

the banisters: no one ever found him waltzing in his room for the sheer love of life. An accountant had his authority to maintain.

Although Mr. White was guilty of nothing more than anticipation by an hour or two, he planned his raids with a criminal's cunning. He knew that the girl bought the cakes in the morning, arranged them on the plate, put the plate in a tin and the tin in a cupboard with a sliding door. All he had to do was wait until she went out for the mail, step into the adjoining room, help himself to a cake, and retire behind his desk with his spoils.

The accountant never became careless. If the sliding door was open when he went to the cupboard, he took care to leave it open. If the lid of the tin was slightly raised, he left it in exactly the same position. And if there was one cake on the plate more conspicuous than the rest—a cream puff, for example, always stood out—he left it severely alone, confining his depredations to the commoner cakes less easily missed.

He had one or two narrow escapes. There was the day when he dropped the tin on the floor and had only enough time to shovel the biscuits back before the secretary returned. On another occasion the chief clerk surprised him halfway through a slice of fruit cake, so that he had to swallow convulsively and park the rest in his drawer. It was mouldy when he found it again. There was the time, too, when he was called to the phone with the remains of a bun in his mouth, his speaking voice reduced to a gurgle. The operator had to ask him twice if he was working.

But it was not until the new girl arrived that his troubles really began. She was much sharper than the rest, and less easily awed by the weight of his authority. It was no time at all before she was asking the most disconcerting questions.

"You know," she said to him one afternoon, "I could have sworn I put nine cakes on the plate. Now there are only eight."

Mr. White really didn't know anything about that. Affecting to despise food as one of the grosser necessities of life, he dismissed the question with a fine sweeping carelessness.

"It's very odd," she persisted.

"Perhaps it's the mice," he suggested. "They're very bad this year."

"But mice," she said scornfully, "don't open tins."

"Ah, but they're cunning devils," he told her. "You never know with mice."

Nothing more was said, but Mr. White thought it wise to wait a day or

two before resuming his raids. He was no sooner back to his old tricks when the chit of a girl was at him again.

"I'm sure," she said, "there's someone taking these cakes."

"Oh, come, now," he protested, "we're all of us very well fed."

"Nevertheless, I'm positive."

"It might be the office boy," he suggested. "He always looks hungry to me, and he always looks hungrily at you."

Once again the matter was dropped and after a week or two of abstinence Mr. White returned to the tin. Did he but know it, the game was nearly up.

It was a day full of spring and the dust of spring cleaning when the trap was sprung. The girl went out as usual to get the mail. And when the clatter of her feet had died away, Mr. White tiptoed as usual into her room. He opened the cupboard and lifted the lid of the tin. There on the plate were a dozen of the most delicious-looking cakes he had ever seen. Mr. White for once was unable to make up his mind. He simply couldn't decide which one he liked best. He hesitated, and his arm was still deep in the cupboard when the door handle rattled and the secretary confronted him.

Thoughts flashed through Mr. White's head quicker than visions through the mind of a drowning man. He thought of all the things he would like to have said—of hunger new born of abstinence, of his moral right to cakes he had helped to pay for, of an accountant's pleasure to do as he damn well pleased. But the words, when they came, were quite uncontrollable.

"Oh," he said idiotically, "I didn't expect you so soon."

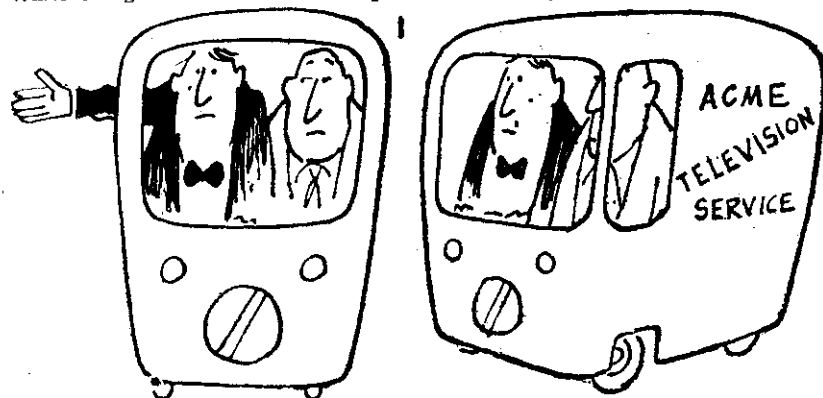
The girl just stood there, shocked and silent. Her expression told him everything—that cream puffs were but a beginning, a tentative first step to a raid on the petty cash and ultimately to full embezzlement. The prison gates swinging open before him, Mr. White surrendered there and then. All his painfully-acquired will power went up in smoke.

"I wonder," he said weakly, "if I might have one of your cigarettes."

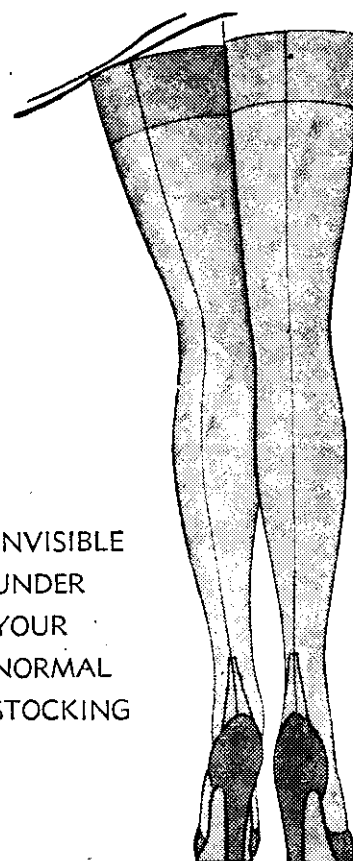
Wordless still, the girl opened her purse and tipped the contents of a packet towards him. He took one. It felt hard and cold, like the butt of a revolver handed to a man with a crime to expiate. He felt a wild desire to press the cork tip to his forehead. But there was no quick way out for him. It would be lingering, like the doctors said.

"Ah, well," he told her lamely, "a man has to die some time, and one way's as good as another."

And he put a match to his cigarette.



David Hughes.  
(C) Punch



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