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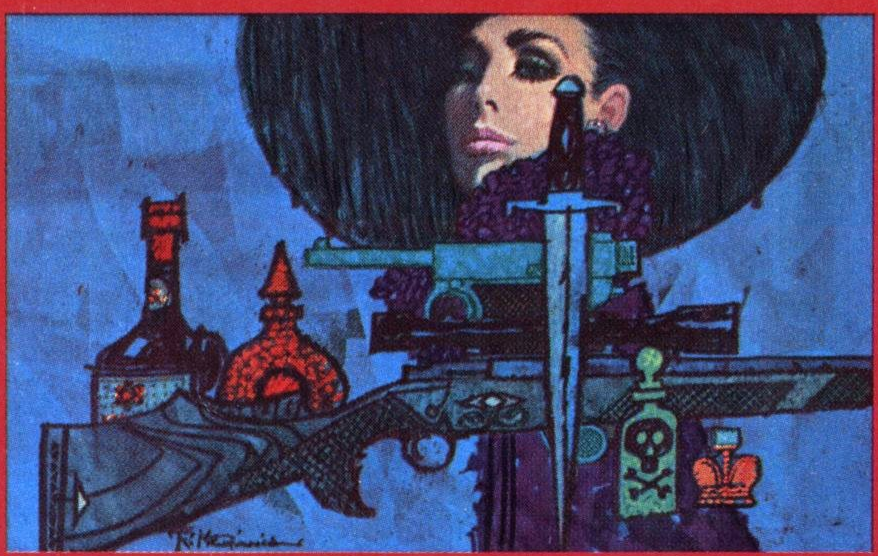
Edited by

BRETT HALLIDAY

Creator of **MIKE SHAYNE**

BEST DETECTIVE STORIES OF THE YEAR



17th Annual Collection

She was too much woman . . .

for just one man, and everyone in the neighborhood knew it. But talk was cheap and Norma Hamilton only had expensive habits.

That was before she struck up a friendship with the TV repairman—and the service charge turned out to be murder.

Just one of the BEST DETECTIVE STORIES OF THE YEAR

Edited by BRETT HALLIDAY

BEST DETECTIVE STORIES OF THE YEAR

17th ANNUAL COLLECTION

Edited by BRETT HALLIDAY

A DELL MYSTERY

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FOREWORD

EDITING THIS year's collection of the BEST DETECTIVE STORIES OF THE YEAR has been a lot more fun than last year, and a lot more difficult. The basic reason for this is the heartening and hopeful fact that 1961's harvest of short stories is much richer than it was in 1960.

This made my year of magazine reading more enjoyable, but at the end of the year I was appalled to discover that I had earmarked forty-odd stories as worthy of inclusion among the best. Then came the really difficult task of thinning the wealth of material down to fit the space limitations of this volume. Many fine stories had to be discarded for one reason or another. The final selections are (as they were last year) the result of my own personal likes and dislikes. Basically, I demand two things in a story: that the writer have a strong, dramatic story to tell, and that he shall tell it superlatively well.

Four of the stories do not really belong in a collection devoted to the best of 1961, because they first appeared in magazines published before that date. They came out near the end of 1960—two of them right at the turn of the year. I was not able to include them in the BEST DETECTIVE STORIES for last year—and yet I have not been able to forget them either. They seem to me to belong with the best, and so I have added them to my new collection—to pacify myself and to provide a bonus of good reading for you.

A look at the Table of Contents will show that only two of the current authors were represented in last year's volume: Jack Ritchie and Henry Slesar. Does this indicate that in addition to all of last year's top writers, there is a new group coming along to carry on the tradition of fine mystery writing? I sincerely hope so.

We also have the extremely heartening fact that so many

more important "names" in the mystery-writing field are included here than in last year's volume. Does this indicate that the more successful practitioners of the craft are returning to the short-story form? I sincerely hope so.

I have one regret. This year's collection has too few stories written by women. But I do hope the "deadlier of the species" will be more plentifully represented next year.

And I have one confession. There is a story here by an author with whom I have a personal affinity. Probably no other editor would pick this work for inclusion in a volume of the year's top stories—but I'll let you be the judge of that.

Again, I must express my sincere thanks not only to all the authors who contributed stories to this collection, but also to the many others whose work gave me so much reading pleasure this year—and I humbly apologize for having to leave so many fine pieces of writing out.

BRETT HALLIDAY

It is a pleasure to open this collection, as I did last year's volume, with a fine, dramatic story by an old friend and an old-timer in the field. Like Talmage Powell from last year, Bruno Fischer has given me a great deal of reading pleasure over a great many years.

Also, like Tal, when he is good, Bruno is very good indeed, and this is one of the best stories from his typewriter that I have read for many a year.

Bruno Fischer

SERVICE CALL

I TAKE FRIDAYS OFF, but you know how it is with a dentist. That morning I had to go downtown to my office to attend to a patient who had spent a bad night. I made the necessary extraction.

When I returned home at noon, I found Margaret on the porch indulging in her favorite hobby, which was minding other people's business. Time hung heavily on her hands since our daughter had gone off to college.

"Now that hussy is carrying on with the television repairman," she told me.

I didn't have to ask her which hussy she meant this time. She was staring at the Hamilton house directly across the street, and in front of it at the curb stood a small truck on which was lettered: RIVERSIDE TV SERVICE.

"He's been in there for quite a while. And it's not the first time."

"So they have trouble with their set," I said. "Don't we all?"

"Every few days?" Margaret sounded pretty grim about it, a sure indication that she was enjoying herself. "In recent weeks, practically every time I looked I saw that truck parked there."

I took off my jacket. Now at noon the day was becoming

quite warm. "All it could mean is that the Hamilton's got stuck with a lemon of a set. Some need more fixing than others."

"How convenient for her—if true." She uttered that feminine sniff that proclaimed she knew what she knew beyond argument. "You men," she said. "Always trying to find excuses for women like Norma Hamilton."

"Oh, hell," I said eloquently.

Leaving Margaret on the porch to her fun, I went upstairs to our bedroom to change my clothes.

Two of the bedroom windows were at the front of the house, and as I pulled on a cool polo shirt, I could look down at the placid, tree-lined street and across it at the Hamiltons' red brick house sitting behind a lawn and a rock garden and shrubbery. The truck remained at the curb. We also used Riverside Service, and I remembered the repairman from the time he had been in to change a tube in our set a couple of months ago. I supposed he was the same one —a youngish man who rolled his sleeves up to his shoulders to display his muscles. A virile blond animal, that one was, and it could be that Margaret was right. Because Norma Hamilton was very much a man's woman.

She was about thirty, the prime age, and rather pretty, but what set her off from other women was an aura of sexuality that enveloped any man in her presence. It affected even me, who had a middle-aged paunch and whose feet always hurt from standing at a dentist chair. Often, of an evening, I would watch Norma Hamilton standing at her rock garden, charmed by her ripe figure in shorts and a snug blouse, and maybe I would dream a little. The scuttlebutt in the neighborhood, especially among the women, was that there were men other than her husband who did considerably more than dream. Now including, perhaps, the television repairman.

Suddenly a familiar gray sedan rolled up the street.

I moved closer to the window. The sedan stopped some hundred feet away, in the middle of the street, and I could feel Arnold Hamilton staring at that truck in front of his house. He owned a haberdashery store downtown a block from my office; usually he had lunch in the same restaurant

I did, and sometimes, since we were neighbors if not exactly friends, we ate at the same table. Had he come home in the middle of the day because he suspected something or merely because he had decided to have lunch at home for a change?

Margaret burst into the bedroom. "Erwin, Arnold's come home."

"So I see," I said.

She joined me at the window. He was getting out of his car, which he had pulled into his driveway.

"I ought to phone Norma," she said.

"Why?"

"To warn her." She was still panting from her run up the stairs. "Something terrible might happen if he catches them together."

"You'll only make yourself ridiculous," I pointed out. "Besides, it's too late."

Arnold Hamilton was at the front door of his house. He was a gaunt man with sad eyes and thinning hair. It seemed to me that there was something stealthy in the way he let himself into the house, though probably I was simply being affected by Margaret's overactive imagination. The door closed behind him.

We waited at our upstairs window. I found myself listening for loud voices; they would surely have carried across the quiet street. No sound came from the house, and after a minute or two, the repairman appeared carrying his kit. He got into his truck and turned around at the end of the street and drove off.

I chuckled. "Disappointed, Margaret?" I said.

She actually seemed to be. It occurred to me that nothing much was happening in her life since Betty had left for college. She wasn't the clubwoman type and made few friends and usually I was too tired to take her places after work. The result was that she lived a lot of her life vicariously through books and television and the more dramatic doings of our neighbors.

I slipped my arm about her waist. "Tell you what, sweetheart. Let's go swimming after lunch."

"I'd like that," she said, leaning against me.

Her waist was remarkably slim for a women her age. Not

that she was old—only partway in her forties. In my arms she didn't feel much different than she used to. I kissed her on the cheek and we went down to the kitchen.

It must have been an hour later that I heard the siren.

I ran out to the porch. A black-and-white police car stopped with a jerk where the truck had been. We had finished our lunch and Margaret was upstairs getting our swimming things together. In almost no time, she joined me on the porch. We stood together watching two uniformed policemen hurry into the Hamilton house.

"Something must have happened," she said.

"I hope it's nothing serious," I said.

Cars continued to arrive. They contained policemen both in uniform and in plain clothes, and the entire neighborhood was pouring into the street. A word spread among the people gathered in groups, a word we could hear all the way to our porch. The word was murder.

"We ought to tell the police what we saw," Margaret said to me in a hoarse whisper.

"We didn't see anything much."

"Still, it's our duty to tell them."

"All right, I'll do it," I said. "You stay here."

I crossed the street. A uniformed cop stopped me on the opposite sidewalk.

"If what I hear is true, I think I have some information," I said. "Was somebody really killed?"

"It was Mrs. Hamilton. Who are you, sir?"

"I'm Dr. Erwin McKay. I live in that house across the street."

He led me up the walk to the front door and said to wait there and went inside. Pretty soon he reappeared with a burly man in a slouch hat. "This is Dr. McKay," the cop said and returned to his post on the sidewalk.

The other man said, "I'm Detective Breen," and put out his hand. After I had shaken it, I told him about the television repairman and how Arnold Hamilton had suddenly come home.

"Yes, we know," Detective Breen said. He was sucking a curved pipe the way a child would a lollipop. "Mr. Hamil-

ton told us about him. But he doesn't know his name and can't think of the name of the company he works for."

"It's the Riverside TV Service."

"Thanks a lot, Dr. McKay. This will save a lot of trouble locating him."

"Glad I could help," I said. But I didn't leave. Putting a match to his pipe, the detective studied me lazily. The entire street was watching us. I began to feel self-conscious. I drew in my breath and asked, "Has he confessed?"

"Mr. Hamilton? No. He insists it was the TV man."

"At least an hour passed after he'd driven away before the police came," I said. "Did you know that?"

"No, we didn't. Interesting." He nodded to himself. "Would you mind coming in with me, Dr. McKay?"

I had no idea why he wanted me in there, but of course I went.

The house had a center hall. Through an open door on the left, I could look into a kind of study. The television set stood against a wall, and on a sofa at the opposite wall Arnold Hamilton sat. His face was in his hands. The way his sparse hair was plastered sideways on his scalp to cover as much area as possible struck me as particularly pathetic. He didn't look up. A motionless, silent detective stood near him.

We went up the hall a little way and turned through an arched doorway into the bedroom. Three men in plain clothes and one in uniform were in there. And Norma Hamilton.

She was grotesque in death. In falling, one of her arms had hooked over the post at the front of the bed. She hung there, just her toes touching the floor. Blood covered her head and face and spattered the beige carpet. Not far from her right hand was what must have done it, since some blood was on it—a slender, off-white earthenware flower vase. The only aura emanating from her now was that of death. I was quite shaken.

"The coroner is on the way here," Breen was saying to me. "But he's not a doctor. We've sent for Dr. Morganstern, who usually comes in a homicide, but he happens to be out on a call. I'd appreciate it, Dr. McKay, if you'd make a

preliminary examination to determine how long she's been dead. Time is important, as you—"

"But I'm not a physician," I broke in.

"You're not?"

"I'm a dentist."

Somebody in the room laughed softly.

"I see." Breen managed to keep himself from looking foolish. "Sorry to have troubled you."

He conducted me out of the house. As we passed the television room, I had another look at Arnold Hamilton on the sofa. He had raised his head, but he wasn't looking at anything. Breen opened the front door and said, "I'd like to speak to you and your wife later, Dr. McKay," and closed the door behind me.

Neighbors converged on me when I reached the street. I told them what I had seen; then I moved on to my house, where Margaret was waiting on the porch rocker, and I told her.

"We should have done something," she said.

"Such as what?"

"I don't know, but I feel we could have saved her." Margaret was very pale; at times like this she was beginning to show her age. "I felt in my bones something would happen. But you scoffed at me."

"You sound as if you think it's my fault."

Margaret said nothing more for a while. She rocked gently and I paced the porch, both of us watching what went on across the street, along with the rest of the neighborhood.

There was a lot of coming and going of cars, and then from a police car that had pulled up at the curb stepped the television repairman. He now wore a tan poplin jacket over his muscles. On the sidewalk, he paused to look at the crowd with an expression of bewilderment. Then one of the two detectives who had brought him touched his arm and they moved up the walk to the house.

Margaret said, "It's his fault Arnold killed Norma. And nothing will be done to him." She sniffed—a habit of hers I detested. "But of course the really guilty person has already been punished."

"How easy for you to make moral judgments."

"You're still trying to find excuses for her," she said like an accusation.

"I don't know enough about it to excuse or not to excuse anybody," I said. "But I saw what had been done to her with that vase. Try a little pity, Margaret."

She looked up at me from the chair, and then in the same instant, we looked away from each other.

The afternoon dribbled on. The repairman came out with one of the detectives who had brought him and they drove away. Shortly afterward, Arnold Hamilton appeared, flanked by two detectives. The street became very quiet; a funeral hush hung in the hot air. Arnold Hamilton walked between the detectives as if unaware of them and his gawking neighbors. The three got into one of the police sedans, and when it was gone, the voices in the street resumed like a collective sigh.

Then Detective Breen was crossing the street. He came up on our porch and I introduced him to Margaret. She did not pause in her rocking as she nodded, moving in that chair with a kind of relentless rhythm. Breen, taking his time, put his broad rear on the porch railing and set about loading his pipe.

"Well, did either of them confess?" I burst out.

His quiet eyes looked up at me over the flaring match. "No." He drew the flame into the bowl and then said, "Mrs. McKay, your husband told me you often saw the TV truck parked at the Hamilton house."

"I don't know how often. Every few days, it seemed. There may have been other times when I wasn't home to see it." Margaret rocked and rocked. "Didn't he admit he was carrying on with her?"

"He denies it. But then he would. It gives him a motive."

"Motive?" I said. "Isn't it obvious that her husband killed her?"

"Not obvious. Let's say probable at this point." He smiled a little. "We policemen have to make these nice distinctions. We are holding Hamilton for further questioning. We are also holding Forrest.

Margaret said, "Did he, Forrest—that's the repairman, isn't it?"

"Larry Forrest, ma'am. What were you going to ask me?"

"Didn't he admit anything at all?" Margaret said.

"About what, ma'am?"

"About their affair."

"I said he didn't. Mrs. McKay, how long would you say his truck was in front of the house before Hamilton came home?"

"Quite a while. I don't remember exactly. But longer than it ordinarily takes to repair a set."

Breen nodded. "In this case, there was nothing wrong with the set."

"You see!" Margaret cried triumphantly. I didn't like the almost gloating expression on her face. "It's proof of what I've been saying."

"It could be." Perched on the railing like a small boy, Breen rubbed the hot pipe bowl against his cheek. "Mrs. Hamilton called up Riverside Service and said that her set was out of order. According to Forrest, there was no answer when he rang the doorbell. But the door was unlocked, so he let himself in."

"Because he was right at home there," Margaret said.

"So it seems. He said he'd been there before and knew where the set was in that room off the hall. He turned it on and the picture was all right. But the fact was that Mrs. Hamilton had called in saying it wasn't. He said he thought maybe the trouble would show up after the tubes had warmed up, so he sat down to wait. He said after ten minutes, maybe a little longer, the set was still working properly, and he decided to leave. Just then, he saw Hamilton get out of his car in the driveway. Anyway, that's his story."

"And what's Arnold Hamilton's story?" I asked.

"He agrees that Forrest was in the hall, apparently about to leave, when he entered the house. Forrest explained about the service call and Mrs. Hamilton not being home and the set being all right. Then he left. As for Hamilton, he claims he spent a few minutes in the bathroom, then he passed the bedroom and looked in and saw his wife lying

there dead in her own blood. He insists that Forrest must have done it."

"The hour that passed," I murmured.

"Yes, the hour between the time you two saw Hamilton come home and the time he called the police. Hamilton admits it. He says he went into shock—that he was so numb, it was a long time before he could rouse himself to call the police. And that's his story." Breen struck a match; like most pipe-smokers, he smoked more matches than tobacco. "I'm not supposed to discuss a case with outsiders. But you've both been of help, and I'm hoping you can both be of still more."

I said, "Arnold seldom came home for lunch."

"I see," Breen said. "That's the kind of thing I'm trying to learn. Possibly Hamilton suspected Forrest and set a trap for him. He didn't catch them together, but he caught Forrest there and nothing wrong with the set. Let's say Mrs. Hamilton had gone out for a few minutes and Forrest was waiting for her and Hamilton guessed why. She came home after Forrest left and—" Breen paused. "You folks didn't see Mrs. Hamilton come home, did you?"

"We were eating lunch in the kitchen," I told him. "You can't see the street from there."

"Well, it could be that she came home after Forrest left and she and her husband had a fight because of him and in a fit of jealous rage, he grabbed hold of that vase and struck her with it."

Margaret, still rocking, had a kind word to say for somebody. "I can't believe it. Arnold is such a nice, mild person."

"You think so, ma'am?"

"Oh, yes. Arnold couldn't hurt a fly. It must have been the other one—that Larry Forrest. He was here once to repair our set. He looked so—well, I wouldn't put it past him having an affair with a married woman and then murdering her."

"We're considering that," Breen said, and suddenly he looked around.

The hush had again descended on the street. A stretcher covered by a sheet was being brought out of that red brick house. I could imagine Norma Hamilton under there—not

as I had seen her a short time ago but vibrantly alive. The stretcher was shoved into a police ambulance, which then rolled to the corner and made a U-turn and passed the house.

"Let's see," Breen said, "isn't that where the new Green Acres development is?" He had got off the porch rail; facing the street, he waved his left hand.

