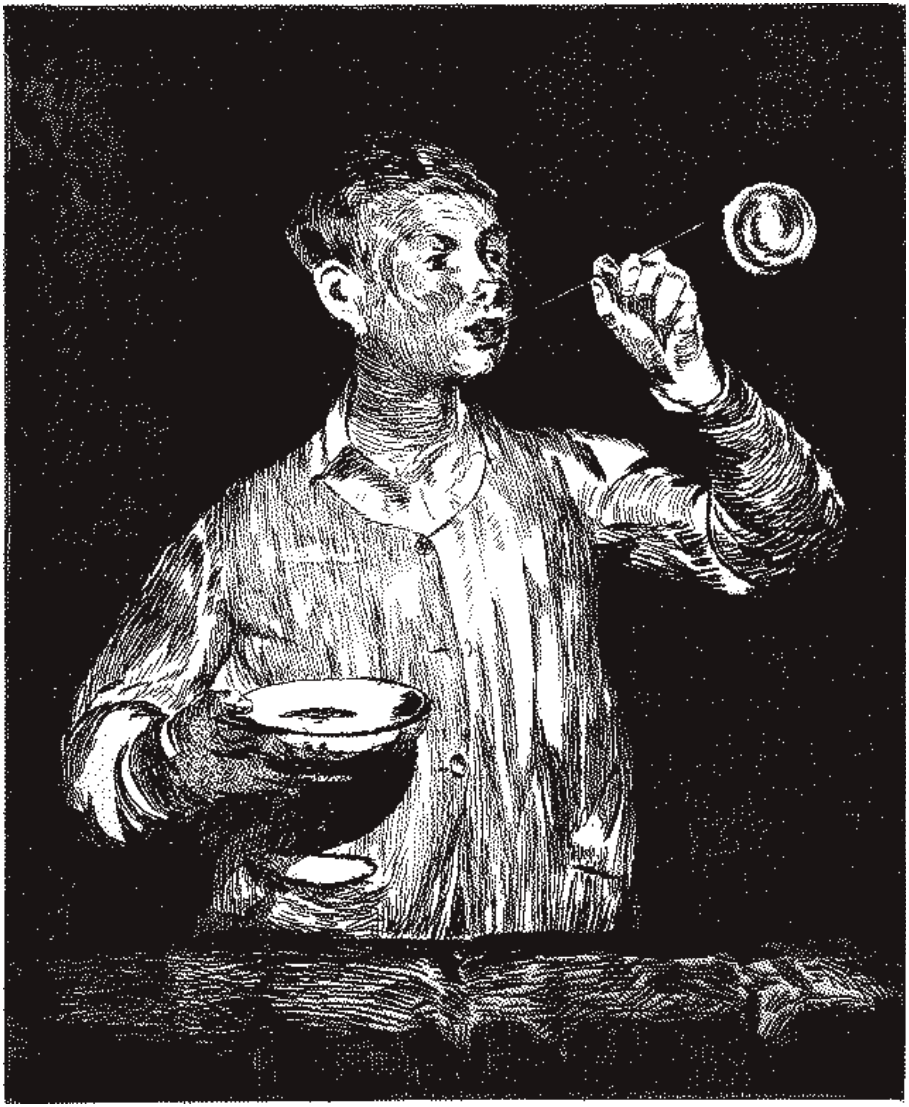

Subversive

By Mack Reynolds

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SUBVERSIVE

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A Gaslight zine from HOUDINI Magazine.

The young man with the brown paper bag said, "Is Mrs. Coty in?"

"I'm afraid she isn't. Is there anything I can do?"

"You're Mr. Coty? I came about the soap." He held up the paper bag.

"Soap?" Mr. Coty said blankly. He was the epitome of mid-aged husband complete to pipe, carpet slippers and office-slump posture.

"That's right. I'm sure she told you about it. My name's Dickens. Warren Dickens. I sold her--"

"Look here, you mean to tell me in this day and age you go around from door to door peddling soap? Great guns, boy, you'd do better on unemployment insurance. It's permanent now."

Warren Dickens registered distress. "Mr. Coty, could I come in and tell you about it? If I can make the first delivery to you instead of Mrs. Coty, shucks, it'll save me coming back."

Coty led him back into the living room, motioned him to a chair and settled into what was obviously his own favorite, handily placed before the telly. Coty said tolerantly, "Now then, what's this about selling soap? What kind of soap? What brand?"

"Oh, it has no name, sir. That's the point."

The other looked at him.

"That's why we can sell it for three cents a cake, instead of twenty-five." Dickens opened the paper bag and fished out an ordinary enough looking cake of soap and handed it to the older man.

