Escape Clause

by Rod Serling, 1924-1975

Published: 1959
in »The Twilight Zone«

Walter Bedeker lay on his bed waiting for the doctor. He wore a heavy, wool bathrobe over heavy wool pajamas, and had a heavy wool scarf wrapped tightly around his head and knotted under the chin in a giant bow. On the nightstand next to him was a tray full of bottles. There were pills, lotions, antibiotics, nasal sprays, throat sprays, ear drops, nose drops, three boxes of Kleenex and a book titled, *How To Be Happy Though Bedridden*. He stared dourly up at the ceiling then cocked an irritated eye toward the bedroom door, beyond which he could hear his wife's footsteps walking from kitchen to living room.

Ethel his wife was healthy. Oh God, she was healthy! Like a horse was Ethel. Never even had a cold. But he, Walter Bedeker, went from crisis to crisis, ailment to ailment, agonizing pain to agonizing pain.

Walter Bedeker was forty-four years old. He was afraid of the following: death, disease, other people, germs, drafts and everything else. He had one interest in life, and that was Walter Bedeker; one preoccupation, the life and well-being of Walter Bedeker; one abiding concern about society; if Walter Bedeker should die, how would it survive without him. In short, he was a gnome-faced little man who clutched at disease the way most people hunger for security.

Ethel entered his room for the fifth time that hour to even out his blankets, fluff up his pillow. He looked at her jaundice-eyed and didn‘t say anything except to groan slightly when she helped him put his head back down on the pillow.

„Head still ache, darling?“ Ethel asked him.

„Ache, Ethel, is not the word for it,“ he told her through a taut mouth. „Ache is a mild inconvenience. What I have is an agony. What I have is a living torture!“

Ethel made a brave attempt at a sympathetic smile. Walter never talked of his ailments in anything less than superlatives and this was his fifth stay-in-bed that month. The door chimes rang and she was unable to keep the look of relief from crossing her features. Walter recognized it instantly.

„Can‘t stand being in the room with me, can you,“ he said to her. „Sick people bore you, don‘t they?“ He turned away to look at the wall to his right. „That is the tragedy of illness,“ he said to the wall. „The fleeting compassion of your so-called loved ones!“

„Oh, Walter—“ Ethel began, and then stopped. She shrugged resignedly and went to answer the front door.

The doctor was waiting there with his black bag and he followed Ethel into the bedroom.

„Well, how are you feeling today, Mr.Bedeker?“ he asked. The doctor was tired and his feet hurt. He hated house calls unless they were emergencies and Walter Bedeker’s beckonings were never emergencies. He had difficulty keeping the tiredness out of his voice.

„How do I look?“ Bedeker barked at him.

The doctor smiled at him and said, „Rather well, as a matter of fact.“

Bedeker’s face screwed up like a persimmon and mimicked him fiercely. „Rather well, as a matter of fact, huh? Well I can assure you, doctor, I’m not rather well. I’m not in the least bit well. I’m a very sick man. Which you’ll soon discover once you examine me. But I want you to tell me the worst. I don’t want any cushioning. I’m not a coward, doctor.“

„I’m sure you aren’t. Hold your arm out, Mr. Bedeker. I’d like to take your pressure first.“

Bedeker thrust out a remarkably well muscled arm for a man his age and the doctor wrapped the pressure cloth around it.

Ten minutes later he was putting most of his impedimenta back in the bag while Bedeker stared at him glumly.

„Well, doctor?“

The doctor closed the bag and turned to Bedeker without speaking.

„I asked you a question, doctor. How bad is it?“

„It isn’t bad at all.“ the doctor said. „As a matter of fact, it’s quite good. You have no temperature. Pressure normal. Respiration normal. Heart action normal. No infection. Throat clear. Nasal passages clear. Ears clear.“

„What about the pains in my back and side? what about four sleepless nights in a row? What about that?“ Bedeker shouted triumphantly.

The doctor shook his head. „What about that? *That*, Mr. Bedeker, is psychosomatic!“

Bedeker’s eyes grew large. „Psychosomatic? You’re trying to tell me that I’m sick only in the mind?“

„Something like that, Mr. Bedeker," the doctor answered quietly. „There's nothing wrong with you, really, except the ailments you manufacture for yourself. Your pains, Mr. Bedeker, are imaginary. Your inability to sleep is a case of nerves—but nothing more. In short, Mr. Bedeker, you're a very healthy man!"

Walter Bedeker smiled sadly at his favorite confidant, the wall on the right, and talked to it, occasionally jerking his head toward the doctor.

„See? This is a doctor. Four years premed. Four years medical school. Two years internship. Two years residency. And what is he? I ask you, what is he?" Then he shouted, „A quack!"

The doctor had to smile in spite of himself. Ethel came in on tiptoe, and whispered to the doctor, „What's the prognosis?"

Bedeker shouted, „Don't ask him. The man's an idiot!"

„Walter, darling," Ethel said patiently, „Don't excite yourself."

„Don't whisper," Bedeker shouted. „You're looking at half of my troubles right there," he said to the doctor. „This woman. This awful woman who runs around whispering all day long to make me think I'm sick even if I'm not. And I am," he added quickly. „I'm lying here at death's door and who's ushering me out? A quack and this whispering woman without a mind!"

„I'll call tomorrow, Mrs. Bedeker!" the doctor said jovially.

„There'll be no need to call," Bedeker answered. „just come on over with the death certificate and fill it out."

„Oh, Walter—" Ethel said piteously.

„Don't drench me with those crocodile tears of yours, idiot," Bedeker screamed at her. „She'd be so happy to get rid of me, doctor, I just can't tell you."

