# The Fool-Killer

O. Henry

Down South whenever any one perpetrates some particularly monumental piece of foolishness everybody says: “Send for Jesse Holmes.”

Jesse Holmes is the Fool-Killer. Of course he is a myth, like Santa Claus and Jack Frost and General Prosperity and all those concrete conceptions that are supposed to represent an idea that Nature has failed to embody. The wisest of the Southrons can-not tell you whence comes the Fool-Killer’s name; but few and happy are the households from the Ro-anoke to the Rio Grande in which the name of Jesse Holmes has not been pronounced or invoked. Always with a smile, and often with a tear, is he summoned to his official duty. A busy man is Jesse Holmes.

I remember the clear picture of him that hung on the walls of my fancy during my barefoot days when I was dodging his oft-threatened devoirs. To me be was a terrible old man, in gray clothes, with a long, ragged, gray beard, and reddish, fierce eyes. I looked to see him come stumping up the road in a cloud of dust, with a white oak staff in his hand and his shoes tied with leather thongs. I may yet —

But this is a story, not a sequel.

I have taken notice with regret, that few stories worth reading have been written that did not contain drink of some sort. Down go the fluids, from Arizona Dick’s three fingers of red pizen to the in-efficacious Oolong that nerves Lionel Montressor to repartee in the “Dotty Dialogues.” So, in such good company I may introduce an absinthe drip — one absinthe drip, dripped through a silver dripper, orderly, opalescent, cool, green-eyed — deceptive.

Kerner was a fool. Besides that, he was an artist and my good friend. Now, if there is one thing on earth utterly despicable to another, it is an artist in the eyes of an author whose story he has illustrated. Just try it once. Write a story about a mining camp in Idiho. Sell it. Spend the money, and then, six months later, borrow a quarter (or a dime), and buy the magazine containing it. You find a full-page wash drawing of your hero, Black Bill, the cowboy. Somewhere in your story you employed the word “horse.” Aha! the artist has grasped the idea. Black Bill has on the regulation trousers of the M. F. H. of the Westchester County Hunt. He carries a parlor rifle, and wears a mon-ocle. In the distance is a section of Forty-second Street during a search for a lost gas-pipe, and the Taj Mahal, the famous mausoleum in India.

“Enough! I hated Kerner, and one day I met him and we became friends. He was young and gloriously melancholy because his spirits were so high and life bad so much in store for him. Yes, he was almost riotously sad. That was his youth. When a man begins to be hilarious in a sorrowful way you can bet a million that he is dyeing his hair. Ker-ner’s hair was plentiful and carefully matted as an artist’s thatch should be. He was a cigaretteur, and be audited his dinners with red wine. But, most of all, be was a fool. And, wisely, I envied him, and listened patiently while he knocked Velasquez and Tintoretto. Once he told me that he liked a story of mine that he bad come across in an anthology. He described it to me, and I was sorry that Mr. Fitz-James O’Brien was dead and could not learn of the eulogy of his work. But mostly Kerner made few breaks and was a consistent fool.

I’d better explain what I mean by that. There was a girl. Now, a girl, as far as I am concerned, is a thing that belongs in a seminary or an album; but I conceded the existence of the animal in order to retain Kerner’s friendship. He showed me her picture in a locket — she was a blonde or a brunette — I have forgotten which. She worked in a factory for eight dollars a week. Lest factories quote this wage by way of vindication, I will add that the girl bad worked for five years to reach that supreme elevation of remuneration, beginning at $1.50 per week.

Kerner’s father was worth a couple of millions He was willing to stand for art, but he drew the line at the factory girl. So Kerner disinherited his father and walked out to a cheap studio and lived on sausages for breakfast and on Farroni for dinner. Farroni had the artistic soul and a line of credit for painters and poets, nicely adjusted. Sometimes Ker-rier sold a picture and bought some new tapestry, a ring and a dozen silk cravats, and paid Farroni two dollars on account.

One evening Kerner had me to dinner with himself and the factory girl. They were to be married as soon as Kerner could slosh paint profitably. As for the ex-father’s two millions — pouf!

She was a wonder. Small and half-way pretty, and as much at her ease in that cheap cafe as though she were only in the Palmer House, Chicago, with a souvenir spoon already safely hidden in her shirt waist. She was natural. Two things I noticed about her especially. Her belt buckle was exactly in the middle of her back, and she didn’t tell us that a large man with a ruby stick-pin had followed her up all the way from Fourteenth Street. Was Kerner such a fool? I wondered. And then I thought of the quantity of striped cuffs and blue glass beads that $2,000,000 can buy for the heathen, and I said to myself that he was. And then Elise — certainly that was her name told us, merrily, that the brown spot on her waist was caused by her landlady knocking at the door while she (the girl — confound the English language) was heating an iron over the gas jet, and she hid the iron under the bedclothes until the coast was clear, and there was the piece of chewing gum stuck to it when she began to iron the waist, and — well, I wondered bow in the world the chewing gum came to be there — don’t they ever stop chewing it?

