

## CONVERSATIONS WITH MY KNEES

by RON GOULART

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What do you mean, you don't believe the title means what it says?

The side effects of my knee replacement procedure were not what I'd expected. They included the termination of my marriage to a once nationally popular folksinger, a fling with a redheaded young woman I'd initially thought was just a night nurse, the intrusion into my life of spies and secret agents of several nations, and my conversion, at the age of sixty-one, into what I can only describe as some sort of superhero.

My knees started talking to me the second day I was back home in my Marin County home after my stay at the Slesinger Foundation Clinic over in San Rafael. I was sitting in our beam-ceilinged living room, looking down toward San Francisco Bay far below. As usual, there were quite a few bright sailboats wandering around down there. My wife had propped two fat paisley pillows behind my back and draped a Navajo rug over the lower part of me before driving to a rehearsal studio in Sausalito.

You've probably heard of her. Mavis Scattergood. Until about seven years ago she and two fellows were the Scattergood Singers, very successful singers of liberal folk tunes who came damn close to winning a Grammy. Mavis had recently rounded up two new fellows and was hoping to revive the Scattergood Singers. Only snag was Edmond Scully, the new banjo player, who felt the group should be called Edmond, Fred and Mavis. My name, by the way, is Frank Whitney, and I'm a retired advertising agency art director.

"Don't worry about falling down while you're home alone, dear," said a motherly voice.

Though I had the impression the voice was coming from the vicinity of my left knee, I glanced around the big sunlit room. There was nobody to be seen.

"Imagine your wife abandoning you, and you only two days out of surgery."

Leaning forward on our tangerine-colored sofa, I tugged off the red, gold, and yellow blanket so I could scrutinize my knees.

“What you really ought to be worrying about, pal,” said my right knee through my wrinkled denim slacks, “is what your dumpy missus is really doing in Sausalito with Edmond and Fred. Especially Edmond, who’s a real stud but, truth to tell, a lousy banjo picker.”

The motherly voice of my other knee said, “Now don’t get poor Frank all riled up. A wayward wife isn’t the major problem he has to—”

“Pardon me,” I put in, reaching toward the blond coffee table for my cell phone. “I’d best call the Slesinger to report these hallucinations.”

“Relax, dimbulb,” advised my right knee. “You ain’t goofy. What they implanted, unbeknownst to you, chum, are some very state-of-the-art artificial knees. Or rather not *they* but Dr. Wallace Dowling.”

“Dowling?” I frowned, putting the phone down. “He’s not my physician.”

“Were you awake during the operation, pal?”

“Well, no, but—”

“Dowling took over after you shuffled off to dreamland.”

“Dr. Dowling is a very nice man,” said my left knee. “We’re starting to get very worried about—”

“Button your yap, sister. We’ll get to that in—”

“Wait now,” I said, frowning. “They mentioned Dowling on *Wake Up, Marin* this morning, didn’t they?” It hadn’t taken me long to get used to my unusual knees. Here I was having a conversation with them already.

“That they did, kiddo. The doc vanished last night, did a bunk, vamoosed.”

“Come now, the poor man was obviously abducted.”

I cleared my throat. “It’s too bad about Dr. Dowling,” I admitted. “However, I’m much more interested in why my replacement knees can talk. There sure as hell wasn’t anything about that in the brochure they—”

“All in good time,” my motherly knee told me. “First, young man, let us tell you about the favor we want you to do for us.”

“He ain’t a young man,” corrected my other knee. “Sixty-one puts him in the old fart category. All you got to do is take a gander at his puss to realize—”

“How can you look at me?” I wanted to know. “Knees don’t have the power of vision.”

“We’re using *your* eyes, dopey. When you looked in the bathroom mirror this morning, we took a gander,” explained my knee. “Got a look at your missus, too. Jeez, is she going to seed. Only forty-nine, too. She’s going to be a real blimp by the time she’s your age.”

“Now, now, Mavis is still a very attractive woman. And she has a truly lovely voice.”