Mr. Coty took it, stared down at it, turned it over in his hands. He was still blank. "Well, what's different about it?"

"There's nothing different about it. It's the same as any other soap."

"I mean, how come you sell it for three cents a cake, and what's the fact it has no name got to do with it?"

Warren Dickens leaned forward and went into what was obviously a strictly routine pitch. "Mr. Coty, have you ever considered what you're buying when they nick you twenty-five cents on your credit card for a bar of soap in an ultra-market?"

There was an edge of impatience in the older man's voice. "I buy soap!"

"No, sir. That's your mistake. What you buy is a telly show, in fact several of them, with all their expensive comedians, singers, musicians, dancers, news commentators, network vice presidents, and all the rest. Then you buy fancy packaging. You'll note, by the way, that our product hasn't even a piece of tissue paper wrapped around it. Fancy packaging designed by some of the most competent commercial artists and motivational research men in the country. Then you buy distribution. From the factory all the way to the retail ultra-market where your wife shops. And every time that bar of soap goes from one wholesaler or distributor to another, the price roughly doubles. You also buy a brain trust whose full time project is to keep you using their soap and not letting their competitors talk you into switching brands. The brain trust, of course, also works on luring away the competitor's customers to their product. Shucks, Mr. Coty, practically none of that twenty-five cents you spend to buy a cake of soap goes for soap. So small a percentage that you might as well forget about it."

Mr. Coty was obviously taken aback. "Well, how do I know this nameless soap you're peddling is, well, any good?"

Warren Dickens sighed deeply, and in such wise that it was obvious that he had so sighed before. "Sir, there is no difference between soaps. Oh, they might use a slightly different perfume, or tint it a slightly different color, but for all practical purposes common hand soap, common bath soap, is soap, period. All the stuff the copy writers dream up about secret ingredients and health for your skin, and cosmetic qualities, and all the rest, is Madison Avenue gobbledygook and applies as well to one brand as another. As a matter of fact, often two different soap companies, supposedly keen competitors, and using widely different advertising, have their products manufactured in the same plant."

Mr. Coty blinked at him. Shifted in his chair. Rubbed his chin as though checking his morning shave. "Well ... well, then where do you get *your* soap?"

"The same place. We buy in fantastically large lots from one of the gigantic automated soap plants."

Mr. Coty had him now. "Ah, ha! Then how come you sell it for three cents a cake, instead of twenty-five?"

"I've been telling you. Our soap doesn't even have a name, not to mention an advertising budget. Far from spending fortunes redesigning our packaging every few months in attempts to lure new customers, we don't package the stuff at all. It comes to you, in the simplest possible wrapping, through the mails. A new supply every month. Three cents a cake. No middlemen, no wholesalers, distributors. No nothing except soap at three cents a cake."

Mr. Coty leaned back in his chair. "I'll be darned." He thought it over. "Listen, do you sell anything besides soap?"

"Not right now, sir. But soap flakes are coming up next week and I think we'll be going into bread in a month or two."

"Bread?"

"Yes, sir, bread. Although we'll have to distribute that by truck, and have to have almost hundred per cent coverage in a given section before it's practical. A nickel a loaf."

"Five cents a loaf! You can't *make* bread for that much."

"Oh, yes we can. We can't advertise it, package it, and pay a host of in-betweens, is all. From the bakery to you, period."

Mr. Coty seemed fascinated. He said, "See here, what's the address of your office?"

Warren Dickens shook his head. "Sorry, sir. That's all part of it. We have no swanky offices with big, expensive staffs. We operate on the smallest of shoestrings. No brain trust. No complaint department. No public relations. No literature on how to beautify yourself. No nothing, except good soap at three cents a cake, plus postage. Now, if you'll sign this contract, we'll put you on our mailing list. Ten bars of soap a month, Mrs. Coty said. I brought this first supply so you could test it and see that the whole thing is bona fide."

Mr. Coty had to test it, but then he had to admit he couldn't tell any difference between the nameless soap and the product to which he was used. Eventually, he signed, made the first payment,

shook hands with young Dickens and saw him to the door. He said, in parting, "I still wonder why you do this, rather than dragging down unemployment insurance like most young men fresh out of school."

Warren Dickens screwed up his face. This was a question that wasn't routine. "Well, I make approximately the same, if I stick to it and get enough contracts. And, shucks they're not hard to get. And, well, I'm working, not just bumming on the rest of the country. I'm doing something, something useful."

Coty pursed his lips and shrugged. "It's been a long time since anybody cared about that." He looked after the young man as he walked down the walk.

Then he turned and headed for the phone, and ten years seemed to drop away from him. He lit the screen with a flick, dialed and said crisply, "That's him, Jerry. Going down the walk now. Don't let him out of your sight."