"That's right," I said.

"Mostly dead-end streets and loops, as I remember. Hard to get through. So I guess most cars come to this street from that direction and go the same way." This time he waved his right hand, toward where nearly all of the city lay.

Again I told him he was right. I had no idea why that should interest him, and I brought him back to what we had been discussing by saying, "Isn't it possible to tell which one killed her by determining the exact time of her death?"

"If we could," Breen said. "It's never simple, and circumstances make it even tougher than usual in this case. First of all, it's a hot day, which delayed the onset of *rigor mortis*. Secondly, quite a lot of time passed before the body was finally examined. That was why I was anxious to have you do it, Dr. McKay, when I thought you were an M.D. No, I'm afraid we won't be able to pin the time of death down close enough to mean much."

Suddenly Margaret stood up. The chair continued to rock for a moment after she was on her feet. "Would you like a cool drink, Mr. Breen?"

"Very much, ma'am. But something soft, please. I'm on duty."

I noticed that as she moved to the door, he looked after her figure the way men hanging around on street corners look after almost any passing woman. Detectives, I supposed, were as human as anybody.

He drank the lemonade Margaret brought out and then left the porch. But he didn't leave the street. He mingled with the people lingering on the sidewalk and talked to them. Later, after practically all of our neighbors had gone back to their houses, I saw him move down the street like a door-to-door salesman.

Needless to say, we didn't go swimming that afternoon.

Much of the day was gone; anyway, we weren't in the mood. Margaret went into the house to work on a skirt she was sewing for our daughter, Betty, and I got out the lawn mower.

I was mowing the front lawn when Detective Breen, having been in about every house on the block, passed by and stopped. I said, "You seem to be the only detective working on this case."

"There are plenty more," he said. "This particular angle happens to be mine."

"Which angle?"

"What the neighbors know about the Hamiltons. They agree with your opinion that Norma Hamilton was rather free and easy with men."

"That's my wife's opinion, not mine."

Breen pushed back his slouch hat and ran a handkerchief over his brow. Going from door to door must have been hot work. "Were you, Dr. McKay?" he said.

"Was I what?"

"A man Mrs. Hamilton was free and easy with?"

"Look at me," I said, patting my pot belly. "Am I the kind of man who would appeal to an attractive young woman?"

"Let's turn it around. Did she appeal to you?"

"I'm a normal man," I said. "Every now and then I see a woman who appeals to me. So what? That doesn't mean I do anything about it. Or could even if I wanted to. You'll have to concentrate on a handsome young man or on a jealous husband."

"My job is to concentrate on everybody." He looked across the street. "Your wife wasn't the only one who noticed Forrest's truck parked often in front of that house."

"Then there's your proof she had an affair with him."

"Not exactly proof, but something." Breen clicked his pipe against his teeth. "Well, it's been a long afternoon."

"Just a minute," I said as he started to move on. "I'm curious about one thing. Weren't there fingerprints on the vase?"

"Somehow, they're seldom where you want them. The

vase had been handled too much before the murderer did to leave anything but smudges."

And his lazy eyes studied me—as if to see, I thought, if I was relieved by that information. Then he said good-by and crossed the street to where he had left his car.

I went into the house and told Margaret my conversation with the detective—except for the part where he had asked me if Norma Hamilton had been attractive to me.

"You see, I was right about the hussy and the TV truck out there so often," Margaret said. "And you refused to believe me."

As usual she had the last word.

After dinner, we did what we always did after dinner—we settled down in the living room to watch television. We started at eight o'clock, when a movie we hadn't seen in years came on. It ran an hour and a half. After that there was a half-hour Western and then a comedy show that would last a full hour and bring us to our bedtime, at eleven o'clock. We never saw it all. At about a quarter to eleven, the doorbell rang.

"Who can that be at this hour?" Margaret said in a tight voice.

She knew as well as I who it was. I went to the door and admitted Detective Breen.

He took off his hat. For the first time, I saw him without it on and he was quite bald on top. He said hello to Margaret and stood in the middle of the living room, watching the television screen as if that was what he had come here to do.

"This is a good set you have," he said presently. "Have much trouble with it?"

"Hardly any," I said.

"Then why has Larry Forrest been here so often to fix it?"

There was an uproar of laughter from the set at something the comedian had said. I turned it off. Margaret was sitting deep in the wing chair with her hands folded on her lap.

"I don't know what you mean," I said to Breen. "The only trouble we had with it was a couple months ago, when a tube had to be replaced."

"So I was led to believe." Breen took from his pocket a number of yellow cards. "These are from the Riverside Service files. They are made out by the repairman after each call so the company will have a record of what work was done on each set and how much time was spent on the job." He shuffled the cards as if about to deal them. "There are nine here in the name of McKay at this address. Nine in seven weeks. There were only three under Hamilton."

I said, "There must be a mistake."

But looking at Margaret, I knew there wasn't. She had put her head against the back of the chair and closed her eyes.

"Like almost all cars that come to this street, Forrest's truck came from the right," Breen was saying. "That's why he always parked across the street, on the right side of the street, in front of the Hamilton house, because it's directly opposite this house. He made his calls here. Anyway, most of them. The last one here was eight days ago. Then two at the Hamilton house."

He had been speaking to me, and only to me, from the first. As Margaret remained silent, I had to say something. I said, "But if it was anything but a service call, would he have made out a service card?"

"The only time the coast was clear was when you were at your office," Breen said. "Those were also his working hours. He had to report each call he made to explain to his office the time spent. These are the cards. Probably he paid for the charges written on each of these out of his own pocket."

Margaret started to laugh. That was the most awful sound I had ever heard.

"I paid for each call," she said. "I paid the charge each time." She laughed some more and said, "For services rendered."

"Margaret!" I cried.

She looked at me, and for some reason, I was the one who cringed.

"Twenty years of dullness," she said. "Twenty years of living with you. And it was unbearable this last year with Betty away and the house always so empty. Then there was

Larry Forrest and it was like being reborn. Like being young again." Her hands writhed on her lap. "Then he saw Norma. He made a call there, and he was no different than the others. Because she was younger and prettier and threw herself at him, he—he . . ."

There was a silence. She had become a stranger to me. It was odd that a man could live with a woman for so long and not know her.

The detective stood shuffling those cards, and after a long moment, he said, "So this morning you killed her."

"I didn't go there to kill her," Margaret said. "I went to plead with her. I told her she had other men. I had only Larry. I begged her to let him come back to me. Norma sneered at me. She said I was too old for him. We were in the bedroom. I snatched up the vase."

Her voice faded. She slumped in the chair.

"And then you had to bring Forrest into it," Breen said. "You called Riverside Service and told the girl in the office that you were Mrs. Hamilton. You said your set was out of order and please send a man at once because there was a program on soon you were anxious to see. You knew that Forrest phoned his office every hour or so to find out if there were calls for emergency service in his area. From your porch, you watched him arrive and go into that house across the street. Once again he was serving you, this time in a different way. He was set up by you to take the rap for you."

"No. That wasn't it. I didn't care so much about myself." Margaret's head lifted, and her face was stern. "He had to be punished, too," she said.

I think it will be well to follow the solid detection you enjoyed in the preceding story by chilling your blood with this shorter piece.

I won't call GAME a horror story, but I think I can guarantee that you'll have the horrors after you've read the final paragraph.

Herbert D. Kastle

GAME

ED GAINES WAS a man in his thirties, tall and slim, who had lost the excitement, the drive, the verve of life during the past ten years. Working in Margaret's father's shoe store had done it; living with Margaret herself had done it. So he was running, fleeing down the two-lane highway which stretched over the Texas Big Bend country like a dark ribbon.

He'd left the Fort Worth store at one, saying he had an appointment at the doctor's after lunch. That would hold his father-in-law. And the call he'd made at 5 P.M. from the gas station on the highway would hold Margaret. "I've run into an old friend, dear . . ."

Now it was almost nine and he'd penetrated deep into the near-desert. His lights tunneled a path through the blackness; a path which could end in Mexico, Argentina, Brazil —he had enough money to go anywhere, to start fresh when he got there. Eight thousand seven hundred dollars: his life's savings; Margaret's, too, for that matter. He had emptied their joint bank account at one thirty this afternoon. He had taken it in cash, and put it in the money belt fastened around his waist under his clothing. Now he was driving toward the Rio Grande, about three hours away. Now he was heading for a renewal of brightness and youth. Or so he hoped, and the hope was strong enough to keep him smiling and humming.

Until shortly after the gaudy Cadillac hard-top passed his Lark sedan, passed it so quickly that he failed to catch even a glimpse of the occupants. It shot ahead some hundred feet, slowed, and stayed there, matching his own sixty to seventy miles per hour. Together they streaked along the smooth, straight road, through the cloudy-night darkness, deeper into arid country.

Five minutes later, the Cadillac swerved far to the left, across the white line and into the opposite lane of the two-lane road, to smash a jack rabbit that was attracted by its lights.

Ed Gaines was immediately sickened. He'd lived in Texas all his life; he'd traveled its roads and knew the habits of the jack rabbit and had no particular love for the stupid creature which often ran mothlike into the lights of the night-traveling autos. But he'd never met anyone who *deliberately* ran them down. What was more to the point, he had never been so captive an audience to the results—his eyes and senses were offended by the red-and-brown splotch steaming on the night-cool pavement. And within the next sixty seconds, the driver of the Cadillac swung even farther to the left to destroy a second rabbit. And again the bloody mess came under Ed's headlights.

He turned on the radio, made himself hum, made himself go back to planning the good life. A store of his own. A beautiful woman to arouse and satisfy passion. Leisure time. . .

Twenty minutes later, the road bulged around a huge malpais rock formation, then straightened. During that brief turn, Ed glimpsed the interior of the car before him—a split-second view of two shadowy shapes in the front seat.

He wondered what it was like to be traveling with the kind of man who enjoyed smashing out life at seventy miles per hour. He wondered if the second shadow was a wife, and felt quick pity.

They approached a gas station, small, dark, dead, with a dim light showing from behind drawn shades on the second floor. Someone lived up there; and someone's dog ran out barking to meet the Cadillac. Ed never did see what sort of dog it was, only that it was small. And while it was a fool-

ish mutt to chase after cars, it wasn't quite so foolish as to cross in front of the hurtling vehicles. But the driver of the Cadillac swung hard right as soon as the dog appeared. The dog tried to reverse field, but the Cadillac plunged off the road, churning up hard-packed sand and scrub grass, hunting it down. The dog was sent spinning up and over the hard-top's roof to land in a mangled, intestine-smeared clot near the pavement.

Ed shouted and pounded his horn and pressed his gas pedal to the floor boards, raging to catch the Cadillac and do something to the man who was driving. But the Cadillac swung back onto the road and shot out ahead, picking up speed much faster than the six-cylinder Lark could. And continued to streak away at what must have been close to a hundred miles an hour, its taillights dwindling rapidly in the darkness, until Ed was again alone on the road to Mexico—except for a bloody little clump some five miles farther on.

It was a few minutes to ten when he pulled off the road onto the black-top of the Green Circle Tavern, which maintained a dozen cabins in addition to its wine-and-dine facilities. He turned left to park within white guide lines, radiator first against a low wire fence. Walking back toward the road and the entrance to the tavern, he counted four other cars beside his own. The last one made him stop. It was the Cadillac hard-top.

The Green Circle's taproom held three separate couples at three separate tables. Ed Gaines walked to the bar, took a stool and glanced into the long mirror. To his right, near the door and just visible past the barrier of his own reflection, were two middle-aged women chatting over the remains of a meal. To his left was the greater part of the room, and the other two couples. The one nearest him—just a few feet away—immediately claimed his attention. The man was big and heavy and graying, but it was his face that made Ed feel a swift return of the rage he'd experienced on the road. He quickly cautioned himself about judging people by their looks, and moved his eyes to the woman. She created another quick surge of emotion. She was slender, yet fully fleshed; small-boned and curved and

catlike; a dark, sleek girl with wide-set eyes. And those eyes rose, as if in response to his, and searched his face in the mirror. They looked at each other a moment, and in that moment, Ed knew she was full of sickness, full of despair. As if to point to the reason for this despair, her glance flicked to the man beside her. The man laughed, and said quite distinctly, "Would you like *him* for your Prince Charming, Cecily?" She paled, picked up a cocktail glass and drank. The man laughed and drew on a cigarette and looked at Ed in the mirror. Ed's first impulse was to drop his eyes, but he controlled it. He stared back at the thick-faced, hard-faced, cruel-faced man. And something made him move his eyes slowly, deliberately, to the lovely woman and smile at her. The man laughed again.

Ed examined the last couple—youngsters; honeymooners, probably; wrapped up in each other. He made himself consider the possibility that they, or the middle-aged women now rising from their table, were the occupants of the Cadillac. Or a person or persons not present. But then he returned his eyes to Cecily, and she was again looking at him, and her sickness, her *hatred* of the man beside her, again came through. And the soft, thick laughter again sounded, and the deep, taunting voice said, "He's definitely the Prince Charming type, Cecily."

Ed turned and looked at the lovely girl. "You and your friend driving to Mexico?"

The man laughed. "I told you, Cecily." He nodded at Ed. "We are. Or we were. But we've had a few discussions, my lovely wife and myself, and we're undecided now."

The bartender finally made his appearance. Ed ordered beer and a ham sandwich. His heart was pounding wildly, and he wondered why he was doing this. And said, "That your Cadillac in the parking lot?"

Cecily's eyes remained on the table; her face remained deathly pale. Her husband looked surprised. "That's right." Then his smile grew and a note of vindictive delight entered his voice. "You're the one we passed, aren't you? You're the one who blew his horn." He slapped his hands on the table. "He's the one, Cecily. I tell you—"

She jumped up, whispering, "Let me go, Carl! *Let me go!*" She stopped then. The young couple was staring.

Ed's mouth was dry, but he said, "My name's Ed Gaines. Mind if I join you?"

Cecily looked at him. There was surprise in her face, which was quickly replaced by a childish surge of pure hope.

"By all means," her husband said, and he was shaking his head and laughing heavily, consistently.

Ed walked to their table. As he sat down, one clear thought emerged. *This girl was the beauty and passion he'd wanted all his life!*

Cecily was still standing. Ed examined her, openly, not hiding a thing from the heavy-set man. She wore a simple, tight sheath; pale-blue, sleeveless, perfect because her body was perfect. He smiled at her. She sat down.

The bartender came with his beer and sandwich. He raised his glass, and cleared his throat. "It might help to tell me what the trouble's all about."

Carl lighted a fresh cigarette. His voice was heavy with sarcasm. "Why certainly, Ed. Cecily wants me to give her a divorce. She wants to get away from me as soon as possible—tonight; tomorrow morning; just as soon as she can." He smiled, his hard face genuinely amused. "But I won't allow it. I like having her."

"Having me," Cecily whispered.

Carl nodded, looking at her. "I spent thousands feeding, clothing and entertaining you. That proves I like having you, doesn't it?"

Her face flamed.

Ed sipped his beer. He looked at that wide, cruel face, at the smirking lips, at the amused but cold eyes, and felt a sudden chill. Dogs and rabbits weren't the only things that man could kill. Yet he said, "Are you sure you want to leave your husband, Cecily?"

She put her hands to her cheeks and whispered hoarsely, "God, I've never been so sure of anything in all my life! If you asked me whether I'm more sure of that or of wanting to live, I couldn't answer."

"Then I offer you transportation."

"I accept."

He nodded, the blood pounding in his temples. "Would you like to leave now?"

"Yes, but. . ." Her eyes broke away.

"I really feel bad about mentioning it," Carl said, "but I still want her around. At least for a while yet." He shook in laughter.

"This is the United States," Ed said. "You can't force a woman—"

Carl's laughter ended. "You're wrong, Prince. I *can*."

This was the part Ed feared; the part where the claws would begin to show. "How, if we just drive away?"

Carl rose slowly. "I have money, and money can buy all sorts of services, and I also have the will—" his smile was pure malice as he looked down at his wife— "and the contacts to carry out that will. If you doubt me, leave with Cecily while I'm washing up. I won't follow. I'll just use the phone." He walked away.

Ed raised his glass, but his hand was trembling and he put it down again. "Want to leave?" he asked.

"He means what he says!" And then, face and voice suddenly shy, "Why in the world would you want to. . ." She didn't finish.

"I'm running away myself," he murmured. "We could run together."

Her hand came across the table and touched his. His fingers reacted as if with a will of their own, meshing in hers. The trembling flowed through both of them, merged, and stilled. Her eyes blinked back tears. "So quickly—yet we both feel. . ." She shook her head. "But it's a waste, Ed. Only when he dies. . ."

"It can happen." He heard himself say it, and didn't wonder. He only *wanted*. He'd wanted to leave the old life, and had done so. Now he wanted to gain the most important single component of his new life—a woman to arouse and satisfy passion—and would do so. He stood up, jerking his head at the archway. "Just for a minute, Cecily, please?"

She flushed at the hunger in his voice, and rose. They went along the central corridor to the doors, where it was dark. He touched her arms, and she turned. A second later,

she was tight up against him, her lips parting moistly under his. Then her breath tingled his ear. "Money and possessions, that's all he ever thinks of! That's why I hate him. *Feelings*—excitement and warmth and human feelings—they don't mean a thing to him. But you, Ed! You're what I've wanted. You're doing this, even though you heard what he said."

He backtracked. "He wouldn't actually try to—"

"He would! He's not just an ordinary businessman. He manufactures games—pinballs and one-armed bandits and dice cages and roulette wheels. He has contacts with all sorts of people. He'd have me killed—you, too." Her head jerked; she made sure her husband wasn't returning. She whispered. "He's had others—at least one I know of—taken care of. Please don't doubt that, Ed! He can kill without a thought!"

Ed nodded slowly. Thinking of that dog, he believed her. And for a moment, he wanted to walk away. But in the next moment, her lips returned to his; her kiss was pure fire; they rocked together, burning. He spoke to her, and learned they were staying the night, and got the number of their cabin. And said, "If it's the only way, so be it." She trembled against him. They spoke again, whispering frantically, interrupting each other frequently. Then it was settled.

When Carl came to find them, they were sitting on straight-backed chairs, smoking. Carl laughed. "For a minute I thought I'd have to make those calls. But Prince Charming's sensible, isn't he? Try again in a year or so, Prince Charming. I might be ready to dump her."