“Oh yeah? How come this broad hasn’t had a singing gig in six years?”

I again requested, “Tell me why my new knees can talk.”

“Simple. Dowling used you as a guinea pig, sappo. He wanted to test us out—and we’re a lot more than knees, by the way—before installing his gadgets in somebody important.”

I shot to my feet and began to pace the big room. “No, before I call the clinic, I’m going to get in touch with my attorney. And maybe the AMA.” I went striding over to one of the big view windows to gaze out at the glaring afternoon.

“Notice anything, dude?”

“Hum?”

“You walk pretty good for a gink just out of surgery.”

I inhaled sharply, stared down at my feet. “Yeah, now that you mention it, how come I—”

At that point I began to tap dance. I circled the living room, doing a pretty fair impression of Fred Astaire. Then I completed a brief but complex Irish jig, added a few very convincing Flamenco stomps, and settled down in one of our faux Morris chairs. “Christ,” I observed. “How in the hell can I—”

“First,” cut in my right knee, “ask not what your knees can do for you, chum, but what you can do for us.”

I overcame the impulse to stand up again. I didn’t want to risk dancing around the room anymore. “Do for my knees?”

The motherly one said, “All we’d like you to do is help us find Dr. Dowling.”

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“I’m not much of a cook,” I said.

“You are now,” my right knee assured me.

My knees and I were standing in our large redwood and copper kitchen. Dusk was settling in outside.

“You need some good warm food inside you, dear boy,” said my other knee. “A meat loaf sandwich indeed.”

“Soyloaf on twelve-grain gluten-free bread,” I corrected.

Mavis had called a few minutes earlier to say the New Scattergood Singers’ rehearsal was running late. She wouldn’t be home in time for dinner, but she’d left a substantial sandwich for me in the refrigerator.

“Late rehearsal, my fanny,” commented my right knee. “It’s shack-up time in the old corral if—”

“You don’t have a fanny,” I pointed out as I found myself trotting out into the kitchen.

“Figure of speech.”

Now I was standing in front of our state-of-the-art turquoise-colored stove. “These new knees—you guys, that is—you can convert me into a gourmet chef? What the hell does Dr. Dowling have in mind?”

“His initial assignment from the National Office of Clandestine—”

“No need to blab too much, sis.”

“Well, the poor man has to know what’s happened to him.”

“Okay, but I’ll give him the skinny. Dowling is an expert on advanced robotics and performance-enhancing implants.”

“Why would a guy with those qualifications be working at the Slesinger?” I noticed that I had walked over to the fridge and was taking out a carton of eggs and a handful of portabella mushrooms.

“Some parsley, too,” suggested my maternal knee.

The other knee continued, “Doc Dowling has a little lab hidden down in the bowels of the joint. He’s developed a device that can convert an average gink like you into a crackerjack fighting man. Once inserted it can—”

“Why does a crackerjack fighting man need to tap dance or concoct omelets?” I was beating an assortment of omelet ingredients in one of our earth-color mixing bowls.

The maternal knee explained, “Dr. Dowling, bless him, believes that even a brutal fighting man should be well-rounded. You’ll find that now that his secret serum is coursing through your veins you—”

“Secret serum.” I stopped whisking, and goosebumps visited both my arms.

“You will be a wiz at math, including advanced calculus, speak six additional languages, including Mandarin Chinese and—”

“You won’t have any further trouble getting it up,” added my other knee. “Bothersome erectile dysfunction is a thing of the past.”

“Hey, I don’t have any problems with that.”

“Haven’t had much opportunity to test that premise of late, have you, dude?”

“Well, no, but—”

“Let’s get on with fixing dinner. A nice salad will fit in perfectly with our omelet.”

As I gathered the ingredients for a small salad out of the crispers, I

asked, “Why did Dowling put his gadget in artificial knees?”

“He only did that in your case. Usually, chum, the enhancer, housed in two very compact units, will be installed in one of the buttocks.”

