OUR FOOTLOOSE CORRESPONDENTS

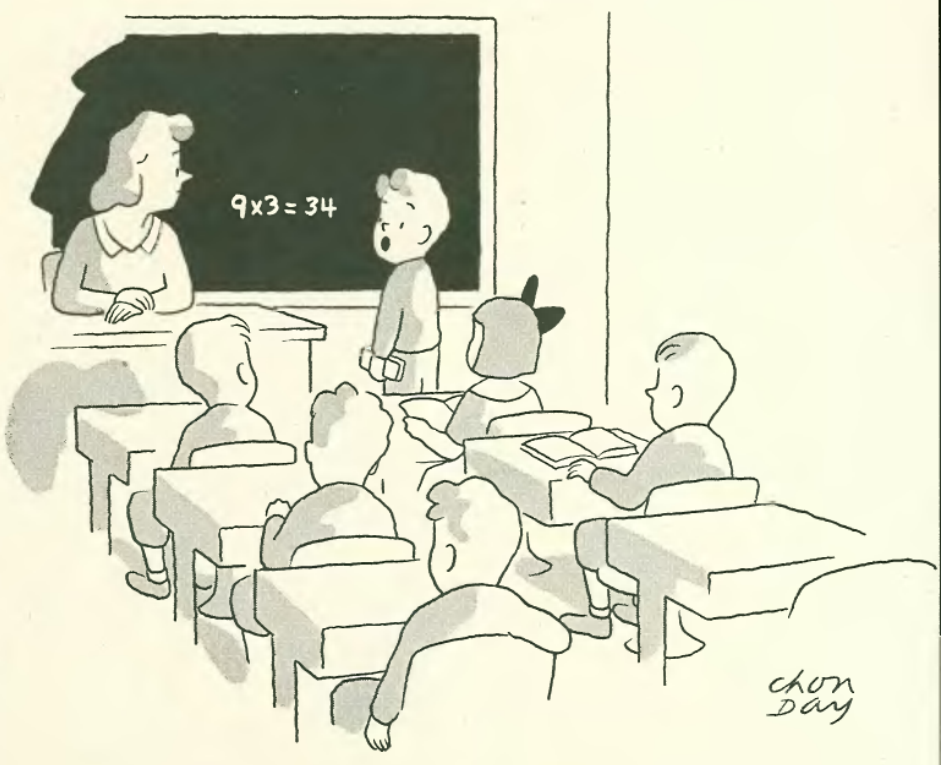
THE UPS AND DOWNS OF BUSCHBECK & HOLTZMANN

GOING broke and starting again from scratch is almost standard practice for the proprietors of a medium-size zinc-casting firm in West Berlin that I shall call Buschbeck & Holtzmann. When I talked to Herr Ernst Buschbeck not long ago, in his office off the main machine shop of the plant, he was about to go bankrupt for the sixth time in his thirty-five years with the company and was already arranging a seventh fresh start. "There's one good thing about going broke so often," Buschbeck said. "You get to take it in your stride, like taxes, politicians' promises, and the common cold. In this country, you know, a bankrupt doesn't necessarily lose control of his firm. The first time we went bankrupt, I was so ashamed I wanted to jump out of the window. The second time, I got drunk and stayed drunk for two days, which wasn't fair to the creditors. Now I don't even give it a second thought."

Buschbeck is a heavyset, rugged man with close-cropped hair and a martial voice that one can easily imagine rising above the din of his plant's machines running at full blast—which they rarely do these days. He wears a stiff white collar, and carries a heavy watch chain draped across his waistcoat. In his cheerful cynicism, he reflects the attitude of many West Berliners, whose brash sense of humor has not been subdued by the proximity of the Russians. "I inherited a factory from my father, who died in the First World War," he told me. "Not this factory—we've only been here in West Berlin since the spring of 1949—but one in Weissensee, over in the Russian sector. In 1918, Germany lost the war, the firm lost its Army contracts, and I went under. Then Wilhelm Holtzmann, who'd been a classmate of mine, joined me as partner and brought in some fresh money. We lost that in the twenties, during the inflation. Then, in 1932, the depression knocked us flat. We failed again during the last months of the Second World War, when everything went to pieces. We started up once more in May, 1945, as soon as the smoke had cleared, but after we had been operating awhile the Russians hauled off most of our machinery, and we went bust again. In 1948, we were caught by the currency reform, and ever since, we've been gradually going under again, like so many other firms here. We've been trying and trying to get back on our feet—Holtzmann is down seeing the credit manager of our bank right now—but we just can't seem to make a go of it here and will surely have to move out of Berlin to Western Germany. That's six times all in all, isn't it?" He counted on his fingers. "Yes, six times. Two lost wars, two economic breakdowns, the depression, and the Russians."

