mother was named Agnes." Singer vented the vials of his wrath on Sneeleman, Agnes, and boss rule in our city impartially.

"There are also cheese, pickles, and three eggs in the icebox," I thrust in.

Singer reappeared in ten minutes balancing a fried egg sandwich, a pickle sandwich with cheese, a cheese toastwich, and a bottle of beer.

"You used all three of the eggs," I remarked.

"Your eye, as always, is clear and cold as the arctic ice," Singer admitted through the egg sandwich. He waved at a corner of the room.

"Did you see the mouse trap?"

"At last. The mouse pack is build-

ing a new nest. They used most of my pillow."

"Funny mouse trap. Some antique crackpot wandered into the office last night while I was standing near the City desk. Said he wanted a subscriber to use his mouse trap. An experiment."

I LEFT Griff Hollingsworth clawing at the face of an alabaster ice peak and examined the trap. It was between the 1890 davenport and the wall. The trap was nickel steel, had three glowing bulbs atop it, a switch box, small cage beneath, and the entire apparatus plugged into a light socket with a length of heavy rubber cable. A name plate on the switch box said: MAOS TRAP.

"That's a peculiar way to spell 'mouse'."

"Yah. M-A-O-S," Singer read over my shoulder. "I didn't notice it before. He pronounced it 'mouse' and I thought he meant M-O-U-S-E. Never heard of a maos."

"Maybe it's just a trade name."

"Hell, it was an outright gift," Singer said.

"Does it electrocute 'em?"

"Beats me," Singer shrugged. He got up and scraped crumbs carefully from his pants onto the carpet and muffled giggles came from the hall.

"O'Doon and Agnes," Singer hissed, eyes rolling in an expression of great suffering.

The door flung wide and six feet four inches of O'Doon beamed down upon us where we stood *en tableaux* over the maos trap.

"Well," boomed O'Doon. "I've brought up Agnes."

"Welcome as polio virus," Singer laughed engagingly. We scooped the old magazines and egg cartons from the couch deftly and waited. O'Doon turned to face the door and Agnes entered the room on the heels of a great silence.

Agnes refuses to speak to Singer

and me on the ground that we are newspapermen, ergo, immoral wastrels. The fact that O'Doon is also a newspaperman adds a touch of mystery to her conclusion. But Agnes is above feeble logic and she swept in like a veritable tidal wave of righteousness engulfing the evil men.

"Good evening, Agnes," said Singer. "It's a pity you came just now. Ben was going to administer my morphine. I suffer with glanders." He grimaced with sad and noble courage.

"I—I can't do it, Singer," I groaned in my best Little Theater style. "The screams, those awful screams—"

Singer smiled gently. "We must all be brave, Ben, mustn't we?"

Agnes continued to stare at an upper corner of the room and the temperature faltered and dropped.

"Don't you two want to eat out?" O'Doon inquired. "Agnes and I are having a little snack here and then going to a movie."

"No eggs," I pointed out. "Singer just ate 'em."

O'Doon was bitter. "You're bluffing," he said but we stared back with level and honest eyes.

"You did this apurpose. You did this to spite Agnes," O'Doon bellowed and O'Doon has a respectable bellow, and Agnes continued frosting the atmosphere.

Singer finally brought an egg noodle roll from Schwartz's delicatessen and Agnes and O'Doon ate alone in the kitchen. Singer went downtown, the lovebirds drifted movieward flecking bits of egg noodle roll from their dentures, and I returned to *Death Among the Icecakes*.

I was painting the charms of Rita, my dark-eyed heroine, in glowing adjectives when rattling sounds came from the davenport and I retrieved Singer's maos trap and examined the cage attachment.

I returned to my butt-scarred desk and my thinning hairs were standing individually on end, but I took a

draught at the beer bottle and set the maos trap beneath the harsh light of the desk lamp.

The maos trap had caught something but it wasn't a mouse. The bright-gleaming steel cage was occupied by a scaly, small beastie eight inches in length, colored purple, and it was watching me with intent, beady, green eyes. Three of them.

Retrieving our tin bread box from the kitchen, I dumped the beastie into its cockroach-ridden depth and reset our trap.

AT 11 P.M. SINGER charged into the flat, his wildly fevered eye portending flood, fire, or a juicy murder case.

"This is a news break, Ben," announced Singer and helped himself to my pot of coffee. "Shooting down in the 1700 block of Anthony Avenue. A witness identified the gungsel as Whitey Behr. The victim was—hang on to your upper—Attorney Anderson."