“And why test it on me?”

“Dowling wanted to run a few human tests right now, but the higher ups nixed that. They didn’t think the enhancer was quite ready yet. So the doc decided to try it out on his own.”

“But why me? I’m too old to be a fighting man.”

“Exactly, buddy. If he can convert an old wreck like you into a first-rate warrior, then the enhancer will work on anybody. That means that a lot of young wrecks can be turned into gung-ho soldiers come the next big one.”

I was crumbling feta cheese into my salad dressing. “How come the doctor didn’t ask my permission? And was he planning to let me know eventually about his illegal experiment?”

“Of course he was, dear boy. Unfortunately, he vanished.”

“Bright and early *mañana*, kiddo, we’ll start hunting for him. You can’t trust the FBI to track him down, nor the ... Oops!”

I set down the bottle of olive oil I’d picked up. “What?”

“Visitors. Let me handle this, jocko.”

“How can a knee—”

The door chimes sounded.

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Two tall men in dark suits were standing on our twilight doorstep. Both had close-cropped blond hair and were in their early thirties.

The leaner of the pair inquired, politely, “Are you Mr. Frank Whitney?”

“Yeah, and who might—”

“I’m Agent Mickens with the National Counterspy Bureau.” He showed

me a plastic ID card with a holographic portrait of him included. As he tilted it toward me his image took on a third dimension. “And this is Agent Tubridy, also with the NCB.”

When Tubridy, the bulkier one, tilted his ID, the portrait remained two-dimensional.

I was about to suggest they come into the living room, when I found myself saying, “Nice try, buster, but no cheroot. That ID of yours is as phony as a three-buck bill. It lacks the spread eagle and the Colonial flag images that are supposed to appear behind your portrait.”

“Sir, I assure you that—”

“Looks to me, buddy boy,” I informed him, “like you’re actually in the employ of some second-rate, low-budget Middle European nation with delusions of grandeur.”

“In that case,” said the apparently spurious Mickens, “grab the bastard, Bruno.”

The faux Tubridy leaped across our threshold, grabbing me in a very impressive bear hug.

To my surprise, I kneed the big man in the groin, which caused him to let go. I then grabbed his arm, applied some sort of martial arts grip, and tossed him halfway across the room.

Bruno landed, hard, on Mavis’ Early American rocking chair.

The whole damn chair, which I’ve never much liked, collapsed under him.

Discouraged, he got to his feet to go running across the living room. He slid open the wide glass door to the deck and dived outside into the approaching night.

Following, I tackled the big fake agent.

He fell with a substantial *thunk*, twisted free, and grabbed up Mavis’s large potted cactus.

I avoided his attempt to conk me with the heavy orange pot, jabbed him in the midsection. He yowled, toppled back against the deck railing.

Along with the potted cactus, he went falling down to the shaggy slanting hillside some ten feet below.

The pot shattered, sending orange shards into the new night, and the cactus shot up a few feet and then bounced on Bruno's crewcut head. He got, shakily, to his feet to go running, shakily, away into the night.

I spun around, ready to face the fake agent Mickens.

My front door stood open, the living room was empty.

"Damn it all," commented my right knee, "you let both of those bozos get clean away."

"Now, now. He did pretty well, considering he's just getting used to being a crackerjack fighting man."

"Yeah, I suppose so, sis. And, hell, they'll be more spies and secret agents dropping in from now on. Sure, we can question *them*."

"More?" I asked.

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It was around about midnight that I found out about another batch of my new abilities. Since coming home from the clinic I'd been sleeping in the spare bedroom. Mavis had complained, as she was driving me home from the Slesinger, that my new knees made funny squeaking noises that might keep her awake, especially if I tossed and turned as I usually did at night. "That's disturbing enough," she pointed out, "without adding metallic sound effects."