Jerry's face was in the screen but he was obviously peering down, from the helio-jet, locating the subject. "O.K., Tracy, I make him. See you later." His face faded.

The man who had called himself Mr. Coty, dialed again, not bothering to light the screen. "All right," he said. "Thank Mrs. Coty and let her come home now."

* * *

Frank Tracy worked his way down an aisle of automated phono-typers and other office equipment. The handful of operators, their faces bored, periodically strolled up and down, needlessly checking that which seldom needed checking.

He entered the receptionist's office, flicked a hand at LaVerne Sandell, one of the few employees it seemed impossible to automate out of her position, and said, "The Chief is probably expecting me."

"That he is. Go right in, Mr. Tracy."

"I'm expecting a call from one of the operatives. Put it through, eh LaVerne?"

"Righto."

Even as he walked toward the door to the sanctum sanctorum, he grimaced sourly at her. "*Righto*, yet. Isn't that a bit on the maize side? Doesn't sound very authentic to me."

"I can see you don't put in your telly time, Mr. Tracy. Slang goes in cycles these days. They simply don't dream up a whole new set of expressions every generation anymore because everybody gets tired of them so soon. Instead, older periods of idiom are revived. For instance, scram is coming back in."

He stopped long enough to look at her, frowning. "Scram?"

She took him in quizzically, estimating. "Possibly *dust*, or *get lost*, was the term when you were a boy."

Tracy chuckled wryly, "Thanks for the compliment, but I go back to the days of *beat it*."

In the inner office the Chief looked up at him. "Sit down, Frank. What's the word? Another exponent of free enterprise, pre-historic style?"

Frank Tracy found a chair and began talking even while fumbling for briar and tobacco pouch. "No," he grumbled. "I don't think so, not this time. I'm afraid there might be something more to it."

His boss leaned back in the massive old-fashioned chair he affected and patted his belly, as though appreciative of a good meal just finished. "Oh? Give it all to me."

Tracy finished lighting his pipe, flicked the match out and put it back in his pocket, noting that he'd have to get a new one one of these days. He cleared his throat and said, "Reports began coming in of house to house canvassers selling soap for three cents a bar."

"*Three cents a bar?* They can't manufacture it for that. Will the stuff pass the Health Department?"

"Evidently," Tracy said wryly. "The salesman claimed it's the same soap as reputable firms peddle."

"Go on."

"We had to go to a bit of trouble to get a line on them without raising their suspicion. One of the boys lived in a neighborhood that was being canvassed for new customers and his wife had signed up. So I took her place when the salesman arrived with her

first delivery--they deliver the first batch. I let him think I was Bob Coty and questioned him, but not enough to raise his suspicions."

"And?"

"An outfit selling soap and planning on branching into bread and heavens knows what else. No advertising. No middlemen. No nothing, as the salesman said, except standard soap at three cents a bar."

"They can't package it for that!"

"They don't package it at all."

The Chief raised his chubby right hand and wiped it over his face in a stereotype gesture of resignation. "Did you get his home office address? Maybe there's some way of buying them out--indirectly, of course."

"No, sir. It seemed to be somewhat of a secret."

The other's eyes widened. "Ridiculous. You can't hide anything like that. There's a hundred ways of tracking them down before the day is out."

"Of course. I've got Jerome Wiseman following him in a heliojet. No use getting rough, as yet. We'll keep it quiet ... assuming that meets with your approval."

"You're in the field, Frank. You make the decisions."

The phone screen had lighted up and LaVerne's piquant face faded in. "The call Mr. Tracy was expecting from Operative Wiseman."

"Put him on," the Chief said, lacing his plump fingers over his stomach.

Jerry's face appeared in the screen. He was obviously parked on the street now. He said, "Subject has disappeared into this office building, Tracy. For the past fifteen minutes he's kinda looked as though the day's work was through and since this dump could hardly be anybody's home, he must be reporting to his higher-up."

"Let's see the building," Tracy said.

The portable screen was directed in such manner that a disreputable appearing building, obviously devoted to fourth-rate businesses, was centered.

"O.K.," Tracy said. "I'll be over. You can knock off, Jerry. Oh, except for one thing. Subject's name is Warren Dickens. Just for luck, get a complete dossier on him. I doubt if he's got a criminal or subversive record, but you never know."

Jerry said, "Right," and faded.

Frank Tracy came to his feet and knocked the rest of his pipe out into the gigantic ashtray on his boss' desk. "Well, I suppose the next step's mine."

"Check back with me as soon as you know anything more," the Chief said. He wheezed a sigh as though sorry the interview was over and that he'd have to go back to his desk chores, but shifted his bulk and took up a sheaf of papers.

