

There but for Grace

BY
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Illustrated by Frederic Mizen

There was growing within him a sudden startling connection between what he was saying and those people out in the audience.



Harve Twitler finds a wife can transform even a dissatisfied bank clerk

HARVE TWITLER sat at his desk in the loan department of the First National Bank, disconsolately filling out the loan form for one John Prokos.

Two hundred fifty dollars, it seemed, was going into John Prokos's massive jaw. One-fourth of a grand in bridge-work. Harve scowled at the "Smile" plaque mocking him from his desk. Glancing at the red-faced giant with the overhanging cowlick, he said:

"Everything is in order, Mr. Prokos. Just go to the cashier's window at the left."

The man's eyes brightened, taking on that gleam of achievement Harve had seen often in the eyes of a client whose loan had been O. K'd.

Harve patted his blond hair, tugged at his reddish mustache and was about to give himself up to doleful meditation of the vagaries of a borrowing public when the mahogany gate squeakingly ushered in a new client.

"What can I do for you?" he asked, inwardly cringing in anticipation of the gate's closing squeak.

"Just want to pay up the loan on my furniture so I can sell the stuff before I leave," the man said breezily.

"Oh, you're leaving town?" Harve asked politely. "Won't you sit down?"

"Yeh, joined up, ten days to get things in shape."

Harve faced the man with new interest. Here was a fellow who looked forty, and he'd got in. He took his name, sent the clerk for the file, and asked, "Have any trouble passing the physical?"

"No, sailed right through."

"What branch?"

"Marines, toughest of the lot." The man's voice boomed with satisfaction.

"No family?" Harve asked, trying to keep his tone casual.

"Only the little woman. . . . Raised Cain at first, objected to selling the car and furniture. O. K. now." He was grinning as if still savoring the flavor of domestic victory.

Harve's thoughts bounced along the upheaval such an announcement would raise in his own household. But, of course, the setup was different. He could think, for instance, of no more flagrant inconsistency than referring to his Grace as the "little woman." Feeling a twinge of guilt at this unprecedented spurt of disloyalty, he reassured himself that Grace was a good wife and the mother of two fine children.

The girl brought the papers and he turned to them, remarking, "Here it is—balance \$200."

"Yes, sir, and I might not have joined up if it wasn't for that furniture," the man said, leaning far over toward Harve. "I'm a mechanic, and I get dirty and greasy. At night there's that blond furniture with the pink stuff on it, and that damn blue carpet . . . like a movie dame's boodwar. Do I get to sit down and read the paper? No, first I got to go to the basement, take a shower, and change clothes. At home we had fumed oak with leather seats. Fumed oak is good furniture. The marines won't fuss about me sitting around messed up a little, and Mabel is being brave. I ain't telling her what I told you until we start buying furniture again—fumed oak."

"And you had no trouble about your age?" Harve questioned.

"Nope, I'm over 38, but they need men," he said, expanding his decklike chest.

Harve handed him the contract. "The cashier will give you your receipt. Good luck to you."

As he watched the man walk away, envy swept over Harve. His thoughts swung past the squeaking gate, past the cashier's cage to a coral beach. Marines stalking boldly . . . bayonets fixed. Did a bayonet make a scrunching sound against bone? He shivered delightfully. He had been born for excitement. He of the roving spirit should not have been shackled by routine.

Maybe he should have stayed on the stage, though the one-night-stand stock companies, the kind that had flourished in Kansas and the Dakotas, had died about the time Grace had taken him out of it. Somehow meeting Grace that spring in River-ton had changed the whole situation. Before the next season

opened he was married and in the bank.

On the trolley going home, the coral beach receded. The bayonet did an alley-oop and, as he walked up the steps of his bungalow, the whole fascinating marine-peopled reverie went chimerical before the immediate pleasant contemplation of the evening paper and one of Grace's dinners.

Phyllis, his seven-year-old daughter, grabbed him about one leg as he came in. "Daddy, Daddy, can I have a yo-yo? Daddy, they're only fifteen cents."

Easing himself into the red chair, he took her hand, still plump with baby softness. Her rosy, fair cheeks, the blond hair in two stout braids, made her look like some erstwhile *mädchen*. Always she made him feel warmly grateful for having fathered her.

"You've no finesse, baby, grabbing me and demanding money. No snuggle, no kiss, no welcome for your old dad."

She kissed him a tough little bruising kiss, and holding out her hand, grabbed the money.

Going into the kitchen, he called, "Hello, dear," to Grace, who was whipping something in a bowl. He kissed her plump flushed cheek, and got a spatter of salad oil on his tie and forehead.

