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BY GEORGE O. SMITH

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We Kill People

By

Henry Kuttner

Writing under the pseudonym Lewis Padgett.

First published *Astounding*, March 1946.

It was quite a business, too . . . and it wasn't anything you could prove murder. Murder, after all, is strictly a human affair; this was, on the contrary, an inhuman sort of business!

Glowing in polychromatic light, the neat, cryptic sign atop the building said sedately:

WE KILL PEOPLE

In the foyer, the directory told Carmody that the main office was on the second floor. There was nothing else listed on the glass-fronted board. Of the bank of elevators, only one was running, and that one operated by a uniformed moron with sleepy eyes and jaws that monotonously masticated gum. Carmody stepped into the car.

"Second," he said.

The operator didn't answer. The door closed, the floor pressed upward and then decelerated, and the moron slid the door open, to shut it quietly as Carmody stepped out on the deep carpet of a big, well-furnished reception room. One wall was lined with doors, numbered consecutively one to ten. The wall opposite the elevator was blank except for a few framed pictures and a six-by-six screen that showed a blond young man seated at a desk.

"Good morning," the young man said, looking into his telescreen and meeting Carmody's eyes. "May I help you?"

"Yeah. Who do I see about—"

"Oh," the young man said soberly. "Our exterminating service?"

Carmody didn't say anything.

"You *are* a client?"

"I might be. It depends."

"Quite," said the young man. "Our Mr. French will take care of you." He did things with the buttons on his desk. "Yes, he's free now. Would you mind stepping into Office Number One?"

Carmody pointed silently, and the young man nodded. Carmody walked across to the door, pushed it open, stepped through and glanced around, his face impassive. He was in a small room, furnished simply but with good taste. A relaxer chair extended beside a broad, low table that held a minor-size telescreen. The makings for smokes and drinks were conveniently handy.

On the screen was the head and shoulders of someone—our Mr. French, presumably. He had gray-streaked brown hair, a smooth, thinnish face, a sharp nose, and old-fashioned noncontact pince-nez. His clothes—what Carmody could see of them—were conservative. And his voice was dry and precise.

"Will you sit down, please?"

Carmody sat down. He lit a cigarette and looked speculatively at the face on the screen.

"My name is French, Samuel French. You'll notice the receptionist didn't take your name. If you decide to make use of our service, we'll need it, of course, but not just yet. First let me assure you that nothing you may say to me will put you in danger from the law. An intention to commit homicide is not actionable. You are not an accomplice either before or after the fact. Once you understand that, you'll be able to talk to me freely."

"Well—" Carmody said. "I'm a little—hesitant."

"We kill people," French said. "That's what brought you here, isn't it? To get an exterminating job done—safely."

It wasn't what had brought Carmody here, but he couldn't tell French that. He had to submerge himself completely in the role he was playing. From now on, he had to forget that he was working for Blake and play the part of a customer. At least until he had found out a little about this organization.

There had been nothing like it in the Amazonas. But the Amazonas Basin wasn't civilized, even fifteen years after World War II had ended. In the five years of Carmody's life there as a construction engineer he had seen little change, really; a dam here, a railroad there, but nothing to touch the rain-forest and the big river and the seasonal floods. Then his discontinuance notice had come through, and, in white-hot fury, he had hopped the first clipper to New York, determined to punch the big shot in the nose.

He hadn't done that. There had been secretive visitors and interviews, a closed air cab that whipped northward, and the vision of an Aladdin's palace that he recognized as Oakhaven, the country estate of Reuben Blake. Even in this day of fabulous fortunes and super-tycoons, Blake was a figure. He represented money and industries—and politics.

Oakhaven was an architect's dream. The new plastics and alloys had made such engineering feats possible—towering columns that sprang sky-high from fragile-seeming, translucent floors, concepts from Rackham and Sime transmuted into hard reality. Carmody, flanked by guards, was passed from chamber to chamber, till he reached the penthouse sanctum of Blake. A battalion could have deployed across the resilient, landscaped floor of that sanctum. And, seated at an onyx table with a chessboard inlaid into the top, a big drunken man was jittering nervously as he laid scraps of paper on the board's squares.

"Carmody," Blake said, looking up. "I'm glad you got here. Have a drink." He pushed glass and bottle forward. Carmody laid his hands flat on the table and glared.

"I want to know why I'm here," he said.

Blake gave him a glance that, surprisingly, held only appeal.