The doctor was no longer smiling as he went out, followed by Ethel. At the front door he looked at her very closely. She must have been a very attractive woman in her day. God, to be married to that man for as long as she'd been married to him!

„How is he, doctor?" Ethel asked.

„Mrs. Bedeker," the doctor said, „your husband is one of the healthiest patients I have. If he were up in front of me for an exam to get into the combat Marines, I'd pass him with flying colors."

Ethel shook her head dubiously. "He's sick most of the time. He won't let me open a window in the house. He says for every cubic foot of air, there are eight million, nine hundred thousand germs."

The doctor threw back his head and laughed. „He's probably right."

Ethel said worriedly, „And he's just quit his job. The fifth job he's quit since the first of the year. He says they make him work in a draft."

The doctor stopped laughing and looked at this small, comely woman in front of him. „Mrs. Bedeker," he said softly, „there isn't a thing in the world I can do for your husband. Or any other doctor for that matter—except, perhaps, a psychiatrist."

Ethel's hand went to her mouth in a shocked gesture. „A psychiatrist," she said.

The doctor nodded. „His trouble is in his mind This awful fear of disease. This phobia about death. I suppose I'm oversimplifying it when I say there's nothing wrong with him because in a sense there really is. This constant

worrying about himself is an illness of a sort. Has he always been this frightened?“

„Ever since I can remember,“ said Ethel. „When he was courting me he told me he was in the last stages of T.B. and only had a week to live.“ She looked away reminiscently and sadly. „I only married him because I felt so sorry for him—!“ She bit her lip. „What I meant, doctor—“

The doctor patted her on the arm and said, „I understand. I'll give you a call tomorrow.“ He looked closely at her again, reached in his pocket for a pad and scribbled down a prescription. „Here,“ he said, handing it to her. „You look a little rundown yourself. This is for vitamins.“

Bedeker's voice came shrieking from the bedroom. „Ethel! There's a draft in here and I feel a coma coming on!“

„Yes, darling,“ Ethel hurriedly called. „I'll be right in.“

„Don't forget about the vitamins,“ said the doctor, wincing a little at the sound of Bedeker's voice. „Good-by, Mrs. Bedeker.“

Ethel shut the door behind him and rushed back into the bedroom. Bedeker lay on the bed, his head off the pillow, and waved weakly toward the window to his left. „Ethel,“ he whined at her, „there's freezing air blasting into the room!“

The window was open about a fifth of an inch. As she put it down, Bedeker half rose in bed.

„Do you know how many germs come in one cubic foot of air, Ethel?“

Under her breath she repeated the figure as he called it out. „Eight million, nine hundred thousand!“ He lowered his head back to the pillow. „I know you want me gone and that's why you leave windows open all over the place, but as a point of decency, Ethel, couldn't you do it more subtly?“

Ethel smoothed out his blankets. „The doctor said you needed some air. He said it was stuffy in here.“ She patted his hand which he drew away sharply.

He suddenly saw the prescription in her other hand. „What's this?“ Bedeker said, yanking it out of her fingers. „Where'd you get this? I'm not sick, but he gives you a prescription for medicine for me. Nothing wrong with me and while I lie here helpless, he's out there telling you that I've got a life expectancy of twenty minutes.“ He puckered up his mouth like a prune. „Don't deny it, Ethel. Kindly don't deny it. I smelled the collusion the moment he left the room!“

Ethel's eyes closed as a wave of weakness hit her. Then she took a deep breath. „It is for vitamins, Walter, for me.“

Bedeker bolted upright in bed. „Vitamins? For you.“ Then he turned to the wall and spoke to it, nodding familiarly at it. „I lie here while the life seeps out of me, and that quack prescribes medicines for my wife. See? I'm dying and she gets vitamins!“ He broke into a spasm of coughing. When Ethel tried to pat his back he pushed her away, then very limply and weakly he lay back down on the bed, shook his head and closed his eyes.

„Never mind, Ethel. Go on, get out of here. Let me die in peace.“

„All right, Walter,“ Ethel said softly.

„What?“ Bedeker shouted.

This time it was Ethel's eyes that closed. „I meant,“ she whispered, „I'll let you alone, Walter, so you can take a little nap.“

He lay there quietly for a moment and then suddenly jumped up and sat on the edge of the bed. „I can't nap,“ he squealed. „Why does a man have to die anyway? I asked you a question, Ethel. Why does a man have to die?“ He got out of bed and went to the window, feeling the sash at the bottom for any errant

air that might intrude. „The world goes on for millions and millions of years and how long is a man's life?" He held up two fingers. „This much! A drop. A microscopic fragment. Why can't a man live five hundred years? Or a thousand years? Why does he have to die almost the minute he's born?"

„I'm sure I don't know, dear."

„No, you wouldn't. Go on, get out of here, Ethel."

„Yes, dear," she said, and escaped into the living room with the tremendous sense of relief she always felt after getting out of Walter Bedeker's presence. Today had been one of the worst days. He had called the doctor four times that morning, then had Ethel phone the hospital to check on the availability of an oxygen tent. He had insisted right after lunch that she phone the janitor to come and check the heating pipes. The janitor had arrived and Walter had immediately engaged him with a running broadside from the bed as the janitor pounded on the hot water pipes and steam and damp heat floated into the room.

„You want heat, Mr. Bedeker?" the janitor had said to him gleefully. „In about twenty minutes, it'll be about a hundred and five in here. So heat you'll get!"

