

# THE HOURS ARE GOOD



*No doubt of it, success  
calls for a salute —  
but a one-gun salute?*

By GORDON R. DICKSON

Illustrated by Burns

**T**HE mists of preconditioning rolled away. Harold Smith-Jones came back to himself on the hospital-like metal table of the Technical Center. They were just cranking the hood up off him.

"There you go," said one of the white-coated technicians, giving him a hand up. Off the table and once more on his feet, Harold frowned at the youngster.

"— sir!" he corrected.

"There you go, sir," the technician made haste to amend.

Harold's frown relaxed. He did not approve of this modern laxity — but they were good boys. He did not approve of riding subordinates, either.

He allowed himself to be helped on with his regency coat. A tall, blond young boy was standing back from the group a bit, waiting. His new decoy, no



doubt. A good type, in jumper and slacks, athletic, his only adornment the thin, sharp-edged strip of polished steel that held the watch on his wrist. The boy was somewhat tight-faced and looked nervous.

"Cheer up, there!" said Harold, giving him a friendly whack on the back. "All in the day's work."

The decoy managed a grin. A trifle sick — but a grin. Good lad, thought Harold, and, leaving the room, headed out for the job.

As he stepped, a moment later, out of the gray building's austere entrance, the brilliant September sunlight struck him a sudden, dazzling blow, and for a moment the street before him wavered and blurred.

"Steady on, now — " he thought, catching hold of the left arch of the entrance. He felt the gray stone rough under his palms, took a deep breath, and the street steadied and came back in focus.

The preconditioning again, of course, he told himself. It must be he had developed a sensitivity to the hypnotic drug they used to put him in a receptive state for instructions. Slight allergic reaction on his part, possibly. He made a mental note to mention the fact in his report later.

There was no point in his being uncomfortable. On the other hand, it would hardly do

to take on a job without the protection of full preconditioning. Under the latest laws dealing with this sort of thing, the opposition had the right to question him if they happened to get their hands on him before he reached the street afterward. Only if he showed obvious evidence of preconditioning, so that he could tell them nothing of how he had planned the job, would there be no point in their doing so. And such questioning could be — well, there was no point in dwelling on unpleasant details.

Not that anything would go wrong. Not with a job he himself had researched and planned. Not with a possible new world's record staring him in the face.

Thirty-four consecutives. *Thirty-four!* Without a hitch, or a scratch upon him. He would take a little vacation after this one, thought Harold. Rest on his laurels.

He took another deep breath and stepped hard on his left foot. The outline of the small plastic gun could be felt through the inner sole, and at the feel of it the old magic flooded through him once again, like a spate of warm wine. Ah, he thought, never mind fame and riches, never mind palaces and beautiful women. Give me a gun.

With confidence and even good



humor returned, he got down onto the nearest strip of the moving sidewalk before him and let it carry him off.

The sidewalk slid him off down the block and swept around a corner. As he came around the curve, he caught sight of his own dark image, obscurely reflected in a passing store display window. Perfect, perfect!

**A** HEAVY-BODIED, somewhat small man in regency coat, breeches and jackboots — with lilies of the valley in the little vases at each ankle. Thank God nowadays everybody dressed the way they wished. When he had been a boy, back in the nineteen-sixties, everybody he remembered had dressed alike. But now, with the overpopulation pressures, nobody cared much whether the individual lived or died, let alone how he dressed. A damned, dull time, the past, no matter what the historical entertainments liked to pretend. He preferred the present.

Of course, for business reasons, mainly. With any costume permissible, it was that much easier to create the image of a harmless, pompous, little fat man.

On the other hand, thought Harold, his feet changing slide-ways without consulting his brain, maybe his liking for the present was based on the fact he

was in a special situation. Few people had his opportunities for what you might call excitement and adventure. After all, he reminded himself, he had originally intended to be a wine-taster, having that wonderful discrimination of taste that is born in one person in a million. If it hadn't been for that little psychotic upset (but everyone had them these days) he might not have lost it, and never gone into this business at all. And never discovered what an aptitude he had for it. Ah, yes — "*Some are born great. Some have greatness thrust upon them . . .*"

On the other hand . . . Harold found himself glancing at a street sign, and changed to another moving sidewalk with the automated reaction of good preconditioning. On the other hand, aptitude itself was really only the cornerstone of his success. Study, study — plan, plan — practice, practice — *that* was the real secret; that and his attention to details like seldom using the same decoy more than twice, and little touches like the lilies of the valley on his boots. And the man in the street thought all it took was a good target eye and a touch of sadism.