At about ten o'clock that fateful night Mavis was fluffing the pillows on the narrow bed I was temporarily occupying. "You've got to use that cane I bought you, Frank," she said as she bent to kiss me on the cheek. "We can't have any more accidents like this afternoon. You could have been seriously hurt. Not to mention that the chair cost \$500."

I hadn't yet told my wife about my new knees or the visit from the spurious American intelligence agents. I had said I stumbled and fell over the rocker. "Won't happen again, dear."

"And do be more careful when you go hobbling out onto the deck," she continued. "This time only a potted cactus fell downhill, and it only cost



\$129, but if *you* had fallen—

“I know, I’m worth at least three times that.”

“Seriously, Frank.” Mavis pointed at the cocoa mug on my temporary nightstand. “Drink the hot chocolate I fixed for you. It will help you sleep.”

I didn’t believe that after my stimulating last few hours I’d be able to do much in the way of sleeping. But I picked the cup up, took a sip. Then I grimaced. “Not especially sweet.”

“We’re watching our intake of sugar, remember. Now drink up.”

I drank up and set the mug back on the table. Surprisingly, I was feeling drowsy already. As my wife tiptoed out of the room and quietly shut the door of the bedroom, I sank back and commenced slumbering.

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“Rise and shine, chum. Off your ox and grab your sox.”

I jerked up into a sitting position. “Hum?”

“How are you feeling, dear boy?”

“I’m okay. Did you wake me up just to—”

“Shake a leg,” suggested my right knee. “The game’s afoot.”

“What game?” I swung out of bed, feeling completely awake. “Funny, I don’t feel at all sleepy, but before—”

“That’s because we’ve counteracted the sleeping potion your fat folknik wife slipped into your hot toddy, dumbbo.”

“She’s a bit plump, but not—”

“Fat or skinny, dude, what you ought to wonder about is *why* she doped you.”

“If she actually did.” I was pulling on a pair of dark blue jeans.

My left knee asked, “Who can you trust if you can’t trust your own knees, dear boy?”

“Socks and shoes and hurry up,” said my other knee. “She’s already pulling out of the driveway.”

I continued dressing. “Who?”

“Your missus, the sweet singer of Sausalito, the distaff Pete Seeger.”

I glanced over at the alarm clock on the nightstand. “Were would Mavis be going at midnight?”

“To meet one third of the Scattergood Singers.”

Fully clothed, I now had a desire to leave the spare bedroom. “I thought you were interested in locating the missing Dr. Dowling. What’s Edmond Scully—I assume it’s him you’re alluding to—got to do with that?”

“All in good time,” said my maternal knee. “Now put on a warm coat, the night’s turned a bit chilly.”

I took my fleece-lined car coat out of the hall closet. “Hey, how am I going to follow Mavis? We only have one car, the Toyota, and she took that, according to you.”

“On foot, dopey.”

“Then let’s hope she’s not going far.”

“Sausalito.”

“Sausalito? Christ, that’s at least fifteen miles from here.”

Walking down stairs, my right knee said, “Told you he was still dense, in spite of all the improvements we’ve made.”

“Not dense, just a mite slow on the uptake.”

“What are you implying? That I’ve turned into some sort of Six Million Dollar Man?”

“Wasn’t that obvious after this afternoon, buddy?”

“I suppose so, but—”

“Less gab, more action.”

I stepped out into the night.

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“Slow down a little, dude,” cautioned my right knee, “or you’ll overtake her.”

“Don’t be so critical,” said my other knee. “After all, this is his maiden run.”

I slowed my pace. “This is neat. I’ve been running for over fifteen minutes and I’m not even winded. And I’m covering a mile or so every minute. That’s beating every record.”

“Quit bragging, Speedy. Concentrate on our mission.”

Mavis was taking a roundabout route to Sausalito, avoiding main roads. Following our red Toyota, I’d been running, with ease, along quirky back roads and along narrow, tree-lined lanes.