Livid with rage at the noise of the janitor's pounding, Bedeker had shouted at him, „Ape! Get out of here. If I'm to die, at least I'll die in comfort and peace. Go on, get out of here!"

The janitor surveyed his principal irritation in an apartment house of eighty-three families. „Well, if you do die, Bedeker," he'd said, „and you go where you're going—as far as the temperature goes, YOU ain't gonna be able to tell the difference!"

Now Ethel felt the result of the janitor's promise. The apartment was stuffy beyond belief. She opened up one of the living room windows and let the cool, fall air ripple over her hot, tired flesh. But she could still hear Walter Bedeker's running monologue from the bedroom.

„It's a crime for a man to live such a short span of years. An absolute crime," Bedeker's muffled voice said.

Ethel went into the tiny kitchen, shut the door and poured herself a cup of coffee.

Walter Bedeker sat propped up in bed looking at his reflection in the dresser mirror across the room. „A crime," he repeated. „What I wouldn't give! What I wouldn't give to live a decent number of years. Two hundred. Three hundred." He heaved a deep sigh and shook his head.

A voice, deep, resonant, with a chuckle in it, said, „Why not five or six hundred?"

Bedeker nodded agreeably. „Why not? Or a thousand. What a miserable thing to contemplate. A handful of years, then an eternity in a casket down under the ground. The dark, cold ground!"

„With worms yet," the voice answered him.

„Of course, with worms," Bedeker said. Then his eyes grew wide as suddenly across the room, materializing rather rapidly in the bedroom chair, he saw a large, fat man in a dark suit. Bedeker gulped, gaped, blinked his eyes and then just stared.

The gentleman smiled and nodded. „I subscribe to your views wholly, Mr. Bedeker," he said. „I mean wholly."

Bedeker continued to stare at him and said, „I'm delighted. And who might you be?"

„Cadwallader's my name," the gentleman answered. „At least I'm using it this month. It has a nice feeling on the tongue."

Bedeker surreptitiously looked around the room, checking the door, the window, then took a quick look under the bed. Then he looked at the man accusingly. „How did you get in?"

„Oh, I've never been gone," Cadwallader said. „I've been here for some time." Then he leaned forward in the manner of a man about to start his business. „I'll be brief, Mr. Bedeker," he said. „You look like a man with a nose for a bargain. I'd like to make a proposition to you. We each have something the other wants, and that seems a relatively solid basis for a bargain."

Bedeker's voice was coolly appraising. „Do we? What in the world do you have that I could possibly want?"

The fat man smiled and lit a cigarette, then he sat back comfortably. „Oh, many things, Mr. Bedeker," he said. „You'd be surprised. Many things. Varied and delightful."

Bedeker studied the man's face. An odd face, he reflected. Fat, but not unpleasant. Nice white teeth, even though the eyes were a little shiny and wild. Bedeker scratched his jaw thoughtfully. „What do I have that could remotely interest you?"

Cadwallader's smile was deprecating. „Actually a minor item," he said. „Smaller than minor. Insignificant. Microscopic." He held up two fat, little fingers. „Teensy weensy!"

The two men's eyes locked.

„What did you say your name was?" Bedeker asked.

„What's in a name, Mr. Bedeker?" Cadwallader replied ingratiatingly. „Just a question of semantics—language. A stretch of words, really. For example, what is it you want? You want an extended life span. You want a few hundred years to play around with. Now some people would call it immortality of a sort. But why give it that kind of description? Why make it sound so imposing. Let's call it—the two of us—let's call it some additional free time! After all what are a few hundred years or a few thousand years?"

Bedeker swallowed. „A few…thousand?"

„Or five thousand or ten thousand—" Cadwallader threw the numbers into the breach like a used car salesman bringing up his heavy artillery. „The world will go on ad infinitum, so what's a few thousand years more or less, give or take, add or subtract."

Bedeker rose warily from the bed and studied the fat man. „This little item, Mr. Cadwallader, that I am to give you in exchange—what do you call that?"

Cadwallader gave him a little Santa Claus wink. „What do we call that?" he asked. „Let's see! We can call it a little piece of your make-up. A little crumb off the crust of your structure. A fragment of an atom from your being." His smile persisted, but it never quite reached his eyes. „Or, we might call it a—"

„Or a soul!" Bedeker shrieked at him triumphantly.

The smile on Cadwallader's face was positively beatific. „Or that," he said softly. „After all, what is it? And when you're gone, thousands of years hence—what do you need it for?"

Walter Bedeker stood up and pointed a wavering finger in the direction of Mr. Cadwallader. „You're the Devil," he announced.

Cadwallader bowed slightly from the giant equator that was his waist and said modestly, „I'm at your service. How about it, Mr. Bedeker? Why not? A partnership of a sort. You deed me over your so-called soul and I give you immortality. Life everlasting—or as long as you want it to be everlasting. And indestructibility, Mr. Bedeker. Think of it! Complete indestructibility. Nothing can ever hurt you!"

Bedeker looked off dreamily. „Nothing can hurt me? And I can live forever?"

Cadwallader smiled and said, „Why not? Certainly forever. Again, Mr. Bedeker, just terms. And everything's relative. For you, it's forever. For me, it's just a walk around the block. But we're both satisfied."

Bedeker stood there lost in thought and Mr. Cadwallader walked over to his elbow. His voice was soft and gentle, but also rich with promise. „Think of it," Cadwallader said, „to be without fear of dying. To be indestructible. Invincible. Not to have to worry about disease. Accidents. Pestilence. War. Famine. Anything. Governments and institutions disintegrate. People die. But Walter Bedeker goes on and on!"