Just as Tracy got to the door, the Chief said, "Oh, yes. Easy on the rough stuff, Tracy. I've been hearing some disquieting reports about some of the overenthusiastic bullyboys on your team. We wouldn't want such material to get in the telly-casts."

Lard bottom, Tracy growled inwardly as he left. Did the Chief think he liked violence? Did anyone in his right mind like violence?

* * *

Frank Tracy looked up at the mid-century type office building. He was somewhat surprised that the edifice still remained. Where did the owners ever find profitable tenants? What business could be so small these days that it would be based in such quarters? However, here it was.

The lobby was shabby. There was no indication on the list of tenants of the firm he was seeking, nor was there a porter. The elevator was out of repair.

He did it the hard way, going from door to door, entering, hat in hand, apologetically, and saying, "Pardon me. You're the people who sell the soap?" They kept telling him no until he reached the third floor and a door to an office even smaller than usual. It was lettered *Freer Enterprises* and even as he knocked and entered, the wording rang a bell.

There was only one desk but it was efficiently equipped with the latest in office gadgetry. The room was quite choked with files and even a Mini-IBM tri-unit. The man behind the desk was old-fashioned enough to wear glasses, but otherwise seemed the average aggressive executive type you expected to meet in these United States of the Americas. He was possibly in his mid-thirties and one of those alert, over-eager characters irritating to those who believe in taking matters less than urgently.

He looked up and said snappily, "What can I do for you?"

Tracy dropped into an easy-going characterization. "You're the people who sell the soap?"

"That is correct. What can I do for you?"

Tracy said easily, "Why, I'd like to ask you a few questions about the enterprise."

"To what end, sir? You'd be surprised how busy a man I am."

Tracy said, "Suppose I'm from the Greater New York *News-Times* looking for a story?"

The other tapped a finger on his desk impatiently. "Pardon me, but in that case I would be inclined to think you a liar. The *News-Times* knows upon which side its bread is spread. Its advertisers include all the soap companies. It does not dispense free advertising through its news columns."

Tracy chuckled wryly, "All right. Let's start again." He brought forth his wallet, flicked through various identification cards until he found the one he wanted and presented it. "Frank Tracy is the name," he said. "Department of Internal Revenue. There seems to be some question as to your corporation taxes."

"Oh," the other said, obviously taken aback. "Please have a chair." He read the authentic looking, but spurious credentials. Tracy took the proffered chair and then sat and looked at the other as though it was his turn.

"My name is Flowers," the Freer Enterprises man told him, nervously. "Frederic Flowers. Frankly, this is my first month at the job and I'm not too well acquainted with all the ramifications of the business." He moistened his lips. "I hope there is nothing illegal--" He let the sentence fade away.

Tracy reclaimed his false identity papers and put them back into his wallet before saying easily, "I really couldn't say, as yet. Let's have a bit of questions and answers and I'll go further into the matter."

Flowers regained his confidence. "No reason why not," he said quickly. "So far as I know, all is above board."

Frank Tracy let his eyes go about the room. "Why are you established, almost secretly, you might say, in this business backwoods of the city?"

"No secret about it," Flowers demurred. "Merely the cheapest rent we could find. We cut costs to the bone, and then shave the bone."

"Um-m-m. I've spoken to one of your salesmen, a Warren Dickens, and I suppose he gave me the standard sales talk. I wonder if you could elaborate on your company's policies, its goals, that sort of thing."

"Goals?"

"You obviously expect to make money, somehow or other, though I don't see that peddling soap at three cents a bar has much of a future. There must be some further angle."

Flowers said, "Admittedly, soap is just a beginning. Among other things, it's given us a mailing list of satisfied customers. Consumers who can then be approached for future purchases."

* * *

Frank Tracy relaxed in his chair, reached for pipe and tobacco and let the other go on. But his eyes had narrowed, coldly.

Flowers wrapped himself up in his subject. "Mr. Tracy, you probably have no idea of the extent to which the citizens of Greater America are being victimized. Let me use but one example." He came quickly to his feet, crossed to a small toilet which opened off the office and returned with a power-pack electric shaver which he handed to Tracy.

Tracy looked at it, put it back on the desk and nodded. "It's the brand I have," he said agreeably.

"Yes, and millions of others. What did you pay for it?"

Frank Tracy allowed himself a slight smirk. "As a matter of fact, I got mine through a discount outfit, only twenty-five dollars."

"*Only* twenty-five dollars, eh, when the retail price is supposedly thirty-five?" Flowers was triumphant. "A great bargain, eh? Well, let me give you a rundown, Mr. Tracy."

