

This was the real thing. Barfield was gloriously sure of that. Not just a dream, like it had been a thousand times before. This time he was really astride a powerful white stallion, drawing looks of admiration, fear, and respect from hundreds of upturned faces as he rode through Central Park.

It couldn't be a dream, because he never thought to wonder about that when he was dreaming. And a dream wasn't this real.

Just to make sure, he studied the reins gripped lightly in his right hand. Genuine leather, all right, with blood-red rubies attached in little square silver mountings that were pointy at the corners. Certainly no dream contained detailed stuff like that.

Was he going to fall off? Not in a hundred years! The dream intensifier had finally worked, and simply by dreaming of riding, he had learned to ride.

A family of picnickers scattered in all directions as he galloped his horse over their spread cloth. He roared with laughter to see them jump, their faces pale with terror. He towered over them for a moment, then rode on...

... Into a swarm of high-society chicks having a lawn party. He picked a choice one and swept her up in front of him.

"Barfield!" she exclaimed, recognizing him.

"Yeah." He knew who she was, too—Jacqueline Onassis' granddaughter—but he wasn't going to give her the pleasure of letting her know he knew.

He stood in the stirrups and quickly had his satisfaction with her. Then he let her slide from the horse to sprawl panting and indecent on the grass.

His horse was now climbing a hill, going up fast in powerful hinges. All the world lay below him, below the magnificent Barfield.

They topped the hill crest. The down slope on the other side was dizzyingly steep. Barfield gasped and cringed back. His left foot lost the stirrup and ...

... He was falling!

"Ugh!" he grunted as his body gave a jerk. He opened his eyes and gazed dully at the captive across the room for a moment.

"Something wrong?" the man asked in that annoyingly confident voice of his.

"I must've dozed off," said Barfield.

He stood up, feeling as short, dumpy, and ineffectual as he knew he looked, and walked over to check the captive's cuffs and blindfold.

"We haven't been properly introduced," the man said pleasantly. "My name's Paxton . . . G. Donald Paxton."

"Never mind the chitchat, Body," Barfield growled. Usually a captive would show fear when addressed as "Body," but this guy didn't turn a hair.

He saw the cuffs were still tight on wrists and ankles, and returned to his chair, his mind returning to his dream. Funny how real it had seemed, and how sure he had been of it. Looks like that high-society party would have been a dead giveaway. Everybody knew upper-crust chicks didn't fool around in places like Central Park. Besides, there'd been something on the tube about that girl dreaming herself up a judo black belt. Nobody was going to grab *her* up on a horse and get away with it.

But it had been a good dream—all but the last part.

"I hate to be a nuisance," said Paxton, "but I need to go to the bathroom."

Barfield got up. "No sweat, Body." He got out his keys and removed the cuffs from Paxton's ankles. "Stand up." Paxton stood, and Barfield guided him into the bathroom, where he refastened his ankles and freed his wrists.

"I'm gonna close the door, and then you can take off the blindfold," he instructed. "When you're through, put the blindfold back on and call me. Try something funny, and there ain't enough ransom in the bank to keep you alive. Got it?"

"Yes. Thanks very much, Friend," said Paxton.

Barfield thought a few cuss words. What kind of nut was this guy, Paxton? Acting like he didn't have a care in the world, which was no way for a kidnap victim to act.

Presently Paxton called him, and Barfield opened the door and returned the man to his seat.

When they were settled down Barfield said, "You don't catch on, do you, Body? You stand a good chance of getting conked. You dig that?"

"Of course," Paxton nodded, cheerful as ever. "As an attorney, I'm quite familiar with the kidnap racket and its practices. I believe the general rule is to kill one out of four victims, to keep the public aware you mean business."

"One out of three," Barfield corrected, grimly. If Paxton had said one out of three, he would have replied one out of two. But again the victim showed no sign of intimidation. "You figure the odds are in your favor, huh, Body?"

Paxton shrugged. "If not, everybody's got to die some time, Friend," he replied with a mild chuckle.

"Well, if I don't hear soon that the payoff's bein' made, your time's comin' pretty damn soon," Barfield glowered. He looked at his watch and blinked. Five hours had passed since Stony Stan and the other guys had brought Paxton in. He ought to have heard from Stony long before now.

