

THE GOLDEN AGE

By Elmer Ransom

● An elixir of immortality, a potion that would make one forever remain at whatever age he had attained when he drank it. But—what is the perfect age, the age to freeze forever?

Illustrated by Kolliker

A human question mark, Dr. Henry Smith; young without the elasticity of youth, he came to us out of obscurity and did nothing to enlighten our tight and curious South Carolina countryside as to his past. Small and gray of face, he always wore gray English tweeds of a winter and white linens, come summer. He had a great shock of unbarbered sandy hair, never covered by a hat.

Only once had I seen him take the slightest interest in any community matter, and that was when he surprised the local branch of some peace society by donating a hundred dollars when they appealed for funds.

"I have seen war," he explained in his stilted fashion. "I hate it. It interrupts the tapestry of so many lives. Every man should have the privilege of living out his span of years—living them out if nothing more. Man has a right to old age, a right to the dignity of a seemly death."

"Henry!"

The word was a sharply spoken warning from his wife who stood on the threshold of the doctor's undistinguished office. A look passed between them, and she turned and smiled at me; a tired, age-old smile which involved only her rather wistful mouth. Mary Smith wore a spotted laboratory apron that gave off the faint odor of antiseptics. Her black hair was drawn back severely from her shiny forehead. What a pity that Henry Smith should have married a woman so utterly indifferent to all possible feminine appeal. She was a technician, and a dowdy one at that, not a wife.

"He is impulsive, parson," she explained. "What could he know of war?"

She switched on the center light for us. "Dr. Harper wishes to see you, dear." The voice was tired, flat.

Dr. Harper's ample frame filled the doorway. His heavy, sensual face was moist from the rain. Fleshy jowls folded piglike over his soft collar. His eyelids were puffed and the whites of his

eyes shot through with tiny red veins. His white hair gave his face an unmerited distinction.

"Please don't go, parson," he said as I rose. "Beastly weather for September."

We didn't get along very well—Harper and I—and possibly my greeting was rather curt. He had something definite on his mind, and he didn't seem to notice.

"I wondered if you would see Bob Jenks for me," Harper said to Dr. Smith.

Since Bob was the amiable young Negro giant who took me fishing Saturday afternoons, I asked what ailed him. He didn't know. Sarah, Bob's wife, had got word to Dr. Harper last night.

"Last night?" Smith asked, frowning.

"Yes, I was busy," he answered indifferently. "Nine miles, and lucky to get three dollars."

"But, doctor," I remonstrated, "he might be seriously ill."

Harper smiled his oily smile. "It's all right for youngsters like Dr. Smith to work for experience, but we older doctors must have something more substantial." He lit a cigar and fogged himself in its heavy smoke. With splendid indifference he said: "That's something I want you to help me with, parson. This young man refuses to send out his bills. People are taking advantage of him."

I said nothing. It was common talk. Smith neither paid nor collected except under pressure. Dressler, the local pharmacist, had shown me Smith's account of several hundred dollars and asked me to speak to him about it. "The Millers owe him enough to settle all of his obligations if he'd only bill them," Dressler had said. "And the doctors here don't like it any more than I do."

The telephone rang and Smith excused himself. Harper leaned confidentially toward me: "This young man is a gift to you from heaven, parson. Straighten him out. He's willing to practice on your Negroes and poor whites for nothing. But he's hurting himself with his lack of business management, and he's hurting the other doctors



here. For his own sake I wish you'd speak to him. He might listen to you."

I had no idea whatever of attending to Smith's business, but fortunately before I could answer the doctor returned. He had on his raincoat and his bag was in his hand.

"That was Sarah," he announced, "calling from Greene's store. She was trying to locate you and said she had four dollars. Would you go with me, doctor?"

"Nine miles, on a night like this! Hardly," Harper answered, rising. "Bob lives on the mail route just before it turns back to Burton. You can find it. And, parson, please remember what I told you. I'm interested in this young fellow."

Harper left. Mrs. Smith entered, dressed against the rain.

"Please, Mary," the doctor said, "I'll be all right and I want you to watch the animal."

Her face reflected a strange terror. "You will be careful?" she asked as though the country ride involved some extreme hazard.

"Please," he answered wearily. "I have told you that you have nothing to fear."