Harold stepped off the sidewalk into an entrance blazoned above with the legend MOTHER TURNER'S TEA ROOMS. Marvelous,



thought Harold, the way the pre-conditioning had brought him right to the place when every jot of knowledge about the job had been hidden from his mind by the hypnotic block. He'd had no idea where he was heading until the moment of recognition right now. The boys in the technical department deserved a commendation in his report. And would get it.

Entering, he nodded to himself. One of the decently exclusive gathering places. Wisely, these places kept their prices up and excluded the salaried mob, who never ceased to be baffled by the fact that the Tea Rooms offered no better drinks or accommodations than their own cocktail lounges. They missed the point entirely.

Harold passed on into a dim-lit foyer. Two men converged on him immediately.

"Mind stepping on this metal plate, sir?" — hum of detectors.

"Excuse me, sir." — hands patting him swiftly all over.

"Not at all, boys. I know you've got a job to do." Harold's voice rang heartily; a generous man, a jolly, fat man with an untroubled conscience. With a cheerful wave of his hand, he turned to the right. There, before an arched interior entrance, was a placard.

**WILLIAM X. KLANNERT**  
*Editorial Auction*

**T**HAT'S right — the little nodule of pre-planted information said in Harold's head, releasing its interior surprise of information. Klannert was the author of that best-selling new philosophical novel, *Existence's Worth*; and this was one of those publicity affairs promoted by his publishers under the guise of auctioning off a subsidiary right or two. Really, just a good public relations excuse to introduce Klannert to magazine editors, TV and film people, etc. He himself, Harold pre-remembered suddenly, was supposed to edit one of the intellectual weeklies under the name of Spence.

"Oh, Mr. Spence! Here you are! Martini?"

Harold became suddenly aware of a seductive blonde in flame-purple, standing just inside the entrance to the placarded room and tempting him in with a full cocktail glass. A hostess, of course — preconditioned to recognize all those to whom invitations had been distributed. Harold himself (or the technical boys) had been thorough with this detail, too. Harold went graciously toward her.

"Why, thanks, no," he said. "I never drink." True enough. Did the gunmen of the old West — the good ones, that is — drink while awaiting their moment of



truth? And how much more foolish for Harold. "Iced tea, perhaps."

"Of course, Mr. Spence. Of course!"

She swept off to get him one. He glanced about the room. There, that was Klannert over there — the peaceful-faced, silver-haired man seated on the little dais at the end of the oval room, a crowd clustered around him.

"Your iced tea, Mr. Spence."

"Thank you, ma'mselle. Cheers!"

"Oh, *cheerio*, Mr. Spence!"

He continued on into the room, glass in hand, caught up immediately in the good-sized crowd.

"Oops, terribly sorry — " He had collided with a small brunette.

"My fault, really. Say, I don't know you, do I? I'm Hepzibah Collins. *Wasteland*."

"Aneas Spence. *The Fabliau Weekly*."

"You must give me your biog and I'll have it preconditioned into me the next time at the office. I do feel it's everybody's duty to know everyone they meet, don't you?"

"Absolutely." Harold fumbled artistically in a huge pocket of his regency coat. "I don't seem to have a biog slip with me — "

"Oh, dear. Well, tape it to me.

There's Samantha! Sam!"

She disappeared into the crowd. Moving off himself, Harold came on to a small empty balcony and stepped up on it for a look at the crowd.

The number of people he saw rang a sudden icy tocsin of warning in his mind. There were at least twenty or thirty more here than his formal estimate of attendance had calculated. In a small room with a single exit, such a mob could hamper escape; and he would not legally be free from capture or reprisal until he was actually out of the building.

Harold carefully set down his glass of iced tea and took another deep breath, putting his weight once more on his left foot to feel the solid shape of the gun. The situation at once became clearer. He congratulated himself on his early study of Yoga. Like every other bit of knowledge he had painstakingly acquired, it paid off a thousandfold at times.

NOW THAT he thought of it more objectively, the crowd might not hamper him. It might even help him by interfering with pursuit. Harold smiled. Once again his wisdom in leaving the final situation fluid and adaptable was proving itself.

He turned his attention to the business of spotting Klannert's



bodyguards. Klannert would be expecting someone to try to do a job on him sooner or later. Everyone in the public eye knew such things were inevitable. Harold let his gaze search the crowd. That girl — Hepzibah Collins, the *Wasteland* editor — was one, of course. An expert frisker, undoubtedly; her collision with him would have been for the purpose of doubling-checking the detectives' search. Odd existence, thought Harold, momentarily struck by that strange, sad, philosophical turn of mind that had been growing on him these last few years. Imagine making a living going through life bumping up against people! Still, some sorts of persons might actually enjoy it.

