BEST DETECTIVE STORIES of the YEAR

16th ★ ANNUAL COLLECTION

EDITED BY

Brett Halliday

Creator of Mike Shayne

Best Detective Stories
OF THE YEAR
16th Annual Collection

EDITED BY
BRETT HALLIDAY

E. P. DUTTON & CO., INC.
New York 1961

Published simultaneously in Canada by
Clarke, Irwin & Co., of Toronto

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER: 46-5872

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CONTENTS

FOLLOWING in the footsteps of David C. Cooke's 15-year tenure as editor of this series presents a stimulating challenge. This, the oldest annual collection of detective-mystery fiction, carries the unmistakable imprint of Mr. Cooke's good taste and excellent critical judgment, and I can only hope this volume will meet the high standards he has set over the years.

My sole criterion in selecting these 20 stories is my own personal judgment. I "like" every story I have chosen. Any story that I could not read with enthusiasm and enjoyment from the first page to the last was automatically discarded. I think it is unrealistic and dishonest for an editor to claim he has used any other yardstick in his selections.

My qualifications for the job are as follows: I have earned my living writing mystery fiction for the past twenty-five years. I have edited five similar collections in the past. For several years I was co-author of a weekly review column specializing in mysteries. For five years I was head of a literary agency in New York. I am currently owner and editor of a small publishing house. And finally . . . I like to read mystery fiction.

I don't know what my own standards are for judging a story. Above all else, I think, I demand that the writer have a *story* to tell. Then, he must tell it well. Catching my interest with the opening paragraph, and keeping me reading eagerly to the final word. Each of these stories does exactly that.

Nine of these stories come from the pages of *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*. Four appeared in the *Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine*, and three in *Manhunt*. *The Saturday Evening Post*, *This Week Magazine*, *Dude* and *Bestseller Mystery Magazine* are each represented by one story.

Thus, only three out of twenty stories come from the "slick" or mass-circulation magazines. There are two reasons for this. First: With the disappearance of so many such magazines in the past few years and the continual constriction of fiction in those that remain, there is very little mystery fiction being printed in the slicks today. Second: Much of what there is is not my kind of story.

So far as I know, only two of the authors here are women. I am sorry about this because these two stories are a couple of the hardest-hitting and most memorable in the book. I would like to have had more from the softer sex, but I simply could not find them.

I think there are stories here that will appeal to every taste. This is not because I have consciously catered to different tastes, but because I, personally, enjoy every sort of fine mystery writing whether it is done with gentle humor or with uncompromising realism.

I realize that aficionados are going to raise their eyebrows and exclaim loudly at the non-appearance of any stories from *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*. The explanation is very simple.

Ellery Queen is now publishing two collections each year from his own magazine. These two volumes pretty well take up the bulk of the original fiction published by EQMM, and they certainly call for the best that appeared in those pages.

My sincere thanks go not only to all the authors who contributed stories, but also to all the other writers whose published work over the past year has given me so much reading pleasure . . . and has made my task of selecting the twenty "Best" such a difficult one.

BRETT HALLIDAY

Best Detective Stories
OF THE YEAR
(16th Annual Collection)

TALMAGE POWELL

MURDER METHOD

I am delighted to open this volume with a strongly dramatic and richly human story by an old friend and an old-timer in this field. For more years than Mr. Powell and I like to recall, he has been writing regularly superlative mystery and suspense short stories.

When Tal is good, he is very good indeed; and I think you will agree this is one of his best.

TALMAGE POWELL

MURDER METHOD

WE KILLED HER, Ralph Corson and I, as surely as if we had used a knife or a gun, and it is the manner of the killing that haunts and torments me.

I met Peri in Miami. She was the wife of as good a friend as I ever had.

It was right after I lost my shirt in an orange deal. I'd bought a bunch of futures in oranges, and a freeze had killed the crop. I was sitting in a small waterfront tavern, making wet rings on the bar with a beer glass and wondering what to do next, when a man walked up behind me and laid his hand on my shoulder.

"Tom Danton," he said in a quiet voice. "It's good to see you after such a long time."

I turned on the bar stool and felt better right away. Marty Janus had always affected me that way, even in our college days.

A subtle change came over any room Marty entered. He was a dark, good-looking, slender, energetic man, but it wasn't his looks that did it. It was the Marty Janus dwelling deep in the flesh and bones, the Marty who believed in the beauties and joys of life, the worth of life, the worth, decency, and integrity of his fellow man.

But by no stretch of the imagination was Marty a dreamy starry-eyed fool. He was smart, tough, courageous. The occasional individual who tried to take advantage of him because of his outlook, social position, and wealth failed to sour Marty.

He accepted them as part of the world and time into which he had been born and felt sorry for them.

In short, Marty was a rare man. I suspect that if and when Marty's kind become the majority, most of the world's ills will vanish along with fear and hatred.

"Sit down," I said. "I'm buying."

"Thanks. You're looking fit, Tom." A smile crinkled the deeply tanned flesh at the corners of his eyes. "Fifteen years out of college, and I'll bet you could still do a broken field run that would make the other team dizzy."

"If I had Marty Janus with me as a blocking back," I said.

"Hell," he laughed, "you're just saying it because it's true. I heard you were in Miami, Tom. Wanted very much to see you. What you been doing for yourself?"

"I dropped my roll on some oranges."

"That's too bad. Married yet?"

"Nope."

"Business deal lined up?"

"Not so far."

"No strings on you—okay, so we'll go fishing. We'll get the kinks out of our systems, the cobwebs out of the old brains, and figure out an assault on the future."

"Thanks, Marty, but I . . ."

"I'm planning a trip. A real jaunt. You enjoy fishing?"

Tropical water, a brilliant sun, the roll of a boat, the big ones hitting . . . "Are you kidding, Marty?"

"Then it's settled."

"No," I said, "I meant it when I said I dropped my roll. I couldn't make a down payment on the bait."

"The heat's got him," Marty said to no one, "so how can I consider it an insult?" He turned and looked at me. "All right,

you're broke. Think of the advantage in that. You can face the future, enter the next round of the scrap with everything to gain, not a thing to lose. Check?"

"I suppose." He wasn't simply a wealthy man talking from a lofty position of security. Marty would never have to worry about money; but he'd made it honestly, because he'd been smart enough to know the time and place for his subdivisions and because people couldn't be in the state a week without knowing you'd get your money's worth if you bought a home in a Janus development.

As a kid he'd lived on a Florida farm with sneakers as his Sunday shoes. He'd waited on tables, studied like a Socrates, and played football to get himself through college. He'd worked on construction jobs in South American jungles and mountains and lived on beans for two years to get his first tiny capital together.

" 'I suppose,' " he echoed, "Tomas, muchacho, that proves it. You need open sky and fresh air to put some vigor in your outlook. I got a boat docked no more than a couple of blocks from here. I was on my way to the marine supply house when I glanced in here, did a double-take, and realized it was really you. The gear can wait. I want you to see the new boat, the *Peri*. It's named after my wife."

If you knew Marty really well, you could catch the faint inflection when he said "my wife." He said it with a vast and deep contentment, as if life, after this, could only be perfect, never topping itself.

Water sparkled in the slips and lapped gently against the pilings. The masts of the yachts made a forest of clean, slender spears against the deep blue of the sky. Marty and I paused at a slip. He looked at me with a grin.

The *Peri* crouched at her moorings. She gleamed, mahogany and brass, all forty feet of her. She was sloop rigged, her cabins low, her bridge straining toward the open sea, her engine housings built for diesel auxiliaries.

I shared Marty's grin. "She makes you feel like a Viking."

"That she does," Marty said.

We went down the short gangway onto the deck. A girl came from aft, out of the cabin. Marty went forward to meet her, taking her hand in his.

A magazine illustrator couldn't have done the portrait better. She was lithe and graceful in white shorts and halter, carrying the vigorous animalism of her sex appeal quite unconsciously.

She was gold, while Marty was dark-tanned leather. His coloring made her hair seem more golden, her eyes bluer, and her hair and eyes possibly made her lips seem redder than they really were. The top of her head came just above Marty's shoulder, and she leaned against him slightly in an automatic little gesture of affection.

"Peri," Marty said, "this is Tom Danton. Tom, my wife."

She offered her hand. Her fingers were slim, cool, strong. "I'm very pleased to know you, Tom. Marty has told me a great deal about you."

I said something or other and let go of her hand.

Marty told her I was joining the trip, and she remarked that it was nice.

"Bring your stuff on board this afternoon, Tom," Marty said. "We'll get underway with the tide tomorrow morning."

The rubber soles of white canvas shoes squeaked softly behind me on the hot planking of the deck.

I looked over my shoulder. A man had come aboard. Wearing a T-shirt, ducks, and an old yachting cap, he was long, heavy,

big-chested in the body and short in the legs. His face was square, his features blunt. His eyes were black and small, or perhaps they only looked that way because of his black, jutting, heavy brows.

He stood spread-legged, as if the deck of a boat were home to him. He took off the cap, with the inverted V crimped in the cracked bill, and wiped the sweatband. "You get to the marine supplier, Mr. Janus?"

"Not yet, Ralph. We'll go over there now," Marty said. "I ran into a friend. He's going with us. Tom Danton, Ralph Corson."

The stocky man looked me up and down, offered his hard, calloused hand for a brief shake. "Glad to have you, Mr. Danton." There was neither welcome nor disrespect in his tone. "You know anything about sailing?"

"A little."

"He'll pull his share," Marty said.

"Then we won't need another hired hand?"

"I think not, Ralph."

The stocky man shrugged and went aft.

"He's not the friendliest man alive," Marty said, so that Ralph Corson wouldn't hear, "but he's a competent seaman."

I soon found out that Marty had told the truth about Corson. We fished our way down the Keys. Corson knew his business, and I didn't mind taking his orders and instructions. But in less than a week, I'd begun to hate the man.

I couldn't single out a reason for this feeling. It wasn't in anything he actually said or did. His orders were peremptory, even to Marty. That was all right, as it should be. Out here, Corson was captain of the boat.

Nor was the reason particularly in Corson's attitude toward

me. He treated me as something of a cluck, a habit of sea-wise men toward the landlubber. To him, I was no more than a shadow aboard. Still, this was not enough to arouse the feeling I felt for him.

Then late one afternoon, I knew suddenly why I felt as I did. The Atlantic was as smooth as a tub of oil. Sea and sky were hushed, and I had the feeling that we were in a vacuum. We were making for port in Key West under the power of the auxiliaries because of the expected light blow. Corson was on the bridge, at the helm.

Everything aboard the *Peri* was secured. Marty's wife had made sandwiches for dinner, and there was nothing to be done, aside from Corson's task.

Peri and Marty were forward, sitting very close together in deck chairs. They were talking to each other, but their tones were low and intimate and could not be heard above the steady whisper of the diesels.

They made a fine picture, sea and sky for a backdrop, she like an enticing golden thing that had come out of the sea and Marty like the hero from some book who'd captured her, mind, body, and soul. Marty said something to her, and they looked at each other. And Corson stood looking at their profiles, and a bestial thing came to his face.

He didn't know I was watching. I'd been at the stern. He hadn't heard me come forward. I'd been on the point of speaking to him when that change had come to his face. His eyes glittered, his lips pulled back tight to show his teeth. Dark blood suffused the heavy planes of his cheeks and jaws.

His lips twisted as he spoke noiseless words to himself. I could guess that it was a speech of raw animal desire and hatred. Lust for the woman and hatred, arising from envy, of the man who

could own her, and this boat, and the services of other people.

I turned and went quietly sternward. I went in the galley and mixed a drink for something to do. There was a suffocating feeling in my chest and a band of steel tightening about my temples.

I shook with my hatred for Corson.

Because I wanted the woman as badly as he did.

The revelation was not sudden, though it seemed so at the moment. It filled me with a quick and deep shame.

Marty was my friend—and she was a part of Marty. Not for a moment was there any doubt of that. She didn't worship or idolize him. She simply belonged to him, completely, without reservation. She wanted nothing more. She would never ask nor seek for anything more. She had found the ultimate purpose of womanhood, a personality into which her own being could fuse until the two became a single entity.

Her life had a single mainstream and anything else—Corson and I, for example—were just objects on the distant shores of that stream.

So she was blameless. And yet she was wholly to blame, for in her, Marty had found the thing that every man seeks, the realization of the idealistic wish every man has felt to some degree when he was very young.

Corson and I had discovered there really was a woman like this in the world. It stirred the senses and fanned a fire, because there was the emptiness of the sea and sky, the smallness of the boat, the endless langorous days and nights—and the sight of her continually dangled before Corson and me.

I wanted to leave them in Key West. Instead, I told myself I couldn't do it gracefully.

Although the season was late and there were reports of squally weather, Marty aimed the *Peri* at the Gulf, where he heard a few tarpon were still running.

"Those running this late," he decided, "will be monsters. We might even set a record!"

The weather reports weren't exaggerated, and the fifth day out, Corson asked Marty to make for Fort Myers.

"There's even rougher weather ahead," Corson said, "and this craft ain't as seaworthy as she looks. She's been built for looks, Mr. Janus—to . . ."

"Yes, Corson?"

"All right," Corson said, rubbing his palms on his ducks, "I'll say it. The *Peri's* a tub. I suspected it from the second I looked at her. Now I know it. She was built to grab a rich landlubber's dollars. There's too much of her topside. I don't like the way she handles. I don't like the roll of her. As a fancy toy, she's fine, but it'd take a lot better craft than the *Peri* to weather the blow moving up from Dry Tortugas."

"Well," Marty said, "I guess I'm not the first man to get stuck." He grinned wryly. "Nor the last. We'll put in at Fort Myers."

We failed to reach the port. The heavy blow caught us off the unexplored wilderness shown on the charts as Ten Thousand Islands.

The darkness and wind and rain came quickly. The tropical hush was filled with a roar. The sky disappeared, and the seas came over the *Peri's* deck.

Just before the blow hit, Corson had seen the smudge of an island on our portside horizon. He swung the *Peri* wide, making for the island.

When the leaden sky came down to meet the angry sea, the

island disappeared. Corson put the nose of the craft into the teeth of the wind and tried to hold her there. She kept sheering off, rolling heavily, like a creature alive and wanting to flee in panic.

The rain was icy after the heat of the day. One moment the diesels labored so hard it seemed they would quit; the next, they tried to tear themselves out of their mountings as the prow of the *Peri* wallowed heavily and the screws screamed free.

It was up to Corson now. We stayed topside, Peri at Marty's side, keeping her fear under tight control.

The *Peri* shuddered as she crested, the wind tearing at her. She fell like a toboggan, her stern free, her prow slicing to the depths of the watery trough. She met the wall of water with a booming crash. Her stability was gone, and the water swept her decks clean, pouring into her depths.

I heard Peri scream Marty's name. Then panic blanked everything else from my mind as the world turned to angry black water.

I felt Corson's weight slam into me. His arms grabbed for me. I slugged at him and clawed my way toward the surface.

Something hard slammed against my shoulder. I grabbed it, locked my arms about it. We'd all had on life preservers, of course, but they wouldn't keep a man from drowning in this weather. The short length of broken mast helped.

I was under the surface more often than not as the water roiled over me. But I was alive, and I clung to the mast and gagged out water—and heard her cry out Marty's name once again. It was a very feeble cry, but I knew she must be close. The human voice was no competition for the angry bellow of the wind.

I glimpsed her face, a few feet away. I worked the mast

toward her. I felt the dizzying pitching and knew another mass of water was coiled over us. I grabbed her arm. As we went under, she was almost torn away. The water parted, and she put her arms across the mast, gagging and coughing.

She never stopped saying his name for long. Only when there was no breath in her did she refrain from calling for Marty.

I felt the warm sand of a beach beneath my back, and opened my eyes. The sky was blue, bland, capriciously innocent. There was a stillness, broken only by the light surf breaking with faint, rasping sounds.

I sat up, remembering the blow, the touch of solid bottom beneath my feet. Remembering that I had dragged her with me until I'd collapsed.

My wild, swinging gaze jerked to a halt. She lay near me. I could almost reach out and touch her. She was a carven, golden image there on the quiet beach.

As I stood up, she stirred. She looked at me blankly. Then her eyes darkened, deepened. She sat up and looked toward the sea.

"We made it to the island," I said.

"Marty . . ." she said.

"Maybe he made it too."

She didn't look at me. "No," she said. "He didn't."

I kneeled beside her and touched her shoulder. "Don't borrow trouble. Let's not decide about Marty until we know for sure."

She sat looking at the sea, not feeling my touch.

A voice from down the beach called, "Hallo, there!"

The sea still held her attention, for it was Ralph Corson's voice she heard.

He came walking up the beach, his clothing stiff with salt and sand. He stood breathing heavily. "I've been looking for you. I was beginning to think I was the only one who made it.'

"There's no sign of Marty," she said.

"No," Corson said.

She made no move, sitting as if nothing could surprise or hurt her.

"We're on the island," Corson said. "It appears to be a sizeable strip of land. I reckon we're somewhere southwest by south of Ten Thousand Islands. I think we can manage, until somebody picks us up."

He looked down at her. "We've got some immediate problems to think about."

"I'll be all right," she said dully. "Just give me a little while."

Corson jerked his head. I followed him as he moved away. We walked toward the interior of the island. It was heavily grown with palms, palmetto, low brush. As we moved into the jungle, I said, "Something's on your mind."

"We may have to call this place home for quite awhile," Corson said. "We're off the shipping and air lanes."

"The Coast Guard will search."

"Maybe. But where do they start? Where do they look? Ten Thousand Islands may be a part of the United States, but even that area has never been explored. From this point, civilization might as well be a million miles away."

I was sweating heavily; from the dense heat, and from his words.

"Somebody will find us," I said doggedly.

"Or what's left of the *Peri*," Corson said. A wolfish grin came to his face. "At least, we won't starve—as long as you and the woman follow my orders."

"You fancy yourself king of this island, Corson?"

"Damn right I do. I've lived in swamp country. I know how

to live off the land. Without me, you and her wouldn't last a week."

I sensed the unleashed arrogance in Corson. I thought that if anything happened to me she'd be here alone with him.

It seemed we had to accept a king, for a little time, anyway.

Corson hadn't been boasting when he said he knew how to live off the land.

Our first problem was water. In a small, sandy clearing near the center of the island, Corson and I dug with sticks. We scooped out a shallow pan, four feet across, nearly three feet deep. There was dampness, and from the dampness came the seepage of water.

"It'll be brackish," Corson said, wiping sweat from his face with his forearm. "It'll have the taste of the sea, but it'll sustain life."

The next three days ran together in an endless moment of heat, toil, hunger, with only the meaty buds of the wild cabbage palm to stave off starvation.

Corson spared himself no more than he spared Peri and me. Under his direction we gathered the wild thistle that Seminole tribes once used to mix with water and make a form of bread. We dug coontie root, scrounged bird and turtle eggs. We explored every inch of the island, until we knew where snakes might be had for emergency rations.

Wild life was plentiful, hares, field mice, swarms of birds. We set snares and deadfalls. We fashioned crude, basket-like crab traps from strips of palm frond, baiting them with putrid meat after our traps began operating. We had vines and plaited palm fibers for cordage, and when we hauled in the first of the crabs, I looked at the size and numbers of them, and I shuddered, thinking of Marty.

There were wild bananas on the island. As for vegetables, Corson assured us that a human being could eat practically anything growing out of the earth so long as it did not run milky sap when broken.

We gathered the largest shells on the beach for cooking and eating utensils.

One of Corson's very first achievements was fire. He took the crystal from Peri's useless diamond-studded wrist watch. It was convex, to magnify the delicate numbers on the watch face. Corson piled a bit of tender dried grass near the edge of the jungle. He crushed more of the grass to make a volatile powder and added it to the pile. Then for a solid hour he crouched in the merciless heat, concentrating the power of the sun through the tiny watch crystal. Finally, the grass began to smoke around the pin-point of sun fire that Corson held so steadily on a single spot. We lighted sticks and carried our fire to our campsite beside the spring Corson and I had made.

And then it seemed that quite suddenly our time of exhaustion, of drugged sleep alternating with periods of violent activity, was over.

We possessed thatched huts. We ate well, even salting our foods with the residue left after evaporating sea water in shallow shells. We refreshed our pile of greasy, green vegetation near the campfire. This would be thrown on the fire to send up a column of smoke, a signal, if the empty sky or brassy hot horizon ever showed a sign of life.

Until we were a going concern, there was little chance to think or feel the things that plague civilized people. Peri had to work shoulder to shoulder with us, until we were all ready to drop in our tracks. During those first days, our individuality

and the things that had made us what we were aboard the *Peri* were pushed into the background.

Then we had a little leisure again—and I saw the grossness of Corson, because Peri was once more a woman, a very special woman, the only one of her kind in all the earth.

Corson knew what I was feeling, and his thoughts were as plain to me as if he had spoken them aloud. Outwardly, neither made a move, not yet, but the men inside the cloaks of sun-blackened skin crouched and watched with mounting wariness and hatred.

Peri seemed to sense nothing of it at first. She had worked like a robot, as tireless as Corson or me. Now she walked the beach just as tirelessly, trying to find something to interest her, but never able for long to keep her gaze from seaward, from the place far out where Marty had died.

She still pulled her own share of the load. She still said little, living in those days before crashing waves had washed across the *Peri.*

I loved her with a tenderness I didn't know was in me. At night, when she sat silent, bathed in the flickering light of the campfire, so beautiful she was a creature beyond belief, I wanted to tell her. I wanted to help her accept the fact that Marty was gone, forever. I wanted to say things I'd never said to another woman.

I said nothing.

Because there was Corson. Corson would never believe the way I felt. He'd never understand. I couldn't explain to him, and so long as Corson was in the way, I could say nothing to her.

I began sleeping badly. Even in sleep, I was aware of her near me at one hand, Ralph Corson at the other.

Then one night he went to her.

It was a night brilliant with moonlight, the skies blue and clear, a faint breeze curling off the Gulf over the island.

I woke and lay perfectly still, seeing the bulk of him standing near her shelter. He was crouching a little, looking in at her as she lay spangled with moonlight.

I heard a shuddering breath come out of him. I saw his hand pass over his face. I witnessed the final struggle of the man with himself.

There was cunning on his face as he looked toward the thatched lean-to where I slept. And I knew then that he had made his decision, finally. He had decided that the three of us could live no longer on this island. It might come to me tomorrow, or next week. He might use a club, or report to her that I'd drowned accidentally.

Or he might not wait at all.

He was looking around. Cat-like, he moved toward the fire. From the old edges of the fire he picked up a stick. It was thicker than my wrist. Its end had been burned to a fire-hardened point.

With a sound that I didn't recognize as coming from my own throat, I threw myself out of the lean-to as he came toward me with the spear upraised.

He cursed, changed his mind, swung the stick as a club.

I stumbled and fell. I rolled away. He was in a momentary fury, beyond all reason, goaded with the knowledge that he had actually put dark thought to action and could not turn back now.

I grabbed a club, larger than Corson's, from the wood pile. I met him snarling. The clubs crashed together. We both fell back, circled. Panting, sweat rolling down our faces and naked chests, we went at each other savagely.

This was the picture of us that Peri received. She had wakened, and she stood looking at us.

As I fell back from Corson's heavy blows, I glimpsed her face.

For a brief instant I could visualize what she was seeing. I saw the change hit her face as a horrible understanding came to her.

Corson's swing brought his club against mine. The weapon almost left my hands. I continued to fall back. She was out of range of my vision now. All I could see was Corson's face, the exultation in it as he sensed triumph.

He was less cautious, and I was filled with a sudden cunning. He was stronger, but I was faster. I invited a blow by appearing to be off balance. When he swung, I slipped to one side, and I had him.

I laid the stick along the side of his head. He fell, legs twisting.

He went scrabbling away like a killer crab. He seized his club, tried to rise, and I knocked the weapon out of his hands.

He fell back and lay gasping, looking up at me.

"Corson," I said, "you're not king any longer."

"You're the boss, Danton. All the way the boss," he panted. "Danton! She's gone!"

I thought at first it was a trick. I stepped back, still watching him. Then I glanced over my shoulder.

He hadn't been lying.

"Peri!"

There was no answer from her, and I forgot Corson for the moment.

I couldn't see her around the edges of the clearing. I moved down the pathway we'd worn toward the beach.

I didn't see her there, either.

Not at first.

I was in water to my waist when Corson grabbed me from behind.

"You fool," he said, "you'd never catch her."

Together we stumbled backward to the beach. I hated him as I'd never hated before, and I knew the feeling was mutual. I knew too that we'd live in uneasy truce until the day in the indeterminate future when someone else fished these waters and saw our smoke column and came to investigate. There was no reason now for blood letting and neither Corson nor I wanted to face the future alone on the island.

We stood and watched, and as the golden head crested the low, murmuring waves, we called to her.

I shouted, the sound an agony in the bright night, until I had no voice left.

She was out of sight then, and she would keep going. Until she reached that spot far, far out where the part of her known as Marty Janus had gone down.

Finally, Corson and I stood under the vast sky in silence, not looking at each other, thinking of the way we had killed her, and of the weapon we'd used . . .

HENRY SLESAR

WELCOME TO OUR BANK

For a change of pace from MURDER METHOD, I unhesitatingly recommend this rather short piece with a beautifully ironic twist at the end.

Told deftly and permeated with subtle humor, it will make you understand George Picken and sympathize with him in his thoroughly human desire to better his financial position to the point that he could conscientiously ask Jennifer to be his wife. Poor, dear George and his dreams!

HENRY SLESAR

WELCOME TO OUR BANK

STAR *light, star bright, first star I see tonight, wish I may, wish I might, have the wish I wish tonight. Please let the First Central Bank be robbed,* thought George Picken, looking up at the pale pinpoint of light that studded the clouds over Southwick Corners. He had been repeating the childish ritual for years, almost since the day he started to work at the bank six years ago, as an assistant teller. Now he was a full-fledged teller, with a brass plaque and a cash box all his own. Once he had thought that this was the acme of his desire, but soon he learned different. It wasn't the job, or the title, that really mattered. It was the Money—so crisp, so green, so crackling with promise, so unlike the measly stipend he received from the First Central every other week. Sometimes, there was as much as *fifty thousand dollars* under his thumb, fifty thousand verdant passports to the pleasures and comforts of the larger, brighter world beyond Southwick Corners.

George was a Bothwick Boy, and that meant he couldn't steal the money himself. Bothwick Boys, graduates of that dear and hallowed prep school, were taught that stealing was wrong. No Bothwick Boy had ever been arrested for stealing. The three that were electrocuted, hung, and life-imprisoned, in that order, simply didn't count. No Bothwick graduate *stole.* And besides, there were three people whom George couldn't disappoint. One was Mr. Burrows, the bank president, who had given him the

job (and was a Bothwick Boy himself). The second was Aunt Finney, who had raised George with decency, brown soap, and boiled food. The third was Jennifer, who would probably marry George once he named the day.

No, George Picken knew he could never simply *take* the thick wads of bills that were always under his hand. There was really only one solution. The First Central *must* be robbed. He thought about it constantly, especially when he flipped open his morning paper and found repeated items about bank holdups in all parts of the country. It was becoming a national pastime, an indoor sport, a new profession. Everybody was robbing banks these days. Not just professional hoodlums, with guns, gas masks, and getaway cars. Little old ladies were shoving threatening notes through tellers' windows, downy-cheeked lads were walking off with thousands, rank amateurs were emptying cash boxes from Maine to California. There was hardly a bank in America that *hadn't* been robbed, George thought sourly. Except, of course, the First Central Bank of Southwick Corners. What was *wrong* with his bank? Did it have some kind of monetary B.O.? Were would-be criminals contemptuous of the bank's paltry four million dollar assets? Were they in awe of Mr. Ackerman, the ancient bank guard, who hadn't unbuttoned his gun holster in twenty-two years of service? Or was it just plain bad luck?

Mournfully, George Picken trudged home from his chores every day, and asked himself these questions. Why, why, *why?* With bank robberies decidedly on the increase, why couldn't *he* get robbed?

Naturally, there was a method behind George's madness. It was a method which had occurred to him long, long before. The scheme was simple, and it went like this:

If Bank Robber A holds up Bank Teller B . . .

And if Teller B gives Bank Robber A a certain amount of money . . .

Who is to know *how much* money Bank Robber A received from Teller B?

What is to prevent Teller B from pocketing all the money left and claiming its theft by Bank Robber A?

It was as simple as simple arithmetic, and every time George Picken examined the plan, it seemed more certain every time.

There was only one flaw.

Where was Bank Robber A?

One morning, George Picken awoke with a strange presentiment. His Aunt Finney was aware that he was troubled the moment she saw him at the breakfast table.

"You sick, George?"

"No, Aunt Finney. Why do you say that?"

"You *look sick*. Must be those lunches you eat downtown. Maybe you better come home for lunch from now on. Some good boiled food will fix you up."

"I'm all right," George Picken said.

On his way to work, he met Jennifer, and had a sudden urge to tell her something.

"Jennifer—"

"Yes, George?"

"Jennifer, about that—matter we were talking about. You know, on the porch swing."

She blushed. "Yes, George?"

"I just wanted you to know. It won't be *long* now, Jennifer. I feel it in my bones."

As he walked into the bank, heading for his cage, Mr.

Burrows, the president, greeted him with a customary nod.

"Morning, Mr. Burrows," he said cheerfully. "It's a *wonderful* day, isn't it?"

Mr. Burrows blinked in astonishment, grumbled, and went into his office.

At two o'clock, the bank door opened and Bank Robber A walked in.

There was no doubt of his identity, not for a moment. For one thing, he *slinked* in. The everyday customer of the First Central either strolled or slouched into the bank. They never slinked. Even more conclusive was the fact that the man wore a white handkerchief over the lower part of his face. Nobody in Southwick Corners wore a mask, except at Halloween.

"All right," the man said hoarsely. "This is a stick-up."

Any doubts about his intent were certainly erased by his words, and by the ugly black revolver he took from his right hand pocket. Mr. Ackerman, the guard, made a small piping sound. "You," the Bank Robber said to him. "Lie down on the floor." Mr. Ackerman sighed, and lay down contentedly, like an old obedient Doberman. Mr. Burrows came out of his office, grunted when he saw the bandit, and started back where he came from. The Bank Robber asked him, politely, to return. Mr. Burrows, grumbling in discontent, did as he was told. Then the man in the mask stepped up to George Picken's cage.

George sighed in relief. There were two tellers' cages, his own, and Miss Dyke's, and it was a fifty-fifty tossup as to who would get the business. Luckily, the robber had chosen him.

"All right," the man said. "Hand it over."

"Yes, sir," George said brightly. "Any particular denominations?"

"Just hand it over!"

George reached into his cash box, and took all the bills from the top compartments. The total was close to six thousand dollars. There was another layer below, containing thousands more. He passed the bills through the window, and the Bank Robber took them greedily. Then he stuffed them in his pocket, and wheeled back toward the exit.

Then, while all eyes watched the retreat of Bank Robber A, Bank Teller B calmly lifted off the top of the cash box, and unobtrusively slipped the largest possible bills into his trouser pockets.

The door swung outwards, and the bank robber was gone.

"Call again on our bank," George thought.

Then he fainted.

When he stirred and woke, his first concern was that he had been searched. He slapped his hands on his trousers and felt the bulges. He smiled up at the concerned faces that surrounded him.

"I'm all right," he said bravely. "I'm perfectly okay."

"Wasn't that awful?" Miss Dykes, the second teller said, her eyes bright with excitement. "Did you ever see anything so *brazen* in your life?"

"Never," George agreed. "Mr. Burrows—"

"Mr. Burrows went to call the police," Mr. Bell, the chief auditor said. "You sure you don't want a doctor, George?"

"No, no, I'm all right. If I could just go home now—"

"I think you should," Miss Dykes said. "I really think you should, Mr. Picken. What an *awful* experience."

"Yes," George said. "It was really awful."

A few minutes later, he was out on the street. He didn't count the money until he was safely behind his bedroom door. It was

seven thousand five hundred dollars. He was very happy.

He slept late the next morning, feeling it was his due. When he awoke, his Aunt Finney told him that someone from the bank had called, inquiring after his health. She had said that he was all right, but in need of rest, and would probably take the day off.

"Oh, no," he said stoutly, for he must continue to appear a hardworking and loyal bank teller. "Can't do that, Aunt Finney. There's work to be done."

"Tut," his aunt said. "Your health comes first. Besides, they're not opening the bank for business today. I think they're having a special audit or something."

"All the more reason for me to go," George said, as a Bothwick Boy would say.

He dressed, and went downtown. As soon as he arrived, he saw that his aunt had been correct; the First Central Bank was definitely not open for business, even if all the employees were present. But the strangest impression he received upon entering was that the bank's personnel were in exceptionally high spirits. Miss Dykes, behind her bars, was smiling broadly. Mr. Bell, busy with his adding machine, winked at him. Old Mr. Ackerman was rocking on his heels, his hands locked behind his back, looking as placid as ever. And when he was told to enter Mr. Burrows office, he opened the door on an oddly amiable bank president.

"You wanted to see me, Mr. Burrows?"

"Oh, yes! Come in, George!"

Mr. Burrows' teeth were exceedingly handsome and flawless. George had never seen them before.

"Want you to meet somebody, George. Old friend of yours." Mr. Burrows chuckled deep in his throat.

Now George saw the man in the chair. He recognized him at once as Mr. Carruthers, the ex-president of the First Central and current Chairman of the Board of Directors, a title meant to soften the blow of retirement. Mr. Carruthers, a fine, spruce gentleman in his late sixties, smiled quizzically and nodded his head in greeting.

"Morning, George. Sorry to hear about your trouble yesterday. You all right now?"

"Oh, yes, sir, Mr. Carruthers, I'm just fine."

"Good, glad to hear it." He laughed lightly. "That was quite a little adventure, George, wasn't it? Just goes to show how easy it is to rob our little bank, doesn't it? We were pretty smug about it, weren't we?"

"Sir?"

Mr. Burrows released another dry chuckle. "Don't let him rib you any more, George, he's had enough fun for awhile. Will you tell him, Dan, or should I?"

"Oh, I guess it's my duty." Mr. Carruthers scratched his chin. "George, I was sorry to be so hard on you, but I just thought it would be a good idea, considering all the banks being robbed these days, to prove that *our* bank can be robbed, too. I may be on the inactive list, but that doesn't mean my mind's not working. That's why I played my little game yesterday, just to keep everybody on their toes. It might seem pretty silly, but I think we all learned something, don't you?"

George's head was moving involuntarily, back and forth.

"I don't understand," he said. "What game? What do you mean?"

The old man laughed, and whipped out a white handkerchief from his trouser pocket. He placed it over his mouth, and said:

"All right. Hand it over!"

Mr. Burrows laughed heartily, but George wasn't able to join in.

"And the money?" he said, in a choked voice.

"Oh, don't worry about that," Mr. Carruthers said. "I put it all back in your cash box, George, all six thousand of it. We're just finishing up the audit now." He got up and walked over to clap George on the shoulder. "You're a good lad, George, a good lad. Bothwick Boy, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir," said George Picken wearily.

Behind them, the door opened and Mr. Bell, the chief auditor, poked his lean head into the room. "Mr. Burrows," he said gravely. "May I see you a moment?"

BABS H. DEAL

MAKE MY DEATH BED

I think it's fun having a husband and wife both represented here and with two such brilliant and different stories. I've been reading and enjoying Borden Deal's stories for many years, but this is the first one I have read by Babs.

It is beautifully told, with a lovely sockeroo for its climax.

BABS H. DEAL

MAKE MY DEATH BED

THE phone rang at two o'clock in the morning. Bob Hudson's wife answered it, but he was awake. It was seldom enough there was a two o'clock call for the coroner in a town the size of Bellefonte. He lay quietly, listening to her voice from the next room and feeling a flood of excitement mingled with guilt. A two A.M. phone call to the coroner meant trouble for somebody —somebody he knew at that. Still, there was the excitement.

Della came back into the room. She was a small woman with black hair and an air of competent assurance. She went to the closet and began putting on her clothes. "I reckon I'll go over with you," she said. "She'll need somebody, and her mother won't come. I'm sure she won't."

"Della!" he scolded, getting out of bed and already pulling on his pants. "Who was it?"

"I told you it'd come to this sooner or later with that country club bunch," she said placidly.

"Will you tell me what's happened!" he shouted at her, and went on knotting his tie.

"Ken Taylor's shot Bishop Darby," she said, powdering her face. "Dead as a doornail."

He cursed briefly and went on out the door, getting his hat and car keys from the hall table in the same movement of hand and eye. Della turned out the lights and followed him. They were already in the car before he said briefly, "Where?"

"Over at Taylor's, of course," she said. "You know Bishop's been staying there since his wife went home for the summer."

He said, "Oh." Then, "Light me a cigarette," turning down Laurel Street and heading out toward the lake front.

The fog was coming in off the river bottom, filling the road with its white amorphous presence, making him squint his eyes against the expected glare of an oncoming car before he thought that, of course, any car out now would probably be going in the same direction he was.

"Have they notified her yet?" he said.

"I don't know. It was Clint called. He said Ken called in himself. Said to come out there, that he'd shot Bishop, and hung up."

Bob stubbed the cigarette out in the ashtray and reached his hand out for the new one she'd lighted. Out of the corner of his eye, he glanced at Della. She was smoking quietly, looking out into the fog.

"You reckon it was Elise?" he said.

Della snorted. "What else could it be?" she said. "What else could possibly make Ken Taylor shoot anybody?" She giggled suddenly. "Except his golf scores. And it wasn't that. Because Bish doesn't even play golf."

"Della, it's not funny."

"I know. I'm sorry." She put her hand on his knee. "After all, you've never been immune to her yourself, have you?"

Now he snorted.

"Well you're male, aren't you?" she said. "And even we females have to admit that Elise Taylor's beautiful." Yes, she thought, she's beautiful all right, or maybe flamboyant was the word. At any rate, she didn't look as though she could possibly have been born in Bellefonte, Alabama, much less have spent her life there. She looked like one of the exotic faces that smile at us

from the pages of movie magazines and TV guides, or the glossy pages of the fashion magazines. She was brunette, tall, lithe, with eyes that slanted just enough to emphasize her cheekbones, gray eyes with black lashes; her mouth curved as mouths are meant to do, and her nose was unbelievable. Noses are always so awful, Della thought. Almost everybody has an awful nose. Everybody except Elise. She thought of Jackie Darby's plain, smiling face, and sighed, wondered how Jackie would make out now that her husband was dead.

Bob made the left turn onto the dirt road that led to the lake front, praying that no car would come barreling over the fog-covered hill, relaxing when he felt the tires crunch on gravel. "What the hell was Bish doing staying over there anyway?" he said.

"For the coroner you don't hear much," Della said. "Everybody knows it."

"Knows what?"

"That he's staying over there while Jackie goes to her mother's. I told you."

"Still doesn't explain why," he said. "Isn't that rather dumb of Jackie?"

"Bob, darling, what else could she do?" Della said. She tucked one knee under her and turned toward him. "I ask you. Your husband is making eyes at your best friend. You always go home for the summer so the children can see their grandparents. Was she *not* going to go and tacitly accuse them? *And* let everybody in Bellefonte know she accused them?"

He shook his head. "It's a shame she didn't stay, and let 'em think what they liked."

"Poor Jackie," Della said. "She'll have to come back and bury him, won't she?"

He felt gooseflesh rise on him suddenly, and rolled up the window he had cracked against the cigarette smoke. "I'd just as soon," he said, "not have to go out here."

"That's what I thought, love. That's why I came. I'm not particularly worried about Elise actually. I never knew Elise to need a woman."

"That's the first catty thing I ever heard you say," he said.

"That's not catty. That's just the truth."

And it was the truth, she told herself. Elise had never had women friends, not in high school and not since. Unless you counted Jackie. And somehow right now Della didn't feel like counting her.

Jackie and Bishop Darby had come to Bellefonte from New England, sent by the company for which he sold appliances. They were young and attractive, and very much in love. They rented an apartment just down the street from Della and Bob, and for them Della had relaxed her rule against entertaining, because they were new and strangers and charming, and because she thought they might want to get to know a part of Bellefonte that wasn't the country club and the endless dinner parties and fishing trips. She'd grown very fond of Jackie that first summer, Jackie with her odd ways, her faint coolness that turned into an enchanting sense of humor when you knew her. She was short and small-boned, and her two baby girls were exactly like her. Bish was the Apollo type, and Della hadn't know them long before she began to be afraid for Jackie. Because for a man to look like a Greek god and to be a newcomer in Bellefonte meant trouble, simply trouble.

Della lit a cigarette, peering out the windshield at the dark pines along the roadside. "I didn't know how much trouble," she said softly.

Bob jerked his head toward her. "What?" he said sharply.

"Nothing. Oh, nothing. Are we nearly there?"

"Couple more turns." He sighed. "Clint didn't give you any details?"

"Just what I told you. Bob, do you think we could have done anything?"

He shook his head. "Don't start thinking that, Del. People'll do what they do. That's all."

She nodded, remembering. Bellefonte's younger crowd hadn't claimed Bish and Jackie for almost a year, but of course they had eventually. Bish's folksongs that he played on the guitar and sang in a husky baritone opened the door. He joined the J.C.s and the Lions and the country club, and after awhile Bob and Della didn't see much of them anymore. Because Della and Bob didn't go to the country club. "If you want to dance with somebody else's wife," Della said, "do it in private." And because Bob would rather read a book or watch TV, they didn't go to the country club.

But Bish and Jackie did, and they also went to the camps in summer and to the kitchen parties at Ken and Elise Taylor's in the winter. And after awhile everybody said, "Have you seen Elise and Bish dance together?" And later, "Well they do seem so right."

Jackie ignored this kind of talk. Jackie, after all, was Elise Taylor's best friend. They ate dinner together at least once a week; they took trips to Chattanooga, shopping and to take the Darby kids to the dentist. They even talked Ken and Bish into going shares on a boat. Even the most persistent of the town gossips didn't dare say anything about Elise Taylor to Jackie Darby. And most certainly not I, Della thought. Most certainly not I.

They could see the lights from the house now, shining out over the point and into the road. It was a neat white ranch house like all the others along the lake, new and neat, and mortgaged. The sheriff's car was in the drive, and Dr. Clifton's, and another one Della couldn't identify. "Probably the Taylor's," she said. "I bet her mother won't come."

"Why do you say that"

She shrugged.

They got out and went onto the porch. Bob knocked, but no one came and he pushed open the front door and looked into the hall; then he glanced into the living room on the right. There was no one in sight.

"In the kitchen," Della said. "They all live in them all the time. I imagine they die in them too."

He looked at her impatiently, but saw that she was serious. They walked through the living room and into the combination kitchen and den.