She turned to me: "Won't you drive with him?" I knew where Bob lived and I agreed, mildly irritated at any such stupid anxiety.

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We drove in silence until I protested at the speed of his driving. "Time might be of tremendous importance," he explained. "Tremendous."

The storm had increased in violence. Dead limbs carpeted the roadway and trees swayed and creaked ominously in the blackness that pressed in upon us.

"Isn't Bob a young man?" he asked. I assured him that Bob was no more than twenty-five, a prime specimen of a man.

"A young man," he muttered. "A young man. No young man should die." It was an obsession with him. I had heard him say it many times before.

I clutched the door handle: "Why do you think that this young Negro might die?" I asked.

He didn't answer, but I knew that Sarah had alarmed him. We turned off the hard surface into a sand-clay township road. Suddenly a wagon loomed straight ahead. Dr. Smith jerked the car to the left and the wheels skidded sickeningly. I threw my arm against the instrument board and braced myself. We missed the wagon, crashed sideways into a tree, slewed forward with that terrible lurch of a skidding car completely out of control. The two left wheels plowed along

the ditch, until the car pitched entirely over, resting on its top.

I called out to Dr. Smith, but there was no answer. A tiny tongue of flame licked under the hood and the smell of hot metal reached my nostrils. I drove my foot into the door and it flew open. Vague forms appeared in the light of the burning car. Someone grabbed my arm and dragged me out.

"Doc Smith's in there," I shouted.

I tore away, and reaching in the car felt the slumped figure. I tugged at it, but found the upper part of his body wedged between the wheel and the top of the car. The flames spread with incredible rapidity, and yet it seemed hours that I pulled at Smith's body, calling to him. Someone appeared at the other side of the overturned automobile and began to push the unconscious figure. Suddenly it gave and I dragged him across the road. As I did, the flames ran over the upholstering inside the car.

"Quick," a voice urged. "I'll help you, suh."

We carried him down the road for fifty yards before the gasoline tank exploded. The flames leaped into the air with the sound of escaping steam. The rain beat down upon us and the trees complained in the stiffening wind. The colored folks from the wagon stood around waiting for me to direct them.

Smith sat up and felt his head. "What happened?" he asked thickly.

I told him. I urged him to lie still, but he got shakily to his feet. He stared moodily at the car which fast became a twisted mass of glowing metal with a few flames licking out of it here and there.

"So," he said, "again." There was a vast disappointment in the tone, an incomprehensible weariness. He turned to me, his figure drooping and disheveled in the gloom.

"Do you remember what Christ said? 'Father forgive them for they know not what they do.' Must I be forever crucified for one mistake?"

I was taken aback, hurt. Undoubtedly I had saved the doctor's life and instead of gratitude he met me with bitterness and denunciation. Before I could phrase any fitting answer, he thought of our mission:

"This Bob. How far is it? We must get along. Where is my bag?"

"Your bag burned up," I answered, aware that, but for me, he would have perished with the bag.

The Negroes agreed to take us to Bob's house in the wagon. Some regret at his outburst moved him as the mule trudged along in the storm.

"I'm sorry, parson. Possibly some day I can explain myself."

We found Bob's huge frame lumped and shadowy under a ragged quilt. His right leg was drawn up close to his body. He moaned when

Dr. Smith forced it gently down, but the Negro was entirely unconscious.

"Rigid," mumbled Dr. Smith, probing the man's abdomen. "We'll get him to town at once. There is no time to lose. None to lose."

"He ain't gwine die, suh?" Sarah asked, terror in her voice.

"Eh," the doctor said. "Die? Not if I can help it. Not a young man. Send for a car."

We carried Bob into the surgery back of Dr. Smith's office. Three small rooms adjoined here. One he used for animal experimentation of some kind. One he had fitted as an operating room. The other contained a single bed. Dr. Smith used it mainly for emergencies such as the present one. A crude arrangement, of course, a small-town compromise, the best that could be done.

Mrs. Smith's eyes flashed that strange terror I had seen in them before. "An accident," Dr. Smith said. "No time to explain now. We'll have to scrub up. You must give the anæsthetic. I'll want a leucocyte count first."

Neither the doctor nor his wife paid the slightest attention to me. Inside of an hour Dr. Smith was ready to operate and I went into the outer office. Sarah sat huddled in the corner, frightened and distraught, the whites of her eyes like great agates against her black skin. I could distinguish the occasional impatient demand for forceps or sponges, followed by the light footsteps of Mary Smith. The odor of ether sickened the air.