THE record of Buschbeck & Holtzmann is not exceptional in West Berlin, which is now going through a life-or-death economic struggle. For every two employed workers here, one is on the streets. Berlin was once the third largest city in the world, with a population of more than four million, the capital and metropolis of a thriving country, combining the characteristics of Washington and New York. It was the administrative, financial, and insurance center of Germany, where hundreds of thousands of civil servants and office workers were employed; it was also famous for its "specialty industries"—electrical and optical equipment, textiles, chemicals, drugs, machine tools, precision instruments, radios, and musical instruments—which employed hundreds of thousands of skilled workers. The civil servants, office workers, clerks, and skilled laborers are still in Berlin, but their jobs have gone to Bonn, Frankfurt, and the other industrial centers of Western Germany. It is impractical to run Western Germany from a besieged city a hundred miles behind the Iron Curtain. It is even more impractical for outsiders to do business with Berliners. This has been fatal to many of West Berlin's industries, which must trade with Western Germany if they are to survive. But they have to get their raw materials from and make their deliveries to the West by way of a corridor through the Soviet Zone, which can be closed at the whim of the Russians. The Russians have completely blockaded Berlin once, they frequently halt traffic on the waterways, they stop and delay trucks on the Autobahn, and they have invented thousands of minor additional obstacles.

It was a Thursday morning when I visited the Buschbeck & Holtzmann factory, but only four employees—maintenance men—were on duty; the machines were standing idle. "Last week we worked eighteen hours, and the week before sixteen," Buschbeck said gloomily. "But, my God, I'd rather be broke here than a rich man over there in West Moscow. Until a couple of years ago, we were in the Soviet sector, as I said. After the East-West split and the currency reform, we came to the conclusion that it would be suicide to stay. Sooner or later, they would get us. My wife got so upset she



"Am I warm?"

didn't even want me to go to the factory. She worries a lot now about our widowed niece Charlotte, who works in a Russian-controlled plant in East Berlin that turns out radio and electronic equipment."

"I'm surprised the Russians let you move out of their zone with your machinery," I said.

"They didn't," Buschbeck said. "We had to smuggle the whole damn business out. It wasn't funny. The *Volkspolizei*— Ah, here is Holtzmann."

A tall, nervous man with deep-set eyes came in and disgustedly threw a shabby briefcase on one of the office's two desks. Buschbeck introduced us. Holtzmann shook hands and then sat down in a chair and rubbed his eyes. He seemed very melancholy. His right trouser leg was clamped tight with a bicycle clip. Buschbeck gave him a questioning glance, and he shook his head.

"Not one pfennig," he said. "You can't blame them. The only collateral we have is our furniture at home and the few machines here, and the credit manager told me the bank already owns enough machines to fill a ten-story building."

Buschbeck seemed neither surprised nor dejected. "Well, there you are," he said to me. "Production in the zinc-casting plants of Western Germany is a hundred and six per cent of what it was in 1936. Here in Berlin, it's less than thirty per cent. Everybody approves of the brave fight we're putting up in Berlin, but no one in Western Germany spends a pfennig to help us. During the blockade, when the West German manufacturers' associations orated about our sacrifices, their industrial production doubled while ours was being cut in half."

Holtzmann, looking even more melancholy than before, spoke up. "A couple of months ago, there were several hundred petitions for bankruptcy in the courts here, but only forty-five were granted," he said. "In all the other cases, there weren't enough assets left to pay the bankruptcy administrator. When I told the officials at City Hall that we were thinking of moving to Western Germany, they didn't mind at all."

"I hate to leave," Buschbeck said. He paced up and down, playing with his watch chain. "After all, this is my home town. It's a funny place now—ugly and cold and full of Russians—but here you at least have a feeling of knowing what's going on in the world."

"Well, let's stay here and starve, then," Holtzmann suggested.

Buschbeck ignored him. "We're

down to our last thousand marks," he said to me. He slipped a forefinger inside his stiff collar to expedite a sigh. "If we were workers, we could each draw thirty marks unemployment insurance a month. As it is, we've had to start selling our household furniture and books to pay the rent on this place. Holtzmann calls on our customers on his bicycle to save twenty pfennigs carfare. Oh, we're poor, all right!"

