

December 1985 \$1.50

# Reader's Digest



**"DO YOU HEAR  
THE BELLS,  
FATHER JERZY?"**

## **MURDER OF A POLISH PRIEST**

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"TO BE, or not to be: that is the question: . . . To suffer . . ." was literature's first expression of the basic philosophy of that phenomenon we call the wimp. Confused, unable to take action, apologetic and soul-searching, Hamlet spent his time fumbling around and whining. Classic wimpiness.

To wimp, or not to wimp: that is the question. American men have been asking themselves for the past couple of decades, which some observers call the Golden Age of Wimpiness. Now the wimp world has crested and is in rapid decline—square jaws are back—so it is time to record characteristics of this dying species.

*Wimpus apologeticus americanus* apologizes profusely, in the belief that everything is somehow his fault. A wimp on the up escalator will involuntarily mutter "excuse me" to the people on the down escalator.

He feels guilty when a plague of locusts descends on an obscure country 12,000 miles away. His first question is, "How have I failed them? Where did I go wrong?" He is consumed by guilt—not to be confused with *compassion*, which

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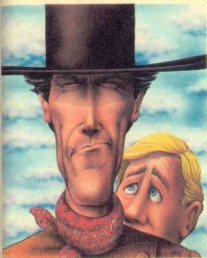
# THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE WIMP

After two decades in the limelight, the hand-wringing quiche-eater is being shoved aside, whining as he falls, "Where have I failed?"

Condensed from  
THE NEWSDAY MAGAZINE  
JEAN SHEPHERD

is an entirely different emotion.

Scholars studying the field believe the high point of wimpishness was captured by a photographer showing President Jimmy Carter seated in a rowboat fighting off an attacking killer rabbit with an oar. From that moment on, wimps were in retreat, casting nervous glances behind them in fear of pursuing rabbits, while the rest of us instinctively sighed in relief, hoping that the whole madness was now exposed and would die of its own nervousness. As my Aunt Clara used to say: "My best friend,



Mabel, died of nerves." I never knew what she meant, but I do now.

The rise of contemporary wimp-ery began with the emergence of sad-eyed, apologetic Ringo Starr. (A wimp is almost always quite attractive because he has such endearing eyes, full of fear and concern.) Richard Benjamin used to play wimps magnificently. Who can forget his classic wimping in *Goodbye Columbus*?

Trapped in the clutches of the strong, decisive Ali MacGraw, he had the scared look of Carter fight-

ing off that damn rabbit. Who could fail to love him, while at the same time feeling a nagging urge to kick him in the butt and yell, "For God's sake, Benjamin, tell her off and clear out!" In the wimp's eyes, bad (i.e., insensitive) people are those who do precisely that.

Many wimps were created by viewing too much of Alan Alda on the TV and movie screens. His characters revel in wimp-ery, making of it a positive virtue and, in fact, proclaiming wimpishness as a form of liberation, which, of course, is the opposite of the truth. No one is more in chains than the true wimp, forever quivering over the feelings of others. Eternally consumed by guilt, he rarely sleeps well.

During the flood tide of wimp-ery, TV talk shows were inundated with countless "liberated" men fervently apologizing for being male. Whole new industries sprang up around wimp-ery. "The Phil Donahue Show" grew heavy with commercials.

A few years ago, the most admired man in America was Alda, but now it is Clint Eastwood, who may be a lot of things, but a wimp he ain't. How did this change come about? Or, as a wimp would mut-

ter, "Where did I go wrong? How did I allow this to happen?" What shift in the national perception has caused Hollywood agents to fan out in the jungle, beating the undergrowth for potential "hunks," while scrapping the contracts of those undersized actors who, for 20 years, personified the sensitive wimp? Some say it was Christopher Reeve, who as Superman took on the whole world of evil, while Margot Kidder clung to him feverishly. Others point to Sly Stallone and his immortal Rocky.

Hollywood scuttlebutt has it that the next wave of pictures will be neoclassic westerns. Dustin Hoffman will be but a faint memory when the appaloosas come galloping down the ravines to the roar of a Colt revolver. Sporadic battling will break out as the beleaguered wimps circle the wagons, crying piteously, "Where is Phil Donahue when we really need him?" And a sequin-studded Michael Jackson will cower in the shadow of Bruce Springsteen, the Boss.

Even in cars the change is clearly noticeable. Sonny, the tough cop who lives with an alligator (an alligator!) on "Miami Vice," drives a mean, black, thundering sports car. It is today's equivalent of the Lone

Ranger's mighty Silver, a horse that certainly was no gelding.

Men's clothing also marks the change. The fedora, which was the trademark of the old tough-guy days of Bogie and Al Capone, has made an astounding comeback. There are those who even say that Harrison Ford hit it big because he wore such a lid and not the other way around.

Wimpy food is even going the way of the wimp. Recently, magazines have done pieces on the rise of good old American classic food, extolling the virtues of pot roast, apple pie, mashed potatoes and even meat loaf. You could see Gary Cooper sitting down to a meal of pot roast and mashed potatoes before he went out to fight the bad guys in *High Noon*. Yes, it's true, real men *don't* eat quiche or alfalfa sprouts.

There are a few rear-guard actions, such as the recent rash of movies where tiny, valiant women "save the farm" while their wimpy husbands lurk in the background, holding the kids in their arms, but the corner has been turned. Like most massive social shifts, no one can say for sure why. But the wimps are in full retreat. Bring on the pot roast!

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*Ask a Stupid Question.* A visitor to New York City stopped to admire one of the handsome cabs outside Central Park. She examined the horse from head to tail, feeling its mane and inspecting its legs. Finally she turned her attention to the driver. "Are you the cabby?" she asked.

"No," came the reply. "I'm the horse. We're often mistaken for each other."

—Gene Brown in *Dartbury, Conn.*, *New York Times*