Paxton seemed to realize that. "I'm afraid I have enemies as well as friends," he said. "That could delay the payoff."

"Friends?" grunted Barfield. "What about your family?"

"No family. The ransom will be collected from my friends, or business associates might be more accurate."

Barfield frowned. Stony Stan never told him more than he had to know about a job, which was damn near nothing. Barfield's job was to baby-sit the victims, and then drive them to the release or conk-out point. So maybe this wasn't an unusual job, so far as he knew. But it seemed risky to expect a payoff from a guy's buddies instead of his relatives.

"What kind of line you in?" he asked.

"I'm an attorney, as I think I mentioned. Actually, my position is general secretary of a union."

"Big operator, huh?" glowered Barfield. "I got a hunch you're goin' to be the one out of three, Body." He stared at the blindfolded man in resentful silence for a while. A damned union boss, and Barfield couldn't even get into a union as a member!

"Which union?" he finally asked.

"American Bar Association."

That didn't win any sympathy from Barfield. He knew several barkeeps, and thought most of them were jerks.

"Your friends better come through pretty damn quick," he said.

After a silence Paxton asked, "Do you know you talk in your sleep?"

"Huh?" Barfield sat up. "What did I say?"

"It sounded as if you were talking to a horse. Were you having a dream about riding?"

"Yeah." Barfield's thoughts returned to the dream.

"It sounded like a good one, except perhaps at the end," Paxton said.

"I fell off the damn gluepot," Barfield said in injured tones. "I always do."

"I do a little riding," Paxton said modestly. "It's very pleasant exercise, don't you agree?"

"Me, I couldn't say, Body," Barfield retorted. "I can't stay on top of a damn pony."

"Oh? That's too bad. Why don't you get an intensifier and let your dreams teach you how to ride?"

"Look, I already told you," Barfield snapped, "I keep fallin' off at the end of the dream!"

"Oh, yes. That would invalidate the dream-learning procedure, wouldn't it?" Paxton said.

Barfield grunted.

"That's said to be why there are so few levitators," Paxton went on thoughtfully. "Many people have dreams of floating through the air, but the overwhelming majority of those dreams end in crash landings." He chuckled. "Of course when someone has that dream under an intensifier, the technique of levitation

becomes clear to them, but the crash at the end becomes equally realistic, and traumatic. As a result, they actually have the waking skill of levitation, but the trauma is a total block that keeps them from ever using the skill. It never occurred to me that the same condition would apply to dream-learning how to ride a horse, but I can see now why it might. Effortless motion is involved in both—suddenly becoming very effortful."

"How come a mouthpiece knows so much about dream-learnin'?" Barfield demanded.

"An attorney has to know a little about a lot of things," replied Paxton. "I've never used dream-learning myself—never felt the need for it, really—but I have several acquaintances in the dream-psychology field, and have discussed the subject with them frequently. Just a couple of weeks ago—"

Paxton's voice trailed off. Barfield was thinking of Stony Stan, who could levitate. That ability of the gang's chief was very useful in pulling kidnappings. In fact, it was their secret of success. But just the same, Barfield cherished the hope that some day Stan would lose control and fall to the ground and burst open like a rotten apple. That would be fun to see happen. If what this guy Paxton was saying was right, Stan had never dreamed of falling, didn't know the helpless terror of it, and the damn bossy bastard had it coming to him.

Barfield blinked suspiciously. "Yeah? What about two weeks ago?"

"I beg your pardon?" Paxton smiled brightly.

"You said something about two weeks ago, and then shut up. What is it?"

"Oh, nothing. I merely decided I was boring you with all my chatter about dream-psychology."

"The hell you say," growled Barfield. "You're tryin' to hold some-thin' out on me! Start talkin', Body, or I'll konk you right now!"

"Well . . . it was just something this acquaintance was telling me about recent research on the fall-syndrome. Really, Friend, I don't think you want to hear this."

"Keep talkin'," Barfield commanded. He wasn't sure he wanted to hear any more about falling, either, but making victims obey him was one of the pleasant things being in this racket.

"If you insist," Paxton shrugged. "He said they've discovered the cause of the fall-syndrome."