My eyesight had greatly improved, too. I could see the rear lights and our license plates from a quarter mile behind. People do jog by night in Marin County and I slowed to a normal pace when an infrequent car approached, so I didn’t attract undue attention. Although one Volvo driver yelled, “Carry a flashlight, asshole!” as he passed me going in the other direction. A belligerent German Shepherd chased me for a couple minutes, but I easily outran him.

“Destination coming up,” announced my right knee.

We had reached the outskirts of Sausalito, up in the hills above the bay. Downhill Mavis was signaling for a right turn. Taillight blinking, she eased off the road into the small parking lot next to a small club called The Lethal Injection.

I shifted down to a slow trot, then stopped behind a stand of eucalyptus trees at the lot edge. “How’d you know Mavis was heading here?” I asked in a whisper.

“Eavesdropping while you were snoozing, chum.”

“How could you do—”

“Your hearing is enhanced, dear boy.”

“We can hunker down here and listen in on your spouse’s midnight rendezvous inside.”

“I don’t hear anything but crickets.”

“You have to concentrate. We’ll help you get going and show you how to zero in on her and the lad who’s cuckolding you.”

“Even if that’s true, which I doubt, what in the hell does it have to do with Dr. Dowling and—”

“Listen, dude.”

“...first garage band to fuse hip-hop, bebop, and retro rockabilly,” I heard an MC saying. “Here are the Defrocked Priests for their final set at Lethal Injection.”

“Yow,” I remarked as very loud electric music came flooding into my head.

“It’ll take another minute to locate Mavis and filter out the surrounding noise.”

“...hip hop shabam always reminds me of you,” sang someone through his nose.

“...but how did they know we were sleeping together, Edmond?”

“They’re *spies*, flowerbabe,” said Edmond. “They know how to find out stuff.”

“This gink calls your wife flowerbabe?”

“So it seems.”

“A rather catchy sobriquet.”

“Hush, sis, so we can monitor this gabfest.”

“You were the one who first intruded.”

“Button your yap.”

“...can’t believe anyone would think Frank is important,” Mavis was saying to her banjo player.

“They’ll pay us \$20,000 to lure your useless husband to their lab.”

“That would certainly help finance the comeback of the Scattergood Singers, but—”

“Edmond, Fred and Mavis,” Edmond corrected.

“Still,” continued my wife, “I don’t understand how they can remove Frank’s knees without hurting him. Admittedly he’s not much of a hubby, but it will bother me if he’s going to bleed all over the place.”

“Look, Mavis, they’ve got this Dr. Dowling stored away in their clandestine laboratory,” he pointed out. “The guy ought to be able to perform a simple goddamn knee operation.”

“But then Frank won’t have any knees.”

“Don’t be obtuse, hon. They’ll obviously force him to replace the knees with new ones.” His voice was sounding a bit impatient. “These spies sounded pretty humane to me.”

“You haven’t mentioned what country they represent.”

“The United Kingdom, I think.”

“Aren’t you sure?”

“Well, the three of them are very polite and well behaved. They wear tweedy clothes and have BBC accents,” Edmond explained. “I’d say they’re Brits, though they haven’t openly declared that.”

“Britain is an ally of the United States, sort of. So it’s not like selling Frank’s knees to, say, oh, China or Cuba.”

“Course not. And we can sure use \$20,000.”

“Be nice if the price were a bit—”

“I’m meeting one of them tomorrow afternoon to set up the details of

delivering Frank. I can suggest \$25,000 would suit us better.”

“Ask for \$30,000. After all he’s *my* husband.” Mavis’ voice faded out.

The Defrocked Priests came back. “Enough,” I said and all sound from within the club ceased.

I heard crickets again, then a young woman being sick in the parking lot.

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The note was affixed to the surface of the fridge with a Bob Dylan magnet. *Must make unexpected trip to San Fran. To see publicist, dear. Since you’re still incapable of driving, you won’t mind my taking car. Frozen waffles in freezer. Don’t use too much maple syrup because we’re watching our sweets intake. Love, M.*

“Lot of hooey,” remarked my right knee. “She took off for a roll in the hay with the banjo virtuoso.”

