

## Jokers Compleatly

By Dennis Payton Knight

Practical jokers are socially reprehensible beings, barely human, and ought to be ostracized from the planet. I am not one, and probably never will be. But wouldn't it be fun?

One of my favorite American humorists is the late H. Allen Smith, the author of such delightful doozies as "Low Man on a Totem Pole" and "Life in a Putty Knife Factory." In preparing for today's essay, I have been consulting his *Compleat Practical Joker*, a scholarly volume he sprung on us in 1953.

Smith exposed instances from his days of the ghastly art of practical jokers from around the world, including a couple by one of the most celebrated of all, William Horace De Vere Cole, a substantial British citizen with a large house in a fashionable section of London. One day, needing string to hang some pictures, Cole went out and bought a ball of twine from the nearest stringmonger (Allen's word). On his way home, he encountered an approaching proper Englishman, a stranger, stiff and splendidly dressed. The perfect opportunity to whip out a ball of twine.

"I say. I'm in a bit of a spot. We're engaged in surveying this area in order that we may realign the kerb, and my assistant has somehow vanished. I wonder if I could prevail upon your time for just a few moments."

"To be sure," said the stranger, ever the proper Englishman.

"If you would be so kind as to hold the end of this string. Just stand where you are, and keep a tight hold on it, and we'll be finished in a few moments. It's really quite important."

The splendid gentleman took hold of the end of the string and Cole began backing away from him, unwinding the ball. He continued all the way to the corner, disappeared, turned another corner, then a third, until the string finally gave out.

Wondering what to do with his end of the string, Cole decided to tie it to a doorknob. But then, as Allen described it, Providence sent him a second proper gentleman, fully as elegant and polished as the first. Cole stopped him. "Would the good sir be so kind as to assist me in an engineering project?"

Certainly! Cole handed him the end of the string and directed that he simply stand firm and hold it. Then Cole disappeared through an alleyway, hastened back to the shop for another ball of twine, and returned to his home to finish hanging pictures. Cole never knew how long those two men stood holding the string. He could have circled back and spied on them, but he didn't even consider doing it.

H. Allen Smith's *Compleat Practical Joker* is replete (or is that repleat?) with a score or more of such ignominious, shameful transgressions against their unsuspecting, dignified, civilized victims of the world. I can't wait to finish it.

And then maybe I'll go out and find myself a good stringmonger somewhere in Colorado.