

THE TIME

Recently

(ALFRED SHIPMAN's office; At the moment, ROGER HIRSH is by himself)

ROGER

(Shouts into an adjoining room) Send someone to the pharmacy. I need some aspirin! (He picks up a pitcher off the desk, tips it, assuming it is empty; but some water spills onto his shoes) And have them bring me a fresh pitcher of water! (He sits down) My God, I'm worn out! And I'm shivering in this heat! I must have a fever! (He waves his fingers in front of his face) And now I'm seeing spots in front of my eyes! And that ass, Shipman, insists on reading this report today at the general meeting! My God, I hate that man! And to think he got the Presidency over ME! And to lord it over me he has me working as hard as a galley slave! Well, if everything comes off all right today, he's promised me a nice bonus. I'll retire soon. But if it doesn't come off... Well, I can be nasty, too! My wife can verify that!

(From the other room, there comes the sound of applause, cheering, etc; We hear ALFRED's voice: "Thank you, I'm very moved;" He enters with a golf putter)

ALFRED

(Still speaking into the other room) I will treasure this, I can tell you that. Thanks again. (He waves the putter, then comes over to ROGER) Ah, my friend, this is quite a day.

ROGER

Let me congratulate you, too, sir.

ALFRED

Good grief, Roger, I know it's a special day, but there's no need to be so formal!

(And then KAREN, ALFRED's Secretary enters, with some papers for him to sign)

KAREN

You forgot to sign these, Alfred, and they have to be in the mail tomorrow!

ALFRED

(Signing them and smiling, to ROGER) How would I get along without Karen?

ROGER

(Deadly serious) We all wonder.

KAREN

(To ROGER) He'd probably be fired.

ALFRED

This isn't the right time to be facetious.

KAREN

Who's being facetious?

ALFRED

(Hands her the papers) You can get these in the mail now.

KAREN

It's about time. (She exits).

ALFRED

Sometimes I think I let Karen become a bit too familiar.

ROGER

(About the putter) You don't play golf, do you?

ALFRED

It's time I took it up. I need some exercise.

ROGER

Do you have any idea how many men who take up golf in their middle years drop dead on the golf course?

ALFRED

(Irrked) Have you finished that report yet, Roger?

ROGER

I'll have it finished in less than half an hour.

ALFRED

I hope so. That's when the Board of Directors is due.

ROGER

Have no fear.

ALFRED

This is very important to me. You're sure you'll have it done in time?

ROGER

It's in the bank.

ALFRED

Let me see what you've done. (He looks at the report, rubs his head) Nevertheless, I hardly slept a wink last night and then with all the excitement today, I feel terrible!.
(He sets the report down) I'm sure you've done a superb job.

ROGER

Only a few pages to go. (He sits down, begins working on the report) I don't mind telling you I've got a devil of a headache myself. It's making me dizzy! (He rubs his eyes, etc).

ALFRED

Something else unpleasant happened this morning. Your wife called me.

ROGER

I suppose she was complaining again.

ALFRED

In a way.

ROGER

That woman! She's never happy!

ALFRED

She said you were chasing her around the house with a loaded shotgun.

ROGER

Ridiculous nonsense!

ALFRED

I hope so.

ROGER

It was not loaded.

ALFRED

Good heavens, man, what next!

ROGER

Listen, I know this is a big day for you.

ALFRED

So I hope you're not going to make a shambles of it for me.

ROGER

No. But I would like to ask you a small favor.

ALFRED

You'll get your bonus, I promise you.

ROGER

I mean please keep your nose out of my family business!

ALFRED

Listen to me, my friend. You really need to keep that temper of yours under control. And when it comes to women, you're like a senior citizen's version of Jack the Ripper! I don't know why you hate them so much.

ROGER

And I don't know why you don't!

ALFRED

Now, now, let's not bring MY wife into this discussion.

ROGER

Let's drop the subject altogether.

ALFRED

You're right. Why put a damper on such a magnificent day. The employees have given me this beautiful putter, and I believe this afternoon the Board is planning to give a speech in my honor and present me with a gold watch.

ROGER

Who told you?