Twenty minutes passed. Then the door opened. I hope I never shall see again such a look as I saw on the face of Dr. Henry Smith. The feverish light had died out of his eyes. They were flat, dead-gray. The blue welt on his forehead, relic of our accident, stood out against a gray face. His nostrils expanded and contracted under hard breathing like a man suffering with asthma. His hands were clenched, bloodless.

"I made a mistake," he murmured, "a terrible mistake." He looked at me and all the tragedy of his life which I was so soon to learn stared out of tortured eyes. "Bob is dead," he said flatly. "I killed him."

Sarah stood up, swayed; then she began to shout as only a Negress can shout in the presence of unexpected death. It was horrible, unendurable.

"Stop it," I ordered.

Sarah retreated before me and, turning, dashed from the room.

"An aneurysm of the abdominal aorta," Smith said. "I missed it. I didn't ask for a history. I didn't use my head. Oh, God, how many men have I killed! How many young men who should live out their lives!"

My heart overflowed with pity for this young doctor, so obviously in the depths of despair. I

told him that he had done his best, done it without any hope of reward of any kind. Bob would have died, anyway, without his help. I mumbled all the numberless platitudes a minister musters for such an emergency.

"You don't understand," he said bitterly. "I am condemned to go on and on making the same blunders. I can never grow up."

The words seemed melodramatic then, but I was soon to learn that they were strangely, bitterly true. Henry Smith, I believe, suffered more than any man who has ever lived.

The next morning Dr. Henry Smith informed me that he was leaving our little town.

"No," I objected at once. "Suppose you did make a mistake—do you think that other doctors never make them? We need you."

"It is nice here," Dr. Smith agreed. "Nicer than anywhere I've ever lived. I would like to grow old in such a place." His voice was wistful when he added: "But you will understand soon that I can never stay in any place for very long." Queer words from a man of his age who had been with us for seven years.

"I'm called away. I shall be gone for several weeks. When I return, I'll get my instruments and close my office. While I'm away you must do something for me. You will promise, now, that whatever you think, whatever I tell you, you will keep it inviolable"—he paused—"during my lifetime."

"I would not betray you."

"Henry!" Again that single sharp warning from Mary Smith.

"Please, Mary, you insist on going with me. There is no other way."

He led me past her into the small room which he used for animal experimentation. It was cluttered with the usual paraphernalia of the scientist. Dr. Smith lifted a nondescript puppy from a box and fed it with a medicine dropper. The dog took the mixture with the obvious greedy enjoyment of any healthy, young animal.

I would have guessed that the dog was less than a week old, its eyes not yet open. After feeding, and still without explanation, he sterilized a hypodermic, took a vial from his electric refrigerator, filled the tube of the syringe and inserted the needle deftly under the animal's skin without apparently causing any pain at all. When he replaced the puppy in its box he turned to me.

"My revelation begins here," he said. "Don't think that I wish to make a mystery for you, but I must. Please promise me that you will watch this puppy carefully while I am away."

Mystified and feeling a little sick, I agreed.

"The procedure is quite simple," he explained. "I have standardized the formula and the puppy will thrive on four feedings a day. On what hap-

pens to this puppy depends the lives and happiness of three people. You won't fail me?"

"I won't fail you."

"In case the weather turns cold, the room must be heated. You will attend to that?"

I nodded.

"Then that is all for the present," he said, obviously relieved that I had pressed no questions of my own. He pulled out his handkerchief. A telegram fell from his pocket. He stood undecided a moment. "Read it," he said. The message read:

I CAN'T GO ON. UNLESS YOU CAN DO SOMETHING, I AM CHECKING OUT.

RALPH.

I handed it to him. "That," he said, "is from one of the three."

Dr. Smith and his wife left town the next morning, and I took up the mysterious nursing of a week-old puppy, feeling very much as though I had lent myself to some satanic witchery. This feeling increased as the weeks passed and—as you have doubtless guessed—the puppy did not change in any way. It gobbled its milk, slept, whined and cried at times as young dogs will, but it showed no evidence of increasing maturity. In some cruel fashion, Dr. Smith had arrested the development of the animal.

