

That Low

By

THEODORE STURGEON

There was a "psychic" operating on Vince Street. Fowler went to see her. Not that he had any faith in mumbo jumbo: far from it. He had been told that this Mrs. Hallowell worked along strictly logical lines. That's why he went. He liked the sound of that, being what he was. He went to her and asked her about killing himself. She said he couldn't do it. Not "You won't" or "shouldn't". She said, "You can't."

This Fowler was a failure specialist, in the sense that a man is a carburetor specialist or a drainage specialist or a nerve specialist. You don't get to be that kind of specialist without spending a lot of time with carburetors or sewers or nerves. You don't stay nice and objective about it either. You get in it up to the elbows, up to the eyeballs. Fowler was a man who knew all that one man could know about failure. He knew all of the techniques, from the small social failure of letting his language forget what room of the house his mouth was in, through his declaration of war on the clock and the calendar (in all but style he was the latest), to the crowning stupidity of regarding his opinions as right

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purely because they were his opinions. So he had fallen and floundered through life, never following through, jumping when he should have crept, and lying down at sprintingtime. He could have written a book on the subject of failure, except for the fact that if he had, it might have been a success . . . and be bated failure. Well, you don't have to love your specialty to be a specialist. You just have to live with it.

It was understandable, therefore, that he should be impressed by Mrs. Hallowell's reputation for clarity and logic, for he truly believed that here was a kindred spirit. He brought his large features and his flaccid handshake to her and her office, which were cool. The office was Swedish modern and blond. Mrs. Hallowell was dark-, and said, "Sit down. Your name?"

"Maxwell Fowler."

"Occupation?"

"Engineer."

She glanced up. She had aluminum eyes. "Not a graduate engineer." It was not a question.

"I would of been," said Fowler, "except for a penny-ante political situation in the school. There was a fellow--"

"Yes," she said. "Married?"

"I was. You know, the kind that'll kick a man when he's down. She was a--"

"Now, Mr. Fowler. What was it you wanted here?"

"I hear you can foretell the future."

"I'm not interested in gossip," she said, and it was the only cautionary thing she said in the entire interview. "I know about people, that's all."

He said, "Ever since I could walk and talk, people have been against me. I can whip one or two or sometimes half a

dozen or more, but by and large I'm outnumbered. I'm tired. Sometimes I think I'll check out."

"Are you going to ask me if you should?"

"No. If I will. You see, I think about it all the time. Sometimes I---"

"All right," she said. "As long as you understand that I don't give advice. I

just tell about what's going to happen."

"What's going to happen?"

"Give me a check."

"What?"

"Give me a check. No-don't write on it. just give it to me.pp

"But--"

"YOU wouldn't pay me afterward."

"Now look, my word's as good as--" and then he looked into the eyes. He got out his checkbook. She took a pen and wrote on the check.

She gave it back to him and he looked at it and said, "That's foolish."

"You have it, though."

"Yes, I have, but--"

"Sign it then," she said casually, "or go away."

He signed it. "Well?"

She hesitated. There was something--

"Well?" he rapped again. "What'll I do? I'm tired of all this persecution."

"I take it you're asking me what you shall do--not what you should or will do."

"Lawyer's talk, huh."

"Laws," she said. "Yes." She wet her lips. "You shall live a long and unhappy life." Then she put away the check.

Maxwell looked after it, longingly. "It can't be unhappier than it is."

"That may well be."

"Then I don't want to live a long life."

"But you shall."

"Not if I don't want to," he said grimly. "I tell you, I'm tired. t?"

She shook her head. "It's gone too far," she said, not unkindly. "You can't change it."

He got up. "I can. Anytime, I can. Then you'll be wrong, won't you?"

"I'm not wrong," said Mrs. Hallowell.

"I'll kill myself," said Maxwell, and that was when she told him he couldn't.

He was very angry, but she did not give him back his check. By the time he thought of stopping payment on it, it had cleared the bank. He went on living his life.

The amount of money he had paid Mrs. Hallowell dug quite a hole, but for a surprisingly long time he was able to walk around it. However, he did nothing to fill it up, and inevitably he had the choice of facing his creditors or killing himself. So he got a piece of rope and made a noose and put it around his neck. He tied the other end to the leg of the radiator and jumped out of the window. He was a big man, but the rope held all right. However, the leg broke off the radiator, and he fell six stories. He hit a canvas marquee, tore through it, and fell heavily to the sidewalk. There was quite a crowd there, after a while, to listen to the noises he made because of what was broken.

Fowler took a while to mend, and spent it in careful thought. He took no comfort from his thoughts, for they were honest ones, and he did not care at all for his conclusions, which drafted a portrait no one would admire and an insight no one would want as a bedfellow. He got through it though, and put a list of his obligations down on paper

and drew up a plan for taking care of things. It was a plan that was within his capabilities and meant chip, chip, chip for a long, long, time before he could ever call himself honestly broke again. The first person he tried it out on was the business manager of the hospital, and to his immense surprise it worked: that is, he wouldn't get sued for the bill, and the hospital would go along with him until it was all straightened out. Nobody had ever given him

that much of a break before; but then, he had never tackled a problem this way before.

He got out of the hospital and began chipping.

Mrs. Hallowell had a bad moment over Fowler. She started up out of her sleep one night, thinking about him.

"Oh, how awful," she said. "I made a mistake!"

She phoned in the morning. Fowler was not there. Mrs. Hallowell phoned and phoned around until she got someone who could tell her about Fowler. The tenant in the apartment next to Fowler's had made a mistake about a gas heater, and had a bad cold, and lit a match, and blew the end of the building out. Fowler had been picked up from the wreckage, bleeding. The someone said, "Is there any message I could send to him?"

"No," said Mrs. Hallowell. "No. Not . . . now."

They saved Fowler that time, too. It was a lot of trouble. They had to take this and that off, and the other out. He was put, finally, in a very short bed with a mass of equipment beside him, humming and clicking. It circulated fluids, and another part of it dripped into a tube, and there was a thing that got emptied a couple of times a day without Fowler's worrying about it.

That was the trouble with Mrs. Hallowell's talent. It lay in such broad lines. A mistake could cover a lot of territory.

Fowler gradually became aware of her mistake. It took him about two months. People came by and clucked their tongues when they saw him. There was a bright-eyed, dry-faced old lady who put flowers near him every week or so. He didn't have to go on with that chip, chip, pay, pay any more. Everybody was sorry for him, and everybody always would be, as long as he lived, which would be very nearly as long as the equipment could be kept running. A long time. A long life. Mrs. Hallowell had been right, dead right, about the long life. Where she made her mistake was in thinking that he would be unhappy.