"Hi, Bob," Clint Hawkins, the sheriff, said. He was a big man with gray hair and bifocals. He wore his badge pinned carefully to his suspenders. Bob and Della went into the room and Clint nodded toward the fireplace.

Bishop Darby lay sprawled across the hearth. He was wearing a striped T-shirt and a pair of skivvy shorts.

"What's that under him?" Della whispered.

"Say," Bob whispered back to her in astonishment, "it's his guitar."

Ken Taylor sat beside Clint's deputy on the window seat, his head between his hands. Elise was sitting at the table drinking a cup of coffee. She wore a pair of turquoise lounging pajamas, and her face was carefully made up. Ken's father and his lawyer stood beside her, talking in low voices.

Elise looked up. "Hello, Bob," she said. "You got a cigarette on you? Everybody here seems to have run out. Hello, Della."

Della pitched her pack of cigarettes onto the table and went to the stove to fix herself a cup of black coffee. Bob was across the room now with the body, but she didn't look back at it again after the first quick glance.

Elise was lighting a cigarette, her hands steady. She glanced up at Della and beckoned to her. Della took her coffee to the table and sat down across from her.

Elise looked at her and around the room quickly and back again. "They won't do anything to Ken, will they?" she whispered. "It was all my fault. I'll say so."

Della shrugged.

"It's Jackie I feel so bad about," Elise said. Della stared at her, feeling a small shock. She meant it. Elise was speaking her usual cool and exact truth. "Poor little Jackie," she went on. "What did she do to deserve this?" She glanced up at Mr. Taylor and the lawyer. "Come over here," she said to Della.

Della followed her to the stove and watched while she turned on the electricity under the coffee pot and leaned over, her hands braced on the pine edge of the stove cabinet. "It was hardly worth it, was it, Della?" she said softly. "I thought I'd die if I didn't have him. But it was hardly worth it. Jackie and the kids without any Bish. And the world without any Bish, and Bish's music, and Bish's beautiful body. I sure fouled this one up, didn't I?"

Della didn't answer her. She lit a cigarette instead.

"Of course it was the original mistake," Elise said softly. She put the palm of her hand against the side of the coffee pot, and switched off the burner. "It was the mistake of thinking Ken would put up with anything from me. That's why I married

him, you know?" She looked straight at Della, and Della looked straight back.

"I could have had almost anybody in Bellefonte," Elise went on wistfully. "Bob, for instance." She didn't say it with malice, only with a sort of sad certainty. "But I thought Ken Taylor would put up with me. And, Della, just—just look at me. Was I meant for one man and one life and one dedication to the gods of Bellefonte respectability?"

"You could have got out of Bellefonte," Della said. Behind them she could hear the sounds as they put the body on the stretcher that had arrived at the back door, and the sudden twang of strings as the guitar was picked up from the hearth.

"Bish was the first," Elise said. "The first since I've been married. Just the flirting was enough . . . till Bish."

"I guess the gods weren't working for Bish and Jackie when they sent him south," Della said.

She walked away from the stove and over to Bob who was writing on his report pad.

"We'll have to take statements in a minute," Bob said in her ear. "She all right?"

Della laughed mirthlessly. "She's all right," she said. "Have you notified Jackie?"

"I thought you . . ."

"Oh no," Della said, "Not me. Why don't you let her best friend?" She turned and went into the living room, the cold, useless beautiful room with the five-hundred dollar drapes and the un-sat-in chairs and the cold fireplace. She opened the drapes and stood looking out into the woodland around the house. The fog had crept up onto the road now, the wisps of white clinging gently to the pines. She shivered a little, thinking again, as she often did, how glad she was to live in town.

The door from the kitchen opened and Elise came into the room. "I feel so odd all of a sudden, Della," she said slowly. "Just odd."

Della turned, seeing Elise slump onto the edge of the velvet-covered loveseat. She was pale now, her black eyebrows and lashes standing out against her face.

"It's about time, I guess," Della said. "Why don't you get Dr. Clifton to give you something? What are they doing in there?"

Elise blinked at her. "They had us say again how it happened. How Ken came in and saw us and said, 'I waited long enough, but I got you now,' and just took out the gun. Della?" She stood up suddenly. "Where did Ken get that gun? How long do you reckon he's had it?"

Della smiled. She felt her lips curve and tried to stop them, but couldn't. She thought of Ken Taylor and his dull interminable conversations about golf and insurance and mortgages, and the thought that this negative cipher had actually had the nerve to obtain and keep and wait to use a gun still amused her. "He wouldn't have any trouble getting a gun," she said.

"We had steak for supper," Elise said. "Because Bish is dieting again. He always diets when he puts on a little weight. Jackie always laughs about it. And she thought it would be too much trouble for us to feed him diet food." She looked bewildered for a moment. "Bish is dead," she said. "I'm talking about him as if he's not."

Della sat down on a straight chair and waited.

"It was because I forgot about the J.C.'s letting their parties out early on foggy nights," Elise said. "It was the fog. Because they always come home early because so many live on the lake."

"Have they called Jackie?" Della said.

Elise shook her head. "I think Bob wants you . . ."

Della went out of the room, slapping the swinging door open with the palm of her hand. They had cleaned up some of the mess, although the guitar with its crushed side and broken strings still stood against the chimney. She walked over to Bob. "What in heaven's name was he doing with that guitar?" she said.

Bob shook his head. "Had it in the other hand, I reckon," he said. "You gonna call Jackie for me?"

She shook her head. "I can't, Bobby, I'm sorry. I'd make a mess of it."

"All right." He patted her shoulder. "Say, you put Jackie on the train, didn't you?" he said suddenly. "I'd forgotten."

She nodded, and for the first time felt as if she might cry after all. Jackie had called her. She didn't see much of her anymore, but sometimes in the mornings they'd get together for coffee. That morning she'd left the dishes and gone down the street to Jackie's apartment.

"I want you to take me to the train tomorrow," Jackie had said as soon as she'd poured the coffee. "Bish'll be at work with the car at train time and I don't want him to have to leave. Elise'll be busy enough getting ready for company. Lord knows, with Bish on his diet again she'll have to restock the larder." She'd laughed then, naturally and happily, and Della thought, "It isn't true. It's just dirty gossip and nothing else. It's because Bish is so good-looking and Elise is so gorgeous. Gossips would just have to pair them off because their little minds work that way." She'd convinced herself in that moment. And she'd felt a lot better about putting Jackie on that train. Because for awhile she'd almost said, "Don't go." And she knew that would have been admitting she believed it too. I wish to God I had believed it, she

thought now. Because an unfaithful husband is a lot better than a dead one.

They had taken Ken away, and Mr. Taylor and the lawyer had gone with them. The sheriff still stood in the kitchen, watching the blood-stained hearth as though he might look it away. Dr. Clifton had gone in to speak to Elise. None of her family had arrived and Della thought again that they weren't likely to. They had all but disowned her when she married Ken Taylor, for all his respectability. They'd wanted her to go to college. And, Della thought, they'd been right.

Bob had picked up the phone. He was having trouble with the long distance operator. She could feel his rage and frustration mounting in the tightly controlled voice he was using.

Dr. Clifton came in. "Della," he said, "she doesn't look good. Try to get her to take these. Two now . . . two in another hour." He dropped a white envelope into her hand. "Do you think you should take her somewhere?"

"Where?" Della said.

He shrugged. "Will you stay here?"

She looked at him for a moment. Then she nodded. There really wasn't anybody else to do it.

The sheriff and Dr. Clifton went out the back door and Elise came into the room. She poured coffee again and opened the icebox and slammed the door and stirred a silver spoon slowly in her cup.

"You're drinking too much coffee," Della said automatically. "You need to sleep." She glanced over at Bob.

"Mrs. Bishop Darby," he was saying into the phone. "That's right. I'll hold on." He turned from the phone and said to Della, "Take this with me on the living room extension."

"Come on, Elise," Della said. "Let's go back into the living room."

Elise sat on the loveseat again, sipping coffee steadily. She looked worse. "I'm going to stay with you tonight," Della said.

"Thank you. I don't feel quite right. I keep thinking about a song Bish used to sing," Elise said. " 'Barbara Allen.' Do you know it?"

"I know it," Della said, seeing Bish's long fingers, strumming the six strings, and Jackie, sitting at his feet on a cushion, listening, always listening. She shook her head and went across the room to the telephone on the neat cherry stand. She glanced at Elise, then picked up the phone and put the receiver to her ear.

"There's a verse to it," Elise's voice said softly. " 'Oh mother, mother, make my bed; O make it long and narrow; Sweet William died for me today; I'll die for him tomorrow.' "

"Jackie?" Bob's voice came to her through the receiver, loud and distorted in the quiet room.

"Hello, Bob," Jackie said, her voice no different, even now waked from sleep at the dead hour of the morning.

"Jackie, I'm afraid I've some bad news for you," Bob said.

"Yes?" Her voice still didn't change.

Across the room, Elise had lain down across the loveseat, the cup of coffee on the floor beside her. She was still singing softly, " 'She looked to the east, she looked to the west; She saw the corpse a-coming; O hand me down that corpse of clay; That I may look upon it.' "

Della shivered.

"It's Bish," Bob said, his professional voice firming and taking over the chore for him. "He's been killed."

"All right," Jackie said. Her voice still did not change. She's in shock, Della thought. She looked out the window. The fog

was creeping around the house now, its wispy tendrils catching on the tree branches just below her.

" 'A rose, a rose, grew from William's grave,' " Elise sang, " 'From Barbara's grew a briar . . .' "

Della straightened and looked at her. She lay stretched out on her stomach now, her hair falling over her face.

"Do you want me to turn myself over to the authorities here?" Jackie said, "Or should I come back there?"

"What?" Bob's voice exploded in her ear.

"I said who should arrest me?" Jackie said again. Her voice was still even.

Bob spoke again, less loudly. "Jackie," he said, "you're in shock. I'm trying to tell you Bish has been killed. He was shot."

"Shot?" Jackie said. "Shot?"

"Yes, Jackie," Bob said. "It was—"

"Ken." Jackie said. "Ken." She started to laugh. There was nothing hysterical in the laughter, just amusement and infinite good humor. It was the same response Della herself had felt when she'd thought of Ken Taylor with a gun instead of a golf club.

"Jackie," Bob said, "you're not yourself. Let me speak to your mother or father."

Jackie stopped laughing and for a moment there was only the sound of the humming wire, holding open the distance from south to north. Then she spoke again softly. "I'm all right, Bob," she said. "I'm fine. But if Ken shot Bish then—then you'd better do something about the saccharin . . ."

But Della had already thrown down the phone and started toward Elise. She was lying face down now, breathing shallowly. Della picked up the cup and looked into it, seeing the oily swirl where the coffee hadn't mixed with the cream. Then she was

through the door and into the kitchen. Bob looked up at her dully, still holding the phone to his ear.

"Hang up," Della said. "Hang up and call Dr. Clifton. Quick."

She went to the stove and then to the cabinet, searching swiftly. It was by the cream pitcher, the small bottle of white saccharin pills that Bishop Darby used when he was on one of his diets. There were only a few pills left in the bottle now. She touched her tongue to one, but it was only saccharin. It must have been just one, she thought, or two. I don't think she meant poison for both of them. I don't think she thought at all that Elise with her figure would ever want to diet. But then, she thought suddenly, maybe Jackie thought they'd figure it was Elise who'd poisoned Bish. She shuddered, and went back into the living room. She could hear Bob on the phone now, calling Dr. Clifton.

There was no sound in the living room at all now. The slow heavy breathing had stopped. Across the room the fog had crept onto the window sill, curling limply against the blackness outside. She went to Elise and lifted her head, but she couldn't feel any breath or pulse.

She sat very still, holding the beautiful body of Elise across her lap, and after awhile she heard Dr. Clifton come into the drive, the slamming of the back door, and the sudden discordant jangling of strings as he stumbled against the broken guitar in his haste.

JAY FOLB AND HENRY SLESAR

VICTIM, DEAR VICTIM

Telling a story in the form of letters, with no comment whatsoever from the author, is a difficult and intriguing feat of craftsmanship.

And when the surprise ending can be concealed until the final 13th word, I think the author deserves our applause and thanks. Messrs. Folb and Slesar have that from me for this story.

JAY FOLB AND HENRY SLESAR

VICTIM, DEAR VICTIM

February 4, 1960

DEAR MOTHER,

I'm sorry for the long delay between letters, but I've been in such a state this past week that I simply couldn't hold a pen steady. Here it is over a year since Joe retired from the Department and I'm still worried sick about those awful criminals he used to deal with. You know how they never forget, Mother. They're like elephants, some of them, and Joe put so many of them in prison it's no wonder I'm a bundle of nerves. Well, you can imagine how I felt last week when he got this terrible letter in the mail. It was one of those crude letters without a signature, but Joe thinks he knows who sent it, that Willy Luddock who just got paroled in January. You remember Willy Luddock, he was the one who looked just like a gorilla and he was arrested by Joe in 1945, for killing that shoe repair man. God knows how they ever paroled a man like that, I mean actually a murderer. As soon as Joe saw that letter he knew it was Willy Luddock. He was talking about him only a week ago and wondering if he was going to make any trouble.

Well, you can imagine, I almost died when I saw that letter. It said Joe wasn't going to live very long, that he was going to Get It, and he better Start Praying. But you know Joe, Mother, even for a man his age he's not afraid of anything, he just cursed the way he does. Frankly, it didn't help his temper very much.

I asked him to please tell the Department about the letter, at least Sam Crawford, so we could have some kind of protection, but he just got more angry and said he can take care of himself, and that it was none of my business.

Well, Mother, nothing much else to write about. This letter business has me in such a state, I can't think about anything else. I know one thing, if Joe receives any more I'm certainly going to insist he tell the police about it. A person can't take too much of this sort of thing. But please don't worry about me and take care of yourself. I wish I could be with you now that you're sick. If only you could live here so I could take care of you, but you know how things are. Give my love to Poochie and write me when you feel better.

Martha

To J. Quinn—
You got just days to live, copper. Meantime, happy dreams.
Mercy Killer

February 7

Lt. Sam Crawford
Homicide
12th Precinct
Grand View
Dear Sam,

That wife of yours sure keeps you under wraps. When are you and me going to take off a few days and raise a little hell?

But I'm not writing to pull you away from your wife's apron strings. This is serious. I don't have to tell you that every man on the force makes quite a few enemies if he's got any spunk in him. Before my retirement I made a list of enemies as long as my arm.

Anyway, about a week or so ago I received a threatening letter. The note was written on ruled yellow paper with block letters drawn neat as you please. Yesterday, I got another one just like it.

Believe me, I'm not worried one bit. Why should I? The guy who sent me those letters wants me to worry myself to death and probably, I say *probably*, has no intention of following through.

My only mistake so far was to tell Martha. You could almost see the nerves stand out on her skin. Even when things are okay she acts like she just heard the crack of doom, but when this letter arrived she carried on so much I had to ship her off to the doctor's.

I think I can clear this up fast because I got a good idea who it is. I'm 99% convinced it's Willy Luddock, who murdered a shoe repair man back in '45. There was all that stink about police brutality, and with one of the smartest lawyers in the business working for him, Willy nearly beat the rap. Well, here it is fifteen years later and society has to contend with a killer again.

The day sentence was passed—I'll never forget it—Willy turned that butchered face on me and swore he'd kill me when he got out. Does it pay to mollycoddle a punk like that? I had the chance and the *right* to gun him down the day I took him, and I'm sorry I didn't.

What can Willy do now? I live in a suburban area. Not too many homes where we are. Plenty of space. And I still carry the automatic. He'd have to face me man to man and there's one thing about creeps like him, alone they turn a brilliant shade of yellow.

Now get this straight, Sam. Don't go jumping into that brand new Ford they're pampering you guys with these days. Stay

right where you are. I don't want help. Repeat. *I don't want help.*

I'm an old-timer with old-time methods. You have to admit, Sam, the Department's soft. They'd send Willy an engraved invitation. They'd ask a psychiatrist to hold his hand. Then that smart lawyer of his would start working up another brutality suit against the city.

Brutality! They make one of the best weapons justice ever had sound like poison. This is strictly between you and me, but more confessions and convictions came out of this right hand of mine than all the interrogating ever got.

Anyway, I'll let you know what develops. Take it easy, Sam.

Joe

To J. Quinn—

I know *who*. I know *how*. Now I know *when* I'll commit hommicide. Good-by Joe.

Mercy Killer

February 13

Lt. Sam Crawford
Homicide
12th Precinct
Grand View
Dear Sam,

I appreciate the offer, but the answer is no. You couldn't get anything out of Willy by sitting him in a chair and throwing questions at him instead of punches. He'd bounce them right back, and then what could you do? Nothing. You'd only show him I'm worried and that's what he wants. He'd go right home and drag out his yellow pad again.

I'm enclosing the last letter he sent because I got the biggest laugh of my life when I read it. Willy spent fifteen years of his life in jail for homicide, and he never even learned how to spell the word. Imagine spelling it with two m's. Dumb? Man!

Anyway, a pal of mine got hold of Willy's address for me and maybe I'll give him a lesson in English. I would have done it yesterday only I had one hell of an argument with Martha about her Mother spending a week here. Martha and that mother of hers. Wow! Anyhow, that fight we had started me on a binge that left me with a head as big as a watermelon. But the party's over and I'm back to normal. Tomorrow, I'll pay a little social call on Willy. His letter sounds like he means business, but he won't sound so tough tomorrow.

Don't go getting any ideas about stopping me, Sam, because by the time you get this letter things will be straightened out between me and that punk. I'll drop by the precinct one day next week and tell you all about it. Take it easy, Sam.

Joe

February 15, 1960

Inter-departmental Memo
From: Lt. Sam Crawford
To: Inspector G. Blankenship
George:

This is a preliminary report on the Luddock case, and I hope we can keep some of the details out of the official record book. Joe Quinn was too good a cop to wind up looking bad on his last entry.

The facts are these. Quinn had been receiving threatening letters for the last month, and it was easy enough for him to figure who was responsible. Willy Luddock, the man Joe had

nailed for the murder of Harry Donzetti, a shoe repair man, had been released on parole just before the first letter arrived. There were newspaper stories about Willy's release, so it was no secret. Luddock had a burn against Joe, and two and two made one.

I blame myself for not acting faster than I did. Joe wrote me and told me about the letters, but when I cautioned him about leaving the matter to the Department, he acted like the same old mule he always was. I didn't think anything would really happen. Joe's no kid anymore, and the worst I expected was that he might lean on Luddock a little. I never thought he'd bring that service automatic along.

Well, you know what happens when a couple of hotheads get together. Joe traced Luddock to a crummy boarding house downtown and busted in on him. Luddock played dumb about the letters, of course, and Joe turned on the muscle. Luddock must have fought back, because the gun came into the argument. This is the part I hope we can play down, because not once in his thirty years on the force did Joe Quinn let a hood take a piece from him. But that's what happened. Luddock must have gotten tougher on those road gangs, and Joe had gotten flabby on Martha's cooking. I don't know if Luddock wanted to use the gun, but you can see how it became inevitable. He pulled the trigger when Joe went for him, and the bullet hit Joe square in the chest. He died instantly, according to the M. E.

Naturally, the boys here are a little upset about this and they're screaming for blood. I don't think we'll have any trouble putting Luddock back on ice, but in a way, it *was* self-defense, even if he did send those letters, which he's still denying. Anyway, you'll get a full report on the case in a few days.

Sam

March 18

Dear Mother,

Thank you for the plums. I really didn't think I could eat anything, the way I've been feeling since Joe died, but they were so delicious I couldn't resist.

Well, things are finally quieting down around here. The man from the second-hand store was in this morning, and it's really a shame what they're offering for the furniture in Joe's room. But I know you'll be more comfortable in your own bed, so it has to be done. Have you called the moving men yet?

Sam Crawford wrote me yesterday and said that Willy Luddock has gone back to prison, but with a light sentence. Can you imagine anything more unfair? Anyway, they're making it up to Joe by awarding him a posthumous medal. He deserves it. After all, he served thirty years in the hommicide department.

I can hardly wait for you to move in.

Love,
Martha

C. B. GILFORD

MURDER, 1990

Want a look into the future? Here it is, presented with such absolute conviction and realism that we feel the author is *there, and that his manuscript must have come back to us by some weird manipulation of a Time Machine or some such.*

My feeling after finishing this story was that the present isn't so bad after all.

C. B. GILFORD

MURDER, 1990

THE case of Paul 2473 really began when he discovered the old book. He recognized it instantly for what it was, because he had once been through the Micro-filming Section where they were recording some old-fashioned but worthy volumes on genetics before destroying them. But the sight of this book, obviously an uninspected relic of the dim past, provoked a simultaneous curiosity and dread in him.

He'd been marching with the Thursday Exercise Platoon over a country back road, and now they were enjoying their ten-minute rest period, lying by the roadside among the grass-strewn brick ruins of some ancient building. Paul was bored—Thursdays always bored him intensely—and both his mind and eye were casting about for something of interest to focus upon.

Which was why his gaze had roamed over the crumbling, disintegrating wall beside him. He saw the aperture almost immediately. At this particular spot, the bricks seemed to have fallen down against a still standing portion of the wall so as to make a small igloo or cave. A tiny, cozy, rain-proof den, he thought, for some small wild thing. A few of the little beasts always seemed to survive the best efforts of the decontamination squads which constantly scoured vacant areas.

Paul turned over and lay on his stomach so that he could peer into the dark hole, and saw the book. He knew instantly, of course, what the proper procedure was. He should take the

thing, not open it, but hand it over instead to the Platoon Leader. He'd been taught that all such objects pertaining to the former civilization could be either valuable or dangerous. He had no more right to destroy the book than he had to look at it.

Half-intending deceit but not fully decided, he checked first to see if he were being observed. The Leader was nowhere in sight. The members of the Platoon were all prone, none of them close to Paul, and none of them paying the least attention to him. Tentatively, still not committed to disobedience, Paul reached into the hole, grasped the book and drew it out.

It was small, light, and seemed ready to fall apart at his touch. Trembling, but overwhelmed by curiosity, he lifted the cover and glanced at the fly leaf. *The Logic of Murder*, he read.

For a moment he experienced a dismal disappointment. The word "logic" had some meaning for him, though vague. The last word, "murder," was completely and totally mysterious. The book was useless if he knew absolutely nothing of its subject matter. But as he pondered it, he was not so sure. The book might teach him what "murder" was. And "murder" might be something vastly entertaining.

"Everybody up!" The Platoon Leader's shrill bark of command came from far away through the trees.

In the instant before the somnolent members of the Platoon could rouse themselves and stir from the matted grass, Paul 2473 came to a momentous decision. He thrust the little book inside his shirt. Then he got up, stretched, and walked back to the road where the files were forming.

In his cubicle, Paul 2473 re-invented the ancient strategem of schoolboys. Every evening during the few minutes he had to

himself, he held the little book behind the afternoon edition of *The News of Progress*, and thus, while seeming to be immersed in the sort of reading that was his duty, he was actually engaged in a forbidden pastime. He practiced this little deception in case the wall television screen chose at any time to look in on him.

As he read, though more and more conscious of the dangers involved, he grew more and more fascinated by what he found in the little book. Gradually, by piecing together scattered references, he began to arrive at some conclusions.

Murder, he discovered with something of a shock, was the taking of a human life. It was a completely new and hitherto undreamed of idea to him. He knew that life did not go on forever. He knew that elderly people sometimes got sick, were carted off to some medical building or physiology laboratory or clinic, and then were never seen again. Death, he also knew, was usually painless—unless there were a specific, scientific reason for the authorities to decree it should not be—and so he had neither considered death much nor feared it.

But murder had apparently been a phenomenon of the previous civilization in which the authorities not only did not arrange human death, but were actually opposed to individuals who took such matters into their own hands. Yet the practice, though accompanied by danger, seemed to have been amazingly popular. Paul 2473 shuddered at the barbarism of it, but could not stop reading.

But as he came to understand the title of the book, he discovered that although murder was hideous, it had been in its own past environment rather understandable. In a society where people had chosen their own mates at random, murders had been committed out of sexual jealousy or revenge. In a society

where the authorities had not provided sustenance for the population, murders had been committed to acquire wealth.

As he read on, Paul was treated to the full panorama of homicidal motivations, both sane and insane. There was a chapter on methods of murder. There were sections on the detection, apprehension, and punishment of murderers.

But the conclusions of the book were the most amazing part. "Murder," it was stated emphatically, "is a much more widespread crime than statistics indicate. Many murders are committed without premeditation, in the heat of emotion. Those who commit such murders are quite often brought to justice. Much more successful at evasion, however, are the murderers who plan their crimes beforehand. The bulging files of unsolved murders are predominantly of this variety. In the battle of wits between murderer and policeman, the former has all the advantage. Although the findings of various statistical studies have varied somewhat, they all point inescapably in one direction. Most murders go unsolved. Most murderers live out their natural lives in peace and safety and the enjoyment of the fruits of their efforts."

Paul 2473 was thoughtful for a long time after he finished the book. He recognized the peril of his own position more than ever. The new civilization simply could not afford to let this book be disseminated, to allow humanity to realize how recently it had emerged from primitive savagery. He himself had therefore broken an important rule in reading the book, and he saw now why it was an important rule. If he were found out, he would surely be reprimanded, demoted, perhaps even publicly disgraced.

But he did not destroy the book. Instead he hid it inside his mattress. The notion of murder, like some inventor's dream,

intrigued him, and he devoted all his spare time to thinking of it.

He even considered mentioning it to Carol 7427. He saw Carol 7427 almost every evening at Recreation, on many occasions had gone into the Caressing Booths with her, more often than with any other girl. He had taken Compatibility Tests with Carol 7427, and was hoping for a Three-Year Assignment with her, a Five-Year if he could get it.

That first evening after he had finished the book, he came very close to confiding in her. She came into the Recreation Center still in her work slacks, but they fitted her so neatly and snugly that he did not mind. He gazed at her close-cropped blond hair, at her bright blue eyes and clear skin, and he thought about the Mating Assignment. It would be very nice to share a double cubicle with someone, to have someone to talk to, really talk to, someone to whisper to, out of the reach of the microphones, someone with whom to discuss strange and fascinating and bizarre ideas such as murder, and what civilization must have been like when individuals dared to murder one another.

He maneuvered her over into a corner, away from the Group Conversation on Radiation Agriculture. "Would you like to know a real secret, Carol?" he asked her.

Her long lashes blinked at him, and her color heightened prettily. "A secret, Paul?" she breathed. "What kind of a secret?"

"I've broken a rule."

"Really!"

"A serious rule."

"Really!" She was enthralled.

"And I've discovered something that's terribly interesting."

"Tell me!" She leaned closer to him. She had taken a perfume tablet, and her exhalations enchanted him.

"If I told you, you'd either have to report me, or you'd be in the same dangerous position I'm in."

"I'd never report you, Paul."

"But I wouldn't want to get you into trouble."

She looked disappointed and began to pout. But her reaction pleased him. They shared the same spirit of adventure and curiosity. He wouldn't tell her now. But when the Mating Assignments came out—next week for sure—when they shared a cubicle, then he would give her the book to read, and they could discuss the wonders of homicide for hours and hours.

That was the day that Paul 2473 definitely decided he was compatible with Carol 7427. And surely the Tests, scientific as they were, would bear him out.

But the Tests didn't. He saw the results on a Thursday, as he came back from Exercise. The enormous poster almost covered the bulletin board, and it read, "Five-Year Mating Assignments for Members of Complex 55." Confidently he raced down the list. But it was with horror that he made two discoveries. Carol 7427 was paired with Richard 3833, and he had drawn Laura 6356.

Laura 6356 for five years! A simpering, dumpy little thing with mouse-colored hair. Was she the sort with whom they thought he was compatible? And Richard 3833, who was to have exclusive possession of Carol for five years, was a beast, a swaggering, arrogant beast.

Paul contemplated his future with indignation. He was now in the age group to which the Caressing Booths were no longer allowed. The authorities had found that at this age a worker would be more productive if he had a settled and well-defined

social pattern. Therefore, the Mating Assignment meant that he would be tied exclusively to Laura 6356, while Carol would be just as exclusively the companion of Richard 3833.

He and Carol would scarcely see each other! There would be no cozy cubicle for them. No stealthy little discussions after hours about his wonderful book.

The book!!!

It was by no devious, hesitant line of reasoning that Paul 2473 came to a conclusion about committing murder. It posed itself instantly as the solution to his problem. His mind traveled briskly through the check list—motives, methods, risks.

Certainly the motive was there. He was to be mated with an incompatible person, while his compatible person, was to be mated with someone else. As he referred to his handbook for possible variations to remedy this situation, he perceived that a purely emotional murderer might choose to eliminate Carol to prevent Richard's getting her. But that line of action would not obtain Carol for himself, and it would leave him with Laura.

A double murder was necessary then. Richard and Laura. A bit more complicated in the execution, but the only procedure that would guarantee satisfaction.

The details of the method he left for later. But he did choose a weapon. Or rather, necessity chose it for him. He had no gun, nor means of obtaining one. He had no knowledge of poisons, nor access to any. Richard 3833 was bigger and stronger than he, and Laura 6356 was hardly a frail creature, so strangulation and all such feats of overpowering violence were impossible to him. But he could get a knife, and he could sharpen it adequately. And he knew enough physiology to know how a knife should be used against the human body.

Finally, he tried to calculate the risks. Would they catch him? And if they did, what would they do to him?

It was then that something really amazing occurred to him. As far as he knew, there was no crime called murder in the statutes. If there were, he surely would have been aware of it. They were lectured often enough on things they should do and things they shouldn't do. At the head of the list, of course, was treason to the state. This included such things as sabotage, insurrection, and subversive activities of all sorts. Below treason on the list were the crimes of sloth, failure to fulfill work quotas, failure to attend meetings, failure to maintain mental and physical health.

And that was it. Murder wasn't listed, nor any of the other crimes often connected with murder—no fraud, none of the old attempts to gain material wealth by violence. Paul realized that he lived in an ideal civilization, where there was an absolute minimum of motivation for crime. Except the one that he had found—when some official made an obvious error in grading the Compatibility Tests.

Now the amazing thing then was simply this. Without the crime of murder even mentioned in the law books, the state simply possessed no apparatus for dealing with murder. There was no organization, no experienced detectives, no laboratory scientists trained in sifting clues, none of the things or people that the book had said existed in the old civilization. With just a little reasonable caution and planning then, the murderer of this new, enlightened age could take the authorities completely by surprise, catch them utterly unprepared. And he could commit his crime in absolute safety!

This realization set Paul's heart to beating fast, and set his mind to scheming. The Mating Assignments would go into

effect just as soon as the plan for the shifting of cubicle occupancy could be drawn up. This would, he knew, take a week. As it turned out, he had plenty of time. He was ready to begin operations in two days.

His job gave him an initial advantage. As an air filtration maintenance engineer, he was free to rove throughout the entire area of Complex 55. No one would question his presence in one place or his absence from another. All he needed was a work schedule that would take him on a route in the vicinity of first one of his victims and then the other.

Thursday came, and he had to waste a whole afternoon trudging about with the Exercise Platoon. On Friday, however, luck turned in his favor. As he glanced at the sheet which listed the air filtration trouble spots he was to visit that morning, he knew the time had come.

He carried his sharp steel blade tucked into his belt under his shirt. In his soft-soled, non-conductive shoes he padded noiselessly along the antiseptic corridors. His work schedule was tight, but the route was perfect. He could spare a minute here and there.

He arrived first in the vicinity of Richard 3833. The latter worked in Virus Chemistry, had his own private corner where he could work more efficiently out of sound and view of his fellows. Paul found him there, absorbed in peering through a microscope. "Richard," Paul greeted him softly, "congratulations on your Mating Assignment. Carol's a fine girl."

There was always a chance, of course—perhaps one in fifty, or a hundred—that a microphone would be eavesdropping or a television screen peeking in on them. But Richard—and Laura too, for that matter—had never caused any trouble. So they would not be under special surveillance. And very seldom did

the guards monitor anyone during working hours. The small risk had to be taken. He would conduct his business as quickly as possible though.

"Thanks," Richard said. But his mind wasn't on Carol. "Say, while you're here, take a look at this little beast on this slide." He climbed off his stool and offered his place to Paul.

Paul took an obliging look, and managed surreptitiously to turn a couple of adjustment knobs while he was doing it. "I can't see a thing," he said.

Richard patiently went back to re-adjusting the knobs. His broad back was turned to Paul, all of his attention concentrated on the microscope. Paul slipped the knife from under his shirt, chose the exact point to aim at, and struck hard.

Richard's reaction was a startled grunt. His hands clutched at the counter top. But before he sagged, Paul withdrew the blade, then stood and watched as his victim slumped into an inert heap on the floor. Then very carefully he wiped the bloody knife on Richard's shirt, and left the laboratory immediately afterward. No one saw him go.

Within four minutes from the time he stabbed Richard 3833, Paul arrived at the Mathematical Calculation Section where Laura 6356 tended one of the huge machines. As in the case of Richard, Laura worked practically alone, out of contact with the other girls who did similar work on similar machines. Her only companion was the monster itself, an enormous panel of switches, buttons, dials, and blinking lights of all colors.

Laura saw her visitor out of the corner of her eye, but her fingers continued to type out information for the machine. She was a very conscientious worker.

"Hello there, Paul," she said with a little giggle. She had scarcely noticed him before the Mating Assignments came out,

but since that time she had grown very feminine. "Don't tell me our cubicle's ready to move into!"

Did she imagine that he would make a special trip to bring her news like that? He maneuvered to a position behind her and groped under his shirt for the knife.

Possibly she imagined he was going to caress her, despite the fact that such things were strictly forbidden during working hours. Her chubby shoulders trembled expectantly, awaiting his touch. He plunged the knife in quickly.

She did not sag to the floor as Richard had done, but instead fell forward over her keyboard. The machine continued to hum, its lights continued to flash, as Laura's dead weight pressed down upon the keys. The machine will be giving some inaccurate answers, Paul thought with grim amusement as he withdrew the knife and wiped it on the sleeve of Laura's blouse.

But then as he went away and back to his own work, another, pleasanter thought occupied his mind. Carol 7427 and Paul 2473 now had no mates. Surely it would be logical—and the easiest thing to do in view of the compatibility scores—for the Committee to assign these two orphans to the same cubicle. For five years, subject to renewal, of course.

He had not known what to expect. He could not predict how the rulers of Complex 55 would react. The book was an inadequate guide in this respect, since it dealt with the phenomenon of murder in the old civilization.

Murder always had the power to excite interest, the book said. Especially if the victim were well known, if the method of murder were particularly gruesome, or if there were some sensational, scandalous element involved. The newspapers featured detailed descriptions of the crime, then followed along as it

unraveled, finally—if the murderer were caught—reported on the trial. The whole thing could drag on for weeks, months, even years in a spasmodic fashion.

But in Complex 55, *The News of Progress* was circulated that afternoon without containing any mention of an unusual happening. At Recreation that evening, nothing seemed amiss, except that Richard 3833 and Laura 6356 were missing.

Paul saw Carol there, and realized he had not spoken to her since the Mating Assignments were published. He managed to detach her from her companions, finally, and then carefully, casually asked her a question.

"Where's Richard?"

She shrugged her attractive shoulders. "I don't know," she answered. "I haven't seen him."

He was overjoyed at her attitude. Richard was missing and she didn't seem in the least concerned, as if she had never read the Mating Assignments. Probably she didn't care for him at all. When this was all straightened out, she'd be quite willing to accept a new arrangement without mourning for Richard.

He stayed with her most of the evening, in a happy, languorous state. He was even beginning to believe that the authorities, confronted with a new problem outside the realm of their rules and experience, might even decide to hush the matter up, pretend it never happened, in the hope that the rank and file, if kept ignorant of the idea of murder, would never think of indulging in it.

By the time he retired that night, Paul had convinced himself of the soundness of this theory.

Reveille on Saturday morning shattered his illusions. In fact, he wasn't even certain it was reveille because the high-pitched

buzzer seemed to sound louder and more insistent. And also at an earlier hour. It was still dark outside his single window.

He climbed into his clothes quickly and joined the others out in the corridor. They were all as startled as he was, very meek, slightly uneasy.

"Forward . . . march!"

They tramped in long files to the end of the corridor, plunged down the iron stairs on the double, emerged into the courtyard where light awaited them. All the floodlights on the roofs and the high walls had suddenly been turned on. In their harsh glare platoons and companies formed quickly and stood at stiff attention. There was no talking in the ranks, no complaining at being routed out at this early hour. An atmosphere of fear and foreboding settled over the whole place.

Paul felt it. Even if he had known of no reason to be afraid, the others' fear would have communicated itself to him. Nothing quite like this had ever happened before. Surely nothing pleasant was in store.

What were they going to do? There would be an announcement probably, stating that two people had been killed. And what then? Would they ask the guilty party to identify himself? Or ask if anyone could volunteer any information?

Then quite strangely, he felt calm. If they had brought everybody out here, that meant they didn't know who was responsible, didn't it? That was encouraging. Of course it appeared now that there would be an investigation of some sort. Questions asked. Whereabouts checked. He would have to be careful. But the main thing to remember was that the authorities did not yet know who the murderer was. And if he could keep his wits about him, they need never know.

But there was no announcement from the loudspeakers. The

long ranks of silent men were left to contemplate the unknown, to nurse their fears. Perhaps the authorities had planned it this way, to let those fears wreak their psychological mischief for a little while before the questions began.

Half an hour went by, and still the dawn did not appear. Yet no one broke ranks. No one coughed or shuffled his feet. The only sound was the moan of the night wind over the high walls.

What bothered Paul the most was the floodlights. They seemed to be shining directly into his eyes. He could blink against the glare, but he discovered that if he tried to close his eyes for a few seconds, his body had a tendency to sway. He didn't dare call attention to himself by falling down or even by swaying too much. So he tried to endure the glare, tried to think of the pleasant things that would happen when this ordeal was over.

And it had to be over some time. The whole machinery of Complex 55 with its hundred thousand members could not be halted and disrupted indefinitely because two of those members had been murdered. People were taken off to die every day, and their places were filled with recruits from the Youth Farms. There would be some excitement and tension for a while, but sooner or later things would have to return to normal.

Normal . . . a mating cubicle with Carol . . . somebody to talk to . . . talk to privately . . . an end to the deadly aloneness . . . even with the microphones and the television screens, he knew that mated couples could manage a certain degree of privacy.

"Company Number One! Right face! Forward march!"

A sound of tramping feet, and a hundred men left the courtyard.

By listening to the shouted command that followed, Paul could estimate where they had gone. To the Recreation Hall

adjoining the Dormitory. Whatever was happening to them, whatever processing they were going through, was being done in the Rec. That didn't sound too ominous. If they had marched out the gate, he might have felt rather more uneasy.

A few more minutes passed. Possibly a quarter of an hour. The lights were becoming unbearable, and there was still no sign of dawn. But Paul was in the second company. Perhaps he could manage. But there were pains shooting up and down his legs. A slight dizziness attacked him momentarily. The floodlights danced before him. He closed his eyes tightly, but they could not be shut out. The dance became weird.

"Company Number Two!"

He marched, fawningly grateful for the exquisite feeling of being able to move again. Yes, they were going into the Rec. Two guards held the doors ajar, and the entire company tramped into the big place.

More lights, but no longer painful. A buzz of human voices pitched low. The company was taken to the far end, then formed into a single file. They were held at attention no longer, but still the men could not relax. Their fears had been worked on too long. They were silent, refusing to speculate among themselves.

Finally, the single file became a queue, and began moving through a small door. Paul was perhaps the twentieth man in line. It seemed to him that the men ahead of him moved through the door at a rate of one every thirty seconds or so. He awaited his turn, still calm, confident that the huge scale of this maneuver indicated desperation and helplessness on the part of the authorities.

Then he saw around the shoulders of the man ahead of him, saw through the door into the room beyond. There was no one

and nothing there, but a nurse with a tableful of hypodermic needles beside her.

He could have either laughed or cried with relief. They were only giving shots. Oh, of course, it perhaps meant a plague scare. Or a test of some new serum. Or even a possibility of bacteriological warfare—and they were being given a precautionary antidote. It had nothing at all to do with his two insignificant little murders.

When his turn came for the needle, he endured the small sting with supercilious disdain. After the long ordeal in the courtyard and his occasional uneasy imaginings, this was a small enough price to purchase reassurance.

Yet the effect of the shot was rather strange. There was scarcely any pain in his arm, but there was an odd lightness in his head. Surely, he thought, he wasn't going to faint in this moment of triumph.

But then he lost all awareness of himself as self. He did as a guard told him. He walked into the next room. There a man in a white coat and a very penetrating stare confronted him.

"Did you stab two people to death yesterday?" the man asked.

Somehow there didn't seem to be any choice, but to answer with the truth. Perhaps it had been the shot.

"Yes," he said.

There was a big trial. He was dazed throughout most of it. But it wasn't for his benefit anyway. It was rather for the edification of all the members of Complex 55.

Then afterward they put him in a glass cage at one end of the courtyard. He was strapped there in an upright position. More than a hundred wires were inserted into various portions of his

body, and ran down through the floor and thence out into a control box where there was a button for each wire. His torturers were the members of Complex 55 themselves, who were expected to display their devotion to civilization by pausing in front of the cage whenever they had a moment and pushing a few of the buttons. The result was exquisite pain, which made him scream and writhe inside his bonds, but which was never fatal.

Once a day, of course, the loudspeaker reminded him and all the others why he was there. "Paul 2473," it would intone, "in wantonly and wilfully destroying two pieces of valuable state property, Richard 3833 and Laura 6356, committed sabotage, and is a traitor to the state."

But his miscalculations had not ended there. One of the most frequent visitors to the cage, and one of the most enthusiastic button-pushers, was Carol 7427.

C. L. SWEENEY, JR.

A QUESTION OF VALUES

This is the shortest story in the collection, and certainly the most haunting.

It is told with beautiful restraint and economy of words, building in suspense to the climactic scene which you will not soon forget . . . though you will wish you could.

C. L. SWEENEY, JR.

A QUESTION OF VALUES

I SUPPOSE that every older man with a young and beautiful wife asks himself these same questions sooner or later. Sooner or later he awakes one morning and sees his wife lying there beside him, sees her young and warm and desirable there in her sleep, and for no reason at all a little sliver of panic suddenly forces itself into the back of his mind.

He hurries into the bathroom, turns on the light and hopefully examines himself closely in the mirror, searching for a reassurance that is not there. He sees instead a man no longer young, grey flecks in the stubble of beard, white in the hair at the temples, and eyes pouched and tired.

And then the panic sharpens unreasonably and the questions begin to flood into his mind. Will a younger man try to take her away from me? Who will he be? What will he look like? What will she do? What will I do? These—and a thousand others like them.

