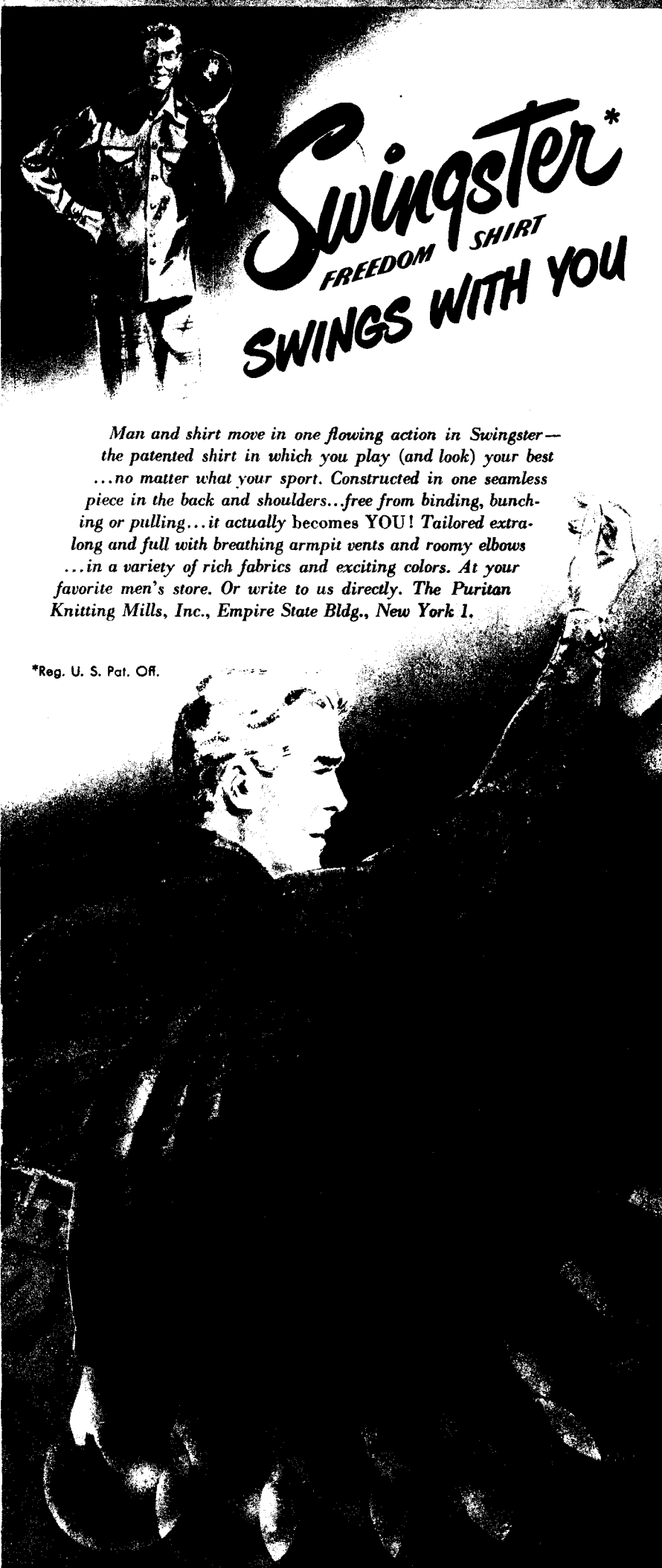


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Wait for Me, Darling!

By KEN KRAFT

How to hang around department stores without getting arrested



Even with his fingers in his ears he looks like a floorwalker

A HATLESS friend of mine has been troubled for years by people mistaking him for a floorwalker in department stores. Baring his teeth or putting his fingers in his ears when he is asked for directions has no effect. Customers seem used to these little evasions, and insist upon an answer.

I have a different problem in department stores. I am always mistaken for a customer.

You can't blame the department-store people for this. But you can blame my wife. She thinks department store means waiting room. She says, "I'll meet you in the yard goods. Wait for me, darling." Or, "Be in the flat silver at three. And wait—I'll try to be on time, but you never know."

I never do.

Three o'clock will find me loitering in the silver, alone with my thoughts, six salesladies and the steady gaze of the house detective.

By keeping up a slow back-and-forth stroll along the edge of the counter I can avoid looking the clerks in the eye for a while. This strategy wears thin in five minutes and a clerk grabs the ball and runs with it. "Something I can show you?" she asks, fondling a glittering service for 12, priced at \$299.95.