I didn't like it. I didn't like it at all, and I was happy one evening when Dr. Smith and his wife walked in on me while I was at the monotonous task of supplying that insatiable young appetite.

"Parson, how are you?"

I turned to answer, and saw that neither Dr. Smith nor his wife really saw me. They stared down at the dog.

"Its eyes?" Mary Smith almost gasped.

"They are not open— Oh, my God, Mary."

"It is no use." Her voice was weary, hopeless.

"You mustn't say that," he said. Her face was twisted, despairing. She walked blindly out of the room.

Dr. Smith asked: "What do you think of me?"

"I don't know," I answered, perplexed. "I am waiting." I dropped into a chair and he sat opposite me.

"I'm going to tell you the whole story," he began. "That puppy is eleven months old. It will live just as it is until some accident or disease takes it off. It will not age a day or an hour. Once the vaccine is in the blood stream the whole mechanism of maturation stops."

I stared at him, unbelieving, only half comprehending the import of his words, not understanding that the injection I had seen him give the puppy was an effort to counteract this strange vaccine of which he spoke.

"I was born at Berkeley in Gloucestershire, Eng-

land, on January 1, 1773. I have been living for one hundred and sixty-six years, but I am only twenty-eight years old."

The first shock passed. The man was insane.

"Don't excite yourself, Dr. Smith." I tried to smile. "You are much too old to risk it." His face changed instantly and I hurried on:

"Dr. Francis Merton, of Baltimore, is a close friend of mine. I should like for him to see you."

"Merton. Oh, yes, the psychiatrist. I treated him fifty years ago when he was a boy. Does he still have the curious trick of twisting the left side of his face?"

I persisted: "He has done wonders with overwrought nerves."

Smith smiled, his dead, humorless smile: "You don't believe me, parson, but you will before I am through. I don't need a psychiatrist."

He took off his coat and, rolling up the sleeve of his shirt, bared his left arm. A deep, ugly scar scored it almost from the shoulder to the elbow.

"I was one of the first persons to be vaccinated for smallpox. This vaccination was given to me by Dr. Edward Jenner in 1795.—You know, of course, the history of Jenner's great experiments?"

I nodded and he went on after replacing his coat:

"These experiments came long before Lister's work on antiseptic and aseptic surgery. They preceded, too, Pasteur's remarkable contributions which were the real beginning of the germ theory of disease. Jenner's contribution is all the more spectacular because of this. He worked empirically, but he was wise before his time. He stamped smallpox out of Europe without knowing the cause of the disease.

"The work fired my youthful imagination. If it could be done with smallpox, why couldn't it be accomplished for that unconquerable malady of the human race—old age? If one disease could be conquered, why not another?"

"I conceived the idea that man was born with the essence of death in his veins. That essence worked to bring him from infancy to childhood, to adolescence, youth, and last to old age.

"If some vaccine could be developed that would halt this process, then I would have discovered the principle of perpetual youth."

He paused and for a moment his face lit up. "At least I was centuries ahead of my contemporaries who scoffed at my crude laboratory. The idea obsessed me. I gave up all practice. Days and nights I worked. There is a hand-written manuscript in a London museum today which describes me under another name as consorting with the devil.

"Three years after the beginning of my experiments I discovered what I was seeking. It came, as such things so often do, by chance. The vac-

ination of a young puppy stopped his development at once. I then vaccinated myself." He passed his hand over his face. His voice shook. "Later I vaccinated Mary.

"Of course, it was crude. In giving it to some hardy cronies, who were willing to take the risk for the sake of eternal youth, I infected them. A few died. I was forced out of England. I came to America in 1810. Since, barring accident or disease, I would live forever, I could bide my time.

"Life was to be for Mary and me a measured and stately thing. Youth and health and vigor were forever ours. We would work carefully, confide in no one, give our vaccine only to those great souls who would pick humanity up out of the welter of its ignorance.

"But we neglected one item. If maturation is stopped, it is stopped just as a clock is stopped at a certain hour. One lives on, but one does not progress. The very brain cells are frozen in their grooves. Beyond a certain point we could never go. I attended another medical school, learning all that was new."

"I have earned, I think, twelve medical diplomas. I have served as many internships. Always I am a brilliant student. Why shouldn't I be? Always I am offered a junior's place with some great man."