“Frozen waffles indeed,” said my other knee. “Let’s whip up a batch of flapjacks.”

“I’m not especially hungry.”

“It’s wisest, dear boy, to begin the day with a hearty breakfast.”

“Okay, okay.” I fetched a carton of buttermilk out of the refrigerator.

The Brazilian secret agents, two of them, arrived as I was setting my plate of syrup-drenched pancakes out on the deck table.

They’d apparently tossed grappling hooks up from below and come climbing up thick plastic ropes.

“*Bom dia, senhor,*” said the first one, “we’re here to inquire after your *joelhos.*”

“Your knees,” translated the second one.

“Oh, I’m doing just fine, better, actually, than I expected.” I remained on my feet, smiling blandly. “Certainly nice of you guys to climb all the way

up here to ask about—”

“Roll up your pants above the knee,” ordered my right knee.

I obliged, far from certain why I was.

“What’s this *tolo* up to?” the other intruder asked of his partner.

“Now, dear boy, aim your left knee at the nearest Brazilian. We’ll do the rest.”

“I see our cover story about being nothing more than concerned neighbors isn’t going to work, *senhor*,” said the farthest agent as he reached inside his blue blazer.

Before I could lift my foot high enough above the redwood deck to aim at my target, the pant leg unrolled and covered the knee again.

“Nitwit,” remarked my other knee. “The dang ultrasonic beam won’t work if the knee is covered.

“How the hell am I supposed to know that?” I reached down to tug up the trouser leg again. “If you would be a shade more confiding, then we—”

“*Senhor*,” said the Brazilian who was now pointing a .38 revolver at me, “we would very much like you to accompany us to our laboratory, *se faz favor*, so that we can extract your knees and return to Rio with—”

“Aim your damn knee, dude.”

The second South American agent had produced a .45 automatic. He, too, was pointing his gun at me. “We would prefer to perform that operation there, but we are prepared to do the job, albeit in a cruder fashion, right here.”

“Drop your weapons,” suggested someone up on my slanting red tile roof.

I looked up to see a slim, red-haired woman of about thirty-five, clad in a crisp nurse’s uniform, standing there with a .38 revolver in each hand. “Nurse Munson,” I said loudly, “what are you doing on my roof?”

Ginger Munson had been my night nurse during my recent stay at the

Slesinger Clinic.

Just then, as one of the Brazilians was aiming his gun at Nurse Munson, my knee went off. A thin line of blurred air shot out at the nearest agent. It struck him in the middle of his chest, then vanished.

*"Inferno!"* He remarked as he fell over onto the deck, bumping against the table and upsetting my plate of syrupy pancakes.

While this was occurring, Ginger had jumped down off the roof to tackle the other Brazilian intruder.

He was now lying face down, unconscious, and she was handcuffing his hands behind his back. "These fellows are from Brazil's *Agencia Muito Secreta*," she said as she stood clear of the sprawled man. "This one is Antonio Bulcao."

"Apparently you're more than a night nurse."

"I'm with the National Counterspy Bureau. I've been working undercover at—"

"The last person who claimed to be with the NCB," I cut in as I gathered up the fallen flapjacks, "turned out to be a phony and so—"

"Nix," warned my right knee. "This cookie is legit."

"You made a darn favorable impression on me at the clinic, Mr. Whitney," said the government agent. "So I'm assuming you'll cooperate and return to the clinic and, you know, voluntarily return those knees so that—"

"Whoa, honey," said my knee. "How come it took you so dang long to get here? If we hadn't been on duty, a stewpot of spies and secret agents might've hauled this poor sap off to—"

"Now, now," said my other knee, "I'm sure this sweet young lady has a perfectly acceptable explanation. And there's no reason to refer to poor Frank as a sap, now that he's been converted into a—"

"I was reassigned to collect Mr. Whitney after, well, my partner and I didn't succeed in locating Dr. Dowling."