ALFRED

No one had to tell me. I bought the watch and wrote the speech myself. Frankly, I was afraid none of them would think of it on his own. And anyway, I couldn't trust them to do it properly. I mean who would know better than me all the improvements I've made in my five years? Don't I have a right to be proud of myself?

ROGER

No one knows that better than you do.

ALFRED

True! I have developed for this bank a reputation for trustworthiness, for... what?

ROGER

Honesty?

ALFRED

Absolutely so! And for... neatness. (He picks up a piece of paper from the floor and, giving ROGER a nasty glance, throws it in the wastebasket).

ROGER

Sorry, sir.

ALFRED

And for Goodness's sake, look at you, Roger. Your tie is askew, there's a coffee stain on your shirt, your shirttail is hanging out, your shoes need a shine, and that jacket! Good grief, what color is that!

ROGER

I think they call it salamander.

ALFRED

What's wrong with you?

ROGER

I'm afraid I'm a slob.

ALFRED

But the Board will be here in less than half an hour. Do something about it!

ROGER

Yes, all right. (He starts to tuck in his shirt, etc.)

ALFRED

And I've got to have that report!

ROGER

I can't do two things at once!

ALFRED

Sometimes I wonder if you can do ONE thing at once!

ROGER

I'm sorry, but I'm working myself to death! My ankles are swollen as thick as tree trunks. My fingers are inflamed, and my head feels like someone is trapped inside it and he's trying to punch his way out through my eyeballs!

ALFRED

Is that any excuse for wearing such an ugly jacket?

ROGER

Well, when the Board members arrive, I'll keep out of sight.

ALFRED

All right, all right! Just get me that report.

ROGER

(He works for a few seconds) There are so many distractions!

ALFRED

What now!

ROGER

(A few drunken cheers from the other room; 'To the Boss!' 'Hear, here!' etc.) Well, those maniacs, for one thing!

ALFRED

Well, they're celebrating my anniversary. It's only natural they'd be happy for me.

ROGER

And then last week your wife said something about some Internet shares and how worried you were about them.

ALFRED

Good Lord, I must be talking in my sleep again!

ROGER

If MY wife had said something like that! (He draws his finger across his throat).

ALFRED

Let's think of something more pleasant, please.

ROGER

Your wife should be here any minute.

ALFRED

(Sarcastic) Thank you!

ROGER

Been to visit your in-laws, hasn't she?

ALFRED

Yes. She was planning to spend a few extra days, but it didn't work out. I suppose she wanted to be here for the party. Of course I'll be glad to see her. (A sudden facial tic) It's just that I'm rather tired and she'll expect to go out tonight, and originally I had some plans with a couple of the Board members. Now I imagine I'll have to listen to stories about her dragon-lady mother and her hare-brained sister. But naturally, I'll be extremely glad to see her.

ROGER

Naturally.

ALFRED

As long as I'm well prepared.

ROGER

You'd better be prepared.

ALFRED

What do you mean?

ROGER

I hear her now.

ALFRED

That can't be! I thought I had another hour, at least... (He looks at his watch)...

(And then ANITA SHIPMAN enters, as the saying goes 'Like a Freight Train').

ANITA

Darling! (She rushes to ALFRED, kisses him). It's good to be home! How much have you missed me?

ALFRED

You'll never know.

ANITA

(To ROGER) Hello, Roger, how are you?

ROGER

You don't want to know.

ANITA

The same, I see.

ALFRED

Well, my dear, how was your little vacation?

ANITA

(She sighs) Oh Alfred, there's really too much to tell—

ALFRED

Good, because we're rather busy—

ANITA

But I'll certainly try to tell it all. Well, first off, on the way to Ohio, we suddenly hit this incredible storm. I was sure the wings were going to blow off the plane. This nice young man sitting in the next seat, assured me that was impossible, but I can promise you I honestly believed it was all over. I really saw my life pass in front of my eyes. I actually saw the Barbie doll I had when I was seven years old—

ALFRED

Well, thank God you're all right now. Now then, Roger...

ANITA

And then, when we finally did arrive, nearly an hour late, no one was there to meet me. For some reason, they were under the impression the plane was due at eight o'clock in the evening, not the morning... (She looks at ALFRED) However, it seems you don't care, so maybe I'm simply wasting my breath.