Cecily left. Carl laughed. Ed returned to the taproom, just as the honeymoon couple was leaving. His sandwich and beer were still waiting. He ate slowly, alone in the room. The bartender began cleaning up. Ed finished, paid, and said, "Well, back to the road." He went outside. Hugging the building shadows, he moved toward the line of twelve cabins a hundred or more feet back. And noticed that only the Lark and Caddy remained in the parking lot, and that no other car was visible at the cabins. Still, he moved carefully, quietly, as he approached the one lighted

cabin. When he reached the door marked with a brass FOUR, he put his hand on the knob and turned. Cecily had done her part. The door opened and he stepped inside. And from then on was in mortal danger, because the important part of his plan was that there be no plan at all when it came to this.

Carl was standing near the bed, fastening a blue silk dressing gown around his thick body. Cecily was on the other side of the bed, face twisted, saying, ". . . . never again!" They both turned to Ed. Carl's mouth dropped open in surprise. Cecily said, "On your right, Ed." Ed saw the table, and the two full bottles of whisky. He took one by the neck. It felt heavy in his hand. He was terribly afraid.

Carl said, "Get out of here, *fast!* You can still save your life!" He stepped forward, fists rising.

Cecily moved then. She picked something up off the lamp table—a long nail file. Carl glanced at her. Ed moved forward with the bottle.

Carl jumped back. His face changed. He was afraid. He said, "Now just a minute. Now hold it a minute. Maybe—"

"He'll have us killed," Cecily whispered. "If he ever gets to a phone, we're dead."

Carl laughed—a braying, panicked sound. "That was just talk. Big talk with nothing—"

Cecily was near enough to jab his shoulder. Carl said, "No, please!"

Ed didn't want to do anything to this frightened man. But then Carl grabbed Cecily's wrist and the nail file clattered to the floor. "Silly broad!" he said, triumphant and threatening again.

Ed hit him with the bottle. It broke. Whisky flooded the graying hair, soaked the blue dressing gown. Carl sat down on the floor, hands over his head. "Stop," he murmured. He fell over on his side and his eyes rolled back. He said something else. Ed bent, trying to hear. "Again," Cecily said, and put the other whisky bottle in his hand. "Again, Ed, again, or he'll kill us!" So he hit him again, and yet again, as Cecily directed.

They worked hard, cleaning the cabin of everything but liquor, moving Carl and their luggage to the Caddy. Ed didn't allow himself to think of what he'd done. He merely walked to the Lark as Cecily went to the restaurant-bar. It was 2 A.M.

Ten minutes later, he was parked at the side of the road, waiting. Cecily was to tell whoever was on night duty that she and her husband were getting an early start for Mexico. She was to ask for a bottle of bourbon, and pay as much as necessary to get it. She was to act drunk, and intimate that her husband was even drunker. If she heard Ed pulling out of the lot, she was to raise her voice to cover his exit. Failing that, she was to say it was a car on the highway. Then she would go to the Caddy and drive off.

If everything went well, that is.

The Caddy pulled up behind him. He got out. Cecily ran over. "The bartender was the only one there," she said. "He didn't hear you." He nodded and went to the Caddy. She went to the Lark and pulled onto the highway. He followed her, refusing to glance at the body propped up beside him.

Eight or ten miles farther, he saw the sign on the right reading ARROYO NEGRO—BLACK CANYON. Cecily pulled over and waved her hand at car tracks packing down the sandy soil. He drove carefully, though moon and stars gave plenty of light. And saw the low picket fence and second sign—a warning to stop here as the canyon commenced within fifty yards. He went off the car tracks and around the brief fence and saw the change in land ahead; saw the black gash in the earth which was Arroyo Negro. Cecily had been here before, on her honeymoon.

He opened the Caddy's door. He stepped on the gas. As he'd seen so many times in movies, he sent the car spurting forward and leaped clear. It went over, hit the side with a tremendous rending of metal, bounced, and continued down to the bottom, about three hundred feet at its deepest point. There it settled with a chittering of smashed parts. There it lay in the moonlight, even more of a wreck than he'd hoped.

Cecily stood beside him, brushing at his clothes, examining him for cuts and bruises. There weren't any, except for a mildy skinned wrist. "We're all right," she said. "It'll be

found, but not soon. They'll think I got out and died in one of those caves. Or wandered into the desert. Or maybe wasn't in the car when it crashed. Anyway, we'll be in South America. Far away. We'll be together. Forever. We'll be so happy . . ." She was gripping him about the waist. He felt her body pulsing against his. But he was very tired now; very dull and drained and tired.

They returned to the Lark. He asked if she minded driving. He just had to rest for a while. She kissed him and said of course she would drive. She would do whatever he wanted from now on. Weren't they bound together by the strongest of ties—blood?

They pulled onto the road. He slumped low in the seat and put his head on her shoulder. Her fragrance came to him, soft and delicate. After a while, he slept.

He awoke, knowing something was wrong. It was still dark, and he was still in the car, and she was still driving. Nothing had changed from the time he'd fallen asleep, so nothing could be wrong. And yet he *knew* there was.

His thoughts came to an end as he squinted up at her. She was sitting—or crouching—over the wheel, lips parted, eyes wide and fixed, dampness covering her forehead, face and neck. And even as he stared, a new and terrific tension entered her body.

He moaned once—a sound embodying his sudden and complete loathing for this terrible stranger to whom he was tied forever; this stranger who might yet cost him his life. She didn't hear him. She was too engrossed in swinging the wheel hard left, peering intently at the road directly in front of the swerving, hurtling car, and then releasing her pent-up breath in a gasp of pure delight as the thump and sodden, squishing sound filled his ears and all the world.

For many years, many writers of fiction have been intrigued by the central theme of this story: How would you spend the last few months of your life if you were free to do as you wished and a definite date were set for your death?

I think Jack Ritchie's solution is admirable. There's a chuckle here—albeit a grim one.

Jack Ritchie

FOR ALL THE RUDE PEOPLE

"HOW OLD ARE YOU?" I ASKED. His eyes were on the revolver I was holding. "Look, mister, there's not much in the cash register, but take it all. I won't make no trouble."

"I am not interested in your filthy money. How old are you?"

He was puzzled. "Forty-two."

I clicked my tongue. "What a pity. From your point of view, at least. You might have lived another twenty or thirty years if you had just taken the very slight pains to be polite."

He didn't understand.

"I am going to kill you," I said, "because of the four-cent stamp and because of the cherry candy."

He did not know what I meant by the cherry candy, but he did know about the stamp.

Panic raced into his face. "You must be crazy. You can't kill me just because of that."

"But I can."

And I did.

When Dr. Briller told me that I had but four months to

live, I was, of course, perturbed. "Are you positive you haven't mixed up the X-rays? I've heard of such things."

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Turner."

I gave it more earnest thought. "The laboratory reports. Perhaps my name was accidentally attached to the wrong. . ."

He shook his head slowly. "I double-checked. I always do that in cases like these. Sound medical practice, you know."

It was late afternoon and the time when the sun is tired. I rather hoped that when my time came to actually die, it might be in the morning. Certainly more cheerful.

"In cases like this," Dr. Briller said, "a doctor is faced with a dilemma. Shall he or shall he not tell his patient? I always tell mine. That enables them to settle their affairs and to have a fling, so to speak." He pulled a pad of paper toward him. "Also I'm writing a book. What do you intend doing with your remaining time?"

"I really don't know. I've just been thinking about it for a minute or two, you know."

"Of course," Briller said. "No immediate rush. But when you do decide, you will let me know, won't you? My book concerns the things that people do with their remaining time when they know just when they're going to die."

He pushed aside the pad. "See me every two or three weeks. That way we'll be able to measure the progress of your decline."

Briller saw me to the door. "I already have written up twenty-two cases like yours." He seemed to gaze into the future. "Could be a best seller, you know."

I have always lived a bland life. Not an unintelligent one, but bland.

I have contributed nothing to the world—and in that I have much in common with almost every soul on earth—but on the other hand I have not taken away anything either. I have, in short, asked merely to be left alone. Life is difficult enough without undue association with people.

What can one do with the remaining four months of a bland life?

I have no idea how long I walked and thought on that

subject, but eventually I found myself on the long curving bridge that sweeps down to join the lake drive. The sounds of mechanical music intruded themselves upon my mind and I looked down.

A circus, or very large carnival, lay below.

It was the world of shabby magic, where the gold is gilt, where the top-hatted ringmaster is as much a gentleman as the medals on his chest are authentic, and where the pink ladies on horseback are hard-faced and narrow-eyed. It was the domain of the harsh-voiced vendors and the short-change.

I have always felt that the demise of the big circus may be counted as one of the cultural advances of the twentieth century, yet I found myself descending the footbridge and in a few moments I was on the midway between the rows of stands where human mutations are exploited and exhibited for the entertainment of all children.

Eventually, I reached the big top and idly watched the bored ticket-taker in his elevated box at one side of the main entrance.

A pleasant-faced man leading two little girls approached him and presented several cardboard rectangles which appeared to be passes.

The ticket-taker ran his finger down a printed list at his side. His eyes hardened and he scowled down at the man and the children for a moment. Then slowly and deliberately he tore the passes to bits and let the fragments drift to the ground. "These are no damn good," he said.

The man below him flushed. "I don't understand."

"You didn't leave the posters up," the ticket-taker snapped. "Beat it, crumb!"

The children looked up at their father, their faces puzzled. Would he do something about this?

He stood there and the white of anger appeared on his face. He seemed about to say something, but then he looked down at the children. He closed his eyes for a moment as though to control his anger, and then he said, "Come on, kids. Let's go home."

He led them away, down the midway, and the children looked back, bewildered, but saying nothing.

I approached the ticket-taker. "Why did you do that?"

He glanced down. "What's it to you?"

"Perhaps a great deal."

He studied me irritably. "Because he didn't leave up the posters."

"I heard that before. Now explain it."

He exhaled as though it cost him money. "Our advance man goes through a town two weeks before we get there. He leaves posters advertising the show any place he can—grocery stores, shoe shops, meat markets—any place that will paste them in the window and keep them there until the show comes to town. He hands out two or three passes for that. But what some of these jokers don't know is that we check up. If the posters aren't still up when we hit town, the passes are no good."

"I see," I said dryly. "And so you tear up the passes in their faces and in front of their children. Evidently that man removed the posters from the window of his little shop too soon. Or perhaps he had those passes *given* to him by a man who removed the posters from his window."

"What's the difference? The passes are no good."

"Perhaps there is no difference in that respect. But do you realize what you have done?"

His eyes were narrow, trying to estimate me and any power I might have.

"You have committed one of the most cruel of human acts," I said stiffly. "You have humiliated a man before his children. You have inflicted a scar that will remain with him and them as long as they live. He will take those children home and it will be a long, long way. And what can he say to them?"

"Are you a cop?"

"I am not a cop. Children of that age regard their father as the finest man in the world. The kindest, the bravest. And now they will remember that a man had been bad to their father—and he had been unable to do anything about it."

"So I tore up his passes. Why didn't he buy tickets? Are you a city inspector?"

"I am not a city inspector. Did you expect him to *buy* tickets after that humiliation? You left the man with no

recourse whatsoever. He could not *buy* tickets and he could not create a well-justified scene because the children were with him. He could do nothing. Nothing at all, but retreat with two children who wanted to see your miserable circus and now they cannot."

I looked down at the foot of his stand. There were the fragments of many more dreams—the debris of other men who had committed the capital crime of not leaving their posters up long enough. "You could at least have said, 'I'm sorry, sir. But your passes are not valid.' And then you could have explained politely and quietly why."

"I'm not paid to be polite." He showed yellow teeth. "And, mister, I *like* tearing up passes. It gives me a kick."

And there it was. He was a little man who had been given a little power and he used it like a Caesar.

He half rose. "Now get the hell out of here, *mister*, before I come down there and chase you all over the lot."

Yes. He was a man of cruelty, a two-dimensional animal born without feeling and sensitivity and fated to do harm as long as he existed. He was a creature who should be eliminated from the face of the earth.

If only I had the power to . . .

I stared up at the twisted face for a moment more and then turned on my heel and left. At the top of the bridge I got a bus and rode to the sports shop at thirty-seventh.

I purchased a .32 caliber revolver and a box of cartridges.

Why do we *not* murder? Is it because we do not feel the moral justification for such a final act? Or is it more because we fear the consequences if we are caught—the cost to us, to our families, to our children?

And so we suffer wrongs with meekness, we endure them because to eliminate them might cause us even more pain than we already have.

But I had no family, no close friends. And four months to live.

The sun had set and the carnival lights were bright when I got off the bus at the bridge. I looked down at the midway and he was still in his box.

How should I do it? I wondered. Just march up to him and shoot him as he sat on his little throne?

The problem was solved for me. I saw him replaced by another man—apparently his relief. He lit a cigarette and strolled off the midway toward the dark lake front.

I caught up with him around a bend concealed by bushes. It was a lonely place, but close enough to the carnival so that its sounds could still reach me.

He heard my footsteps and turned. A tight smile came to his lips and he rubbed the knuckles of one hand. "You're asking for it, mister."

His eyes widened when he saw my revolver.

"How old are you?" I asked.

"Look, mister," he said swiftly. "I only got a couple of tens in my pocket."

"How old are you?" I repeated.

His eyes flicked nervously. "Thirty-two."

I shook my head sadly. "You could have lived into your seventies. Perhaps forty more years of life, if only you had taken the simple trouble to act like a human being."

His face whitened. "Are you off your rocker, or something?"

"A possibility."

I pulled the trigger.

The sound of the shot was not as loud as I had expected, or perhaps it was lost against the background of the carnival noises.

He staggered and dropped to the edge of the path and he was quite dead.

I sat down on a nearby park bench and waited.

Five minutes. Ten. Had no one heard the shot?

I became suddenly conscious of hunger. I hadn't eaten since noon. The thought of being taken to a police station and being questioned for any length of time seemed unbearable. And I had a headache, too.

I tore a page from my pocket notebook and began writing.

A careless word may be forgiven. But a lifetime of cruel rudeness cannot. This man deserved to die.

I was about to sign my name, but then I decided that my

initials would be sufficient for the time being. I did not want to be apprehended before I had a good meal and some aspirins.

I folded the page and put it into the dead ticket-taker's breast pocket.

I met no one as I returned up the path and ascended the footbridge. I walked to Weschler's, probably the finest restaurant in the city. The prices are, under normal circumstances, beyond me, but I thought that this time I could indulge myself.

After dinner, I decided an evening bus ride might be in order. I rather enjoyed that form of city excursion and, after all, my freedom of movement would soon become restricted.

The driver of the bus was an impatient man and clearly his passengers were his enemies. However, it was a beautiful night and the bus was not crowded.

At sixty-eighth street, a fragile white-haired woman with cameo features waited at the curb. The driver grudgingly brought his vehicle to a stop and opened the door.

She smiled and nodded to the passengers as she put her foot on the first step, and one could see that her life was one of gentle happiness and very few bus rides.

"Well!" the driver snapped. "Is it going to take you all day to get in?"

She flushed and stammered. "I'm sorry." She presented him with a five-dollar bill.

He glared. "Don't you have any change?"

The flush deepened. "I don't think so. But I'll look."

The driver was evidently ahead on his schedule and he waited.

And one other thing was clear. He was enjoying this.

She found a quarter and held it up timorously.

"In the box!" he snapped.

She dropped it into the box.

The driver moved his vehicle forward jerkily and she almost fell. Just in time, she managed to catch hold of a strap.

Her eyes went to the passengers, as though to apologize for herself—for not having moved faster, for not having

immediate change, for almost falling. The smile trembled and she sat down.

At eighty-second, she pulled the buzzer cord, rose, and made her way forward.

The driver scowled over his shoulder as he came to a stop. "Use the rear door. Don't you people ever learn to use the rear door?"

I am all in favor of using the rear door. Especially when a bus is crowded. But there were only a half a dozen passengers on this bus and they read their newspapers with frightened neutrality.

She turned, her face pale, and left by the rear door.

The evening she had had, or the evening she was going to have, had now been ruined. Perhaps many more evenings with the thought of it.

I rode the bus to the end of the line.

I was the only passenger when the driver turned it around and parked.

It was a deserted, dimly lit corner, and there were no waiting passengers at the small shelter at the curb. The driver glanced at his watch, lit a cigarette, and then noticed me. "If you're taking the ride back, mister, put another quarter in the box. No free riders here."

I rose from my seat and walked slowly to the front of the bus. "How old are you?"

His eyes narrowed. "That's none of your business."

"About thirty-five, I'd imagine," I said. "You'd have had another thirty years or more ahead of you." I produced the revolver.

He dropped the cigarette. "Take the money," he said.

"I'm not interested in money. I'm thinking about a gentle lady and perhaps the hundreds of other gentle ladies and the kind, harmless men and the smiling children. You are a criminal. There is no justification for what you do to them. There is no justification for your existence."

And I killed him.

I sat down and waited.

After ten minutes, I was still alone with the corpse.

I realized that I was sleepy. Incredibly sleepy. It might

be better if I turned myself in to the police after a good night's sleep.

I wrote my justification for the driver's demise on a sheet of note paper, added my initials, and put the page in his pocket.

I walked four blocks before I found a taxi and took it to my apartment building.

I slept soundly and perhaps I dreamed. But if I did, my dreams were pleasant and innocuous, and it was almost nine before I woke.

After a shower and a leisurely breakfast, I selected my best suit. I remembered I had not yet paid that month's telephone bill. I made out a check and addressed an envelope. I discovered that I was out of stamps. But no matter, I would get one on the way to the police station.

I was almost there when I remembered the stamp. I stopped in at a corner drugstore. It was a place I had never entered before.

The proprietor, in a semi-medical jacket, sat behind the soda fountain reading a newspaper and a salesman was making notations in a large order book.

The proprietor did not look up when I entered and he spoke to the salesman. "They've got his fingerprints on the notes, they've got his handwriting, and they've got his initials. What's wrong with the police?"

The salesman shrugged. "What good are fingerprints if the murderer doesn't have his in the police files? The same goes for the handwriting if you got nothing to compare it with. And how many thousand people in the city got the initials L. T.?" He closed his book. "I'll be back next week."

When he was gone, the druggist continued reading the newspaper.

I cleared my throat.

He finished reading a long paragraph and then looked up. "Well?"

"I'd like a four-cent stamp, please."

It appeared almost as though I had struck him. He stared at me for fifteen seconds and then he left his stool

and slowly made his way to the rear of the store toward a small barred window.

I was about to follow him, but a display of pipes at my elbow caught my attention.

After a while I felt eyes upon me and looked up.

The druggist stood at the far end of the store, one hand on his hip and the other disdainfully holding the single stamp. "Do you expect me to bring it to you?"

And now I remembered a small boy of six who had had five pennies. Not just one this time, but five, and this was in the days of penny candies.