For most men these questions need never be answered, simply because, like most things we worry about, the event never occurs. For others, like myself, the questions are forced on them and must be met.

When the time comes, however, some of them will obviously answer themselves. For example, what will he look like? There was no longer any reason to wonder. He sat across from me now, a young man of about her age, handsome, almost pretty,

soft like his expensively tailored cashmere jacket, soft like the skin on his beautifully tapered hands, strangely out of place here against the worn books and racked guns and roughly hewn logs of my hunting lodge.

"Really," he said petulantly, looking about the room with obvious distaste, "I don't see why you should ask me to drive up to the top of this Godforsaken mountain."

"I'm sorry," I said, "but I've always found that I can think better, clearer somehow, up here at the lodge. The mountain air perhaps, the clean scent of the pines. I thought we could make our decisions more intelligently up here than in some crowded bar in the city."

"Decisions?" He flicked at an invisible spot on his cashmere lapel. "There was only one decision to be made. That was hers and she made it. She's leaving you. That's all there appears to be to it."

I leaned forward in my chair. "But *has* she really made that decision?" I asked him. "Does she know you well enough as a man to decide that she can love you better than she has loved me?"

"I don't follow you," he said, his voice sulky, bored.

"I'm suggesting," I said, watching his delicate hands, white against the dark oak of the table, "the possibility that she doesn't really love you, the possibility that she is only temporarily infatuated because you are a rising young concert pianist and because she has always loved music. I'm suggesting that perhaps she is in love with your talent, with the artistry in your hands, not with you as a man."

His lip curled disdainfully. "That's ridiculous," he said.

"Ah," I said, "but how do we know? That's one of the questions which must be answered."

He looked at his watch and yawned. "Really, if this is all you have to—"

"No," I said, "it's not all. There's also the question of what I will do about it."

"What you will do about it?" He shrugged. "And what do you think you can do about it?"

"The choices are simple," I said. "I can let her go or I can refuse to give her a divorce and keep her. On the other hand, the decision between these choices is much more difficult. You see, it's not easy to give up the woman you've adored for almost five years."

He shrugged again and smiled. "I wouldn't know," he said.

"No," I agreed, "I suppose you wouldn't, and yet I want you to understand exactly how I feel, appreciate the importance of this decision to me." I thought for a moment and then my eyes stopped and steadied on those soft, white beautiful hands of his. "Yes," I said slowly. "Yes, I believe that's it. I believe that losing her would mean as much to me as, say, losing one of those hands would mean to you."

He winced involuntarily and pulled his hands back into his lap.

I laughed. "I'm sorry if that upset you," I said. "I was only trying to draw a comparison."

He cleared his throat, moved uneasily in his chair and looked at his watch again.

"So there we have it," I said, before he had a chance to speak. "She has a question to answer and I have a question to answer. And yet, oddly enough, neither of us can come to an intelligent decision until we know how your question will be answered."

"Question?" I watched him closely. A few tiny beads of

perspiration were beginning to form along his brow. "I'm not aware of any question I'm supposed to answer."

"Ah," I said, "but don't you see? That's just the point. Of the three of us, you're the only one who has no question to answer, no decision to make, everything to gain, nothing to lose. It offends my sense of fairness."

He started to get up. "Really—" he said.

I stood up with him. "I'm sorry," I said. "I'm afraid that I've been a poor host, moralizing to you like this, not even offering you a drink." I went to the cupboard and took down two glasses. "Surely you'll at least have one with me now before you go."

He hesitated for a moment, then, "All right, just one," he said, "just one for the road."

"Just one for the road," I agreed and went to the heavy ring bolt in the floor in front of the fireplace and tried to lift the trapdoor. "I keep my liquor in the little cellar under here," I explained and pulled on the ring again, tugging at it this time. He had moved over to watch me and I looked up at him. "I haven't opened it for some time and it seems to be stuck," I said apologetically. "Perhaps you'd—?"

He knelt down and grasped the ring with me, his right hand against my left. "All right," I said, "all together when I give the word." I put my right hand into my hip pocket and removed the steel handcuffs. "Now," I said. He strained upward and I snapped the cuffs tight, one about his wrist, the other through the ring. Then I stood up.

He looked at the cuffs and then at me, his face suddenly pale. "What is this, a game?" he said tightly "Are you crazy?"

"No," I said "or at least I'm reasonably sure that I'm not. I'm merely trying to illustrate what I was saying before, that of the

three of us you alone have had no question to answer, you alone have been spared the pain of a decision."

I walked to the mantle over the fireplace and took down a heavy hunting knife and balanced the point thoughtfully on the tip of my forefinger. He watched me, fascinated at first, then little sounds like whimpering beginning to come from his throat. I laughed. "Don't worry," I said, "I'm not going to harm you. The decision will be entirely your own." I held the knife out to him, handle first, but he only stared at it, refused to touch it, and so I drove it into the floor beside him, where he could reach it when the time came.

"They'll find me here," he said. The whimpering had become more distinct. "They'll miss me. They'll come looking for me."

"Yes," I said. "Yes, they'll come looking for you, but in the meantime you'll have already made your decision and then perhaps she and I will be able to make ours."

I turned my back to him and went to the corner and took the can of kerosene and began to soak the walls, the books, everything. I felt his eyes on me and heard the rising panic in his harsh breathing but I didn't look at him again until I had tossed a wad of burning rags against one wall and watched the flames leap to the ceiling.

I went to the door then, opened it and turned. I saw him through the eddies of smoke, on hands and knees, choking, sobbing, frantically digging at the wood about the bolt with the knife.

"It's no use," I said. "It's four inch oak and the door has been bolted down."

He stopped and looked at me, the sobs rising to a scream. "Don't leave me, I'll burn, I'll burn."

I shook my head. "Not necessarily," I said.

Slowly then his eyes left me and went to the gleaming knife in his left hand, to the white wrist imprisoned by the steel cuff. Finally, realizing, eyes wide with shock, he looked back to me.

I bowed slightly. "Your question," I said and closed the door and got into my car and drove down the mountain to the broad highway leading into the city, never looking back.

ARTHUR PORGES

NO KILLER HAS WINGS

No volume such as this would be complete without at least one example of the Locked Room Puzzle. Yet variations on the theme are extremely difficult for authors who must follow in the footsteps of John Dickson Carr, Clayton Rawson, et al.

Mr. Porges deserves to be complimented for an original and plausible idea.

ARTHUR PORGES

NO KILLER HAS WINGS

I was beginning to think that Lieutenant Ader had finally run out of bizarre cases. He hadn't bothered me for almost six months, or since that "Circle in the Dust" affair.

But I should have known better; it was just a breathing spell. His jurisdiction, mainly the city of Arden, isn't likely to be free of skull-duggery for long. Not that I minded too much; in fact, I like playing detective. For that matter, who doesn't?

This was something of a switch, however; because instead of asking me to help solve a murder, it was more a matter of unsolving one first, you might say.

I'm used to being called on by Ader. As the only reasonably well qualified expert in forensic medicine in these parts—I'm chief pathologist at Pasteur Hospital, serving the whole county—I do work for a number of communities in the area. You see, they don't trust their local coroners, since most of them are political hacks long out of practice. So whenever they need a dependable autopsy, especially the kind their man would just as soon not handle—say somebody buried a month—they send for Dr. Joel Hoffman: me.

Last Tuesday I was happily preparing a slide of some muscle section; it had a bunch of the finest roundworm parasites that you'll ever see. Oddly enough, it occurred to me that these organisms, so loathsome to the laymen, were not only gracefully proportional, and miracles of design, but never killed each other through greed or hate, and would never, never build a hydrogen bomb to destroy the world.

Well, think of the Devil—in this case, murder—and he's sure to appear. Into the lab came Lieutenant Ader with a young girl in tow. Him I've seen before, but never in such company, so being a man first and a pathologist second, I looked at her. A small girl, dark, and just a bit plump. What my racy old man used to call a 'plump partridge.' She had been crying a lot; it didn't need eight years of medical study to tell that. As for Ader, he was half angry, and half ashamed.

"This is my niece, Dana," he said gruffly. "You've heard me mention her occasionally."

I smiled. She fixed her enormous, smoky grey eyes on me, and said: "You're the only one who can help us. Everything adds up all wrong. Larry couldn't have done it, and yet there's nobody else who went out there."

"Whoa," I said. "Back off a few paragraphs, and start over again."

"Larry's her fiancé," Ader explained. "I'm holding him on a first degree murder charge."

I must have looked surprised, because he reddened slightly, and snapped, "I had to, but she thinks he's innocent. Why, I don't know. I've told her about your work before, and now she expects you to perform a grade A miracle to order. In other words, Dana's picked you to smash my nice open-and-shut case to little pieces."

"Thanks a lot, both of you," I said sardonically. "But I only do wonders on Wednesday and Friday; this is Tuesday, remember."

"That's all right; you can solve the whole case tomorrow," the lieutenant said, giving his niece a rather sickly grin. It was a noble attempt to cheer her up, and of course a complete failure, as such things always are.

"Look," he added, obviously on a hot spot, and not enjoying it, "I've got the boy cold; the evidence is overwhelming. You'll see what I mean in a minute. But Dana here isn't convinced, and to be perfectly honest, I don't see Larry bludgeoning an old man to death for money, myself. He's pretty hot-tempered, but gets over it fast. I don't think he goes in for physical violence, anyhow. Still . . ." He broke off, and I could almost read his mind. When you've met enough murderers, one thing soon becomes as clear as distilled water: there's simply no way to tell a potential killer in advance of the crime.

"Why are you so sure he didn't do it?" I asked Dana.

Her round little chin rose stubbornly; I liked her for that. I hate the passive, blonde, doughy kind of girl.

"I know he couldn't kill anybody," she said, "especially an old man lying on the sand. He might punch another fellow his own age, if they were both on their feet, but that's all. Do you think I could love a murderer, and be ready to marry him?"

I looked at Ader, and both our faces must have become wooden at the same time, because she gave a little cry of pure exasperation.

"Ooh! All you men know is evidence. I know Larry!"

The lieutenant is married, and so knows about women. Even so, this line of reasoning, being so feminine, made him wince. But the answer was about what I expected. So I merely remarked: "Suppose you give me the main facts, and then we'll fight about who's guilty."

"Right." Ader seemed relieved. He was always at his best with evidence rather than theories or emotions. I imagine that Dana, in cahoots with his very warm-hearted wife, Grace, had been needling him for hours. Not that he's unsympathetic. I've known cops who wouldn't mess with a case that was all sewed

up to please their wives, children, or grandparents. He was doing it for a mere niece.

"First," Ader said, "the victim is Colonel McCabe, a retired Army Officer, sixty-two years old. Yesterday morning, quite early, he went down to his private beach, as usual, accompanied by his dog. After a brief paddling in the shallows, he dozed on a blanket, and while he was dozing somebody came up to him, carrying a walking stick, and calmly smashed his skull with the heavy knob. It seems beyond a doubt that the killer must have been Larry Channing, the colonel's nephew, a boy of twenty-four, who lives in the same house."

"And the motive?"

"Money. McCabe had a bundle. Larry's one of the minor heirs, but fifty thousand or so isn't hard to take at his age."

"Larry's going to be a doctor," Dana flared. "He wants to save lives. And he didn't need the money. His uncle was going to see him through med school."

"That's true," Ader said. "But a quick fortune might tempt even a potential doctor."

"Not only potential ones," I said a little enviously, thinking of the ocean cruiser I'd like to own some day. "But just how did you tag Larry as the murderer?"

"Because the young hot-head acted like a complete fool. He left enough evidence—you couldn't call them 'clues'; they're much too obvious—to convict an archangel. Let me show you the sketch."

Here Ader reached into his briefcase, and brought out a scale diagram which indicated the position of the body on the beach and the footprints made by the Colonel and those made by the murderer—to the body, and away from it.

"The sand was quite unmarked to begin with," Ader said,

"smoothed out by the tide the night before. We found the colonel's prints, leading from the stairs across the sand to the water, and then back to where he lay down on his blanket. Then there are Larry's tracks from the stairs to McCabe, and back. Nobody else's there except the dog's, which go all over, above and beneath the others. The beach is accessible only from the house and the sea; there's no possible approach at the sides for they're sheer rocky cliffs. That perfect privacy is what makes the property worth $200,000. Now, considering all that, what can any sensible person conclude? McCabe's only visitor, as clearly shown by the tracks, was Larry Channing."

"I suppose you checked all the prints."

"Of course. Although it was hardly necessary. Larry admitted walking out to see his uncle about seven-thirty, while the rest of the family still slept. He even told us that they quarreled again. It wasn't the first time. You see, the colonel didn't want him to marry a poor girl like Dana." A tinge of bitterness came into Ader's voice. As an honest cop, he was always one jump ahead of the finance company. "The old man said that nobody but a fool married except for money, that love was a typically modern delusion, confined largely to soft-headed teen-agers and the women who read confession magazines. It's just as easy to fall for a rich girl as a poor one, he maintained. That's how he got his own fortune—by marrying a wealthy widow, no beauty, needless to say. The hell of it is, that gives the boy a better motive than money alone. The colonel was mad enough to cut him off for picking Dana. In that case, no med school."

"Sounds pretty bad. What about the weapon?"

"Well, since McCabe's skull was crushed, we looked for some kind of club. It wasn't near the body, so we figured Larry

got rid of it. But blamed if we didn't find it right in the house, at the back of his own closet. It's Larry's pet walking stick, an ebony one with a roughly rounded, heavy knob for a handle. It had been carelessly wiped. There's still some blood and hair on the thing. Now isn't that a stupid way to commit murder?"

At that Dana leaped up, her eyes blazing. "He didn't do it, that's why! Don't you see it's too obvious, too easy?"

Ader grimaced.

"I've thought of that," he said, "and in a way I agree. Unless he hoped to make us think that way—to believe he was framed, and very crudely at that. Larry is a bit hot-tempered, as I've said, but no fool. And only a prize idiot would leave a damning trail like this one. Talk about painting yourself into a corner. This bird put on a dozen coats."

I had been studying the diagram while Ader talked, and now I groaned. "It was sure to happen some day. I might have known."

"What's that?" the lieutenant demanded.

"I'll tell you. If Larry is innocent, you've got a real classic here—a locked room murder, basically. The tracks on the sand show plainly that nobody else came anywhere near the victim. Are you positive he was killed by a blow from that stick?"

"Not yet, although I'd bet on it. But there's been no autopsy yet, and the stick hasn't been tested by a pathologist. All we've done so far is check finger-prints and tracks. They're all Larry's and the colonel's. The rest is up to you. But the man's skull was dented badly, so if anything else killed him, the blow was superfluous, which makes no sense. However, the body's at the morgue; I'll have it brought here. You can have the stick any time, too."

"What about Doc Kurzin? Going to bypass him again?"

Kurzin's the coroner, an ancient incubus who missed his forte as a meat-cutter for some supermarket.

"I'll have to, if we're going to get anywhere. Your standing as an expert in this county gives me that right, officially."

"All right," I said, a little reluctantly, because to be honest, it seemed that the boy must be guilty. After all, most murders are not subtle; they are chock full of blunders. When a man is keyed up to the point of killing, he's not likely to be a cool planner. "I'll do the P. M. as soon as you get the body here to the hospital. Then, if you want to bring the stick later, I'll see if the blood and hair are really the victim's. Meanwhile, do the usual and make me one of your fine lists of suspects. You know, descriptions, character analysis— the works. You've a knack for that."

"There are plenty of possibles," Ader said glumly. "Four other heirs in the house, and I don't think the colonel ever won any popularity contests in the army or out of it."

"How many of the other suspects fly? Because, believe me, it'll take wings or teleportation to explain how the old man got killed without the murderer leaving tracks on the sand."

"That's why I can't help thinking Larry did it. I don't want to believe it, but the alternative, as you say, means a parachute jump, or something. And," he added in a bitter voice, "a similar jump in reverse—upwards."

"Larry is innocent," Dana said firmly to me. "If you remember that, you'll find the explanation. You're our only hope, so please try very h-hard."

"I should warn you of one thing," I told them, "I'm not an advocate, remember; I can't take sides. What if the facts of my investigation—" I was going to say, "—put another nail in the boy's coffin?" but had the good sense to hunt a different meta-

phor—"make the case against Larry even worse? Maybe you should give the job to Kurzin at that. He'll mess it up so that the jury might give the boy all the benefit of the doubt."

"You won't hurt his chances. He didn't do it, and that's what the evidence is bound to show finally," Dana said, her voice still firm.

Ader shrugged in half humorous resignation.

"You heard her," he said. "I'm inclined to agree that there's nothing to lose, really. The worse D. A. in the business couldn't fail to get a conviction right now, with no further investigation." He led his niece gently towards the door. "I'll have the body brought over immediately. And I'll drop by myself with the stick later, unless I get tied up somewhere." He patted the girl's shoulder sympathetically, and they left.

Watching Dana leave, chin up, I thought that if Larry was smart enough to pick her, he wasn't likely to bungle a murder so badly. Then I thought my logic was getting worse than hers, so I went back to my roundworms.

The body arrived about ninety minutes later, and things being slack at Pasteur, I was able to get right to work. Beginning, as usual, with the head, I had to agree with Ader that the crushed skull certainly explained the man's death. In addition, it was also true that the old boy was remarkably healthy otherwise, and could have reached a hundred. There were laborious tissue and toxicological tests possible, but I felt them to be counter-indicated. I had no doubt he was killed by a blow on the head. I was just finishing up these gross tests, when Ader came in with the walking stick.

He studiously avoided looking at the remains, even though

everything was back in place. In another minute I was through, and covered the body with a sheet. Then Ader came closer.

"Well?" he demanded.

"He was killed by a clout on the head, all right. Let's see that stick."

He gave it to me. There was a plastic bag over the heavy end of the stick; the stem was thin, tough ebony, thirty-eight inches long. There was little doubt that egg-shaped handle could account for the bone injury. Whether it had or not remained to be seen.

The blood test was fast and simple, a matter of typing the blood. The hair didn't take long either, using a good comparison microscope. I shook my head ruefully at the results, and Ader's face was bleak. He had his tail in a crack, so to speak. On the one hand, he had a dream of a case, with none of the usual rat-race of finding reluctant witnesses and other sorts of elusive evidence. On the other there was his niece, Dana, a favorite relation I inferred, about to lose her beloved to the gas chamber, or, if they were lucky, to a prison for thirty years or so. Either way, the lieutenant wasn't going to be happy. Unless, of course, we found a new candidate for the big jump.

"I'm sorry," I said. "This is no help. McCabe was killed by this stick. I'll stake my professional reputation on that—and will have to so testify under oath."

"I wasn't expecting anything else," he said listlessly. "For Dana's sake, I was only hoping. Anyhow, here's that complete run-down on the rest of the household. Read it over tomorrow, and maybe you'll think of something. You've done it before on more hopeless cases."

"This one out-hopelesses all the others," I said. "And frankly, we don't need suspects as much as we need 'how was it done.'

One murder; one rather obvious killer—what's the point in additional names?"

"I don't know," he said wearily. "But begin by assuming Larry is innocent, and then figure out how somebody else might have done it."

"Very simple," I replied. "All I need is another month and fifty per cent more brains. But I'll try, Master."

Ader left, looking desperately tired. He probably hadn't slept much since the murder.

It was after eleven, but I didn't feel pooped at all, so I sat down with the family dossier. Ader is very good at this sort of thing, and I could easily visualize the members of Colonel McCabe's household.

There were five in the family itself, exclusive of the dead man. They were Larry, the nephew, a boy of twenty-four; two sons, Harry, aged thirty-two, and Wallace, thirty-nine; the colonel's brother, Wayne, fifty-seven; and a cousin, Gordon Wheeler, twenty-eight. As for servants, an elderly couple kept the place clean and did the gardening. A middle-aged woman did the cooking.

When it came to motive, they all had it, except for the servants, who were provided for whether the colonel lived or died. For the family, it was a matter of money. McCabe was worth well over a million, his late wife having been the childless widow of a rich manufacturer. The colonel's will was no secret. The two sons were down for $200,000 each; the brother, $150,000; Larry, $50,000; and the cousin, $30,000, all tax free. After a few small annuities to the servants, anything Uncle Sam left would go to the local museum, provided they kept McCabe's arms collection, all of it, on permanent display.

For the old man fancied himself a military expert of high

order. But instead of refighting the Civil War, and the one in 1914, he preferred to correct the errors of earlier generals. In short, he intended to rewrite Oman's "The Art of War in the Middle Ages."

One room of the house was devoted to a collection of medieval arms and armor. This was the responsibility of the cousin, Gordon, who catalogued the stuff, and kept it so polished and functional that McCabe could have left on a crusade at any moment, perfectly equipped with plate armor, sword, lance, dagger, and crossbow. Only a horse was lacking.

The late colonel was something of a bully at times, but not really a bad sort. There was no evidence that he interfered unduly with the members of his family, or that any of them had serious cause to hate him. It seemed to me, reading between Ader's lines, that the only reasonable motive was money. For McCabe was possibly a bit stingy on handouts, although everybody had an allowance of sorts.

But, actually, motive wasn't the basic problem here. My real job was just as I'd stated it to Ader: If Larry didn't kill the colonel, *how* was it done? The "who" could wait, and would probably come from the method, I felt sure.

I took out the diagram and photos again. There's a process called "brain-storming," very popular on Madison Avenue. It consists of throwing the rational mind out of gear, and letting its motor race. You give your wildest fancies free rein, hoping to find gold among the dross. I tried that, and came up with some weird notions. The craziest was a theory that the murderer wore shoes giving fake pawprints of a dog. The trouble with that was the obvious shallowness of the prints on the photos. The coach dog weighed perhaps sixty pounds, this weight distributed over four paws. A 160 pound man would

leave suspiciously deep prints by comparison. Still, I meant to have Ader check on the actual depth of the prints. I was desperate, you see.

But that "solution" didn't even convince its inventor, so I took another tack, and this one gave me a thrill of hope. What if the approach had been from the sea? According to Ader's notes, all members of the family were water-skiers, and the like —why not skin divers, too? If the murderer came out of the water, with or without special equipment, killed the colonel, and returned the same way, would he have left tracks, or would the tide erase them? Here was a very tenable possibility.

I was tempted to ring Ader at once, but it was after twelve, and I remembered his weariness. Wednesday would be soon enough. So I went home to bed, and dreamed of a skin-diving coach dog that terrorized the bathers.

The next morning I phoned the lieutenant, and told him my two theories. The man walking like a dog, as I'd feared, was nonsense. The plaster casts—this surprised even me, but Ader leaves nothing to chance—showed them far too shallow to have been made by a man.

The second solution, about approach from the sea, however, did excite him. The only question was whether such a feat was possible at the private beach. One way to settle that was to check with Sammy Ames, sports editor of the local paper, a buff on water games. Ader gave him a call, while I listened in, conference style. Ames was very emphatic. Nobody unwilling to commit suicide would swim within five miles of that coast at this time of the year. The undercurrents made it physically impossible to survive there; not even an Olympic gold medalist could manage it.

That was bad enough, but a call to the Yacht Club brought

further verification, plus the fact that some footprints would have been left, at least until the evening tide came in.

It was hard enough finding those two theories; now I had to come up with a third, and it had to be a better one. That made a visit to the house mandatory, so I asked the lieutenant to take me there.

The place was quite impressive: a big, roomy, two-story mansion, with stairs in the back leading down some sixty feet of rock to the private beach. That beach was bounded with those minor precipices on three sides, and the sea itself on the fourth.

I won't waste time describing the family, since their physical qualities are not relevant. All the men were healthy, athletic types, strongly masculine. They seemed genuinely sorry for Larry, but certain he was guilty.

The collection of medieval arms would have made the visit worthwhile in less harrowing circumstances. The walls were lined with daggers, battle-axes, bills, pikes, crossbows, and other ancient man-killers. There were several dummies in full suits of armor, beautifully burnished. Wheeler, the curator of this family museum, was obviously proud of the collection, and had become a trained specialist on medieval warfare through his research for the colonel. He enthusiastically demonstrated the correct use of several outlandish weapons, handling them with the assurance of an expert.

But none of this was clearing up the mystery—if there was one, and Larry didn't happen to be our murderer.

Well, I was pretty discouraged at this point. Maybe John Dickson Carr can make up and solve these locked room puzzles on paper, but this was too much for me. I was ready to throw in the sponge, and go back to Larry as the killer.

But then I recalled other recent cases Ader and I had worked

on. In those, a fresh appraisal of the evidence broke the impasse. Besides, I liked Dana. And it makes a difference, when you have a personal interest in an investigation.

So back I went to the lab. The first thing I did was re-read my notes on the autopsy. They didn't change a thing. The colonel's skull had been fractured just above the right ear. I tried to visualize how the blow might have been struck. If the killer had stood to the right of, and just behind the old man, lying there with his feet towards the sea, and made a golf-like swing from the right to left, with the knobby end of the stick down, hands near the ferrule, that would account for the injury. Nothing unlikely there; no inconsistencies to take hold of.

Rather gloomily, I turned to the remaining evidence, the stick itself. I held it in the way I had pictured it, and tried to re-enact the fatal swing. Suddenly I felt a surge of hope. The blood and hair were in the wrong place! If the stick had been swung, like a golf-club, by a standing man, the side should be stained. In fact, that would be true no matter how the thing was manipulated as a bludgeon. But instead, the very top of the handle had the blood and hair. How was that possible?

Excited, I experimented again. The only way to hit a person with the top of the knob would be to make a spear-like thrust forward with it. But that would be awkward and unlikely even if enough power was possible, something I doubted. Then a whole new prospect opened before me, one that suggested many significant modifications of our interpretation of the evidence. That stick hadn't been used as a club at all. It must have been projected like a spear, knob first. But how? Certainly nobody could actually throw the thing, like a lance, with sufficient force and accuracy to kill a man from—how many feet? I checked the drawing again. The body was almost forty feet

from the foot of the stairs, which is where the murderer would have had to stand in order to avoid tracking up the sand. Such a throw was utterly fantastic by sheer muscle power. The skull has thick bones, not easily fractured.

Then, looking at that long, slender body of the stick, I had an idea. I grabbed my lens and studied the metal ferrule. Sure enough, there were two shallow but definite grooves across the tip. They could have only one explanation; in them a taut string would not slip off the end of the ferrule. That meant a crossbow—it seemed obvious, now. What could be simpler than placing the narrow ebony rod in the slot of a strung crossbow, knob forward, and then, from a position on the stairs, aiming at the man lying there on the sand. The stick, propelled with all the force of a powerful metal leaf spring, would strike a terrific blow on the victim's head.

I began to pace the floor feverishly. A perfect solution; one that explained everything. So that's why there were no other tracks. The killer didn't need to leave the stairs. What no mere arm could do, the crossbow made easy. Aiming one was no harder than pointing a rifle, and forty feet was a short range. Even so, the murderer must have practiced a bit to make sure. Perhaps he hadn't hoped to convict Larry, but merely to confuse the issue.

All right, he shot the strange arrow, then leaving it by the body—I cursed. Another good theory gone to pot. The stick had not remained by the corpse. How did the marksman recover it without leaving tracks?

I thought of a string, say a nylon fishline, tied to the missile. But another peek at the photos ruined that solution. There was no long, narrow trail in the soft sand to show where the stick was hauled back.

But I knew there must be some explanation; the rest fitted too well. I examined the stick again, starting at the ferrule. In the middle of the polished stem, I found some indentations. They were not deep, but then the wood is very hard. I measured them, and noticed their spacing. There were no others like them; obviously, Larry took good care of his prize possession. It was baffling, especially because I felt that I was getting close.

Then, seeing the photo again, it came to me. The sort of thing I should have spotted immediately. But any theory needs testing, so I called Ader, and asked him to meet me at the beach. He was to get, on the Q.T., one of the nonsuspects, say the housekeeper, to bring Gustavus Adolphus, the coach dog. I wanted somebody the animal knew, and would obey. Since she fed him, that was no problem. He knew and obeyed her.

At the beach, I showed Ader the marks on the stick, and explained the crossbow theory.

"Those marks have been made by teeth," I told him. The Dalmatian was racing about, happy to be out on the beach again for a romp along the shore. At our request the housekeeper, a little bewildered but willing, stood on the stairs and flung the ebony stick end over end towards the water. "Fetch, Gustavus!" she shrilled, and barking joyously, the spotted dog raced out, seized it with his mouth, and carried it to the woman.

I grinned at the lieutenant.

"That completes the story. When the old man was dead, and the killer stood where she is now, all he had to do was shout 'Fetch!' and the dog retrieved the murder weapon. A wordless accomplice. Neat. No footprints on the sand."

"He was sure a lot of help to the poor colonel," Ader snapped giving the clumsy hound an indignant glare. "Instead of chewing up the murderer, he helps the guy get away with it. Or almost."

"Don't blame the dog," I said. "You can't expect these so called lower animals to understand murder. That takes the higher intelligence; the same that invented it. But Wheeler must be our man; as you saw, he's an expert on all those medieval weapons. Now that I think of it, he didn't demonstrate or even discuss the crossbow. That's pretty significant."

"I've no doubt that's the way it happened," Ader said. "Now to prove it to a jury."

"That won't be easy," I said. "Except for the grooves for the bow-string, and the teeth marks on the stick, there isn't any evidence to impress laymen. I can't prove the stick was actually fired. Maybe we haven't helped Larry very much, even now."

"Don't you believe it," was the grim reply. "I know just how to break Wheeler down. The oldest trick in the game. He'll get an anonymous phone call tonight. Somebody will describe the main points of the murder, claiming to be an eye-witness, and demanding a pay-off. If Wheeler's guilty, and I've no doubt about that, he'll want to meet that Mr. X very badly, either to bribe or kill him. We'll have him cold, with witnesses. But first, we'll have to see that the housekeeper doesn't spill the beans. Luckily, Gustavus Adolphus can't talk."

"Don't say that. If he could talk, our job would have been a lot easier."

Well, as Ader promised, the trap worked. I can see why. A murderer is full of fears generally, and the worst of them is an eye-witness to the crime.

Dana says that she and Larry will name their first boy after me. I suggested Gustavus Adolphus instead. Although he was an accomplice, he finally testified for the defense, making our case solid.

MATT TAYLOR

McGARRY AND THE BOX-OFFICE BANDITS

How many among my readers are unfamiliar with Dan McGarry and Kitty, his mouse? For the past twenty years, two or three of Matt Taylor's delightful yarns about this couple have appeared annually in This Week Magazine.

Now, alas! This Week *has abandoned fiction, and Matt tells me this may be the last appearance in print of Dan and his mouse. I am happy to preserve it between the covers of this book.*

MATT TAYLOR

McGARRY AND THE BOX-OFFICE BANDITS

"McGarry!" roars the Inspector, "where are you?" "Right here," says Dan McGarry, the plain-clothes cop, hastily coming in from the outer office. But it is the wrong answer.

"Where are you when the Apollo Theater gets robbed this afternoon?" the Inspector demands. "It's the same gang that holds up the Bijou two weeks ago. They tie the manager up and take two grand from the wall safe."

The Inspector looks as accusing as if Dan himself has held up the movie house.

"Two grand," he repeats. "With that kind of take, they're bound to try again. Now I figure the next house they hit will be one like the Bijou and Apollo—a honky-tonk, open but not doing much business around six o'clock. The most likely place is the Plaza. I know the manager and I've got it all fixed. McGarry, you're it."

"What's it?" Dan asks.

"You will have the job of lobby man in the theater."

"Fine," says Dan.

"Tomorrow you show up at the Plaza in time to try on your costume."

"Costume?" yells Dan. "What costume?"

"You'll see, McGarry," says the Inspector cryptically.

The manager of the Plaza turns out to be a tubby white-haired old guy named Alexander Moon. He sits in a tiny office

off the inner lobby and looks Dan over and says, "I usually don't use a lobby man during the slack hours. But I will be glad to have you. I appreciate the protection."

"Don't tell me I have to give with a spiel?" Dan asks.

"Oh, no spiel," says Alexander.

"That's a help, anyway," Dan says gratefully.

"All you have to do," the old guy says, "is strut back and forth in your kilts."

"In my what?" Dan yells.

Alexander chuckles. "I'm a showman of the old school," he states. "I always dress my lobby man in a costume that ties in with the movie we're showing. Atmosphere, you know. Right now the film is 'Zombie of the Highlands.'" He spreads his hands. "So you wear kilts. And bagpipe music will come out of the loudspeaker in the lobby. Simple, isn't it?"

"Simple-minded," Dan sighs.

"Be back at six," Alexander tells him. "My regular lobby man doesn't come on until eight. You will change in that room across the lobby. Your costume will be waiting for you."

And so it is that Dan steps out on the sidewalk two hours later looking more Scotch than the whole clan of McTavish put together. His kilts are a gaudy plaid and he wears a jaunty Scotch cap over one eye. His gun is tucked in a shoulder holster beneath his tweed jacket. He nods and smiles weakly at the dizzy blonde dame in the box office, and she gives him back a cold stare.

"Since when," she asks, "do we work a lobby man at this time of day?"

"I am sort of special," Dan says. "Don't tell anyone, but I'm a cop. Probably the first male cop in police history to wear skirts.

Some hoods knocked off that movie house down the street yesterday. We think they may have a try at this place next."

He struts as ordered and he draws a few "hoot-mons" and giggles from passing dames, which he ignores with great dignity. The bagpipe music starts. It sounds like the wailing of two dozen banshees and does horrible things to his eardrums. Then, during a merciful lull, he hears a small screech from behind him. He turns and sees Kitty. She is holding her hand over her mouth.

"So all right, I look funny!" Dan says stiffly. "It's all in the line of duty."

Kitty manages to stop laughing. "It's just that your knees are a bit knobby," she says.

"I'm atmosphere," Dan says.

Kitty smiles. "I can practically smell the heather," she shouts above the wailing of the bagpipes.

"I wonder what you'll be next?" she says. "What's the coming attraction?"

"With luck I won't be here," Dan says. "Those crooks may make their move any day."

But the crooks do not oblige. Three days later Alexander greets Dan happily. "We're showing 'Werewolf of the Northland' now," he says "Your costume's ready."

"Now what am I?" Dan growls.

"Obviously," Alexander says, "an Eskimo. And I have some oversized false teeth for you. You'll have fangs. We'll make you a bang-up authentic werewolf."

"I'll scare small children," Dan says.

"Let them scare," Alexander says merrily. "Small children don't buy movie tickets."

Dan gets into the imitation fur trousers and hooded parka

and knee-high boots and attaches his fangs. He puts in a rugged four evenings strutting the frozen wasteland and baring his fangs at one and all. Every evening Alexander inspects him before he goes on duty, and likewise every evening the stick-up hoods are very much absent.

He feels pretty sunk when he drops in on Kitty after serving his hitch in the Arctic. "Today I ask the Inspector how long this fancy-dress stakeout has to go on," he says. "He tells me he will bring in those crooks if it takes the rest of the year."

"At least it's June and not January," Kitty says cheerfully.

"Well," Dan says, "maybe I have a small break coming up. Starting tomorrow we show 'Maniac Brain Surgeon.' I don't see how that third-rate Barnum can dream up a costume to tie into that."

"Want to bet?" Kitty says. "He'll think of something."

And she is right as usual. At six the next evening when Dan comes out on the sidewalk he looks ready to take out anyone's tonsils at the drop of a hat. He wears white linen trousers, and his doctor's gown reaches from his neck to his knees. A surgical mask covers all of his face except his eyes. On his head is a white skull cap and his rubber gloves are up to his elbows. In any operating room he would be the main attraction.

Kitty feels so sorry for him when she hears about it she decides to look in on him the following evening. At 6:30 she drives up, and there is the poor guy in white, standing by the box office, looking even sillier than she thought he would.

She waves out the car window. "Hi, Doctor!" she calls.

The guy in white gives her a cold stare. Then he turns his back on her.

Kitty gasps and her eyes pop open. If the guy in white doesn't recognize her he isn't Dan, and if he isn't Dan who is he? She finds a parking space half a block away and hurries back to the theater. She buys a ticket from the dizzy blonde and goes inside. Dan has told her about the room to the right of the inner lobby where he makes himself ridiculous every evening.

She pushes open the door. Dan is lying on the floor, very neatly tied up like a Christmas package, only with rope, not ribbon. There is a gag over his mouth. His eyes are open, but they have a glassy look.

Kitty rips off the gag. "A guy was laying for me here," Dan tells her. "I see the billy coming down on my noggin, but I can't get out of the way."

"He put on your surgeon's costume," Kitty says. "He's out in front now. How did he know you were a cop?" She works fast trying to untie his hands.

"That blonde in the box office!" Dan says. "She tipped them off." He shakes his head. "Why can't I learn to keep my big mouth shut?"

Kitty gets his arms free. "If he's out there as a lookout it means just one thing," she says.

Dan nods. "It means the other two are with Alexander now, giving him the business. He keeps the heavy dough in a wall safe." He reaches inside his coat and lets out a yell. "The son of a gun stole my rod!"

"I'll phone headquarters!" Kitty says, getting the rope off his ankles at last.

"We can't wait. They'll be lamming out any minute."

"There will be two of them," Kitty says. "With guns even."

There is a bronze desk clock on the table. Dan hefts it. "This will do," he says. "I'll pass the time of day with those hoods."

He moves quickly across the lobby. What with television and the dinner hour, business is indeed slow and there isn't a customer in sight. He stands in front of the manager's door. The clock is in his right hand. He pulls back his arm like a quarterback getting set for a touchdown pass. Then he flings the door wide open with his left hand.

Alexander is standing beside the open wall safe with his hands in the air, and his face is now as white as his hair. One guy is in front of him holding a gun. The other is on one knee stuffing bills into a canvas bag.

At eight feet Dan can't miss. There is a crash and the insides come out of the clock and a perfectly good timepiece is ruined. But then so is the guy with the gun.

Dan jumps the second guy before the first one hits the floor. This guy is so busy stowing away the cash that he does not have his gun out, and Dan twists his arm behind him before he can reach it. But he breaks free and from then on it is a slugfest such as you can see on television except that no one throws breakaway chairs or whisky bottles or shot glasses. The guy finally manages to pull out his rod and it is a full two minutes before Dan can bend his arm and make him drop it. Then they roll around on the floor, and it isn't until Dan can reach the fallen gun and bring the butt of it down on the guy's head that peace and quiet are restored.

"There's another one outside in the lobby," Dan tells Alexander when he can get his breath. "And, by the way, you can take your hands down now. You're among friends."

"I guess I am still a little scared," Alexander says. "I inspect the lobby man before he goes on duty like I always do, and I think he is you. All I can see is his eyes."

"They have it figured that way," Dan says. "If your hands aren't shaking too much maybe you can phone headquarters for me. These two guys will keep. I got a date outside with a maniac brain surgeon and a dizzy blonde."

He runs to the outer lobby with his gun ready. And what he sees there is indeed a surprise. The guy in white and the little blonde are lined up against the wall with their hands over their their heads and Kitty is in front of them with a gun.

"Hello, Danny," Kitty says gayly. "I sneaked in and took this gun from the floor of the office while you were staging your wrestling match. It's great fun being a cop, isn't it?"

"Like the man says," Dan sighs, "everyone wants to get into the act. A squad car will be along in a minute. Then we will go and celebrate over a steak."

"First," Kitty says firmly, "I want to take these two to headquarters and turn them over personally to the Inspector. After all, they're my babies."

PAUL W. FAIRMAN

THE DARK ROAD HOME

This was originally published in the Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine *under the pseudonym, Paul Daniels, to disguise the fine hand of the Managing Editor of* Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine.

I am pleased that he has shrugged off the shroud of anonymity and allowed me to present his striking and memorable novelette under his own name.

PAUL W. FAIRMAN

THE DARK ROAD HOME

THE woman was in a terrible rage. The little girl, highly sensitive to human reactions—to fear and tension and anger—could feel the vibrations coming through the wall from the room beyond; coming into the place where she sat very still and waited.

The woman kept repeating a single word: "Stupid—stupid—stupid—" and the man who was with her there in the other room growled his defense: "It wasn't my fault. How could I know? I just did like we planned. It wasn't my fault."

The little girl was not frightened in the accepted sense. She had known of too much oppression and injustice to panic even in a situation such as this.

"The important thing now, Helen," the man whined, "is what are we going to do?"

"What can we do? We've got to get rid of her. She's worthless. It's all danger now and no profit. We've got to get rid of her and give ourselves an even break."

"You mean—?"

"What else could I mean?"

The little girl didn't understand one word in ten but the woman's tone, the aura of poised violence, the fear in the man's last question, gave her the meaning. And she knew the Terror had returned; was here again; had to be reckoned with.

There had been a long, pleasant time beyond reach of the

Terror; when they'd told her it would never come again. But she'd known that it would; that it was only waiting out there somewhere to sweep in and take her as it had taken her mother and her father and so many of the people she had known.

And what did you do when the Terror came? You did as you were told. You obeyed orders without question, knowing those who gave the orders loved you and wanted the best for you.

But it was different now. They were all gone. All except Uncle Hugo and maybe he was gone too. So it followed that you did the best you could; gave your own orders to yourself and then followed them.

And the order that came from deep in the little girl's highly sensitized mind was—*leave—get away from this place—make an effort to survive.*

Trust no one in this big black world and never, never, never give up.

This last was the most important lesson she'd learned in the whole eleven years of her life. The will to survive. This was a part of her as she got up from the chair they'd put her in and moved along the wall toward the window. She knew that haste was imperative but also that too much haste could be fatal, so she examined the window very carefully.

It was broken. Three jagged shards angled toward a smashed center and the little girl tested them carefully and found they were loose. Working carefully, she removed them one by one and then lifted herself even more carefully over the sill.

If she had an urge to leap out to freedom—to scream for help—to cry or act in any manner like a child—she stifled the demand because she had learned long ago to do none of these things. Trained for six of her eleven years in the wisdom of

alert, deliberate movement, restraint had become a part of her nature even in the face of great peril.

So her seeming casualness, now, was logical as she stood outside in a soft, abandoned flower bed and marshaled all her knowledge of this particular situation.

She'd been brought in through the front door of this secluded house. It was set in a clearing, in a completely deserted section of a forest. There were trees on all sides but the safest direction to move was straight back because then the house itself might keep the man and the woman inside from seeing her.

There were other things she knew also; that the man had brought her some fifty kilometers north of where she had been; that the automobile in which they'd ridden had been an old one; that they had gone most of the distance on winding country roads with trees close in on both sides.

These things she'd learned even while bound and covered on the floor in the back of the car; learned and remembered.