"Please. Please sit down and let me explain. I . . . I had to do some things . . . you'll understand. But first get this. I'll pay you whatever you want. I'll see you get your Brazilian job back, if you want it. I'm not trying to coerce you."

"Why was I fired?"

"I needed you," Blake said simply. "The construction company could get along without you, and I couldn't. I can't. Not very well. Now have a drink, sit down, and give me a chance to explain. Man, I'm sick!"

That was true. Something had hit Blake hard and knocked the tough backbone out of him. Carmody hesitated, sat down, and looked at the chessboard. Each square had a bit of paper on it. The first one said 1¢. The one next to it was marked 2¢. The third, 4¢; the fourth, 8¢. The ultimate figure was astronomical.

“Yeah,” Blake said, “you’ve heard the old gag. A rajah offered his favorite the choice between half his kingdom or—I forget what it was. The favorite said he just wanted a chessboard filled with money, doubled for each successive square. I don’t know if the rajah ever paid it. Who could?”

“So what?”

“I’ve got power. But I need an operative. I’m fighting something that’s plenty smart. An organization. They’ve got their ways of checking up, and if they ever suspected you were working for me—well! That’s why I couldn’t have gone about this more openly. I had to cover up. If you’ll do a job for me, you can have anything you want. Literally.”

Carmody started to answer, and then paused, his mouth open. Blake gave him a twisted, slack-mouthed grin.

“You’re getting it. I *can* give you anything you want—within human limits. I’m Reuben Blake. But I won’t be for long, unless I get help.”

“I thought you had an organization.”

“Sure I do. But this has to be strictly undercover. I picked you out from fifty case records. You’re smart, not too scrupulous, you know your way around. You’re qualified for the job.”

“What’s the job?”

“It’s a frame,” Blake said. “A smart frame. What it boils down to is this: my money or my life. And I’ve got to hand over one or the other!”

“But—how?”

French adjusted his pince-nez and said, rather wearily, “I should have a record made of this. Our clients are always skeptical at first. Unless they know us by reputation . . . you’ve *never* heard of us?”

“I just got back from Brazil,” Carmody said. “Since then I’ve heard things, sure. That’s why I looked you up. But I can’t quite see how you can do it.”

“Commit murder?”

“Exactly. The law—”

“We have a foolproof method,” French said. “It’s absolutely undetectable. Indistinguishable from natural death. The insurance companies are our biggest enemies, but we’ve a corps of attorneys who watch out for loopholes. We won’t go to jail for income tax evasion!”

“You might go to jail for murder though. How about that?”

“Hearsay isn’t evidence. You pay us to kill your enemy. He dies—of natural causes. We’ve had lawsuits, but we’ve never been convicted. Autopsies proved nothing except that no homicide was committed. You might call this insurance in reverse. Death insurance. If your enemy doesn’t die, we refund your money. But we’ve never had to make a refund yet—except under Clause A.”

“What’s that?”

“We’ll come to it later. First of all, let me apologize for pointing out that we must be assured you’re a bona fide client. We have no time for reporters, spies, or curiosity-hunters.”

“I’m a *prospective* client,” Carmody qualified. “And I want a—job done, yes. Only I don’t want to hang for it.”

French put the tips of bloodless fingers together. “We have been in business only four years. Our organization is based on a certain scientific . . . ah . . . discovery. Our patent, you

might call it. And that, of course, is a secret; if the nature of this patent were known, we'd have nothing to sell."

"The *modus operandi*, you mean?"

French nodded. "Yes. As I say . . . we're expanding. We don't advertise much; we don't want to attract a low-class clientele. And we *are* incorporated; we have an exterminator's license, and we do maintain a service, on the side, to get rid of bedbugs and termites. We don't encourage that sort of thing, but we must do a bit of it for a front. However, our money is made through murder. Our clients pay well."

"How much?"

"No fixed rate. I'll explain *that* later, too."

"There's got to be some minimum, though," Carmody said.

"Why? We went into the whole matter thoroughly, with expert psychologists and criminologists, before we incorporated. Experience proved our theories to be correct. What are the motives for murder?"

Carmody ticked them off on his fingers. "Well, greed—jealousy—revenge—"

"Passion or profit—two classifications, generally. We get few of the former. Such crimes are generally committed during a temporary emotional storm. Give the storm time to die down, put it on a practical level of hard cash, and the passion-murderer usually changes his mind. Moreover, very often he wants the pleasure of committing the crime himself. There *have* been cases, of course. But profit is the main motive. And most of our clients are drawn from the higher income brackets. It's a convenient service we offer, after all. The lower brackets are pretty conservative; they have indoctrinated morals, and think it's worse to pay for murder than to commit it personally."