Holtzmann shook his head. "If I'd known in 1945 what I know now, I wouldn't have started all over again."

"Yes, you would have," said Buschbeck. "We always do."

I asked what had happened in 1945.

"Oh, it was much different then," Buschbeck said. "Then it was mostly a matter of physical reconstruction—at least, more than a matter of economic conditions, because there *weren't* any economic conditions. During the first part of the war, the Allied planes never hit our factory in Weissensee. We hung on there until April, when the Russian artillery got too close. Holtzmann had been called up for the *Volkssturm*, but I had managed to stay out. Then, of course, when the Battle of Berlin was on, we all had our hands full just to stay alive. I rarely thought of the factory, and when I did, I was sure it had been destroyed. But on May 11th, after the organized fighting was over, one of our old workers—fellow by the name of Heinz—came to my house in Steglitz and said he'd heard that the factory was still standing. I couldn't believe it. He and I decided to walk to Weissensee and take a look. It was quite a walk—fifteen kilometres, past burning, crumbling buildings, past Red Army troops and snipers of both sides. When we got to the factory, we could hardly believe our eyes. One wall and the roof were gone, but the rest was undamaged and the machines were all there. Incredible! We settled down and started to take an inventory. We Germans love to make lists and take inventories, you know. So we were busy doing that when, late in the afternoon, a bunch of Russian soldiers drove up in two trucks. Without paying the slightest attention to us, they loaded up everything that wasn't bolted to the floor—machine parts, tools, the desks and chairs and light bulbs, even the carbon paper and stationery. And what was left of our scrap metal and alloys, of course. Heinz said I was crazy to let them get away with it, but I knew better. I'd heard of a manufacturer in Steglitz who protested when Russian soldiers raided his machine shop. They just laughed. They

had already taken everything that was loose, and when he complained, they brought in a light tank and heavy chains and yanked the heavy machinery off its foundations—like pulling teeth—and dragged it away. As they left, they shot the manufacturer."

Buschbeck and Heinz were joined the next day by two more old employees, and the four of them began to clean up the rubble and to fix the broken wall and roof. In time, other employees came back to work. They patched up the machines in makeshift fashion, using odds and ends they found in the rubble—rivets, empty shell casings, bits of wire, and such. Buschbeck had no money to pay the workers, but they said they would stick with him if he could get them one hot meal a day. Holtzmann, just returned from the *Volkssturm*, scouted up a *Fernküche*, a sort of mobile kitchen, and made a deal with the owner to repair the kitchen's pots and pans and provide him with some new ones in return for a daily supply of hot soup and vegetables.

"There was an astonishing amount of confidence in those days," Buschbeck said. "Everybody strung along together on a system of barter and mutual credit. Holtzmann found some old Wehrmacht steel helmets, and we turned them into cooking pots. We gave a few to the *Fernküche* man, and the rest we loaded onto handcarts and sold on the streets. Once, I pushed a handcart twelve kilometres, from Charlottenburg to Kreuzberg, selling pots. Holtzmann got hold of a bicycle, and of a Red Cross armband like the ones doctors wore, and the Russians didn't bother him. To find even a hammer or a few screws was a big problem. I remember what we went through to get a band-saw blade we needed very badly. There was a firm

in Neukölln, in the American sector, that had a spare blade, but they wanted aluminum in exchange for it. Holtzmann had heard of a factory in Thuringia that was supposed to have some extra aluminum, so he went there on his bicycle. When he arrived, the aluminum had already been taken away by the Russians, but he was able to pick up a keg of screws, which we later traded with another firm for four power belts. We traded the belts for some aluminum, and eventually got our saw blade.

"By the end of August, we had fixed up a few machines and were making simple things—pots and pans, casings for gas meters, stuff like that. One day, two Russian officers came in, looked over the plant, and gave us an order for gas-meter casings that would keep our men busy for two or three weeks. I explained to them that we could fill the order only if we had a certain die and various parts for one of our big die presses, which was still out of commission. The Russians said they'd get us the die and parts, and they did. The machine was repaired, and the Russians got their order on time. They were satisfied. In fact, they were so satisfied that they came back a few weeks later with soldiers and trucks and hauled away the big die press, and two other machines as well. Such experiences were common, and pretty soon no manufacturer in East Berlin wanted to have anything to do with them. But they had control of all raw materials—there was no black market in those days—and you had to get supply permits from them, which they would issue only if you were doing work for Vojentorg, the Communist military-equipment monopoly."