It was some comfort too, to know that the direction in which she now moved—toward the forest behind the house—was bringing her closer to Uncle Hugo—if Uncle Hugo still lived. Not much closer, but south, in the right direction; only a few steps subtracted from fifty kilometers but even this was comfort for a child who had learned to live—as her parents had lived—from moment to moment. Because only hope supports such living; you learn to rely heavily on hope; so even knowledge of a right direction was a great comfort.

The little girl reached the trees safely; touched a young birch as though it were a loving friend; held its trunk in her arms while she allowed herself the luxury of a quick little-girl sob.

But only one and that but for a short moment because the Terror thrived on those who took time to feel sorry for them-

selves. It made short work of weak victims. That was why her mother and her father and the people she'd known had lasted so long in the face of the Terror; because they were filled with courage; because they stayed and lived on hope and didn't cry.

And so, after the stolen luxury of one small sob, the little girl circled the birch sapling and moved like a slim blond shadow into the forest . . .

The Doberman, a sleek, graceful unit of highly trained ferocity, whined to himself as he paced the eight-foot length of his kennel. He had been a witness and the incident at the child's playhouse in a secluded corner of the estate near his kennel had driven him momentarily mad; a weird silent madness during which he threw himself at the wire walls and the solid roof and had put bruises on his sleek hide.

The action had been over quickly but its image was sharp in the dog's memory; the tall, thin man; the blanket with its musty odor; the battered car the man had driven away.

The action finished, another man, a friend, was approaching the kennel and the Doberman paced restlessly, waiting to be let out so he could follow the car and set things right.

The friend was big, grizzled, slow of movement. He wore the clothing of a gardener, a caretaker, and his eyes were kindly. Exactly the opposite of the Doberman's because the dog had been meticulously trained to kill and death always lurked back behind his eyes; back in his memory.

The dog did not bark at Hugo Kroener because that had been a part of his training also. Never any noise; run silent; run deadly; come out of nowhere to kill.

Kroener said, "Poor, Prince." He smiled and put his hand on the wire as close to the dog's nose as possible. "You'd like to be

out running like a dog should, wouldn't you? Out in the forest chasing rabbits."

The dog sat motionless now, waiting to be released. But Hugo Kroener had not seen the action at the playhouse. He took a piece of dog candy from his pocket and tossed it through the wire. The responsive move of the Doberman's head was automatic—the dog appearing to accept the favor as some sort of stupid but necessary preliminary to the important business at hand.

But Hugo Kroener was a great disappointment to the dog. He turned away and started back toward his work at the other side of the estate. After a few steps, he stopped and turned and again smiled. "You miss her, do you not, old fellow? You like to have her in your sight all the time. But that cannot be. She is probably in the great house playing with the other little girl."

The dog knew that the other little girl was afraid of him. He'd learned this while watching the two of them at play; while he'd watched with yearning from his heavy wire kennel. Now he watched Hugo Kroener; motionless; a statue; a rigid machine of man-made death. Tolerated because a little girl loved him.

Kroener moved out of sight and the dog began sniffing the ground along the fence that trapped him . . .

The little girl had been moving slowly and deliberately through the forest but now she was tired and felt herself entitled to a rest. Not a long one; just a few moments to ease the tension of eternal concentration.

She found a small pocket in the trunk of a big rotted-out tree and vanished from sight so completely that only a highly trained person could have located her.

Momentarily safe, she allowed her mind to slip its grasp on

current reality; allowed it to rest and, automatically, memory took over. This was not a good thing, even while resting. In such circumstances as this she knew she should stay passively alert even while regaining her strength. But her longing was great and her thoughts went back . . .

. . . To the awful day when the Terror struck so savagely in Budapest. There had been a very important meeting that morning in the cellar of the house where the little girl lived with her mother and father. Several men came quietly to talk over some important matters with her father.

Her father was a leader and the little girl had been very proud of him; proud of the respect and deference in the voices of the men who came. She had been proud of her mother also. Her mother never said a great deal but at times her opinion was asked on some matter of importance and she always had something very quiet and sensible to say and the men listened.

The little girl's mother and father talked together also, usually with the little girl in her mother's lap, feeling the gentle touch of her mother's hand and the warmth and comfort of her presence.

But on the awful day of the Terror, the little girl could tell by the tight feeling in the air, by the nervousness of her mother's hands, that things were very wrong.

Then had come the sounds of gunfire in the streets not far away and her father and the other men went there to see if they could help.

After a while the phone rang and the little girl sat very close to her mother while she answered and even though she didn't hear what was said over the phone there was her mother's choked sob and the little girl knew her father was dead.

But her mother did not cry, so the little girl did not cry. They

sat alone in the quiet house for a long time, the mother holding the little girl close in her arms. There alone in the quiet house, waiting, while the Terror lashed back and forth in the streets around them.

Then the telephone rang again, a nerve-ripping jangle in the darkness, breaking in frighteningly upon the stillness.

More news came over the phone and the little girl knew it was bad because her mother's fingers closed over her arm, hurting her, but the little girl made no outcry because she knew her mother was not aware of the hurt.

Now her mother began using the telephone, desperately and after a while the little girl knew her mother was talking to Uncle Hugo.

Uncle Hugo tried to get the little girl's mother to run; to try to escape past the Terror through the streets but she refused. She said it was too dangerous—the two of them—out there in the bullet-riddled night. Besides, there was no time.

So she told Uncle Hugo what he was to do and then hung up the telephone and held the little girl tight in her arms for a little while. But even then she was not crying.

When there was no time left even for love, the little girl's mother said, "Now I want to go to your hiding place under the porch. No matter what happens, you must not make a sound. Do you understand that, my darling? Not one single little sound. You must promise."

"I promise," the little girl said.

After her mother held her for a few scant seconds longer and gave her kisses she would always remember and she went as she had been ordered, to the snug little place under the front porch where—if you stayed quiet as a mouse—no one would ever know.

She'd hardly gotten there when heavy footsteps thumped

across the porch over her head; the footsteps of the Terror shaking dust down into her hair.

The men went on into the house, smashing in the door with the butts of their rifles. Then there were deep gutteral sounds. There was the brutal laughter of men who took the Terror with them wherever they went.

They stayed in the house quite a while and the little girl's mother screamed twice before she was finally quiet.

But the little girl obeyed the orders of the one who loved her most and she was as quiet as the stones around her.

She did not cry out even when the men crossed the porch again, on their way out; even when she knew the body they dragged after them was the body of her mother.

Then it was very quiet in the house and on the streets around the house, with the gunfire dying down as though the Terror had spent itself and had to rest and gain new strength.

Still the little girl sat.

Then there was a soft sound close by. The little girl reached out and touched a cold, wet muzzle.

The dog had come . . .

But now, hiding again in the rotted tree, half a world away from Budapest and that awful night, the little girl felt a touch of alarm at allowing her mind to wander so far from this new time and this new place. A dangerous thing to do; dangerous because the Terror never rested. It was always alert; always ready to pounce down on the dreamer, the rememberer, the one who allowed mind and its senses to relax.

Besides, Uncle Hugo was fifty kilometers away and the little girl had to get back to him as soon as possible. Uncle Hugo couldn't possibly come for her this time because the little girl's

mother hadn't been there to call him on the telephone and tell him where the little girl would be hiding. Therefore she would have to find Uncle Hugo all by herself. There was no one else to help her.

She pushed carefully out of her hiding place, scarcely stirring a leaf or a blade of grass as she tested for danger. There did not appear to be any at the moment so she came into view and continued on toward the south. Moving slowly and carefully through the forest because haste itself could be the greatest danger of all . . .

The man and the woman in the secluded house argued, berated, and cursed each other for half an hour before it was finally settled; before they agreed upon what needed to be done. Their mistake had to be obliterated; all evidence of it completely destroyed. And even though it would be a grim chore, it would not be difficult. After all—a child of eleven or twelve.

And there were any number of places to hide the body; places in the comparatively wild country where it might never be found; and would certainly remain hidden until time had worked in favor of the man and the woman.

"When?" the man asked sullenly.

"What's wrong with now?"

"I suppose so. How?"

"Do you know how to blow your nose?" Helen Mayhew asked contemptuously.

"Okay, okay."

The man prowled the room. He weighed the lethal comparatives of a milk bottle and a scarred rolling pin and selected the latter. He went to the door leading into the rear room and paused. "Maybe we ought to wait 'til dark."

"And lose the time? Who's around, you lamebrain? Have we got an audience or something?"

"Maybe we ought to take her where we're going to leave her first. Find the place."

"Get it over with, Mack—or haven't you got the guts? Do you want me to do it?"

"Quit riding me!"

Frank Macklin opened the door. He stood for a moment, looking into the back room, then lumbered forward. He found the closet empty, inspected the paneless window, and came back to Helen with a blindfold he'd just picked up from the floor.

"She's gone," he said.

Helen had been putting on lipstick with the aid of a piece of broken mirror on the table. She straightened with a look of fright.

"What do you mean—gone?"

"What I said. She took this off and blew."

Helen's rage flared again. She beat back her fear and made room for rage and if she'd had a weapon at that moment she would have killed Macklin. She glared at him and went back to the old word: "Stupid—stupid—stupid. I lay things out. I plan—"

Macklin took a menacing step forward. "But you didn't do none of the work. The dangerous stuff—"

"You fool—she saw *me*—not you. When I took the blindfold off and found you'd blundered."

"That's right," Macklin said virtuously. "She saw you—not me. I seized her from behind."

"I made the plans—you made the mistakes. Now you get out and find that kid because I swear if I'm dead you're dead too."

Macklin—for all his stupidity—was still blessed with a certain logic. He nodded stolidly. "Uh-huh. We're both in it. But

there's no cause to worry. She couldn't go far in this kind of country."

"Then don't stand there! Move! Do something!"

Helen's rage was melting. The fear was seeping back. The man patted her arm clumsily. "Don't worry. I'll find her. Everything's going to be all right."

And obviously there was some sort of a distorted love between the two of them because Helen's face softened. "Be careful," she said.

Macklin laughed boisterously. "I got danger with a twelve-year-old kid?"

"Move, you fool! Find her."

"Sure, sure."

As he left the house to start searching Helen Mayhew's fear returned. She was crying when he closed the door.

Outside, Macklin went around to the paneless window and found the small shoe prints in the abandoned flowerbed. He scowled. Up to this time he had been very gentle with the little girl—careful, as with a thing of value. But now she was a potential danger and he hated her; hated her as a peril and also for having become valueless.

He followed the tracks over the soft earth to the wall of trees behind the house, muttering as he walked:

"I'll find her and kill her. She won't get us into no trouble. I'll find her. I'll kill her—real good . . ."

In the wooded, hilly country there were many summer homes owned by people who came north for the good months; many who felt a country summer to be incomplete without a pet to share it with—usually a dog because a dog will romp with its benefactors and show appreciation in many ways.

But later, many of these dogs become problems. What to do with them when summer is over? They would be annoyances in city apartments, needing attention and care. Everyone knows a dog is not happy in close quarters. They belong in the open where they can run and play.

So in many cases the problem is solved by driving away from it; by leaving these summer friends in the country where they gather in packs for mutual protection and are soon no longer pets.

Where they revert to the law of the wild and kill to live. They kill woodchucks and rabbits and pull down deer. Packs with a particularly savage leader will slaughter domestic animals for food. And some of these packs, reverting completely before they are hunted down, have been known to maim children.

Such a dog pack roamed the country through which the little girl moved. The leader, a big German Shepherd gone shaggy and vicious, caught her intriguing scent on the late autumn breeze and sat down on his haunches to consider the matter while his four followers awaited his decision.

The pack as yet had not gone totally vicious what with food still available and the weather still good. But they were farther along than they should have been because they'd been roughly handled. Chased off one farm with clubs, they'd approached the second with far too much trust and had been met by a load of buckshot.

The small Collie swung a loose foreleg as a result and the German Shepherd was in a sullen mood from a wounded jowl that hurt him whenever he opened his mouth to breath, which was most of the time.

The female Beagle, sensing his pain had tried to lick his wound and he'd slashed her shoulder by way of gratitude.

Still, the German Shepherd was not quite ready to take human life—to pass that point of no return in dogdom—but the scent made him quiver deep inside because while human it was not adult and a dog pack is attracted to helplessness.

The German Shepherd came off its haunches and circled restlessly, growled in its throat, and started off through the woods.

Moving with more decision as the scent grew stronger . . .

Neal Garrett looked up from the book he'd been reading and saw his caretaker approaching the patio across a hundred yards of lawn. There would have been time to read another page but Garrett put the book down because he enjoyed watching Kroener. Sight of the big European gave him a sense of satisfaction, Kroener being a reflection of Garrett's own generosity.

And Garrett had a right to this satisfaction. Wasn't he one of the comparative few who'd been thoughtful enough to extend a helping hand to those poor devils? Sharing good fortune with the unfortunate? God, what those damned Russians had put them through over in Hungary! Enough to make a man's blood boil. Of course, Kroener didn't talk much but it had come to Garrett from other sources. Facing death for the little girl. Getting across the border with Red bullets clipping at his heels. Who wouldn't want to help a guy like that?

Besides, there were rewards for Garrett's kind of virtue. Not that they'd been the first consideration of course. But good luck keeps an eye on generous men because Garrett had had to wait only three weeks after he'd first gotten the idea until they told him they had a crackerjack gardener for him.

And this specification hadn't been so unreasonable on his part. After all, didn't a top-notch grass and flower man rate a break as much as some slob who figured America owed the world a living and would just stand around and collect it? Hell yes!

Of course there weren't too many of that kind. European workmen hadn't been ruined by unions and prosperity and most of them appreciated a break. This Kroener for instance. He kept the whole damn ten acres looking like an exhibit and hadn't asked for a lick of help. One man doing the work of two and maybe even three.

Garrett was glad, now, that he'd gambled on the child. He'd almost turned them down on Kroener when they told him the little girl had to come too—figured maybe the guy would have her in tow all the time and let the place go to pot.

But it hadn't worked out that way at all. Just about the opposite in fact. The little girl had even been good for Cindy. Same age, same build. And two little blonde heads around the place were kind of cute.

So it had worked out fine. With both Kroener and the kid knowing their place and Kroener never letting her come into the house unless Grace invited her.

Garrett wondered. Maybe Grace had her up from the cottage a little too much. Not that he was a snob, mind you. Just for the kid's own good. Might be rough on her with so much here she couldn't have. In her condition it might be easy for a kid to turn morbid and get to be a problem.

But that was a minor point. Garrett forgot about it and wondered if he should ask Kroener to have a drink. Not that he wouldn't have done it automatically, but what the hell—how did they do it in Europe? That was how Americans got a bad name around the world; being too damn generous. Treating

people as equals—peasants who weren't used to it and figured you for a peasant yourself just for fraternizing with them. They were queer ducks all right, some of them.

Hugo Kroener had arrived now. He took off his hat and spoke in careful, laborious English. "Mr. Garrett, sir. I have come to inquire of you if my little Tina is here. With your Cindy?"

Garrett got up and went out onto the lawn still carrying his scotch and soda. "Tina? Haven't seen her. I thought she was with Cindy—over in Cindy's playhouse."

"They were there. Now the playhouse is empty. There is no one there."

"Then they may be in the house. Upstairs in Cindy's room, maybe. Wait a minute."

Garrett went back into the screened patio and called, "Grace! Hey, Grace—is Tina in there anywhere?"

His voice was loud enough to reach all of the seventeen rooms and soon a tall, graceful woman appeared. She smiled and said, "Don't stand out there in the sun, Mr. Kroener. Come in where it's cool."

Hugo Kroener gravely obeyed and Neal Garrett said, "He's come for his little girl. I told you that. You could have brought her down and saved a trip."

Grace Garrett was surprised. "Why, I thought Tina was with you, Mr. Kroener. Cindy came back from the playhouse quite a while ago. She's upstairs in the bathtub."

Hugo Kroener was troubled. "Usually I watch them—to see that Tina is not left alone too long. But I got busy with the back shrubs."

"It was thoughtless of Cindy. Leaving her that way. I'll speak to her about it."

Garrett said, "She's probably roaming the grounds somewhere. Hope she's careful about not stepping on flowers and things."

"Tina is very careful," Hugo Kroener said.

Grace Garrett frowned slightly as she glanced at her husband. "I'm sure she couldn't have gone far."

Garrett sloshed his ice cubes around and said, "Sure. Let's face it—how far could a blind kid go?"

Grace Garrett was embarrassed—something in her husband's tone and manner. A crudeness. She said, "We'll help you look around, Mr. Kroener."

"Thank you, Mrs. Garrett, but I will find her. As Mr. Garrett said, she could not go very far."

A bell toned melodiously somewhere inside the house. "The front door," Neal Garrett said. "I'll get it, hon. Make yourself a drink and relax a while."

After her husband left, Grace Garrett asked, "Would you care for a drink, Mr. Kroener?"

"No thank you. I must go and look for Tina. I am sorry I have troubled you."

"It was no trouble. And Tina isn't, either. I think it's wonderful, she and Cindy having one another to play with."

"It is very good for Tina," Hugo Kroener said gravely. "She needs friends."

Hugo Kroener returned as he'd come, toward the wooded and shrubbed areas beyond the lawn. Tina had several hiding places around the estate and once in a while, when he was ahead in his work, she would select one and then Kroener would make an elaborate, noisy business out of finding her; calling her name in mock anger; bringing giggles from lips that seldom smiled.

But there was no time for a game now; a quicker way of

finding her. The dog. He never made a game of it. He always went straight to where she was and licked her face in glee. The dog and the child loved each other and they belonged together but that was impossible. They could be together only when he was there to watch.

The Garretts were afraid of having the dog loose. And perhaps they were right although Hugo Kroener knew in his heart that Prince would die under torture before he would hurt a child. But there *were* other people around and you could never tell about a dog with his kind of background.

Hugo Kroener stopped and looked toward the kennel. Then he hurried forward. A hole had been dug underneath the wire.

The Doberman was gone . . .

The terror, Tina had learned, was not a single, clearly defined thing. It was a dark mixture of many evils. Basically, it was the nonlove, the hostility, of persons unknown, and this she had come to take for granted as a part of life, just as her mother had trained her to make the will to survive a part of her life.

You didn't waste mental energy wondering why the unknown persons wanted to destroy you. Instead, you used that energy to always fight back with whatever weapons were available, and Tina's weapons were incredibly keen ears, her every sense honed and sharpened to the uttermost in compensation for her blindness.

So her ability to walk a straight south line through a strange forest was not incredible; no more so than knowledge of the distance she had been driven, or her ability to read black intent from the tone of strange words and feel danger in the subtle vibrations around her.

A mixture of many evils, the Terror, with fatigue, hunger,

and cold numbered among them because these weapons of the Terror were calculated to dull your senses, cripple your reactions, make you an easy target for the final attack.

Thus rest was not a luxury; it was a necessity, so in the sharpening chill of late autumn afternoon, Tina began looking for another sanctuary and found a snug hole under a cluster of boulders, probably the deserted nest of a fox or a woodchuck because it was heavy with old animal odors.

There she rested and as her mind again let go, it seemed she was back in the other cave under the porch in Budapest; just as she had been when Prince first came; his cold wet nose; his soft tongue . . .

In a sense, the Doberman too had been a victim of the Terror—trained to become a savage part of it—put to work in places where high walls and barb wire had sometimes failed. He had been skillfully brain-washed and taught to do his work well, his gentler instinct scientifically stifled.

Stifled but not quite destroyed as was proven that terrible night in Budapest when a cog in the machine of the Terror slipped and he was left to himself; no leash; no commands to sit, to stand, to heel—to kill.

A lean black shadow moving through the tense city; trying possibly, to escape the gunfire smells he had always hated; or perhaps keyed to destroy on his own whim if the need came.

He stopped in the vicinity of a darkened house—one that looked empty and deserted—giving it his attention because he knew this was not the case. Life still existed there and he crossed the street and found it in a small nestlike place under the front porch.

But he did not attack. There was something unusual about this helpless wisp of form and movement; something in the un-

certainty of the hand that touched him. A confusing thing but oddly pleasant. He licked the small hand and allowed it to pat his nose.

The Doberman licked the little girl's face and she almost laughed as she heard his tail thump but she caught herself in time and whispered, "Don't be afraid, doggie. I'll take care of you until Uncle Hugo comes."

The dog put his head into her lap and quivered as the little girl stroked him and they waited together.

Perhaps the strangest aspect of the phenomenon was the dog's complete trust in the little girl as was proven when Hugo Kroener crawled under the porch and knelt for a few tight seconds within inches of sudden death. But a whispered word from the little girl told the dog this was a friend and the dog understood.

But Hugo Kroener didn't. He tried to send the Doberman on its way but the dog stood firm, stubbornly demanding acceptance, until Kroener realized that henceforth the little girl's way was the dog's way also, and they moved in stealth through the strife-torn city—the man, the child, and the lean black shadow —avoiding destruction—escaping into Austria . . .

But now the Terror had come again and Tina was alone with only her hope and her instinct for survival. Reaching out from the near-edge of sleep, she whispered, "Prince—Prince—come and find me."

But this, she knew, was wishful thinking. Prince would not come. He was trapped in a kennel with wire over the top. No one would come, so she must rest and banish the weariness and then move on again . . .

Hugo Kroener returned to the big house at dusk. Neal and Grace Garrett were having coffee behind the screens of the

patio. Kroener gripped his hat in his huge hands and said, "I have not found her. She is not anywhere on the grounds."

While Neal Garrett frowned out across the lawn, his wife said, "Then we must call the police. She has wandered off and must have gotten confused."

Neal Garrett did not appear to be convinced. "Are you sure you looked every place? This is a pretty good-sized layout. Maybe she got tired and dropped off to sleep under some bush."

"I looked everywhere," Kroener said. "I think the police should be called. It could be very dangerous."

"Dangerous? You've got your locations mixed. This isn't the African jungle. It's urban United States—seventy miles north of New York City."

"But the dog is with her. It might be dangerous for anyone who approached her to ask a question."

"You mean she took that killer—?"

"No. He dug out under the wire of his kennel."

"Then how do you know he's with her? He might have just taken off into the hills."

"Wherever she went," Kroener said, "he is with her."

"Okay—I guess we better call the State Troopers—have them check the neighborhood." There was an odd reluctance in his voice and Grace Garrett looked up quickly, wondering about it, feeling vaguely troubled . . .

They called the closest State Police barracks and were told that all cars in the area would be alerted. A search would be made. The Trooper on the phone said not to worry. They would find the child.

Hugo Kroener went back to his searching. After he left, the Garretts were silent for a time, with Grace Garrett watching her husband as he paced the floor.

Neal Garrett said, "I hope that beast doesn't take an arm off somebody. We'd be liable. I shouldn't have allowed them to bring the monster with them."

"Neal—"

He didn't quite meet her eyes. "Yes—?"

"Has it occurred to you that Tina might have been kidnapped?"

He stared incredulously. "Kidnapped! Are you out of your mind? A nobody's kid. What would be the point?"

"Our Cindy isn't a nobody's child. You happen to be worth a great deal of money."

"Nobody figures me in that class," he snapped.

"Someone might suspect."

"Anyhow, you aren't making sense. We weren't talking about Cindy. She's safe upstairs in bed."

"That's true, but she and Tina look very much alike."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"You're being purposely dense. A mistake could have been made."

"Why hell's bells! They're as different as night and day. The Hungarian kid is blind. Anyone could tell—"

"Of course, but very few people realize it at first glance. She lost her sight from scarlet fever when she was five years old but her eyes weren't damaged. And with the training she got from her mother—to hold her head up so proudly—she appears to be quite normal most of the time."

"You're crazy. Kidnappers are smart. They wouldn't make a mistake like that."

"I don't agree. I think the fact that they're kidnappers makes them stupid. And I think a situation might arise where a mistake like that could easily occur."

"I say you're off your rocker. Nobody could be sure I'd be able to pay. They wouldn't make the gamble. So that leaves some enemy or other and nobody's out to get even with me for anything. Not people like that, anyhow."

"Of course I'm sure. What are you driving at?"

"Somehow I keep thinking of that Mayhew woman."

"Who's she?"

"The maid who worked for us a month or so last spring. She dropped a trayful of glasses, remember?"

"Oh—that one."

"You lost your temper and cursed her."

"She had it coming."

"Nobody deserves to be cursed for an accident. She cursed you back, you'll recall—said she'd get even with you."

"Hell—she probably forgot all about it the next day."

"Still, you've got to admit she became an enemy."

"You're way out in the left field. Kidnappers don't keep you in the dark. They leave a note or send one. They want money."

Grace Garrett studied her husband thoughtfully. "I suppose you're right." There was something distant and uncertain in her voice. She arose from her chair suddenly. "I'm going up to look in on Cindy," she said, and left the room.

Alone, Neal Garrett mixed himself a drink. He gulped it down. At intervals, he swore softly . . .

It had taken the Doberman less than five minutes to tunnel under the wire wall of his kennel—a felony he committed only after discovering that Kroener was not going to release him. He went straight to the spot where the hedge had been broken by

the tall man's passage in and out; through which he'd carried the little girl wrapped tight in the blanket.

Just beyond the hedge was a point where a narrow country road wound in close to that corner of the grounds before it snaked off into the northern hills. That was where the car had stood; where the man had bound and blindfolded the little girl before finally covering her with the blanket on the floor in the back seat.

And the Doberman found something else; a heavy blood spoor. This came from the dead body of a robin that had been killed by hitting an overhead telephone wire in flight, the body later flattened by the rear wheel of the fast-traveling car.

So, as the dog loped north in pursuit, the blood spoor remained strong. The road also was a fortunate one for his purpose. In earlier years it had been a main thoroughfare but a six-lane parkway had been built a mile to the east and now the old road was used by the comparatively few people whose country homes bordered it.

Thus there was no heavy traffic to confuse the Doberman, a breed not noted for superior tracking abilities. In fact, if the kidnap car had turned off into any of the estate entrances, the dog would probably have been thrown into a fruitless circle.

But it stayed on the rutty blacktop mile after mile; until the country became more hilly and deserted and it finally dwindled into a dirt road, rough and tortuous; heavy with dust that held the blood spoor even better than the paved surface.

So the dog found no great problem until he came, after three hours of steady, mile-eating lope, into an area where the dirt road dwindled off and vanished into overgrown trails and footpaths. There, the scent wore out and the dog began circling;

flushing out small game and ignoring it as he followed one false lead after another.

But he did not give up. That also was a characteristic of the breed and a marked trait of this particular dog. He would circle and follow, return and go forward, until he dropped in his tracks . . .

The frightened woman, left alone in the isolated house, made dozens of trips into the yard as the afternoon waned into evening. She kept watching the south forest line for a sign of the man's return and now her nerves were about as raw as she could stand. The surrounding woods with its whispering, menacing trees had begun to move in on her; to seem more and more like a big black trap.

She had admitted no guilt in front of the man but alone she conceded that she'd blundered also. That was what came from trying a thing you'd had no experience with. That way, you found out your mistakes after you made them.

First, she should not have moved in anger—she shouldn't have let that slob Garrett bug her so much. Of course, if he hadn't treated her like so much dirt, she wouldn't have gotten the idea in the first place. It had been strictly from revenge in the beginning, with Garrett's contempt and his curses and foul names eating at her until she decided to make him pay.

And it had looked so easy. Helen Mayhew had been sure Garrett would pay; that his wife wouldn't let him go to the cops. And afterwards, how could she and Mack be traced? Who could suspect? Neither of them had a record. When you hunted for a kidnapper, you went through the police files and looked for somebody with a criminal background. You didn't

track down ordinary citizens who'd always minded their own business.

And with the kid back, the whole thing would have died down after a while. She and Mack would just have had to be careful with the money—not flash it around.

But she should have checked one last time. It *had* been several months. She'd taken the chance from fear of being seen in the neighborhood; had gambled that things would be the same. But she'd told Mack that if things didn't look just right to just drive on by and come back.

So it wasn't her fault. She'd told him that and things hadn't been right. But he hadn't driven on by. He'd snatched the wrong kid. How could she have known he'd have a choice? Two kids. Both of them blonde and around eleven years old. Good God!

Thus the failure roiled around in Helen Mayhew's mind; accusation and alibi until the forest shrieked in her ears and she could stand it no longer.

Until she grabbed her purse and started the car and headed out. Out to anywhere. She didn't care. She only knew that she had to get away from this place and keep going. Keep going 'til she hit an ocean somewhere.

And then keep going some more . . .

The wounded German Shepherd, viciousness flowing into it with its heightening hunger, circled the cluster of boulders under which the little girl waited. The dog could have gone on in and dragged her out but a thin edge of caution held him back; a caution requiring him to snarl and froth in his rising madness a while longer, working himself to a higher pitch of noncaution.

This caution was based on an instinctive fear of traps, the cave under the boulders having that aspect. The wild hunter, the pack leader to which the abused animal had reverted, prefers to work in the open; to circle and bring its quarry down with quick lunges at exposed flanks.

But with the agony of a torn jaw nourishing the dog's madness, the barrier of caution was fast vanishing. Soon he would be ready. He had already pushed to within inches of the crouching child, had ravened in her face and then pulled back at the last moment.

The pack milled restlessly, waiting for the leader to make his move; expecting him to make it, with the leader aware of this demand for leadership. He had to produce food and comfort or he would lose the pack.

The crippled Collie pressed a little too close and the German Shepherd whirled and ripped at the injured paw. The Collie shrieked in pain and limped away. The German Shepherd slavered a warning and moved back to the cave opening.

He was ready now. This time he would finish the chore. But at just that moment a furious black shadow came out of nowhere to bar the way, smashed against the German Shepherd and knocked him sprawling.

It was a pitifully unequal battle, the German Shepherd supported only by madness and instinct while the Doberman, silent as a well-oiled piston destroyed his enemy with a detached savagery born of cold, scientific training.

There was no time even for the pack to close in on its fallen leader and help with the kill; time only for surprise before the Doberman turned from the death he had dealt out and streaked for the Collie.

And thus the pack was informed of a difference here. This

was not a new leader destroying the old one and taking over the pack. Here, the pack itself was in danger of annihilation and the dogs fled in all directions to look back in bewilderment from beyond the perimeter of danger and then go their separate ways.

The Doberman stood watch for a while, grinning at them as they left, and then entered the cave; wriggling along on his belly with strangely immature puppy whines of contentment.

The little girl's hand touched his bloody muzzle and did not draw back. She held the dog close and the dog quivered as from weakness when she whispered, "Prince—Prince. You *did* come and find me." Not in those words; in the soft guttural Hungarian the dog understood.

He put his head in her lap and banged his tail against the ground and after a while Tina—her courage and fortitude shredded by weariness—dropped off to sleep.

But the dog did not sleep. He lay unmoving with his head in the little girl's lap, a blood-spattered threat of sudden death to anyone who came too close . . .

The tall man had hunted through the forest all that day but had not found the little girl. After the tracks vanished into an unbroken carpet of dried leaves, he began moving in aimless circles, feeling that one direction was as good as another.

At one point he came upon the tracks again, or thought he did, but they proved to be a part of many others, converging upon a place where many children had come for a picnic—probably in early summer from the deserted look.

He went on with his wandering, hoping each moment to catch sight of a yellow cotton dress so he could finish the job he'd come to do.

But the little girl seemed to have been swallowed up and the man began cursing his evil luck.

How was it that not a damn thing ever worked out? How come even a sure thing went wrong? Garrett would have paid. And he'd have kept his mouth shut, too. He was that kind of a guy. Inside the law, but not wanting any cops snooping in his business.

That was how Helen Mayhew had it figured and she'd been around him long enough to know. Helen was smart. She knew what she was doing and just how things should have worked out.

Only one thing—they should have checked first and found out about the second kid. Or would it have made any difference? Maybe not.

His weariness growing, Macklin turned back toward the deserted house. Deep in self-pity, he decided it wouldn't have made any difference. If it hadn't been two kids to trip him up there would have been something else. He'd never been able to ring up a score. Just a hard-luck guy from the beginning and he'd probably end that way.

He broke into the clearing and saw the house; no light; no sign of life. But Helen was probably playing it smart. Some local yokel might spot a light and start nosing around and more trouble would come down on them.

But no car either. What the hell had she done with the car? He called her name. There was no answer. Damn it all, she didn't have to play it that smart.

"Helen! Where the hell are you? It's Mack. You don't have to hide. I'm all alone." No answer. He plodded toward the house.

And even then it took him a good five minutes to realize the

truth. She'd run out on him! She'd taken the car and headed out with him pounding the woods like a maniac trying to keep *her* out of trouble.

The lousy, cheap, conniving bitch! She'd taken off and left him to face the rap! He'd kill her by God! He'd find her and ring her goddam no-good neck!

But now he was hungry and he stopped reviling the woman long enough to wolf down some bread and cold meat she'd left in the house. Damned white of her not leaving him to starve to death.

His hunger dulled, fatigue took over, and an earlier resolution to get the hell out of there came up for reappraisal. Sure, he'd have to get away fast but not in a night so goddam black you could crack your skull on it. This was as safe a place to sleep as any. He'd rest up and hit out before dawn—straight south—through the woods; get down into civilization and keep going clear into the South maybe.

He bedded down in a corner of the room they'd first put the kid in and that made him remember her. Damn stupid little brat. Sneaking out and ruining everything. They weren't going to hurt her. But that was how things went for him. He was a hard luck guy . . .

He awoke, refreshed just before dawn as he had intended to, shook off the autumn chill, and ate the rest of the food. Then, as soon as it was light enough to keep from breaking your leg, he started south through the woods. Morning deepened and he moved faster . . .

Until, around ten o'clock, Macklin got his break. The kid. There she was; walking kind of slow and funny through the woods. Walking like she was afraid of falling over a cliff.

And damn if she didn't have a dog with her. Where had she

picked up the mutt? A black Doberman. There'd been a dog like that back at Garrett's place; a dog that couldn't bark. It had gone crazy in its kennel when he took the kid.

This couldn't be the same one, though. Just a coincidence that they looked the same.

Mack picked up a section of fallen branch, a good strong club. Maybe he'd have to kill the dog first. Or maybe the mutt would run. A belt across the chops and it would get the message, anyhow.

The dog had turned and was eyeing Macklin; motionless and silent with no hint of what went on in its mind. The man and the dog stared at each other for long moments. Then the man raised the club and moved forward.

Macklin said, "One side, you black bastard or I'll—"

It was the evening of the second day and the State Police together with members of volunteer fire companies in the surrounding area were out beating the hills for some sign of the little blind girl. So far they'd seen nothing.

With lack of evidence to the contrary, it had been assumed that she'd wandered away into the hills and was perhaps hiding, weary and frightened, in some rock-pocket or thick undergrowth.

They had rimmed off the widest circle that a blind child could conceivably cross and were covering every inch of it.

But without result. Still, they kept on as others joined them and their wives leagued together and brought food and drink and began collecting flashlights and batteries in preparation for night search.

Hugo Kroener moved steadily, doggedly, silently over his apportioned segment refusing food or rest; like a man hunting

for a time bomb with the minutes ticking away. Perhaps not even minutes now . . . Perhaps it was already too late.

Neal and Grace Garrett remained home on advice of the State Police; to be available in case the thing "took a new twist" —words with which the State trooper in charge framed his fear of kidnapping.

He was Sergeant Farrier, a pleasant young man with an air of efficiency about him. He made several visits to the Garrett home during the day and then, around six o'clock, he called from the Patrol barracks and talked to Grace Garrett.

"The little girl may have been found," he said. "We got word from Centerville, a little place about forty-five miles north of here. Something's been going on up there."

Grace Garrett's nerves were a trifle raw. "Just what do you mean by—*something's been going on?* Either they found her or they didn't. Is Tina—?"

Farrier forestalled the word *dead.* "We don't know yet. As I said, we got the report but in cases like this it's best to go up and find out first-hand. I'm leaving now. I'll be there in less than an hour."

"Shall I tell—?"

"Don't tell anyone. Let the hunt go right on until we find out what this is all about."

"Hurry—please hurry."

"I will." Farrier hesitated, then added. "I can tell you this much. The little girl they found is blind."

"Then it *is*—" . . .

"It would seem so. But there are other blind children and we want to be sure."

"Thank you. I'll be waiting right here."

Grace Garrett put the phone down and turned to her hus-

band who stood waiting. "They think perhaps they have found Tina."

"Where for God's sake?"

"They aren't sure it's Tina yet. A call came in from a place forty-five miles north of here."

"That's silly. A blind child wandering that far."

"Sergeant Farrier is driving up to see. Until they know for sure we mustn't say anything about it."

"It—it just doesn't sound reasonable," Neal Garrett said.

"We can hope."

"I'm going to get a cup of coffee."

Grace Garrett followed her husband's exit with troubled eyes. This affair had driven a wedge between them; mostly her fault, no doubt, because she hadn't inquired too deeply into the cause of his obvious upset. Concern was natural, of course, but Neal seemed to have a personal secret eating at him.

Perhaps, Grace Garrett thought, she should have kept probing until she'd brought it out. But she had a feeling that she knew what it was and had been hoping he would tell her of his own accord. Had she been right in thinking—? No. Of course not. How could she have gotten such an idea?

Her head ached dully and she took two aspirin before going upstairs to keep Cindy company. She had kept Cindy inside the whole day and it was difficult for the child . . .

Farrier returned around ten o'clock that night, bringing another Patrolman with him. They were met at the front door by the Garretts and Farrier said, "We had good luck. Things seem to be all right. The little girl is unharmed."

"Where is she?" Grace Garrett asked.

"There in the back seat. We fed her before we started back. She's sound asleep now."

Grace Garrett took a step forward but the second Trooper raised his hand. "She's perfectly comfortable. It might be better if we let her sleep until her uncle comes. He'll be better able to handle the dog."

"This is Trooper Kane," Farrier said. "He was in charge of things up at Centerville. He rode down with me to kind of wrap it up."

"The dog, you said?" Neal Garrett asked.

"A black Doberman. He's tied up but let me tell you—there's one rough customer."

"Thank God everything's all right," Neal Garrett said fervently. "I'll go out and find Kroener and tell him."

"That won't be necessary. We reported at the local barracks on the way over. The word was sent out to the uncle—and to call off the search. But there are a few things—"

"Come in, please," Grace Garrett said. "We shouldn't have kept you standing here."

"—a few things—" Farrier repeated over a cup of coffee in the study with Grace Garrett sitting on the edge of her chair and Neal Garrett with his back to the fireplace, tense and silent.

"Some pretty peculiar points, actually," Trooper Kane said. He was an older man, stocky, with a bronzed, weatherbeaten face. "A man was killed."

Garrett winced. "You mean you killed someone rescuing her?"

"No, it wasn't quite like that." Trooper Kane frowned at the cup in his thick fingers. "Let's see if I can put it in some kind of sequence. First, a farmer outside of Centerville heard what sounded like a dog fight off in the woods late last evening.

"He went out this morning and found a dog dead there—a big

German Shepherd. It looked as though it had been killed in the fight. That wouldn't have been too exceptional, though, because we're bothered up in that section by wild dogs. Summer people leave them when they go back to the city."

"You said a man was killed."

"I'm coming to that. A couple of hours later two fellows hunting rabbits came across this man about half a mile south of the dead dog. He was dead too. It was pretty bad. The man had obviously been killed by a savage animal. His throat had been—well anyhow, that was what we had; until we covered the section a little more thoroughly and came on the girl.

"We couldn't get to her, though, because she had a black Doberman with her—the one we've got in the car. He blocked us off from her—wouldn't let us get even close—so we brought out some nets and trapped him."

The Trooper shrugged and set his cup on the coffee table. "We didn't realize the little girl was blind for a few minutes; you'd certainly think she was all right to look at her. Then we found she couldn't speak much English; kept asking for her *Onkel* Hugo. There couldn't have been two like that roaming the woods so we were pretty sure we'd found your stray."

"But the dead man—" Grace Garrett said.

"We actually can't say the black dog killed him. It could have been the German Shepherd."

"Then there isn't any certain connection between the man and Tina."

"I wouldn't say that exactly. The man had some papers on him—a social security card. His name was Frank Macklin and we're checking him out."

Trooper Kane reached into his pocket and brought out a stamped, addressed envelope. He held it up. "The man was

carrying this, too. All stamped and ready to put in a mail box. It's addressed to you, Mr. Garrett."

Trooper Kane took out the single folded sheet of paper the envelope contained and flattened it out on the coffee table. "A ransom demand," he said, forgetting to speak with his usual calmness.

The Garretts moved forward as one and read the scrawled words: *Drive north on Old Mill Road. Throw the satchel with the 25 Gs under the old bridge a mile south of King's Crossing. Then keep right on going. Do like we say and your little girl will be let go. Drop the satchel at 10 o'clock Friday night and keep right on going or it will be too bad.*

"Then Tina *was* kidnapped," Grace Garrett said.

"It looks that way," Sergeant Farrier answered.

"We'll find out exactly what happened—"

Trooper Kane broke off as Hugo Kroener entered from the patio side of the room without ceremony. "I was told that you found Tina."

Kroener was unshaven and haggard. He looked like a specter out of a bad dream. Grace Garrett went to him and laid a hand on his arm and said, "Yes. She is asleep out in the car. We thought it best to wait for you. The dog is with her."

He went past them, through the front door and when they reached the car behind him, he asked, "What dog? What child? Is this a joke?"

The State Troopers peered into the car. "They were there—in the back," Trooper Kane said.

"Then I think I know."

"The dog was tied. The little girl was asleep."

"The little girl was not asleep. And knots can be undone."

He left them and walked off in the darkness, the others fol-

lowing. He crossed the estate to the Doberman's kennel and went in through the open gate to kneel in front of the dog house.

They were inside, the child and the dog; the dog motionless in the entrance; black head resting on tense paws; eyes as cold as an Arctic winter.

Hugo Kroener called, "Tina," and the little girl answered. "*Uncle Hugo—I am so tired!*" she said in her native tongue. He lifted her out carefully. "*It is all right, my little one—it is all right now!*" And to the Doberman: "Come, old fellow. You may lie at the foot of her bed and watch over her . . ."

Later that night, after the Troopers had left, Grace Garrett faced her husband and put the question that had to be asked: "Why did you do it, Neal?"

He feigned surprise. "Do what for God's sake?"

"Cover it up—keep silent. You knew Tina had been kidnapped."

"I knew *what?*"

"Oh, don't pretend," she said wearily. "It will all come out. They aren't going to drop it here. They'll find the Mayhew woman and—"

"But you said I knew. The kidnap note was in Macklin's pocket—not mine."

She met his gaze unwaveringly.

"The second one—yes. The one he didn't mail. But the first one came when you and Hugo Kroener and I were on the patio. You went to the door."

"How did you know it was a kidnap note?"

"I saw the special delivery mailman driving away. And you didn't mention what he had brought. I know you so well, Neal.