"While the upper brackets are amoral, eh?"

"It's a case of relative values and proportions. Especially in *this* day and age. Power grows in direct ratio to money; if you have enough power, you approach godhead in your ability to juggle with lives. The gods were notorious for inundations and lightning-bolts. They could destroy mere humans without compunction. But the money barons don't need our help to handle lower-bracket enemies—they've got their own financial weapons for that. It's only when the gods were fighting among themselves that they called in aid. I could tell you cases that would surprise you—but, naturally, I shan't. Now—shall we discuss business?"

"All right," Carmody said. "The guy's name is Dale, Edward Dale."

"Address?"

Carmody gave it.

"Your name?"

"Albert Carmody. Don't you want to know my . . . uh . . . motive?"

"That will be investigated. Most of our running expenses are aimed at covering the initial investigation. As soon as we assure ourselves that you have a sound motive for wanting Dale killed, we'll take action. That's to protect ourselves against spies, framed evidence, and so on. We'll find out all about you, Mr. Carmody, don't worry about that."

Dale was executive president of the Brazil-U. S.-Combine that had fired Carmody. The motive was O. K.; it would, Carmody knew, check with his own rather violent personality-pattern.

"How much?"

"We set no price. That's up to you."

“Ten thousand dollars.”

“I see,” French said, making a note. “Now let me explain Clause A. In a business like this, we must set a high standard of honesty and professional ethics. We’re bonded with Dow-Smith—the regular honesty bond, by which we forfeit ninety-five percent of our assets if it can be proved that we renege on a contract. We have a standard of moral ethics, too.”

“Moral?” Carmody said, lifting an eyebrow.

“Certainly. We’ve reduced life-value to a basis of pure cash. Here’s how it works. Our investigators will give us an estimate of your total assets. Let’s say arbitrarily you’re worth a hundred thousand dollars. You’ll pay ten thousand to have Edward Dale killed. His life, then, is worth ten percent of your assets. You follow me?”

“So far.”

“If Dale’s life is worth, to him, ten percent of *his* assets, we’ll refund your check.”

“I don’t get that.”

“Dale will be notified that a client has asked for his death. Your name, of course, won’t figure in it. Nor will the amount you offered. The percentage *will* be mentioned. If Dale will pay ten percent of his total assets, we’ll drop the case and refund your money.”

“But how do you know he’s got any money?”

“The chances are he’s got more than you have, or you wouldn’t need our services to exterminate him. It depends on your motive, of course. It’s a risk we run. But we average. We average.”

“It sounds like blackmail to me,” Carmody said. “If I pay you to kill Dale, and you take protection money from him—”

“Two things are sure, death and taxes. The moment we accept your patronage, Dale is *in articulo mortis*. We are in the position of a physician who can save his patient’s life—and charges for that medical service.”

“After he’s first administered poison.”

“We have our ethics,” French said, spreading his hands, and glancing interestedly at the well-manicured nails. “We put a cash value on a man’s life, that’s all. And a life isn’t as intangible as . . . say . . . a lease.”

“That’s a question. Anyhow—let me think this out. You’ll take my check for ten grand to kill Dale. But if he pays you—ten percent—of his assets, then he survives.”

“And your money is refunded, under Clause A.”

“What’s to prevent me from coming back a week later and offering twenty thousand to get Dale killed? I could ruin the man that way. He’d have to keep on paving and paying till—”

“Ethics. We never accept the same client aiming at the same objective twice. That’s a rule. You might come back and hire us to kill somebody else—that’d be acceptable—or anybody else might come in and pay us to kill Edward Dale, but we’d never accept another commission from you to murder Dale.”

“But there’s nothing to stop me from giving dough to some friend and having him hire you to kill Dale.”

“Not a thing. Except our corps of investigators. They’d find out where that money came from. And if the client had a real motive for wanting Dale killed. It would look fishy. And we wouldn’t take the case.”

“I see,” Carmody said, and a faint grin crossed his face. He was thinking of Dale’s reaction. Dale would pay; the man was familiar with the way WE KILL PEOPLE worked, Carmody knew, and would certainly pony up ten percent of his sufficiently large fortune to

save his own life. Carmody had surreptitiously assured himself of that already. He himself had killed in the past, but never quite in cold blood. He didn't want Dale dead, no. But the man had been guilty of double-dealing. He had taken Reuben Blake's orders, and fired Carmody from a job he liked and wanted. So Dale would have to pay for that. Not with his life, but with ten percent of his assets—which would total a lot more than ten thousand dollars!