ALFRED

No, no, nothing like that. I'm sorry, my dear. It's just that... (He shrugs and looks to ROGER for help).

ROGER

Maybe you know about the celebration, Mrs. Shipman? It's Alfred, Mr. Shipman's, fifth year as President, and the members of the Board will be here in a short while.

ALFRED

(Interrupting with a strained smile) In a very short while! Now then, Roger, about that report.

ROGER

All right, all right, sir! I was just being polite to your wife. (He retires to a desk and begins working on the report).

ANITA

Naturally, I'm excited about all that, Alfred. I remember that excellent speech you wrote for the Chairman of the Board. Is he planning to read that today? (ROGER pointedly clears his throat).

ALFRED

(After wasting an irritated glance at ROGER) Listen, my dear, I'm sure you are incredibly tired and you'll no doubt want to go somewhere for dinner tonight. Why don't I ask someone to give you a lift home so you can take a little nap before this evening?

ANITA

I think you're right.

ALFRED

Fine! I'll call Karen.

ANITA

But first I really have to tell you all about my trip. I think I mentioned the young man sitting beside me on the plane? He was a graduate student, in anthropology, I believe. But the point is he was flirting with me the entire trip. Can you imagine that: an old woman like me! I swear he was young enough to be my... Well, my much younger brother, anyway, but I simply couldn't shake him off. And talk! Good Gracious, I swear to you, I couldn't get one word in edgewise! You could never believe the way he rambled on—

ALFRED

I'm sure I couldn't.

ANITA

At the airport I had to go to the ladies' room, and I finally lost him.

ALFRED

How fortunate.

ROGER

(Mutters under his breath) For him!

ANITA

(Rushing on, heedlessly) But the real problem is my sister, Charlene. I'm afraid she's going to give Mother a stroke! Her behavior, even in this day and age, well, I can hardly bring myself to talk about it—

ALFRED

Then maybe you shouldn't.

(Then from the other room, KAREN's voice: 'No! You can't go in there. Please wait!')

KAREN

(Now entering) I'm really sorry, but there's a woman here who absolutely DEMANDS on seeing you personally!

ALFRED

Now? Who is she?

KAREN

(Shrugs) Well, here she is. Ask her yourself.

(And at that point, ANNA MERKLE enters the room; She is small but assertive)

ANNA

Ah. Here he is.

ALFRED

I'm very sorry, Miss or Ms. Or... but we're extremely busy today. My secretary—

ANNA

I came right up to you, because I could tell immediately that you were the person in charge. You are the President, are you not?

ALFRED

(Flattered) That's right. But...

ANNA

How do you do, I'm Anna Merkle, wife of Herman Merkle, who was a loan officer at your Briar Valley branch. That is until his unfortunate accident.

ALFRED

(Mildly alarmed) His accident?

ANNA

Of course the police said it was his fault. Can you believe it? They insisted he was drunk! But then small town policemen aren't the brightest human beings in the world! We all know that!

ALFRED

Of course I'm sorry, Mrs. Merkle, but we are really incredibly busy today. Now if you'd like to make an appointment, this is my secretary, Mrs. Steel—

ANNA

But this won't take a minute. I'm sure you'll be able to straighten everything out. My husband has told me many times what a kind and generous and understanding man you are.

ALFRED

(Flattered) Well, I probably have a minute. (He scowls at ROGER) I'm waiting for a report.

ANNA

If you can just give me a minute, sir, sixty seconds...

KAREN

(Noticing ANITA) Oh. Hello there, Mrs. Shipman, it's nice to see you here today.

ANITA

It's nice to be back, Karen, let me tell you. You look especially nice today.

KAREN

Thanks. It's because of the anniversary party. I'm sure you know all about that. But you've been to visit your mother, haven't you? I hope she's all right?

ANNA

(Clears her throat) The point is in that accident, Herman ruptured a disc in his back. And then a month ago he began to receive only two-thirds of his pay every two weeks!

ALFRED

I'm sure he explained the sick leave policy. That happens after a certain number of months. (He shrugs) Or is it years?