Your business mail never comes here—and you were careful not to mention it to me."

"All right—quit bugging me. It was a ransom note."

"But why did you conceal it—that's what I must know. Why did you keep saying Tina couldn't have been kidnapped."

"Twenty-five thousand dollars! That's why! I figured it might work out. And that's a lot of money to lay out for someone else's kid."

"I thought that was probably the reason."

"Well, why not? It's your money—and Cindy's—as well as mine."

"Tina took Cindy's place. She could have died for Cindy."

"All right. But would that have been my fault? Is that any reason for not being practical?"

"I suppose not, from your standards, Neal, but there's one more question I have to ask."

"Okay—get it over with. I'm tired."

"If there had been no mistake. If it *had* been Cindy. Would you have cringed at the thought of paying out."

"Grace! For God's sake! How can you ask a question like that? What do you think I am? Inhuman or something?"

"No—no Neal. I'm sorry. I don't think that at all."

"Then let's go to bed. Things worked out all right and that's the main thing."

"Yes, that's the main thing," Grace Garrett said. And it seemed to her that she had grown suddenly older as she got into bed beside her husband.

The next morning Hugo Kroener carefully explained to his niece that what had happened was a very exceptional thing, not an ordinary occurrence in America at all; that it could not pos-

sibly happen ever again and that it had nothing to do with the Terror.

Tina listened dutifully and nodded and agreed with her uncle because she loved him and knew he really thought he was right. But of course he wasn't. You couldn't hide from the Terror by simply crossing an ocean. It wasn't as easy as that. The Terror was many things and it would come back again. It always had.

The thing to do was to stay alert.

Stay alert and never, never give up.

BRYCE WALTON

SUIT OF ARMOR: SIZE 36

Here is sheer, uncompromising horror, growing slowly and inevitably out of an ordinary situation between two ordinary men . . . one of whom is quite an unpleasant fellow.

Mr. Walton tells his story with a quiet restraint which slowly —oh, very slowly—raises the hackles at the back of one's head. It is one of the longer stories in the book, but not one word too long.

BRYCE WALTON

SUIT OF ARMOR: SIZE 36

THE first time Morris Slater ever saw Joe Scudmore was at a quarter after ten Monday morning. He saw him again at two that afternoon, and at approximately two-twenty decided to murder him. That one man should meet another and hate him enough to murder him four hours and five minutes later requires some explanation.

Slater arrived at the de Kalb mansion and, as on every morning at ten, for thirteen years excluding sick leaves and Sundays, started to let himself in the servant's entrance. Being de Kalb's private secretary and curator of his European armor collection, Slater was entitled to use the main entrance. But he preferred to remain inconspicuous and not incur the jealous resentment of the servants, by using it.

It was a gray drizzling morning, and Slater's frail figure trembled like a bird returning to its nest as he got a key out, inserted it in the lock. The mist made de Kalb's mansion seem more than ever like a medieval castle. It was the sort of day that, once Slater was by the big stone fireplace in the armor room, would cut him off more than ever from the outside world and make even more convincing the need to feel that he lived in his own private version of the 15th Century. He could hardly wait to get back to de Kalb's newly acquired dagger collection. He was rearranging them in a new glass case according to their line of development from the ring daggers of 1300 A.D. through the

basilards, quillons, poignards, plug bayonets and stylets of the late 17th Century.

As he started to open the door, he heard a metallic clang across the courtyard. Then a curse was followed by the sort of crude derisive laughter that Slater associated with oafs. He hesitated, then walked timidly through the thick mist and was stopped by the side of a moving van. The truck had backed up to the double doors leading into the left wing and the armor room.

Slater edged uncertainly to the rear of the truck.

A burly man wearing a black leather jacket was retrieving a peasecod breastplate from the mud. He heaved it up, hurled it into the mouth of the van with a nauseating clatter. Another man staggered out with part of a suit of armor rattling over one shoulder. A metal leg fell off, then part of an arm. A manifer bridle gauntlet struck the wet cement, fell into several pieces. Both men grumblingly began gathering up the dismembered parts and tossing them pellmell into the van.

A kind of terror too large and sudden to have a recognizable source seized Slater and impelled him forward. He grabbed the knuckle plate of a steel gauntlet. "Give me that!" he panted. He tried to tear it from the hand of leather jacket. "Give it to me!"

Although leather jacket was only about five feet seven, he was heavily built and towered over Slater like a stone monolith. He grunted, jerked the gauntlet toward him. Slater, as a consequence, was hurtled through space and thudded against a fluted column.

"What's the big idea?" leather jacket said, peering through the mist at Slater. The other man chuckled. A third man, fat,

with a crooked nose, appeared in the doorway with an armful of double-handed Claymore swords and rapiers.

Slater stumbled forward in a somewhat disoriented way. "What are you doing here?"

"Take it easy there, shrimp," said leather jacket.

"I'll call the police!" Slater said.

"You nuts or something?"

"I'm Colonel de Kalb's secretary."

"Who's de Kalb?"

Slater grabbed at a sword hilt. The man's load made a fearful clatter as he let it drop on the concrete steps.

"Hold on, halfpint," leather jacket said. He grabbed Slater by the coat collar, hoisted him a foot in the air. Someone laughed.

A lifetime's accumulated humiliation and caution drained further rebellion from Slater. He sagged compliantly in the man's grasp like a wet sack. "Put me down," he whispered. "Please."

He was propped against the column. "What's eatin' you, bub?" the burly man asked, in a not unfriendly tone.

"Did Colonel de Kalb call you in here?"

"I don't know no de Kalb, pal. Now what's eatin' you?"

"But this is Colonel de Kalb's house," Slater almost screamed.

"Never heard of him," leather jacket said. He gestured at the others. "Get movin', boys. We got to have all this junk out of here by four."

Slater ran into the long, raftered gallery. Mist from outside had filtered into the room. Suits of armor lay like fallen bodies on the stone floor. Wooden cartons were scattered about. A dim figure was throwing steel pikeman's pots into a crate. A

man was climbing a ladder, tearing shields and halberds from the tapestried walls.

Slater began to perspire heavily. He fought a sensation of suffocation as he ran past suits of armor, down a narrow hall to his office, his open coat flapping.

His office door was locked. He let himself in, feeling only a momentary sense of relief. The suit of black 1460 Gothic armor that de Kalb had given him as a bonus for his dedicated work as curator, stood in the corner of the room near Slater's desk. It seemed to watch him with the stern unblink-steel slit of its eye. Slater's hands fluttered about the desk like pink birds. No memos from de Kalb. His desk was just as he had left it Saturday morning.

He ran out, down the hall, up the dark circular stairs, down another dimly lighted hall to the double oaken doors of de Kalb's study. Despite his near panic, Slater's knock was quietly obsequious.

"Come in!" The voice was loud and full-throated. It was not Colonel de Kalb's.

Slater went in, softly closed the door, looked around the large study and library at the familiar rich shine of oaken paneling, the tapestries, the walls hung with halberds, couteau de breche, fauchards, partison spontoons, feather-staffed pikes, and several spike-knobbed flails. His dazed eyes returned to the figure of the huge man in shirt sleeves in the middle of the room adjusting his stance to the angle of a golf club. The man hardly glanced up, he was that absorbed in putting golf balls across the rug, up the colletin or neck-guard and into the chinless steel mouth of a closed armet helmet he had placed on the floor.

"Guess you'd be Slater."

"Yes," Slater said, shrinking a bit more in the presence of the other man's formidable hulk that looked like that of a former football star who, at forty, seemed capable of returning to the team. The man consisted of at least two hundred and thirty pounds, still all muscle, distributed over a square six-foot-three frame. "Morris Slater, Colonel de Kalb's secretary." He stared at the wrists working the golf club, wrists as thick as Slater's legs, at the blunt and stubby fingers covered with coarse black hair. His face was square too, and deeply creased and his hair started low on his forehead.

"I'm Joe Scudmore, City-Trust. Guess you know about us. We handled the Colonel's mortgage."

"I must see Colonel de Kalb at once!"

Scudmore putted another ball. It rolled dutifully across the rug, up the collar guard and popped into the helmet's mouth.

"Westside Chapel," Scudmore said. "Colonel'll be there until tomorrow morning." He turned as Slater made an odd incoherent sound in his throat. "I'm sorry, fella, but I thought you'd know."

"Know what?"

"Don't you read the papers or look at television?"

Slater slowly shook his head as he looked up at Scudmore's massive face.

"Well, the old boy had a heart attack. Passed on about one o'clock Sunday morning."

Slater sank down, almost disappeared in a black leather chair.

Scudmore eyed a third golf ball and adjusted his stance. "Sorry, fella, guess it's a shock to you. Been with him thirteen years wasn't it?"

"Almost fourteen," Slater said in a thin distant voice.

"Pour yourself a shot there." Scudmore motioned toward a

decanter of whiskey on the desk. "The old boy kept good stuff."

"Thank you, but I don't use it." He stared at a golf ball idling toward the gaping mouth of the helmet and twisted his gaze away. The wall at which he stared seemed to blur. Finally he said vaguely, "What now, Mr. Scudmore?"

"What now?" Scudmore turned, scowled down at Slater. "Now look, fella, don't you worry. Why should you worry, Slater? With your background and experience working for a man like de Kalb? Come over to the bank tomorrow. We'll find something for you."

"His private collection—they're—hauling it away."

Scudmore tapped the helmet with his hoe. It rolled across the rug and thumped the wall. He poured himself a shot of whiskey and stood studying Slater curiously.

"Yeah, we're moving fast, Slater." Scudmore took a deep breath and walked to the window and looked out. "They'll have this pile of mouldly stones leveled in a couple of weeks. Know what'll sprout up here, Slater? Modern apartment building. Thirty-five stories. Eighty dollars a room. Individual sun-porches. Over there'll be a supermarket—"

"But Colonel de Kalb wouldn't want that," Slater whispered.

Scudmore turned slowly, scowling. "What was that?"

"He told me, many times, Mr. Scudmore. He was going to make this into a public museum. And I—I was going to stay on as curator."

Scudmore walked around the desk toward Slater. He stood over the chair. "I liked the Colonel. But he was sort of an eccentric, know what I mean? The way he went for this medieval stuff. But how many care about that old junk? Let's face it, if we opened this place as a museum, how many people would pay

to go in? A few, sure, but it'd be a steady loss. We'd go in the red every day."

"But he wouldn't want this to happen to everything," Slater said. He took his glasses off and began wiping the lenses with a handkerchief. "It's a vulgar—" He turned his face away. "It's a shameful vulgar thing to do."

Scudmore's heavy face flushed. He stepped back and leaned against the desk. "You mean you're losing a soft touch here, isn't that what you mean?"

Frightened by his loss of control, Slater's voice turned servile. "Yes, yes, Mr. Scudmore, I enjoyed my work here very much." His voice choked slightly. "It meant a great deal to me."

Scudmore poured a double shot into his pony glass and tossed it off with a smoothness born of years of practice. "My sympathies, fella, but that's the way the old ball bounces. Why, there's fifty acres of valuable real estate right here in the heart of the city. It'd be a damned shame, a silly waste of the taxpayers' money to keep it tied up for a few pieces of historical scrap metal. You got to admit that."

Slater made no comment.

Scudmore poured another double shot. His face was red. He began walking around his desk, obviously in an expansive and self-congratulatory mood. "It took some doing, fella. But I used my head. I figured the Colonel wouldn't be around too much longer so I went to work on his daughter. You see the old boy left everything to her. He didn't leave a will asking outright that this place be converted into a museum. He just expressed the desire that it go to his daughter, you see, Slater, boy? Left it up to her. And he believed that she felt the same way he did about the place."

Scudmore grabbed up the whiskey decanter again. "Well,

Slater, seems that's about all his daughter, Nancy, ever got out of this place—and I don't blame her a bit, understand—was the creeps. Just goes to show you. How many fathers know, really know, their own children? Why, when I told her what a thirty-five story apartment building and a supermarket would bring in, there was never another word about a museum." Scudmore chuckled. "Not another word."

"I see," Slater said and stood up.

Scudmore's slab of an arm pressed down on Slater's shoulders as he was shown to the door. "Think of it this way, fella. Time marches on! You come in and see me at the bank. We can always use someone, even with your background."

One may file for future reference the fact that Slater, accustomed to being overly polite and considerate, even toadyish at times, said nothing in response to Scudmore's magnanimous parting remark. He did not even look at Scudmore as he walked away and seemed to dissolve in the damp shadows of the chilled hallway.

Slater sat in his small office downstairs for some time and tried without success to blot out the excruciating sound of vandalism and desecration clanging and banging incessantly from the gallery. His nerves quivered. He felt hollow, with a cold wind blowing through him. Every sound touched him to the quick, like a series of electric shocks, and all of it gradually grew in volume until he felt as if he were a part of a huge building tumbling down.

Once, feeling forlorn and terribly isolated, he was even impelled to call home.

"Selma," he said.

"Morris!" Selma shouted. "Are you sick? Have you caught a cold?" He never called during the day.

"Colonel de Kalb's dead, Selma. He died Sunday morning."

"What? Oh dear."

"And he isn't—I mean—it won't be a museum. Everything's being moved out."

"God rest his soul, he was a decent man, I suppose, dear. But in a way I'm glad."

"Selma!"

"Now you can come home regular hours, live like a normal human being, get a respectable job. I'm tired being married to a shadow."

He dropped the receiver as glass crashed in the gallery. It was one of the glass cases, he knew, probably the new one containing the daggers. He turned. The suit of 1460 Gothic seemed to be watching him accusatorially through the black stern slit of its eye.

He went over and stood beside it and looked into its eye. For a moment he heard no sounds at all. A blissful silence wrapped around him and he remembered when he had first stood beside this same suit of armor, the day almost fourteen years ago when he had come to work for Colonel de Kalb.

Morris Slater shared a common characteristic of most murderers—he seemed incapable of even mild forms of violence. At fourteen he had been 4 feet 6 inches tall, weighed 126 pounds. Thirty years later there had been no important changes in his life other than his having gained one pound and shrunk a quarter of an inch.

Slater was not only small, he was frail, almost bird-like, with skin so thin all of his nerves seemed to be showing through it.

He dressed with impeccable neatness, but in a manner that blended him, like a lizard's skin, into his surroundings. His speech matched his manners, quiet, unobtrusive. His personality was, in a word—cautious.

No one would even have suspected him of concealing a temper. His deceased mother could have discussed early temper tantrums. But no one had ever been curious about young Slater.

Boys who had shouted "pee-wee, shrimp and runt" at Slater while chasing him home with a bleeding nose could have told of his futile outbursts against humiliation that eventually turned to silent flight and finally to anonymity. They were never asked to testify.

His wife, considerably taller and heavier than he, had married him because large male figures frightened her. He, in turn, found her bulk comforting. She knew about his occasional outbursts of rage, found them amusing and cute, always harmless. When she saw symptoms appear, she would rush Slater into the basement and shut the door. Down there, alone, he threw things, kicked objects especially arranged for that purpose by Selma who was fond of various home remedies.

And so Slater lived detached from a world he bitterly resented, grew to hate, always feared. So he never knew health or happiness—that is to say, he refused to adjust himself to being undersized in a culture whose values were symbolized by the Empire State Building and the latest innovation of General Motors.

Then he went to work for Colonel de Kalb and a curtain fell across his past. He began a new and happy life.

His first day at de Kalb's mansion, Slater began making an inventory of its contents. He was standing by that suit of 1460

Gothic full armor when he suddenly realized that the formidable mass of steel was only an inch taller than he was.

His first reaction was that the suit was an imitation. He asked Colonel de Kalb who said, "Look at the others, sir. They were all little men, but for a few rare exceptions, especially the French and Italians who made most of the armor. I doubt if the men averaged more than five feet tall. And the women were even smaller. If you could see them gathered at court they would look like a group of midgets."

In an euphoric daze, Slater returned to the armor room. He began a slow personalized survey of every suit of armor. He began with the earliest, a Post Roman 650 A.D. model, worked up through the 850 A.D. Frankish, the 1050 Roman, the 1250 Chain Mail, the transitional mail-and-plate of 1350, the 1440 and 1460 Gothic, through the Maximilian and the complete and half-armor of 1535 and 1650 A.D.

But for two exceptions, he could have worn any of those suits of armor as though they had been forged just for him.

In those halcyon days, a big man had been the freak!

From that moment on, Slater can be said to have lived a happily adjusted kind of existence—that was, however, entirely dependent on de Kalb's armor room. Bitter resentment gave way to a grandiose fatalism. He had simply been born a few hundred years too late. Once he could have been a hero, a paragon of knighthood, a champion of the lists breaking lances with with the best. And minstrels might still have sung ballads glorifying his deeds.

In any case, Slater proved a paragon among curators. Soon every piece of armor shone like polished chrome. No speck of dust was ever in evidence. Defective hinges and leather strappings were lovingly replaced, and with painful care so as to du-

plicate the originals. Rotting sections of crossbow and pole arm haft woods were replaced with such care that even the kind of wood and the grain were perfectly matched. He polished halberd heads and swords and spurs dating from 200 B.C. He rehung French tapestries with buckler, targa, elliptical, kite, spiked, giucco di ponte and gauntlet shields.

The contemporary reality offered no more pain to Slater. Except for bus trips to and fro and a few evenings and Sunday with Selma, that world had ceased to exist. When in it, he drifted as if momentarily and only slightly displaced in time.

Overtime meant nothing to Slater. Selma called him to come home late at nights, forced him to remain home on Sundays. She developed a violent and jealous distaste for European armor. And mention of history earlier than when she had last visited her sister, Blanche, was forbidden.

But De Kalb, delighted with Slater's dedication, had given him the 1460 suit of Gothic. Slater had never taken it home. Selma would have denied it admission to any place but the basement and it was too damp down there for a 1460 suit of Gothic.

At two in the afternoon, Slater ran back upstairs and—without knocking—into de Kalb's former study. Scudmore was sitting behind the desk, his feet crossed on a corner of it, the decanter of whiskey in his right hand. He looked like a somewhat intoxicated man of distinction.

"You can't let them do it!" Slater choked.

"You know something, you could get in a person's hair."

"You've got to stop them!"

"You better join me in a drink, fella."

"I won't stay down there and watch what they're doing to it. They're ruining, wrecking everything!"

"Wrecking? What are you talking about?"

"They're just throwing it around, breaking things, mixing pieces up. They're carrying it through the rain. It'll rust!"

Scudmore chuckled. "It's antique stuff isn't it? That might make it even more valuable, like punching wormholes in wood."

"They don't have to ruin everything."

"They're in a hurry. They wanted to work by the hour, but I said, 'No sir, boys. You get a flat fee for the job and the stuff has to be out of here before five.'"

"Then tell them, tell them to do it correctly. At least do that much, Mr. Scudmore."

"Will you stop bothering me?"

"Mr. Scudmore—"

"I mean it. Get out of here."

"Please—"

"So what's a few more dents and scratches? That stuff's been knocked around for centuries. It won't be worth any less. I already got a high bid on it from a guy up in Canada. De Kalb's reputation as a collector turned the trick. Sight unseen. Contract signed, check in the mail. And he'll get every piece he ordered. How does he know what shape it was in? Let him put the pieces together."

Slater trembled. His hands clenched. His voice, although barely audible, was almost a snarl. "You ought to be ashamed, Mr. Scudmore. I hate you."

Scudmore sat up, then stood up, then he lunged around the desk and towered over Slater. "Now I've had it, fella. Out, get out of here."

Only Slater's pale blue eyes reflected something other than servility as he backed toward the door. "You're vulgar," he whispered. "Stupid and vulgar!"

Scudmore drew back his fist. "You want some of this, don't you? Don't you, little man?"

Slater fumbled behind him, got the door open and backed into the hall. He was shaking his head. "No," he said softly. "I don't want any of that."

As he walked back down the darkening stairs he realized, without shock or even surprise, that he was going to murder Scudmore. It was as though he had known Scudmore and had been planning to kill him since the day he was born.

Slater's only concern was to kill Scudmore without getting hurt. And without getting caught.

He calmly approached leather jacket who was sweating over a box into which he was tossing helmet and spurs. Yes, leather jacket said, they would finish loading up by four so they could get over to the warehouse, leave the truck and check out by five. They were union.

Slater also had to finish up by four.

"Well, I dunno," leather jacket was saying, scratching his head, a few minutes later.

"That suit of armor belongs to me," Slater said calmly. "Maybe you think I'm stealing it?"

"No, wouldn't say that."

"I'd hardly steal it in such an open-handed way, would I? Anyway, who would want to steal a piece of junk like that?"

"I didn't say you was trying to swipe nothing."

Slater took out his wallet, extracted several bills. Every word he now said, every action, heightened a strange euphoria. Never before had he ever had the daring effrontery to offer anyone a bribe. He held out two tens.

Leather jacket grabbed them and smiled, appeared suddenly willing to serve.

"The armor is in my office down the hall there. I want your men to bring a crate in there, that one will do nicely. The armor mustn't be taken apart, but loaded carefully into the crate, understand?"

Leather jacket nodded.

"Don't take anything apart or the armor will be ruined, is that clear?"

"Leave it in one piece," said leather jacket.

"It's been welded and reinforced with lead so it will be quite heavy. Place it in the crate, on its back."

"Gotcha," leather jacket said.

Slater looked at his watch. "It's now 2.30. I have to do some work on the armor before it can be lifted from its base. I'd prefer to do that work myself. I should be finished a few minutes before four. You can load it on last, and that way you can easily drop it off at my house on your way back to the warehouse. Here's the address." He handed leather jacket a slip of paper.

Leather jacket glanced at it and put it in his pocket. Then he called over the fat one with the crooked nose and Slater followed them as they carried a crate, suggestive of a crude coffin, into his office and put it on the floor.

Slater pointed at the 1460 Gothic. "That's it. It'll be ready to load a little before four."

"Gotcha," leather jacket said.

Soon as they left him alone in his office, Slater began the difficult task of encasing himself in almost 300 pounds of steel. Had fate been more considerate, the task would have been performed by several eager squires; but the increasing sense of implacable power he acquired with each additional piece of

invulnerability more than compensated for his having to do the task all by himself.

First, of course, he had to dismantle the suit entirely. He propped the breastplate and backplate together on the floor, hooked the shoulder straps together, then got down on his hands and knees, crawled under the hinged parts stuck his head up through the neck and struggled to his feet. Trembling with eagerness, he quickly locked on the placcate that covered his stomach, then the taces over his hips and groin. He then buckled on the tassets that covered his thighs fore and aft.

Then the iron legs, the hinged steel feet. His body felt hot, swelling with power inside the metal cocoon as he buckled on the shoulder plates, the upper arm pansieres. The effort of reaching back over each shoulder to secure the shoulder plates and pansieres was extremely trying. He had to stop several times to rest his aching arms and regain his breath. He almost panicked at the thought that he might not succeed. Yet he had to be completely covered. No part of him must be exposed to attack by Scudmore. And he had to be completely covered in order to escape detection when he was loaded into the van.

He struggled, grunted, strained. There, the last tace and tasset were secure.

Now he was ready, all but for the huge heaume helmet with its ferocious dog-like face. And the massive locking elbow gauntlets. The gauntlets had to go on last, to leave his hands and fingers free for the intricate preceding business.

He started to lift the helmet, then remembered that he had to call Selma. He clumped across the room, his steel shod feet striking the floor with the deadly solidity of falling granite. The massive helmet thudded on the desk top. He dialed.

"Selma, listen carefully."

"What?"

"I said to listen carefully and please don't interrupt."

"Well, I never!"

"Colonel de Kalb honored me with a gift before he died. A suit of armor. I'm having it dropped off at the house. It will be there about four-thirty."

"Oh no you don't! I won't have—"

The room shivered as Slater stomped his foot. "You accept the crate when it's delivered, Selma, or you will wish that you had, understand?"

"Morris!"

"This suit of armor means a great deal to me, Selma. Remember that."

He hung up and slipped the helmet over his head. He stood there a moment breathing deeply, peering through the narrow slit. His fingers were wet and slippery as he locked the five hooks fixing the helmet to the colletal border of the breastplate.

He walked around the desk. There were several squeaks which he quickly alleviated with a can of 3-in-1 oil. Then he donned the gauntlets. Each gauntlet extended to the elbows, where they hooked to the upper arm plates. They were huge miton gauntlets, hinged palms, no fingers, with only a slightly prehensile thumb. Each weighed thirty-five pounds and had once served as formidable bludgeons for an unhorsed knight who had lost or broken a sword. He locked the left gauntlet before putting on the right one. He locked the right one by beating his arm against the stone wall and jamming the hooks.

It was then 3.25, which would give him a minimal amount of time to kill Scudmore.

Carrying his own weight up a flight of stairs had always

winded Slater. But climbing to the second floor weighing 450 pounds meant nothing. He floated up. He walked up on air. He drew energy and strength from man's little-used, inner resources.

He came down the thickly shadowed hall. He moved with the implacable power of lava, or of a glacier.

Without hesitating, he drew back one steel arm and slammed it against the door. The wood panels shivered and splintered.

As Scudmore jerked open the door, Slater clumped on through, swung his right, then his left gauntlet. Scudmore was hurtled clear across the room and into the desk. He rolled along its edge, his massive head bobbing like an incredulous baloon. Blood ran out of the corner of his mouth.

"God!" he yelled. "What. . . !"

Slater's 450 pounds ran into Scudmore and hurled him into the wall. A gauntlet cracked two of his ribs. The big man struck out reflexively with a skilled one-two punch and then screamed hoarsely as his knuckles broke. Thirty-five pounds of steel smashed his nose and teeth. Scudmore made a low line charge into Slater's belly and fell groaning on the floor with a broken collarbone.

Slater lifted a ball-and-chain flail from the wall and turned. He caught Scudmore crawling on hands and knees toward the door . . .

He lay in the crate feeling the fine spray of rain on his helmet. It trickled down through the cracks in his armor, loosened nervous chilling flushes over his body.

He heard leather jacket and somebody else grunting as they carried him up the steps of the front porch. He knew he would get away with it. They would never suspect him, of that he

was positive. No police officer, let alone a jury of normally intelligent people, would ever accuse a frail, 126 pound man of doing what had been done to Joe Scudmore. They would look for a mad brute, a Gargantua. Not for Morris Slater.

"Don't you bring that thing in here!" Selma yelled.

Slater winced.

"Lady, we was told to deliver it at this address," said leather jacket.

"Well, you're not bringing it in here and tramping mud in the house. You take it around to the side and put it in the basement. There's no door. There's a window. I'll go down and open it. Just shove it in there, it's the coal chute."

Slater shifted uneasily. The rim of his glasses clicked inordinately loud against the helmet's locked ventail.

"Hurry it up," leather jacket said. "We ain't getting overtime."

Slater felt the slide, the crash, then darkness.

He opened his eyes, but the darkness was like the inside of an abandoned coal mine. After some effort, he managed to get out of the crate. He clumped about in the darkness looking for the light-switch; then he remembered that it was at the head of the stairs. That didn't matter. First he had to get out of the armor. He didn't trust Selma. He certainly didn't want her to see him inside the armor.

He slapped at himself several times before he realized that, with the gauntlets on, he couldn't grasp the buckles or hooks to unlock the pieces of the armor. How could he get the gauntlets off? He beat them aginst the stone walls. He found a hammer and pounded at himself.

It would be impossible to say when Slater began to panic and lost his head.

He must have started to scream, but Selma, even if she could have heard him through the helmet and the floor of the house, was not at home. She always attended the church social on Monday nights.

The shaky stairs gave way and crashed under him as he tried to get up to the kitchen door. He ran into the wall a number of times. He exhausted himself trying to get up the coal chute to the window. But even if he had been able to reach the window, he would probably not have had the strength to drag himself out.

He soon grew too weak even to drag his weight over the floor. He lay on his back, slept fitfully.

Very early Tuesday morning, a truck backed up and dumped five tons of coal down the chute.

ROG PHILLIPS

GOOD SOUND THERAPY

Somehow, we feel sorry for Dr. Melvin Fogg up to the very end of this light treatment of a heavy subject. I particularly liked the doctor when he dropped the typewritten sheets into the garbage can. A practical and sensible act, as the author points out with sly humor.

Indeed, the whole story is very *practical and* very *sensible.*

ROG PHILLIPS

GOOD SOUND THERAPY

Dr. Melvin Fogg sighed heavily and shut off the array of instrument panels and recording meters that occupied most of the desk-space in his therapy room.

"We aren't getting anywhere yet, Walter," he said, crossing to the man lying on the analysis table. At his words the voice typewriter beside the desk clattered swiftly. "Of course this is only our fifth session. We can't expect much yet. But we should be picking up one or two clear-cut syndromes by now and we aren't. I could almost believe you are consciously hiding everything from me that is of any importance."

He began unstrapping electrodes from the wrists, temples, ankles, and bared chest of the patient.

"We haven't even established your truth curve. Your reactions are too mixed up. For example when you think of your wife you go into a rejection psychosis that would be interpreted by an ordinary technician as lying—that you actually had no wife at all. But that is because you reject her. To your subconscious you *have* no wife."

The voice typewriter ejected the sheet of paper into the hopper and inserted another, then typed faster to catch up. Dr. Fogg sighed again.

The patient, Walter Myers, freed of the dozens of electrodes, sat up. He was a small, thin man, about thirty, with sandy hair and eyebrows, and sallow, slightly freckled skin.

"I'm trying not to hide anything," he said defensively.

"Yes, yes, I know." Dr. Fogg ran his stubby fingers through his mane of thick black hair and brought his bushy eyebrows together in a frown.

"I wouldn't throw away twenty-five dollars every Wednesday if I didn't intend for you to do me some good."

"Let's hope not," Dr. Fogg grunted. He glanced at the gold wristwatch on his thick, hairy wrist. "My next patient is waiting. You can find your way out, Walter. Down the hall to the side door."

"Of course, Doc." Walter Myers slipped into his suitcoat, the right hand pocket slapping his side from the weight of something small and heavy. His eyes darted in alarm to the doctor who seemed not to have noticed.

In the hallway he pressed his ear to the door until he heard the doctor's deep voice and a reply in a shrill female voice. Then on tiptoe he stole down the hall to another closed door. With great care he turned the knob and inched the door open.

The room he entered was a comfortably furnished office with wall to wall carpeting, a walnut desk, walnut-finish, all metal file cabinet and strongbox assembly, davenport, floor lamps, and three large comfortable chairs. The drapes over the windows were partly open, letting in enough moonlight to make objects in the room visible.

Walter Myers took the heavy object from his pocket. It was a blue-steel, blunt-nosed revolver. He released the safety on it, then climbed over the davenport and settled down behind it to wait.

His eyes glittered feverishly in the darkness . . .

Dr. Fogg let Mrs. van Jason out the front door and locked it,

and turned out the lights in the waiting room on his way back through. In the therapy room he put away the electrodes, and stared moodily at the array of instruments on his desk, wishing he knew more of what they could tell him.

If only he knew how to read them.

He did know, of course—as well as the average psychiatrist. But all it brought him was a clearer realization of how little he knew about the human mind. God, how little! The primary function of all this modern equipment still remained the one of dazzling the patient.

Dr. Fogg picked up the stack of typed sheets from the hopper behind the voice typewriter.

Why did he feel so depressed tonight? It had all the earmarks of presentiment. He chuckled dryly at the thought. Presentiment was one manifestation of the god-drive, the attempt of the archetypal *I*-symbol to occupy the central symbol position, to be God, to exercise the sophism, *I am omniscient, therefore I am invincible.*

That heavy object in Walter Myers' pocket had bothered him. But it had probably been only an apple. No, not round enough for an apple. Perhaps a bottle of aspirins. Certainly not a gun.

Still, a negative little psychopathic liar like Walter might some day turn into a killer to protect his lies. You stood and listened to him and impressed him with encephalographs, cardiographs, neurographs, a clattering voice typewriter that typed page after page for the wastebasket, and prayed the lid would stay on while you worked it dangerously loose.

Dr. Fogg turned out the lights in the therapy room and went out into the hall. Here with all the doors shut it was peaceful and quiet—a symbol of life's road, perhaps. Straight toward the

grave, down at the end of the hall, with doors every few steps that opened into rooms, the symbols of jobs, ways of life, marriages. But always again there was the hallway, with the door at the end leading into the hereafter—and the garbage can.

Smiling at his little joke he went down the hall and out to the back stoop, and dropped the day's accumulation of typewritten sheets into the garbage can. A practical and sensible act, but also having its adverse symbolic effect on his mind as he well knew. More and more he was beginning to consider the purgative ramblings of his patients as deserving no other fate.

Returning to the hall he closed and locked the door, then walked quickly to the door to his private office, feeling almost cheerful as he opened it. He turned on the lights and crossed to the filing cabinet. He twirled the combination on the strongbox and pulled open the door. From its interior he brought out a half filled fifth of a good grade of whiskey and carried it to the desk with him and sat down.

Leaning back, he tipped the bottle to his lips and drank several swallows as though it were water. Then he put the bottle down in front of him and sat very still, waiting for the alcohol to work.

Suddenly the impulse to get really drunk possessed him. He lifted his bushy eyebrows in surprise at the impulse. His trained mind went to work tracing it to its source.

That premonition. That damned premonition. He hadn't gotten rid of it. He had pushed it down and it had come up again —as a desire to get drunk.

He took another stiff drink, and leaned back, half closing his eyes.

Then he said, only because he had to say something, "Well what in the world are you doing here, Walter?"

Walter Myers had stood up behind the davenport, his snub-nosed revolver pointed at Dr. Fogg.

"Stand up," Walter Myers rasped. "Stand up and don't make any sudden moves. Cup your hands against the back of your head."

Very carefully Dr. Fogg obeyed, and at the same time he talked soothingly. "I understand what is driving you to this, Walter," he said. "Actually, you don't have to come back for more sessions. No law says you have to. No, it is *something within you* that says *you must*—and to escape that commanding voice you feel you must do this thing. Isn't that so?"

"Nuts," Walter said. "You're a lousy quack. Nothing is wrong with me. Absolutely nothing. You hear?"

"Of course there isn't, Walter," Dr. Fogg said, straightening up, his hands locked behind his head. "Nothing monumental, at any rate. If I've seen it once I've seen it a thousand times, a person concealing something that he would almost rather die than confess. And almost invariably it is something perfectly normal *which he has been taught since early childhood to think of as a monstrous sin!*"

He saw the amusement in Walter's expression.

"Now," Dr. Fogg said, smiling with a calmness that belied the beads of perspiration on his forehead, "You feel safe. You are going to kill me, so that I can never learn what it is you hide from yourself and the world."

Walter Myers put one leg carefully over the back of the davenport and sat straddling it while he brought the other up.

"You sound to me, Doc," he said, "As if you *wished* me to kill you." He sat on the back of the davenport with his feet on the cushion, and for an instant there was a look of sympathy and pity in his eyes.

Dr. Fogg saw the pity and it terrified him. He was quite sure that only a killer who had made up his mind to kill could experience pity at such a moment. But perhaps he could capitalize on it . . .

"Possibly I do—or part of me does, anyway," he said heavily. And in seeming blind forgetfulness he lumbered up from his chair and came around the desk, putting his hands in his pockets. In the center of the room he stopped, aware of the flattening of Walter's eyes, and the whitening of his knuckle against the trigger.

As Walter slowly relaxed again Dr. Fogg breathed a silent prayer of thanks. He was in a much better position now.

"You almost got it right then," Walter Myers said.

"Sorry," Dr. Fogg said gruffly. "I forgot myself," He waited an appropriate interval, then added, "In the therapy room I am used to keeping my own feelings in the background. Here in my private office—" He nodded toward the whiskey bottle. "My feelings come out." He smiled a twisted smile. "Would you like a drink, Walter?"

"Ha!" Walter snorted. "You'd like the chance to turn the tables on me and send for the police."

"No, Walter, I would like to help you."

"I thought you wanted me to help *you*," Walter Myers said, smiling slightly.

Dr. Fogg nodded. This might be the way out. Walter seemed to be swinging to a somewhat paranoid expansiveness. It might pay to coax it along a bit. "Maybe I do," he said slowly. "In some ways, sometimes, I'm as confused as my patients seem to be."

"And you think maybe *I* could help *you*?" Walter Myers said, a toying indecision in his voice and expression.

Dr. Fogg found it difficult to conceal his surge of hope. He

was succeeding! With remarkable self control he put on an expression of almost hopeless discouragement and said, "I wish *somebody* would help me."

"Well..." Walter Myers stepped down off of the davenport. "As a matter of fact, in a manner of speaking, that's what I was planning on doing. I really don't want to kill you, unless I have to. You see, like you I'm a specialist in my line of work. I specialize in helping people like you."

"What is your line of work?" Dr. Fogg asked eagerly. Things were working fine now. Later, when Walter was gone, he could have his nervous reaction, but right now he must play his fish with infinite care.

"I'm a thief," Walter Myers said.

Dr. Fogg blinked. "A—a what?" he said.

"Let's see if I can get you to understand," Walter Myers said. "As you know, most people's aberrations stem from their search for a father-substitute. Some tear up traffic tickets to force the police to punish them. One special kind, the kind I'm interested in, doesn't tear up traffic tickets. Instead, they fail to report all their income. They report enough to keep from being investigated. The rest? They can't bank it because then it would be on record, so they keep it in cash somewhere where they can get their hands on it quickly."

Dr. Fogg's face began to turn pasty. His eyes darted toward the open strongbox section of the file cabinet, and away again with great rapidity.

"What they subconsciously want," Walter Myers said, smiling, "Is—not the money—but to be caught at it and punished so they can feel that someone or something—Fate, perhaps—has become a father-substitute to them. And that's where I come in. I locate such people. It's fairly easy. You'd be surprised how

many there are. When I find one I study him until I know all I need to know. Then I step in and take the money he's saved up. He doesn't dare report the theft because then the revenue boys would want to know where he got so much money. He just has to take it on the chin and keep his mouth shut, like any well-disciplined kid getting a licking."

Walter Myers inched toward the strongbox, his gun pointed at Dr. Fogg's chest.

"Don't move, Dr. Fogg," he said as he filled his pockets with packs of currency. "Don't try anything foolish that will get you killed. Try to understand that what I'm doing is for your own good. It's rough." Walter Myers shook his head in what appeared to be genuine sympathy.

"But it's good sound therapy."

BORDEN DEAL

THE SECRET BOX

As I mentioned earlier, Borden Deal will have to look to his laurels now that his wife has taken typewriter in hand.

At the moment, I'd say it's sort of nip and tuck between them. Where does your vote go?

BORDEN DEAL

THE SECRET BOX

TOMMY was not afraid until he picked up the telephone. Then he knew that he was afraid because his voice was shaking when he spoke to the operator.

"The police," he said, just like the people on TV said it. "Give me the police."

"What do you want, little boy?" the operator said in that exasperated voice grown-ups get when they don't like the game you're playing.

He tried to steady his voice. He wanted to cry but he knew that he couldn't cry. Not yet. Not for a long time yet.

"The police," he repeated. "Somebody shot Mark and my mother. Somebody killed them."

He heard the sharp intake of the operator's breath and he knew it was all right now; she didn't believe he was playing any more. Then he had the police on the phone and it was better, he could just think about telling them his name and where he lived and that Mother and Mark were lying on the floor dead where someone had shot them.

He hung up the phone and went back to sit on the sofa. He did not let himself look at the bodies but kept his eyes firmly on the opposite wall. The room was warm but he was cold in his pajamas and he wished suddenly that he was still in his warm

bed with the voices of Mark and Mother in the living room and that he was just dreaming it instead of really being in it. He wanted to wake up and not have it true, with the police really and truly on the way here with their sirens whining along the streets.

Thinking of that, he wanted to turn on the TV set. He was never allowed up this late and he had often wondered what kind of programs they had on TV at this time of night. But he knew that would not be the thing to do. The thing to do was to sit on the sofa in his pajamas until the police came; he couldn't even go into his daddy's room and wait for them there; he had to wait here in the living room where the bodies were.

He began to hear it now, very faint in the distance and then coming closer and closer until it frightened him. It was never that close on TV, not even when the police car was right in front of the screen. It was never alive, that scream of the police siren, like this real one that was coming after him.

It stopped with a low growl of sound out in front of the house and then he heard them coming up the walk. He did not move until the doorbell rang and after the sound of the siren the doorbell sounded very soft and musical and ordinary for he was used to hearing that all the time.

He got down from the sofa and went to open the door. He looked up into the faces of the tall blue men standing there and then they went on past him into the living room.

"Good God," one of them said. "Good God, the kid was telling the truth."

He could look at the bodies now because the cops were looking at them. He stood there in the middle of the floor, his bare feet cold on the tile floor, and watched while the cop knelt over Mark sitting in the chair he always sat in while he was here.

Nearly always, unless he was sitting on the sofa close to Mother. Mark sat in the chair and he did not look like he was dead at all. But Tommy knew that he was dead.

Mother was dead, too. She was sprawled in the doorway leading into the kitchen, the other cop leaning over her where she had fallen. There had been two drinks in her hands and one of the glasses had only spilled while the other was broken, the fragments of glass glittering. She had always said that if you dropped anything on this tile floor it was a goner. But one of the glasses had not broken after all.

He wanted to tell the cops that you weren't supposed to touch the bodies, but he didn't say anything. They ought to know what to do without an eight-year-old boy telling them. So he sat down on the sofa again and waited. He was going to have a lot of waiting to do. He had stopped trembling when he'd hung up the phone and now he was all right again.

One of the cops came over to him. "How did it happen, sonny?" he said.

Tommy looked up at him and started to tell him how it had happened but the other cop stopped him.

"Better wait till the lieutenant gets here," he said. He shook his head, as though unaware that Tommy could see the warning. "He might not be able to tell it but once . . . just a kid. Call in, Charlie, and get them on the job."

Charlie went to the phone and then the one who had stopped him from telling it sat down beside him. He put his blue-clothed arm around Tommy.

"How are you, old fellow?" he said in a kind of voice he'd never heard a cop use on the television shows.

He wanted to move away from the arm, but he did not. "I'm all right," he said. The arm was making him warm and sleepy

and he knew he could not go to sleep now. Not now. Not until it was all over.

The cop leaned back and looked at him. "You're a fine brave young fellow," he said.

Tommy thought he was doing all right, himself, but he didn't say so. He knew the lieutenant was coming and he wouldn't be in blue policeman clothes and he would be the one to ask all the questions. This one didn't have to ask questions so he could afford to sit down and put his arm around a person and use a kind voice in talking to him.

Then the lieutenant was there. He was a little man, smaller than the two policemen who had first come, and he was not alone. There was a whole bunch of men with him, a man with a camera and a man with a doctor's bag and another one with some other stuff that he went around looking for fingerprints with and all of a sudden the room was full of cops doing the things they always did on the television shows.