Bedeker, his head tilted, a smile playing on his puckish, gnome-like face, walked over to the mirror and studied his reflection. „Walter Bedeker goes on and on," he said thoughtfully.

Mr. Cadwallader stepped up behind him so that his reflection joined Bedeker's.

„Mr. Cadwallader," Bedeker said, „about this soul. You say I won't miss it?"

„Why, you'll never know it's gone."

„And I'll go on and on quite unable to die, you say?"

„Quite."

„No tricks?" Bedeker asked. „No hidden clauses? I'll just live as long as I want to live, is that it!"

Cadwallader chuckled at him. „That's it. That's precisely it."

Mr. Cadwallader went back over to his chair and sat down again. Bedeker remained at the mirror studying his face, running a questioning finger over it.

„How about my appearance?" he asked.

„I'm afraid I can't do much about that," Cadwallader said thoughtlessly, but he glided over the slip. !What I mean is—you should look pretty much the same."

„But in five hundred years," Bedeker insisted, „I don't want to look like any dried up old prune."

Cadwallader looked up toward the ceiling, and shook his head at the enormity of the competition. „Oh, Mr. Bedeker," he said, „you drive a mean bargain. A most difficult bargain. But," he made a gesture of resignation, „You'll find me a cooperative"—he smiled apologetically while he searched for the right word—„man?—And we'll throw this into the bargain. Whatever aging takes place on your features will be more or less imperceptible."

Bedeker turned to him from the mirror. „Cadwallader, I believe we're close to making a deal."

Cadwallader began to rub his hands together and then quickly put them behind his back. „Mr. Bedeker," he said happily, you'll never regret this. Not to your dying day!" Bedeker looked at him sharply. „Which by rights," Cadwallader added hurriedly, „should not be for several thousand years. However, there is something, Mr. Bedeker—"

Bedeker waggled a finger at him. „Ah ha. Ah ha. Ah ha! Now it comes out, huh?“

„It’s for your benefit, I can assure you.“ Cadwallader took a large, thick document from his pocket and thumbed through it. „Article 93,“ he exclaimed. „Here it is, right here.“ He pointed to the page and turned it around so that Bedeker could see it.

„It’s for your benefit, I can assure you.“ Cadwallader took a large, thick document from his pocket and thumbed through it. „Article 93,“ he exclaimed. „Here it is, right here.“ He pointed to the page and turned it around so that Bedeker could see it.

„What about it?“ Bedeker asked warily. „Read it to me.“

The fat gentleman cleared his throat. „It’s in the nature of an escape clause,“ he said. „Your escape clause. Whereas the party of the first part upon due notification to the party of the second part—“ Cadwallader mumbled. „Oh, this is tiresome. I’ll just give it to you thumb nail. It’s simply this. If you ever get tired of living, Mr. Bedeker, you can exercise this clause by calling on me and requesting your—“ He smiled. „Oh there go the semantics again. Your demise? At which point I shall see to it that you are given a rapid and uncomplicated—“ he held up his hands and wiggled his fat fingers—„departure?“

Bedeker puckered up his mouth in a wise, elfish little look, snapped his fingers and beckoned for the document. Cadwallader handed it over with a flourish, then loosened his tie as Bedeker riffled through the pages. Mr. Cadwallader took a large crimson handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his face.

„You sure keep it hot in here!“ he murmured.

Bedeker finished the last page, then handed the document back to the fat man. „It appears to be in order, Mr. Cadwallader, but I can assure you that I’m not the sort of man to kill the goose that lays the golden egg. When you talk immortality to me, brother, I mean immortality! You’re going to have a long, long, long wait!“

Again Cadwallader bowed his assent. „Mr. Bedeker,“ he said, „nothing would please me more!“

Bedeker said, „Then I think you’ve got a deal.“

This time Mr. Cadwallader couldn’t restrain himself from rubbing his hands together. His eyes positively glittered and it struck Bedeker that he was looking at a two-holed opening into a furnace. He could reflect no longer upon this because Mr. Cadwallader reached into the air and pulled out what appeared to be a smoking rubber stamp. This he swung in a wide arc and brought it down on the front page of the document. There was a sizzling sound and the document floated to the floor, burning at the edge. Bedeker could see that on the lower right-hand corner was the imprint of a seal. It looked like a circle with horns in the middle. After a moment the fire went out and the paper lay smoking. Bedeker bent over and picked it up.

„Yes, it seems to be pretty much in order,“ Bedeker said. „Now a few other questions, Mr.—“

But the room was empty. He thought he heard the sound of distant laughter retreating into the night, but he wasn’t sure and soon he heard nothing. Bedeker carefully folded the document and shoved it in the dresser drawer. He smiled at himself in the mirror, then went to the window and with an impulsive gesture, he flung it open, letting the cold air rush into the room. He stood

beating his chest and breathing deeply. He had never in his life felt so free, so unencumbered, and so absolutely healthy.

This reminded Bedeker of his tray, with all its medicines, bottles, jars, lotions, and his book, *How To Be Happy Though Bedridden*. He picked them up and hurled them out the window, smiling as after a few seconds, he heard the bottles smash on the pavement fourteen stories below. Turning from the window, he noticed the hot water pipes. A shimmering heat rose from them and they looked brick red in the lamp light. He approached them gingerly, and stood over them, very slowly raising his hands until he could feel the heat pour into his palms and through his fingers. Red hot, he noted. Red hot.

„Proof of the pudding," Bedeker murmured, „and no time like the present!"