I whistled appreciatively for a variety of reasons. These were, briefly: Whitey Behr was a snowbird, a narcotics user; Whitey would probably spill any number of beans if held in custody for any length of time; Whitey was rumored currently employed by Boss Sneeleman; and lastly, Attorney Anderson had begun an investigation of voting records in Boss Sneeleman's home precincts.

"Rest your feet. And look what your trap caught."

Singer pulled another chair to the desk and we peered into the tin bread box at the three-eyed monster. It eyed us back suspiciously with all three eyes. Singer made gulping noises, and I thought maybe I should have prepared him. He retreated to the davenport and dropped on the relic with a shock that brought another spring up through the cushion waving a triumphant wad of horsehair.

"What is it? A visiting relative?"

"It must be a *maos*. It was in your *maos* trap."

The monster squeaked and peeked over the rim of the bread box at us.

"What will we do with it?" Singer inquired. He got up and closed the bread box lid gently.

"Why not give it to Agnes? They'd be a great pair of kids."

"Even Agnes doesn't deserve this."

"Maybe we could send Sneeelman a pair—" I started to say but Sneeelman's name brought Singer erect as a warhorse who smelleth the battle from afar, ha, ha.

"Keep coffee on. This is an all-night job."

He slammed on his hat and moved out like a cub reporter in a Grade B movie. Singer dearly loves to dramatize the newspaper business, but he's a cracking good reporter.

At 11:30 O'Doon returned from the movie, by which time our *maos* trap had produced another nightmare, a pea-green and chartreuse number with one eye and more teeth than a dental supply house. O'Doon poured himself a cup of coffee and returned the pot to the electric plate atop my desk. He peered absently into the bread box and Three-eyes peeked back and chirped.

O'Doon's mouthful of coffee went across the room in a cloud of brown vapor. O'Doon vented a low scream of despair and flung himself on the couch and the apartment shook. It was like an elephant falling down. His father having been a man troubled with peculiar alcoholic visions, the current O'Doon secretly fears the ailment is hereditary.

"Relax, you hulk. It's only a *maos*."

O'Doon, as his name suggests, is of a dark and mystic Irish line and has great respect for the occult and weird. He rose from the couch and freed himself carefully from the spring that stuck through.

"You—you see that thing in our bread box?"

"Solid as your head," I rejoined brightly.

O'Doon approached the bread box and examined the beasties and spotted One-eye crouching in another corner of the box. One-eye was inclined to be a bit distant. With the set of fangs he sported it was just as well.

O'Doon refilled his coffee cup and returned to the couch.

"Where are they coming from?"

"Some old professor designed a *maos*, M-A-O-S, trap that picks them out of thin air." I went on pecking at the saga of Griff Hollingsworth, who was bartering with a wily Eskimo shaman.

O'Doon nodded reasonably. "This ancient gives Singer the trap. I can see it all perfect. Singer sees no cost is involved. Singer thanks old man and comes home all enthusiastic. Nothing draws Singer like an easy buck."

"You don't have that failing, I've noted."

"Well," O'Doon beamed modestly. "Perhaps I'm just too generous for my own good."

"Oh, I wouldn't worry. You haven't paid for the Sunday papers in five weeks."

O'Doon scowled in apparent thought. "That's funny. I must not have been around."

This is a type of self-deceit practiced often by O'Doon. On Sunday mornings he is not only around but charging into the hall at the jingle of a coin. He snatches the comic section from Singer or me as we stand paying the newsie. We have come to expect this, as O'Doon is a photographer and the members of that craft are notoriously blighted and warped.

O'DOON HEAVED up from the couch, vanished into his bedroom, and returned with his treasured second-hand Leica. He opened up the lens and began shooting closeups of Three-eyes looking at us over the

bread box rim. O'Doon stopped and scratched his chin.

"Wonder what they eat," he said.

"There's a bottle of milk in the ice-box."

O'Doon went into the kitchen and returned with a saucer of milk. He lowered the saucer cautiously into the breadbox on a sling he made with a folded newspaper.

Bubbling sounds came from the box and O'Doon smiled beatifically.

"They like the stuff. You just got to know how to treat animals."

He sank ponderously to the couch and was silent, possibly contemplating his skill with animals, then, "Did you hear more on the Anderson-Behr shooting?"

"Singer is on the story. He was up here groaning earlier," I told him.

"There's a new development. That witness they had—he's disappeared."

"From police custody?"

"Story is he went across the street to a drugstore for cigarettes. Desk sergeant sent a patrolman with him. Both of them vanished. Funny, huh?"