Barfield started. "Is that the straight stuff?" he demanded.

"Oh, yes. The man I'm speaking about is one of the top experts in the field. I'm sure he was right."

"I mean are you *givin'* it to *me* straight?" yelled Barfield in exasperation.

"I have a precise memory of the conversation," replied Paxton. "An attorney has to have a—"

"I mean, are you tellin' me the truth?" hissed Barfield.

"Oh. Yes, of course. Sorry I didn't catch your meaning sooner, Friend."

Barfield sat back in his chair. He was inclined to believe this guy. "What does cause it?"

"The fall-syndrome? Fear . . . but oddly enough, not usually fear of falling. That's why it stumped the dream-learning specialists for so long. It can be fear of almost anything, but is usually a realistic fear, based on feelings of guilt."

"Hah! I ain't afraid of anything! Except fallin'!"

"Well, it can be fear of falling, of course," said Paxton, "but is usually something else. I suppose, then, you have a fear of high places—acrophobia, it's called."

"Hell, no," grunted Barfield. Paxton paused, looking surprised. "You're sure of that?"

"Sure I'm sure!"

"Well . . . that doesn't jibe with a fear of falling," Paxton murmured, as if to himself. "So it must be . . . well . . . never mind."

"Must be what, Body?" Barfield yelled, rising and walking forward to stand menacingly over the captive.

"It must be a fear you can't let yourself know about," said Paxton rapidly, cowering.

"Yeah? And what's that?"

"I have no way of knowing, Friend," Paxton babbled. "Possibly a man in your . . . your profession would have a fear of getting caught. Other than that, I honestly don't know."

"Me afraid of the cops! Haw!" Barfield strode away to stand close to the phone. He wished it would

ring and Stan would tell him the job was going according to schedule. Had something happened?

He decided he needed a drink. When he picked up the bottle he noticed his hand was shaking. He stared at it.

Hell. Paxton was right.

"Anybody who ain't in with the law is scared of gettin' caught," he said defensively, "but that ain't one of them phobia things. It's just common sense! I got good reasons to be scared of cops!"

Paxton brightened. "Why, certainly. That's it, then. This acquaintance said it usually would be a realistic fear, one well-justified by the person's circumstances."

"But Stan . . ." Barfield hesitated. "This guy I know who can levitate. The cops would like to get the goods on him, too. How come he don't fall?"

"I'm really not an expert in all this, Friend. But I would suppose the person you speak of is insensitive. Others might consider him extremely brave, but the truth could be that he is insensitive to fear, even when being afraid is quite sensible."

"Yeah, that's him, all right," mumbled Barfield.

"A dangerous man to the people around him."

"Yeah?" Barfield looked up. "Why?"

"Because, being without fear, he might take risks that endanger others as well as himself."

Barfield looked at his watch.

Damn that Stony Stan, anyway! If something had gone wrong with the job, to hold up the action this long, why didn't he phone and call it off? Stan was gambling, just like Paxton said. But would Stan get caught if something went wrong? Oh, no, not him, the damned levitator! He would sail away, leaving Barfield and the other guys to take the rap!

The sensible thing to do was scam out of this place right now. Just leave Paxton where he was. Damn if that wasn't exactly what he was going to do!

With the decision made, Barfield felt better, and his mind turned again to the talk about the fall-syndrome.

"A good shrink could get rid of a guy's fear, and then he wouldn't fall no more in his dreams. Right?"

Paxton shook his head. "No. That's why I didn't want to talk about all this. A psychoanalyst can't help."

"Why the hell not?"

"Because they deal with irrational responses, and often can relieve them. But when a fear is rational, based on a clear recognition of a real danger, an analyst can do nothing."

Barfield's shoulders drooped. There went his hope of ever sitting tall on a horse in real life. For a little while this Paxton guy had really had him stirred up. Right now, the thing to do was lam out of here fast while he had the opportunity.

"The only solution," Paxton was saying, "would be to remove the need to feel fear, to change one's actual circumstances so as to eliminate—"

At the door, Barfield turned and came back. "What are you mumblin' about, Body?"

"Nothing you would find helpful, I'm sorry to say. For you to get rid of your fear of the police, it would be necessary for you to clear yourself with them. I'm sure you find that out of the question."