"You're early," she said, without looking up.

He wiped his tie vigorously with a tea towel, considering the blandness of oil without condiments, and the blandness of kisses that shared interest with combination salad.

What the devil is wrong with me? he chastised himself, then, "Can I help?" Going by the oven door, he sniffed the savory odors of baked hash and tea muffins. "Swell," he said.

"It's a new muffin recipe," she said cheerily. Grace was short and too plump, but there was about her a soft prettiness accented by the deep blue of her eyes and an abundance of soft brown hair. She had a crisp white apron over her gay print dress.

They waited dinner for Eugene, as almost every night throughout the year they waited for the ever pressing affairs of the twelve-year-old to be finished off. He came in just as they had finally seated themselves, yelled "Hi" and swung into his chair.

Harve said, "Look at your hands." He said the same thing each evening.

The boy spread his hands out, palms down, saying, "Gosh, Dad, that's clean dirt. That's just dust—just plain dust. We dip into it so we can hold the bat better."

"I'm not interested in where it came from. Get rid of it." This was one occasion when Harve's usually mild voice took on the timbre of one of the more virile characters of an almost forgotten dramatic repertoire, and its effect on the family was a startled alert.

Eugene got up, knocking over his chair. He righted it, saying, "Oke, I'll wash 'em, but they ain't germey."

At times, Harve reflected, Eugene's joints seemed to be definitely unhinged.

"Daddy, do we just have to sit here while he cleans up?" Phyllis wailed, putting her yo-yo carefully by her glass.

Harve began to serve.

Dinner ended, Harve sank into a living-room chair to read. Eugene came down dressed in Boy Scout uniform, his arms full of assorted metal objects.

"For the metal drive," he said, answering his father's unspoken question. "Got something you want to send? Nothin's too little. How about those medals, Dad, ya got for speaking or something?"

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HOUSEHOLD

JULY

1944

VOLUME 48

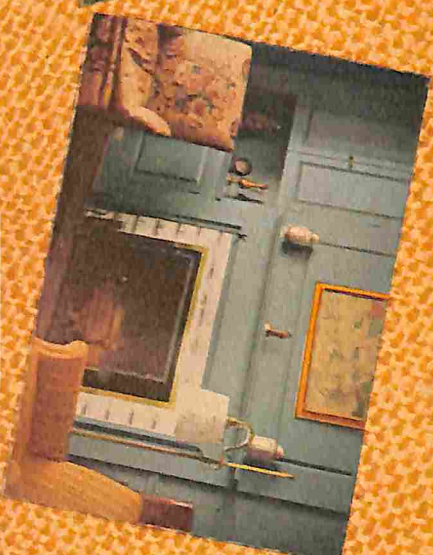
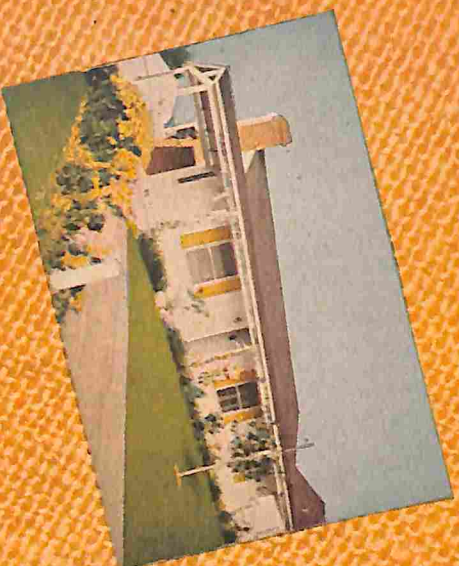
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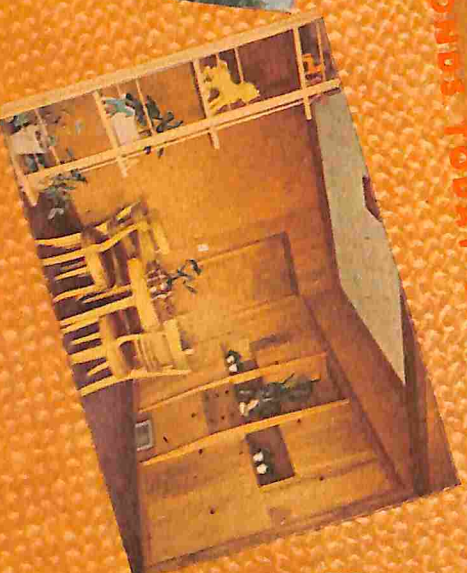
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