He slammed both palms down on the pipes, listened to the sizzle of the burning flesh, watched the smoke rise in front of his eyes. But there was no sensation of pain. There was no sensation of any kind. He lifted his hands and stared at them. Not a mark. He looked down at the red hot pipes, and laughed aloud. He continued to laugh, his head back, as he walked across the room and threw himself on the bed. He heard the bedroom door open and Ethel stood there staring at him, frightened.

„Walter," she said nervously. „Is everything all right?"

„Is everything all right?" he repeated. „Everything, Ethel, my love, is delightful. Everything is superb. Everything is perfect."

He got up and went to the dresser. There was a nail file lying alongside a brush set. He picked it up and smiling happily, jammed the point into his palm. Ethel screamed and fell back against the door.

Then very slowly she opened her eyes to look at the Cheshire-cat grin on her husband's face. He held out an unscathed palm.

„See, my dear? The hand is quicker than the eye! The proof of the pudding! Witness, my dear… the new Walter Bedeker!"

He started to laugh again, a gusty, roaring, uncontrollable laugh and he paraded back and forth across the room like a rooster in a barnyard. Ethel stood still, her face pale, wondering if she dared leave the room to get to the telephone. Or if at any moment the demented man in front of her might get violent. Her eye fell on the nail file on the dresser. She gasped, bit deep into a knuckle, and looked at Walter in horror. There had been blood on the nail file.

In the weeks that followed, Ethel Bedeker was never sure whether or not she preferred the old days to these new ones. Or whether perhaps it had been an irreparable mistake to have been married or even born. The „new" Walter Bedeker turned out to be a mystifying individual. True, he no longer betook himself to his bed five times a month and screamed impossible demands. As a matter of fact, he was rarely home any more. But his new behavior was equally disturbing.

The first indication she got of what might be expected was a phone call from an insurance adjuster attached to a building firm. Walter, it seemed, had been hit by a falling steel „I" beam that weighed about two and a half tons. It had been in the process of being raised by a chain to the tenth floor of an office building under construction. The chain had broken and the beam had fallen three hundred feet to land on Walter's head and smash him down into the sidewalk. The foreman on the job first had been violently ill, then had walked very slowly toward that spot in the sidewalk where the horror was waiting for him. He covered his eyes because of a normal reluctance to view mangled

bodies. He had also peeked between two fingers, because of the equally normal trait of being fascinated by the horrible. He was to be disappointed on both scores, because Walter Bedeker had crawled out from underneath the beam, none the worse for being squashed, except that his clothes were ripped and his hair disheveled. He had thundered at the foreman that he'd better contact his lawyer because there was going to be one helluva whopping suit in the offing.

It was to tell Ethel all this that the insurance adjuster had phoned, and to inform her that he was on his way to their apartment.

That afternoon Walter signed a waiver of further claim and collected a check for five thousand dollars.

This happened on a Wednesday and the following Saturday afternoon Walter was alone in the self-service elevator when for some strange reason the main cable broke, and the elevator car shot down the two-thousand-foot shaft to be smashed to smithereens at the bottom. The building superintendent heard his shrieking voice echoing up through the shaft and went down to the basement to pry open the wrecked door. Bedeker lay in the rubble with nothing injured, not even his aplomb. (This affair was settled for thirty eight hundred dollars and forty two cents.)

A week later Bedeker was standing in front of a fireworks factory when the building went up in smoke. The newspapers called it the worst fire disaster to occur in the city in twenty-five years. Luckily, it happened after the five o'clock whistle, and only three bodies were found, burnt beyond recognition, in the debris. Bedeker had been buried under a collapsing, burning wall, but had crawled out on his hands and knees right to the foot of a fireman who had fainted dead away upon seeing him. His clothes had been burnt entirely off his body and this accounted for the figure of thirty-nine dollars and fifty cents added to the ten thousand for which the fireworks company settled with him.

In the next five weeks Bedeker was in eight major accidents—a subway collision, a bus overturning, five automobile accidents (in each case the driver swore that Bedeker had stepped out in front of the speeding car), and a decidedly freakish circumstance in a restaurant where Bedeker complained there was glass in his beef stew. It wasn't until after the manager had paid Bedeker two hundred dollars in cash that the waiter showed the manager a half-chewed glass on the table. By this time Bedeker had walked out in a huff, pocketing his two hundred dollars, and was no more to be seen.

It was now New Year's Eve and Ethel had timidly asked Bedeker if they could go out to dinner or to a show or perhaps to a nightclub. Bedeker stood at the window, his back to her, not answering.

„Eleven accidents," he said, „that's what I've been in. Eleven accidents."

Ethel, who had just mentioned that it was a long time since they'd been dancing together, tried another tack.

„That's the point, dear," she said hopefully. „You need recreation. You need to get your mind off things."

Bedeker continued to stare out the window. „Wouldn't you think, Ethel," he asked rhetorically, „that there'd be an element of thrill in eleven accidents. Eleven accidents in which you know nothing can happen to you?"

„I guess so, Walter," Ethel answered irresolutely, not understanding a thing he was talking about.

„Well, it's a fact," Bedeker continued. „There should be an excitement in this sort of thing." He walked away from the window. „Well, there isn't. It's dull. It's absolutely without the remotest bit of excitement. In short, I'm bored with it."

„Walter, dear," Ethel said softly, „I guess we should count our blessings."

„You, Ethel," Bedeker snapped, „should shut your mouth. You look for all the world like a small gray mouse searching for a piece of cheese."

She let the cold, hurt feeling subside before she answered him.

„Walter, you can be terribly cruel, do you know that?"