He looked at me owlishly: "Your friend, Dr. Francis Merton, offered me one, not recognizing in this ambitious young medico the doctor who had treated him successfully for chorea when he was a child."

He paused and I found myself leaning forward, almost holding my breath. I was just forty, in the full vigor of my manhood. If I might overcome the toll which the next few years would take, I could carry my word and my mission on and on and on.

No age before had so intrigued me as these present years. The first flush of irresponsible youth was behind me. I had maturity of judgment, knowledge of people. The blood surged through my veins at the idea. And then I thought how foolish I was. This man was crazy, insane.

"What is this organism that causes us to age?" I asked.

"I have never isolated it," he answered. "I know only how to combat it, how to make the animal mechanism build up antibodies to it."

My voice was not quite steady: "You mean that if you vaccinated me, I would in all respects remain forty years of age?"

His eyes were queer now: "Vaccination isn't quite the word. I have improved the technique. Five cubic centimeters of the vaccine injected by hypodermic will absolutely stop the aging process in a man, and nothing that I have been able to discover will start it again."

I thought of the puppy that I had wet-nursed for thirty days, lying there with its eyes still

closed. My mind raced back to Smith's disregard for his obligations, his indifference to money that others owed him, his passion that men should live out their lives, that young men shouldn't die, to a hundred small remarks that now took on a new and strange meaning. I remembered him as he had come to us. I saw him now. He certainly had not matured in those seven years. This thing was incredible, and yet it might be true.

If life were so wearisome to him it was because he had stopped it too soon. As well stop it at twenty-eight days as twenty-eight years. There was little difference between the greedy infant, content with its mother's breast and the warm comfort of a crib, and the advanced adolescence of twenty-eight. Life could have no real savor. Twenty-eight was reckless, adventurous, radical, thoughtless, but not satisfying. The very animal passions of a man of twenty-eight are so ill directed as to make it impossible for him to appreciate their real meaning, their possible beauty. He couldn't know food, music, literature, art or life at twenty-eight.

But, ah, forty, that was the golden period. At forty a man held the respect and devotion of his contemporaries. He had background. He had begun to live. Dr. Smith watched me curiously, trying I think to penetrate the emotions that must have chased themselves over my face.

He misinterpreted them: "You wonder why, if I am ill of life, I lack the courage to end it?" I shook my head in disagreement, but he went on wistfully: "I see other men mature, see them get the full meaning of life. I want it. You see, whenever I die, I must die a young man unless I can discover some means of counteracting the vaccine.

"Yet it must come through some fortuitous chance, for a man of twenty-eight is not prepared for research. The very lack of maturity which I embraced defeats me.

"Moreover," he continued, "there are Ralph and Mary, both as desperate as I. Others to whom it was given have died through war or accident or disease. One committed suicide. All people who had never lived fully because, regardless of years, when a man dies before his time he has not lived

out his life. There was a child—Mary's child and mine— But never mind that." His voice was low, desperate. "This story is grim enough as it is. I can't leave Mary and Ralph to such tragedy so long as I have any hope of success."

I continued to eye him without speaking, and he shifted restlessly and asked me:

"You are still doubtful?"

Carefully I guarded my voice, made it indifferent.

"Doubtful enough," I answered smiling, "to be willing to refute your theory by taking your vaccine."

For a minute he didn't answer. Then he said bitterly: "So, parson, you are like all the rest. You, too, seek the fountain of youth. Where is your philosophy?"

"I simply do not believe that what you say is true," I answered stiffly.

"Possibly not," he replied, "but you hope that it is true. Well, parson, it is, but I have not given the vaccine to a human being for seventy years. I will never give it again. You don't realize what a perpetual hell you ask for."

He rose: "And now I'm tired." Some profound disappointment and dejection gripped him. "I had hoped," he said, "that you could help me."

I did not believe his bizarre story. Of course not. I would not be so stupid. Yet I hurried to a telephone.

It took me an hour to get Dr. Francis Merton in Baltimore. My first words must have startled him for he asked me sharply if I were ill. He would come down if I needed him. No, I was not ill, I answered with some irritation. I wanted to check up some facts for historical and biographical purposes. I realize now that I must have sounded quite beside myself.