He had been entranced at the display in the showcase—the fifty varieties of sweet things, and his mind had revolved in a pleasant indecision. The red whips? The licorice? The grab bags? But not the candy cherries. He didn't like those.

And then he had become conscious of the druggist standing beside the display case—tapping one foot. The druggist's eyes had smouldered with irritation—no, more than that—with anger. "Are you going to take all day for your lousy nickel?"

He had been a sensitive boy and he had felt as though he had received a blow. His precious five pennies were now nothing. This man despised them. And this man despised him.

He pointed numbly and blindly. "Five cents of that."

When he left the store he had found that he had the candy cherries.

But that didn't really matter. Whatever it had been, he couldn't have eaten it.

Now I stared at the druggist and the four-cent stamp and the narrow hatred for anyone who did not contribute directly to his profits. I had no doubt that he would fawn if I purchased one of his pipes.

But I thought of the four-cent stamp and the bag of cherry candy I had thrown away so many years ago.

I moved toward the rear of the store and took the revolver out of my pocket. "How old are you?"

When he was dead, I did not wait longer than necessary

to write a note. I had killed for myself this time and I felt the need of a drink.

I went several doors down the street and entered a small bar. I ordered a brandy and water.

After ten minutes, I heard the siren of a squad car.

The bartender went to the window. "It's just down the street." He took off his jacket. "Got to see what this is all about. If anybody comes in, tell them I'll be right back." He put the bottle of brandy on the bar. "Help yourself, but tell me how many."

I sipped the brandy slowly and watched the additional squad cars and finally the ambulance appear.

The bartender returned after ten minutes and a customer followed at his heels. "A short beer, Joe."

"This is my second brandy," I said.

Joe collected my change. "The druggist down the street got himself murdered. Looks like it was by the man who kills people because they're not polite."

The customer watched him draw a beer. "How do you figure that? Could have been just a hold-up."

Joe shook his head. "No. Fred Masters—he's got the TV shop across the street—found the body and he read the note."

The customer put a dime on the bar. "I'm not going to cry about it. I always took my business some place else. He acted as though he was doing you a favor every time he waited on you."

Joe nodded. "I don't think anybody in the neighborhood's going to miss him. He always made a lot of trouble."

I had been about to leave and return to the drug store to give myself up, but now I ordered another brandy and took out my notebook. I began making a list of names.

It was surprising how one followed another. They were bitter memories, some large, some small, some I had experienced and many more that I had witnessed—and perhaps felt more than the victims.

Names. And that warehouseman. I didn't know his name, but I must include him.

I remembered the day and Miss Newman. We were her sixth graders and she had taken us on another one of her

excursions—this time to the warehouses along the river, where she was going to show us "how industry works."

She always planned her tours and she always asked permission of the places we visited, but this time she strayed or became lost and we arrived at the warehouse—she and the thirty children who adored her.

And the warehouseman had ordered her out. He had used language which we did not understand, but we sensed its intent, and he had directed it against us and Miss Newman.

She was small and she had been frightened and we retreated. And Miss Newman did not report to school the next day or any day after that and we learned that she had asked for a transfer.

And I who loved her, too, knew why. She could not face us after that.

Was he still alive? He had been in his twenties then, I imagined.

When I left the bar a half an hour later, I realized I had a great deal of work to do.

The succeeding days were busy ones and, among others, I found the warehouseman. I told him why he was dying because he did not even remember.

And when that was done, I dropped into a restaurant not far away.

The waitress eventually broke off her conversation with the cashier and strode to my table. "What do you want?"

I ordered a steak and tomatoes.

The steak proved to be just about what one could expect in such a neighborhood. As I reached for my coffee spoon, I accidentally dropped it to the floor. I picked it up. "Waitress, would you mind bringing me another spoon, please?"

She stalked angrily to my table and snatched the spoon from my hand. "You got the shakes, or something?"

She returned in a few moments and was about to deposit a spoon, with considerable emphasis, upon my table.

But then a sudden thought altered the harsh expression of her face. The descent of the arm diminuendoed, and when the spoon touched the tablecloth, it touched gently. Very gently.

She laughed nervously. "I'm sorry if I was sharp, mister."

It was an apology, and so I said, "That's quite all right."

"I mean that you can drop a spoon any time you want to. I'll be glad to get you another."

"Thank you." I turned to my coffee.

"You're not offended, are you, mister?" she asked eagerly.

"No. Not at all."

She snatched a newspaper from an empty neighboring table. "Here, sir, you can read this while you eat. I mean it's on the house. Free."

When she left me, the wide-eyed cashier stared at her. "What's with all that, Mable?"

Mable glanced back at me with a trace of uneasiness. "You can never tell who he might be. You better be polite these days."

As I ate I read, and an item caught my eye. A grown man had heated pennies in a frying pan and tossed them out to some children who were making trick-or-treat rounds before Halloween. He had been fined a miserable twenty dollars.

I made a note of his name and address.

Dr. Briller finished his examination. "You can get dressed now, Mr. Turner."

I picked up my shirt. "I don't suppose some new miracle drug has been developed since I was here last?"

He laughed with self-enjoyed good nature. "No, I'm afraid not." He watched me button the shirt. "By the way, have you decided what you're going to do with your remaining time?"

I had, but I thought I'd say, "Not yet."

He was faintly perturbed. "You really should, you know. Only about three months left. And be sure to let me know when you do."

While I finished dressing, he sat down at his desk and glanced at the newspaper lying there. "The killer seems to be rather busy, doesn't he?"

He turned a page. "But really the most surprising thing

about the crimes seems to be the public's reaction. Have you read the Letters From the People column recently?"

"No."

"These murders appear to be meeting with almost universal approval. Some of the letter writers even hint that they might be able to supply the murderer with a few choice names themselves."

I would have to get a paper.

"Not only that," Dr. Briller said, "but a wave of politeness has struck the city."

I put on my coat. "Shall I come back in two weeks?"

He put aside the paper. "Yes. And try to look at this whole thing as cheerfully as possible. We all have to go some day."

But his day was indeterminate and presumably in the distant future.

My appointment with Dr. Briller had been in the evening, and it was nearly ten by the time I left my bus and began the short walk to my apartment building.

As I approached the last corner, I heard a shot. I turned into Milding Lane and found a little man with a revolver standing over a newly-dead body on the quiet and deserted sidewalk.

I looked down at the corpse. "Goodness. A policeman."

The little man nodded. "Yes, what I've done does seem a little extreme, but you see he was using a variety of language that was entirely unnecessary."

"Ah," I said.

The little man nodded. "I'd parked my car in front of this fire hydrant. Entirely inadvertently, I assure you. And this policeman was waiting when I returned to my car. And also he discovered that I'd forgotten my driver's license. I would not have acted as I did if he had simply written out a ticket—for I was guilty, sir, and I readily admit it—but he was not content with that. He made embarrassing observations concerning my intelligence, my eyesight, the possibility that I'd stolen the car, and finally on the legitimacy of my birth." He blinked at a fond memory. "And my mother was an angel, sir. An angel."

I remembered a time when I'd been apprehended while absent-mindedly jaywalking. I would contritely have accepted the customary warning, or even a ticket, but the officer insisted upon a profane lecture before a grinning assemblage of interested pedestrians. Most humiliating.

The little man looked at the gun in his hand. "I bought this just today and actually I'd intended to use it on the superintendent of my apartment building. A bully."

I agreed. "Surly fellows."

He sighed. "But now I suppose I'll have to turn myself over to the police?"

I gave it thought. He watched me.

He cleared his throat. "Or perhaps I should just leave a note? You see I've been reading in the newspapers about . . ."

I lent him my notebook.

He wrote a few lines, signed his initials, and deposited the slip of paper between two buttons of the dead officer's jacket.

He handed the notebook back to me. "I must remember to get one of these."

He opened the door of his car. "Can I drop you off anywhere?"

"No, thank you," I said. "It's a nice evening. I'd rather walk."

Pleasant fellow, I reflected, as I left him.

Too bad there weren't more like him.

During the past few years Robert Bloch has repeatedly demonstrated his mastery over one of the most difficult forms of storytelling: the psychological-suspense story that is told so deftly and believably that the reader goes along trustfully to a denouement of ultimate horror.

This short piece is a beautiful example of Mr. Bloch's art.

Robert Bloch

A HOME AWAY FROM HOME

THE TRAIN WAS LATE, and it must have been past nine o'clock when Natalie found herself standing, all alone, on the platform before Hightower Station.

The station itself was obviously closed for the night—it was only a way-stop, really, for there was no town here—and Natalie wasn't quite sure what to do. She had taken it for granted that Dr. Bracegirdle would be on hand to meet her. Before leaving London, she'd sent her uncle a wire giving him the time of her arrival. But since the train had been delayed, perhaps he'd come and gone.

Natalie glanced around uncertainly, then noticed the phone booth which provided her with a solution. Dr. Bracegirdle's last letter was in her purse, and it contained both his address and his phone number. She had fumbled through her bag and found it by the time she walked over to the booth.

Ringing him up proved a bit of a problem; there seemed to be an interminable delay before the operator made the connection, and there was a great deal of buzzing on the line. A glimpse of the hills beyond the station, through the glass wall of the booth, suggested the reason for the diffi-

culty. After all, Natalie reminded herself, this was West Country. Conditions might be a bit primitive—

"Hello, hello!"

The woman's voice came over the line, fairly shouting above the din. There was no buzzing noise now, and the sound in the background suggested a babble of voices all intermingled. Natalie bent forward and spoke directly and distinctly into the mouthpiece.

"This is Natalie Rivers," she said. "Is Dr. Bracegirdle there?"

"Whom did you say was calling?"

"Natalie Rivers. I'm his niece."

"His what, Miss?"

"Niece," Natalie repeated. "May I speak to him, please?"

"Just a moment."

There was a pause, during which the sound of voices in the background seemed amplified, and then Natalie heard the resonant masculine tones, so much easier to separate from the indistinct murmuring.

"Dr. Bracegirdle here. My dear Natalie, this is an unexpected pleasure!"

"Unexpected? But I sent you a 'gram from London this afternoon." Natalie checked herself as she realized the slight edge of impatience which had crept into her voice. "Didn't it arrive?"

"I'm afraid service is not the best around here," Dr. Bracegirdle told her, with an apologetic chuckle. "No, your wire didn't arrive. But apparently you did." He chuckled again. "Where are you, my dear?"

"At Hightower Station."

"Oh, dear. It's in exactly the opposite direction."

"Opposite direction?"

"From Peterby's. They rang me up just before you called. Some silly nonsense about an appendix—probably nothing but an upset stomach. But I promised to stop round directly, just in case."

"Don't tell me they still call you for general practice?"

"Emergencies, my dear. There aren't many physicians in these parts. Fortunately, there aren't many patients, either." Dr. Bracegirdle started to chuckle, then sobered. "Look

now. You say you're at the station. I'll just send Miss Plummer down to fetch you in the wagon. Have you much luggage?"

"Only my travel-case. The rest is coming with the household goods, by boat."

"Boat?"

"Didn't I mention it when I wrote?"

"Yes, that's right, you did. Well, no matter. Miss Plummer will be along for you directly."

"I'll be waiting in front of the platform."

"What was that? Speak up, I can hardly hear you."

"I said I'll be waiting in front of the platform."

"Oh." Dr. Bracegirdle chuckled once more. "Bit of a party going on here."

"Shan't I be intruding? I mean, since you weren't expecting me—"

"Not at all! They'll be leaving before long. You wait for Plummer."

The phone clicked off and Natalie returned to the platform. In a surprisingly short time, the station wagon appeared and skidded off the road to halt at the very edge of the tracks. A tall, thin, gray-haired woman, wearing a somewhat rumpled white uniform, emerged and beckoned to Natalie.

"Come along, my dear," she called. "Here, I'll just pop this in back." Scooping up the bag, she tossed it into the rear of the wagon. "Now, in with you—and off we go!"

Scarcely waiting for Natalie to close the door after her, the redoubtable Miss Plummer gunned the motor and the car plunged back onto the road.

The speedometer immediately shot up to seventy, and Natalie flinched. Miss Plummer noticed her agitation at once.

"Sorry," she said. "With Doctor out on call, I can't be away too long."

"Oh, yes, the house-guests. He told me."

"Did he now?" Miss Plummer took a sharp turn at a crossroads and the tires screeched in protest, but to no

avail. Natalie decided to drown apprehension in conversation.

"What sort of a man is my uncle?" she asked.

"Have you never met him?"

"No. My parents moved to Australia when I was quite young. This is my first trip to England. In fact, it's the first time I've left Canberra."

"Folks with you?"

"They were in a motor smashup two months ago," Natalie said. "Didn't the Doctor tell you?"

"I'm afraid not—you see, I haven't been with him very long." Miss Plummer uttered a short bark and the car swerved wildly across the road. "Motor smashup, eh? Some people have no business behind the wheel. That's what Doctor says."

She turned and peered at Natalie. "I take it you've come to stay, then?"

"Yes, of course. He wrote me when he was appointed my guardian. That's why I was wondering what he might be like. It's so hard to tell from letters." The thin-faced woman nodded silently, but Natalie had an urge to confide. "To tell the truth, I'm just a little bit edgy. I mean, I've never met a psychiatrist before."

"Haven't you, now?" Miss Plummer shrugged. "You're quite fortunate. I've seen a few in my time. A bit on the know-it-all side, if you ask me. Though I must say, Dr. Bracegirdle is one of the best. Permissive, you know."

"I understand he has quite a practice."

"There's no lack of patients for *that* sort of thing," Miss Plummer observed. "Particularly amongst the well-to-do. I'd say your uncle has done himself handsomely. The house and all—but you'll see." Once again the wagon whirled into a sickening swerve and sped forward between the imposing gates of a huge driveway which led towards an enormous house set amidst a grove of trees in the distance. Through the shuttered windows Natalie caught sight of a faint beam of light—just enough to help reveal the ornate façade of her uncle's home.

"Oh, dear," she muttered, half to herself.

"What is it?"

"The guests—and it's Saturday night. And here I am, all mussed from travel."

"Don't give it another thought," Miss Plummer assured her. "There's no formality here. That's what Doctor told me when I came. It's a home away from home."

Miss Plummer barked and braked simultaneously, and the station wagon came to an abrupt stop just behind an imposing black limousine.

"Out with you now!" With brisk efficiency, Miss Plummer lifted the bag from the rear seat and carried it up the steps, beckoning Natalie forward with a nod over her shoulder. She halted at the door and fumbled for a key.

"No sense knocking," she said. "They'd never hear me." As the door swung open, her observation was amply confirmed. The background noise which Natalie had noted over the telephone now formed a formidable foreground. She stood there, hesitant, as Miss Plummer swept forward across the threshold.

"Come along, come along!"

Obediently, Natalie entered, and as Miss Plummer shut the door behind her, blinked with eyes unaccustomed to the brightness of the interior.

She found herself standing in a long, somewhat bare hallway. Directly ahead of her was a large staircase; at an angle between the railing and the wall was a desk and chair. To her left, a dark, panelled door—evidently leading to Dr. Bracegirdle's private office, for a small brass plate was affixed to it, bearing his name. To her right was a huge open parlor, its windows heavily curtained and shuttered against the night. It was from here that the sounds of sociability echoed.

Natalie started down the hall toward the stairs. As she did so, she caught a glimpse of the parlor. Fully a dozen guests eddied about a large table, talking and gesturing with the animation of close acquaintance—with one another, and with the contents of the lavish array of bottles gracing the tabletop. A sudden whoop of laughter indicated that at least one guest had abused the Doctor's hospitality.

Natalie passed the entry hastily, so as not to be observed, then glanced behind her to make sure that Miss Plummer

was following with her bag. Miss Plummer was indeed following, but her hands were empty. And as Natalie reached the stairs, Miss Plummer shook her head.

"You didn't mean to go up now, did you?" she murmured. "Come in and introduce yourself."

"I thought I might freshen up a bit first."

"Let me go on ahead and get your room in order. Doctor didn't give me notice, you know."

"Really, it's not necessary. I could do with a wash—"

"Doctor should be back any moment now. Do wait for him." Miss Plummer grasped Natalie's arm, and with the same speed and expedition she had bestowed on driving, now steered the girl forward into the lighted room.

"Here's Doctor's niece," she announced. "Miss Natalie Rivers, from Australia."

Several heads turned in Natalie's direction, though Miss Plummer's voice had scarcely penetrated the general conversational din. A short, jolly-looking fat man bobbed towards Natalie, waving a half-empty glass.

"All the way from Australia, eh?" He extended his goblet. "You must be thirsty. Here, take this. I'll get another." And before Natalie could reply, he turned and plunged back into the group around the table.

"Major Hamilton," Miss Plummer whispered. "A dear soul, really. Though I'm afraid he's just a wee bit squiffy."

As Miss Plummer moved away, Natalie glanced uncertainly at the glass in her hand. She was not quite sure where to dispose of it.

"Allow me." A tall, gray-haired and quite distinguished-looking man with a black mustache moved forward and took the stemware from between her fingers.

"Thank you."

"Not at all. I'm afraid you'll have to excuse the Major. The party spirit, you know." He nodded, indicating a woman in extreme *décolletage* chattering animatedly to a group of three laughing men. "But since it's by way of being a farewell celebration—"

"Ah, there you are!" The short man whom Miss Plummer had identified as Major Hamilton bounced back into orbit around Natalie, a fresh drink in his hand and a fresh

smile on his ruddy face. "I'm back again," he announced. "Just like a boomerang, eh?"

He laughed explosively, then paused. "I say, you *do* have boomerangs in Australia? Saw quite a bit of you Aussies at Gallipoli. Of course that was some time ago, before *your* time, I daresay—"

"Please, Major." The tall man smiled at Natalie. There was something reassuring about his presence, and something oddly familiar, too. Natalie wondered where she might have seen him before. She watched while he moved over to the Major and removed the drink from his hand.

"Now see here—" the Major spluttered.

"You've had enough, old boy. And it's almost time for you to go."

"One for the road—" The Major glanced around, his hands waving in appeal. "Everyone *else* is drinking!" He made a lunge for his glass, but the tall man evaded him. Smiling at Natalie over his shoulder, he drew the Major to one side and began to mutter to him earnestly in low tones. The Major nodded exaggeratedly, drunkenly.

Natalie looked around the room. Nobody was paying the least attention to her except one elderly woman who sat quite alone on a stool before the piano. She regarded Natalie with a fixed stare that made her feel like an intruder on a gala scene. Natalie turned away hastily and again caught sight of the woman in *décolletage*. She suddenly remembered her own desire to change her clothing and peered at the doorway, seeking Miss Plummer. But Miss Plummer was nowhere to be seen.

Walking back into the hall, she peered up the staircase.

"Miss Plummer!" she called.