The hostess was undoubtedly another.

And then that tall, heavy senatorial type. An excellent actor, but Harold had not studied over fifty thousand job reports in the past fifteen years for nothing. This man had been a bodyguard in the Claire Dumont job in April '89.

Then there was — good lord, whom did they expect to fool with that? That beetle-browed plug-ugly who was supposed, no doubt, to look so much like a bodyguard that nobody could suspect he would be one. And that was the lot — no, wait. That

small old lady over there. She looked perfectly innocent; but the minute Harold's eyes noted the way she held her silver mesh purse, he knew. Those hands had had judo and karate training.

Harold paused, out of thoroughness, to take one last survey of the crowd. But there were no more opposition people to be uncovered. If there had been, he would have known who they were, even if his conscious gaze could find no flaw in them. Sixth sense, in his case, so many people in the Organization said. Nothing of the sort! It was the result of long years of study so intense that few minds could have stood up under it.

But it was time for that decoy of his to be here. Harold turned toward the entrance and spotted the slacks-and-jumper outfit. Then he stiffened slightly. The young fool!

His decoy had brought a good-looking redheaded girl along as part of his camouflage. What was the matter with the boy? Had he been asleep during Harold's lectures to the apprentice classes? A decoy's job was to draw the attention of the bodyguards *gradually* upon himself. Any woman could either attract too much attention or else sidetrack it unduly. With this woman — well, it was damned lucky that Harold's timetable had not called



for elaborate pre-action proceedings.

For the boy's own good, Harold should censure him in his report. But on the other hand, he thought, softening, why make an official matter of it? Teach the lad a lesson instead — Harold smiled slightly to himself — by taking that good-looking redhead away from him afterward. Harold seldom went out of his way now for female companionship, but it was an accepted fact that no woman could resist a successful professional in his line of work. And it would drive home to the boy that lessons were to be learned. Possibly save his life as well, someday.

It was time to begin work.

**H**AROLD left the little balcony and went down into the crowd. The cocktails, he noticed, had been flowing freely and the people were already beginning to clump in little gossipy or argumentative groups. He wandered around a while and then joined one about halfway between the balcony and the dais where Klannert still sat.

"— Nobel Prize," a short, beligerent, broad-shouldered, middle-aged man was saying. He had a bushy, black, ill-trimmed spade beard which he was thrusting at all his hearers.

"Deserved every cent of it! What? Man is more than merely a sustaining mechanism! No one like Klannert!"

"Come now," said Harold, smoothly intruding. "Mechanism, after all, is an accepted sociological theory. All of us like to see it questioned, for form's sake, if nothing else. But to throw it out completely —"

"Who're you?" said the bearded man.

"Spence. *Fabliau Weekly*."

"I know your rag!" said the bearded man. "Didn't think you'd have the nerve to stick your nose in here!"

Smiling — for the *Fabliau* was wholly imaginary — Harold bent his head politely.

"I think my lead article in the issue before last answers your arguments," he said.

"Lies, lies, lies —" sputtered the bearded man. But Harold was already on his way to another group one step nearer to Klannert.

He paused with this group — they were also singing Klannert's praises, but Harold refused to let himself be drawn into conversation this time. He had already made the point — for anyone who happened to be taking an unduly suspicious interest in him — that he was not trying to make himself unobtrusive by hiding his own point of view. In







fact, he had avoided drawing unusual attention to himself by drawing a small amount of the usual sort of attention to himself. At the second group he listened a while, smiled noncommittally and moved on.

That feeling, almost of sadness, slipped over him again as he continued to circle about the room.

It was all so simple, if you knew what you were doing. Experience taught you what the opposition would expect. You gave them something else. It was as easy as that. So simple it was almost a little pitiful.

Look at Klannert up there. A good man, by the standards of those who considered themselves good men. But he had offended somebody or other. Who, of course, would never be known; the Organization was strict about protecting clients. But somewhere, somebody had signed the necessary credit chit — and here was Harold, about to put a period to the life that had been considered good.

And for what? Not really for the money. A little for the excitement of the business. Possibly a little more because this would make a new world's record. But really because that was the way the world wagged these days — for himself, for Klannert, for everybody.

**WE ARE ALL** bound by the wheel of life, thought Harold, with a touch of soft melancholy. All to the same wheel. After this, he *would* take a vacation, get away for a long rest to some place where he could be a common man once more among men. It was time, and overtime, for a change.

