

a story

A DOLLAR TIP

david goldknopf

I SEE where Musial hit two yesterday," said Tony the barber. "Handles that bat like a toot'pick."

His face was morose and unenthusiastic, however, showing none of the pleasure which the performance presumably gave him. His head was bent to his task. His shoulders were bent, too. His body shaped itself to the requirements of its calling. Scissors followed comb. Eyes pursued fingers. He worked with the finical dexterity, the minute near-sighted movements of a man accomplished at snipping small hairs from ears and noses. "I catch him on the

television now and then," he added distantly.

"Makes it look easy," Driscoll agreed.

"Like a toot'pick," the barber insisted. He tucked his comb in his pocket and tilted the chair back.

Driscoll stretched and sighed, awaiting the weekly pleasure of a professional shave. He loosened his tie a little more, craned his neck and sighed again. Water splashed musically behind him. The affairs of the week flowed past him and vanished into the limbo of unessential memories . . . servo motors . . . mu factor . . . pulse modulation . . . conference with Fastman about taking Schroeder into project . . . lunch with Fastman and Schroeder . . . pretty good story about the Eskimo at the circus . . . wait-

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ress came around at punch line . . . oh well, she's probably heard that word before . . . good looking waitress . . .

His eyes flickered as the barber touched the towel to his cheek.

"Too hot?" the barber asked.

"No."

As a matter of fact, it was not quite hot enough. For a moment he was inclined to let it go. He disliked bother, and people who made it. At the same time, carelessness, in and out of the laboratory, nettled him, and in this case he was annoyed by the dissipation of a simple but eagerly anticipated pleasure. As the towel cooled, his annoyance increased.

"I believe the towel could be just a little hotter, Tony," he finally said.

"Hotter?" the barber inquired anxiously. "Why sure!" He uncoiled the towel. "I don't want to burn you. You know how it is, better too cold than too hot."

"Just right is best of all," Driscoll corrected mildly.

"Why sure! If something is out of the way, you tell me. That's what I'm for, to give service. That's right, isn't it?"

"You bet, Tony."

"You been coming here a long time."

"That's right, Tony."

"You don't have to be bashful with me. You know, I like to give satisfaction. Everybody makes a

mistake. When I make a mistake you tell me, right?"

"Right."

Steam wreathed from the towel as he held it to Driscoll's cheek.

"How's that?"

"That's fine. That's just right."

"Not too hot, not too cold."

"No, Tony. Just right." Again Driscoll sighed, this time with untampered contentment. Underneath the coil of hot towelling he breathed slowly, deeply . . . In a few seconds he was napping.

Elsewhere clippers buzzed, machines made lather, lights glinted from marble, glass and chrome. Before the wall-length mirrors lay the brilliant, hygienic panorama of the modern barber shop; beyond them lay endless corridors inhabited by endlessly reiterated images — reflections of reflections, illusions of illusions, separated from the sustaining reality by transparent and illusory walls. And in the most distant reaches of a glass gallery Tony the barber stropped a razor, and hunching over Driscoll's supine form applied it almost stealthily to his face.

THE REAL BOB DRISCOLL, fleshed and unreflected, was thirty-four years old, tall, well-proportioned and unpretentiously handsome. For the past three years he had been a project director with an alert and growing firm which built specialized electronic instruments for transportation companies. He was well

regarded by his employers and associates and could look forward to progressive advancement. But the present — and he lived largely in the present — was attractive too. His home was attractive, his income was attractive, and Marcia, his wife, was more than attractive. She was beautiful — even women were agreed on that.

All these facts were familiar to the friends of the Driscolls, who were quite numerous, to their maid, Pauline, to the tradespeople who came to their house on Huntington Terrace, to Tony the barber, to many others. But a stranger, entering the barber shop, would have seen only a tall recumbent figure whose face was being shaved and whose nails were being trimmed while his body lay motionless beneath a sheet, toes pointed upward like a dead man's.

DRISCOLL WAKENED as the barber wiped lather from his ears.

"Massage?" Tony suggested.

"Please."