ANNA

Oh, I understand that. Naturally, I don't think it's fair. Nevertheless—

ALFRED

That's not under my personal control, of course. Still, there are ways to appeal. I assume his medical expenses are being taken care of?

ANITA

(Looks annoyed at ANNA, takes KAREN aside somewhat) Mother is fine. At least for the moment, but my sister, Charlene, now that's another story! Maybe you remember her? She was here with mother a couple of years ago?

KAREN

Of course I do. She was a beautiful young woman.

ANITA

Maybe a little TOO beautiful, if you know what I mean?

ANNA

(Looks annoyed at ANITA) But that's not what I'm complaining about. The problem is when I received Herman's check last Friday five hundred dollars had been taken out of it!

ALFRED

Five hundred dollars?

ANNA

That's right! I was told he'd withdrawn that money from his retirement account, but how could he have done that?

ALFRED

Well, I would agree with you that it's not necessarily a wise thing to do, but it is permissible.

ANNA

Without my approval!

ALFRED

He didn't tell you he was withdrawing the money?

ANNA

No! And I think it's disgraceful that a man is permitted to withdraw money from a fund which has been created for the future protection and security of his family, his WIFE, without her even knowing about it, much less giving her approval! How can that be, Mr. Shipman! But then, maybe I'm asking the wrong person. Maybe you can't realize what that money means to someone in my position.

ALFRED

Believe me, Mrs. Merkle, you have my deepest sympathy.

ANNA

Now that's what I was hoping you'd say. Herman always told me how understanding you are.

KAREN

(Looks back at an irked ANITA) Excuse me Mrs. Shipman, but is your sister in trouble?

ANITA

(Sotto voce, as ANNA looks at her) I don't know if I can even talk about it...

KAREN

Oh. Well, I'm sorry I brought it up.

ANITA

But maybe it will help to tell someone—

ALFRED

(Tactfully diverting ANNA) I'm very sorry about your problem, Mrs. Merkle, but I really don't see how I can help you.

ANNA

Of course that's the response I should have expected! My son-in-law, Wilbur, told me I would be wasting my time!

ALFRED

I hope that's not true.

ANNA

Bankers have no heart, he told me. But then Herman, my husband, said that you were an entirely different type. He said you were a kind and compassionate man. Look at these, sir! And these are only a few of the medical bills! (She pulls a bunch of papers from her capacious purse).

ALFRED

You did tell me the medical expenses were being taken care of, didn't you?

ANNA

If you only knew what I've been through, but then, as my son-in-law, Kurt, says, 'You can't get blood from a stone!'

ALFRED

I thought your son-in-law's name was Wilbur.

ANNA

It is. I have two of them. Of course I realize I'm only a poor defenseless housewife. And when they talk about the 'little people,' well, I'm, one of the littlest. (She takes a hankie from her purse and manages to wring a tear from her eye, then blows her nose loudly).

KAREN

(Turns back to ANITA) Now, now, naturally, I'm willing to listen, Mrs. Shipman.

ANITA

For heaven's sake, Karen, call me Anita!

ALFRED

Listen, Mrs. Merkle, at this bank we care about all our employees, and their wives, too, naturally.

ANNA

That's very kind of you, but as you know, actions speak louder than words.

ALFRED

Well... But what can I do?

ANNA

I've thought about that, and if it were possible to take up some kind of collection, simply to replace the money taken from the retirement fund, it would be a great relief to me.

ALFRED

I'm afraid I don't have the authority to insist on something like that.

ANNA

I could be a widow tomorrow! (She manages a few weak sobs).

ANITA

(Looks back at KAREN) I can tell you this. She's become a terrible embarrassment to Mother.

KAREN

(Now becoming mildly interested) Oh, really? How is she doing that?

ANITA

She's making a spectacle of herself!

KAREN

Yes? Go on.

ANITA

Chasing after the local Mayor like a tramp!

KAREN

No!

ANITA

Of course it's got everyone in town talking. But maybe you don't know what people are like in small towns.

KAREN

They're pretty much the same everywhere.

ALFRED

Mrs. Merkle, believe me, I'm very upset by your problem, but I really have a lot to deal with today. I really think you should talk to my Vice President, Mr. Hirsh. Roger? (Panic) Roger, I need you!