No. Ten percent had been the arbitrary figure set by French. The figure would be closer to five than ten—still large enough to hurt, though. And Carmody's bankroll was no windfall. He had earned it, and no investigation could shake that fact. That financial asset had been one of the reasons Blake had chosen Carmody—

“—to help me,” Blake had said, back in his palace penthouse, two weeks ago, while he stared at the chessboard before him. “You've got to, Carmody. Or I'll be ruined.”

“A firm like that—” Carmody said thoughtfully. “WE KILL PEOPLE. Why isn't it stopped?”

“I told you why. I've explained. But now—well, all I can do is find out *how* they kill people. I can't move economically against them; their weapon is murder, and it's absolutely sure-fire. They've built up a reputation in four years.”

“Without proof?”

“Without *legal* proof. Listen. Kalman, the oil man, told me he'd been approached. Fifteen percent of his assets—they knew exactly how much that'd be, too—or he'd be killed. He told them to go to hell. He got legal aid and police protection. Fortnight later, polio killed him.”

“Polio?”

“Yes. Seth Berger—septicemia. Miller—atypical pneumonia. Bronson—rheumatic fever; Jaeckle—cerebrospinal meningitis.”

“Lately?”

“Of course not,” Blake said, pouring himself a drink. “Most of those were three years ago, at least. Jaeckle died last year, but he had delusions of grandeur. He was guarded day and night. Thought he could escape. Result, meningitis.”

“How?”

“Nobody knows. WE KILL PEOPLE didn't send out a man to stick a hypodermic needle into the guy, if that's what you mean. They have some absolutely sure method of committing murder so it looks like death from natural causes.”

“Had Jaeckle been exposed to meningitis?”

“How can you answer a thing like that? Maybe, maybe not. And listen, Carmody—people get over meningitis, and pneumonia, and rheumatic fever. But not Jaeckle or Bronson or Miller. With WE KILL PEOPLE, the mortality rate is one hundred percent. Forget about precautions. They won't work. If WE KILL PEOPLE puts the bee on a man, he's *dead*! No, what I want to find out is how it works. What their trade secret is. Once I know that, I can move. Not necessarily legally, but effectively. I have a good organization, as you've found out.”

“I've found out, all right,” Carmody said, and Blake swallowed his drink hastily, spilling some of it down his chin. He dabbed ineffectually at his foulard.

“O. K., I've apologized! I told you I'd give you anything you wanted!”

“And you can do it. That's why I'm saying yes. But I need more information. Are you afraid to die?”

Blake sighed, put down his glass, and stared at nothing. “Sure. And I’m afraid of waste. I’m a white rat going crazy in a maze. My plans aren’t finished by a long shot. I know my average life expectancy, and I’ve enough doctors in my pay to keep me healthy—unless I’m murdered. But I don’t want to be poor. I’d rather be dead.”

“What do WE KILL PEOPLE want? A hundred percent of your dough?”

“It was a frame-up,” Blake said. “A very neat, logical frame. I told you how WE KILL PEOPLE works. They’re ethical, in their way. But these twenty men—more or less. I don’t know how many there are, and that’s what’s helping to drive me nuts!”

“What about them?”

“Enemies of mine. I’ve enemies, of course. I suppose they hate me, and I suppose they’ve got justification. I’ve probably ruined a lot of ’em in various ways. I don’t apologize for that. I can’t hunt up everybody who’s suffered by my policies and apologize personally—or pay them off. There are too many. And I don’t know who all of them are. I open a plastic factory, and an employee of copper somewhere in Burma gets fired, goes hungry, his family starve—he hates me. Do I know anything about it? No.”

“So you’ve got a lot of enemies. What are they doing?”

“Ruining me,” Blake said. “They aren’t rich, I’m sure. I’m one of the wealthiest men in the world, and there aren’t many in my class. No, these are middle-income figures. Call ’em A, B, C, and so on. A is worth practically nothing. No assets to speak of. B has a little more but not much. C has a little more than that. I’ve figured it out, Carmody, and it makes sense.”

“Well?”

“These—enemies—got together and figured out an idea. A cumulative method of ruining me. A went in to WE KILL PEOPLE and offered ’em one percent of his assets if they’d kill me. Fine. WE KILL PEOPLE got in touch with me and told me about it. I paid—one percent of my total holdings. Leaving me ninety-nine percent.”