Bedeker rolled his eyes upward and said, „Ethel, please shut your mouth!" He paced the room back and forth. „I swear he cheated me! Mortal-shmortal! What's the good of it when there aren't any kicks? Any excitement at all!"

Ethel found herself looking at him in helpless confusion He was Walter Bedeker all right. He was her husband. But he was totally and distinctly different from the man she married, the hypochondriac she had lived with for so many years.

„Walter," she asked, „do you feel all right?"

Bedeker ignored her. „At least when I was concerned about my health," he said aloud to no one, „there was an element of risk there. But now there is no risk. There is no excitement. There is no nothing!"

He suddenly cocked his head slightly, his eyes grew wide and he ran past her to the bathroom. She heard him fumbling through the medicine chest over the sink. There was the clatter of bottles and of glass.

„Ethel?" he called from the bathroom. „Do we have any starch?"

Ethel walked toward the bathroom door. „Starch?" she asked.

Bedeker said, „Of course, starch."

Ethel looked over his shoulder at the bottles he had lined up.

There was iodine, rubbing alcohol and Epsom salts. He had one glass into which he was pouring sizable portions from each.

„Starch!" Bedeker repeated impatiently.

Ethel went to the kitchen and got a bottle of starch from a cabinet under the sink. She brought it to Bedeker and he immediately unscrewed the top and poured this last ingredient into the mixture, which foamed and took on a kind of mustard color. Bedeker held up the glass, and with a quick motion, drank it all down. Ethel gaped at him as he smacked his lips, looked at his face in the mirror, stuck out his tongue, then put the glass down disconsolately.

„You see?" he asked.

„See what?" Her voice trembled.

„See what I just drank? Iodine, rubbing alcohol, Epsom salts and starch. And what did it do to me, Ethel? I ask you—what did it do to me? It did nothing! Absolutely nothing. I've just drunk enough poison to kill a dozen men and it tasted like lemonade. Weak lemonade."

Ethel leaned against the door. Her voice was very steady. „Walter," she said, „I want to know what this is all about!"

Bedeker peered at her elfishly. „What it's all about? You really want to now?"

She nodded.

„All right," Bedeker said, „I'll tell you. I happen to be immortal. I am indestructible. I made a pact with a man named Cadwallader who has given me immortality in exchange for my soul. More succinctly than that, I couldn't put it."

Ethel caught a brief look at her reflection in the mirror and wondered in part of her brain how any woman could look so pale and so frightened.

„I want you to sit down, Walter," she said, collecting herself. „I'm going to make you some tea and then I'm going to call the doctor."

She turned to leave and Bedeker grabbed her arm, yanking her around to face him.

„You will not make tea," he commanded. „And you will not call the doctor. If you had any imagination at all, Ethel, you might tell me what I could do to get a little excitement out of all of this. I've been in subway crashes, bus accidents, major fires and just now, I drank poison. You saw me." He paused and shrugged. „Nothing! Absolutely nothing. You know what I've been thinking?" He left the bathroom and walked back into the living room. „I have been thinking, Ethel, that I should go up to the roof and throw myself down the light well! Smack dab down the light well. Fourteen stories down just for the experience of it."

Ethel sat heavily down in a chair, close to tears now. „Please, Walter. Please, for goodness' sake—"

Bedeker went toward the door. „Ethel, darling, shut your mouth."

She sprang to her feet and raced to the door, intercepting him just as he started to open it.

„Walter," she beseeched him. „Please, Walter, for God's sake—"

He pushed her out of the way and went out, down the hall, to the rear stairs and started to climb. Ethel followed him, pleading all the way, arguing, cajoling, but he would have none of it. On the roof, he headed toward the light well. It was a big, square hole covered by glass. There was a small concrete shelf around it that stood only about eight inches high. Ethel immediately got between Walter and the concrete strip, and held out her hands to him.

„Please, Walter," she said. „Please, my darling—"

Bedeker said, „Ethel, go drown in the tub and leave me alone. I'm going head first down that light well, and I want you to get out of the way!"

He advanced toward her and she backed away from him.

„Please, darling," she said. „Please come back to the apartment. I'll make you potato pancakes. Remember, you used to love potato pancakes."

Bedeker yanked her arm away from him, pushed her aside. „You, my dear," he said, „are a potato pancake. You look like a potato pancake. You have all the excitement of a potato pancake. You are as tasteless as a potato pancake. Now I've told you for the last time to get out of my way."

She threw herself against him, struggling to push him back and only at the last instant did she realize that her foot was no longer on the level of the roof floor. It dangled over the concrete stoop surrounding the stairwell. In a moment her balance shifted and she had fallen backwards, smashing through the glass, and hurtled fourteen stories down to the concrete courtyard below. Even her scream was a quiet, pathetic noise coming from a quiet, pathetic woman. It was more misery than horror; more a gentle protest than the last utterance of a woman going head first to her death.

Bedeker tiptoed over to the light well and looked down. Lights were going on sporadically on every other floor like the panel board of an elevator announcing the stops. He scratched his jaw, took out a cigarette and lit it.

„I wonder what it felt like," he said softly.

Some place off in the distance he heard a siren. There was a growing mumble and jumble of voices inside the building. Then suddenly he had a thought. It was a wonderful thought. An exciting thought. He hurried to the door leading to the rear stairs, went down them two at a time, trotted into his apartment and picked up the telephone.

„Operator," he said, „get me the police, please. Immediately. It's an emergency." After a moment he heard the voice of a desk sergeant at the local precinct. „Hello? Is this the police station? Well, this is Walter Bedeker, 11 North 7th Street. That's correct. Apartment 12B. Will you please come over here right away. No, no trouble. I just killed my wife. That's right. Yes, I'll stay right here. Good-by."