"Was your partner working undercover at the Slesinger, too?" I asked



her.

“Yes, she’s Hazel LaMond, but we really must—”

“Huh, the nurse who gave me backrubs.”

“We really must be going,” Ginger told me. “I do hope you’ll come along without too much fuss.”

I said, “Suppose you found Dowling and brought him back, Nurse Munson? Do they give bonuses in the NCB?”

She took a step back from me, staring into my face and frowning. “Do you have some idea where he might be?”

“Sister,” said my knee, “if you tag along with us, we’ll lead you right to him. How about it?”

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Midway across the Golden Gate Bridge fog closed in around Ginger’s SUV. “Going to make it harder to follow them,” I remarked.

Ginger, wearing dark jeans and a black pullover, was driving. “We know where they’re going.”

“Use your noggin,” added my right knee. “We have the ability to track your cheatin’ wife and her banjo beau because of the many technological gadgets built into—”

“The dear boy hasn’t quite gotten used to being superhuman,” my other knee reminded.

“I wouldn’t call myself superhuman.”

“Don’t be so modest, dear boy.”

Ginger asked, “Do they always go on like this?”

“Pretty much.”

“Hush until we get across the bridge,” the redheaded NCB agent suggested.

It was just about three thirty in the afternoon when we reached fogbound San Francisco. Earlier we'd staked out Edmond's cottage in Sausalito. Using my recently acquired eavesdropping abilities, I overheard the phone call from one of the UK agents. He'd invited Edmond to rendezvous with him at their hideaway across the bay in San Francisco to go over plans for luring me into their clutches. Since my wife was with the banjo player and not consulting with her publicist, she was allowed to tag along.

The British agents were operating out of a two-story Victorian house in Presidio Heights. As Ginger drove by the Britishers' lair, I spotted my Toyota sitting in front of the narrow, lemon-yellow house.

We parked the SUV just around the corner on Laurel Street.

"Let's tune in on the Brits," said my right knee.

Ginger said, "I brought my own surveillance equipment, a sound gun and—"

"I'll broadcast through my knee," I found myself saying. "We can both hear."

"Cease babbling," suggested my knee.

"...sorry, old man, but \$25,000 is absolutely the most we can offer. These are tough times in the UK and hence we—"

"But Mavis is betraying her husband," Edmond pointed out. "That ought to be worth at least \$30,000."

"Look here, old chap," a second British voice said, "we can simply go over to the lady's house, cosh the bloke on the head, and drag him over here to our hidden lab.

"However, we have a reputation for subtlety and we also rather enjoy luring someone into our web."

"As opposed to overt violence."

Mavis said, "All right, okay. We'll take the \$25,000. I don't want to have poor Frank suffer any more physical injury than is absolutely necessary."

Sighing, Ginger gave my arm a sympathetic pat.

A British agent, the one with the more nasal voice, said, “What say we now discuss ways and means to get this Whitney cove to trot into our trap of his own free will?”

“Well, flowerbabe and I have been thinking that maybe—”

“I say, who in blazes is—”

The broadcast abruptly ceased. I inquired, “Why’d you—”

“Out your window, dude.”

I turned to see a slim young fellow in a blue blazer leaning toward my window, a snub nose .32 in his hand. I opened the window. “Something?”

“By Jove, this *is* a blooming bit of luck,” he said, pointing the gun directly at my head. “Rather ironic as well, I must say. While you’ve been eavesdropping on us, I’ve been concealed in yonder shrubs using my sound gun to—”

“I’m with the NCB,” Ginger told him. “I’d advise you to put down your weapon and lead us to Dr. Dowling.”

“Hard cheese,” replied the agent. “What’s actually going to happen, madam, is that you’re going to turn this Whitney chap over to—”

“Look into my eyes,” I found myself telling him.

“Really, old man, this is hardly the time or place for a flirtation.”

“Look deeply into my eyes,” I suggested. “You are growing drowsy. Soon, quite soon, you’ll be nodding off.”