There was no response.

Then, from out of the corner of her eye, she noted that the door of the room across the hallway was ajar. In fact, it was opening now, quite rapidly, and as Natalie stared, Miss Plummer came backing out of the room, carrying a pair of scissors in her hand. Before Natalie could call out again and attract her attention, Miss Plummer had scurried off in the other direction.

The people here, Natalie told herself, certainly seemed odd. But wasn't that always the case with people at parties? She crossed before the stairs, meaning to follow Miss Plummer, but found herself halting before the open doorway.

She gazed in curiously at what was obviously her uncle's consultation room. It was a cozy, book-lined study with heavy, leather-covered furniture grouped before the shelves. The psychiatric couch rested in one corner near the wall and near it was a large mahogany desk. The top of the desk was quite bare, save for a cradle telephone, and a thin brown loop snaking out from it.

Something about the loop disturbed Natalie and before she was conscious of her movement she was inside the room, looking down at the desk-top and the brown cord from the phone.

And then she realized what had bothered her, the end of the cord had been neatly severed from its connection in the wall.

"Miss Plummer!" Natalie murmured, remembering the pair of scissors she'd seen her holding. *But why would she have cut the phone cord?*

Natalie turned just in time to observe the tall, distinguished-looking man enter the doorway behind her.

"The phone won't be needed," he said, as if he'd read her thoughts. "After all, I *did* tell you it was a farewell celebration." And he gave a little chuckle.

Again Natalie sensed something strangely familiar about him, and this time it came to her. She'd heard the same chuckle over the phone, when she'd called from the station.

"You must be playing a joke!" she exclaimed. "You're Dr. Bracegirdle, aren't you?"

"No, my dear." He shook his head as he moved past her across the room. "It's just that no one expected you. We were about to leave when your call came. So we had to say *some*thing."

There was a moment of silence. Then, "Where *is* my uncle?" Natalie asked, at last.

"Over here."

Natalie found herself standing beside the tall man, gazing

down at what lay in a space between the couch and the wall. An instant was all she could bear.

"Messy," the tall man nodded. "Of course it was all so sudden, the opportunity, I mean. And then they *would* get into the liquor—"

His voice echoed hollowly in the room and Natalie realized the sounds of the party had died away. She glanced up to see them all standing there in the doorway, watching.

Then their ranks parted and Miss Plummer came quickly into the room, wearing an incongruous fur wrap over the rumpled, ill-fitting uniform.

"Oh my!" she gasped. "So you found him!"

Natalie nodded and took a step forward. "You've got to do something," she said. "Please!"

"Of course, you didn't see the others," Miss Plummer said, "since they're upstairs. The Doctor's staff. Gruesome sight."

The men and women had crowded into the room behind Miss Plummer, staring silently.

Natalie turned to them in appeal. "Why, it's the work of a madman!" she cried. "He belongs in an asylum!"

"My dear child," murmured Miss Plummer, as she quickly closed and locked the door and the silent starers moved forward. "This *is* an asylum. . ."

I wrote the first Michael Shayne novel in 1936, and the first three publishers who saw the manuscript rejected it swiftly and with brief, almost identical notes. All three of them regretfully informed me that the "hard-boiled" detective story had run its course and was passé. They advised me to forget Michael Shayne and write something in a more popular vein.

After nineteen more rejections, DIVIDEND ON DEATH was finally published in 1939 by an adventurous publisher called, in those days, Henry Holt & Co. Since then more than thirty million copies of Michael Shayne novels have been sold throughout the world.

And during those years many new writers have come along to prove again and again how wrong those three publishers were about the "hard-boiled" story in 1936. Stephen Marlowe is one of those. His novels featuring Chet Drum are carefully plotted and exciting reading. If you don't already know Drum, you can get acquainted with him here in a very few words.

Stephen Marlowe

DRUM BEAT

THE BIG MAN sitting next to me in the window seat of the turboprop that was flying from Duluth, Minnesota to Washington, D.C. looked at his watch and said, "Ten after seven, Drum. We're halfway there. If I were running away and out over the ocean somewhere, they'd call it the point of no return."

"You're not running away, Mr. Heyn," I said.

He smiled a little and agreed. "No, I'm not running away."

And then the ticking started.

Heyn's eyes widened. He's been living with uncertainty and fear too long. The physical response was instant: the widening of the eyes, the sudden rictus of the mouth, a hand clutching at my wrist on the armrest between us.

The wordless response said: You read the papers, don't you? This wouldn't be the first bomb planted aboard an air liner, would it? And I'm a marked man, you know I am. That's why you're here.

I stood up quite calmly, but a pulse had begun to hammer in my throat, as if in time to the ticking. For a moment I saw the deep blue of the sky beyond Heyn's head and then on the luggage rack over it I saw the attaché case. It wasn't Sam Heyn's. Heyn's was next to it, monogrammed.

The ticking came from the unmarked case. It was very loud, or maybe that was my imagination. It sounded almost like a drum—each beat drumming our lives away and the lives of forty other innocent people in the turboprop.

I looked at the attaché case. I didn't touch it. Time-rigged, sure; but who could tell what kind of a spit-and-string mechanism activated it? Maybe just lifting it from the rack would set it off.

A minute had passed. Heyn asked, "Find it?"

I nodded mutely. A little boy squirmed around in the seat in front of Heyn. "Mommy," he said, "I hear a clock."

Mommy heard it too. She gave Heyn and me a funny look. Just then a stewardess came by with a tray. She stopped in the aisle next to my seat, in a listening attitude.

"Is that yours?" Her smile was strained. "With a clock in it, I hope?"

"It's not mine." I squeezed near her in the narrow aisle. Close to her ear I said softly, "It may be a bomb, miss. That's Sam Heyn in the window seat."

Her back stiffened. That was all. Then she hurried forward to the pilot's compartment. Heyn looked at me. A moment later over the PA a man's voice said:

"Whoever owns the unmarked attaché case above seat seventeen, please claim it. This is the captain speaking. Whoever owns . . ."

I heard the ticking that was like a drum. Faces turned.

There was talking in the cabin of the turboprop. No one claimed the attaché case.

Sweat beaded Heyn's forehead. "When, dammit?" he said. "When will it go off?"

The captain came back. He had one of those self-confident, impassive faces they all have. He looked at the attaché case and listened to it. A man across the aisle got up to speak to him.

"Sit down, please," the captain said.

Then a voice said: "Bomb . . ." and the passengers scrambled from their seats toward the front and rear of the cabin. In the confusion I told the captain quickly, "My name is Chet Drum. I'm a private investigator bringing Sam Heyn here to testify in Washington before the Hartsell Committee. If he can prove what the Truckers' Brotherhood's been up to in the Midwest, there's going to be trouble."

"I can prove it," Heyn muttered.

I stared at the attaché case. I heard the ticking. It didn't look as if he'd get the chance.

"We could unload it out the door," the captain told me.

"Cabin's pressurized, isn't it?"

"So?"

"Who the hell knows how it's rigged? Change of pressure could be enough to set it off."

The captain nodded. He raised his voice and shouted, "Will you please all resume your seats?" Then he said, "If we could land in a hurry . . ." His face brightened. "Jesus, wait a minute." He looked at his watch. "Seven-nineteen," he said. Nine minutes had passed since the ticking started. "All we need is four thousand feet of runway. There's a small airport near New Albany . . ."

He rushed forward. Seconds later we were told to fasten our seat belts for an emergency landing. The big turboprop whined into a steep glide.

The attaché case ticked and ticked.

We came in twice. The first time the wind was wrong, and the captain had to try it again. Buzzing the field, I saw a windsock tower, two small lonely hangars and three shiny black cars waiting on the apron of the runway.

Three black cars waiting for what?

I felt my facial muscles relax. I smiled idiotically at Sam Heyn. He frowned back at me, mopping sweat from his forehead. "Well, well, well," I said.

He almost jumped from his seat when I reached over his head and lifted down the ticking attaché case. The man across the aisle gasped. We were banking steeply for our second run at the field. I carried the attaché case forward and through the door to the crew compartment.

The copilot had the stick. The captain looked at me and the attaché case. "Are you nuts or something?"

"I almost was."

He just stared. The flaps were down. We were gliding in.

"Keep away from that field," I said. The copilot ignored me.

I did the only thing I could to make them listen. I smashed the attaché case against a bulkhead, breaking the lock. The captain had made a grab for me, missing. I opened the case. There was a quiet little clock inside, and a noisy big one. The little one had triggered the big one to start at seven-ten. That was all.

No bomb.

"They knew your route," I said. "They figured you wouldn't dare ditch a time bomb, knew you'd have to land here if you heard it ticking at seven-ten. Three shiny black cars waiting at an airport in the middle of nowhere. They're waiting for Heyn." I pointed. "If you radio down below, you can have them picked up by the cops."

It was seven-thirty. "I never want to live through another twenty minutes like that," the captain said.

Neither did I. But Sam Heyn would get to Washington on schedule.

Ross Macdonald is another of the fine writers who have brought new vitality and new popularity to the "hard-boiled" story in past years.

His protagonist, Lew Archer, is an authentically tough guy. When the chips are down, Archer is not one to back away from trouble.

Essentially a novelist, Mr. Macdonald packs a lot of story and fast-paced action in few words when he turns to the shorter form. I am proud to present MIDNIGHT BLUE as the longest story in this volume.

Ross Macdonald

MIDNIGHT BLUE

1. IT HAD RAINED

in the canyon during the night. The world had the colored freshness of a butterfly just emerged from the chrysalis stage and trembling in the sun. Actual butterflies danced in flight across free spaces of air or played a game of tag without any rules among the tree branches. At this height there were giant pines among the eucalyptus trees.

I parked my car where I usually parked it, in the shadow of the stone building just inside the gates of the old estate. Just inside the posts, that is—the gates had long since fallen from their rusted hinges. The owner of the country house had died in Europe, and the place had stood empty since the war. It was one reason I came here on the occasional Sunday when I wanted to get away from the Hollywood rat race. Nobody lived within two miles.

Until now, anyway. The window of the gatehouse overlooking the drive had been broken the last time that I'd noticed it. Now it was patched up with a piece of cardboard. Through a hole punched in the middle of the cardboard, bright emptiness watched me—human eye's bright emptiness.

"Hello," I said.

A grudging voice answered: "Hello."

The gatehouse door creaked open, and a white-haired man came out. A smile sat strangely on his ravaged face. He walked mechanically, shuffling in the leaves, as if his body was not at home in the world. He wore faded denims through which his clumsy muscles bulged like animals in a sack. His feet were bare.

I saw when he came up to me that he was a huge old man, a head taller than I was and a foot wider. His smile was not a greeting or any kind of a smile that I could respond to. It was the stretched, blind grimace of a man who lived in a world of his own, a world that didn't include me.

"Get out of here. I don't want trouble. I don't want nobody messing around."

"No trouble," I said. "I came up to do a little target shooting. I probably have as much right here as you have."

His eyes widened. They were as blue and empty as holes in his head through which I could see the sky.

"Nobody has the rights here that I have. I lifted up mine eyes unto the hills and the voice spoke and I found sanctuary. Nobody's going to force me out of my sanctuary."

I could feel the short hairs bristling on the back of my neck. Though my instincts didn't say so, he was probably a harmless nut. I tried to keep my instincts out of my voice.

"I won't bother you. You don't bother me. That should be fair enough."

"You bother me just *being* here. I can't stand people. I can't stand cars. And this is twice in two days you come up harrying me and harassing me."

"I haven't been here for a month."

"You're an Ananias liar." His voice whined like a rising wind. He clenched his knobbed fists and shuddered on the verge of violence.

"Calm down, old man," I said. "There's room in the world for both of us."

He looked around at the high green world as if my words had snapped him out of a dream.

"You're right," he said in a different voice. "I have been blessed, and I must remember to be joyful. Joyful. Creation

belongs to all of us poor creatures." His smiling teeth were as long and yellow as an old horse's. His roving glance fell on my car. "And it wasn't you who come up here last night. It was a different automobile. I remember."

He turned away, muttering something about washing his socks, and dragged his horny feet back into the gatehouse. I got my targets, pistol, and ammunition out of the trunk, and locked the car up tight. The old man watched me through his peephole, but he didn't come out again.

Below the road, in the wild canyon, there was an open meadow backed by a sheer bank which was topped by the crumbling wall of the estate. It was my shooting gallery. I slid down the wet grass of the bank and tacked a target to an oak tree, using the butt of my heavy-framed twenty-two as a hammer.

While I was loading it, something caught my eye—something that glinted red, like a ruby among the leaves. I stooped to pick it up and found that it was attached. It was a red-enameled fingernail at the tip of a white hand. The hand was cold and stiff.

I let out a sound that must have been loud in the stillness. A jay bird erupted from a manzanita, sailed up to a high limb of the oak, and yelled down curses at me. A dozen chickadees flew out of the oak and settled in another at the far end of the meadow.

Panting like a dog, I scraped away the dirt and wet leaves that had been loosely piled over the body. It was the body of a girl wearing a midnight-blue sweater and skirt. She was a blonde, about seventeen. The blood that congested her face made her look old and dark. The white rope with which she had been garrotted was sunk almost out of sight in the flesh of her neck. The rope was tied at the nape in what is called a granny's knot, the kind of knot that any child can tie.

I left her where she lay and climbed back up to the road on trembling knees. The grass showed traces of the track her body had made where someone had dragged it down the bank. I looked for tire marks on the shoulder and in the rutted, impacted gravel of the road. If there had been any, the rain had washed them out.

I trudged up the road to the gatehouse and knocked on the door. It creaked inward under my hand. Inside there was nothing alive but the spiders that had webbed the low black beams. A dustless rectangle in front of the stone fireplace showed where a bedroll had lain. Several blackened tin cans had evidently been used as cooking utensils. Gray embers lay on the cavernous hearth. Suspended above it from a spike in the mantel was a pair of white cotton work socks. The socks were wet. Their owner had left in a hurry.

It wasn't my job to hunt him. I drove down the canyon to the highway and along it for a few miles to the outskirts of the nearest town. There a drab green box of a building with a flag in front of it housed the Highway Patrol. Across the highway was a lumberyard, deserted on Sunday.

2. "TOO BAD ABOUT Ginnie," the dispatcher said when she had radioed the local sheriff. She was a thirtyish brunette with fine black eyes and dirty fingernails. She had on a plain white blouse, which was full of her.

"Do you know Ginnie?"

"My young sister knows her. They go—they went to high school together. It's an awful thing when it happens to a young person like that. I knew she was missing—I got the report when I came on at eight—but I kept hoping that she was just off on a lost weekend, like. Now there's nothing to hope for, is there?" Her eyes were liquid with feeling. "Poor Ginnie. And poor Mr. Green."

"Her father?"

"That's right. He was in here with her high school counsellor not more than an hour ago. I hope he doesn't come back right away. I don't want to be the one that has to tell him."

"How long has the girl been missing?"

"Just since last night. We got the report here about 3 A.M., I think. Apparently she wandered away from a party at Cavern Beach. Down the pike a ways." She pointed south toward the mouth of the canyon.

"What kind of party was it?"

"Some of the kids from the Union High School—they took some wienies down and had a fire. The party was part of graduation week. I happen to know about it because my young sister Alice went. I didn't want her to go, even if it was supervised. That can be a dangerous beach at night. All sorts of bums and scroungers hang out in the caves. Why, one night when I was a kid I saw a naked man down there in the moonlight. He didn't have a woman with him, either."

She caught the drift of her words, did a slow blush, and checked her loquacity. I leaned on the plywood counter between us.

"What sort of girl was Ginnie Green?"

"I wouldn't know. I never really knew her."

"Your sister does."

"I don't let my sister run around with girls like Ginnie Green. Does that answer your question?"

"Not in any detail."

"It seems to me you ask a lot of questions."

"I'm naturally interested, since I found her. Also, I happen to be a private detective."

"Looking for a job?"

"I can always use a job."

"So can I, and I've got one and I don't intend to lose it." She softened the words with a smile. "Excuse me; I have work to do."

She turned to her short-wave and sent out a message to the patrol cars that Virginia Green had been found. Virginia Green's father heard it as he came in the door. He was a puffy gray-faced man with red-rimmed eyes. Striped pajama bottoms showed below the cuffs of his trousers. His shoes were muddy, and he walked as if he had been walking all night.

He supported himself on the edge of the counter, opening and shutting his mouth like a beached fish. Words came out, half strangled by shock.

"I heard you say she was dead, Anita."

The woman raised her eyes to his. "Yes. I'm awfully sorry, Mr. Green."

He put his face down on the counter and stayed there

like a penitent, perfectly still. I could hear a clock somewhere, snipping off seconds, and in the back of the room the L.A. police signals like muttering voices coming in from another planet. Another planet very much like this one, where violence measured out the hours.

"It's my fault," Green said to the bare wood under his face. "I didn't bring her up properly. I haven't been a good father."

The woman watched him with dark and glistening eyes ready to spill. She stretched out an unconscious hand to touch him, pulled her hand back in embarrassment when a second man came into the station. He was a young man with crew-cut brown hair, tanned and fit-looking in a Hawaiian shirt. Fit-looking except for the glare of sleeplessness in his eyes and the anxious lines around them.

"What is it, Miss Brocco? What's the word?"

"The word is bad." She sounded angry. "Somebody murdered Ginnie Green. This man here is a detective and he just found her body up in Trumbull Canyon."

The young man ran his fingers through his short hair and failed to get a grip on it, or on himself. "My God! That's terrible!"

"Yes," the woman said. "You were supposed to be looking after her, weren't you?"

They glared at each other across the counter. The tips of her breasts pointed at him through her blouse like accusing fingers. The young man lost the glaring match. He turned to me with a wilted look.

"My name is Connor, Franklin Connor, and I'm afraid I'm very much to blame in this. I'm a counselor at the high school, and I was supposed to be looking after the party, as Miss Brocco said."

"Why didn't you?"

"I didn't realize. I mean, I thought they were all perfectly happy and safe. The boys and girls had pretty well paired off around the fire. Frankly, I felt rather out of place. They aren't children, you know. They were all seniors, they had cars. So I said good night and walked home along the beach. As a matter of fact, I was hoping for a phone call from my wife."

"What time did you leave the party?"

"It must have been nearly eleven. The ones who hadn't paired off had already gone home."

"Who did Ginnie pair off with?"

"I don't know. I'm afraid I wasn't paying too much attention to the kids. It's graduation week, and I've had a lot of problems—"

The father, Green, had been listening with a changing face. In a sudden yammering rage his implosive grief and guilt exploded outward.

"It's your business to know! By God, I'll have your job for this. I'll make it *my* business to run you out of town."