Tony gave a good massage. Driscoll became aware of the underlying structure of his face, its muscles and tendons. He felt it as something more than a mere setting for his features. It was a sensitive and subtly expressive organ in its own right. He experienced his face. He enjoyed it. He was glad he had one. His skin was cool and clean. It danced. The last traces of the week's

fatigue were drawn up from all the parts of his body, into his face, into the cheeks, the temples, and so away through the strong, skillful fingers of the barber. He blinked his eyes and worked his mouth as a pianist works his fingers, enjoying the suppleness of his muscles. Wasn't it the Romans, he mused, who were much given to this sort of self-indulgence? A sensible people, unfairly maligned, great law-makers and engineers who had kept things humming in their part of the world for almost a thousand years. After they pooped out, it had taken almost another thousand to pick up the pieces. Peace, justice, tolerance, political efficiency and even a certain amount of social security — all Roman contributions. The trouble was, they had tangled with the early Christians which had given them a bad press ever since. But even there they had a point. Fanatics caused nothing but grief, and the martyrs were a particularly bothersome lot. He could easily imagine one of those able Roman administrators hearing the reports of the latest disturbances as he got his expert shave and massage. He could see him frown and shake his head dubiously. Something would have to be done about those fanatics. Religious tolerance was all well and good — nobody cared who or how you worshipped — but the law had to be obeyed. Agitators had to be taken in hand.

Somehow you had to sympathize

with a man like that. There was the kind of man you could talk to, reason with — a member of a sensible, sanitary, efficient race who believed in live and let live and built first-rate aqueducts to bring sweet water to its cities . . .

"How's that?" Tony asked. "Feels good, eh?"

"Wonderful, Tony. Wonderful." He was a little disappointed, however, wanting the massage to go on. The chair tilted forward. Once again he was facing the mirror. He looked good — clean, alert, boyish. The clear, supple skin had taken up the slack, erased five years. Only the thin streaks of grey over the temples said, "Over thirty." He looked good. He felt swell. Yes, real swell.

For that reason, perhaps, he was all the more startled by the barber's drawn and pallid face. It bobbed just above his head, eyes narrowed, corners of the mouth pulled down in an embittered curve, the scar which ran from the left eyebrow to the cheekbone a livid blaze on the swarthy skin. He had often wondered about that scar. It was the sort of thing one wondered about — but didn't ask about. And Tony had never told him. Mostly they talked about sports. Or they did not talk at all. Driscoll knew very little about Tony. In fact he did not even know Tony's second name.

Nevertheless, he could not help noticing that the barber was un-

usually depressed. His face did not look healthy. The fatigue which his skillful fingers had drawn from Driscoll's face and from the many other faces he had massaged that day seemed to have been concentrated in his own. And yet fatigue alone would never have left such marks. They seemed rather the stigmata of a fresh, unhealing grief. Driscoll felt a twinge of remorse. It was barely possible that he was responsible, at least in some measure, for the barber's visible unhappiness. Perhaps his little joke had gone too far. At any rate, it had gone too long and it was time to wind it up.

His little joke — how had it started? He barely recalled. For months he had tipped the barber fifty cents. And then one day, for no reason that he could remember, a piquant curiosity teased him as he put his hand into his pocket for change. What if he were to give Tony a smaller tip? And even as he considered the academic possibility with amusement, he placed three coins — a quarter, a dime, and a nickel — into Tony's suavely presented palm.

THE NEXT WEEK Tony was a trifle cool. Courteous, competent — but cool. There was no talk about baseball (it was the beginning of the training season), and there was just a hint of asperity in the snipping of the shears, not to mention brusqueness in the extension of the palm.

Into that palm Driscoll had placed an unusually generous tip.

The next week Tony was more affable and solicitous than ever. He lavished all his artistry upon the massage. He snipped invisible hairs. He employed the brush and comb, Driscoll mused, as if he were preparing an entry for a dog show. But the tip was small.

AND SO IT WENT. Sometimes the tip soared to eighty cents. Sometimes it dropped to thirty-five. And meanwhile the barber tried doggedly to fathom the secret of these wild aberrations, to correlate the size of the tip with the services he performed, to correct his errors, to make amends, to *please*. Last week the towel had been a trifle too hot. This week he had veered nervously in the opposite direction. And every week he questioned Driscoll guardedly. Was he satisfied with the service? Was anything out of line? In brief, he applied reason to a situation to which reason did not apply — a joke. That's what made a joke funny, that's why it couldn't be explained. That's why the only way to beat a joke is to laugh at it; if you try to figure it out, it laughs at you. Driscoll smiled. (He saw his face in the mirror, and it was smiling. He saw the barber's tense and haggard face too, and he was a little contrite. Nevertheless his face could not help smiling.) What creatures of habit we are! After all, the barber's tips had

averaged the same during this, you might call it, experiment. And the difference of a few cents, either way, in any one week, surely had very little effect on his domestic economy. You might have expected the barber to enter into the spirit of the thing, to give his curiosity free play and ultimately to solve the riddle, co-operate in it and by acting contrary to Driscoll's anticipations bend it back upon him — a turn of affairs which he would certainly have received with good grace. But, no — a pattern had been altered, a pebble had been dislodged, and rolling downhill rumbled like an earthquake.