A while after that — don’t be impatient, the absinthe drip is coming now — Kerner and I were dining at Farroni’s. A mandolin and a guitar were being attacked; the room was full of smoke in nice, long crinkly layers just like the artists draw the steam from a plum pudding on Christmas posters, and a lady in a blue silk and gasolined gauntlets was beginning to bum an air from the Catskills.

“Kerner,” said I, “you are a fool.”

“Of course,” said Kerner, “I wouldn’t let her go on working. Not my wife. What’s the use to wait? She’s willing. I sold that water color of the Pali-sades yesterday. We could cook on a two-burner gas stove. You know the ragouts I can throw together? Yes, I think we will marry next week.”

“Kerner,” said I, “you are a fool.”

“Have an absinthe drip?” said Kerner, grandly. “To-night you are the guest of Art in paying quantities. I think we will get a flat with a bath.”

“I never tried one — I mean an absinthe drip,” said I.

The waiter brought it and poured the water slowly over the ice in the dripper.

“It looks exactly like the Mississippi River water in the big bend below Natchez,” said I, fascinated, gazing at the be-muddled drip.

“There are such flats for eight dollars a week,” said Kerner.

“You are a fool,” said I, and began to sip the filtration. “What you need,” I continued, “is the official attention of one Jesse Holmes.”

Kerner, not being a Southerner, did not comprehend, so he sat, sentimental, figuring on his flat in his sordid, artistic way, while I gazed into the green eyes of the sophisticated Spirit of Wormwood.

Presently I noticed casually that a procession of bacchantes limned on the wall immediately below the ceiling bad begun to move, traversing the room from right to left in a gay and spectacular pilgrimage. I did not confide my discovery to Kerner. The artistic temperament is too high-strung to view such devia-tions from the natural laws of the art of kalsomining. I sipped my absinthe drip and sawed wormwood.

One absinthe drip is not much — but I said again to Kerner, kindly:

“You are a fool.” And then, in the vernacular: “Jesse Holmes for yours.”

And then I looked around and saw the Fool-Killer, as he had always appeared to my imagination, sitting at a nearby table, and regarding us with his reddish, fatal, relentless eyes. He was Jesse Holmes from top to toe; he had the long, gray, ragged beard, the gray clothes of ancient cut, the executioner’s look, and the dusty shoes of one who bad been called from afar. His eyes were turned fixedly upon Kerner. I shuddered to think that I bad invoked him from his assiduous southern duties. I thought of flying, and then I kept my seat, reflecting that many men bad escaped his ministrations when it seemed that nothing short of an appointment as Ambassador to Spain could save them from him. I had called my brother Kerner a fool and was in danger of hell fire. That was nothing; but I would try to save him from Jesse Holmes.

The Fool-Killer got up from his table and came over to ours. He rested his hands upon it, and turned his burning, vindictive eyes upon Kerner, ignoring me.

“You are a hopeless fool,” be said to the artist. “Haven’t you had enough of starvation yet? I of-fer you one more opportunity. Give up this girl and come back to your home. Refuse, and you must take the consequences.”

The Fool-Killer’s threatening face was within a foot of his victim’s; but to my horror, Kerner made not the slightest sign of being aware of his presence.

“We will be married next week,” be muttered ab-sent-mindedly. “With my studio furniture and some second-hand stuff we can make out.”

“You have decided your own fate,” said the Fool-Killer, in a low but terrible voice. “You may consider yourself as one dead. You have had your last chance.”

“In the moonlight,” went on Kerner, softly, “we will sit under the skylight with our guitar and sing away the false delights of pride and money.”

“On your own head be it,” hissed the Fool-Killer, and my scalp prickled when I perceived that neither Kerner’s eyes nor his ears took the slightest cognizance of Jesse Holmes. And then I knew that for some reason the veil had been lifted for me alone, and that I bad been elected to save my friend from de-struction at the Fool-Killer’s bands. Something of the fear and wonder of it must have showed itself in my face.

“Excuse me,” said Kerner, with his wan, amiable smile; “was I talking to myself? I think it is getting to be a habit with me.”

The Fool-Killer turned and walked out of Far-ronils.

“Wait here for me,” said I, rising; “I must speak to that man. Had you no answer for him? Because you are a fool must you die like a mouse under his foot? Could you not utter one squeak in your own defence?