“Oh-oh,” Carmody said. “You mean—”

“Then B called on WE KILL PEOPLE and paid ’em two percent of his assets. He could afford that; he had a little more dough than A. WE KILL PEOPLE asked me for two percent of my assets *at that date*—that is, after one percent had been deducted from the total. I paid. A week later, I was called on to pay three percent. After that, four percent of what I had left. D’you see?”

“But . . . uh . . . huh. That means the percentage will keep going up as your assets go down.”

Blake seized a stylus and figured rapidly on a pad. “I know this by heart. Let’s say my total assets, originally, were represented by the arbitrary sum of one hundred dollars. Here’s the breakdown, so far.”

The figures looked like this:

1%	of	\$100.00	\$99.00
2%	of	99.00	97.02
3%	of	97.02	94.11
4%	of	94.11	90.35
5%	of	90.35	85.83
6%	of	85.83	80.68
7%	of	80.68	75.03
8%	of	75.03	69.03

“Multiply that by billions and you’ve got it,” Blake said. “A lot of my assets are tied up or frozen. I can’t keep jerking out cash without upsetting the apple cart. Can you think of a better way to drive a guy nuts? I don’t know how long this will keep up, you see. When I’ll get a call for nine percent—and after that, ten and eleven and *hell!*”

“At the rate of pay you offer,” Carmody said, “I’d be a fool if I didn’t take the job. However! I’m just one man—”

“All the data we’ve gathered will be placed at your service. I’ve a staff of military and strategic experts, you know. And technicians. We’ve a few gadgets that’ll help you. You’ll be well equipped for offense and defense. But in the end it’ll depend on you personally. I want to know how these—murders!—are committed. After that—”

“—after that, you’ll be notified,” French said. “You understand that our investigations come first. Then we accept or reject your case. Finally, we’ll give Dale a chance to meet your figure. If he does, of course—he lives.”

Carmody took out his checkbook, but French lifted a restraining hand. “That’s not necessary yet.”

“All right. There’s one more thing, though.”

“What?”

“I’m looking for employment.”

French seemed surprised. “A job?”

“A job. I was fired from a good one by some sort of wire-pulling. I’ve enough dough to settle down, and I could get another job easily. But ordinary work won’t suit me. I want something interesting. Now that I know a little about your set-up, I’m intrigued. Plenty.”

“Well,” French said, “I don’t know. It isn’t often we get a client and an applicant for work at the same time.”

“I’m an unusual guy. And my qualifications are good—I think. At least, for your line of business. My record will show that.”

“You’ll have to see Mr. Higgins,” French said. “He’s the president of the firm. Naturally, personal interviews are pretty important—and so are references.”

“You’ll save money,” Carmody suggested. “You’ll be investigating me anyway in connection with Dale, so—”

“Mr. Higgins handles all that,” French repeated. “He sees all applicants. It has nothing to do with me, you know. The board of directors is in charge of organizational work; WE KILL PEOPLE is a group of separate units—financial, investigatory, operative, and so on—each one fairly independent. But if you want to see Mr. Higgins, I’ll arrange an appointment.”

“Will you do that?”

“Of course. You understand, some precautions must be taken—eh?”

“I can see that.”

“Very well,” French said, smiling for the first time. “You’ll be notified, then. Any questions? Well, if not—thank you for giving us your custom, and good afternoon, Mr. Carmody.”

He politely stayed on the screen till Carmody went out of the office.

Carmody didn’t report to Reuben Blake. It wouldn’t have been safe. The strategic campaign had been settled a week ago, and the supply line was open whenever Carmody needed material. From now on, the spies of WE KILL PEOPLE might be watching him any

time, so his life must be above suspicion. Blake could hold out for a while; the important move now was to gain entrance to the sanctorum of the homicide corporation. Certain of the gadgets Carmody had available would be useful; there was a microscopic wireless microphone-scanner to be planted in the right place, and there were other interesting devices. Meanwhile, he put the whole matter out of his mind and began living the life of a repatriate from South America—which mostly involved entertainment.

After two days French called him on his hotel telaudio. It was a playback, for Carmody had been out when French put through the call, so it was a monologue rather than a conversation, though, as usual, the automatic questioner, originally dictated by Carmody, had been left audible for convenience.

“Mr. Carmody, please.”

“He’ll be back at noon. Automatic speaking. Who is calling?”