The bondage of habit . . . Driscoll mused. Not that he was free of it. Far from it! But lately it had become far more constraining. He felt a need to unsettle things. Not radically. Not like the fanatic. But to make minor rearrangements in the world around him. To alter or enliven the tempo of his life in a mild, experimental way. Dictating a report a few days ago, for example, he had had an almost uncontrollable urge to interpose, in a calm, completely natural tone, an obscene word. How would Miss Raffenburg, his secretary, have reacted, he still wondered. Would she have blushed, cried, "Oh!", dropped her pencil, burst into tears? Or would she have distrusted her ears, believed that her own imagination, housing unspeakable dreams, had actually converted

an innocent combination of sounds into an indecent one? It would certainly have been interesting to find out. He might still try it. Of course he really wouldn't! But it was amusing to think about it. Again the face in the mirror smiled.

THE BARBER LOOKED AT HIM in the mirror with a quizzical and apologetic expression, as if he had absent-mindedly missed the point of a joke.

"Just thinking of something," Driscoll explained.

The barber nodded. He combed and brushed Driscoll's hair with sweeping elegance and whipped the sheet from him. Driscoll fixed his tie, held out his arm for the coat, tipped the boy, tipped the manicurist, and took the bill from the barber.

"What's the matter, Tony?" he asked. "You look sad."

"What?" Tony said abstractedly.

"Sad. You look sad."

The barber gestured indefinitely and turned away. "Lost my girl," he said.

"Lost your girl?" Driscoll chaffed him. "Well," he drawled, "there are plenty more. Lose one today, find a better one tomorrow." He buttoned his topcoat. "Girls are a dime a dozen, Tony," he grinned. "Dime a dozen."

"My girl, I lost my girl," Tony the barber explained softly but with extreme precision. "My little girl.

Emily. Six years old. Died last Monday. Rheumatic Fever."

Driscoll saw a face in the mirror — his own. Shocked, wincing, the mouth open, the eyes aghast . . .

"Tony, I—I didn't know," he stammered. "I'm—I'm awfully sorry . . . sorry to hear of your bereavement. It's a terrible thing . . . terrible . . ." His lips continued to mumble inane condolences, but at the same time his hand had reached for his wallet, and almost without his knowledge it was placing a dollar bill in the barber's palm.

The fingers curled, crumpling the bill. The livid scar blazed across the swarthy skin like a flash of lightning across a raging sky. The blazing eyes met Driscoll's, narrowed. Sentence was pronounced.

Like the old Romans, Bob Driscoll was no coward. His back was straight, his head was high, as he advanced between the mirrors, and the rank of his reflections kept flawless step with him. Flawlessly they passed in review before the empty barber chair and wheeled and paid their bills — only to be cut down as they stepped toward the door.

He alone survived, still tall, erect, handsome, and superbly groomed, but blinking rather foolishly in the strong afternoon glare, while across the street the store windows glinted at him like levelled spears or rifle barrels.

SARATOGA

Gets the Rap

Norman Ritchie

WAY BACK LAST SPRING a lively foxhunt was started in Saratoga County, New York. It was a chase after the big, bad red fox of Gambling and Corruption. As this is being written, in early 1952, it is still agallop and no one can say for sure whether the big, red fox will finally evade the baying hounds.

It was Senator Estes Kefauver who blew the first sonorous bugle. In New York City, at hearings of the U. S. Crime Investigating Committee, the Chairman waggled a well-manicured finger of reproof at the historic resort city of Saratoga Springs, N. Y., where gambling on a fantastic scale has been going on for

nearly a century. Then, with a loud tantivy, it was yoicks and away! Governor Dewey joined the chase with a ringing blast. This took the form of a directive calling for a special grand jury. It was to be promptly convened for the purpose of exposing the presumptive tie-up between organized gambling and racketeers, and also any links between professional gamblers and "any public officer or political figure" in Saratoga Springs or Saratoga County.

Apparently, the Kefauver testimony had put the Governor on the spot. In 1947, the Superintendent of the State Police had ordered his men to make a survey of seven Saratoga gambling casinos in the height of the racing season. Their report was, it seems, extremely revealing. But the superintendent had merely filed it away under the head of "Classified."

"Except for thirty years on the newspaper circuit," writes Norman Ritchie, "I have been a lifelong Saratogian." His career has been further embellished by a stint as owner-editor of a rural paper.