He did remember a young country doctor out of Wilmington, Delaware, who had treated him as a boy for chorea, but he couldn't see what interest I had in the matter. It had been all of fifty years ago. Smith or Brown or Jones was the doctor's name, he thought. A colorless, sandy-haired youth with flat gray eyes who always wore gray English tweeds, married to a mousy, black-



haired wife, but he knew his stuff. Then Dr. Merton chuckled:

"I remember so well because he never sent my father a bill, and they finally ran him out of the county because he never paid one."

When I hung up the telephone I shook like a man in the grip of malaria.

My hand tightened on the key to Dr. Smith's office. At two o'clock that morning I returned. Once inside, I pinned black cloths over the windows. Then systematically I searched for the record which he must have kept. I found it after not more than half an hour—a small, Manila-covered book.

The record began more than twenty years before. The puppy which I had fed was No. 24. The book included a diary comment, the amount of vaccine given, and the technical data on the serums concocted in an effort to counteract the vaccine.

I read: "October 19, 1938—Animal No. 24, age six days. Gave one cc. O. A. V. from Lot X 22." On October 31st the record reported the eyes still closed. "November 15th I tried R. V. 104, two cc. December 1st, unchanged. (Will I never succeed!)" The last entry on the animal was September 15, 1939. It read: "Two cc R. V. 105. I must see Ralph. Someone must care for 24. Have determined to confide in the parson."

It was easy to see that O. A. V. referred to old age vaccine, given to the young puppy to stop maturation. The other vaccines referred to the effort to reclaim the dog, and I mentally tagged this as reclamation vaccine. It was the O. A. V. that I sought.

I found it readily enough in the electric refrigerator with the other vaccines, but before I could sterilize a hypodermic I heard a car stop back of the office. I turned out the lights, snatched the cloths from the windows and slipped cautiously out of the front door. Dawn was just coming when I let myself into my own house. I placed my precious package far back in the ice-box and went to my room.

I cannot properly describe my exhilaration as I lay in bed, tossing from side to side, visioning the long stretch of the future. The vial contained not more than five cubic centimeters and I alone could take it.

At eight o'clock the front-door knocker sounded. A few moments later my wife entered my room. I turned over, feigning the drowsiness of recent waking, and she put her hand gently on my head.

"It is Dr. and Mrs. Smith," she said. "They seem troubled."

I met them in my study. A stranger was with them and Dr. Smith introduced him as Ralph Jones. Jones appeared to be a man of about sixty, dressed as colorlessly as Dr. Smith and with the

same dead look in his eyes.

My wife excused herself to see about breakfast. Dr. Smith told me that they were leaving in a few minutes; they wanted to say good-by. They cherished my friendship. Would I please forget all that he had told me. Of course I would, and added fatuously that I still wished that he would see Dr. Merton.

"Dr. Merton can't help us," he said.

The air was strained, unreal. I wanted to be rid of these people who had failed to take advantage of the boon Henry Smith had conferred. The utter stupidity of their hopelessness irritated me. But they wouldn't leave, and the demands of hospitality made me simulate politeness.

I said something about a sermon. It was rude, but the strain was telling on me. I must get this fluid into my veins before these dead-live people talked me out of it.

Jones engaged me in conversation. I do not know to this day all that he said. It returns to me only in snatches.

"What is there in life for a man who can live for several lifetimes?" he asked. "His contemporaries pass; there is no competition; no real reason to surge ahead. You are a young man with ambition and energy. Your work grips you. It seems important. But if you had continuous life there would be too much time."

Never had I heard a more stupid statement. I agreed to it, however. Anything to be rid of them.

"Last week I buried my youngest son," he went on. "He died at eighty-two, surrounded by his children, rich in his accomplishments and his memories. Me," he added bitterly, "no matter how long I live, I can never know what it is to be eighty."

Absurd to wish to be eighty. Forty was the golden age.

Mary Smith pointed to an ancient live oak that spread its benediction over almost half an acre of lawn.

"Was that tree more lovely as an ugly sapling?" she asked. "I want nothing so much as to be a nice old lady with white hair, with grandchildren."

I was relieved when Dr. Smith joined us. His eyes sparkled with some of the rare vivacity which a puzzling case sometimes brought to them. I loved him at such times. Yes, he was going away. No—he smiled a real smile—he couldn't promise to keep in touch. Then they were gone and my wife called me to breakfast.