The lieutenant stood back and watched them for a moment, looked at the bodies briefly, and Tommy wondered if they were going to move them now. Then he came over and looked down at Tommy, his hands in his pockets and his shoulders hunched over.

"He was all alone, huh?" he said to the cop.

The cop was standing up now. "Yes," he said. "He's taking it well, though." Then he added in a strange voice, "He was the one who called in. The desk man told me it was him."

The lieutenant looked down at Tommy. He quatted down on his heels before him. "What's your name, old fellow?" he said.

"Van," Tommy told him. "My name is Van."

The lieutenant kept on looking at him. "It says on your pa-

jama pocket that your name is Tommy," he said, pointing to the letters.

"That's the name my mother called me," he said. "Ever since Daddy left she's called me that. But Daddy calls me Van, and that's my name."

"The man over there isn't your daddy?" the lieutenant said in a sharp voice.

"That's Mark," Tommy told him. He wanted to go on and tell the lieutenant that Mark called him T.V. Smith because T.V. was his initials and because Tommy always wanted to stay up and watch television when Mark was there. But he decided not to mention it.

The lieutenant looked up at the cop. "Where is your daddy?" he asked Tommy.

"He doesn't live here any more," Tommy told him. "Just me and Mother." He looked at the lieutenant and said in a solemn voice, "Mother and Daddy aren't married any more."

The lieutenant's face tightened with satisfaction and he glanced at the cop again. Then he smoothed his face out, he even smiled a little. "What did your daddy want when he came here tonight?" he said. "Did he want to talk to your mother?"

"Daddy wasn't here," Tommy told him, with surprise in his voice. "He didn't come tonight. He comes sometimes on Sunday. But he doesn't ever come here at night any more. Just Mark."

The lieutenant's face was tight again when Tommy got through saying that. One of the other men came over, then.

"Well, Bill," he said. "This is the way it looks."

Lieutenant Bill stood up and listened to the man. Tommy listened too, holding the trembling far inside him where no one could see it, and for the first time he let himself wonder when

Daddy would come. He would come sooner or later. Tommy knew that. He had to. He would come and Tommy wouldn't be Tommy any more; he would be Van again.

They wouldn't make a little boy eight years old stay in this house by himself. He would get to go with Daddy, and that would be good; that would be worlds better than just having Daddy's room.

Mother never had liked that, how Tommy always wanted to play in Daddy's room. It was a little room upstairs where Daddy used to work when he lived with them and stayed at home all day writing the books that he wrote. There was a desk and a tall green file and a big comfortable real-leather chair that Tommy liked to curl up in and go to sleep. And there was the secret box. It was a box that had belonged to his daddy because he'd found it in the back of the green file and now because Daddy was gone it belonged to Tommy and it was his secret, the only secret he had, and it was a big part of the reason why he liked Daddy's room.

But when Daddy came he wouldn't need the room or the faint smell of Daddy's pipes you could still smell in the real leather of the chair; he wouldn't even need the secret box any more.

All the time he was listening to the man talking to Lieutenant Bill.

"It must have happened about this way," the man told Lieutenant Bill. "The man was sitting in that chair, while the boy's mother was in the kitchen fixing some drinks. The man was shot first, sitting right in that chair—it looks like a .32 but we can't be sure yet—and then the woman was shot when she came running out of the kitchen with the drinks in her hands."

"Why wasn't the man standing up?" Lieutenant Bill said.

"If somebody rang the doorbell, or even if somebody busted in here . . ."

The man shook his head. "Well, he was sitting down. Maybe the door wasn't locked and he didn't see the murderer until it was too late to move. But that's about the way it happened . . . the man first, in the chair, and then the woman." He shook his head. "Two bullets in each of them. Death was practically instantaneous."

The lieutenant turned his attention back to Tommy again. He sat down beside him, still looking up at the man.

"This boy here is going to help us out," he said. "He's going to tell us all about it. Aren't you, Tommy?"

"I know your name too now," Tommy told him. "It's Lieutenant Bill."

The men laughed and the lieutenant said, "All right, Tommy, you just call me Lieutenant Bill." He paused a moment. "Now, I'm going to ask you some questions, Tommy. I want you to think hard and get the answers right. That way you can help us find whoever it was that killed your mother. Understand?"

"All right," Tommy said. He wanted to tell Lieutenant Bill to call him Van because that was his name now, but he didn't say anything.

Lieutenant Bill put his hand on his arm. "Are you all right?" he said anxiously. "I've got to ask you, Tommy. So you've got to be a fine brave kid and help us out."

"All right," Tommy said again. Then he couldn't help it any more. "When will my daddy come?" he said.

Lieutenant Bill said, "We'll get him here as quick as we can. I promise you that. We want to see him, too."

Tommy was satisfied; he could feel the knot of tenseness dissolving inside him. Everything would be all right when Daddy

came, and he knew he could last long enough, knowing for sure that Daddy was on the way.

"Now tell me," Lieutenant Bill said, "was Mark your mother's friend?"

"Yes," Tommy said. "Ever since Daddy left, Mark's been hanging around here."

The listening men laughed and Tommy knew what the laughing was about but he didn't let it show. Lieutenant Bill frowned up at them and they hushed.

"Were there any other men who came here, too?" Lieutenant Bill said. "How many others?"

Tommy considered that one. He had to be careful. "Well," he said, "for awhile there were one or two but that didn't last long. Pretty soon it was just Mark. Because Mark and Mother were going to get married."

He watched Lieutenant Bill's face and saw that that was all right.

"Did they fight much?" Lieutenant Bill said. "Did you ever hear them quarreling?"

Tommy considered that one, too. "Well, some," he said. "But not as much as Mother and Daddy used to."

"What did they fight about?"

Tommy looked straight into Lieutenant Bill's face. "Me, mostly," he said.

"Was Mark your friend?"

Tommy considered the question.

"Well, he was more Mother's friend," he said. "He didn't like me very much. He kept saying my daddy ought to take care of me instead of Mother. But Mother wouldn't listen to him. She said where she went I went and that she wasn't going to let Daddy have me."

Lieutenant Bill looked up at the men and shook his head. "Little pitchers," he said. "Out of the mouths of babes . . ." And Tommy knew what he meant by that, too.

"What about your mother and father?" he said to Tommy. "What was it they fought about when your father was here? About other men?"

Tommy shook his head. "About me, mostly, too," he said. "But it was different from Mark. They both didn't want the other to have me." He took a deep breath. "There was a big fight all about it and the judge even took me into his room and asked me whether I wanted to live with my mother or my daddy and I told him but they gave me to my mother instead and Daddy could come only on Sunday once in awhile and Mother didn't even want me to go into his room and sleep in his leather chair and play with the things that he left."

"The poor little guy," Lieutenant Bill said to nobody in particular, in that soft voice he'd never heard a cop use on television, not even once. "Your mother wasn't very good to you, was she?"

"Yes," Tommy said. "She was just as good as she could be." He looked at Lieutenant Bill seriously, trying to make him understand. "It was just that she had Mark. She didn't need me because she had Mark."

There was a little silence after that and Tommy looked at the men. They were all stopped working now, watching him and Lieutenant Bill talking together.

Lieutenant Bill took a deep breath. He put his hand on Tommy's knee. "Tommy," he said. "I'm going to ask a hard question now. I know it isn't going to be easy. But you're a big boy and you've got lots of guts and I know you're going to tell me the answer."

"All right," Tommy said. "If I can."

Lieutenant Bill put his hand on his head, the way Daddy did sometimes, and ruffled his hair. "That's the boy," he said. "Now tell me. What happened here tonight? Take it step by step, Tommy. First—were you in bed when . . ."

"Yes," Tommy said. "I was in bed and Mark was here and I could hear them in the living room. They weren't fighting or nothing, not tonight, they were laughing and carrying on the way they do sometimes. And then there wasn't anything for awhile and I nearly went to sleep instead of listening and then all of a sudden I heard the pistol start to shooting."

He took a deep breath. "It shot four times. I was scared and at first I got down under the covers and I didn't want to go and see. But then I got up and I went into the living room and there was Mark in the chair and Mother in the kitchen door and the broken glass on the floor. But one glass didn't break. So they were both dead and the front door was standing wide open, so I locked the front door and then I called the police and at first the operator thought that I was just playing a game and she was mad at me but finally she gave me the police and the two policemen came, and you came, and you told me that my daddy was going to be here."

He stopped then, breathless, watching Lieutenant Bill's face. It looked as though he were hurting, the way it was twisted up, and then Tommy knew it was all right because he didn't move his hand away but instead gripped his shoulder with it good and hard.

"You didn't see anybody?" Lieutenant Bill said. "Nobody at all? Stop and think."

"No," Tommy said. "Like I said, I put my head under the

covers before I came in here. The front door was standing wide open. But whoever it was was gone."

Lieutenant Bill stood up. "Well, I guess he's helped us all he can," he said. He looked down at Tommy, studying him. "He's quite a little guy."

Tommy looked away from him, then, and made himself wonder what kind of television they had by this time of night. It was getting very late. Then Lieutenant Bill turned away from him, seeming to forget Tommy completely, his voice getting brisk and businesslike.

"Any results on the father?" he asked one man. "He's number one, you know. He better have an air-tight. And we've got to do something about this boy. He can't stay up all night, and I'd rather not take him to a Home. He's going to break down sooner or later and he'll need his daddy then. Unless . . ."

He stopped, but he did not look at Tommy. Tommy knew, though. Lieutenant Bill thought it had been his daddy who had come in the house and shot his mother and Mark, his daddy who had left the front door wide open. He hoped that Daddy would have an air-tight, because he didn't want to go to a Home. He did need somebody. He needed somebody pretty bad right now.

He sat on the sofa, holding himself in tight and hard, and made himself get interested in the way they put the bodies on a little low stretcher and wheeled them out of the house and put them into an ambulance and took them away. The little man with the equipment was still dusting for fingerprints and he watched him for awhile. Then he considered asking Lieutenant Bill if he could go up into his daddy's room and wait there, but he decided he better not.

Then there was a phone call, and Lieutenant Bill talking to someone, and then he came over to Tommy.

"He checks out," he told the other men. "He was at a party with some friends. Never out of sight for a minute." He turned to Tommy. "We finally got hold of your daddy, Tommy. He's on his way to get you right now."

Tommy wanted to be sure he had it straight. He looked seriously at Lieutenant Bill. "Did he have an air-tight, Lieutenant Bill?" he said.

Lieutenant Bill laughed. "He couldn't have a better," he said. "No sir, son, your daddy didn't kill your mother. That's one thing we can be sure of."

"Well," Tommy said, "I knew that. I just wanted to be sure you did."

Lieutenant Bill shook his head. "But that really makes it a puzzler," he said half to himself. "That really puts the frosting on the cake."

Tommy didn't care what Lieutenant Bill said any more. He was waiting for Daddy and then he didn't have to wait any more; Daddy came striding through that front door and gathered him up in his arms and he could cry a little while because Daddy held him close and warm and it was a thousand times better than the leather chair could ever be.

Then Daddy and Lieutenant Bill had to talk a little bit, in low tight voices, but Tommy didn't listen any more. He was looking instead at the woman.

She was a pretty woman, and she had come in with Daddy. She had on a white dress down to the floor and she smelled good in the room with all the men. She looked at Tommy, and then she looked embarrassed as though she wanted to come close to him but was afraid to touch him at the same time.

Daddy came back. "Come on, Van," he said. "I'm taking you home. You're going to live with Daddy now. From now on."

Tommy pointed with the whole reach of his arm and hand and finger. "Who's she?" he said, pointing at the woman.

Daddy looked at her and laughed a funny kind of laugh. "That's Martha," he said. Martha came close then, took Tommy's hand in her warm hand, and smiled at him. Daddy looked back at Tommy. "She just might be your new mother one of these days," he said with that silly way of talking grown people got sometimes. "If I can talk her into it. And I think I just about have."

Tommy looked at her. He took his hand out of her warm clasp. Then he looked at his daddy. He studied his daddy's face.

"Can I have secrets there?" he demanded. He felt very strong and sure of himself now. He had been strong and sure all night, hadn't he? He'd thought he could quit when Daddy got here but he could keep right on without any trouble.

"Sure," Daddy said heartily. "All the secrets you want. You'll have your own room, and everything."

"Real secrets?" he said, his voice insistent. "Not just make-believe secrets?"

"Of course," his daddy said. "You know I always keep a promise."

Tommy looked at Martha. "But will she?" he said pointedly.

"Of course, Van," Martha said. She smiled in a silly way at his daddy. "Any boy needs his own secrets."

"All right then," Tommy said. "I've got a secret I want to take with me. A secret box."

"Get it," his daddy said. "You've got to get to bed, boy."

Tommy went up the stairs to his daddy's room. He opened the door. He did not have to turn on the light but went straight

in the darkness to the file and opened the bottom drawer. He reached far in the back into the secret place and took out the secret box. It felt firm and good in his hands. It was an old cigar box he had found one day playing in the room where Daddy had worked and it had been his secret ever since. From everybody. Everybody in the world.

He put the box under his arm and started out of the room. Then he stopped. He fumbled the lid open in the darkness and put his hand inside the box. He touched the cold metal of the .32 pistol, slipping his hand around the grip and holding it for a long good solid moment. He had done it just the way he had known he could, holding the gun straight and steady in both hands and seeing the surprised look on Mark's face and then turning and shooting again but he couldn't remember the way she had looked.

He thought about the two bullets that were left. Then he released the gun and closed the box and tucked it under his arm. His daddy smiled and Martha smiled and Lieutenant Bill and all of his men smiled to see him marching so bravely out of the house into his new strange world with his secret box hugged under his arm.

KENNETH J. McCAFFREY

THE RESIGNATION

This is a very short story with a real wallop in the last two brief paragraphs. I defy you to anticipate the ending, yet the structure is so flawless that you will exclaim after reading it: "Of course! I should have known it all along." This is one of the most difficult tests for a short mystery story to pass.

KENNETH J. McCAFFREY

THE RESIGNATION

MARCIA asked: "About how many do you think you've killed, George?" She was sprawled lazily over the big leather chair, watching George Frankel gather crisp white handkerchiefs from the top bureau drawer and arrange them neatly in the valise.

He didn't look up, but concentrated on his task, his delicate hands busy with a crumpled pair of socks in an empty corner. "That's a strange question. I've never really counted them up."

He stood up straight and arched his stiffened back. "I'd say eighteen. Maybe twenty. I'd really have to think about it. Why did you ask?"

"I was just wondering." She picked up a magazine and began flipping the glossy pages. George Frankel bent again to his packing. "Do you think they'll let you quit?" She spoke in a matter-of-fact tone, with no emotional shadings of revulsion or fear. George Frankel would know what to do.

"I don't see why not. After all, it's a business just like any other business. They want someone killed and they pay me to do it. It's just like having someone paint your house or fix your car. You can do it yourself but it's better to have an expert."

It was very logical and Frankel had a clean orderly mind that put everything in its proper place. "Now I've made enough and I'm going to retire," he said.

"You certainly make it sound simple," Marcia said. "Almost like Social Security. I was just wondering if it makes sense to go and tell them." She didn't look up but continued to turn pages rapidly, barely scanning the advertisements that flashed by in black and white, and four-tone colors.

He snapped the case closed. "It's cleaner this way and they still owe me money." He turned around. "Besides, I've taken precautions."

"Oh?"

Ignoring the question, he crossed to where she was sitting and bent over the chair. "Just think, baby. We can travel, see the world, and maybe buy a place in the country to settle down. We'll even get married if you want, and have a dozen kids."

She looked up at him. "Sounds good, but I don't know about the brat angle." They both smiled.

"Well, all in good time. First for some fun." He returned to the bureau and took the snub-nosed .38 from the bottom drawer. He flipped out the barrel and gave the cylinders a fast professional spin. Then he slid the gun into the flat leather holster that nestled under his arm. He picked up his coat, dusted a piece of lint from the collar, and carefully put the garment on. He adjusted his bow tie before the mirror.

"Now this is the plan, honey." Marcia put down the magazine and gave him her undivided attention. "When I leave here you'll call a cab and have him pick up our bags and deliver them to the Central American Line pier," he went on quickly. "Five minutes later you'll walk down the stairs all the way to the basement and leave by the rear door. You won't take a taxi. You'll get a bus over on Pine Street and go downtown. Register at the Blackstone Hotel."

"Wait a minute. What's all this about?"

"Just listen. Register at the Blackstone Hotel and in half an hour have a meal sent up. When the room waiter leaves walk down by the fire stairs and out the back way. Then go to this address on Greene Avenue and wait." He handed Marcia a slip of paper. "Have you got all that?"

"I've got it but I don't get it," she said. "I thought you were simply going to tell them you're through and walk out."

"Just insurance, honey—just insurance. I never leave anything to chance. I'm covering my bet that they'll take it right. If they don't they'll never find me anyway. Now give me a kiss and I'll get started."

Marcia came over to him, and kissed him hungrily on the mouth. He held her yielding body to him for a long moment and then abruptly pulled away. "Well, let's get it over with," he said.

"George!" He paused at the door, scowling. "Be careful," she pleaded. He nodded and went out.

It had all been very cordial, too cordial. George Frankel didn't like it. The Big Man, all smiles, had admitted suspecting that Frankel was thinking of quitting. Naturally, anyone had a perfect right to retire, and he might even do it himself someday. He had gotten up and gone to the safe for the money, and nobody else had moved or said anything.

They had all shaken hands and Frankel had wise-cracked that they'd find somebody else just as good, or at least nearly as good. The Big Man had laughed and slapped him on the back. "Not half as good as you, son," he had chuckled.

George Frankel was practically dead when he got into his car but he had no way of knowing that.

He eased the car into the crosstown traffic and drove on the slower inside lane. He was stopped at the first light, and watched

uneasily in the rearview mirror as two men got in another car and pulled into the lane a few lengths behind him. It was precisely what he'd known would happen.

Everything would depend on the next few minutes and there was no time for panic or running gun fights. This was big city traffic. Everything inched forward slowly in a great hurry and he'd have to use the delay to advantage. Correct timing was vital. The slightest miscalculation was a luxury he couldn't afford.

Frankel swung into Lexington Avenue, and crept forward behind a slow-moving bus. The trailing car made it on the same light, and shifted over to the left to keep him in sight. Perspiration glued George's hands to the wheel and the fumes of the traffic brought on a spasm of coughing. He had an impulse to get out of the car, and run. But he knew that so rash an act would have been suicidal.

They'd be on him instantly and people would be staring as they hustled him back to the car and abandoned all pretense of not wanting to gun him down in broad daylight. The bus started up with a lurch and George kept on its back for the next five blocks. The streets passed slowly. Thirty-Eight, Thirty-Ninth, Fortieth. Traffic stopped again.

He could see the green post of the subway entrance on the next corner. But he knew that if he went for it now he'd still have to run and too many people would get in the way. He felt for the token in his pocket. Just possibly it might save him the precious seconds he'd need.

The light went green, and they started to move again. At the corner George stopped, turned off the ignition, and stepped out of the car. The man in back sat motionless for a moment before he realized that the car was being abandoned. He leaned on his

horn, but Frankel was already on the sidewalk and thirty feet from the entrance of the subway.

He shot a quick look over his shoulder and noted with an excited satisfaction the delayed reaction of the two shadows. They had waited too long and Frankel had a few more precious seconds added to his start.

He dove down the stairs just as the muffled rumble of an approaching train came to his ears. He brushed past an elderly woman who dropped a bag of onions and a young man who grabbed his arm and asked with venom where in hell he thought he was going. He spun away, and the stile flipped behind him.

He took the remaining stairs in flying leaps. The train was just coming to a halt and George waited a short eternity for the doors to open. He stepped inside and faced the door. The train remained stationary and George stared at the steps and watched people hurry down them and scramble awkwardly for seats.

He waited for the two who counted and cursed the trainman for his delay in closing the doors. There was a rush on the stairs and a college student descended three steps at a time. The doors started to close, but the youth wedged a hand in, and held them open while he squeezed in fast.

George held the center pole very tightly as the train started to move. The two men came down the stairs and stood on the platform watching him. They were a million miles away and the worst was over. The rest would be simple. The train pulled out of the lighted station and moved slowly into the black tunnel.

It was nearly dark when George got off on Greene Avenue. A woman was standing on the stoop of the corner house calling to three small, quarreling children to come in because it was getting late. The rest of the block was empty. He went to the dark brownstone near the middle of the street and rang the

basement bell. The door opened and Marcia stood facing him, tense but smiling. She sighed and he went in past her.

"You were gone so long I was sure something had happened," she said. "How did it go?" She walked to the table and picked up a cigarette that was still burning in the ash tray.

"They didn't like it, and they tried to stop me," he told her. "But I had it all planned. It was close, all right. But it worked. How about you?"

"I did exactly what you told me to do!"

"Good." He went over and took down a bottle and poured a drink. "Want one?"

"No thanks."

"I rented this place about a month ago," he said. "No one knows me or anything about the place. It was all part of the plan." He tossed the drink down fast and looked up at Marcia. "They'll get over it and they'll find somebody else to do their work."

"I know," Marcia said. "They pay very well. They could have done this themselves but, as I don't have to tell *you*, they prefer to hire a trigger and just give the orders, in case something goes wrong. I knew you'd come straight here, but they told me they'd have you trailed to make sure."

Marcia brought the gun up and fired once. George stared at her and blinked and deep crimson smudged his shirt. He rocked a little and there was another smoky roar.

George looked at her in disbelief and slowly sank to the floor. Marcia stepped over the body and put one more bullet through the back of the head.

DE FORBES

A MIND BURNS SLOWLY

I cannot forget how astounded I was when I met this author soon after reading her first published story a few years ago.

I do not think it will detract from your enjoyment of this chilling story to learn that De Forbes is a charming and warm-hearted woman, the mother of three children who adore her and the wife of an advertising executive.

Keep this in mind while you read the denouement to this exercise in psychological horror.

DE FORBES

A MIND BURNS SLOWLY

THE dream was always the same.

She was a little girl again and she was standing in the garden watching her father. A handsome man, her father, with a touch of gray at his temples and a tall, strong, young-man's body clad in tennis shorts. He was going toward the summer house and she watched his long, lean legs as they moved quickly down the path. She was smiling when the dream began, happy in the memory of her father, but suddenly everything changed. Her smile left her and, as her father reached out and opened the summer house door, she screamed.

Her father turned toward her.

But it wasn't her father. It was Greg. It was Greg with the same gray at his temples, the same proud body. And all the terror in the world moved in on her. She tried to run to him and could not. She tried to scream and could not. But bursting inside her brain were the words, "No, father! No, Greg!"

At this point she always awoke, remembered.

It was all over. Greg was gone and she was a widow and she had to live with it. She was in the hospital because of it. Soon she would be out, soon she would be well, and she would be free to run and hide, to lick her wounds. It was all over.

This was the pattern of her nights and her days were empty.

"No visitors," she had told them. She wanted nothing from anyone. What could they give her? Any of them? She wanted nothing but time, time for the wounds to heal.

Seconds, minutes, hours, days, time.

The day that she left the hospital was unreal. The sky, too blue; the sun, too golden. She felt weak, colorless, powerless against all that brilliance. She looked around vaguely for Greg, before she remembered that Greg would not be there.

Frank Townsend was waiting for her instead.

Remembering the good, lawyer's face, the honest blue eyes, she was able to smile for him, to hold out her hand, to feel, even . . . a kind of pleasure.

"Jena." He held a bouquet of red roses in his arms. So like Frank. So thoughtful. So unimaginative. So red, the roses. She took them, held them awkwardly, afraid of the thorns. "Thank you, Frank," she murmured. "They're lovely."

He smiled his sweet, shy smile. "They let me bring the car into the emergency entrance," he said. "There's a reception committee waiting for you out front."

Her eyes were busy with the roses, seeing each petal, each leaf. Her eyes had been like that lately, unable to leave whatever they looked upon. Her ears, hearing, sent a signal of alarm. "Reporters?" What would they want? Tears? She would not cry—for them.

"They've been waiting impatiently," said Frank. He picked up her bag, her jacket. "I thought it would be better if I got you home first. Gave you a chance to see things clearly. Then you can see the press—when you've collected your thoughts." He began to move, to herd her before him, down one of the hospital corridors, toward the rear.

"I don't want to see them at all."

She heard him, felt him stop behind her. "Oh, you'll have to, I'm afraid. It's more than morbid interest. While you were in the hospital, Greg Grant has become a legend."

She hesitated. The door ahead of her was ablaze with sunshine. She must go out into it, become illuminated by it. She wanted, in that moment, to retreat to the shadowy world of her hospital room. But Frank walked behind her and she must go on.

"We'll have to sneak you into the house," he was saying. "They'll probably be waiting there, too."

She stopped abruptly. "I can't do it, Frank. I'm not ready yet."

He put his smile back on, made his eyes gleam with it. "That's what I've been saying, Jena. I've planned everything—to give you time."

"How long? How long will they leave me alone?"

The smile grew uncertain. "Well—I thought at least until this afternoon . . ."

"This afternoon?" She shook her head impatiently. "I can't see them today. I can't hear about it, talk about it today. Nor tomorrow. Nor any day soon at all." She heard her voice rising, saw a passing nurse glance at her curiously. She lowered her tone. "Don't they understand? I've had no time to . . . adjust . . . accept . . ."

Frank put a hand on her shoulder, lightly. She moved a little away. "You've got to face it, Jena," he said softly. "Maybe it would be better if you saw them, looked at the thing clearly, today . . ."

"No!"

She hadn't meant the word to hold such violence. Her lawyer, Greg's lawyer, studied her face with narrowed eyes. "All right," he said at last. "What do you want to do?"

"The beach house," she said. "Greg's—our hideaway. He never let anyone know about it—no one who would interfere. I can go there and stay as long as I like and they'll never find me."

"But it's been closed. There's no time to get it ready. The servants are all at the house in town."

Frank's light eyebrows met in a frown. Frank had never been one to respond to an impulse, she reflected. "It doesn't matter," she said. "I can manage . . . It will give me something to do."

Frank hesitated before he opened the door (that door to the outside, that door to the world, to a Gregless world). "All right," he said and turned the knob. "I'll buy it. For a little while. But not too long. The doctor spoke to me, Jena. He said . . ." he was putting her into the car, his voice trailed off. He went around and slid in behind the wheel. "Not too long."

The doctor said . . . she closed her eyes as the car got in motion, visualized the broad, ruddy face of the specialist who had attended her. "We've cured your physical ills, Mrs. Grant. But—" She had looked at him, looked into him and through him, was rewarded by his small expression of discomfort that came and went. "If at any time," he had continued, "you feel you need help, I think I know a man who could help you. He's a very fine psychiatrist. I'll leave you his name."

And, after the specialist had left, she had torn up the notation, torn it into little pieces and put it on her table. She hadn't let them take it away either. She wanted to be sure the specialist saw the pieces. "The doctor said . . ." Yes, she could imagine what the doctor had said. "Mrs. Grant has had a bad shock. Don't let her try to do too much, to cope with too many problems at first. It takes time for the mind to heal after a shock . . ."

It takes time. The words triggered it off and without warning, the guilt began. Another voice, an imploring voice, her voice

had used those words before. It takes time. Over and over again. And the man to whom she had said them, Greg Grant, her husband, had answered, "I understand, Jena. Oh, darling, I understand. I'll try to be patient . . ." And she had looked at him and been fascinated and repelled, interchangeable emotions that had torn her apart.

"Oh," she cried silently, "the words we can't say to one another!" How could she tell him that when he touched her he ceased to be her Greg? Became instead a stranger, an utter stranger.

How could she tell him things she couldn't even tell herself? He should have understood. (This was the rationalization.) If he really loved her, he would have understood . . .

She wished bitterly for the thousandth time that she could have loved him as he wished and then her memories made her sick and she swept them out, washed her mind and left it to dry. She filled it with other things, lovely things, poinsettias in the snow (but the blossoms caught the sun and turned to flame before her eyes); the bouquet, the warmth of a glass of fine sherry (but the wine darkened and clotted); her father, handsome, virile in his tennis clothes standing in the summer house (but his body, tied round the neck with a rope, grew dark and swelled into horror). All the waking dreams she had had in the hospital had been interspersed with the old dreams: her mother's voice crying in the next room, in the night, words not meant for little Jena, "Don't touch me again. Don't touch me!" or her mother's voice again in the night, whispering urgently, "Help me, Jena. Help me cut him down. No one must know about your father."

The man beside her—Frank, it was, yes, Frank—was talking and she accepted his voice, but not the words, let the sound of it lull her to thoughtlessness.

They took the shore road and at first Jena looked, looked in anticipation, expecting some solace from the sea, the ever-moving sea. But once again the world was too bright and the sun upon the waves looked at times like little dancing flames. She closed her eyes, kept them closed, listened to Frank's voice until she could hardly bear the rise and fall of it any more.

Chains were up across the driveway. No one had been back—since last fall—since the red and gold autumn day when Greg had closed the gate, fastened the chains. Frank got out of the car and undid the chains. His hands, unlike Greg's, were slender, white, almost like a woman's. She put her hands around the paper-covered stems of the roses, laced them around the roses, choked the roses with her hands.

The house was waiting—its blinds closed, half-asleep in the shade of the pines, waiting. For the first time that day, she could look upon something without looking away. The house was all right. It was going to be all right. As long as there was time . . .

She hardly waited for Frank to stop the car before she was out of it and running to the door. The house was white cinder block, but the sea had done things to the white so that it was not a blinding white. This pleased her and she was smiling as she stood on the porch and fumbled for her key. Behind her she could hear Frank, opening car doors, removing her small suitcase, coming toward her.

There. She had the key in the door, turned it, went in.

The drapes were pulled. The big, two-story living room was in semi-darkness. Waxed table-tops, wood that should have gleamed, looked gray under a coat of dust. The fireplace held old ashes. She turned from it, put the roses on a dusty table. When Frank appeared in the bright square of the open door, she was waiting for him.

"Thank you, Frank," she said. "Thank you for everything. I'll be all right now."

He put the case down slowly. "But—don't you want me to help you? Open the windows? See about the phone, the utilities?"

She put a gentle hand on his arm, managed to use its very gentleness to move him back, toward the door. "Not the phone," she said. "The water is on. We left it that way in case" she took a long breath, "of fire. You can stop in town and see about the electricity. Do that for me and I'll be fine."

He was on the threshold, but still he hesitated. Wouldn't the man ever go?

"But—supplies. Don't you want me to bring you some supplies?"

She shook her head. "We stocked the cupboard with canned goods last fall. I'll be quite all right."

He turned. She thought at last he would go, but he took a step forward instead. "Jena, I don't like this. It isn't right."

Control yourself, Jena, she was thinking. Don't alarm him.

She smiled. "Don't worry, Frank. Just a few days. That's all I ask. You can come back—in a few days."

"But you'll be alone. Without a phone, without a car." His eyes were begging her and suddenly she read something else there. The dumb devotion—that one day might catch fire? He took two more steps, these with determination. "No. I won't do it. I won't leave you here alone."

"Can't you see I—I want to be by myself! Get out of here!" She heard it as she screamed it, heard it as an eavesdropper hears an argument, felt a mixture of regret, of elation, and of fear. She saw Frank's form fill the doorway for an instant, block out the light for an instant, and then disappear. She closed her eyes

and listened to the sound of the car starting, moving, going away.

When she opened her eyes, the doorway was dark again. She blinked, wondered if her brain retained Frank's image as one does a too-dark picture on the television screen. But no—another body filled the doorway, a taller, sturdier body. Another man. A strange man.

"I followed you," said the man. "I followed you all the way."

Unaccountably she had moved backward, stood now well inside the room near the chintz-covered sofa. She put icy fingers on its back to support herself.

"Who are you?" she asked.

He moved toward her and she felt herself shriveling as he came near. He moved past her and went to the windows, pulled wide the drapes with a yank on the cords. The sun blazed into the room, crawled across the dusty floor, curled up in a heap in the middle of the Oriental carpet. She could see him clearly now, the white face darkened slightly by the suggestion of black beard, the wide black eyes, the thin mouth, the white teeth. She tried to read his face, to find it somewhere in her collection of remembered faces, but it was new. All new. Unless, now as he smiled, was there . . . something . . . that reminded her of . . . she drew in her breath, almost with a sob . . . Greg?

"I don't suppose you remember me," he said. "I suppose when you saw me you didn't really see me at all."

She repeated herself. "Who are you?"

He left the windows, came across the room. "My name wouldn't mean a damn thing to you. Not any more than my face. It's where you saw me that's important. That's what brought me here."

Suddenly the weakness came back. She felt tears beneath her

eyelids, tried to hold them, hide them from his sight. "I don't know what you want," she said in a shaky voice, "but you'd better go. That was my lawyer who was just here and he's gone into town on an errand. He'll be right back."

He grinned and the white teeth gleamed. "You said the pantry was well-stocked," he said. "Does that include liquor? I think we need a sociable drink."

She half-fell, half-sat on the sofa. He had heard her talking to Frank. Of course he had heard her order Frank away. She knew that he had left the room, found the kitchen. She heard him rummaging in the cupboards, heard his sound of pleasure when he found the liquor cabinet. There was then the tinkling of spoon against glass and the sound of running water. Finally, he was back with two glasses in his hands.

"You'll have to excuse the lack of ice," he said handing her a glass. She took it in nerveless fingers. "The electricity isn't on."

He sat down, gracefully unwound his height into the love seat across from her. "Now," he said, "I'll introduce myself. I'm a musician. A pianist. I played piano at the Forty-nine Palms."

The glass fell from her fingers. She didn't feel its falling, heard the sound of it, rather, as it struck the rug. He looked down at it, made a clucking sound.

"My, my," he said mildly. "Your nerves are on edge, aren't they? I'll get you another."

"What do you want with me?"

He leaned back, reached inside the pocket of his sport jacket. When he brought his hand out, it held a sheaf of newspaper clippings. He smiled at her and began to read.

" 'Greg Grant Dies in Night Club Blaze, One Hundred Killed in Hotspot Fire.' " He looked up. "The headlines can be crude, can't they?"

She was sitting in the sunlight, but she was cold. She shivered, sat there in the warmth, and shivered.

He read on. " 'The veteran film-actor, for twenty years 'King of the Movies' was killed last night in a flash fire at the night club Forty-nine Palms and a hundred other revelers died with him. But for Greg Grant, known best for his roles as the strong, tough-minded lover, his dying capped a career of derring-do that has made him a legend in his time. Greg Grant was killed while rescuing his wife, the former beautiful debutante Jena Thorp.

" 'The fire, believed to have been caused by a careless smoker, roared through the entire club in a matter of minutes. The Forty-nine Palms was decorated, in keeping with its name, with fake palm trees, running from floor to ceiling. Along the ceiling of the club were more paper decorations, palm leaves and coconuts and even paper monkeys were festooned there, making a veritable ceiling of flames when ignited. In the stampede for the doors and windows many persons were trampled underfoot. Some of those who did escape went back in to rescue friends or loved ones and so met their death.' " He looked up. "Shall I go on?"

All through her, she felt an almost unendurable pain. She tried to speak through aching, wooden lips, finally forced them to form words. "No. No. Stop it. Please."

He carefully placed the clippings on an end table, picked up his drink. "In addition to being crude, the newspapers are graphic and colorful. Don't you agree?" He didn't wait for her to answer. "That was just the first one. The others are even more interesting. They go into the late Greg Grant's life story. And they tell a great deal about Mrs. Grant, how did they put it—the former beautiful debutante Jena Thorp. Some reporter

slipped up there. He should have said the beautiful former debutante. Because you are still beautiful, Mrs. Grant. The most beautiful woman, I think, I've ever seen."

"I—" Her voice was a harsh squawk. "I'll take that drink now."

"Sure." And this time she didn't listen to what he did, fastened her eyes instead on the pile of clippings, torn by an almost overpowering impulse to take them up and cast them into the fireplace. But—oh, dear God—but she wouldn't be able to put a match to them.

"Let's not waste this one," she heard him say.

She looked down at the amber liquid, raised the glass to her lips. It tasted bitter. She drank it all.

He continued to speak.

"But they do describe Mrs. Grant," he said, "rather poetically, I think. Let's see—I believe I know it by heart." He put his head back in an attitude of thought. "Hair like spun gold. Huge blue eyes. Heart-shaped face. Figure like Venus. You'd think they'd be more original."

"What do you want?"

He seemed not to have heard her. "Much younger than her famous husband. A sort of May and December romance. But then, with Greg Grant there was no December. Was there?"

She wished she had another drink. But she didn't dare. "My husband," her voice rang out in her sincerity, "was the most exciting man in the world."

He laughed. "Oh, I believe that. I really do. A rare combination. A man of brawn and intellect. A man who never seemed to age. Even with silver in his hair he appealed to women, drew them in at the box office."

"What do you want?"

"Oh, not very much. Not enough to make you use that tone of voice. But, then, I suppose you're still on edge. Takes time to get over a thing like that."

The tears were returning. She mustn't cry in front of him. She mustn't.

"The newspapers made quite a hero out of your husband," he went on. "Called him that, right out. Courageous. Valiant. Facing death with a smile for the woman he loved. Makes a great epitaph."

She couldn't hold back any longer. She turned her face from him. He let her cry. Toward the end, he was beside her with a handkerchief. She took it, daubed at her eyes.

"I don't blame you," he said softly. "Maybe I'd feel worse about your crying if I didn't think it was good for you."

"Would you—would you get me another drink, please?" What did he want, she was thinking. And all the time she knew . . .

This drink tasted better. He went on talking. This time the listening was easier. "As I said, quite an epitaph. But, there's only one thing wrong with it. It isn't true. The whole beautiful story is a tissue of lies. Only two people know it. You know it. And I know it."

She didn't speak, only stared at him.

"We know," he said slowly, emphatically, his eyes on her, "that Greg Grant made no attempt to save his wife at all. We know that the moment somebody yelled fire, the great big hero stood up and ran, forgetting his wife, forgetting everybody except the love of his life—Greg Grant." He stood up quickly, moved toward her. "We know that, don't we?"

She put the handkerchief to her eyes, spoke around it. "He

couldn't help it," she whispered. "I didn't blame him. He was just a child at heart. A boy. And like all boys he was afraid."

He was staring down at her. She could feel the warmth of his eyes on her. "He ran. Panic-stricken. And because he ran, he died. I stood by my piano, as if I was frozen there, for a long time. I'd been watching you, ever since you came in. Because—I guess because you're so beautiful. Every chance I got to look up from the piano, I looked at you. So while I stood there, unable to move, I instinctively looked for you. I saw you, looking after him. I saw the expression on your face. It was easy to tell what you thought. You weren't afraid. You weren't panicked. You were disgusted with Greg Grant."

She took the handkerchief away from her eyes. "You're mistaken," she said calmly. "I don't know what I thought in that moment, but it wasn't disgust. I was thinking what I should do, how I should escape."

He nodded. "Oh, yes. I saw that, too. I saw you ignore the mad scramble, saw you go to the lady's room. When I saw you do that I knew you were all right. There was a window in the lady's room. An easy window, convenient to the ground. Very few had remembered it. You'd be all right. Then I could move. Then I could take care of myself. I followed your example. I climbed out—the same way. You wouldn't have been hurt at all—if you hadn't tried to get back in. If you hadn't tried to get in the front door and been hit by the smoke. They found you near him, unconscious. Smoke-inhalation. But the newspapers got it all wrong. It wasn't Greg Grant who tried to save his wife. It was you—who tried to save Greg Grant."

"He was my husband," she said. "I won't deny what you are saying, but I don't understand why you are saying it. So you and I know a secret. What do you intend to do about it?"

He smiled and sat down beside her. "Do about it? Why, nothing. Nothing at all."

She studied him, tried to see something in his face. It was bland.

"It's just," he said smilingly, "that we have a kind of bond between us. Because, as you say, we know a secret. I could, if I wanted to, take my eye-witness story to one of the more enterprising papers. It would make good reading. Very good reading. I imagine they'd pay quite a sum for it."

She sighed. "I see. You want money. You want me to pay for my husband's good name."

He held up his hands in mock horror. They were big hands, strong hands, with tiny dark hairs on the backs. "God, no. I don't want money. What do you think I am? A common blackmailer?"

"Then what do you . . . ?"

He reached out, put his hand on hers. "I just want us to be friends. After all, it isn't often that an ordinary piano player has a chance to be—shall we say good friends?—with Jena Grant. The former debutante. The widow of the great Greg Grant. I can well imagine if we didn't share our little secret, you wouldn't have had any time for me at all."

He was smiling again and he was very near her. She could feel his hand on hers, feel a certain excitement from it that spoke of more excitement to come. She couldn't tell him of the many disappointments of her marriage, of the nights and days she and Greg had been isolated one from the other by an impassable psychological barrier. But perhaps he knew. Perhaps he did.

Later they decided to swim. There were suits for both of them. They walked down the white hot sand, not touching.

But she knew as she looked at him, at the pale muscular shape of him, that they would touch.

Afterwards, they sat in the half-shade of a rock-strewn dune and she thought about him, about what it would be like. He talked and she listened—music, his early years, his ambitions, the world. She watched his hands, his strong hands, sifting sand in a white stream.

And late in the golden afternoon, on the blazing sand, he put his hands on her, moved her back against the rocky hill and she put her hands high above her head against the rampart and waited for his lips to come closer, closer . . . She moved her stretched-out arms, her hands, involuntarily. One of her hands of its own accord found it, the stone, the nice sharp stone, not too large, not too small, brought it up and down and down and down . . .

When it was all over and she had washed her hands in the sea, washed her hands—and watched him float away—she knew deep down she hadn't wanted to do it.

Any more than she had wanted to light the match and touch it to the palm tree.

THOMAS WALSH

DANGEROUS BLUFF

I don't think any collection of "Best Detective Stories" should be published without a Thomas Walsh story.

I am usually averse to the "slick" technique in storytelling. But Tom Walsh handles it with a difference. True, it does have that glossy finish demanded by every huge-circulation magazine, but it has something else, too, that shines through the gloss. It has the distinctive Tom Walsh "touch."

THOMAS WALSH

DANGEROUS BLUFF

WHEN the call came in—time, twenty past one, Saturday morning; address, old fashioned walk-up apartment in the East Seventies; complaint, prowler; complainant, party named McLaughlin—it happened to be detectives Hallahan and Garrity, from the nearest precinct house, who were sent out to investigate and report on it. But they arrived minutes after the event itself unfortunately, and back of a screaming squad car that roused nothing at all but general commotion and just about the entire neighborhood; so, of course, there was the usual female hysteric who began ululating wildly, and a lot longer and louder than the squad car, when she discovered one of the uniformed men out on her fire escape with a revolver in one hand and a big flashlight in the other.