Connor hung his head and looked at the stained tile floor. There was a thin spot in his short brown hair, and his scalp gleamed through it like bare white bone. It was turning into a bad day for everybody, and I felt the dull old nagging pull of other people's trouble, like a toothache you can't leave alone.

3. THE SHERIFF

arrived, flanked by several deputies and an HP sergeant. He wore a western hat and a rawhide tie and a blue gabardine business suit which together produced a kind of gunsmog effect. His name was Pearsall.

I rode back up the canyon in the right front seat of Pearsall's black Buick, filling him in on the way. The deputies' Ford and an HP car followed us, and Green's new Oldsmobile convertible brought up the rear.

The sheriff said: "The old guy sounds like a looney to me."

"He's a loner, anyway."

"You never can tell about them hoboes. That's why I give my boys instructions to roust 'em. Well, it looks like an open-and-shut case."

"Maybe. Let's keep our minds open anyway, Sheriff."

"Sure. Sure. But the old guy went on the run. That shows consciousness of guilt. Don't worry, we'll hunt him down. I got men that know these hills like you know your wife's geography."

"I'm not married."

"Your girl friend, then." He gave me a sideways leer that was no gift. "And if we can't find him on foot, we'll use the air squadron."

"You have an air squadron?"

"Volunteers, mostly local ranchers. We'll get him." His tires squealed on a curve. "Was the girl raped?"

"I didn't try to find out. I'm not a doctor. I left her as she was."

The sheriff grunted. "You did the right thing at that."

Nothing had changed in the high meadow. The girl lay waiting to have her picture taken. It was taken many times, from several angles. All the birds flew away. Her father leaned on a tree and watched them go. Later he was sitting on the ground.

I volunteered to drive him home. It wasn't pure altruism. I'm incapable of it. I said when I had turned his Oldsmobile:

"Why did you say it was your fault, Mr. Green?"

He wasn't listening. Below the road four uniformed men were wrestling a heavy covered aluminum stretcher up the steep bank. Green watched them as he had watched the departing birds, until they were out of sight around a curve.

"She was so young," he said to the back seat.

I waited, and tried again. "Why did you blame yourself for her death?"

He roused himself from his daze. "Did I say that?"

"In the Highway Patrol office you said something of the sort."

He touched my arm. "I didn't mean I killed her."

"I didn't think you meant that. I'm interested in finding out who did."

"Are you a cop—a policeman?"

"I have been."

"You're not with the locals."

"No. I happen to be a private detective from Los Angeles. The name is Archer."

He sat and pondered this information. Below and ahead the summer sea brimmed up in the mouth of the canyon.

"You don't think the old tramp did her in?" Green said.

"It's hard to figure out how he could have. He's a strong-looking old buzzard, but he couldn't have carried her all the way up from the beach. And she wouldn't have come along with him of her own accord."

It was a question, in a way.

"I don't know," her father said. "Ginnie was a little wild. She'd do a thing *because* it was wrong, *because* it was dangerous. She hated to turn down a dare, especially from a man."

"There were men in her life?"

"She was attractive to men. You saw her, even as she is." He gulped. "Don't get me wrong. Ginnie was never a *bad* girl. She was a little headstrong, and I made mistakes. That's why I blame myself."

"What sort of mistakes, Mr. Green?"

"All the usual ones, and some I made up on my own." His voice was bitter. "Ginnie didn't have a mother, you see. Her mother left me years ago, and it was as much my fault as hers. I tried to bring her up myself. I didn't give her proper supervision. I run a restaurant in town, and I don't get home nights till after midnight. Ginnie was pretty much on her own since she was in grade school. We got along fine when I was there, but I usually wasn't there.

"The worst mistake I made was letting her work in the restaurant over the weekends. That started about a year ago. She wanted the money for clothes, and I thought the discipline would be good for her. I thought I could keep an eye on her, you know. But it didn't work out. She grew up too fast, and the night work played hell with her studies. I finally got the word from the school authorities. I fired her a couple of months ago, but I guess it was too late. We haven't been getting along too well since then. Mr. Connor said she resented my indecision, that I gave her too much responsibility and then took it away again."

"You've talked her over with Connor?"

"More than once, including last night. He was her academic counselor, and he was concerned about her grades. We both were. Ginnie finally pulled through, after all, thanks to him. She was going to graduate. Not that it matters now, of course."

Green was silent for a time. The sea expanded below us like a second blue dawn. I could hear the roar of the highway. Green touched my elbow again, as if he needed human contact.

"I oughtn't to've blown my top at Connor. He's a decent boy, he means well. He gave my daughter hours of free tuition this last month. And he's got troubles of his own, like he said."

"What troubles?"

"I happen to know his wife left him, same as mine. I shouldn't have borne down so hard on him. I have a lousy temper, always have had." He hesitated, then blurted out as if he had found a confessor: "I said a terrible thing to Ginnie at supper last night. She always has supper with me at the restaurant. I said if she wasn't home when I got home last night that I'd wring her neck."

"And she wasn't home," I said. And somebody wrung her neck, I didn't say.

4. THE LIGHT AT the highway was red. I glanced at Green. Tear tracks glistened like snail tracks on his face.

"Tell me what happened last night."

"There isn't anything much to tell," he said. "I got to the house about twelve-thirty, and, like you said, she wasn't home. So I called Al Brocco's house. He's my night cook, and I knew his youngest daughter Alice was at the moonlight party on the beach. Alice was home all right."

"Did you talk to Alice?"

"She was in bed asleep. Al woke her up, but I didn't talk to her. She told him she didn't know where Ginnie was. I went to bed, but I couldn't sleep. Finally I got up and called Mr. Connor. That was about one-thirty. I thought I should get in touch with the authorities, but he said no, Ginnie had enough black marks against her already. He came over to the house and we waited for a while and then we went down to Cavern Beach. There was no trace of her. I said it was time to call in the authorities, and he agreed. We went

to his beach house, because it was nearer, and called the sheriff's office from there. We went back to the beach with a couple of flashlights and went through the caves. He stayed with me all night. I give him that."

"Where are these caves?"

"We'll pass them in a minute. I'll show you if you want. But there's nothing in any of the three of them."

Nothing but shadows and empty beer cans, discarded contraceptives, the odor of rotting kelp. I got sand in my shoes and sweat under my collar. The sun dazzled my eyes when I half-walked, half-crawled, from the last of the caves.

Green was waiting beside a heap of ashes.

"This is where they had the wienie roast," he said.

I kicked the ashes. A half-burned sausage rolled along the sand. Sand fleas hopped in the sun like fat on a griddle. Green and I faced each other over the dead fire. He looked out to sea. A seal's face floated like a small black nose cone beyond the breakers. Farther out a water skier slid between unfolding wings of spray.

Away up the beach two people were walking toward us. They were small and lonely and distinct as Chirico figures in the long white distance.

Green squinted against the sun. Red-rimmed or not, his eyes were good. "I believe that's Mr. Connor. I wonder who the woman is with him."

They were walking as close as lovers, just above the white margin of the surf. They pulled apart when they noticed us, but they were still holding hands as they approached.

"It's Mrs. Connor," Green said in a low voice.

"I thought you said she left him."

"That's what he told me last night. She took off on him a couple of weeks ago, couldn't stand a high school teacher's hours. She must have changed her mind."

She looked as though she had a mind to change. She was a hard-faced blonde who walked like a man. A certain amount of style took the curse off her stiff angularity. She had on a madras shirt, mannishly cut, and a pair of black Capri pants that hugged her long, slim legs. She had good legs.

Connor looked at us in complex embarrassment. "I thought it was you from a distance, Mr. Green. I don't believe you know my wife."

"I've seen her in my place of business." He explained to the woman: "I run the Highway Restaurant in town."

"How do you do," she said aloofly, then added in an entirely different voice: "You're Virginia's father, aren't you? I'm so sorry."

The words sounded queer. Perhaps it was the surroundings; the ashes on the beach, the entrances to the caves, the sea, and the empty sky which dwarfed us all. Green answered her solemnly.

"Thank you, ma'am. Mr. Connor was a strong right arm to me last night. I can tell you." He was apologizing. And Connor responded:

"Why don't you come to our place for a drink? It's just down the beach. You look as if you could use one, Mr. Green. You too," he said to me. "I don't believe I know your name."

"Archer. Lew Archer."

He gave me a hard hand. His wife interposed: "I'm sure Mr. Green and his friend won't want to be bothered with us on a day like this. Besides, it isn't even noon yet, Frank."

She was the one who didn't want to be bothered. We stood around for a minute, exchanging grim, nonsensical comments on the beauty of the day. Then she led Connor back in the direction they had come from. Private Property, her attitude seemed to say: Trespassers will be fresh-frozen.

I drove Green to the Highway Patrol station. He said that he was feeling better, and could make it home from there by himself. He thanked me profusely for being a friend in need to him, as he put it. He followed me to the door of the station, thanking me.

The dispatcher was cleaning her fingernails with an ivory-handled file. She glanced up eagerly.

"Did they catch him yet?"

"I was going to ask you the same question, Miss Brocco."

"No such luck. But they'll get him," she said with female vindictiveness. "The sheriff called out his air squadron, and he sent to Ventura for bloodhounds."

"Big deal."

She bridled. "What do you mean by that?"

"I don't think the old man of the mountain killed her. If he had, he wouldn't have waited till this morning to go on the lam. He'd have taken off right away."

"Then why did he go on the lam at all?" The word sounded strange in her prim mouth.

"I think he saw me discover the body, and realized he'd be blamed."

She considered this, bending the long nail file between her fingers. "If the old tramp didn't do it, who did?"

"You may be able to help me answer that question."

"Me help you? How?"

"You know Frank Connor, for one thing."

"I know him. I've seen him about my sister's grades a few times."

"You don't seem to like him much."

"I don't like him, I don't dislike him. He's just blah to me."

"Why? What's the matter with him?"

Her tight mouth quivered, and let out words: "*I* don't know what's the matter with him. He can't keep his hands off of young girls."

"How do you know that?"

"I heard it."

"From your sister Alice?"

"Yes. The rumor was going around the school, she said."

"Did the rumor involve Ginnie Green?"

She nodded. Her eyes were as black as fingerprint ink.

"Is that why Connor's wife left him?"

"I wouldn't know about that. I never even laid eyes on Mrs. Connor."

"You haven't been missing much."

There was a yell outside, a kind of choked ululation. It sounded as much like an animal as a man. It was Green. When I reached the door, he was climbing out of his convertible with a heavy blue revolver in his hand.

"I saw the killer," he cried out exultantly.

"Where?"

He waved the revolver toward the lumberyard across the

road. "He poked his head up behind that pile of white pine. When he saw me, he ran like a deer. I'm going to get him."

"No. Give me the gun."

"Why? I got a license to carry it. And use it."

He started across the four-lane highway, dodging through the moving patterns of the Sunday traffic as if he were playing parcheesi on the kitchen table at home. The sounds of brakes and curses split the air. He had scrambled over the locked gate of the yard before I got to it. I went over after him.

5. GREEN DISAPPEARED behind a pile of lumber. I turned the corner and saw him running halfway down a long aisle walled with stacked wood and floored with beaten earth. The old man of the mountain was running ahead of him. His white hair blew in the wind of his own movement. A burlap sack bounced on his shoulders like a load of sorrow and shame.

"Stop or I'll shoot!" Green cried.

The old man ran on as if the devil himself were after him. He came to a cyclone fence, discarded his sack, and tried to climb it. He almost got over. Three strands of barbed wire along the top of the fence caught and held him struggling.

I heard a tearing sound, and then the sound of a shot. The huge old body espaliered on the fence twitched and went limp, fell heavily to the earth. Green stood over him breathing through his teeth.

I pushed him out of the way. The old man was alive, though there was blood in his mouth. He spat it onto his chin when I lifted his head.

"You shouldn't ought to of done it. I come to turn myself in. Then I got ascairt."

"Why were you scared?"

"I watched you uncover the little girl in the leaves. I knew I'd be blamed. I'm one of the chosen. They always blame the chosen. I been in trouble before."

"Trouble with girls?" At my shoulder Green was grinning terribly.

"Trouble with cops."

"For killing people?" Green said.

"For preaching on the street without a license. The voice told me to preach to the tribes of the wicked. And the voice told me this morning to come in and give my testimony."

"What voice?"

"The great voice." His voice was little and weak. He coughed red.

"He's as crazy as a bedbug," Green said.

"Shut up." I turned back to the dying man. "What testimony do you have to give?"

"About the car I seen. It woke me up in the middle of the night, stopped in the road below my sanctuary."

"What kind of car?"

"I don't know cars. I think it was one of them foreign cars. It made a noise to wake the dead."

"Did you see who was driving it?"

"No. I didn't go near. I was ascairt."

"What time was this car in the road?"

"I don't keep track of time. The moon was down behind the trees."

Those were his final words. He looked up at the sky with his sky-colored eyes, straight into the sun. His eyes changed color.

Green said: "Don't tell them. If you do, I'll make a liar out of you. I'm a respected citizen in this town. I got a business to lose. And they'll believe me ahead of you, mister."

"Shut up."

He couldn't. "The old fellow was lying, anyway. You know that. You heard him say yourself that he heard voices. That proves he's a psycho. He's a psycho killer. I shot him down like you would a mad dog, and I did right."

He waved the revolver.

"You did wrong, Green, and you know it. Give me that gun before it kills somebody else."

He thrust it into my hand suddenly. I unloaded it, breaking my fingernails in the process, and handed it back to him empty. He nudged up against me.

"Listen, maybe I did do wrong. I had provocation. It doesn't have to get out. I got a business to lose."

He fumbled in his hip pocket and brought out a thick sharkskin wallet. "Here. I can pay you good money. You say that you're a private eye; you know how to keep your lip buttoned."

I walked away and left him blabbering beside the body of the man he had killed. They were both vicious, in a sense, but only one of them had blood on his hands.

Miss Brocco was in the HP parking lot. Her bosom was jumping with excitement.

"I heard a shot."

"Green shot the old man. Dead. You better send in for the meat wagon and call off your bloody dogs."

The words hit her like slaps. She raised her hand to her face, defensively. "Are you mad at me? Why are you mad at me?"

"I'm mad at everybody."

"You still don't think he did it."

"I know damned well he didn't. I want to talk to your sister."

"Alice? What for?"

"Information. She was on the beach with Ginnie Green last night. She may be able to tell me something."

"You leave Alice alone."

"I'll treat her gently. Where do you live?"

"I don't want my little sister dragged into this filthy mess."

"All I want to know is who Ginnie paired off with."

"I'll ask Alice. I'll tell you."

"Come on, Miss Brocco, we're wasting time. I don't need your permission to talk to your sister, after all. I can get the address out of the phone book if I have to."

She flared up and then flared down.

"You win. We live on Orlando Street, 224. That's on the other side of town. You will be nice to Alice, won't you? She's bothered enough as it is about Ginnie's death."

"She really was a friend of Ginnie's, then?"

"Yes. I tried to break it up. But you know how kids are

—two motherless girls, they stick together. I tried to be like a mother to Alice."

"What happened to your own mother?"

"Father—I mean, she died." A greenish pallor invaded her face and turned it to old bronze. "Please. I don't want to talk about it. I was only a kid when she died."

She went back to her muttering radios. She was quite a woman, I thought as I drove away. Nubile but unmarried, probably full of untapped Mediterranean passions. If she worked an eight-hour shift and started at eight, she'd be getting off about four.

It wasn't a large town, and it wasn't far across it. The highway doubled at its main street. I passed the Union High School. On the green playing field beside it a lot of kids in mortarboards and gowns were rehearsing their graduation exercises. A kind of pall seemed to hang over the field. Perhaps it was in my mind.

Farther along the street I passed Green's Highway Restaurant. A dozen cars stood in its parking space. A couple of white-uniformed waitresses were scooting around behind the plate-glass windows.

Orlando Street was a lower-middle-class residential street bisected by the highway. Jacaranda trees bloomed like low small purple clouds among its stucco and frame cottages. Fallen purple petals carpeted the narrow lawn in front of the Brocco house.

A thin, dark man, wiry under his T-shirt, was washing a small red Fiat in the driveway beside the front porch. He must have been over fifty, but his long hair was as black as an Indian's. His Sicilian nose was humped in the middle by an old break.

"Mr. Brocco?"

"That's me."

"Is your daughter Alice home?"

"She's home."

"I'd like to speak to her."

He turned off his hose, pointing its dripping nozzle at me like a gun.

"You're a little old for her, ain't you?"

"I'm a detective investigating the death of Ginnie Green."

"Alice don't know nothing about that."

"I've just been talking to your older daughter at the Highway Patrol office. She thinks Alice may know something."

He shifted on his feet. "Well, if Anita says it's all right."

"It's okay, Dad," a girl said from the front door. "Anita just called me on the telephone. Come in, Mister—Archer, isn't it?"

"Archer."

6. SHE OPENED THE screen door for me. It opened directly into a small square living room containing worn green frieze furniture and a television set which the girl switched off. She was a handsome, serious-looking girl, a younger version of her sister with ten years and ten pounds subtracted and a pony tail added. She sat down gravely on the edge of a chair, waving her hand at the chesterfield. Her movements were languid. There were blue depressions under her eyes. Her face was sallow.

"What kind of questions do you want to ask me? My sister didn't say."

"Who was Ginnie with last night?"

"Nobody. I mean, she was with me. She didn't make out with any of the boys." She glanced from me to the blind television set, as if she felt caught between. "It said on the television that she was with a man, that there was medical evidence to prove it. But I didn't see her with no man. Any man."

"Did Ginnie go with men?"

She shook her head. Her pony tail switched and hung limp. She was close to tears.

"You told Anita she did."

"I did not!"

"Your sister wouldn't lie. You passed on a rumor to her—a high school rumor that Ginnie had had something to do with one man in particular."

The girl was watching my face in fascination. Her eyes were like a bird's eyes, bright and shallow and fearful.

"Was the rumor true?"

She shrugged her thin shoulders. "How would I know?"

"You were good friends with Ginnie."

"Yes. I was." Her voice broke on the past tense. "She was a real nice kid, even if she was kind of boy crazy."

"She was boy crazy, but she didn't make out with any of the boys last night."

"Not while I was there."

"Did she make out with Mr. Connor?"

"No. He wasn't there. He went away. He said he was going home. He lives up the beach."

"What did Ginnie do?"

"I don't know. I didn't notice."

"You said she was with you. Was she with you all evening?"

"Yes." Her face was agonized. "I mean no."

"Did Ginnie go away, too?"

She nodded.

"In the same direction Mr. Conner took? The direction of his house?"

Her head moved almost imperceptibly downward.

"What time was that, Alice?"