Holtzmann nodded glumly. "They also took the saw blade," he said. "My God, it was like walking across the Sahara. You'd cross one dune, and there was always another dune ahead, as far as the eye could see. Naturally, we went broke again. But then the workers said they would rather work under some new pay-and-hours arrangement than not work at all, so we started up once more in a limited way, and scratched along for a couple of years."

I ASKED whether the factory had been able to keep going during the blockade and airlift of 1948 and 1949.

"In the beginning, it wasn't bad," Buschbeck said. "There was so much confusion that some materials were coming in uncontrolled from the Soviet Zone. But on top of the blockade came

the currency reform of June, 1948, and that broke our back."

At the time of the currency reform, which established separate currencies in Eastern and Western Germany, the majority of Buschbeck & Holtzmann's customers were German firms in the Eastern sector of Berlin or in the Soviet Zone of Germany. After the reform, these customers offered payment in Russian-sponsored East marks. Officially, East marks and West marks were worth the same, but in actual trading practice the ratio was around seven East to one West. Moreover, by this time most of the firm's raw material was coming from Western Germany and had to be paid for in expensive West marks. To make matters worse, the firm had accepted a number of contracts on which costs had been figured in West marks and payment would be forthcoming in East marks.

"Thousands of companies in East Berlin were in the same jam," Buschbeck said. "The real trouble started when we finally made it clear to the Russians that we wanted no business from them, or from Russian-controlled German outfits, because they would make no adjustment about paying for everything in East marks. There was no end to our difficulties after that. Once, the Russians cut off our entire gas supply for two months, claiming that the gas was needed for a print shop in our block. Sure—the print shop put out a lot of Soviet books. And then the electricity cuts! One day, we might have current from 8 A.M. to noon, the next day from six to ten at night. You'd never know in advance when the current would be on, and would have to keep the men in the shop night and day. And so it went—every day another annoyance. We got really worried when two tax inspectors from the East Berlin Municipal Council spent several days snooping through our books. They told us that we owed them several thousand marks, and I told them to go to hell. Then two higher-ups from Potsdam came in and questioned us. One said we might have to put our factory on the block for a forced sale to pay the tax deficit. The other threatened to send us to jail. After that, those Russian stooges, the *Volkspolizei*, began to get interested in our plant. It got so bad that I jumped every time the doorbell rang."

"It was a great relief every time it turned out to be only the postman," Holtzmann said.

"We could stand it no longer," said Buschbeck. "In great secrecy, we started looking for a place to move to

in West Berlin, and we found this factory here. It had been vacated by a textile firm that had gone to Düsseldorf with the rest of the textile industry. Then we sounded out our thirty or forty workers to see if they were for us or against us. That was a delicate job. The Russians strictly prohibited the moving of machinery and raw materials out of their sector without permission. Of course, permission was never granted. The Russians themselves kept no special check on us, but the blue-shirted *Volkspolizei* boys were always around. If there had been any Communists in our *Betriebsrat* [workers' council], we would have been licked, but there weren't. We left a few men at the old place who would make believe they were keeping it running. The rest of us hauled and carried the factory over to the West, piece by piece."

Seeing my startled face, Buschbeck nodded emphatically. "Yes, *mein Herr*, piece by piece. The smaller machines were taken apart and smuggled out in briefcases and valises, on pushcarts and in baby carriages. Some of the bigger machines had to be cut into sections; we welded them back together over here. We couldn't use trucks. That would have been conspicuous. No one could go by U-Bahn [subway] or streetcar, because the *Volkspolizei* were always watching them. We worked out a detailed plan of evacuation and got most of the stuff away, but some of the really big things we had to leave behind. After all, you can't carry a turret lathe in a briefcase, no matter how you cut it up. Once we were here, it was like starting all over again, but at least there was nothing to be afraid of."

Holtzmann sighed. "That was just two years ago," he said, "and now we'll have to move again."

"That reminds me, Wilhelm," Buschbeck said. "A letter came this

morning from the Chamber of Commerce of Celle, in the British Zone. They sound interested." He went through a pile of papers on his desk and pulled out a typewritten sheet.

"I'll read it later," Holtzmann said. "I haven't got the strength right now." Buschbeck handed the letter to me instead. The Chamber of Commerce would be pleased to welcome the firm of Buschbeck & Holtzmann to Celle, I read, and would place at its disposal a building formerly occupied by a shoe-manufacturing concern. The main machine shop was twenty by thirty metres and clean and well ventilated, and there was ample storage and office space. The rent was cheap, and the Chamber of Commerce would do its best to get the firm local bank credit. "In the past two years," the letter went on, "the population of Celle has almost doubled and is now about seventy thousand. Many of the residents are *Volksdeutsche* [German refugees from other countries], for whom we are trying to create new employment. Celle has excellent rail and water communications. Our marshalling yards are now being expanded. There is an adequate supply of electric power . . ."

