

Love In The Afternoon

by FRANK LOOMER

We were wishing the air conditioner men would be back soon to finish their work. We had seen nothing of them for a week. It was mid-June, and the hot afternoons of a heat wave had turned our un-conditioned office into a dry oven. The galvanized air conduits of the unfinished conditioning system hung unabashedly open-ended from their clamps along the ceiling. The whole floor would become a sandless and trackless desert before the air conditioner men would at last save our bleached

bones.

I leaned back from my work, which was strewn before me, all over the top of my desk. I felt stiff and weary. I surveyed the chaos on my desk and seemed to ache all over. I looked around briefly for Alfred Buckley, our office boy, I looked expecting to see him, then called over to Pete Fram.

"Let's go out to Rat's Cellar," I said across the aisle, leaning over the side of my desk. Then I got up and headed down the rows of desks out of the front

office. It was a little after by the big GE clock on the back wall. As I walked down the aisle, I was momentarily distracted by the steady, remorselessly unchanging sweep of the clock's red second dial. (The office more or less as a whole despised that clock. Its most vicious quality, I think, was its *insensitivity*. It didn't care whether we suffered or not, or that it reminded us of our suffering. We hoped that someone would sneak in someday and steal it. All the thief would have to do would be unplug it and life it from the wall. There were chairs all around to stand on.)

Just past the front office I stopped at the office-supply door. It was a little ajar. I knocked and found Alfred inside, reading a comic book. He had squeezed himself in between massive cartoons of supply, and had propped his knees up against the gestetner table across from him. The room was long and narrow, and Alfred had very long legs. We had measured them once. Thirty-eight inches.

"Alfred", I said in an interruptive voice as I could muster, with one hand high on the door. "We need you. We require your services. The Desert Rats are dying of thirst."

He looked up with something of a start crossed with the kind of glance someone might give it he's overly accustomed to you. "You mean me?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "You. Hop to it. My tongue's turning black." I stuck out my tongue.

"God, so it is," he said, and rose to his full height. He never ceased to amaze me when he did that. What bones to be so tall!

"You'll find us holed up in Rat's Cellar fighting off slow death," I said epigrammatically.

"Yes, sir," I heard him say behind me as the door closed easily in his face.

After several twists and turns along a winding corridor and past numerous office doors, I arrived at Rat's Cellar. It was



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