"About eleven o'clock, I guess."

"And Ginnie never came back from Mr. Connor's house?"

"I don't know. I don't know for certain that she went there."

"But Ginnie and Mr. Connor were good friends?"

"I guess so."

"How good? Like a boy friend and a girl friend?"

She sat mute, her birdlike stare unblinking.

"Tell me, Alice."

"I'm afraid."

"Afraid of Mr. Connor?"

"No. Not him."

"Has someone threatened you—told you not to talk?"

Her head moved in another barely perceptible nod.

"Who threatened you, Alice? You'd better tell me for your own protection. Whoever did threaten you is probably a murderer."

She burst into frantic tears. Brocco came to the door.

"What goes on in here?"

"Your daughter is upset. I'm sorry."

"Yeah, and I know who upset her. You better get out of here or you'll be sorrier."

He opened the screen door and held it open, his head poised like a dark and broken ax. I went out past him. He spat after me. The Broccos were a very emotional family.

I started back toward Connor's beach house on the south side of town but ran into a diversion on the way. Green's car was parked in the lot beside his restaurant. I went in.

The place smelled of grease. It was almost full of late Sunday lunchers seated in booths and at the U-shaped breakfast bar in the middle. Green himself was sitting on a stool behind the cash register counting money. He was counting it as if his life and his hope of heaven depended on the colored paper in his hands.

He looked up, smiling loosely and vaguely. "Yes, sir?" Then he recognized me. His face went through a quick series of transformations and settled for a kind of boozy shame. "I know I shouldn't be here working on a day like this. But it keeps my mind off my troubles. Besides, they steal you blind if you don't watch 'em. And I'll be needing the money."

"What for, Mr. Green?"

"The trial." He spoke the word as if it gave him a bitter satisfaction.

"Whose trial?"

"Mine. I told the sheriff what the old guy said. And what I did. I know what I did. I shot him down like a dog, and I had no right to. I was crazy with my sorrow, you might say."

He was less crazy now. The shame in his eyes was clearing. But the sorrow was still there in their depths, like stone at the bottom of a well.

"I'm glad you told the truth, Mr. Green."

"So am I. It doesn't help him, and it doesn't bring Ginnie back. But at least I can live with myself."

"Speaking of Ginnie," I said. "Was she seeing quite a lot of Frank Connor?"

"Yeah. I guess you could say so. He came over to help her with her studies quite a few times. At the house, and at the library. He didn't charge me any tuition, either."

"That was nice of him. Was Ginnie fond of Connor?"

"Sure she was. She thought very highly of Mr. Connor."

"Was she in love with him?"

"In love? Hell, I never thought of anything like that. Why?"

"Did she have dates with Connor?"

"Not to my knowledge," he said. "If she did, she must have done it behind my back." His eyes narrowed to two red swollen slits. "You think Frank Connor had something to do with her death?"

"It's a possibility. Don't go into a sweat now. You know where that gets you."

"Don't worry. But what about this Connor? Did you get something on him? I thought he was acting queer last night."

"Queer in what way?"

"Well, he was pretty tight when he came to the house. I gave him a stiff snort, and that straightened him out for a while. But later on, down on the beach, he got almost hysterical. He was running around like a rooster with his head chopped off."

"Is he a heavy drinker?"

"I wouldn't know. I never saw him drink before last night at my house." Green narrowed his eyes. "But he tossed down a triple bourbon like it was water. And remember this morning, he offered us a drink on the beach. A drink in the morning, that isn't the usual thing, especially for a high school teacher."

"I noticed that."

"What else have you been noticing?"

"We won't go into it now," I said. "I don't want to ruin a man unless and until I'm sure he's got it coming."

He sat on his stool with his head down. Thought moved murkily under his knitted brows. His glance fell on the money in his hands. He was counting tens.

"Listen, Mr. Archer. You're working on this case on your own, aren't you? For free?"

"So far."

"So go to work for me. Nail Connor for me, and I'll pay you whatever you ask."

"Not so fast," I said. "We don't know that Connor is guilty. There are other possibilities."

"Such as?"

"If I tell you, can I trust you not to go on a shooting spree?"

"Don't worry," he repeated. "I've had that."

"Where's your revolver?"

"I turned it in to Sheriff Pearsall. He asked for it."

We were interrupted by a family group getting up from one of the booths. They gave Green their money and their sympathy. When they were out of hearing, I said:

"You mentioned that your daughter worked here in the restaurant for a while. Was Al Brocco working here at the same time?"

"Yeah. He's been my night cook for six-seven years. Al is a darned good cook. He trained as a chef on the Italian line." His slow mind, punchy with grief, did a double-take. "You wouldn't be saying that he messed around with Ginnie?"

"I'm asking you."

"Shucks, Al is old enough to be her father. He's all wrapped up in his own girls, Anita in particular. He worships the ground she walks on. She's the mainspring of that family."

"How did he get on with Ginnie?"

"Very well. They kidded back and forth. She was the only one who could ever make him smile. Al is a sad man, you know. He had a tragedy in his life."

"His wife's death?"

"It was worse than that," Green said. "Al Brocco killed his wife with his own hand. He caught her with another man and put a knife in her."

"And he's walking around loose?"

"The other man was a Mex," Green said in an explanatory way. "A wetback. He couldn't even talk the English language. The town hardly blamed Al, the jury gave him manslaughter. But when he got out of the pen, the people

at the Pink Flamingo wouldn't give him his old job back—he used to be chef there. So I took him on. I felt sorry for his girls, I guess, and Al's been a good worker. A man doesn't do a thing like that twice, you know."

He did another slow mental double-take. His mouth hung open. I could see the gold in its corners.

"Let's hope not."

"Listen here," he said. "You go to work for me, eh? You nail the guy, whoever he is. I'll pay you. I'll pay you now. How much do you want?"

I took a hundred dollars of his money and left him trying to comfort himself with the rest of it. The smell of grease stayed in my nostrils.

7. CONNOR'S HOUSE

clung to the edge of a low bluff about halfway between the HP station and the mouth of the canyon where the thing had begun: a semi-centilevered redwood cottage with a closed double garage fronting the highway. From the grape stake-fenced patio in the angle between the garage and the front door a flight of wooden steps climbed to the flat roof which was railed as a sun deck. A second set of steps descended the fifteen or twenty feet to the beach.

I tripped on a pair of garden shears crossing the patio to the garage window. I peered into the interior twilight. Two things inside interested me: a dismasted flattie sitting on a trailer, and a car. The sailboat interested me because its cordage resembled the white rope that had strangled Ginnie. The car interested me because it was an imported model, a low-slung Triumph two-seater.

I was planning to have a closer look at it when a woman's voice screeched overhead like a gull's:

"What do you think you're doing?"

Mrs. Connor was leaning over the railing on the roof. Her hair was in curlers. She looked like a blond Gorgon. I smiled up at her, the way that Greek whose name I don't remember must have smiled.

"Your husband invited me for a drink, remember? I don't know whether he gave me a rain check or not."

"He did not! Go away! My husband is sleeping!"

"Shh. You'll wake him up. You'll wake up the people in Forest Lawn."

She put her hand to her mouth. From the expression on her face she seemed to be biting her hand. She disappeared for a moment, and then came down the steps with a multicolored silk scarf over her curlers. The rest of her was sheathed in a white satin bathing suit. Against it her flesh looked like brown wood.

"You get out of here," she said. "Or I shall call the police."

"Fine. Call them. I've got nothing to hide."

"Are you implying that we have?"

"We'll see. Why did you leave your husband?"

"That's none of your business."

"I'm making it my business, Mrs. Connor. I'm a detective investigating the murder of Ginnie Green. Did you leave Frank on account of Ginnie Green?"

"No. No! I wasn't even aware—" Her hand went to her mouth again. She chewed on it some more.

"You weren't aware that Frank was having an affair with Ginnie Green?"

"He wasn't."

"So you say. Others say different."

"What others? Anita Brocco? You can't believe anything *that* woman says. Why, her own father is a murderer, everybody in town knows that."

"Your own husband may be another, Mrs. Connor. You might as well come clean with me."

"But I have nothing to tell you."

"You can tell me why you left him."

"That is a private matter, between Frank and me. It has nothing to do with anybody but us." She was calming down, setting her moral forces in a stubborn, defensive posture.

"There's usually only the one reason."

"I had my reasons. I said they were none of your business. I chose for reasons of my own to spend a month with my parents in Long Beach."

"When did you come back?"

"This morning."

"Why this morning?"

"Frank called me. He said he needed me." She touched her thin breast absently, pathetically, as if perhaps she hadn't been much needed in the past.

"Needed you for what?"

"As his wife," she said. "He said there might be tr—" Her hand went to her mouth again. She said around it: "Trouble."

"Did he name the kind of trouble?"

"No."

"What time did he call you?"

"Very early, around seven o'clock."

"That was more than an hour before I found Ginnie's body."

"He knew she was missing. He spent the whole night looking for her."

"Why would he do that, Mrs. Connor?"

"She was his student. He was fond of her. Besides, he was more or less responsible for her."

"Responsible for her death?"

"How dare you say a thing like that?"

"If he dared to do it, I can dare to say it."

"He didn't!" she cried. "Frank is a good man. He may have his faults, but he wouldn't kill anyone. I know him."

"What are his faults?"

"We won't discuss them."

"Then may I have a look in your garage?"

"What for? What are you looking for?"

"I'll know when I find it." I turned toward the garage door.

"You mustn't go in there," she said intensely. "Not without Frank's permission."

"Wake him up and we'll get his permission."

"I will not. He got no sleep last night."

"Then I'll just have a look without his permission."

"I'll kill you if you go in there."

She picked up the garden shears and brandished them at me—a sick-looking lioness defending her overgrown cub.

The cub himself opened the front door of the cottage. He slouched in the doorway groggily, naked except for white shorts.

"What goes on, Stella?"

"This man has been making the most horrible accusations."

His blurred glance wavered between us and focused on her. "What did he say?"

"I won't repeat it."

"I will, Mr. Connor. I think you were Ginnie Green's lover, if that's the word. I think she followed you to this house last night, around midnight. I think she left it with a rope around her neck."

Connor's head jerked. He started to make a move in my direction. Something inhibited it, like an invisible leash. His body slanted toward me, static, all the muscles taut. It resembled an anatomy specimen with the skin off. Even his face seemed mostly bone and teeth.

I hoped he'd swing on me and let me hit him. He didn't. Stella Connor dropped the garden shears. They made a noise like the dull clank of doom.

"Aren't you going to deny it, Frank?"

"I didn't kill her. I swear I didn't. I admit that we—that we were together last night, Ginnie and I."

"Ginnie and I?" the woman repeated incredulously.

His head hung down. "I'm sorry, Stella. I didn't want to hurt you more than I have already. But it has to come out. I took up with the girl after you left. I was lonely and feeling sorry for myself. Ginnie kept hanging around. One night I drank too much and let it happen. It happened more than once. I was so flattered that a pretty young girl—"

"You fool!" she said in a deep, harsh voice.

"Yes, I'm a moral fool. That's no surprise to you, is it?"

"I thought you respected your pupils, at least. You mean to say you brought her into our own house, into our own bed?"

"You'd left. It wasn't ours any more. Besides, she came of her own accord. She wanted to come. She loved me."

She said with grinding contempt: "You poor, groveling

ninny. And to think you had the gall to ask me to come back here, to make you look respectable."

I cut in between them. "Was she here last night, Connor?"

"She was here. I didn't invite her. I wanted her to come, but I dreaded it, too. I knew that I was taking an awful chance. I drank quite a bit to numb my conscience—"

"What conscience?" Stella Connor said.

"I have a conscience," he said without looking at her. "You don't know the hell I've been going through. After she came, after it happened last night, I drank myself unconscious."

"Do you mean after you killed her?" I said.

"I didn't kill her. When I passed out, she was perfectly all right. She was sitting up drinking a cup of instant coffee. The next thing I knew, hours later, her father was on the telephone and she was gone."

"Are you trying to pull the old blackout alibi? You'll have to do better than that."

"I can't. It's the truth."

"Let me into your garage."

He seemed almost glad to be given an order, a chance for some activity. The garage wasn't locked. He raised the overhead door and let the daylight into the interior. It smelled of paint. There were empty cans of marine paint on a bench beside the sailboat. Its hull gleamed virgin white.

"I painted my flattie last week," he said inconsequentially.

"You do a lot of sailing?"

"I used to. Not much lately."

"No," his wife said from the doorway. "Frank changed his hobby to women. Wine and women."

"Lay off, eh?" His voice was pleading.

She looked at him from a great and stony distance.

8. I WALKED AROUND the boat, examining the cordage. The starboard jib line had been sheared off short. Comparing it with the port line, I found that the missing piece was approximately a yard

long. That was the length of the piece of white rope that I was interested in.

"Hey!" Connor grabbed the end of the cut line. He fingered it as if it was a wound in his own flesh. "Who's been messing with my lines? Did you cut it, Stella?"

"I never go near your blessed boat," she said.

"I can tell you where the rest of that line is, Connor. A line of similar length and color and thickness was wrapped around Ginnie Green's neck when I found her."

"Surely you don't believe I put it there?"

I tried to, but I couldn't. Small-boat sailers don't cut their jib lines, even when they're contemplating murder. And while Connor was clearly no genius, he was smart enough to have known that the line could easily be traced to him. Perhaps someone else had been equally smart.

I turned to Mrs. Connor. She was standing in the doorway with her legs apart. Her body was almost black against the daylight. Her eyes were hooded by the scarf on her head.

"What time did you get home, Mrs. Connor?"

"About ten o'clock this morning. I took a bus as soon as my husband called. But I'm in no position to give him an alibi."

"An alibi wasn't what I had in mind. I suggest another possibility, that you came home twice. You came home unexpectedly last night, saw the girl in the house with your husband, waited in the dark till the girl came out, waited with a piece of rope in your hands—a piece of rope you'd cut from your husband's boat in the hope of getting him punished for what he'd done to you. But the picture doesn't fit the frame, Mrs. Connor. A sailor like your husband wouldn't cut a piece of line from his own boat. And even in the heat of murder he wouldn't tie a granny's knot. His fingers would automatically tie a reef knot. That isn't true of a woman's fingers."

She held herself upright with one long, rigid arm against the door-frame.

"I wouldn't do anything like that. I wouldn't do that to Frank."

"Maybe you wouldn't in daylight, Mrs. Connor. Things have different shapes at midnight."

"And hell hath no fury like a woman scorned? Is that what you're thinking? You're wrong. I wasn't here last night. I was in bed in my father's house in Long Beach. I didn't even known about that girl and Frank."

"Then why did you leave him?"

"He was in love with another woman. He wanted to divorce me and marry her. But he was afraid—afraid that it would affect his position in town. He told me on the phone this morning that it was all over with the other woman. So I agreed to come back to him." Her arm dropped on her side.

"He said that it was all over with Ginnie?"

Possibilities were racing through my mind. There was the possibility that Connor had been playing reverse English, deliberately and clumsily framing himself in order to be cleared. But that was out of far left field.

"Not Ginnie," his wife said. "The other woman was Anita Brocco. He met her last spring in the course of work and fell in love—what *he* calls in love. My husband is a foolish, fickle man."

"Please, Stella. I said it was all over between me and Anita, and it is."

She turned on him in quiet savagery. "What does it matter now? If it isn't one girl it's another. Any kind of female flesh will do to poultice your sick little ego."

Her cruelty struck inward and hurt her. She stretched out her hand toward him. Suddenly her eyes were blind with tears.

"Any flesh but mine, Frank," she said brokenly.

Connor paid no attention to his wife.

He said to me in a hushed voice:

"My god, I never thought. I noticed her car last night when I was walking home along the beach."

"Whose car?"

"Anita's red Fiat. It was parked at the viewpoint a few hundred yards from here." He gestured vaguely toward town. "Later, when Ginnie was with me, I thought I heard someone in the garage. But I was too drunk to make a

search." His eyes burned into mine. "You say a woman tied that knot?"

"All we can do is ask her."

We started toward my car together. His wife called after him:

"Don't go, Frank. Let him handle it."

He hesitated, a weak man caught between opposing forces.

"I need you," she said. "We need each other."

I pushed him in her direction.

9.

IT WAS NEARLY FOUR when I got to the HP station. The patrol cars had gathered like homing pigeons for the change in shift. Their uniformed drivers were talking and laughing inside.

Anita Brocco wasn't among them. A male dispatcher, a fat-faced man with pimples, had taken her place behind the counter.

"Where's Miss Brocco?" I asked.

"In the ladies' room. Her father is coming to pick her up any minute."

She came out wearing lipstick and a light beige coat. Her face turned beige when she saw my face. She came toward me in slow motion, leaned with both hands flat on the counter. Her lipstick looked like fresh blood on a corpse.

"You're a handsome woman, Anita. Too bad about you."

"Too bad." It was half a statement and half a question. She looked down at her hands.

"Your fingernails are clean now. They were dirty this morning. You were digging in the dirt in the dark last night, weren't you?"

"No."

"You were, though. You saw them together and you couldn't stand it. You waited in ambush with a rope, and put it around her neck. Around your own neck, too."

She touched her neck. The talk and laughter had subsided around us. I could hear the tick of the clock again, and the muttering signals coming in from inner space.

"What did you use to cut the rope with, Anita? The garden shears?"

Her red mouth groped for words and found them. "I was crazy about him. She took him away. It was all over before it started. I didn't know what to do with myself. I wanted him to suffer."

"He's suffering. He's going to suffer more."

"He deserves to. He was the only man—" She shrugged in a twisted way and looked down at her breast. "I didn't want to kill her, but when I saw them together—I saw them through the window. I saw her take off her clothes and put them on. Then I thought of the night my father—when he—when there was all the blood in Mother's bed. I had to wash it out of the sheets."

The men around me were murmuring. One of them, a sergeant, raised his voice.

"Did you kill Ginnie Green?"

"Yes."

"Are you ready to make a statement?" I said.

"Yes. I'll talk to Sheriff Pearsall. I don't want to talk here, in front of my friends." She looked around doubtfully.

"I'll take you downtown."

"Wait a minute." She glanced once more at her empty hands. "I left my purse in the—in the back room. I'll go and get it."

She crossed the office like a zombie, opened a plain door, closed it behind her. She didn't come out. After a while we broke the lock and went in after her.

Her body was cramped on the narrow floor. The ivory-handled nail file lay by her right hand. There were bloody holes in her white blouse and in the white breast under it. One of them had gone as deep as her heart.

Later Al Brocco drove up in her red Fiat and came into the station.

"I'm a little late," he said to the room in general. "Anita wanted me to give her car a good cleaning. Where is she, anyway?"