He took a quick breath. "True, they're advertised to retail at thirty-five dollars. And stores that sell them at that rate make a profit of fifty per cent. The regional supply house, before them, knocks down from forty to sixty per cent, on the wholesale price. Then the trade name distributor makes at least fifty per cent on the sales to the regional supply houses."

"Trade name distributor?" Tracy said, as though ignorant of what the other was talking about. "You mean the manufacturer?"

"No, sir. That razor you just looked at bears a trade name of a company that owns no factory of its own. It buys the razors from a large electrical appliances manufacturing complex which turns out several other name brand electric razors as well. The trade name company does nothing except market the product. Its budget, by the way, calls for an expenditure of six dollars on every razor for national advertising."

"Well, what are you getting at?" Tracy said impatiently.

Frederic Flowers had reached his punch line. "All right, we've traced the razor all the way back to the manufacturing complex which made it. Mr. Tracy, that razor you bought at a discount bargain for twenty-five dollars cost thirty-eight cents to produce."

Tracy pretended to be dumfounded. "I don't believe it."

"It can be proven."

Frank Tracy thought about it for a while. "Well, even if true, so what?"

"It's a crime, that's so-what," Flowers blurted indignantly. "And that's where Freer Enterprises comes in. Very shortly, we're going to enter the market with an electric razor retailing for exactly one dollar. No name brand, no advertising, no nothing except a razor just as good as though selling for from twenty-five to fifty dollars."

Tracy scoffed his disbelief. "That's where you're wrong. No electric razor manufacturer would sell to you. They'd be cutting

their own throats."

The Freer Enterprises official shook his head, in scorn. "That's where *you're* wrong. The same electric appliance manufacturer who produced that razor there will make a similar one, slightly different in appearance, for the same price for us. They don't care what happens to their product once they make their profit from it. Business is business. We'll be at least as good a customer as any of the others have ever been. Eventually, better, since we'll be getting electric razors into the hands of people who never felt they could afford one before."

He shook a finger at Tracy. "Manufacturers have been doing this for a long time. I imagine it was the old mail-order houses that started it. They'd get in touch with a manufacturer of, say, typewriters, or outboard motors, or whatever, and order tens of thousands of these, not an iota different from the manufacturer's standard product except for the nameplate. They'd then sell these for as little as half the ordinary retail price."

Tracy seemed to think it over for a long moment. Eventually he said, "Even then you're not going to break any records making money. Your distribution costs might be pared to the bone, but you still have some. There'll be darn little profit left on each razor you sell."

Flowers was triumphant again. "We're not going to stop at razors, once under way. How about automobiles? Have you any idea of the disparity between the cost of production of a car and what they retail for?"

"Well, no."

"Here's an example. As far back as about 1930 a barge company transporting some brand-new cars across Lake Erie from Detroit had an accident and lost a couple of hundred. The auto manufacturers sued, trying to get the retail price of each car. Instead, the court awarded them the cost of manufacture. You know what it came to, labor, materials, depreciation on machinery--everything? Seventy-five dollars per car. And that was around 1930. Since then, automation has swept the industry and manufacturing costs per unit have dropped drastically."

The Freer Enterprises executive was now in full voice. "But even that's not the ultimate. After all, cars were selling for as cheaply as $425 then. Let's take some items such as aspirin. You can, of course, buy small neatly packaged tins of twelve for twenty-five cents but supposedly more intelligent buyers will buy bottles for forty or fifty cents. If the druggist puts out a special for fifteen cents a bottle it will largely be refused since the advertising conditioned customer doesn't want an inferior product. Actually, of course, aspirin is aspirin and you can buy it, in one hundred pound lots in polyethylene film bags, at about fourteen cents a pound, or in carload lots under the chemical name of acetylsalicylic acid, for eleven cents a pound. And any big chemical corporation will sell you U.S.P. grade Milk of Magnesia at about six dollars a ton. Its chemical name, of course, is magnesium hydroxide, or Mg(OH)2, and you'd have one thousand quarts in that ton. Buying it beautifully packaged and fully advertised, you'd pay up to a dollar twenty-five a pint in the druggist section of a modern ultra-market."

* * *

Tracy had heard enough. He said crisply, "All right, Mr. Flowers, of Freer Enterprises, now let me ask you something: Do you consider this country prosperous?"

Flowers blinked. Of a sudden, the man across from him seemed to have changed character, added considerable dynamic to his make-up. He flustered, "Yes, I suppose so. But it could be considerably more prosperous if--"

Tracy was sneering. "If consumer prices were brought down drastically, eh? Mr. Flowers, you're incredibly naïve when it comes to modern economics. Do you realize that one of the most significant developments, economically speaking, took place in the 1950s; something perhaps more significant than the development of atomic power?"

