

Qwikdiozone

By Tom Word

Melvin Falk was the ultimate con man, a trickster to rival Bernard Madoff, if on a smaller scale. But like Bernie, his con finally got him not prison but a penalty worse. How he thought up his con and practiced it with success for a decade is the story I'll tell you here.

Melvin was a fixture on the bird-dog field-trial scene in its best decade—the 1960s. Best because there were birds—quail were plentiful everywhere. The pro handlers of that era are legends now, remembered as smart, tough, and fiercely competitive. Guys with bird-wise dogs—like John Gates and his son John Rex, Herman Smith and his son Collier, Leon Covington, Paul Walker, Bob Lamb, Fred Bevan, Fred Arant, Marshall Loftin, Bud Daugherty, Bill Rayl, Clyde Morton, Roy Jines, Jack Harper, Hoyle Eaton, David Grubb, Howard Kirk, Ray Smith, Gene Lunsford, Earl Grangle, Ed Mack Farrior, Bill Cosner, George Evans, Doyle Suttle, Phil Brousseau and Duff Gordon.

Melvin Falk was a dog owner in those days, campaigning dogs with first one and then another of the legends. He loved to travel with his horse van to the Deep South in winter to attend the trials at Dixie Plantation where he met marks for his con among fellow dog sponsors. His cover was the life insurance business, but that's not where he made his real money. But it did give him the opening to sell his con and to get his marks thinking about their mortality, the hook for the con.

After Melvin convinced a mark he needed and could afford a big life insurance policy, got him past the physical exam, and delivered the policy and collected the first

premium check in exchange, he'd tender a steak dinner at the buyer's town's best restaurant. He'd be sure the mark had the finest whiskey in several pre dinner highballs. When the mood was just right, he'd introduce the philosophical subject—death.

Melvin Falk's con hinged on every man's fear of a slow, painful death. The other side of that coin being a fast painless one, with no slow decline into helplessness. When the mark was sufficiently plied with alcohol and filled with dread of a slow death, Melvin would spring his con.

Having first sworn the mark to secrecy, Melvin revealed his solution to the universal dilemma. He had a supply of a miracle drug he called Qwikdiozone. One tablet would put a taker into a dreamless, painless sleep, from which the taker would not awake. And the drug left no trace in the taker's blood or bodily systems, Melvin swore. He could make a dose available to his new policyholder for a mere \$10,000.

Melvin practiced his con only on men he knew had the ten thousand bucks—knew it from the financial statement required to get the life insurance policy. As Melvin made his subtle pitch to sell Qwikdiozone, he watched for any sign of reluctance by the mark. In these cases Melvin quickly dropped the pitch. He knew from experience his suggestion would likely bounce around in the mark's head, and after an incubation period of a week or two, the mark would call back to buy Qwikdiozone.

The pills Melvin sold as Qwikdiozone were not lethal, but contained a strong dose of a sleep inducing medicine. So a taker would wake after a sound sleep of eight hours or so. Almost inevitably, the mark would be glad to wake up. He might be angry

at Melvin for the loss of his \$10,000. But he'd be too embarrassed to ask for his money back, or perhaps too grateful to Providence to be still alive.

So how did Melvin's con unravel? That's a story of unanticipated and unintended consequences. A story set in Melvin's little world of bird-dog field trials.

One of Melvin's marks in the year 1965 was the owner of that year's National Bird Dog Champion, Alabama Al. His name was Elmo Cabbage, and he hailed from Birmingham, Alabama. He was rich from the munitions business that had flourished during the Second World and Korean Wars. He sponsored dogs with the south Alabama-based handler Duff Gordon. Gordon had a beautiful wife named Lydia whom Elmo coveted—to use a phrase from the Ten Commandments. Lydia returned the favor—she was tired of a life with little money and much loneliness.

Elmo paid Melvin Falk the \$10,000 for a dose of Qwikdiozone. But he did not intend to use it for his own painless escape from this mortal coil. Instead, he intended to have Lydia slip it to her spouse, Duff Gordon, thereby freeing her to be Elmo's bride.

Lydia slipped the pill into Duff's sweet tea at supper on April 1, 1965, the night of Duff's return from the season's field-trial wars after making the spring circuit down the east coast. Duff promptly went to sleep. Lydia called Elmo, who was waiting nearby. Elmo came over at once, and he and Lydia took the occasion to make love. Duff Gordon woke early and found them in his and Lydia's marital bed. He beat hell out of Elmo, who was lucky to survive the beating.

When Elmo got out of the Selma hospital, he drove to Melvin Falk's home in Virginia. There he put a .38 slug into Melvin's chest, thus ending Melvin's Qwikdiozone con.