“Samuel French.”

“Any message?”

“Yes. The request for an interview has been granted. At two p. m. a blue-and-white copter will sit at Empire Roofport. That’s the one.”

“Thank you. Good-by.”

Empire Roofport towered above all the other buildings in the city. It was enormous; it had to be, to accommodate the downblasts of the copters. Slightly before two, a cold, drizzling rain was falling, and Carmody stepped out of the automatic elevator to find the roof field deserted, except for an overcoated figure hunched uncomfortably under the transparent awning, staring over the guard rail at the street, a good half-mile down. No copters were visible. The man at the rail turned a familiar face.

“Lousy weather,” he said, and then, “Oh! It’s you, eh?”

“It’s me. What are you doing here?”

Edward Dale looked uncomfortable. “Waiting for my copter. That chauffeur’ll tell me the storm held him up over Long Island.”

Carmody wondered if it would be a blue-and-white copter. Dale, of all people! It was impossible. Dale couldn’t be president of WE KILL PEOPLE!

“How are you doing?” Dale asked, after a time.

“O. K. I still don’t know exactly why you’re *here*.”

“I work here,” Dale said, pointing down, and Carmody remembered one of the Brazil-U.S.-Combine’s offices was at Empire.

“You didn’t . . . ah . . . expect to meet me?”

Dale frankly stared. “Why, no, Carmody. Why should I? Did . . . you expect to see me?”

“No,” Carmody said, and Dale, after a puzzled moment, turned to glance over the rail.

“I told him two, distinctly. Well, I’m going to wait five more minutes and then get a cab.”

Carmody watched Dale, while a puzzled frown grew between his eyes. The drizzle grew to a downpour. Finally Dale hunched his shoulders, scowled, and turned back to the elevators. “I won’t wait,” he said. “I’ll put in a call for an air cab at the booth. See you, Carmody.”

“Yeah,” Carmody said, still scowling. He glanced at his watch, 2:08.

At 2:11 a blue-and-white copter dropped from the low ceiling, and its door opened. Carmody ran through the rain and sprang aboard, pulling the door shut behind him. Instantly sight and sound of the outer world were cut off.

“Rotten weather,” a hoarse voice said. “Let’s get to a warmer place, what do you say?”

“You’re Mr. Higgins?”

The fattish man at the controls spun his chair to face Carmody. “That’s right. Come up here and sit beside me, will you?” He indicated a seat at his right. “Wait’ll I lift this windmill. Then we can talk.”

Seated, Carmody surreptitiously examined Higgins. He couldn’t make out much; the man was bundled up in overcoat and scarf, and his shapeless hands, moving deftly over the controls, were cased in heavy thermal gloves. He wore no hat, though, and his bald head gleamed in the light. He had a round, undistinguished face, a button of a nose, and a mouth that was far too small between those bulging cheeks.

“There,” Higgins said, settling back at last. “She’s automatic now.”

“Our destination’s a secret?” Carmody asked, nodding toward the opaqued windows.

“What? Oh, maybe, maybe. Anyway, there’s nothing much to look at in this weather, and the rain’s not very cheerful. Now, Mr. Carmody, to business!”

Carmody decided that the plane was beginning to travel fast. Already he could feel violent acceleration, though, in the padded seat, it wasn’t uncomfortable.

“I didn’t expect a personal interview,” he said.

“I interview all applicants for positions,” Higgins smiled. “However, before we get on to that—there’s another matter. This man Dale. It’s O. K. We’ve checked. We’ll accept your retainer to kill him. You understand that if he matches your percentage, your money will be refunded, and—no hard feelings?”

“I understand.”

“Good. All right, the job. What did you have in mind?”

“I don’t know what’s available. Not office work, though. I want something that’ll keep me interested.”

“Uh-huh,” Higgins said. He touched a stud. “Too cold here. Take your coat off if you want.” He awkwardly struggled out of his own overcoat, pulled the scarf from around his fat neck, and removed his gloves. In a few minutes the copter’s cabin was comfortably warm.

“Well,” Higgins said, “we’ve got several branches. There’s plenty of paper work. Then we’ve got our investigatory corps, and our operative group. But the latter is rather specialized.”

“I can see how it would be. And I wouldn’t expect to get in on that right away—or without thorough investigation. For all you know, I might be in the pay of an insurance company.”

“Those insurance companies,” Higgins sighed, clicking his tongue. “We have trouble with them. But WE KILL PEOPLE is safe as houses, Mr. Carmody. We protect our staff. You might qualify for investigation, but never for operation.”