“You are drunk,” said Kerner, heartlessly. “No one addressed me.”

“The destroyer of your mind,” said I, “stood above you just now and marked you for his victim. You are not blind or deaf.”

“I recognized no such person,” said Kerner. “I have seen no one but you at this table. Sit down. Hereafter you shall have no more absinthe drips.”

“Wait here,” said I, furious; “if you don’t care for your own life, I will save it for you.”

I hurried out and overtook the man in gray half-way down the block. He looked as I bad seen him in my fancy a thousand times - truculent, gray and awful. He walked with the white oak staff, and but for the street-sprinkler the dust would have been fly-ing under his tread. I caught him by the sleeve and steered him to a dark angle of a building. I knew he was a myth, and I did not want a cop to see me conversing with vacancy, for I might land in Bellevue minus my silver matchbox and diamond ring.

“Jesse Holmes,” said I, facing him with apparent bravery, “I know you. I have heard of you all my life. I know now what a scourge you have been to your country. Instead of killing fools you have been murdering the youth and genius that are necessary to make a people live and grow great. You are a fool yourself, Holmes; you began killing off the brightest and best of our countrymen three generations ago, when the old and obsolete standards of society and honor and orthodoxy were narrow and bigoted. You proved that when you put your murderous mark upon my friend Kerner — the wisest chap I ever knew in my life.”

The Fool-Killer looked at me grimly and closely.

“You’ve a queer jag,” said he, curiously. “Oh, yes; I see who you are now. You were sitting with him at the table. Well, if I’m not mistaken, I heard you call him a fool, too.”

“I did,” said I. “I delight in doing so. It is from envy. By all the standards that you know he is the most egregious and grandiloquent and gorgeous fool in all the world. That’s why you want to kill him.”

“Would you mind telling me who or what you think I am?” asked the old man.

I laughed boisterously and then stopped suddenly, for I remembered that it would not do to be seen so hilarious in the company of nothing but a brick wall.

“You are Jesse Holmes, the Fool-Killer,” I said, solemnly, “and you are going to kill my friend Ker-ner. I don’t know who rang you up, but if you do kill him I’ll see that you get pinched for it. That is,” I added, despairingly, “if I can get a cop to see you. They have a poor eye for mortals, and I think it would take the whole force to round up a myth murderer.”

“Well,” said the Fool-Killer, briskly, “I must be going. You had better go home and sleep it off. Good-night.”

At this I was moved by a sudden fear for Kerner to a softer and more pleading mood. I leaned against the gray man’s sleeve and besought him:

“Good Mr. Fool-Killer, please don’t kill little Ker-ner. Why can’t you go back South and kill Congressmen and clay-caters and let us alone? Why don’t you go up on Fifth Avenue and kill millionaires that keep their money locked up and won’t let young fools marry because one of ‘em lives on the wrong street? Come and have a drink, Jesse. Will you never get on to your job?”

“Do you know this girl that your friend has made himself a fool about?” asked the Fool-Killer.

“I have the honor,” said I, “and that’s why I called Kerner a fool. He is a fool because he has waited so long before marrying her. He is a fool because be has been waiting in the hopes of getting the consent of some absurd two-million-dollar-fool parent or something of the sort.”

“Maybe,” said the Fool-Killer — ” maybe I — I might have looked at it differently. Would you mind going back to the restaurant and bringing your friend Kerner here?”

“OH, what’s the use, Jesse,” I yawned. “He can’t see you. He didn’t know you were talking to him at the table, You are a fictitious character, you know.”

“Maybe He can this time. Will you go fetch him?”

“All right,” said I, “but I’ve a suspicion that you’re not strictly sober, Jesse. You seem to be wavering and losing your outlines. Don’t vanish before I get back.”

I went back to Kerner and said:

“There’s a man with an invisible homicidal mania waiting to see you outside. I believe he wants to murder you. Come along. You won’t see him, so there’s nothing to be frightened about.”

Kerner looked anxious.

“Why,” said be, “I had no idea one absinthe would do that. You’d better stick to Wurzburger. I’ll walk home with you.”

I led him to Jesse Holmes’s.

“Rudolf,” said the Fool-Killer, “I’ll give in. Bring her up to the house. Give me your hand, boy.”,

“Good for you, dad,” said Kerner, shaking hands with the old man. You’ll never regret it after you know her.”

“So, you did see him when he was talking to you at the table?” I asked Kerner.

“We hadn’t spoken to each other in a year,” said Kerner. “It’s all right now.”

I walked away.

“Where are you going?” called Kerner.

“I am going to look for Jesse Holmes,” I answered, with dignity and reserve.