I returned the letter to Buschbeck, and he laid it on his desk. "When do you leave?" I asked.

"It's hard to say," Buschbeck said. "There's a lot of red tape involved. You have to get a permit to quit Berlin, and further authorization to remove the machinery and stocks of raw materials. We hope to take some of our workers along, too."

OUTSIDE in the big machine shop, the footsteps of a woman echoed in the stillness, and in a moment a slim, good-looking brunette put her head in the door.

"Charlotte!" said Buschbeck in happy surprise. Even Holtzmann seemed to perk up. The young woman came into the office, and Buschbeck kissed her on both cheeks. "My niece, Frau Jaeger," he said to me. We shook hands, and Buschbeck gave his niece his chair. He sat on the edge of his desk.

"How come you're not working, Charlotte?" Holtzmann asked. "Did the Russians fire you, I hope?"

"No. We got the day off, because they're revising our production quotas," Frau Jaeger said. She explained to me that she was a laboratory technician in the East Berlin plant. "Whenever they revise the quotas, all Germans have to keep out," she said. "And next week we'll have to work overtime for two

days to make up for what we didn't do today." She shrugged. "I've long since given up trying to figure *them* out." Frau Jaeger was, as Berliners might say, *kess*, meaning that she was smart, impertinent, and self-reliant. She had worked in the same factory during the war, I learned, when the firm had been under Wehrmacht control and was classified secret. As soon as the Red Army moved into Berlin, the factory was taken over by the Russians. None of the equipment was touched. Now the place was under Red Army control, a Russian sentry stood where a German sentry had stood before, and everything was more secret than ever. A Russian major had assumed charge of the factory right after the fighting was over and had ordered the German personnel manager to round up all former employees.

"They came for me late in May," Frau Jaeger said. "I went along because I was afraid of them. And I had to have work to eat. There were five classes of food-ration cards. The leading specialists in our laboratory—the advanced-research physicists—got Class One cards, meaning all the food they wanted, including meat and butter and cocoa. Unskilled workers and all members of the sales force got Class Five—good for bread and a little watery soup at noon. The salespeople were called 'unproductive' and were outcasts. Laboratory technicians like me got Class Three—potatoes and noodles and a little meat at noon, and a little piece of margarine or bacon twice a week." Many of the plant's eleven hundred employees had disappeared during the fighting in Berlin, Frau Jaeger said, and the Russians had to press others into service. Of the new laboratory workers, seventy per cent had been members of the Nazi Party, which the Russians were aware of but let pass. All they cared about was whether a man knew his job; a man's political past didn't interest them at all. The two outstanding electrophysicists in the laboratory had been prominent Nazis. "You should have seen how the Russian major treated *them!*" Frau Jaeger said. "He practically forced them to move into villas near the Wannsee, and he gave them fine rugs and stained-glass windows. He was crazy about stained-glass windows. When it got cold, the Russians delivered truckloads of coal to their houses. The major himself took over a big house in the lake district—maybe to be near them. First he got a piano, then a dog, then a sailboat, and then he was suspected of capitalistic tendencies

and was recalled to Russia. We got a new Russian director, who was crazy about work norms, production quotas, and deadlines. Quality of production was secondary to maintaining norms and meeting deadlines. Missing a deadline was considered a form of sabotage. He wanted everybody to live within walking distance of the factory. He was very insistent about it with me. My six-year-old daughter and I live in a one-room apartment in Schöneberg, in the American sector, and the director kept offering me a four-room apartment or a nice little house in the Soviet sector, so I wouldn't have to travel back and forth on the U-Bahn."

The offer was enticing, Frau Jaeger said, but an instinctive fear kept her from accepting it. Many of her colleagues who lived in the Western sectors did accept similar offers. She soon learned how right she had been. On the morning of October 22, 1946, as she got off the U-Bahn, two of her fellow-workers ran up to her, clearly in a panic. "For God's sake, don't go near the factory," one of them said to her. "The Russians are rounding up everybody and sending them to Siberia." That, it turned out later, was not quite true, but almost. Between two and four o'clock that morning, Russian soldiers had rounded up all the plant's laboratory workers who lived in the Russian sector. Trucks had driven up in front of their houses and apartments, and the employees, their families, dogs, canaries, furniture, pianos, clothes, books, paintings, cooking utensils, walking sticks, first-aid kits, wine bottles, and bedding were loaded helter-skelter onto the trucks. The soldiers unscrewed all the light bulbs, removed all the bathroom fixtures, and took all the coal from the cellars. In one house, a man was entertaining a lady, and she was hauled onto the truck with him; from another house, the Russians took not only a man, his wife, and their baby but the child's

baby-sitter, who was just about to go home.