Nothing was wrong, I assured her with some irritation. I fidgeted for two hours until she left to attend a meeting of the library board. Then, excitement surging through me, I started for the refrigerator where I had placed the vaccine.

Again the knocker sounded. Dr. Harper stood

at the door. I did not ask him in, only stared at him coldly. He was so very unimportant.

"I understand Dr. Smith has left town," he said. "I'm rather sorry." He paused awkwardly. "Possibly I gossiped too much. You know how it is with us old fellows. Smith helped me out with my difficult cases. When you write him, I'd like for you to ask him to come back. It is going to be bad without any sort of hospital or surgery."

I stared rudely at the man. Then I stammered a few words. I think I told him that Dr. Smith expected to return. I'm not sure. Dressler, the druggist, drove up. He took no notice of Dr. Harper.

"You've heard, parson?" he asked.

"Heard?"

"Yes, about Dr. Smith."

He read the blank look on my face.

"He was drowned when his car crashed through the drawbridge barrier. Mrs. Smith was driving. There was a stranger with them."

I grabbed his arm.

"Drowned?"

"Yes, the car has been pulled out of the river. The three of them were drowned. And," he added, "there was a puppy in the car—a young puppy with his eyes not yet open."

The blow staggered me. I sat numbed for thirty minutes after Harper and Dressler had gone. Thirty minutes before I thought of my precious bottle—the last of its kind on earth, the last probably that would ever be on earth, and I was its sole possessor. I went to the icebox, removed the milk and water bottles with which I had screened it. Then my heart almost stopped.

Around the bottle was a small slip of paper held on by a rubber band. Trembling, I took it off and read from a prescription blank of Dr. Smith's.

No, parson. You will not be on my conscience, too. Live out your life as it should be lived.

The vial was empty. Then I remembered Dr. Smith's absence, while I talked with Mary Smith and Ralph Jones. I remembered the glint in his eyes when he had returned and I knew that my last chance was gone.

That was thirty years ago, in 1939. Tonight, in the autumn of 1969, I am seventy years old and I know that seventy is the age at which such a serum if ever rediscovered should be given. Seventy gives a man poise and experience. The silly, youthful flush of ambition has passed. Life has ripened as wine ripens in the cask. Philosophy and belief replace the gnawing agnosticism of younger years. Yes, it is the Indian Summer that is really beautiful. Dr. Henry Smith should not have destroyed his magic potion. He should have advised me to keep it until now.

THE END.

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THE WALL

By Robert Arthur

● It was a lovely bit of mural painting the imprisoned artist contributed to Death Row. It also had its uses—

— Illustrated by Kolliker

The first time I visited John Douglas at the penitentiary, after the higher court had upheld his conviction, I took with me a package of oil paints and brushes. He had requested them through the warden, who gave permission for him to receive them. The paints were compounded according to Douglas' own recipes by an old German with a tiny artists' supply shop tucked away in a Village hole-in-the-wall, and he had written that he was most anxious for them.

The paints and brushes having been examined in the prison office, a guard led me to Douglas' cell, through an interminable series of iron doors. He was in a cell at the far end of the little section reserved for the doomed, and when I stopped in front of the barred door I saw that he was already engaged in painting a mural of some sort on the concrete wall.

He had sketched in the outline of what seemed to be a section of stone wall made up of great chunks of granite, and was so absorbed in his work that for a moment he was unaware of me. Then he turned, saw us, and put down the brush.

"Hello, Henry," he greeted me, with characteristic booming heartiness. "You've brought them? Good!"

The guard let me into the cell and carefully locked the door behind me. Then he took his post where he could watch each move we made. The procedure wasn't quite usual, but, then, neither was it usual for a condemned man to be allowed painting materials.

Douglas took the paints and brushes, glanced at them with satisfaction, then put them aside.

"Sit down, Henry," he invited, indicating his narrow bunk. "Use the couch. I'll sit here on the floor, so that Jones, outside, can be sure nothing but words passes between us."

He sat down on the concrete, cross-legged like a Vogt, folded his arms and beamed at me, his blue eyes bright.

"This is a wonderful posture for concentrating, Henry," he told me. "I learned it in Tibet two years ago. Try it sometime when you have a tough case to prepare for. Also it's quite convenient when the accommodations don't include