Flowers blinked again, mesmerized by the other's new domineering personality. "I ... I don't know what you're talking about."

"The majority of employees in the United States turned from blue collars to white."

Flowers looked pained. "I don't--"

"No, of course you don't or you wouldn't be participating in a subversive attack upon our economy, which, if successful, would lead to the collapse of Western prosperity and eventually to the success of the Soviet Complex."

Mr. Flowers gobbled a bit, then gulped.

"I'll spell it out for you," Tracy pursued. "In the early days of capitalism, back when Marx and Engels were writing such works as *Capital*, the overwhelming majority of the working class were employed directly in production. For a long time it was quite accurate when the political cartoonists depicted a working man as wearing overalls and carrying a hammer or wrench. In short, employees who got their hands dirty, outnumbered those who didn't.

"But with the coming of increased mechanization and eventually automation and the second industrial revolution, more and more employees went into sales, the so-called service industries, advertising and entertainment which has become largely a branch of advertising, distribution, and, above all, government which in this bureaucratic age is largely a matter of regulation of business and property relationships. As automation continued, fewer and fewer of our people were needed to produce all the commodities that the country could assimilate under our present socio-economic system. And I need only point out that the average American *still* enjoys more material things than any other nation, though admittedly the European countries, and I don't exclude the Soviet Complex, are coming up fast."

Flowers said indignantly, "But what's this charge that I'm participating in a subversive--"

"Mr. Flowers," Tracy overrode him, "let's not descend to pure maize in our denials of the obvious. If this outfit of yours, Freer Enterprises, was successful in its fondest dreams, what would happen?"

"Why, the consumers would be able to buy commodities at a fraction of the present cost!"

Tracy half came to his feet and pounded the table with fierce emphasis. "*What would they buy them with? They'd all be out of jobs!*"

Frederic Flowers bug-eyed him.

Tracy sat down again and seemingly regained control of himself. His voice was softer now. "Our social system may have its strains and tensions, Mr. Flowers, but it works and we don't want anybody throwing wrenches in its admittedly delicate machinery. Advertising is currently one of the biggest industries of the country. The entertainment industry, admittedly now based on advertising, is gigantic. Our magazines and newspapers, employing hundreds of thousands of employees from editors right on down to newsstand operators, are able to exist only through advertising revenue. Above all, millions of our population are employed in the service industries, and in distribution, in the stock market, in the commodity markets, in all the other branches of distribution which you Freer Enterprises people want to pull down. A third of our working force is now unemployed, but given your way, it would be at least two thirds."

Flowers, suddenly suspicious, said, "What has all this to do with the Department of Internal Revenue, Mr. Tracy?"

Tracy came to his feet and smiled ruefully, albeit a bit grimly. "Nothing," he admitted. "I have nothing at all to do with that department. Here is my real card, Mr. Flowers."

The Freer Enterprises man must have felt a twinge of premonition even as he took it up, but the effect was still enough to startle him. "Bureau of Economic Subversion!" he said.

"Now then," Tracy snapped. "I want the names of your higher ups, and the address of your central office, Flowers. Frankly, you're in the soup. As you possibly know, our hush-hush department has unlimited emergency powers, being answerable only to the President."

"I ... I've never even heard of it." Flowers stuttered. "But--"

Tracy held up a contemptuous hand. "Many people haven't," he said curtly.

* * *

Frank Tracy hurried through the outer office into LaVerne Sandell's domain, and bit out to her, "Tell the Chief I'm here. Crisis. And immediately get my team together, all eight of them. Heavy equipment. Have a jet readied. Chicago. The team will rendezvous at the airport."

LaVerne was just as crisp. "Yes, sir." She began doing things with buttons and switches.

Tracy hurried into the Chief's office and didn't bother with the usual amenities. He snapped, "Worse than I thought, sir. This outfit is possibly openly subversive. Deliberately undermining the economy."

His superior put down the report he was perusing and shifted his bulk backward. "You're sure? We seldom run into such extremes."

"I know, I know, but this could be it. Possibly a deliberate program. I've taken the initiative to have Miss Sandell summon my team."

"Now, see here, Frank--" The bureau head looked at him anxiously.

Tracy said, impatience there, "Chief, you're going to have to let your field men use their discretion. I tell you, this thing is a potential snowball. I'll play it cool. Arrange things so that there'll be no scandal for the telly-reporters. But we've got to chill this one quickly, or it'll be on a coast to coast basis before the year is out. They're even talking about going into automobiles."

The Chief winced, then said unhappily, "All right, Tracy. However, mind what I said. Curb those roughnecks of yours."