Frau Jaeger went back to the American sector until the dust had settled and it became virtually certain that the Russians were interested only in the people who lived in their sector. When she returned to the laboratory a couple of weeks later, sixty per cent of the old personnel was gone. The director was as upset as anybody, and had flown to Moscow to protest. "He should have known better," Frau Jaeger said. "He never came back." I asked whether anything was ever heard of her former colleagues. "Yes, once in a while we get a letter," she said. "Some were sent to Leningrad, others to Moscow or Gorki, where they work in laboratories. They praise the technical equipment and the high standards of the Russian physicists. But you can't believe anything they say. All the letters are censored, of course."

In 1949, all the unskilled workers and salesmen in the electronic firm were dragooned into the S.E.D., or Socialist Unity Party, as the Communist political organization in Soviet Germany is called. The laboratory technicians have not yet been approached, but Frau Jaeger, I gathered, is not hopeful about the future. "Everybody is afraid since that October night in 1946," she said. "When will they round up the next bunch of people and ship them East? And I haven't a chance of making more money. The Russians pay people according to their academic degrees. A man with a Doctor's degree and no experience gets more than a man with no degree and fifteen years' experience. I have no academic degrees. I'm just a technician. But today I'm glad I'm *not* a specialist. It's dangerous. Besides, it's impossible to care any longer. No one has any scientific ambition. We long ago gave up theoretical research and are now nothing but high-class laborers. Everybody is afraid to be exceptional in any way. Prominence may mean a one-way ticket to Russia."

"I wish you had a job here," Buschbeck said.

"Ah, yes," said Frau Jaeger. "But you know very well that I'd never find a job in West Berlin. Did you read the latest unemployment figures? Over two hundred and ninety thousand people out of work. The only job for a woman over here is to be a *Trümmerfrau* [a woman who cleans up rubble]. My God, you know how things are!"

Buschbeck nodded dolefully. "Yes, we know," he said.

"Not that I'm worried about you

two," Frau Jaeger went on. "You've been in trouble before, Lord knows, and you always got out of it." She stood up. "Well, I must be going. I want to drop in on Aunt Hulda this afternoon."

We all got to our feet, and Buschbeck took her to the door. "A good girl," he said to me as he closed the door after her. "She worries me, but she has a lot of courage."

Holtzmann had picked up the letter from the Celle Chamber of Commerce and was reading it. "This shoe factory doesn't sound too bad," he said, looking up, "and the labor situation seems pretty fair, but I think we'd better get a letter off this afternoon asking them to be more specific about the rent. It's all very well to say that it's cheap, but we've got to have exact figures if we're to make a go of it."

—Joseph Wechsberg

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BURGLAR, SPARE THAT STEAK!

Police said that the housebreaker passed up silverware, jewelry, clothing, and other valuables and stole three pounds of steak, four pounds of roast, and two pounds of chops.—*News item.*

Burglar, creeping still as mouse,
Spare, oh, spare that porterhouse!
Take my cash—I'll call no cops—
Take my watch, but not those chops.
Take the candelabra. Scram!
Leave that lovely roast of lamb.

Crack my safe and clean it out—
I'll not struggle, I'll not shout.
I'll not fight for silverware,
Gems or clothing, but beware,
Take it easy, depredator—
Hands off my refrigerator.

—Richard Armour

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Though one thinks of old-style diplomatists as formal, this was only true of their manners; their method of doing business was extremely casual and intimate. Everything was arranged in private conversation; and each knew that he could rely on the other's word even if it was given "off the record." Thus, at Vienna in 1814, Russia and Austria had many conflicts; in fact they almost went to war over the future of Poland. But when Metternich, the Austrian Chancellor, went to call on his mistress. he found the carriage of Czar Alexander drawn up outside the door; and the two men virtually settled the question in a corridor outside the lady's bedroom. It is difficult to think that Mr. Acheson and Mr. Vishinsky could meet in this chance way.—*The Times Magazine.*

Still, it might be worth a try.