"Sneeelman's machine is working. When and if this case is in a court, doughnuts'll get dollars Behr will be out of jail somehow and living in Mexico. Nothing left to prosecute."

"I figure something went wrong to begin with," said O'Doon, who has occasional flashes of intellect. "Sneeelman's boys are careful. This Whitey Behr must have been loaded with hop, knew Sneeelman was worried about Anderson, and Whitey decided to do the big boss a favor. Now Sneeelman is going to have to cover up for Whitey."

"Looks like he already has, if the prosecution witness is out of circulation," I stuck in.

O'Doon yawned. "Well, you can sit up and check Singer in. I'm going to get some sleep. That sadist on City desk will probably call me out for some pix during the night."

The vigorous sounds of his sleep-

ing, an uproar reminiscent of a whirling saw blade hitting a pine knot, were interrupted less than twenty minutes after he'd vanished into his room. The paper needed more cameramen out and that meant O'Doon. Sneeelman was making a statement for the City Council at his home. The sound of O'Doon's Gaelic wrath faded down the stairs and I returned to Griff Hollingsworth. A wolf pack had Griff ringed in and he had only three shells in his thutty-thutty.

At 12:15 Singer stamped up our stairs and collapsed on the couch.

"They're going to swing it!" He deflated after that laconic statement.

"O'Doon is going up to the Sneeelman mansion. The Boss is making some kind of statement."

"I know. Hearts and flowers." Singer poured himself a cup of coffee and made clucking sounds into the bread box. Three-eyes chirped back and One-eye grunted.

"He grunted," Singer enthused. "Maybe he's just shy. Yeah, Sneeelman is going to make a statement. Bright lads say Sneeelman's put the heat on his own crowd. No trial for Whitey Behr if he can stop it."

"The lousy grafter. The deal makes him a murderer. Sneeelman would scare a man-eating octopus."

Singer nodded. "I knew there was something he reminded me of."

"You're on your way to the Sneeelman place now?"

"Yep," said Singer. He looked at the maos trap. We looked at each other.

"If we'd just take off the cage door—" said Singer.

"And set the trap where it wouldn't be noticed," I added.

SINGER unplugged the maos trap and tramped out of hearing down the stairs with the bright glittering little cage beneath his coat.

Singer and O'Doon came grumbling upstairs again at 1:30 a.m.

and repeated the vicious, sad story. Sneeleman and his pirates were crawling from under. The witness had been found dead. Whitey Behr made a sensational escape while being taken from one station house to another. The affair was raw, but Sneeleman was pouring on oil and his administration henchmen were backing him. It was agreed that when the smoke drifted away, the Boss would again be riding single saddle over our city.

O'Doon still had his big 4x5 Graphic. We sat in the flat, the three of us, drinking coffee, feeding One-eye and Three-eyes, and doing a post mortem probe into the affaire Behr-Sneeleman-Anderson.

"Did you plant the maos trap at Sneeleman's?"

"Right in the big boy's bedroom. He'll wake up in a zoologist's nightmare."

"I can see his face when he wakes up. Row of purple lizards staring at him from the foot of the bed."

"Is the trap cage open—can the lizards get out?" The possibilities were beginning to stir O'Doon.

"Under his bed, and it's plugged in," Singer grinned.

"It's good for laughs, but it's not right." O'Doon thought heavily with a coffee cup balanced on one knee and his big chin supported by a ham-sized hand. "Two, maybe three, good men died tonight. Sneeleman murdered them. Just like he fired the shots himself."

"What's uglier, he'll be covered somehow. A thing like that will go on living when honest men have died." That was Singer and he was mad.

O'Doon sermonized in solemn, thunderous tones on Fate. It's one of his conversational set pieces, sort of a big fireworks display that's hidden by the dark until somebody touches a match and then it blazes up. That a kind of retribution was building up and would descend on Sneeleman in a sudden deluge, was his theme.

We guess that O'Doon was right. The early morning editions bannered a new story. Investigators had located some kind of short-circuited, fused electrical device under Sneeleman's empty bed at the Boss' home. The thing had burned itself up and the pungent smoke aroused servants.

It was thought Whitey Behr had been hiding in Sneeleman's home since the thug had escaped police custody. The big story the black screaming headlines were telling us was that Whitey Behr and Sneeleman were dead. *They'd been killed and partially eaten by an inexplicable swarm of purple lizards.*

Sometimes nights we talk about the Sneeleman story over our beers. And we still wonder, O'Doon and Singer and I. Who builds maos traps? And why?