"I don't find nothin' out of the question!" Barfield stormed.

"You mean you'd have the nerve to give yourself up, turn state's-evidence against your associates, and depend upon the gratitude of the police and perhaps the goodwill of certain highly-placed individuals such as myself? Really, my friend, I can't buy that. Not with your fear of the police."

There was a drawn-out silence. "You say you'd pull strings for me?" asked Barfield.

"Certainly. That would be the least I could do."

Barfield's hands were shaking so much he could hardly unlock the cuffs on Paxton's wrists and ankles, but he ignored the shaking with grim determination. He had to do this, or his dream would never come true.

"O.K., Bod . . . uh, Mr. Paxton, let's go talk to the cops," he quavered.

Amid the bustle of the police station, the interrogation of Barfield, the hurried and successful efforts to round up Stony Stan and the rest of the gang, almost two hours passed before Paxton and his younger law partner, Fred Jarman, could have a quiet word together. They were alone in the captain's office, Paxton having a cup of the captain's coffee.

"I hope I handled things right, Don," Jarman said, a trifle uneasily. "I hated to put you in increased danger by holding back on the ransom, but knowing you I assumed that was what you wanted—time to handle the situation yourself."

"You did exactly right, Fred," Paxton assured him. "I admit it was touch and go with Barfield for a while. I had to lie a couple of times, telling him I've never used dream-learning, and promising to pull strings for him. Barfield is quite stupid, you know, and a stupid man is often harder to deal with than an intelligent man." He chuckled. "The poor dope is so uninformed that he didn't even know who I was."

"He didn't know you're presidential timber?"

Paxton shook his head.

"That's why I'm grateful, Fred," he said, "that you handled things the way you did from your end. The public image of a kidnap victim—helpless, intimidated—is inappropriate for a man who aspires to a position of high leadership. A leader must be viewed as a person who can control any situation that confronts him. That's what the public wants."

"But not from on top of a horse," grinned Jarman.

"Never from on top of a horse," said Paxton. "That's something else I lied to Barfield about. I said I rode. Can you imagine what the press would do with a photo of me sitting tall in a saddle?"

"I can see the caption now: 'The Modern Napoleon'," snickered Jarman.

"Or some even less-fondly remembered dictator," Paxton said.

"Well, I'm glad it's all over, Don, and you're safe," Jarman said, becoming serious. "This business gave me a very trying afternoon."

"I'm glad to know my partner appreciates me," Paxton smiled, sipping his coffee.

"I do," said Jarman. "I'd love to have your ability . . . to talk anybody into anything—" He halted and glanced about uncomfortably.

"It's O.K., Fred. This office isn't bugged," said Paxton.

"Good. What I started to say is, that while I don't have the ability to talk anybody into anything, it's great to have a partner who can."

Paxton nodded slowly. "Dream-learning isn't a democratic process, Fred. First, you have to have the dream . . . repeatedly. Otherwise, there's nothing to work with. And nobody can choose the subject matter of his dreams. It's a matter of luck, essentially. I was fortunate enough to have grown up having my dreams of influencing people with my spoken words, and—"

He fell silent as the door opened and the police captain entered. The officer wore a concerned expression.

"How are things going, Captain?" asked Paxton.

"Generally O.K.," the officer replied. "I'm wondering if there's going to be a problem later on, though."

"Oh? What's that?"

"Barfield insists that you're going to pressure the courts into turning him loose. I want to know where we stand with you, Mr. Paxton."

Paxton shrugged. "I'm afraid I did promise to pull strings for him, Captain. If I hadn't, I probably wouldn't have remained alive to bring the Stony Stan gang to justice."

The officer eyed him grimly. "Then you're going to get him off," he said.

Paxton stared down at his feet, looking torn with indecision. Suddenly he looked up at the policeman.

"No, Captain," he snapped. "Barfield's all yours. When it comes to a choice between breaking my word to a criminal, or compromising the judicial procedures of our country, my course is clear."

The police captain beamed approval at him. "Thanks, Mr. Paxton. I'll see to it that this stays out of the press, of course." He hurried out of the office.

"You handled that beautifully, Don," said Jarman as they rose to leave.

"Of course," said Paxton.