He stopped. He had worked his way clear across the room on a slant. He stood now by some egg-yellow wall draperies, not fifteen feet from where Klannert sat. Elsewhere about the room, the people were all huddled in small, busily talking groups. There was space to run between the groups. Now. Once excitement had struck, they would mill around, getting in each other's way and in the way of pursuit. But by that time, he should be in the foyer, if not out into the safety of the public street.

He looked for his decoy. There the boy was, still with the girl, standing out among the less attractive mortals grouped around Klannert, very satisfactorily. The hostess, Harold noted with satisfaction, was standing with apparent casualness quite close to them.

Harold smiled entirely to himself, internally, with that same touch of melancholy. He glanced around without seeming to. His glass of iced tea was almost



finished. He drained the last few drops from it; and as he did, it slipped from his fingers.

It dropped with a soft thump to the thick carpet, rolling half out of sight under the draperies. Exclaiming in annoyance, he bent over as if to pick it up.

Instead, without any undue attempt at concealment, his hand went to the toe of his left boot. Toe and hand lifted together, the top part of the boot and bootsole peeled away from the bottom half, and the plastic gun slipped out into his fingers. He straightened up —

— and something tremendously heavy crashed down on him from behind. He was aware of himself suddenly, on his knees and going down further, with the full weight of another adult on his back. His head was foggy. He could still see and hear, but everything had a dreamlike quality about it. He felt the thick, deep carpet pressing up against the palms of his hands as he flung them out to break his fall. He had a sudden kaleidoscopic glimpse of nearby faces turning to stare in his direction. And then, thin and clear, above the sound of voices still talking, he heard a woman scream.

The weight on his back rolled suddenly off. Turning his head, Harold saw that his assailant had

been the belligerent, spade-bearded man who had been holding forth to the first group of talkers. The man was now scrambling to his feet and launching himself in the direction of the room's entrance. For a second the crowd opened out a little, and Harold had a sudden glimpse of his decoy, bare-wristed, running for the entrance, while the girl with him stopped and half turned, lifting a gun with cool expertness and sending several shots into the spade-bearded man.

Scrambling to his own feet as the spade-bearded man went down, Harold caught sight of Klannert stumbling down from the dais. His hands were up at his chest; and sticking out from between two fingers was a thin strip of metal, a strip of steel about the width of a wristwatch band. As Harold watched, Klannert's knees gave way and he sank down below the bodies of the people who were rushing toward him.

**H**AROLD grabbed at his fallen gun — but in that second, hard hands seized him and hustled him through the crowd. Twisting his head back over his shoulder, he saw he was in the grasp of one of the detective-bodyguards and an unidentified stranger. They impelled him swiftly into the lobby.



"They'll shoot me now — " thought Harold, his heart yammering at his throat. Then, like the thudding of some huge, sickening velvet hammer, despair came to shatter his panic. What did it matter? Caught on the job — a failure — execution left to a decoy. Or had he been double-crossed?

He became aware that those holding him had stopped, and the detective had stepped across the room, leaving Harold pinned by the stranger in an efficient judo hold. Harold could not turn his head to see, or make out the words of the conversation. Suddenly they were interrupted by an ugly laugh from the detective. Heavy footsteps returned behind him.

He was grabbed and rushed forward to the open entrance — hurled roughly out into the street.

Harold staggered, windmilling for balance on the slideway outside. Laughter echoed behind him. He whirled, wild with rage. The gun was still clutched in his hand. They had forgotten it. He jerked it up before him —

— and, abruptly, the mists of preconditioning vanished from his brain. They left him with the suddenness of support jerked

away. He stared at the entrance to Mother Turner's Tea Rooms, and then at the gun down in his hand. He began to weep.

Quite a crowd had accumulated about him. A city policeman came pushing through it, to stand before Harold, red-faced and sweating.

"All right, all right! Move on!" he shouted. The crowd started to drift away. He turned on Harold. "What're you doing with that in your hand? Don't you know it's illegal? Where's your license?"

Harold shook his head, unable to speak. The policeman snatched the gun from him and turned it over in two freckled hands. His expression faded from anger to exasperation. He shoved the gun back into Harold's hands and turned away.

"Get off the street," he said to Harold, and then, to those of the crowd that still lingered, "All right, all right — move along! The gun's a fake. He's only a decoy, just snapped out of conditioning. Nothing more to see. Move along now!" He shoved Harold impersonally. "You too."

Harold moved off, weeping, clutching the imitation gun in his hand, the salt tears streaming down his face.

— GORDON R. DICKSON