"Now it's all right!" Detective Garrity bellowed up at her, doing an impatient best to quiet and pacify the woman. "Take it easy, will you? We just happen to be the law, lady. That's all. Only the law."

But then the uniformed man knocked over a milk bottle, with Detective Hallahan and the two McLaughlin sisters peering across at him from the kitchen window in apartment 3B. It crashed into the yard, with the Swedish superintendent leaping away from it, and then swearing up at the fire escape in a passionate Svenska dialect. And at that mischance the taller and darker of the McLaughlin girls giggled several times, giggled

again when Detective Hallahan scowled around at her and made some apparently very humorous remark to the half dozen or so tenants gathered behind them in the McLaughlin living room.

Well, that was all right. That was just the nervous reaction, probably. So Detective Hallahan cleared the apartment brusquely, made sure that Garrity was checking the cellarways and the back yard, and then got on with the thing by addressing his questions to the other McLaughlin girl—the tiny and petite one, about as big as a peanut, with the brown hair, the prim, delicate features, the earnest dark eyes, the small teeth and the extremely lady-like and restrained manner.

"Well," she began, after considering the matter and frowning up earnestly, "Janey and I were downstairs all evening in Mr. Wieboldt's apartment—One A. We only moved in here two days ago, officer, but he happens to be an old friend, and tonight he gave us a small dinner party down there. I guess we broke up about one o'clock. Then Mr. Wieboldt came up for a nightcap, and the minute I opened the door for us I saw this prowler or whatever he was crouching over by the fire escape there, bold as brass. Well!" Her mouth pursed indignantly. "Mr. Wieboldt shouted at him, Janey and I screamed, but that—that despicable creature just ducked out to the fire escape and vanished away somehow into thin air. I don't know what direction he went even—up or down. I was just petrified."

"And I hardly saw the man," sister Janey put in, touching the hair back of her right ear with a graceful though somewhat affected gesture. "I was just too excited, officer. Because this party we'd been to—well, it turned out to be an engagement party, if you can imagine the thing. For Mr. Wieboldt and me. We're getting married this spring. So—"

And she paused there, looking modestly prepared for the usual congratulations and best wishes. She didn't get them, however. There just happened to be something about her, either the elegant figure, or the bold, sparkling black eyes, or perhaps the somewhat overdone feminine archness and complacency that reminded Detective Hallahan of another girl whom he had been trying desperately to forget for three weeks now. He said nothing at all, therefore, just swinging off instantly and abruptly from her. On his left then was the small foyer. Back of him lay the kitchen. On his right, beyond a pretty antique pillared archway, he glanced into a big and still rather unsettled living room, with bare windows, an unpacked mover's barrel or two, and an old-fashioned wall mirror at the other end, topping the fireplace.

"Guess maybe I'd better look around for you," he informed the other one, keeping that round, ruddy face of his professionally stolid. "Just check the premises, lady. Then maybe you'll feel better. This is a closet?"

And he put his hand on the knob. Behind him, however, and of course reflected for him in the big foyer mirror, there was now acted out a silent but revealing pantomime between the McLaughlin sisters. The slim, bold-looking one made a face after him, stuck out her tongue and tossed up her sleek, dark head disdainfully; and her small sister, trying to hush her up apparently, made a warning gesture with both hands, came forward one or two steps and looked nervous.

"Oh, nuts!" Janey McLaughlin said then, not too loud, but loud enough for Detective Hallahan to hear her. "Who do they think they are, anyway? Only the law! And this one's so smart, Mary Ellen. He's someone from Scotland Yard, maybe."

Detective Hallahan was just opening the closet door. At that

remark, however, he turned toward the foyer again and turned slowly, ominously and deliberately.

"Might show you who I am," he announced to this Janey McLaughlin, something ugly and venomous taking over in him, and something that had never been William Aloysius Hallahan at all, essentially—not before that Dolly Bernard at any rate. "You girls ever been in trouble before, either of you? You ever been arrested for anything? You ever do time anywhere? And just speak up now. I'll show you how important I am. You can give me the whole background on this thing, either here or down at the precinct, sweetheart; so make up your mind, eh? And if—"

But then little Mary Ellen screamed at him, and so did Janey. *What?* Detective Hallahan thought. *Were they crazy, the two of them? Because it certainly*—He was hit from behind at that instant, from the closet he had just opened, and hit brutally. And perhaps he was hit again, on the way down, because quite suddenly the whole living room spread apart and then faded on him. It was—oh, the silliest darned feeling. After that nothing mattered any more to Detective Hallahan. Nothing mattered at all, somehow. Nothing came through.

"Four of you," Lt. Charley Fearick grunted at him just about twelve hours or so afterward, with Detective Hallahan standing then in a carefully deserted squad room at almost military attention, and Charley Fearick, grim but relaxed, over near the street window. "The two uniformed men, and you and Garrity. All right. What happened then? Just elucidate the thing with that acute and penetrating intellect of yours. In what possible fashion did you permit this fellow to skip out and away on the lot of you?"

"Already told you," Detective Hallahan responded effortfully, both hands clenching. "I figured there was only one of those prowlers, lieutenant. The girls told me there was. So——"

"Ah!" Charley Fearick broke in, nodding to himself as though suddenly and miraculously enlightened. "Now we're coming to it. Of course. The girls told you. The two decent and respectable young ladies, private secretaries in a big law office downtown, that you had to bully and insult over there as if they were nothing more than a couple of street-corner hussies misbehaving themselves. But tell me something else now, since I always seem to have a poor, feeble head on my shoulders when discussing complexities of this kind with our Mr. William Aloysius Hallahan—or Silly Willie, as I think I've heard Sergeant Mulligan downstairs refer occasionally to you. Why did this second prowler of theirs hide himself away in that living-room closet? Why didn't he want anyone to see him up there?"

"Because I guess one of them knew him," Detective Hallahan muttered, the top of his skull still aching and throbbing abominably. "That's why. He could have waved his gun at them and got out before I and Garrity showed up. And if he didn't——"

"So that's why," Charley Fearick said, now drawling contemptuously. "Perhaps somebody knew him! Well, it just happens that somebody did know him—Walter Wieboldt. He used to see him around the apartment house every so often this winter, and he spotted him last night just as this fellow was dashing away from the place after disposing of you like a small boy.

"Now"—and he pointed his right forefinger menacingly—"I was tipped off only last week that a darned slippery customer named Diamond Joe Ennis was visiting a girl over there; but she moved out of the place, I imagine after striking up an acquaintance with another and more high-toned gentleman

friend, and the McLaughlin sisters moved in before we were able to put our hands on Pal Joey. So what? So the coincidence struck me the minute I got the news this morning.

"Well, now—just what was going on over there? Why would Joe Ennis be sneaking back to the apartment like that, with his girl gone? What was he looking for over there? Was it possible that he had something hidden away for himself—and something valuable? Well, he did, Hallahan—the Imperial Hotel swag. Johnny Donovan dug it out for me early this morning from behind a couple of loose bricks in the living-room fireplace."

At that point he relighted a stub of cigar for himself, still glowering under tangled and ferocious red eyebrows.

"So just picture the thing. He never informed the lady friend what he had planted for safekeeping back of her fireplace, because he'd trust no one at all, that bucko; and consequently, when she decamped on him without even the least warning, he had to sneak back for the stuff, and sneak back personally. But then he was interrupted last night, and before he could get hold of that nice little chamois bag, Hallahan. And now what? Now he's just got to try again for it, since he assumes that it's still waiting for him, and also that he wasn't recognized last night—and that means I'll have to detail a couple of men in and around that apartment from now on, and day and night, naturally.

"I've already explained to the McLaughlin girls how we'll need their cooperation in this thing—how I want them to go in and out at their regular hours, and behave quite as usual, so that he'll have no reason at all to get the wind up. But meanwhile, do you see, we'll have to put somebody downstairs watching the street entrance and somebody else up in the

McLaughlin apartment to act as safety man. Who, however? Garrity and Silly Willie, is it?" And his voice rose powerfully. "Our two prize specimens? The two bright and intelligent officers, after their half-witted shenanigans last night, who have made themselves the honor and glory of the whole precinct?"

Detective Hallahan winced away from him in a wretched and hangdog manner. "I know how we handled it," he admitted miserably. "Pretty stupid, Lieutenant. But you give us another try at this fellow—I and Garrity. And I promise you that—"

"But it isn't what you promise me!" Charley Fearick bellowed at him. "It's something else. It's what you've learned, Hallahan. So will I be crazy enough to take a chance on you again—the two of you? And should I? That's the question."

It was, however, a purely rhetorical question, and one designed with the well-known Charley Fearick astuteness for moral and psychological effect, obviously. The event proved it. Because at seven that night, while Ed Garrity relieved the day man in a small pickup truck near the front door, Detective Hallahan, up in 3B again presented himself to the two McLaughlin sisters.

"Don't know what got into me last night," he informed them, making that honest and shamefaced apology in part because he wanted to make it and in part because of grim and specific instructions from Charley Fearick. "I mean speaking to you the way I did. Only—well, I had something on my mind, that's all. I wasn't myself, I guess. I'm real sorry."

Which was one way, without full and unthinkable detail, of explaining Dolly Bernard to them—because never, and as long as he lived, did Detective Hallahan feel that he could explain that episode in full even to his sister Loretta or to Ed Garrity.

Impossible! How could he? Funny thing, though. Janey McLaughlin went out somewhere or other that first evening with her Walter Wieboldt; Detective Hallahan, just for something to do, eventually began to help the other one sand down and refinish an old cherrywood desk; and when they had coffee and sandwiches afterward, say about ten-thirty or so—Detective Hallahan with his tie loosened then and his shirt sleeves rolled back, and prim little Mary Ellen perched on a kitchen stool with her knees up, and old scarf protecting her brown hair and one cheek smudged—he dropped the casual but well-meaning remark that she reminded him of his sister Loretta somehow. They were pretty good workers, the two of them. They kept going.

"Oh?" the little peanuthead said, paying absent sidewise attention to him while drying the coffee cups. "Your sister Loretta. Now isn't that nice? You mean she keeps house for you, Mr. Hallahan? You're not married?"

He hesitated a moment. But something began urging him; put it into proper perspective at long last, and then perhaps there might be blessed relief for him. So he did, first telling her about this girl he had gone around with, and this fellow he had introduced her to—his best friend. Why, he declared huskily, he and Chuck Foley had been closer than brothers; they grew up together. And then to think—But his throat tightened there. He could finish the sentence only by means of a passionate and inarticulate gesture.

"Then?" Mary Ellen demanded, glancing around at him this time with understandable and quite obvious feminine interest. "Then what? You just didn't concede, did you? Good heavens! I thought you were crazy about the girl."

"Was," Detective Hallahan admitted to her, his stubborn

Irish jaw setting itself. "Still am, maybe. But when they tell me out of a clear sky what's going on between them and how they feel about each other, I—well, I go belt him one, losing my head kind of, and she begins screaming at me that I must have been crazy to imagine that there was ever anything serious between us. It seemed like I was kind of pathetic, Miss McLaughlin, because I didn't know how to talk to a girl or even kiss one. I had no polish or finesse, you understand, no appeal for a girl. I was really Silly Willie, all right—the way the kids on the block used to call me in high school when I'd do crazy things sometimes, just to show off, I guess. She'd only felt sorry for me, she says. She'd only put up with me. So——"

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" little Mary Ellen exclaimed then, eyeing him with a quick kind of distressed and indignant feminine sympathy. "What a despicable thing to say to anyone! But she only wanted to hurt you, Mr. Hallahan. Don't you see? And I certainly wouldn't keep brooding about it. I wouldn't give her the satisfaction of it. Where's the point?"

And where, indeed? Detective Hallahan asked himself about an hour or so later, when the McLaughlin girls had retired for the night into the sanctum sanctorum of the bedroom passage, leaving the rest of the apartment all properly dark and unsuspicious from outside for Diamond Joe Ennis. It was just that he couldn't forget it, somehow. Silly Willie, all right. But to be twenty-six years old and all through, he reflected heavily, to have everything dead and destroyed in him. Well. . . . It was a long night up in 3B after that; almost endless. He thought grimly about Dolly Bernard. He smoked far too many cigarettes while thinking about her. His throat hurt him.

Another funny thing, though. Maybe he didn't know how to talk to a girl in the ultrasophisticated Dolly Bernard manner,

but on other and following nights in 3B he had no trouble at all talking to Mary Ellen McLaughlin. She was always working at something, leaving no chance for kittenishness or constraint between them; and it was nothing but simple courtesy for Detective Hallahan to move around some heavy furniture for her in the living room and rewire some lamps and assist in laying the new kitchen linoleum. For the first week and a half, dressed in spattered old dungarees and a wool sweater, she waxed, sawed, painted, hammered and hung; and then, on his second Friday up there, she ran off the last slip cover on her electric sewing machine, and Detective Hallahan zipped it up for her, and they had a small celebration for themselves over toasted tuna-fish sandwiches and cold beer.

"Pretty nice," Detective Hallahan informed her then, favorably impressed by the transformation in 3B—by the new neatness and shininess of everything; by the hooked rug, the cozy draw curtains and the antique fireplace screen. "Getting like home, Miss McLaughlin. You got taste, all right. You know something? I like this."

"Well, thanks," Mary Ellen said, sitting herself down wearily in the dungarees but all flushed and triumphant-looking. "So do I. Maybe I'll buy a pine coffee table this spring, after Janey gets married. Right there; right in front of the fireplace, Willie Hallahan. What do you think?"

So they discussed that, Detective Hallahan lighting a cigarette for her and studying covertly the small, earnest face under the lamp light and the brown hair. Suppose he had met this girl say last summer, and before he had met Dolly Bernard? Then perhaps, with time, patience, tenderness and proper devotion, it was possible that something might have developed between them. But now? The stubborn Hallahan jaw tightened. Now

he knew better, he decided grimly; now he'd been taught. Never again!

"Needs a man, though," he announced casually, trying to indicate in that fashion that William Aloysius Hallahan, no matter how much he liked and respected her, was out of contention in that field from the very beginning. "Got a couple of nice young fellows over at the precinct; might bring them around sometime. How about it?"

"Now, I don't know," little Mary Ellen confessed to him, twisting back and arranging the brown hair somewhat confusedly. "I'd say we're just about two of a kind, Willie Hallahan. Because I certainly don't know how to talk to a man, either; and as for kissing one, like that girl told you—well, good gosh!" And she went a fine, delicate pink suddenly. "I suppose I could manage it one way or another, if I wanted to. But it would have to mean something to me, and something pretty important. I'm just too darned particular, I guess. I keep waiting."

"And that's bad?" Detective Hallahan demanded, this unaffected honesty of hers rousing quick and sincere vehemence on his part, and before he could catch himself. "Well, you keep on being particular, Miss McLaughlin—and you'll manage all right when the time comes. You just take my word for it. You're some girl."

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" Mary Ellen said, a bit more flushed then—even a bit flustered, perhaps. "I know. Like your sister Loretta, isn't it? But I might manage at that—when I'm good and ready, of course. Or I'll try. You just wait and see, Willie Hallahan. Who can tell?"

So that warning-off of his didn't quite work out the way that he had expected it to, because it appeared to hint something to

her, or even promise something, that he had never intended to promise. The next night she had her brown hair fixed in a new way, very becoming; the dungarees and the wool sweater had been retired to pasture; and when she came out of the bedroom passage to Detective Hallahan, moving, of course, with the deft and petite physical grace that he had somehow noticed and remembered in her from their first evening together, she wore a warm-looking and extremely attractive dress. "Just thought I'd fix up a little," she announced nervously, fluffing out the full skirt for him with a timid and rather unpracticed gesture, and then examining the hairdo—or examining Detective Hallahan, was it?—in the big fireplace mirror. "Janey's going out to dinner with Walter Wieboldt—so would you like to play Russian bank or something? Put up the bridge table."

That was a night on which Detective Hallahan had something worrying him, however. He put up the bridge table, but afterward he just stared into space darkly and broodingly. He missed plays, too; he appeared altogether absorbed in his own thoughts; and so at ten-thirty or thereabouts, after coffee as usual, most of that new and shyly appealing radiance withdrew itself little by little from Mary Ellen McLaughlin. She tried to keep the conversation going; then she poked up the fire; then, miserably and uncertainly, she sat down with her hands in her lap and a bright, rather artificial smile on her lips.

"What's the time?" Detective Hallahan asked her, finally rousing himself. "A long night, isn't it? You want to hear something funny, Miss McLaughlin? Got a call from that girl today. That girl I told you about. Dolly Bernard."

"Oh," Mary Ellen said. The smile wavered an instant, then

came back again, brighter than ever. "Well. You've made it up, you mean?"

"Could," Detective Hallahan said, not looking at her now, but with a queer and illogical feeling of shamed guilt in him. And for what reason? He became dogged. "It seems she found out a couple of things about that man of the world of hers—Chuck Foley. She wanted to tell me about them. But I didn't talk to her, though. My sister Loretta did. I was asleep."

"Well, I don't know, of course," little Mary Ellen said, keeping her head down now, and brushing at her skirt carefully, "but if a girl had made a fool out of me and used me and then laughed at me, I think I'd have enough pride to—But that's your problem. I wouldn't think that you had to call her back, though; not after that treatment. Why should you?"

"Thought I wouldn't," Detective Hallahan said, smiling bitterly, and somewhat dramatizing himself. "Swore it. Only when you love somebody, it seems like they can do anything at all to you, Miss McLaughlin. It's that old black magic, I guess. You can't help it."

"Well, of course," Mary Ellen said, her expression set now, and her brown eyes flashing ahead scornfully at the fireplace screen. "You can't do one single thing about it—not if you're only eleven and a half years old, emotionally. You know what she is. You told me yourself, didn't you? She proved it."

"Eleven and a half years old?" Detective Hallahan said. He flushed up darkly. "Now wait a minute. I got enough of that from my sister Loretta today. And I didn't come here to—"

"I know you didn't," Mary Ellen said. She jumped up then, going deathly pale on him. "Because you could sit with me in this room for two whole weeks without once saying or doing anything to—to show me that I was a girl even. I wasn't the

wonderful and incomparable Dolly Bernard, was I? Of course; nothing like her. Well, all right!" And she advanced then on Detective Hallahan with such blind fury that he also jumped up, and retreated toward the foyer from her, his mouth gaping. "I knew that, of course. I always knew it. 'But fix up a little,' Janey told me this afternoon. 'And then see what happens. He likes you. He's always looking at you. So if——' " The tears came then, not in a heartbroken and sentimental fashion, however, but in a thick, passionate feminine downflow. "And I fixed up. I was that foolish. And now the minute that creature lifts her little finger at you, and calls you——" She darted past him, throwing the outside apartment door wide open. "Well, you go back to her on your knees, Willie Hallahan—and who cares? Go ahead! But you just get out of my apartment, too, and right now, because I'm telling you to get out—and don't you ever come back again, either. Don't you dare!"

It was inconceivable. He was unable to get out so much as one word to her. She had turned into a furious and appalling stranger, and the next thing he knew Detective Hallahan found himself out on the landing, with his hat and overcoat flung into his face, and the door to 3B slammed, locked and then bolted against him. He just stood there, still dazedly uncomprehending, for a full minute. Then he rapped. "Oh, Miss McLaughlin!" he begged pitiably. "Listen to me. You don't know Charley Fearick. You don't understand what he'll say to me if I have to go back to the precinct and tell him that I—what he'll think is that I tried to get smart with you. He'll blow his stack. Miss McLaughlin!"

There was no answer. He stood aside for some incoming tenants with nothing but a foolishly agonized smile presented to them, and then rapped again. After that he began walking up

and down the landing in front of 3B, wringing his hands literally, and whispering to himself. Perhaps half an hour went by. Then—the last possible resort—he overcame the broken and pitiful remnants of his professional dignity and started downstairs for the pickup truck and Ed Garrity.

But Ed Garrity wasn't in position down there. What had happened? He jumped down from the pickup truck, swinging one way toward Second Avenue, then the other way toward Third—and saw Garrity darting across to him from the opposite street corner.

"What are you doing down here?" he was asked breathlessly. "I saw a car in the street five minutes ago—and going real slow, Willie, like it was casing the joint. I wasn't sure then, but I see that it's parked right around the corner now, and with nobody in it. Suppose it's them? They could sneak through the back yard and up the fire escape, remember—they could be doing that right now. Who's up there?"

From behind the pickup truck they both glanced at the bedroom windows in 3B, hurriedly and instinctively; and for the same split second they both saw the curtain being pulled aside, and a crewcut male head peering right and left furtively.

"Holy Toledo!" Ed Garrity whispered. "What have you done, Willie? They got into the apartment on you. And now they'll—"

The curtain dropped back, and the head vanished. Detective Hallahan, after standing completely frozen for five seconds, darted out and across to the apartment entrance. The first thing he saw there was a row of brass mailboxes facing him, the apartment bells underneath them. He grabbed Garrity by the right arm.

"Now one of us might have a chance to get in there on them!"

he announced desperately. "So look. Give me half a minute to run up and get all ready for them—and then ring her bell down here. They'll want to find out who it is, probably—or they've got to. So they'll split up. One of them ought to open the door and look down over the banister, to make sure if it's her sister coming home; and then I ought to be able to——That's the one chance we have—so come on, and don't stand here arguing about it. There's no time!"

But there seemed to be all the time in the world after he had raced up the carpeted inside stairs noiselessly, on his toes, and flattened himself back against the corridor wall to the left of 3B with his big service revolver out and his cheeks glistening.

He knew then whose fault this was. It was his fault, and that Dolly Bernard's; and, consequently, that was what he would have to think about for the whole rest of his life, if anything happened tonight to Mary Ellen McLaughlin. He groaned softly. Eleven and a half years old; Silly Willie! But of course! There was one girl who had already proved herself to be cheap, common, flashy and altogether despicable; and there was another one who might have been exactly the right kind for William Aloysius Hallahan. But what choice had he made? He had never really intended to call Dolly Bernard back; why, he couldn't remember at this moment what she looked like even. But he had moped around like a heartbroken Hollywood hero; he had luxuriated in cheap and childish self-pity for himself; and yet all the time, and right under his nose, there was a girl so honest, so straight, so unaffected, so truly and deeply feminine, that what she had offered to him wasn't the Dolly Bernard sort of thing, even remotely. So? So he had never allowed himself to recognize it for what it was, and what it meant to him. That

old black magic had been Silly Willie's idea. And now, maybe——

The bell rang in 3B, crisply but casually, and quite as if it were sister Janey ringing it. After a moment or two there was low, hurried movement in the McLaughlin foyer, then an uncertain mutter of male voices, and then the door was unbolted. The one with the crew cut stuck his head out guardedly, trying to peer down past the landing rail without fully revealing himself, but he was yanked out and dropped over it just the same, and in a screaming, leg-kicking scramble, when Detective Hallahan got hold of him by the back of his shirt collar. He crashed down to the next landing then, with Detective Garrity already pounding upstairs to take care of him, and in the McLaughlin foyer a dapper little man in a dark overcoat and a gray Homburg swung Mary Ellen around between him and Detective Hallahan. The dapper man had a gun too. It was pointed dead center at Detective Hallahan's chest.

So that was it. Detective Hallahan couldn't shoot at him. And hit her, maybe? All he could do, his face rigid and streaked with perspiration, was to walk into that foyer slowly and carefully and manage a grin for this Diamond Joe Ennis—or attempt one. "Now just take it easy," Detective Hallahan croaked. "We got guys all over the yard, Joey. You're not getting out of here. So give me the gun, eh? Use your head now. Don't make it tough on yourself. What's the good?"

There was one moment when he thought he had almost convinced Diamond Joe Ennis. The gun wavered; so did the hard and very deadly black eyes. But then he was called a name softly and hatingly, and the gun steadied, and little Mary Ellen squirmed madly around against it, screaming at Detective Hallahan. After that it was all furious and insane commotion. The

three of them crashed together into the living-room sofa, and then over it. The other gun was fired wildly, and at least twice, into the fireplace mirror. Glass tinkled; the tenant across the hall began screaming again, as on that other Saturday night two weeks ago when it had all started; and Detective Hallahan managed to lift the service revolver and smash down with it. Everything got hummingly quiet for a moment or so. Then little Mary Ellen, her new dress torn and her new hairdo crazily disheveled, whispered to herself, reached out both of her hands blindly for Detective Hallahan and began weeping.

But, of course, it wasn't quite so easy as all that a bit later, when the paddy wagon had come and gone, and when Charley Fearick had shown up for his usual on-the-spot check of personal and battle maneuvers. Slipping away from him in the corridor hall, Detective Hallahan edged back into 3B, and tried hurriedly there to explain matters for Mary Ellen McLaughlin from his new viewpoint. He had very little success, however. By that time she had composed herself. She was pale, detached, wretched-looking and absolutely immovable. Her first remark was that she hoped he would be very happy from now on—and she meant that honestly and sincerely. He didn't have to worry about her. She'd be fine. And of course she knew that she had never been anyone glamorous or important to him. He had told her that. He had said who she reminded him of—his sister Loretta. And so——She began weeping again.

It appeared like a very desperate situation to Detective Hallahan then, and one, therefore, that required a very desperate remedy. "O.K.," he said, at the same time moistening his lips quickly and carefully. "My sister Loretta, eh? Well, let's see. Let's just find out for ourselves, why don't we?"

She backed off, looking frightened. She struggled against

him. No avail. The first time Detective Hallahan, rather jumpy about it, was able only to brush her cheek way over under the brown hair, but the second time was much better. She stopped struggling. Again she whispered to herself.

"My sister Loretta!" Detective Hallahan said huskily, because there appeared to be deep waters in this Mary Ellen McLaughlin, all right; and who'd have expected them? "I'll show you who's important to me. I'll show you for the whole rest of my life, Miss McLaughlin. I swear it!"

"I'm only a girl," she whispered pathetically at him. "I just can't fight any more. So go ahead. Break my heart again, Willie Hallahan. Lie to me. Pretend that—"

"Hallahan!" Charley Fearick suddenly thundered in at them. "Come out here! What kind of a miserable cur's game have you been up to this time? Why were you ordered out of that apartment tonight? What did you do in there? Hallahan!"

But Detective Hallahan was now stroking the brown hair tenderly. It must have helped somewhat. She drew back from him, her lips parting. She searched his face quickly and desperately. She looked beautiful.

"Hallahan!" Charley Fearick bellowed. "Hallahan!"

He succeeded in detaching himself. "He's waiting," Detective Hallahan told her. "I'd better—" His arms tightened helplessly. "Oh, Miss McLaughlin!"

She raised her right hand, hesitated a moment, touched his cheek. Her expression became radiant.

"Then all right," she whispered breathlessly. "Just once more. If you mean it, the way you say you do; and if—don't answer him yet. Just show me who's important to you. Show me again, Willie Hallahan. Oh, please!"

KENNETH MOORE

THE SAFE KILL

In the vast amount of reading I have done to make my selections for this volume, I have been struck by the high percentage of stories dealing with cold-blooded killers-for-hire among the current crop.

I don't know whether this is a new trend or not. Perhaps I simply haven't noticed it in past years. I am also not sure that I approve, but three of this type were so superbly done that I could not pass them by.

One is THE RESIGNATION. This is the second.

KENNETH MOORE

THE SAFE KILL

His name was Ramey and at forty-four he had the shoulders of a football player, the neck of a boilermaker, the chest of a wrestler and the integrity of a Kansas City gigolo.

On this hot Friday evening he stood in the middle of Tony Spaino's office holding his hat in his hand and looking very much like a schoolboy waiting to be punished by the principal. He felt beads of perspiration break on his forehead and run to catch in the corners of his eyes. He licked dry lips and wished he had enough courage to light a cigarette.

Spaino, healthy and prosperous behind a polished desk which sent back the bright reflection of the overhead lights, peeled the plastic wrapper from a cigar and waited for his bodyguard to come forth with a platinum lighter. While the bodyguard held the lighter with a steady hand, Spaino studied the man in the center of the office. "How long have you been in this section?"

"Three weeks, sir," Ramey said, then realized he shouldn't have said "Sir". It cast Spaino in the role of the superior.

"Why were you transferred from the old section?"

"I killed a man," Ramey said.

The swivel chair creaked under Spaino's weight as he leaned back and nodded slightly. He made a nice appearance: a tall, heavy man in his mid-forties, with a clean shaven olive face that glistened in the light. The expensive Italian suit was so

well tailored it exposed only a slight trace of a paunch acquired from years of soft living.

"You know about Joey Keener?" Spaino asked.

"The whole city does," Ramey said. He was beginning to relax now, and a smile twisted the corner of his mouth.

"Joey and I used to be friends," Spaino said, "But now we don't get along so well. Joey thought he'd like to take over part of my organization."

"I know the tale," Ramey said. "He tried to gun one of your lieutenants, but an innocent bystander got in the way. Now that Joey's been identified, the cops are working overtime to find him. He's just a punk, but he knows enough about you to put you in the death house. The cops figure if they sweat him long enough he'll testify against you to save himself."

"And if he's knocked off, they'll know I did it or had it done," Spaino said. "Either way I'm on my way to the death house."

"Interesting situation," Ramey said.

"That's why I sent for you," Spaino said. "I've got ten thousand dollars that says you can help me."

He snapped his fingers. The bodyguard moved forward, placed five one thousand dollars bills on the glossy desk. "Take it," Spaino said. "Half now; half when the job's finished."

Ramey looked at the money for a long time, then shook his head. "You're the gambler. Not me."

Spaino's eyes narrowed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I want all of it now."

Spaino relaxed and Ramey could hear him exhale across the room. "Give him the rest of the money, Elwood."

The bodyguard placed five more one thousand dollar bills on the pile. Ramey reached over the desk, folded the money and put it in his pocket.

"Remember, I can't be connected with this in any way. If the cops even suspect I had anything to do with it they'll find someway to burn me for sure."

"Don't worry," Ramey assured him. "You'll be in the clear."

Spaino handed him a slip of paper. "Here's the address. My boys traced him to this spot."

Ramey studied the slip of paper. "What's he doing?"

"Waiting. Trying to decide whether to run or take his chance with the cops." Spaino chuckled lightly then, probably his first chuckle in days. "He's almost in the same predicament as me. If he runs, one of my men will get him sooner or later. If he goes to the cops, he stands a good chance of getting the chair."

"You can relax," Ramey said. "I'll take care of him."

"It has to be tonight. If my boys were able to trace him, it'll only be a matter of time until the cops manage to find him."

"Tonight then."

Ramey turned and walked out of the office. He went down a flight of stairs to the alley and got in his car. He drove six blocks to an all night drugstore, went inside and bought a box of envelopes and a stamp. Inside a telephone booth at the rear, he addressed one of the envelopes with his home address and stamped it. He took the bills out of his pocket, placed them in the envelope. It was a necessary precaution. He couldn't afford to have the money found on him in case he had to go downtown to police headquarters to sign a statement. Some smart cop might take it upon himself to suggest a search.

He left the drugstore and dropped the envelope in a corner mail box. He climbed into his car, studied the address again. He checked his watch, saw that it was half past midnight. He kicked life into the motor, pulled the car away from the curb.

The address was a shabby six floor hotel on the city's south-

side, situated in the middle of a block of gray and black granite buildings. It was typical of a place where a man like Joey Keener might hide. It was a neighborhood where a man could pass unnoticed for months and buy anything if he had the price.

Ramey parked a few doors away from the building and walked to the front entrance. The clerk was dozing behind the desk in the lobby. Ramey went inside, spun the register around on the desk and checked the name assigned to room thirty-seven. He knew Keener wouldn't be using his real name, but Ramey wanted to appear professional for the benefit of the clerk, who now yawned and climbed to his feet.

"Sorry, no vacancies," the clerk said.

"Give me the key to 307," Ramey ordered.

"That's Mr. Scott's room."

Ramey's jacket fell open, exposing the .38 holstered under his arm. "The key," he said.

"Sure, sure," the clerk said. He dug into the pigeonhole for the key.

"How long has this Scott been here?"

"A couple of days," the clerk said. "A week maybe."

Ramey pointed to a chair. "You stay there."

The clerk dropped into the chair, his mouth hanging open. "And don't try to warn him on the house phone," Ramey said over his shoulder as he turned.

"No sir," said the clerk.

Ramey took the stairs three at a time. When he reached the third floor, he dug his .38 from the holster and walked softly down the hall toward the room. He put his ear to the door of 307. Hearing no sound from inside the room, he put his shoulder to the door, felt the lock snap under his weight.

Joey Keener was at the bureau pouring himself a drink when

Ramey came through the door. He spun suddenly, and the glass and bottle shattered against the floor.

"Easy, Keener," Ramey ordered, leveling his gun on the other man's chest.

Keener gave one fleeting glance at the gun on the bedside table across the room. "I wouldn't try it, Joey," Ramey cautioned. "I could drop you before you went two steps."

Keener raised his arms. "Who are you, mister?"

Ramey walked around the shabby room, noted the overnight bag on the bed. "Looks like you were getting ready to take a trip," he said.

He picked up the gun from the table, balanced it on his palm. "Nice gun," he said. He pointed it, pulled off two fast shots in the direction of the doorway. He looked at the holes for a moment, then nodded. "They should do nicely."

"What's the pitch?" Keener asked. "And who in hell are you?"

"Spaino sent me," Ramey said.

"Spaino. He's crazy if he thinks he can get away—" Recognition suddenly crossed his face and with it came fear. "Say, aren't you—"

Joey Keener never finished. Ramey pulled the trigger of his .38 twice and watched the bullets tear into Keener's chest. The little man's body slammed against the wall. He stood there a moment, his body supported by the wall, his fingers laced across the bullet holes in his chest. Then he slid slowly to the floor and collapsed in a heap.

Ramey put away his gun, took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his prints from Keener's gun. He bent over the body, placed the gun in the limp hand. He put the dead man's fingers through the trigger guard, pulled the trigger and

then kicked the gun aside. He lit a cigarette and went over and sat on the bed to wait for the police.

"Christ," swore the lieutenant. His name was Bland, and he had been trying to nail Joey Keener and Tony Spaino for months. He stood in the middle of the hotel room and watched the deputy coroner complete his preliminary examination.

"I tried my best," Ramey said. He pointed to the bullet holes in the door. "But he put up a fight."

"I wish there had been some way to take him alive," Bland said. He looked down at the body. "There goes my last chance to get a case against Spaino."

A reporter pushed his way through the crowd into the room. "How about a story, Lieutenant?"

Bland gave him the story, speaking slowly so the reporter would get all the facts. The reporter jotted notes in his notebook. "Off duty policeman kills wanted man resisting arrest," he said. He turned to Ramey. "Should make a nice headline, Sergeant."

Ramey's face turned sour. "Can I go now, Lieutenant?"

Bland nodded. "Yeah, Sergeant, but you'd better report to headquarters first thing in the morning. The captain will want to talk to you."

Ramey nodded and pushed his way toward the door. The captain would probably raise holy hell and even suspend him, but Ramey wasn't worried. He had ten thousand dollars now, and it was just possible that Spaino could find another job for him in the future.

STEWART PIERCE BROWN

JUST FOR KICKS

I am not going to attempt to tell you why I like this story so very much. I will say that as soon as I read it I knew I wanted it for this book. It isn't hard-boiled; it isn't realistic; it isn't humorous.

It's just a darned good story that stuck in my mind for months . . . as I hope it will stick in yours.

STEWART PIERCE BROWN

JUST FOR KICKS

ARCHER lay on the sagging couch. Ernie Claypen stood staring out the window, seeing nothing through the layers of soot. It was the way they always began a new script.

"Maybe," Claypen was saying, "we could roll the titles over a shot of the Fifth Avenue entrance . . ."

"The counters, and inside them—the diamonds."

"We want to establish those diamonds fast . . ."

"Tight on the guy, he does a little thing with the eyes, and we're out. Under the titles."

The door from the outer office opened slightly. Sheila's equine face was pilloried in the crack. "I'm going down now. Want anything?" Both men shook their heads. "I gotta go to the beauty polla . . ."

"Take your time."

The door closed. "We ought to fire her," Archer said. He felt like hell. His goddamn head ached, for one thing. He always wanted to fire Sheila when they were trying to get a new story off the ground.

"What the hell, there's nothing for her to do now, anyway."

Archer grunted. Even the familiar sight of Ernie's round shoulders at the window irritated him. That was the trouble: it was all getting too familiar and too irritating. It had become as dull as the old copywriting days at Fowler & Hawkes. He felt cheated, somehow.

The springs in the couch made a sound like a bullfrog as he shifted his weight. "Okay, so we got an opening."

"Well, I roughed out a story line. A perfect crime. This guy we see in the opening works out an absolutely can't-miss deal. A whole sackful of stones from the famous Blenheim's. He pulls it off okay and we think he's getting away with it. But then a twist at the end and he gets nailed."

Archer stared at his favorite stain on the flaking ceiling. He felt like having a drink. Or phoning Nancy. Even going up to see her, as much as he disliked matinees. Anything but grinding out another 90-minute helping of dramatic tripe for the great American television public. Fifty-five million squares and always hungry . . .

Today the stain looked like a giraffe. A giraffe with a spear in its side. His private Rorschach.

The couch croaked loudly. "Okay," he said wearily, sitting up, "let's start with the crime bit."

"It's got to be perfect," Claypen insisted. He sketched a large rectangle on the back of a pad. "Say this is the ground floor of Blenheim's . . ."

Carefully, they worked out the robbery. They measured all the distances and timed all the crosses. They marked the locations of the clerks and the guards and the doors to the street. They even traced out the complex wiring diagrams in a pamphlet on electrical alarm systems. Every step was precision planned, every movement.

It took them two full days. But when they finished, Archer felt something he hadn't felt since their Emmy script the year before. The scene had something that went beyond mere dramatic realism. It was so beautifully engineered it could actually

be made to work. It was more than just a perfect scene. It was a perfect crime.

He shook the pages excitedly. "This damn thing's real, Ernie! I'm with it all the way!"

"Kicks?" Claypen grinned.

"Just with it," Archer started to reply and then suddenly the whole thing was right there in his mind as if he'd been thinking it all along. He felt a tiny hot bubble in the pit of his stomach. Talk about kicks—!

"No kidding, Ern, I could do this myself . . ."

"Frank Archer, Boy Bandit. Have at Miltown." Claypen was still grinning but something in his tone warned Archer. Not Ernie, he cautioned himself. Ernie's as square as the rest of them.

He found he was trembling. He made himself sit back on the couch and light a cigarette. Outside, he could hear Sheila's typewriter. From Madison Avenue came the horn-specked traffic rumble. Somewhere in the building a radio was playing. The bubble felt as if it were about to burst inside him.

You must be out of your skull, he hold himself.

But what a wallop! Right under the noses of all the squares and who the hell would ever know?

Out of your goddam skull . . .

It was the phone call from the agency that decided him.

The crime bit was off, the agency man said. He sounded a little hysterical. The client wanted a family conflict with an upbeat ending. By Friday.

Claypen swore bitterly. "Into the old trunk," he said, shoving the unfinished script down the table. Archer picked it up, making himself do it casually. Then he buzzed for Sheila. "Crash program. Stand by to patch a re-run for Friday." Quietly, he dropped the script into the drawer of his desk. He was no longer

trembling. The excitement had made him light-headed, yet his mind was clear. Things seemed very distant, very slow moving, but under complete control.

It was after four when they gave Sheila the last pages of the old script they had picked to rebroadcast. It was interlined with Claypen's tidy long-hand revisions. "I gotta meet a person at six, regardless," she said sullenly. Her hair was untidy and she wore a faint moustache of perspiration. Claypen blew her an exaggerated kiss and he and Archer went out the door. She struck viciously at the keys without replying.

"When do you go to the Coast?" Archer asked, as the two men stood in front of the building. A raw wind flapped a newspaper against Claypen's leg.

"Next week. Tuesday." He twisted his leg and the paper went scuttling down the block. "Christ, I hope Baumer's buying." It was the first of their plays the movies had been interested in.

"Take him some other things, too. That western. And I still say the Emmy piece."

"I don't want to look hungry. They only asked about this one."

"So for a few thousand, look hungry. Take him everything."

Claypen looked at his watch. "We can make the 4:37 . . ."

"Not tonight, Napoleon. I'm staying in town."

Claypen's mouth pressed into a thin line. He didn't approve of Nancy, Archer knew. In Ernie's book married men who *could* get the 4:37 *should* get the 4:37. "Honest, Frank, I think you ought to be going to Dr. Maxe again, I really do."

"Uh-uh, not this well-adjusted, normal-type boy." Archer turned up his coat collar against the wind. Dr. Maxe, he thought wearily, Ernie's answer to everything, the East 70's gift to the

head-candler's union. He had paid the good doctor fifty dollars an hour for more hours than it gave him pleasure to remember, mostly as a favor to Ernie. Fifty dollars per, to be told he was artistically frustrated and was given to structuring fantasy situations. All of which his wife, Alice, had told him for free, less than a month after they were married. And in shorter words. That was one virtue Alice had, he reminded himself—she used short words. "No, thanks," he said. "This time I'll read Norman Vincent Peale."

"Sick, sick, sick," Claypen muttered. He said good night curtly and hurried off down the street, joining the first of the exurbanite lemmings streaming toward Grand Central.

Archer immediately went back up to the office.

"Bars closed?" Sheila asked sourly as he walked through.

"Oh, fun-ny," he said, closing the door behind him. He took the script from his desk and began studying it carefully. The perfection of it brought the excitement back inside him. It was absolutely flawless. And so simple . . .

He was vaguely aware that the chattering of Sheila's typewriter had stopped. There was the angry crash of her desk being closed, the running of water in the tiny washroom. When she leaned in to bid him a hasty good night, her hair was in place and her large-featured face was bright and heavy with make-up.

"You've been a brick," he said with an exaggerated British accent. She slammed the door and he heard her heels clicking rapidly down the empty corridor. The elevator whined up, then down, and the building was still.

He resumed his study of the script. For more than half an hour he checked and re-checked his plans. Finally, he was satisfied. He rose stiffly, feeling the sudden urge to be with people.

Pipp's was crowded but he found a stool at the bar. He felt wildly exhilarated, expansive and friendly. "Who needs a drink?" he thought, but he signalled to Jerry out of habit. Then he swung around to the man next to him and told him he had just come back from the South Pole.

"That's a long way from home," the man said, grinning to show that he wasn't going to be taken in if it were a gag. He was a salesman, wearing a convention card with his name on it on his lapel.

"A long, *long* way,," Archer agreed. "I was flying a chopper in and out from McMurdo and I can tell you, it's good to be back."

"A helicopter?"

Archer nodded, flagging Jerry for a drink for his companion. "That damn wind! Never stops down there, y'know."