I jump as if jabbed with a pickle fork. "No, nothing. Nothing, thanks. I'm—ah—waiting."

This sounds pretty lame to both of us. "Waiting for what?" I can practically hear her thinking. "For my wife," I add aloud, with a laugh intended to mean, "Ah, women!" Judging from the clerk's look, my laugh says, "I haven't even got a wife, and I'm really waiting to palm a dozen sterling soup spoons."

The clerk joins her teammates and I lope off to the end of the counter. They have a huddle and the loser approaches me with a smile like meringue and says, "Is someone helping you?" This is a trick question.

A straight "No" will leave you wide open. "Yes" is a frail fiction soon



"I'm really waiting to palm a dozen spoons"

pierced. "Maybe" is confusing and may gain a little time.

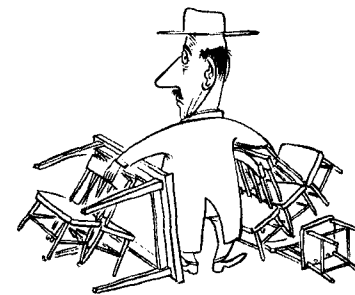
I am usually tripped into some bit of gibberish like, "Oh-h-h... just, um, standing here a while. If you don't mind," trailing off into a low gurgle. This would not convince a retarded mongoose, let alone a quota-conscious saleslady.

If my wife shows up at this point, my character is saved.

But if she is late in arriving, it's another story. The steady pressure of the hovering sales force, the steamy atmosphere of the market place, the sparkle of the merchandise, the chill in my feet—all join and give me the heave-ho. I buy something. It may be merely a souvenir teaspoon, or a combination cigarette lighter and dinner bell. On the other hand, it may be a beach umbrella, a table and six chairs, or an Indian rug-weaving kit. It all depends on where I'm waiting.

After some years of this hangdog buying, my wife got a crafty look in her eye. She began naming such rendezvous as the candy counter, the perfume bar, the negligee department. I suppose I should have noticed that, after this, she was never on time. She seemed happier, too.

I may be a little slow to get the point of these things, but once I do I'm a ball of fire. After two or three years it struck me like a clap of thunder: My wife had been pretend-



So I finally buy something

ing all along that she didn't really have much use for the things I was weakly buying. I was a cat's-paw. She didn't want them like I didn't want a whole skin.

The next time I waited in a department store for her I didn't buy a thing. Nor the next, nor the third. I could see by the look in her eye that I had her going, but she couldn't say a word.

I kept my little secret for a month or so. Then one day I heard my wife rattling her perfume bottles and complaining. "I simply can't understand what's happened to that new bottle of *Quelques Choses*," she said. "You know—that perfume you gave me. You bought it one day when you were meeting me downtown."

"Oh—that," I said. "I remember. You said you didn't need it."

"Well-I-I, I just meant I didn't absolutely need it at that very moment," she murmured, studying me in a cat-and-mouse manner.

"Yes," I said. "So I took it back." She stared at me. "You took it back!"

I nodded. "What in the world—? And you always hate to return anything I ask you to!"

"It's a compensating mechanism," I explained. "Or something." THE END

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PICTURES

The girl had more beauty than discretion, and

Perry Mason went against his better judgment when he saved her from her pursuers that night...

Beginning a new murder mystery

By ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

The case of the NEGLIGENT NYMPH

FROM his rented canoe Perry Mason sized up the Alder estate as a general sizes up a prospective battlefield. The moon, a few days past the full, made a shimmering path of silver in the east, and served to illuminate Mason's objective, an island connected with the mainland by a fifty-foot steel-and-concrete bridge. On that island George S. Alder's huge two-storied mansion faced the narrow channel as a castle might frown down upon its protecting moat.

Fencing off the estate from the curious eyes of passers-by on the mainland was a brick wall topped with wrought iron and studded with broken glass. On the bay side were signs warning trespassers they would be prosecuted. A long wharf ran out into the sluggish waters, a sandspit on the northern side made a crescent-shaped bathing beach and, back of that, a well-kept lawn became a velvety green carpet, thanks to the aid of loam which had been trucked in at great expense.

Alder's legal position seemed, at least on the surface, to be fully as impregnable as the island estate which isolated him and his wealth from the mainland. But Perry Mason was by no means an ordinary lawyer. It was never his policy to attack where the enemy expected the blow to fall. Rather, he preferred to deliver some ingenious objective all his own. He had seen the layout of the place which made it a perfect trap for the enemy, the empire which he could not reach.