He put the receiver down, took a deep luxurious drag on his cigarette, flicked the ashes away and said, „Well, let's give the old electric chair a whirl!"

The trial of the State vs. Walter Bedeker was, in the words of the District Attorney, „the most predictable thing to hit town since professional wrestling." The court reporters, spectators, and certainly the jury seemed to share the prosecution's view. In three days of proceedings, the State made one telling point after the other. They established motive. (Six witnesses had testified to the fights between Walter Bedeker and his wife.) They showed premeditation. (The janitor testified that he had heard Bedeker threaten his wife on at least a dozen occasions.) And they did everything but bring in photographs of the actual commission of the crime. (At least ten neighbors had seen Bedeker come down off the roof and hurry back into his apartment.)

So in short, Mr. Walter Bedeker sat alongside of his lawyer on the eve of the last day of trial in a most vulnerable position. You could not have told this, however, by looking at Walter Bedeker. He sat half smiling at the judge, the witnesses, the prosecution. On the stand he openly and freely admitted he had pushed his wife down the light well and had no misgivings about it at all. As a matter of fact, he would do it again.

His lawyer, hired by the State, was a desperately energetic young man who objected on the slightest provocation, who argued, pleaded and thundered throughout the trial, who parried every telling thrust on the part of the prosecution and parried well. But his was a losing cause and he knew it. He became acutely aware of just how losing it was when after sending a penciled note of inquiry over to his client he received the note back with the following scrawl underneath his question, „Go to hell, affectionately, Walter Bedeker."

From that point on the defense was reasonably certain that the normal rapport between client and lawyer did not exist in this case.

And further, that this was a client whose answers on the stand seemed to suggest collusion between him and the prosecution. Because Walter Bedeker was convicting himself with every answer, every gesture, obviously because he wished to.

On the evening of the third day of trial, Bedeker's lawyer went to see Bedeker in his cell. He arrived during his client's dinner and found himself completely ignored until Bedeker had started his dessert. Then the little man looked up as if suddenly realizing the lawyer was there and nodded perfunctorily.

„Cooper, the legal beagle. What brings you here at this odd hour?"

Cooper sat down on the other chair and studied his client. „Mr. Bedeker," he said grimly, „you may not realize this, but at the rate things are going this case will go to the jury by tomorrow."

Bedeker nodded and continued to spoon down ice cream. „How do you feel, Cooper?" he asked.

Cooper squirmed with frustration and put his briefcase on the floor. „How am I? I'm miserable, Mr. Bedeker. I've been miserable since I took your case. I've had tough clients before, but nobody like you."

„Really?" Bedeker asked insouciantly. „What disturbs you?"

„What disturbs me is that in three days of trial you've acted like a man desperate to get convicted. When I examine you, you shut up like a clam. When the prosecuting attorney examines you, you act as if you were betting on him to win the case." He leaned forward intensely.

„Now look, Bedeker, this is the goods here. If this case goes to the jury tomorrow as things stand now, you don't have chance number one."

Bedeker lit a cigarette and leaned back on his cot. „Is that a fact?" he asked.

„That is a fact. Now tomorrow this is what I want us to do!" He lifted the briefcase and unzipped it. He was diving into it for papers when Bedeker said, „Don't bother, Mr. Cooper. Just don't bother." He waved at the briefcase. „Put it away."

„How's that?" Cooper asked.

„Put it away."

Cooper stared at him for a long, unbelieving moment. „Bedeker, did you get what I was trying to tell you? You're about twelve hours away from a guilty verdict on a charge of first degree murder."

Bedeker smiled and clucked. „And what will the penalty be?"

„The penalty," Cooper said tiredly, „in this State for first degree murder is death in the electric chair."

„Death in the electric chair," Bedeker repeated. He tapped his fingers on the side of the cot and then examined his nails.

„Bedeker," Cooper shouted, almost beyond control.

„Death in the electric chair. And if I were in California?"

„What?" Cooper asked incredulously.

„How would they try to kill me if I lived in California," Bedeker said.

„Capital punishment there is the gas chamber, but I frankly don't see why—"

„And in Kansas?" Bedeker interrupted.

„In Kansas," Cooper answered, „it's hanging. Now I'm going to tell you something, Bedeker—"

Bedeker rose from the cot and surveyed the lawyer who now had a thin covering of perspiration over his face.

„No, Mr. Cooper," Bedeker said mildly. "I'm going to tell *you* something. The only thing they'll get for their trouble if they try to electrocute me is a whopping electricity bill! Now good night, Mr. Cooper. See you in court!"

Cooper sighed deeply. He slowly zipped up his briefcase and rose. „I don't know, Bedeker," he said. „I just don't understand you. The alienist says you're sane and you say you killed your wife. But way down deep I know you didn't. So tomorrow when I sum up for you, I'm going to lead from terrible weakness." He shrugged hopelessly. „But I intend to do the best I can."

He turned and went to the cell door, tapping on it for the guard. After a moment they heard him coming down the corridor. He unlocked the door and Cooper walked out.

„Mr. Cooper," Bedeker's voice came from behind the bars.

The defense attorney turned to look at him.

Bedeker smiled at him. „Mr. Cooper," he said. „Really—don't bother!"

The prosecution on the following morning delivered one of the briefest summations in a murder trial ever presented in the history of the State. It lasted only a minute and a half and afterwards the District Attorney walked smiling and confident back to his seat. Mr. Cooper rose for his summation and after about ten seconds of a stumbling if sincere start, he seemed to warm up and a relatively listless jury suddenly seemed very aware of him. Even the judge leaned over on his elbows to listen more intently. A court reporter later described it as one helluva summation—one of the best ever heard in that courtroom.