“I say, I do feel a mite sleepy now that you mention it.” His eyelids were fluttering, his gun hand dropped to his side.

“I didn’t know I could hypnotize people,” I said.

My right knee addressed the hypnotized British agent. “Now here’s what you’re going to do, dude.”

“Whatever you say, sir.”

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“I say, Denis,” said the plump, sandy-haired British agent who opened the door of the yellow Victorian, “this is a bit of all right. You’ve brought in Frank Whitney on your own and now we shan’t have to pay his wife and her paramour a blooming cent.”

He stepped back, allowing his colleague to herd us into the corridor. “Yes-it-is-jolly-good-Nigel-old-thing.”

“You’re sounding even more stilted and affected than usual,” noticed Nigel. “And why, now that I notice, does he have his trousers rolled up above his knees?”

After kicking the door shut with a backward kick of my foot, I aimed a bare knee at the inquisitive British agent.

“This seems hardly cricket,” he remarked as the sonic beam hit him in the midsection.

Ginger caught him before he dropped, out cold, to the Persian-carpeted hallway floor.

“Okay, Denny old top,” my right knee ordered the hypnotized agent, “escort us to Dr. Dowling.”

“It-will-be-a-pleasure-sir.”

As we followed him down into the cellar lab, Ginger said to me, “I’m going to recommend that they treat you gently, Frank. But, gosh, soon as the doctor is ready to operate, he’s probably going to replace your new knees with less complex ones.”

“We’ll just see about that,” said my right knee. “This dude ought to get a frigging medal.”

\* \* \* \*

Well, Dr. Dowling decided against surgery. What he did was deactivate my knees electronically from without, converting them into just plain artificial knees. He had several other enhancers in the works. The National Counterspy Bureau decided not to brainwash me so that I’d forget about Dowling’s invention. That was because Ginger Munson persuaded

her chief that I was trustworthy. Also I had to sign several binding agreements that I would never say anything. Mavis, only moderately chagrined at having her affair with Edmond discovered or for trying to sell my knees to a foreign power, decided to move out of our marriage and take up residence with her banjo player.

The fling with Ginger that I alluded to earlier didn't commence until about a week after we'd rescued Dowling. I was living alone in the house by then, me and my perfectly plain and average knees. I'd gotten interested in cooking during the short time I'd been enhanced, and on that particular early evening I was in the kitchen, cookbook spread out on a counter. I was trying to create a mushroom pizza from scratch.

The cell phone resting on the counter rang. I wiped a splotch of tomato sauce off my hand and answered. "Hello?"

"How are you, Frank?" inquired Ginger. "Do you miss your former knees or powers?"

"Not too much, no." That was only partly true. I didn't miss the heckling, but some of the added abilities I wouldn't mind having still. "How are you doing?"

"Turns out I'm not posing as a nurse tonight, and I don't have any other NCB chores," she said. "Might I drop by if you're free? Possibly we could go out to dinner. I might be able to put it on my expense account."

"Hey, we don't have to go out," I told her. "I'm making a pizza."

"I'll stop and get ingredients for a salad."

"I'm making the salad, too."

"Well, then I'll just bring wine. Or are you making that, too?"

"Nope. About eight?"

"Fine."

The call ended and setting the phone down, I returned to my cooking. I still had to roll out the dough.

"Hey, dopey, let me help out. If you screw up you ain't going to impress your tootsie."

I dropped the small rolling pin. It hit the floor, rolled, bumped into a leg of the table. "You've been deactivated," I told my right knee.

"The old biddy who was your left knee is long gone, pal," said the knee. "But, c'mon, you didn't think Dowling could knock off someone as clever and crafty as me, did you?"

"What exactly are you up to?"

"We make, I have to admit, a pretty good team."

"Oh, so?"

"Let's cook up the pizza," said my returned knee. "Then you can impress the broad, maybe fool around a little. Later, dude, we can talk business."