The acceleration increased. It was slightly incredible, Carmody decided.

“No?”

“I’m afraid not,” Higgins said. “In the very nature of things—well, if you want to work for us, I suppose there’s no harm in telling you a little. But you understand you musn’t ever repeat this to a living soul.”

Carmody turned his head to stare, but apparently the president was quite serious.

“Oh, we take precautions,” Higgins said. “Our secret hasn’t leaked out yet, has it? I don’t know what would happen if it *did*, because our method can’t be duplicated artificially. It’s . . . well, it’s *natural*. All our victims die of natural causes.”

“Oh?” Carmody said, beginning to frown again.

“Now this isn’t to be repeated,” Higgins said chattily, “but I suppose you know that everybody’s got bugs in him—germs, viruses, and so on? Even the healthiest man contains the seeds of death. Strep, typhoid, tuberculosis, cancer—all sorts of bugs. But usually in such small quantity that the phagocytes can handle ’em. It’s only when the bugs multiply that you run into trouble, and have a prognosis of active polio—or whatever. Well, we just multiply the bugs.”

“If you’re telling me the truth—” Carmody said.

“It’s in confidence. We’ve got a method of multiplying the bugs, that’s all. Ever heard of symbiosis? Give-and-take relationship of two organisms? That’s the answer. A virus, let’s call it x-virus, that sets up a symbiotic housekeeping business—selectivity. Introduced into the human blood stream, it picks out the strongest bug and proposes. It’s a smart little virus. If the polio bug is strongest in your system at the time, it goes into symbiosis with polio. It’s stimulative. And very adaptable. Result: the polio bug multiplies fast, plenty fast—though not so fast it seems abnormal. Atypical, maybe, but not abnormal. If the polio’s cured, the x-virus is still present in the blood stream, and it looks around for the next-strongest bug. Meningitis, or t. b. Anything available, so long as it’s malignant. The human organism can’t stand one attack after another—polio, meningitis, t. b., cancer—right down the list. Death is certain. I’m not much good at explaining all this, I’m afraid. I’m an organizer, not a technician. But perhaps you see the angles?”

“I see ’em,” Carmody said. “It’s death from natural causes, all right.”

Higgins nodded and chuckled. “Sure. The only trouble is how to administer the x-virus to a victim. That’s where our operatives come in. They’re pretty specialized. In fact, you have to be born to the job.”

“They sound like radio-controlled anopheles,” Carmody said.

“No, they’re men—but they’re mutants. We had to put ’em on the Board of Directors, for one reason or another. They’re the ones who started WE KILL PEOPLE. They’re a true mutation. Not many of them, so far, but there’ll be more. Unfortunately they can’t intermarry with humans, only among themselves. So—” He spread his pudgy hands.

“Mutants,” Carmody murmured. His throat felt tight.

“The x-virus is natural to them,” Higgins explained. “Perfectly normal in their blood stream, part of the check-and-balance system of their rather screwy metabolic set-up. Introduced into a merely human circulatory pipe line, it’s fatal. Nothing too startling about that. Some types of blood are plenty dangerous in combination with other types; they don’t mix. Natural selection is behind it, but we can’t read Mother Nature’s mind. The first true humans were mutants, and were given intelligence so they could dominate. They already had agility. Our x-virus boys already had inherited intellect, and maybe this new virus is *their* method of domination. It isn’t too foresighted on Mother Nature’s part, though. Humans would kill the mutants if they knew. They’re typhoid Marys.”

“I don’t see how they survived infancy,” Carmody said.

“Maturation takes time. A baby’s blood will mix with any other type, you know. Later on it acquires its own distinctive typing. It was like that. Our mutants *were* perfectly normal till they matured. It was only after that that the x-virus developed. But you can see the dangers! They couldn’t live in contact with humans without arousing suspicion and eventual real trouble. And they’re not super-minds. Some of ’em are excellent technicians, but no better than human technicians. Perhaps intellect may become as vestigial as agility, a convenient secondary trait. In the future, in a mutant world, a few may specialize in intellect, just as we

have athletes today. I don't know what the main line will be; the x-virus isn't enough. Instinct, possibly. However, if the mutants are to survive at all, they've got to stay under cover. And because they're not super-minds, they had to make a living."

"Oh," Carmody said, uneasiness crawling down between his shoulder blades. Higgins was talking too much and too plainly.