„Guilty, yes," Cooper roared. „But premeditated? Hardly!" His client, Cooper contended, had not led his wife up to the roof. She had followed him. No witness had proven otherwise. Killed her—yes, this he did. Pushed her off the stoop, down the light well—absolutely. No contest. But had he planned to do it? This was a moot point. Twenty-eight minutes later, after an address loaded with moot points, Cooper sat down next to Walter Bedeker and listened to the murmur running through the courtroom. Bedeker smiled vaguely at him. He hadn't been listening. He was busy jotting notes on a pad. Things he intended to do after he got out. Cooper could see a few of his scrawled plans over Bedeker's shoulder. „Land on third rail in subway station." „Jump in front of diesel engine." „Hide in hydrogen bomb testing area." Etc. Etc.

Sixty-three minutes later the jury came back with a verdict of guilty and shortly thereafter Walter Bedeker stood in front of the bench for his sentencing. He leaned against the bench on his elbow, picked his teeth, yawned and looked generally bored. Walter Bedeker had paid little heed to the proceedings in that courtroom. Even now he scarcely heard what the judge was saying. Something to the effect that the court prescribed life imprisonment. It was not the words that jarred him. Rather it was Cooper, grabbing him, hugging him, shaking him.

„Life imprisonment, old man," Cooper screamed into his ear joyfully. „I knew we could do it! I just knew we could do it."

As the turnkey led Bedeker through the side door of the courtroom he became gradually aware of the hum of voices around him. „God, what a summation!" „Life imprisonment—masterful!" „There's one helluva lucky man!"

It wasn't until Bedeker was walking down the corridor outside that he realized what had happened. Cooper had got him off with life imprisonment. He stopped, turned toward the courtroom at the other end of the corridor and screamed out loud, „Wait a minute! WAIT A MINUTE! I can't get imprisoned for life! Don't they understand? Don't they know what this means? I can't go to prison for life."

He began to cry. He was crying when they put him in the black paddy wagon to take him back to jail. He cried all during the trip and that night in his cell he was still crying.

When the cell guard brought him his dinner he noted that Mr. Bedeker's eyes were red-rimmed and that he only toyed with his food.

„You're a lucky guy, Bedeker," the guard said through the cell doors. „Tomorrow they'll be taking you to the penitentiary. That'll be your new home. It's a long way from the death cell."

Bedeker didn't answer. He sat looking down at the tray of food on his lap and felt the rising bubbles of sadness and hopelessness and misery crawl up his body and he had to stifle a sob.

„Look at it this way," the guard said philosophically. „What's life, Mr. Bedeker? Forty years. Fifty years. Hell, you can do that standing on your head." Bedeker could hear him as he went down the corridor. „That's all. Forty, fifty years. Maybe not even that much—"

Bedeker set the tray on the floor and put his head in his hands. „Forty, fifty years," he murmured to himself. „Forty or fifty years. Or sixty, or seventy, or a hundred, or two hundred."

Numbers drifted across his mind. Five figure numbers. Six figure numbers. And he heard a voice thundering at him from no place in particular.

„After all, what are a few hundred years or a few thousand? Or five thousand or ten thousand? What is it in the scheme of things?" The voice ended on a note of laughter. Big laughter. Resounding, quaking laughter that came from the belly of a fat man.

Walter Bedeker looked up to see the corpulent blue-suited figure of Cadwallader standing in the middle of the cell grinning at him, his white teeth gleaming, his eyes suddenly coal red.

„Mr. Bedeker," he rumbled. „Just think of it! Immortality… indestructibility… institutions fail, governments disintegrate, people die! But Walter Bedeker goes on and on." His laugh was rolling thunder across the cell. „Walter Bedeker goes on and on. And on and on and on."

Bedeker screamed and buried his face against the pillow on the cot. There was an odor in the cell. A burning odor. Was it brimstone? Very likely.

„Mr. Bedeker?" Cadwallader's voice was soft now, the words arrived on velvet. „About that escape clause. Would you care to exercise it now?"

Bedeker never even raised his head from the pillow. He nodded and a moment thereafter felt a pain sear across his chest, a terrible pain. A pain more agonizing than anything he'd ever felt before. His body twitched convulsively and he fell off the cot to land on his back, his eyes staring lifelessly up toward the cell. Walter Bedeker was a dead body.

The thing that had been his soul let out a strangled scream and struggled inside the pocket of a blue suit as it was carried into another dimension.

The guard found Walter Bedeker during bed check that night. He opened the cell door, rushed in and felt for a pulse. Then he'd called the prison doctor and the warden. It was a heart attack and this was written on a cardboard tag that was attached to his chart.

A comment was made by one of the attendants in the prison morgue. It was something to the effect that he'd never seen a look of such utter horror on a man's face as that which Walter Bedeker's wore as they shoved him into a refrigerated compartment and closed the door.

The CAMERA PANS away from the body and then slowly up the side of the cell until it stops on a shot of the barred window facing the outside.

NARRATOR'S VOICE

There's a saying… every man is put on earth condemned to die. Time and method of execution unknown.

(a pause)

Perhaps this is as it should be. Case in point—Walter Bedeker, lately deceased. A little man with such a yen to live.

Now the CAMERA MOVES out and through the bars and is shooting up into the night sky.

NARRATOR'S VOICE

Beaten by the devil… by his own boredom… and by the scheme of things in this… The Twilight Zone.

FADE TO BLACK