"I guess it's pretty rugged, all right." The man hitched round on his stool, facing Archer. He had stopped grinning, to show that he knew a serious topic when it came up. Jerry remained just within earshot, his face impassive. Archer let him stay; he liked someone to play to.

"One night," he began, stirring the ice in his glass with one finger, "our survey team got caught out there on the Shelf . . ."

Effortlessly, he spun the story along. He kept his voice low and the man had to lean forward to hear him. When he paused, the man asked him questions and Archer gave him careful, thoughtful answers. He never contradicted himself. Everything he said was accurate and authentic within the context he built. He spoke with easy conviction and the longer he talked, the easier it all became. Simply and surely, he created a whole biography for himself. For almost thirty minutes he was the helicopter pilot from Antarctica.

He finished by telling the man his name was Millard T. Fillmore, from Decatur, Illinois. The salesman promised to look him up the next time he got to Decatur.

Jerry collected the empty glasses after the man had left. He was smiling broadly now. "You had *me* believing it there for a while, Mr. Archer. I don't think he even knew you were giving it to him."

Archer said nothing. Suddenly everything was in danger of going flat. That was one trouble with squares—they never knew when they were being kidded. He glanced along the bar. There they were. Still in charge, still holding the status quo, still playing everything nice and safe and sane. They'd read about the theft at Blenheim's next week and never even get the point. Even if you explained it to them they wouldn't understand.

Pipp's was jammed now. The hum of conversation had grown steadily louder. The waiters were beginning to hiss at the busboys and Jerry's assistant was busy alongside him. There was a bark of laughter down the bar, a steady fluting of pear-shaped tones from the actresses along the banquette. One of them, whom Archer knew slightly—a tall redhead, all cleavage and no talent—waved gaily to him. He nodded in return. Everybody must be hungry this season, he thought. He stared moodily into his drink, shredding the beads of moisture down the glass with his thumb. From the phone booth, he could hear the deep bonging of quarters.

He studied his watch. Nancy had already left for the studio. He waited until the man with the quarters came out of the booth, then he phoned Alice and told her he wouldn't be home. She didn't like it, but he didn't care. It didn't seem important right now.

As he signed the check, he paused before writing "C & A

TV," trying to remember whether they had covered Sheila's paycheck with their last deposit. Finally, he decided to use his own account. Some day, he thought, some one of these neurotic days . . . He felt the bubble again, hot and growing, as he thought of what the diamonds from Blenheim's would be worth. With that kind of dough, he could tell them all to go to hell. The agency, the network—everybody. No more grinding out the pages, no more Friday deadlines, no more rehearsal-hall rewrites, with lousy coffee in waxy containers. No more network editors lousing up the script or agency yes-men, full of client fears, telling him what he could and couldn't write. No more splintered nights' sleep at option time or worries about the house or Alice's drinking. He slashed a heavy line under his name and doubled Jerry's tip.

He had a cab at the studio when Nancy got off the air. It had begun to rain. The neon-bright city repeated itself fuzzily in the glistening pavements as they drove uptown. It reminded him of the wiring diagram for the alarm system.

The next morning he took the subway downtown. He came up at 59th Street and walked west. It was Friday and the lemmings were flooding back into the city. He saw his reflection in a shop window. He looked no different from any of them. Today the idea pleased him.

He walked past Blenheim's without going in. It looked larger than he remembered it. But the exact dimensions were in his head. He repeated them silently as he strolled downtown.

The weekend came and went uneventfully. Claypen and his wife came over to have cocktails with Alice and him on Sunday. They talked mostly about Claypen's forthcoming trip to Hollywood.

"I want him to take a lot of our stuff with him," Archer said,

as he twirled the long-handled spoon in the frosted pitcher. It amused him this weekend to play the exurbanite to the hilt. "They know almost everything we've done. They've nibbled before."

"Oh, yes, I think you should!" Harriet Claypen exclaimed, turning to her husband. She was a fair, fleshy woman with slightly buck teeth. Archer always found her too doughy in the early evening, but as the martinis laid hold, she invariably became more and more Rubenesque. Sometimes he had even considered making some sort of pass at her but it always seemed like too much trouble, all things considered.

Ernie was slowly shaking his head. "I just don't think it's a smart play, that's all. They want to talk about this one piece . . ."

"But you could at least *take* some other scripts along," Alice said reasonably. She was beginning to look a little Rubenesque herself, Archer thought. He decided he had had enough to drink. He divided what was left in the pitcher among the other three glasses.

Tuesday morning Claypen phoned him from Idlewild, waking him.

"Back with my shield or on it," Claypen said and laughed nervously.

"Knock 'em on their widescreen fannies, coach."

"Okay, Frank. See you Friday."

"I'll meet the plane." By Friday, Archer knew, the story would no longer be news and Ernie never read New York papers on the coast. "Good luck, Ern."

It was not quite noon when he got to town. He checked in at the office, exchanged *double entendres* with Sheila—some day, he thought in passing, this might be worth a flier; under

that horsey face is stacked quite a frame—read his mail, typed a letter to his brother, and then went to lunch.

On the way back, he stopped in at Blenheim's.

Everything went so smoothly he felt let down. It worked exactly according to their plan. The clerk responded almost as if he were reading lines. The store detective moved away precisely on cue. Even the sunlight on the front windows was just right.

It was when he was finally walking toward the door that the big wallop hit him. He could hear his heart hammering in his chest and feel the corners of his mouth drying out. But he walked slowly and even stopped to admire a display of uncut diamonds. His attache case weighed heavily in his hand. The door handle felt polar cold under his fingers, the door massively heavy against his push. Outside, the cool air told him he was sweating. For one wild, silent-screaming moment, while his back and shoulder muscles crawled, he stood still on the sidewalk in front of the glistening facade. But no voice spoke his name, no hand fell heavily upon him.

He made himself stay in the office until after four. Sheila came in and talked with him for over an hour, slouched suggestively on the couch. Okay, he thought, but not right now. Right now I'm not in the mood. He filed it away for future reference. Finally, when he made no move, she left. Her desk slammed more angrily than ever and he smiled in spite of himself.

The evening papers gave it front page space. He saw the name "Blenheim's" in heavy black type when he was still twenty feet from the newsstand. He sat on the train and felt the big wallop again as he watched all the squares reading the story. He read it in his own paper three times.

"Slick job," he said to the man next to him, tapping the page with his finger.

"Too slick. Looks like one of their own people."

Archer lifted his eyebrows, his lips pursed. "Hmmm. Never thought of that..."

"Sure, no doubt about it," the man said, with a wave of his hand. "Some two-bit clerk who couldn't stand the sight of all that stuff around him every day. He finally cracked and grabbed a fistful. They'll get him, though."

"Well, I don't know. Sounds like he's got the police baffled, according to this."

The man waved his hand again. "Don't worry. They always get caught, sooner or later."

Only in Squareville, dad, Archer thought, smiling to himself, only in Squareville. The bubble throbbed within him, feeling as if it were about to burst. He wanted to laugh out loud, to tell this smug old bastard how little he really knew about what the hell was going on in the world. The *real* world. He wanted to stand up and tell the whole car, to shout it up and down the train...

As they eased into the station, he took his attache case from the overhead rack. "Would you mind?" he asked, offering it to the man with a slight smile. "Just while I get my coat on."

He took a long time with his coat, while the man held the heavy case across his knees.

At home, Archer hid the stuff in a box full of old radio scripts, on the upper shelf of his closet. He knew a man on 47th Street who would able to sell some of it for him in a few months.

The morning papers had the story on Page One, too, but a new crisis in the Middle East pushed it back inside by the afternoon editions, and by Thursday it had all but disappeared.

There was only a brief and passing reference to it in one of the tabloids.

He was at Idlewild a half-hour before Claypen's plane landed Friday afternoon.

"You goof-off, you got a tan!"

"We do everything at poolside in Bel Air," Claypen said, blowing carelessly on his fingernails. Together, they walked to the baggage area to wait for his suitcase.

"Well, come on, don't keep me hanging. How did you make out? I take it from that fat-cat look of yours that you peddled our deathless prose? At poolside, of course."

Claypen shook his head. "Frank, they were out to rob us blind on the price. And they would have murdered it. You should have heard what they wanted to do to the ending. I told them the hell with it."

"Oh, great . . ."

"Ah, but wait'll you hear! Coming back on the plane just now, guess who I sat with? Tom McNelly, from CBS. Well, you know, we got talking shop, natch and—" Claypen raised himself on his toes, scanning the crowd—"I don't see him around, he said he had to get right into town. Well, anyway, he told me they were looking for a good tight script for Playhouse next month. A crime show. And you know that thing we had to junk last week? Frank, I remembered that scene *exactly* and when I sketched it for Tom he flipped and—"

The loudspeaker above their heads announced a flight leaving for San Juan. Claypen's thin lips kept moving excitedly. Archer watched him dully, seeing the words without hearing them. He felt the corners of his own lips going dry again. But there was no bubble in his stomach. He just felt very, very tired.

RICHARD M. GORDON

APRES MOI, LA BOMBE

Mixing humor with mystery or suspense is a very difficult thing to do. Inevitably, if a story is truly funny, it cannot be very suspenseful.

I think Richard Gordon has done it here about as successfully as it can be done. I hope you'll find it a welcome relief after all the harrowing suspense served up to you by masters of the craft in the preceding stories.

RICHARD M. GORDON

APRES MOI, LA BOMBE

"BALLS!" said the queen contemptuously. "That's all you think of! That's all you have! That's all you are! Balls! Baseballs! Basketballs! Footballs! And," she added as an after-thought, "golfballs! In spite of what some people may think, there's more to running a country than just balls! Even golfballs!"

"Balls!" mimicked the sportsminded king savagely. "That's all you think of! That's all you want! Balls! Costume balls! Charity balls! Hunt balls! Wedding balls! Quadrilles and cotillions! Dancing and prancing! Donner and Blitzen! There's more to being a queen than just balls!"

"Balls!" muttered the anarchical butler behind closed lips, but nobody heard him. He cleared his throat and announced: "Supper is served!" They heard that.

Here, dear reader, we have the ingredients of a classic murder-suspense story—incompatibility in high places, social inequality, a romantic and exotic setting, politics. There are, as you shall see, three potential victims, three potential murderers. But who does what to whom? It's too easy just to say: "The butler did it!" and let it go at that. What we need is a detective, but the private-eye in this case is occupied elsewhere.

Slim, brilliant, patrician Hilary Wren stripped off his rubber gloves. "Take it away," he sighed wearily. He pulled down his gauze face-mask so that it hung beneath his chin, reached under his white robe, took out a cigarette, and lit it.

"Hello," said a young man, "are you a surgeon?"

Hilary blew smoke gently through his finely chiseled nose and smiled wanly under the bright lights of the operating room. "No, I'm a detective."

The young man looked surprised. "A detective doing brain surgery?" he exclaimed. "Isn't that rather unusual?"

"I like it," said Hilary simply. "It relaxes me. Besides, he was very sick. And anyway, is there anything wrong with a detective's doing brain surgery if he wants to?" he asked defensively.

"Nothing whatsoever," soothed the young man expertly. "I see you're a man who thinks for himself," he continued. "What's your cigarette?"

Hilary reached under his robe again and took out the pack. He looked at it. "Viceroy," he said.

"Why?" asked the young man.

"The best possible reason," answered Hilary. "My mother smokes them."

Let's get on with our story, dear reader; Hilary can always catch up with us. I'm sure that they will let him go when he stops thinking for himself and starts thinking like a copywriter. Meanwhile, back at the castle, the king and queen were bitterly batting balls back and forth. It was not always thus.

After they had married some years ago, the royal couple settled down determinedly to live happily ever after. The trouble was that he pursued happiness in the daytime out of doors while she sought it at night in the ballrooms, pavilions, and an occasional high school gymnasium.

They had met and fallen in love at a Dance Marathon which he had attended as an athletic contest and she as a sort of a Terpsichorean double-header. During the short time that the vogue

lasted, they were sublimely happy together. Soon, however, he turned to other sports and she to other dances.

In short, except at supper and at certain unavoidable state functions, they seldom saw each other. He rose early, spent long days on the playing fields with a box lunch, and retired with the sun; she rose at tea-time, revelled till the wee hours, and retired at daybreak. When the unavoidable state function at which they had to appear together took place during the day, he fretted and fumed and frowned to be at the ball game and she yawned and nodded and wished she were in bed. On the other hand, when the official occasion occurred at night, she fumed and fretted and tapped her foot to be in the ballroom, and he dozed and dreamed and longed for bed. They began to hate each other.

To recapitulate: the yoke of axiom which had first drawn them together now pulled them apart: to wit: "Familiarity makes the heart grow fonder" and its off-ox: "Absence breeds contempt."

One day, a lady shotputter caught the king's eye, and he became enamored. She had the bearing, the poise, the pure size to be a much more fitting helpmeet for a king than the indoorsy, dance-crazy, empty-headed queen. Besides, she was in training, and there would be no more of this nonsense about late hours.

At about the same time, the queen met a dancing-master who for grace, poise, and carriage was much more suited to the role of consort for a queen than the short-tempered, muscle-bound, sleepy-headed king.

The queen had a plan. She would put a slow poison in the king's nightly posset and blame it on the butler. After all, the butler was an anarchist, and who, including anarchists, ex-

pected, or indeed even wanted, an anarchist to receive a fair trial?

The king also had a plan. He would strangle the queen with a silk scarf she had won in a Charleston contest and blame it on the butler. After all, the butler was an anarchist, and who, including anarchists, expected, or indeed even wanted, an anarchist to receive a fair trial?

The butler had a plan of his own. He had in his possession a bomb, and he would serve it to the king and queen shortly after he had served them their supper. It was a big bomb and would undoubtedly blow him as high as it did the royal couple, but you can't make an omelet without breaking eggs, and anyway, it was against his credo as an anarchist to stand any kind of trial at all. A future anarchist government would remember him as a martyr and might someday name a street after him.

Which brings us, dear reader, to where we were at the beginning of our story. It's taken long enough, Lord knows, but without a detective to put things in their proper order, we have to take things as they come. Perhaps Hilary will be along to help us with the solution; we'll have to take care of the crime on our own. If you recall, the king, the queen, and the butler were talking about balls when supper was announced.

The royal couple broke off their quarrel and sat down amicably to a dinner which began with melon balls and ended with *bombes glacées.*

When they had finished, the queen put her plan into effect. "You look tired, dear," she said uncharacteristically. "Let me pour you your milk." She did, and the king closed his eyes and drank it down heroically; he hated the stuff, but it was healthy. Tonight, it didn't taste as bad as usual.

When he had finished, the king put his plan into effect.

"Lucretia, my dear, let me help you with the clasp of your necklace," he said, walking up behind her and taking the scarf out of his pocket.

When he had finished (the king, that is), the butler put his plan into effect. Closing his eyes against the loud noise, he threw open the door of the dining room. "Sic semper tyrannis!" he said, and

BOOM!

At last, dear reader, here comes Hilary, and high time too! There are some things that call for a professional's touch, and solving this complicated case is certainly one of them. We are in good hands now.

Hilary went right to work. There were no clues; the three murderers, their victims, the king's posset-cup, the queen's scarf, all the insignia of royalty, and, of course, the bomb, were completely atomized. Nevertheless, Hilary conscientiously interviewed a bevy of buxom chambermaids, one at a time. Then, after carefully weighing the somewhat fragmentary evidence, he called all his suspects together, lit his battered briar, exhaled thoughtfully, and produced a thinking man's solution: "The butler did it!" he said.

"By the way," the newly elected president of the newly formed republic inquired afterward, "did you ever find the royal crown or the orb and scepter?"

"If I had them," said Hilary wisely, "they would be clues, and I could tell you everything that happened."

"If I had them," mused the republican leader wistfully, "I'd be king."

JACK RITCHIE

SHATTER PROOF

Marriage and murder! How very well they seem to go together. I don't think we've had enough of that combination in this volume, so here's one to rectify that.

But not just a standard mate-kills-mate sort of thing. That's old hat. This is an interesting variation on the theme which will keep you guessing to the last.

JACK RITCHIE

SHATTER PROOF

He was a soft-faced man wearing rimless glasses, but he handled the automatic with unmistakable competence.

I was rather surprised at my calmness when I learned the reason for his presence. "It's a pity to die in ignorance," I said. "Who hired you to kill me?"

His voice was mild. "I could be an enemy in my own right."

I had been making a drink in my study when I had heard him and turned. Now I finished pouring from the decanter. "I know the enemies I've made and you are a stranger. Was it my wife?"

He smiled. "Quite correct. Her motive must be obvious."

"Yes," I said. "I have money and apparently she wants it. All of it."

He regarded me objectively "Your age is?"

"Fifty-three."

"And your wife is?"

"Twenty-two."

He clicked his tongue. "You were foolish to expect anything permanent, Mr. Williams."

I sipped the whiskey. "I expected a divorce after a year or two and a painful settlement. But not death."

"Your wife is a beautiful woman, but greedy, Mr. Williams. I'm surprised that you never noticed."

My eyes went to the gun. "I assume you have killed before?"

"Yes."

"And obviously you enjoy it."

He nodded. "A morbid pleasure, I admit. But I do."

I watched him and waited. Finally I said, "You have been here more than two minutes and I am still alive."

"There is no hurry, Mr. Williams," he said softly.

"Ah, then the actual killing is not your greatest joy. You must savor the preceding moments."

"You have insight, Mr. Williams."

"And as long as I keep you entertained, in one manner or another, I remain alive?"

"Within a time limit, of course."

"Naturally. A drink, Mr. . . . ?"

"Smith requires no strain on the memory. Yes, thank you. But please allow me to see what you are doing when you prepare it."

"It's hardly likely that I would have poison conveniently at hand for just such an occasion."

"Hardly likely, but still possible."

He watched me while I made his drink and then took an easy chair.

I sat on the davenport. "Where would my wife be at this moment?"

"At a party, Mr. Williams. There will be a dozen people to swear that she never left their sight during the time of your murder."

"I will be shot by a burglar? An intruder?"

He put his drink on the cocktail table in front of him. "Yes. After I shoot you, I shall, of course, wash this glass and return it to your liquor cabinet. And when I leave I shall wipe all fingerprints from the doorknobs I've touched."

"You will take a few trifles with you? To make the burglar-intruder story more authentic?"

"That will not be necessary, Mr. Williams. The police will assume that the burglar panicked after he killed you and fled empty-handed."

"That picture on the east wall," I said. "It's worth thirty thousand."

His eyes went to it for a moment and then quickly returned to me. "It is tempting, Mr. Williams. But I desire to possess nothing that will even remotely link me to you. I appreciate art, and especially its monetary value, but not to the extent where I will risk the electric chair." Then he smiled. "Or were you perhaps offering me the painting? In exchange for your life?"

"It was a thought."

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Mr. Williams. Once I accept a commission, I am not dissuaded. It is a matter of professional pride."

I put my drink on the table. "Are you waiting for me to show fear, Mr. Smith?"

"You will show it."

"And then you will kill me?"

His eyes flickered. "It is a strain, isn't it, Mr. Williams? To be afraid and not to dare show it."

"Do you expect your victims to beg?" I asked.

"They do. In one manner or another."

"They appeal to your humanity? And that is hopeless?"

"It is hopeless."

"They offer you money?"

"Very often."

"Is that hopeless too?"

"So far it has been, Mr. Williams."

"Behind the picture I pointed out to you, Mr. Smith, there is a wall safe."

He gave the painting another brief glance. "Yes."

"It contains five thousand dollars."

"That is a lot of money, Mr. Williams."

I picked up my glass and went to the painting. I opened the safe, selected a brown envelope, and then finished my drink. I put the empty glass in the safe and twirled the knob.

Smith's eyes were drawn to the envelope. "Bring that here, please."

I put the envelope on the cocktail table in front of him.

He looked at it for a few moments and then up at me. "Did you actually think you could buy your life?"

I lit a cigarette. "No. You are, shall we say, incorruptible."

He frowned slightly. "But still you brought me the five thousand?"

I picked up the envelope and tapped its contents out on the table. "Old receipts. All completely valueless to you."

He showed the color of irritation. "What do you think this has possibly gained you?"

"The opportunity to go to the safe and put your glass inside it."

His eyes flicked to the glass in front of him. "That was yours. Not mine."

I smiled. "It was your glass, Mr. Smith. And I imagine that the police will wonder what an empty glass is doing in my safe. I rather think, especially since this will be a case of murder, that they will have the intelligence to take fingerprints."

His eyes narrowed. "I haven't taken my eyes off you for a moment. You couldn't have switched our glasses."

"No? I seem to recall that at least twice you looked at the painting."

Automatically he looked in that direction again. "Only for a second or two."

"It was enough."

He was perspiring faintly. "I say it was impossible."

"Then I'm afraid you will be greatly surprised when the police come for you. And after a little time you will have the delightful opportunity of facing death in the electric chair. You will share your victims' anticipation of death with the addition of a great deal more time in which to let your imagination play with the topic. I'm sure you've read accounts of executions in the electric chair?"

His finger seemed to tighten on the trigger.

"I wonder how you'll go," I said. "You've probably pictured yourself meeting death with calmness and fortitude. But that is a common comforting delusion, Mr. Smith. You will more likely have to be dragged. . . ."

His voice was level. "Open that safe or I'll kill you."

I laughed. "Really now, Mr. Smith, we both know that obviously you will kill me if I *do* open the safe."

A half a minute went by before he spoke. "What do you intend to do with the glass?"

"If you don't murder me– and I rather think you won't now –I will take it to a private detective agency and have your fingerprints reproduced. I will put them, along with a note containing pertinent information, inside a sealed envelope. And I will leave instructions that in the event I die violently, even if the occurrence appears accidental, the envelope be forwarded to the police."

Smith stared at me and then he took a breath. "All that won't

be necessary. I will leave now and you will never see me again."

I shook my head. "I prefer my plan. It provides protection for my future."

He was thoughtful. "Why don't you go direct to the police."

"I have my reasons."

His eyes went down to his gun and then slowly he put it in his pocket. An idea came to him. "Your wife could very easily hire someone else to kill you."

"Yes. She could do that."

"I would be accused of your death. I could go to the electric chair."

"I imagine so. Unless. . . ."

Smith waited.

"Unless, of course, she were unable to hire anyone."

"But there are probably a half a dozen others. . . ." He stopped.

I smiled. "Did my wife tell you where she is now?"

"Just that she'd be at a place called the Petersons. She will leave at eleven."

"Eleven? A good time. It will be very dark tonight. Do you know the Petersons' address?"

He stared at me. "No."

"In Bridgehampton," I said, and I gave him the house number.

Our eyes held for a half a minute.

"It's something you must do," I said softly. "For your own protection."

He buttoned his coat slowly. "And where will you be at eleven, Mr. Williams?"

"At my club, probably playing cards with five or six friends.

They will no doubt commiserate with me when I receive word that my wife has been . . . shot?"

"It all depends on the circumstances and the opportunity." He smiled thinly. "Did you ever love her?"

I picked up a jade figurine and examined it. "I was extremely fond of this piece when I first bought it. Now it bores me. I will replace it with another."

When he was gone there was just enough time to take the glass to a detective agency before I went on to the club.

Not the glass in the safe, of course. It held nothing but my own fingerprints.

I took the one that Mr. Smith left on the cocktail table when he departed.

The prints of Mr. Smith's fingers developed quite clearly.

JAMES HOLDING

A QUESTION OF ETHICS

This is the third of the killers-for-hire stories previously mentioned. But this one is quite *different.*

Manuel is a killer with ethics. Watch this word. It's a matter of semantics. I didn't say morals—or scruples, even. But ethics—yes!

In that shadowy nether world inhabited by killers-for-hire, Manuel is quite a guy. You'll almost like him.

JAMES HOLDING

A QUESTION OF ETHICS

On this occasion, his contact in Rio was a man called simply Rodolfo. Perhaps Rodolfo had another name, but if so, Manuel Andradas did not know it. He was to meet Rodolfo in the Rua do Ouvidor on a corner by the flower market. While he waited, standing with his back against a building wall on the narrow sidewalk, he looked with admiration at a basket of purple orchids being offered for sale in a flower stall opposite. He wore his camera case slung prominently over his left shoulder.

Rodolfo, when he brushed past Manuel and murmured "follow" from the corner of his mouth, proved to be a nondescript, shabbily dressed man. Manuel followed him through the noonday crowd to a small cafe. There, over a cafe-zinho, they faced each other. Manuel kept his attention on his tiny cup of jet-black coffee.

Rodolfo said, "Photographer, would you like a little trip?"

Manuel shrugged.

"To Salvador," Rodolfo said. "Bahia. A beautiful city."

"So I have heard. Is there a deadline?"

"No deadline. But as little delay, Photographer, as possible." Manuel was known to his contacts simply as The Photographer. He *was* a photographer, in truth. And a good one, too.

"The price?" And as he asked the question, Manuel lifted his muddy brown eyes to Rodolfo, and sipped delicately at his coffee.

"Three hundred thousand *cruzeiros*."

Manuel sucked in his breath. "Your principal must need the work done desperately," he ventured.

Rodolfo smiled, if you could call the oily lift of his lip a smile. "Perhaps," he said. "I do not know. Is it satisfactory?"

"Very generous, yes. Perfectly satisfactory. Expenses, of course, and a third of the price now?"

"*Va bem.*"

The man called Rodolfo idly scratched with a pencil stub on the back of the cafe menu, and turned it toward Manuel. On it, he had written a name and an address. Automatically, Manuel committed them to memory. Then he folded the menu and tore it into tiny pieces and dropped them into the pocket of his neat dark suit. He was frowning.

Watching his expression, Rodolfo said, "What's the matter?"

Manuel said with disapproval, "It's a woman."

Rodolfo laughed. "Business is business, isn't it?"

"I prefer men, that's all," Manuel said.

They rose after draining their coffee cups and turned out into the avenue. Rodolfo, when he shook hands, left a thick pad of currency in Manuel's hand.

Manuel stopped in an open street stall on his way back to his studio and drank a glass of cashew juice. It was better than coffee for settling the nerves, he believed.

Six days later, he went ashore at Bahia from a down-at-the-heels freighter that stopped there on its way north to take on a consignment of cocoa, hides and castor-beans.

Unwilling to invite attention, he walked from the landing place through the teeming traffic of the Baixa to one of the

municipal elevators he could see towering against the cliff above the lower town. The elevator lifted him quickly to the Alta and spewed him out into the municipal square of the upper town. From there, he had a magnificent view over the foliage of fire-red flamboyant trees to the harbor below him, with its lively shipping and quiet fortress.

In the shadowed lobby of the Palace Hotel on Rua Chile, he registered for a room under his own name, Manuel Andradas. And for two days thereafter he behaved exactly as a photographer on assignment for a picture magazine might behave. With two cameras draped about him, he visited Bahia's places of interest, taking numerous photographs of everything from the elaborately carved façade of the Church of the Third Order to the Mondrian-like blue and tan egg-crate walls of the new Hotel Bahia. On the third day of his stay, having established for himself in the city the character of a harmless, innocent photographer, he set about his true business in Bahia.

About an hour after noon, he stuffed a pair of swimming shorts into his camera case with his cameras and left the hotel. He walked up Rua Chile to the square where scores of busses were angled into parking slots, bearing with mechanical indifference the deluge of propaganda and music that cascaded upon him from loudspeakers placed around the plaza. He swung confidently aboard a bus that was labelled *Rio Vermelho and Amaralina*, and took a seat at the rear, a sallow, fine-boned man of quite ordinary appearance except for disproportionately large hands and heavily muscled forearms. Not one among the vociferous, pushing passengers that soon filled the bus to overflowing gave him more than a passing glance.

Manuel closed his eyes and thought of the work ahead. He felt the bus start, heard the excited gabble of the passengers, but

did not open his eyes. The name, now? He remembered it perfectly. Eunicia Camarra. Yes. The address? Amaralina, Bahia. Yes.

Eunicia Camarra. A woman. What was she, or what had she done, that somebody in Rio—his formless, nameless, unknown "customer" in Rio—should want her nullified? That was the word Manuel always used to himself: nullified. Was she a faithless mistress, perhaps? A woman who had spurned an offer of marriage? Three hundred thousand *cruzeiros* was a substantial sum. Perhaps a woman of whom his customer . . . also a woman? . . . was jealous?

Manuel, of course, never knew the truth about his assignments. After the job was done by whatever means seemed most appropriate and practical to Manuel, he never found out the true reason why his professional services had been required. And that was just as well. He preferred to remain emotionally uninvolved in his work. He did each job quietly and efficiently, and avoided becoming entangled in its moral or ethical ramifications.

He put Eunicia Camarra from his mind and opened his eyes. The bus went inland a little way, giving him brief glimpses of raw red earth, patchy gardens, lush tropical foliage. Then its route took the bus back within sight of the sea again, and he felt a cool ocean breeze, entering through the bus windows, begin to dry the slick of perspiration off his face.

At the Amaralina bus stop, he was deposited beside a thatched circular shelter house only a few yards from the beach. Directly before him stood a cafe, scrubbed clean of paint by the endless pummeling of wind and blown sand. It had an open terrace facing the beach. Nearby, a man with shiny white teeth smilingly sold coconuts to half a dozen schoolgirls, hacking off

the top of the nuts for them with a machete so that they could drink the sweet milk.

The children's voices, gay with school-is-over-for-the-day spirits, rang merrily in Manuel's ears as he walked slowly past the cafe terrace and up the beach to a tumble-down bathing pavilion where he changed into his swimming trunks. Then he took his camera case and went out to the beach.

There were not many people about. He saw one couple lying in the sand behind some outcropping rocks, completely engrossed in each other. He saw a small knot of bathers off to his right, wading knee deep in the foaming surf and emitting shrill cries of pleasure. Far off to his left, he could see the buildings of Ondina hugging the sapphire bay. And before him, close to the water's edge, the same schoolgirls he had noticed buying coconuts, were cavorting in the sand.

He went and sat on the sand near the children, cradling his camera case in his hands. The girls wore a simple blue and white school uniform, he saw, and were approximately of the same age . . . twelve or thirteen, perhaps. He smiled at them and greeted them gravely, "*Bonas dias, Senhoritas.*" That was all. He didn't push himself forward. He was more subtle than that. When they returned his greeting, they saw the camera case in his hands. And at once, they evinced a lively interest in it, especially the blonde child who seemed to be the leader of the group.

She approached Manuel. "Is there a camera in that case?" she asked. "May we please see it? Will you take our picture? Are your photos in color? What kind of *pellicula* do you find most satisfactory, *Senhor?* Will you show me how to adjust the lens so that I may take a photo also?"

This was said so breathlessly, so beguilingly, with such animated childish curiosity, that Manuel laughed in spite of him-

self and said, "Not quite so fast, *Senhorita*, if you please! So many questions all at once! Yes, it contains a camera. Several of them. And yes, you may have a quick look at them, but be careful not to get any grains of sand in them." He held out the camera case and the children clustered around it, chattering and exclaiming. The little girl who had requested the privilege of seeing his camera opened the case.

"Wonder!" she said. "A Leica! It is very expensive, no? My grandmother has one." She delved deeper. "And a baby camera!" she exclaimed, holding up Manuel's Minox. "Such a small camera I have never seen."

Manuel sat quietly in the sand and let the children handle his equipment, keeping an eye on them to prevent damage, however. Then he said, "I shall take a photo of you now, all in your school uniforms." They stood demurely together, smiling while he snapped their picture.

The blonde child said, "Will you send us the picture? My grandmother would like to see it."

"Certainly," Manuel said. "And I shall not charge you for it, though I am a professional photographer and get large sums for my work."

"Oh, thank you, *Senhor*," the blonde girl said. Manuel nodded to her, realizing with satisfaction that he had now so ingratiated himself with these children that they would answer eagerly any questions he chose to ask them: questions about Amaralina, their homes, their neighbors, their parents' friends, even questions, no doubt, about a woman named Eunicia Camarra. But there was no hurry.

The blonde child said, "Are you going into the water, Senhor? If so, we will care for your cameras while you bathe. No

harm shall come to them." She appealed to her friends; they chorused agreement.

"Why not?" Manuel said. "If you will be so kind. *Muito obrigado.*" And in rising to enter the water, he made his first mistake. But he was hot and sweaty, and a swim would be welcome, even though he was not a good swimmer. And the girls would remain until he came back, because they would be watching his cameras for him.

"Have a care, there by the rocks," the blonde child said. "There is a strong current there."

He scarcely heard her. His mind was on other things. And only when he had plunged boldly into the water and stroked his way some distance out from shore did he fully comprehend what the child had said. Then it was almost too late. He felt himself in the grip of a force too powerful for even his big hands and muscled arms to resist. His head went under the water and he choked. And he thought, foolishly, how much better to remain hot and sweaty than to cool off at such a price. Then he couldn't think any more at all.

When he opened his eyes, the glaring blue of the sky hurt them. He was lying on his back in the sand. He felt weak, sick. And as he shifted his pained gaze, it centered on the skinny naked body of the blonde girl standing not far from him, about to drop her grubby uniform dress over her head to cover her wet skin. Near her, as his eyes turned, were two of the other schoolgirls, also engaged in slipping on their dresses over wet bodies. He made a choking, grunting sound and sat up suddenly.

The girls screamed and went on wriggling happily into their dresses. "Do not look, *Senhor!*" the blonde child cried gaily.

"We must first arrange our clothing! We have been swimming without suits." The other girls' laughing voices joined hers like the twittering of small parrots. Manuel shook his head to clear it, coughing water onto the sand. The little blonde girl was saying, "We warned you, *Senhor*. There is a strong undertow. You paid no attention!" She scolded him gently, but he could tell that she was mightily pleased he had ignored her warning so that she and her friends might have the marvelous excitement of saving him from the sea. "We are all excellent swimmers," she continued chidingly, "because we live here in Amaralina. But you are not a good swimmer, *Senhor*." She smiled at him. "But we pulled you out. Maria and Letitia and I." Scornfully she said, "The others ran away."

Now Manuel Andradas felt a wave of a very unfamiliar emotion sweep through him, and he said, "*Senhoritas*, I owe you my life. I am grateful. I thank you from my heart." They were embarrassed.

He looked at the blonde child, who was combing her fingers through her wet taffy-colored hair and asked with a premonition of disaster, "*Come se chama?* What is your name?"

"Eunicia Camarra," she said "What is yours?"

He sent the other children home with his thanks, but prevailed upon Eunicia to stay a little longer on the beach with him. "I wish to take your picture again," he explained. "Alone. To have a record of the lady who saved my life." And curiously enough, he found himself for the first time in his career regarding a proposed victim with something besides cold objectivity. He felt an unaccustomed lift of his heart when he looked at Eunicia—an emotion compounded of gratitude, admiration,

liking and strangest of all, tenderness, almost as though she were his own child, he thought vaguely. At the end, after snapping her in a series of childish, charming poses, he said on an impulse, "Now show me how I looked when you pulled me from the water and dragged me onto the beach."

She laughed delightedly and flopped down like a rag doll on the sand. Her arms were disposed limply at her sides; her legs lay loosely asprawl; the closed eyes in her thin face were turned up to the sky; and her mouth gaped. She looked remarkably like a corpse. Manuel leaned over her then, and used his Minox to snap her like that.

And all the time, they were talking.

"Do you live here with your mother and father?" he asked.

"Oh, no, *Senhor* Andradas, my mother and father are dead. I live with my grandmother, in that big house up there on the hill." She waved inland.

"I see. A big house, you say. Your grandmother is a rich woman, I suppose. Not likely to want you saving the life of a poor photographer."

She was indignant. "My grandmother is a great lady," she averred stoutly. "But of course, she is very rich as you say. After all, when my grandfather was alive, was he not the greatest diamond merchant in Brazil?"

"Was he?"

"So my grandmother says."

"Then I am sure it is true. And you are alone there with your grandmother, eh?" He peered at her with his muddy eyes. "No brothers or sisters or relatives to keep you company?"

"None," she said sadly. Then she brightened. "But I have a half brother in Rio. He is an old man now, over thirty I believe, but he is my half brother nevertheless. His mother was the

same as mine," she explained importantly. "But a different father, you see?"

Manuel was, in truth, beginning to see. "Your grandmother does not like your half brother?" he guessed.

"No. She says he is *malo*. A liar and a cheat and a disgrace to her family. My mother ran away and married when she was too young. And brother Luis was born then. I feel sorry for him, because his father is dead, like mine. I write to him sometimes, but I do not tell my grandmother."

"I can see that you might not want her to know," Manuel agreed gravely.

"Especially when she will not help him, even with money. And he asks her many times, I know. She refuses, always."

"Perhaps she will leave him some money in her will when she dies."

"Oh, no she will not. I am to have it all. Luis will not get a penny, grandmother says, while anybody else is alive in the family. She has no patience with brother Luis, you see. Poor Luis. But I think he is quite nice. I shall go to Rio and visit him and do his cooking for him," she finished in a dreaming voice, "when grandmother gives me enough money."

"You've never seen him?"

"No. Only his picture. He sent me a picture in a letter last year, the one in which he asked whether Grandmother had softened toward him. And I sent him a picture of me when I answered. He's quite handsome, really."

"What is his name?" Manuel said.

"Luis Ferreira."

"Does he have a job?"

"Yes. He works in the office of the Aranha Hotel."

After he had changed out of his swimming trunks in the

pavilion, Manuel took Eunicia up to the cafe terrace and, with unaccustomed generosity, bought her a bottle of orange pop. She guzzled the pop energetically. Then she went home, saying her grandmother would be anxious if she didn't soon appear. Manuel said in parting "I am very grateful, Eunicia. Perhaps I shall be able to do you a service in return."

Long after she had gone, he sat alone on the cafe terrace, crouching uncomfortably on a fixed pedestal seat beside a square slate table, and stared out across the beach at the foam-laced sea. He ordered three Cinzanos and drank them down rapidly, one after the other, wrestling with his unexpected problem. Three hundred thousand *cruzeiros!* The whole thing, he thought gloomily, had now come down simply to a question of ethics.

He wished he had a glass of cashew juice.

Manuel Andradas returned to Rio on the night plane that evening. He went from the airport directly to his studio, developed the Minox film he had exposed in Bahia, and carefully examined the tiny negatives with a magnifying glass before selecting one and making a blown-up print of it. He called the anonymous telephone number that eventually put him in touch with the man called Rodolfo, and arranged to meet him again in the Rua do Ouvidor in the morning. Then he went to bed and slept dreamlessly.

Next day, he showed the print to the man called Rodolfo. "It was not a woman," he said with disapproval. "It was a child."

Rodolfo examined the photograph of Eunicia. It showed her lying limp and unquestionably dead on the beach at Amaralina. He nodded with satisfaction. "This should be adequate proof," he said. He kept looking at the picture. Then he smiled. "Even

the young donkey sometimes loses its footing," he said sententiously. "May I keep this photograph? It will be passed along to our principal. And if all is well, I shall meet you at the same place tomorrow afternoon at three."

He went off with Manuel's print. And at three the next afternoon, he met Manuel again near the flower market and paused only long enough to shake his hand and say, "Good work. Satisfactory." This time, he left an even thicker pad of currency in Manuel's hand than when first they had met.

Manuel pocketed the banknotes almost casually, and hailed a taxi. In it, he had himself driven to Copacabana Beach, where he descended about a block from the Aranha Hotel on Avenida Atlantica. Dismissing the cab, he glanced appraisingly at the wide beach, peopled at this hour of the afternoon by bathers as numerous as ants on a dropped sugar cake. Then he entered the public telephone booth across the street, called the Aranha Hotel, and was soon talking in a purposely muffled voice to *Senhor* Luis Ferreira, one of the hotel's bookkeepers.

All he said to him, however, was, "I have a message for you from Bahia, *Senhor* Ferreira. Meet me on the beach across from your hotel in ten minutes. By the kite-seller's stand." He waited for no reply, but hung up and left the booth.

Then he strolled up the beach toward the hotel, automatically picking his way between the thousands of sea and sun worshippers scattered on the sand. Near the small dark man who sold bird-kites to the children he stationed himself, an unnoticed member of the holiday crowd. From the corners of his eyes, he watched the hotel entrance.

Soon a slightly stooped young man with a receding chin and thinning blond hair, came out of the hotel door, dodged through the rushing traffic of the avenue to the beach and approached

the kite salesman. He paused there, looking with worried eyes at the people around him. The beach was crowded; any one of all those thousands could be the message-bringer from Bahia. He looked at his wrist watch, gauging the ten minutes Manuel had mentioned. And Manuel was sure, then, that this was Luis Ferreira, and none other . . . the half brother of Eunicia Camarra.

Manuel stepped quietly toward him through the hodgepodge of bathers. As he did so, he withdrew his hand from his pocket, and brought out with it, concealed in the palm, a truncated dart of the kind, with a long metal point, that is used to throw at a cork target. The dart had its point filed to a needle sharpness; half the wooden shaft had been cut off, so that the dart handle fitted easily into Manuel's hand with only a half inch of needle projecting. And on the needle's point was thickly smeared a dark, tarry substance.

Several customers were clustered around the kite seller. Four youths were playing beach ball three yards away. A fat man and a thin woman lay on the sand, almost at Ferreira's feet.

Approaching Ferreira, Manuel seemed to stumble over the out-thrust foot of the fat sunbather. He staggered a bit, and his heavy boot came down with sickening force on the instep of Luis Ferreira. Manuel threw out his hands as though to catch himself. And in that act, the point of the dart entered deeply into Ferreira's wrist, just below his coat sleeve.

Ferreira did not notice. The prick of the needle was overlooked in the excruciating pain of his trodden instep. He jumped back and cursed. Manuel apologized for his clumsiness and walked on up the beach losing himself in the crowd within seconds.

He neither hurried enough to be conspicuous, nor lagged

enough to waste precious time. Nor did he look back. Not even when he left the beach after a few blocks and walked briskly down Avenida Atlantica toward the city's center, did he so much as turn his head toward where he had left Ferreira. What need? He knew perfectly well what was happening back there.

Already the curare from the dart point would have completed its deadly work. Ferreira's body would be lying upon the beach, still unnoticed, perhaps, among all those reclining figures, but with the motor nerve endings in its striated muscles frozen and helpless, the beating of its heart soon to be forever stilled by the paralyzing drug. In three minutes or less, Ferreira would be dead. That was certain. And the blonde child of Bahia who had so strangely touched the long-dormant buds of affection in Manuel Andradas, was safe from harm.

Manuel permitted himself a chuckle as he walked toward town. If someone saves your life, he thought, you owe them a life in return. And if someone pays for a death, you owe them a death for their money.

He smiled, his muddy brown eyes looking straight ahead.

This question of ethics, he thought, is not so difficult after all.

(continued from front flap)

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