"Which they did. They've got a private world of their own, adjusted to their mutant needs. A small Utopia. It's underground, in a wilderness country, and I don't think humans can locate it. It's a lovely place. And it also costs a lot to maintain. Thus—WE KILL PEOPLE. The mutants had to find a profitable enterprise which would suit their specialized talents, and that was it."

That was it. It explained the basic amorality of WE KILL PEOPLE's theory and practice, too. The Board of Directors didn't kill fellow-humans; they killed members of a lower species. Mankind was playing into the hands of the mutants; no such murderous organization could have flourished among beasts. Beasts did their own killing.

They—

Carmody felt a sudden, unexpected sting of pain that instantly dulled and was gone. A roaring grew in his ears. He heard it stutter and die, and he was looking at the copter from fifty feet away, across an expanse of blindingly brilliant white sand. Behind him was a monotonous boom and thunder.

He was sitting up, his back against something—a rough-boled tree.

Higgins was visible through the open door of the copter, his chair swiveled so he faced Carmody.

"You've been unconscious for a few hours," Higgins said, his voice raised slightly. "I used an instantaneous anaesthetic."

Carmody drew his legs under him. There were no after-effects. He felt fine.

"Don't do it," Higgins said. "I can take off in a second, and I want to talk to you first. We thought you were a spy, you know, but we weren't sure. Not many people ask us for jobs. We tested you."

Carmody reached into a pocket. His gun was gone.

Higgins blinked against the glare. "Your psychology checked. You were the sort of man who'd want to kill Dale because he fired you. But you're also strongly acquisitive. Not miserly, but you want value received. The scene on the Empire Roofport was a frame-up. We maneuvered you—and Dale—into a position where you were both alone up there, and there were no spectators to bring evidence if you'd killed Dale personally. You had the chance. You could have thrown him over the railing, taken the elevator down—it's automatic, you know—and you'd have accomplished your purpose quite safely. And you wouldn't have had to pay us ten thousand dollars. But the idea never occurred to you. We were sure after that."

"What are you going to do to me?" Carmody asked. A muscle was twitching at the corner of his mouth.

"Nothing," Higgins said. "This island is off the air-trade routes. Once in six months a plane visits it, to re-establish boundary lines in the oceanic area. You have slightly more than four months to wait."

"Then I'll be picked up?"

Higgins shook his head. "You'll be buried, that's all. I'm a mutant, too. You have the x-virus in your bloodstream now. We discourage spies, Mr. Carmody." He shrugged and sighed.

“I’ve left you plenty of supplies, so you won’t be hungry. We’ve used this island before, you see. Well, good-by.”

“Wait a minute,” Carmody said, getting ready. “One more thing. How did you infect me?”

Higgins merely smiled, glanced at his hands—he had donned his gloves again—and swung the seat around. Carmody got a sprinter’s start. He plunged for the copter as the engine roared.

He would have made it except for one thing—the downblast. That vertical cyclone knocked him flat. By the time he had scrambled upright, the copter was far out of reach, and heading east. Carmody stood looking after it till it diminished into a speck.

Then he looked at nearer objects. White surf flung its combers over a barrier reef; beyond that, blue sea stretched to meet a cloudless blue sky. Behind him, palmettos and sparse jungle made cool shadows. A stream ran softly out of the forest to meet the sea.

At the foot of the tree where he had wakened was a waterproofed box. Carmody opened it. There was food, plenty of it, and a good variety. He wouldn’t starve.

He rolled up his sleeve and examined his arm for the prick of a hypodermic needle, but he found nothing. He remembered the slight sting he had felt in the copter, but that had been merely the anaesthetic. He remembered Higgins’ gloves, and grimaced.

The x-virus—symbiotic? It would combine with the strongest bug in his bloodstream, and

—
But what bug?

Carmody stood above the box, scowling and staring down. He was checking back, remembering what had killed his parents, his grandparents, his great-grandparents. Had he any hereditary predilection for any particular germ or virus disease?

WE KILL PEOPLE had checked his history; they might know. But Higgins hadn’t said. Something at the bottom of the waterproofed box caught his attention, a small metal case. He weighed it in his hand, hesitated, and opened it.

It held sterilizing equipment, a hypodermic syringe with a dozen fine needles, and a supply of morphine. Carmody’s lips moved silently. He stood there motionless, the pounding of the surf rising to a crescendo of thunder, the prison of sea and sky clamping down rather horribly.

Morphine. To kill pain.

THE END

[The end of *We Kill People* by Henry Kuttner]