* * *

It proved considerably easier than Frank Tracy had hoped for. Adam Moncure's national headquarters turned out to be in a sparsely settled area not far from Woodstock, Illinois. The house, in the passé ranch style, must have once been a millionaire's baby, what with an artificial fishing lake in the back, a kidney shaped

swimming pool, extensive gardens and an imposing approach up a corridor of trees.

"Right up to the front door," Tracy growled to the operative driving the first hover-car of their two-vehicle expedition. "The quicker we move, the better." He turned his head to the men in the rear seat. "We five will go in together. I don't expect trouble, they'll have had no advance warning. I made sure of that. Jerry has equipment in his car to blanket any radio sending. We'll take care of phones in the house. No rough stuff, we want to talk to these people."

One of the men growled, "Suppose they start shooting?"

Tracy snorted. "Then shoot back, of course. But just don't you start it. I shouldn't have to tell you these things."

"Got it," one of the others said. He shifted his shoulders to loosen the .38 Recoilless in its holster.

At the ornate doorway, the cars, which had been moving fast, a foot or so off the ground, came to a quick halt, settled, and the men disgorged, guns in hand.

Tracy called to the occupants of the other vehicle, "On the double. Surround the house. Don't let anybody leave. Come on, boys."

They scurried down the flagstone walk, banged on the door. It was opened by a houseman who stared at them uncomprehendingly.

"The occupants of this establishment are under arrest," Tracy snapped. He flashed a gold badge. "Take me to Adam Moncure." He turned to his men and gestured with his head. "Take over, boys. Jerry, you come with me."

The houseman was terrified, but not to the point of being unable to lead them to a gigantic former living room, now converted to offices.

There was an older man, and four assistants. All in shirt sleeves in concession to the mid-western summer, none armed from all Tracy could see. They looked up in surprise, rather than dismay. The older man snapped, "What is the meaning of this intrusion?"

Jerry chuckled sourly.

Frank Tracy said, "You're all under arrest. Jerry, herd these clerks, or whatever they are, into some other room. Get any other occupants of the house together, too. And watch them carefully, confound it. Don't underestimate these people. And make a search for secret rooms, cellars, that sort of thing."

"Right," Jerry growled.

The older of the five Freer Enterprises men was on his feet now. He was a thin, angry faced type, gray of hair and somewhere in his sixties. "I want to know the meaning of this!" he roared.

"Adam Moncure?" Tracy said crisply.

"That is correct. And to what do I owe this cavalier intrusion into my home and place of business?"

Jerry, at pistol point, was herding the four assistants from the room, taking the houseman along with them.

Tracy looked at Moncure, speculatively, then dipped into his pockets for pipe and tobacco. He gestured to a chair with his head. "Sit down, Mr. Moncure. The jig is up."

"The *jig*?" the other blurted in a fine rage. "I insist--"

"O.K., O.K., you'll get your explanation." Tracy sat down on a couch himself and sized up the older man, even as he lit his pipe.

Moncure, still breathing heavily in his indignation, took control of himself well enough to be seated. "Well, sir?" he bit out.

Tracy said curtly, "Frank Tracy, Bureau of Economic Subversion."

"Bureau of Economic Subversion!" Moncure said indignantly. "What in the name of all that's holy is the Bureau of Economic Subversion?"

Tracy pointed at him with the pipe stem. "I'll ask a few questions first, please. How many branches of your nefarious outfit are presently under operation?"

The other glared at him, but Tracy merely returned the pipe to his mouth and glowered back.

Finally Moncure snapped, "There is no purpose in hiding any of our affairs. We have opened preliminary offices only in Chicago and New York. Freer Enterprises is but in its infancy."

"Praise Allah for that," Tracy muttered sarcastically.

"And thus far we have dealt only in soap. However, as our organization gets under way we plan to branch out into a score, and ultimately hundreds of products."

Tracy said, "You can forget about that, Moncure. Freer Enterprises comes to a halt as of today. Do you realize that your business tactics would lead to a complete collapse of gainful employment and eventually to a depression such as this nation has never seen before?"

"Exactly!" Moncure snapped in return.

* * *

It was Tracy's turn to react. His eyes widened, then narrowed. "Do you mean that you are deliberately attempting to undermine the economy of the United States of the Americas? Remember, Mr. Moncure, you are under arrest and anything you say may be held against you."

"Undermine it!" Moncure said heatedly. "Bring it crashing to the ground is the better term. There has never been such an abortion developed in the history of political economy."

He came to his feet again and began storming up and down the room. "A full three quarters of our employed working at nothing jobs, gobbledygook jobs, non-producing jobs, make-work jobs, red-tape bureaucracy jobs. At a time when the nation is supposedly in a breakneck economic competition with the Soviet Complex, we put our best brains into advertising, entertainment and sales, while they put theirs into science and industry."

He stopped long enough to shake an indignant finger at the surprised Tracy. "But that isn't the worst of it. Have you ever heard of planned obsolescence?"

Tracy acted as though on the defensive. "Well ... sure ..."

"In the Soviet Complex, and, for that matter, in Common Europe and other economic competitors of ours, they simply don't believe in planned obsolescence and all its related nonsense. Razor blades, everywhere except in this country, don't go dull after two or three shaves. Cars don't fall apart after two or three years, or even become so out of style that the owner feels that he's

losing status by being seen in it, the owners expect to keep them half a lifetime. Automobile batteries don't go to pieces after eighteen months, they last for a decade. And on and on!"

The old boy was really unwinding now. "Nor is even that the nadir of this socio-economic hodge-podge we've allowed to develop, this economy of production for sale, rather than production for use." He stabbed with his finger. "I think one of the best examples of what was to come was to be witnessed way back at the end of the Second War. The idea of the ball-bearing pen was in the air. The first one to hurry into production gave his pen a tremendous build-up. It had ink enough to last three years, it would make many carbon copies, you could use it under water. And so on and so forth. It cost fifteen dollars, and there was only one difficulty with it. It wouldn't write. Not that that made any difference because it sold like hotcakes what with all the promotion. He wasn't interested in whether or not it would write, but only in whether or not it would sell." Moncure threw up his hands dramatically. "I ask you, can such an economic system be taken seriously?"

"What's your point?" Tracy growled dangerously. He'd never met one this far out, before.

"Isn't it obvious? Continue this ridiculous economy and we'll lose the battle for men's minds. You can't have an economic system that allows such nonsense as large scale unemployment of trained employees, planned obsolescence, union featherbedding, and an overwhelming majority of those who are employed wasting their labor on unproductive employment."

Tracy said, "Then if I understand you correctly, Freer Enterprises was deliberately organized for the purpose of undermining the economy so that it will collapse and have to be reorganized on a different basis."

"That is *exactly* correct," Moncure said defiantly. "I am devoting my whole fortune to this cause. And there is nothing in American law that prevents me from following through with my plans."

"You're right there," Tracy said wryly. "There's nothing in American law that prevents you. However, you see, I have no con-

nection whatsoever with the American government." He slipped the gun from its holster.

* * *

Frank Tracy made his way wearily into LaVerne's domain. She looked up from the desk. "Everything go all right, Mr. Tracy?"

"I suppose so. Tell Comrade Zotov that I'm back from Chicago, please."

She clicked switches, said something into an inner-office communicator, then looked up again. "He'll see you immediately, Mr. Tracy."

Pavel Zotov looked up from his endless paperwork and wheezed the sigh of a fat man. He correctly interpreted the expression of his field operative. "Pour us a couple of drinks, Frank, or would you rather have it *Frol*, today?"

His best field man grunted as he walked over to the bar. "Vodka, eh? *Chort vesmiot* how tired one can become of this everlasting bourbon." He reached into the refrigerator compartment and brought forth a bottle of iced Stolichnaya. He poured two three-ounce charges and brought them back to his bureau chief's desk.

They toasted silently, knocked back the colorless spirit. Pavel Zotov said, "Well, Frol?"

The man usually called Frank Tracy said, "The worst case yet. This one had quite a clear picture of the true situation. He saw the necessity--given *their* viewpoint, of course--of getting out of the fantastic rut their economy has fallen into." He ran his hand over his mouth in a gesture of weariness. "Chief, do you have any idea of how long it would take us to catch up to them, if we ever did, if they really turned this economy on full blast, as an alternative to their present foul-up?"

"That's why we're here," the Chief said heavily. "What did you do?"

The man sometimes called Tracy told him.

Zotov winced. "I thought I ordered you--"

"You did," the man called Tracy told him curtly, "but what alternative was there? The fire will completely destroy the records. I

have the names and addresses of all the others connected with Freer Enterprises. We'll have to arrange car accidents, that sort of thing."

The fat man's lips worked. "We can't get by with this indefinitely, Frol. With such blatant tactics, sooner or later their C.I.A. or F.B.I. is going to get wind of us."

Tracy came to his feet angrily. "What alternative have we? We've been sent over here to do a job. We're doing it. If we're caught, who knows better than we that we're expendable? If you don't mind, I'm going on home."

As he left the office, through the secret door that led through the innocuous looking garage, the man they called Frank Tracy was inwardly thinking, "Zotov might be my superior, and a top man in the party, but he's too soft for this job. Perhaps I'd better send a report back to Moscow on him."

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