The sergeant cleared his throat to answer Brocco.

All us poor creatures, as the old man of the mountain had said that morning.

This thing, I think, may properly be called a "pastiche," though I confess I am not certain. Maybe Mr. Dresser was serious when he wrote it.

Anyhow, if the "hard-boiled" story can survive this sort of thing, I feel certain it will be with us for many years to come.

Davis Dresser

I'M TOUGH

IT WAS LATE AND it was raining. The streets were sleek, black and dismal. I was wet outside and dry inside. I went into a bar.

It was empty except for a thin man behind the mahogany. He was polishing glasses and he looked over his shoulder at me like he didn't want customers. I dripped water on his clean floor toward the bar. I said, "A double whiskey," to his back.

He turned, shaking his head. "Closing up, chum." He had a thin face shaped like the hatchet Lizzie Borden chopped up her mama with. And with funny ears sticking out on each side that looked like the shrivelled hands of a baby that was born dead.

I slid onto a stool and said, "A double whiskey."

He had a long thin nose and there was a glob of snot forming at the end of it. He shook his head and the end of his nose twitched and the snot started to fall. He reached up and swiped it off with his cloth and went back to polishing the glass. Only it didn't polish so good now. He said, "Closing up."

I got out my gat and laid it on the bar. He looked at the gat and then at my face, and then put down the glass and got a bottle of bonded stuff and a double shot-glass. He said, "Pardon me," and gurgled bourbon to the brim.

He left the bottle in front of me and turned away. I drank

it. I gurgled in more bourbon and drank that. I heard the door open behind me and looked at the mirror behind the bar and saw her.

She was young. Maybe fifteen. Maybe sixteen. She wore a transparent yellow rain cape with a hood that she pushed back off her head. Her hair was pale gold, smooth and straight. Her face was white, and the rose-red lipstick made a gaping wound across her blank face. Her eyes were green as emeralds, slanted and shining as she looked at me.

I said, "Hi, kid," to her reflection in the mirror.

She said, "Hi," back to my reflection. Her eyelids drooped and lifted slowly like the flick of a cat's tail. She moved up close behind me. She said, "Will you do something for me?"

I reached for the bottle. "Name it, kid."

She took a deep breath, sibilant with a little hiss. I could see her teeth between swollen, scarlet lips, small, white and sharply pointed. Her voice close behind my ear was a whisper. "Will you kill a man for me?"

I slid my gat back into my pocket. I turned on the stool and took a long look into those green eyes. They were young and they were hot and they promised me everything. I said, "For you. . .sure, babe."

She said, "Come on," and turned toward the door. I dropped a bill on the bar and followed her out.

Neon lights threw screaming colors across the rain-blackened streets. She left her hood down and walked through the lights and shadows and the rain, stony and detached.

I walked through the rain beside her and asked, "Your boy friend?"

Her voice was small and clear and dry as she answered, "No."

I said, "Who, then?"

She said, "That doesn't concern you."

We went on through the night and the rain. We reached the corner of Broadway at 42nd. There weren't any pedestrians. There was a black-coated cop directing traffic at the intersection. His back was to us.

The wind tore at our bodies and the rain lashed at our faces. There was only an old man selling pencils on the corner. A very old man. His hair was white and his beard

was white and his slack mouth trembled as the cold rain beat at it.

She lifted her hand and pointed a finger at the old man and said, "That's him."

I looked into her green eyes and she looked back and it was like there was a flame between us that the raindrops couldn't put out.

I said, "Okay, babe," and pulled my gun and shot him between the eyes.

He fell flat on his face. His bony fingers scrabbled a moment among the scattered pencils. The cop thought it was a back-fire and kept his back turned. I nudged the old man over with my toe to make sure he was dead. I knelt beside him. His rheumy old eyes were glazing. His lips parted. He muttered, "That bitch," and then he died.

I got up and turned around. She was gone. I was alone with the night and the wind and the rain . . . and with a dead man.

I feel that no collection of this nature would be properly inclusive without at least one story about The Compleat Heel.

This is my selection for this year.

Geoffrey Grayne is just about as no-good a guy as you are likely to meet even in the pages of modern fiction. Douglas Farr handles this familiar material with superb ease, and even manages to pull off a real surprise for his ending.

Douglas Farr

FOR LOVE OF $10,000,000

GEOFFREY GRAYNE was a gambler and did not mind betting high—not even if life and death were the stakes. If the life and death involved were not his own, that is.

He saw the chance for a wager of astronomical size when he met the Akright sisters. And it was just the kind of gamble that he liked best, the kind where there was little chance of his losing. Because right from the beginning he discovered that he could control and manipulate the Akrights almost entirely at will.

It was a shipboard romance—albeit a triangular one—conducted in the salons, the pool, and on the promenade deck of the *Malaguena* as the gorgeous big white ship plied the waters of the Caribbean. And Geoffrey Grayne was as gorgeous as the ship or the setting, admirably equipped by nature to conduct a romance of any geometric pattern.

He was not a big man, but he was well shaped. Wide-shouldered, lean-hipped, muscular as a minor Hercules. Added to these advantages were a handsome face, waving dark hair, passionate brown eyes, a glib tongue, an infinite willingness to lie, to flatter, to deceive, to discipline his own tastes in order to prefer plain women to beautiful ones.

Olive Akright was a plain woman in her mid-thirties. Her face reflected some of the dullness of her personality. Her large-boned body was rather clumsy. All her virtues, meekness, generosity, humility, were the homely ones. But she was rich.

Geoffrey Grayne had a sixth sense which could detect the taint of wealth in women. Small things attracted his notice, such as inattention to money, a way of being waited on that indicated habit. Olive Akright was no mere stenographer on a vacation-of-a-lifetime. She'd been born to the silk, and was on this ship out of boredom, and—perhaps—with a hope of adventure.

Geoffrey's approach was smooth, effortless, experienced. As Olive lay sunning at the poolside, he established himself near her. Yet not too near, just within easy range of her vision. He was aware that she noted his arrival almost instantly. Women always did. Later he swam a bit, demonstrating his athletic prowess. As he emerged, dripping and glistening, he was just a bit closer to her. Then as if noticing her presence for the first time, he grinned in her general direction.

That was all. He had perfect confidence in his skill and his power to attract. He did not make the amateur's mistake of initiating a conversation by some means or other, and following it up with an invitation to luncheon. His method was different, tantalizing, more deadly. After the friendly, unself-conscious grin, he ignored her.

But he knew that when he returned to the pool in the late afternoon, she'd be there waiting for him. And she was. Now he flashed her a smile of greeting, of recognition. The compliment was subtle, but not too much so for a woman. A handsome man had remembered her.

It is a well known and much over-used masculine technique to offer a cigarette or a light to a woman in need of either. Geoffrey Grayne got better results by reversing the idea. He'd noticed that morning that the lady smoked. Now he searched in his own pocket for a non-existent object.

So it was Olive Akright who spoke the first—and fatal—words. "Need a cigarette?"

They dined together that evening. The conversation was

rather one-sided. But Geoffrey led it cleverly and allowed Olive to talk enough to give him the information he needed, the confirmation of what he had already guessed—that she was a wealthy woman.

By the end of the evening he had made heartening progress. Olive thought he was charming. She had no suspicions of his motives. Possibly she didn't realize that he knew she was rich. Possibly she didn't care whether he knew or not. The important thing was that she was already very fond of him.

Disaster struck the next morning. Geoffrey had promised Olive he would meet her for breakfast. And she arrived well on time, eager for a new day in a white sun dress. But she was not alone. Geoffrey sensed trouble, for he noted the family resemblance in the new arrival immediately.

"Geoffrey, this is my sister Hazel."

Hazel seemed to be the younger and smaller of the two, but aside from that, there was little to choose between them. They both had the same lusterless brown hair, the same rather pale gray-green eyes, the same sort of angularity of figure. Hazel, however, wasn't wearing a sun dress, but rather a long-sleeved, high-necked sweater over a wool skirt. It was a difference that later would prove significant.

Although Geoffrey cursed inwardly at this new interference, he remained superficially his charming, gallant self. Since Olive was already nibbling at the baited hook he of course continued to give her the major share of his attention. But to Hazel he was at least courteous, giving her the treatment that befitted the sister of his future bride.

As he soon found out, however, Hazel wasn't too much of a menace during the rest of the cruise. Although she often ate her meals with Olive and Geoffrey, she wasn't in the way at the pool or at any of the other outdoor activities. Nor did she stay with them too late in the evenings. Hazel was "in delicate health," as Olive stated it. But Geoffrey soon discovered this was not quite true. At the age of only thirty-two, Hazel had already retreated into that state of mind which is the refuge of so many bored women. She was terribly and constantly concerned about her health. But there was really nothing the matter with her. She was only

a hypochondriac. Not quite psychopathic about it yet, but on the verge.

At any rate, Hazel was out of the way enough so that by the time the ship docked back in New York, Geoffrey and Olive had come very close to having an understanding. Geoffrey knew the perils of too much speed as well as the perils of too much slowness. And besides, he wanted to be absolutely sure that the Akrights were as wealthy as they appeared to be. So he accepted Olive's invitation to come down to the house at Tanbury the following week end.

But just before the ship berthed, Geoffrey received a visitor in his stateroom. It was Hazel Akright, looking almost chic in a well-tailored woolen suit and wearing make-up other than lipstick for the first time since he'd known her.

"May I come in, Geoffrey?" she asked.

Just a little confused and uneasy—although he was seldom so—Geoffrey invited her inside. With a small, imperious nod of her head she indicated that he should close the door. He obeyed. Then, his usual poise having returned, he quickly offered her his easy chair.

"You're coming to Tanbury, I understand," she said.

"Yes," he admitted. "Your sister asked me. I hope you don't mind."

"Mind?" She smiled. It was an odd expression on her face somehow. Possibly she did not smile very frequently. "Of course I don't mind. If Olive hadn't thought of it, I'd have asked you myself. I'm very glad you're coming."

Geoffrey Grayne did not surprise easily. But he was surprised now. He could only answer, "Well, I'm glad. . ."

"You see, Geoffrey," she went on, "it was only an accident, after all, that you met Olive first. She happens to be the athletic one, while I'm on the frailer side. But it could just as easily have worked out the other way."

Geoffrey sat down on the straight chair, forgetting to remove the shirts that were on it. His original uneasiness was now strongly confirmed. Somehow or other, although she professed happiness at his going down to Tanbury, this girl was going to make trouble. He stayed silent, to be on the safe side, because he didn't know what to say.

"We'll be seeing you again in a few days then, Geoffrey,"

she continued, "and in the meantime I'd like you to think over a few things. First, there's the Akright money. Did Olive ever tell you how much it amounted to?"

"No. . ."

"Well, approximately ten million. Father was in oil and mines and railroads, and he did very well in all of them. Olive and I inherited jointly. And equally."

Geoffrey Grayne licked his dry lips. There was much more money involved than he had imagined. Ten million . . .equally. . .five million apiece.

"And we're both single, Geoffrey."

"Yes, I know that."

"Did you know I was three years younger than Olive?"

"No. . ." His brain was spinning now. What was Hazel trying to say? That she was just as available as Olive?

"And I'm more delicate than Olive. I probably shan't live as long."

He was sweating and his skin was prickly with a thousand little hot needles. How could this woman possibly know his background and intentions? He'd been more than careful enough. Yet she seemed to know exactly what he was. But yet, oddly, she didn't seem to care. In fact, she seemed to be inviting him to switch his attentions from Olive to herself. Because she, Hazel, might die sooner. And then what? And leave him her money! Her five million!

While these thoughts were pounding inside his skull, Hazel stood up suddenly. "Think about what I've just said, Geoffrey, and we'll see you on the week end."

Stumbling to his feet, he managed to intercept her at the door. "Look here," he said desperately, "I don't know what you're talking about."

She smiled up at him calmly. She was really of a better size than her sister. "Oh yes, you do," she corrected him. "Or you will know if you think it over a bit. If I spoke any more plainly, I'd be too forward for a girl trained in the best Swiss finishing schools."

She was gone then, leaving him in the utterest confusion. And he had not recovered from it by the time the ship docked. In a daze, he went through the polite motions of seeing the Akright sisters safely disembarked, their luggage

properly directed. A chauffeured car picked them up then; they both waved good-by to him, and once again he promised to meet them in Tanbury in four days.

He was glad he had the four days to think. For he was thoroughly perplexed and his thoughts were quite weird.

It had seemed relatively simple in the beginning, as well as promising. As Geoffrey Grayne—and under another, less glamorous name—he had had several wives, but he had been quit legally of all of them. When a lot of money was at stake, he believed in operating within the law, because it simply wouldn't do to have an important marriage voided and his claim to an important sum nullified by some indiscretion of the past. When the proper time came, of course, he would have told Olive of his previous marital mishaps, reassuring her that at last he had found his "one true love."

And there was certainly enough money. Ten million in the Akright family. Five million of it belonging to Olive.

But now Hazel was available!

There might be some people who would say there is little practical difference between five million dollars and ten million dollars. In either case one is rich beyond one's ability to spend. But Geoffrey Grayne was not of this mind. Ten million was twice as desirable as five million. Perhaps more than twice. Perhaps the desirability of millions increased geometrically, not arithmetically.

But how could one avail one's self of two available and willing women with five million each? At first the thought intrigued Geoffrey. Then gradually it began to haunt him.

There was one solution, of course. He hardly dared mention it, in a whisper, even to himself. But Hazel Akright had been thinking in the same direction when she had said, "I'm more delicate than Olive. I probably shan't live as long."

The Akright house—or rather, mansion—in Tanbury left little doubt in Geoffrey Grayne's mind that Hazel Akright had not been exaggerating when she mentioned that the family fortune was all of ten million dollars. The mansion was an immense Tudor affair of perhaps thirty rooms, with vines crawling up the brick walls, bright furniture sprinkles around the flagstone terraces, a pool, a tennis court, a stable, and acres of green lawn.

Inside it was no less grand. There was a baronial great hall, oak paneled, with a fireplace two stories high. Geoffrey fell in love with that room, especially, the moment he entered it. He instantly imagined himself striding up and down its vast length, in boots and imported tweed jacket, and gesturing with his riding crop as he gave butlers and grooms their orders for the day. Squire Grayne! Oh, to be master of such a place. . .

Yes, master. But which sister would he have to marry to become master? That thought occurred to him immediately, and became almost as important a factor in his considerations as the matter of ten million versus five million.

"Geoffrey, how nice you could come." Olive Akright greeted him with a frank, outstretched hand. Though she looked like a Midwest farm girl, she had some of the fine manners of the Continental European.

He took her hand and squeezed it with just the right pressure. "Did you imagine I wouldn't come?" he asked her. "I've been very impatient actually."

"Then you should have come sooner."

"Oh no. Anticipation is a joy in itself."

It was only then that he noticed Hazel. She was standing in a shadowy corner, dwarfed by the huge fireplace. "Hello, Geoffrey Grayne," she called to him out of the gloom.

He walked over to her, and she also extended a hand. It was a smaller hand than Olive's, and hot rather than cool. The heat of her hand startled him, and he let go of it quickly. But some of the same fire was in her eyes as she gazed up at him.

"How have you been amusing yourself the last few days, Geoffrey?"

"I've done absolutely nothing, Hazel."

"An idle mind . . ."

"My mind wasn't exactly idle."

She smiled, and left it at that.

But they were already in a kind of communion. They had established a kind of partnership, though neither had announced as much. And they were in a kind of plot together, though neither had outlined its details.

From that moment on, from that Friday evening and

through the days and evenings that followed it, Geoffrey Grayne played a double game. He courted and schemed with Hazel and he courted and schemed with Olive. But only in the dark and private recesses of his own mind were known the blueprints of the master plan, the plan he'd toyed with in a New York hotel room, but the plan—now that he'd seen the baronial great hall of the Akright mansion—he was determined at least to attempt.

The double game was, of course, new even to him. He'd played the single game before, and was adept at it. He knew for a fact that he could carry off Olive any time he wanted her, Olive and her five million. But ten million. . .the mansion. . .the great hall. . .ah, that was the real prize. And for a man of Geoffrey Grayne's tested mettle, the winning of the prize was just as important, if not more so, as the enjoyment of it.

He courted Olive openly and boldly under Hazel's jealous eye. In stolen moments with Hazel, he assured her that that was the only decent thing he could do, since he had already done similarly on the *Malaguena* and since it had been Olive's invitation he had accepted in coming to Tanbury.

And Hazel was indeed jealous. She showed it to Geoffrey, if not to Olive. Whereas Olive was calm, easy-going, gentle, Hazel was almost fiery. She showed her true nature when she spoke of her dear sister.

"You're marrying her for her money, Geoffrey. Let's don't pretend otherwise. You're marrying an old cow who's content to sit and chew her cud all day. You'll be bored stiff."

But Geoffrey only smiled at his tormentor. "If I'm marrying her for money as you say," he answered, "I'll hardly be bored with five million dollars."

"Then you are after money, aren't you? You're money mad."

"I'm fairly found of the stuff, yes."

"Do you know how Olive would react if she knew that? She'd be horrified. But I don't care. Why don't you marry me, Geoffrey? I've got five million dollars, too."

He stared at her speculatively, and let her see that he was

doing it. "You're very anxious to get married, aren't you?" he asked finally.

"Of course I am. What woman isn't?"

"And for some strange reason, you want to marry me."

She smiled stonily. "Yes, for some strange reason."

He smiled back at her. "But, my dear girl, don't you see that Olive stands in the way?"

"Why should she?"

"Because I'm a civilized man, that's why. Olive has been led to expect—well, to expect something from me. Now if I'd turn around and marry her sister, it would be just too cruel."

Hazel laughed at that. "You wouldn't care whether you're civilized or cruel or what you are, if you could get your hands on five million."

Geoffrey laughed right back. "But, my dear girl," he pointed out, "I can get my hands on five million without being cruel, while remaining quite civilized."

He left her with that thought. He played tennis with Olive, swam with her, rode with her, while Hazel kept mostly to her room with her pills and powders, dosing herself with all kinds of concoctions, pretending she was sick. She did have an illness, of course, but not the kind that would respond to medicines. Her illness was jealousy.

Their next conversation was not as calm, and a little stronger in tone. Hazel caught Geoffrey as he returned from a long walk with Olive around the green acres. She drew him into the conservatory, and they hid among the palms.

"You're having to work hard for your five million," she told him nastily. "Olive never lets you rest for a minute, does she?"

"Five million is worth a little labor," he told her.

"You're a fool."

"Am I? Maybe not as much as you think. But I am ambitious."

"For what? Five million."

"Five million's all right. But I'm out for as much as I can get."

She looked at him narrowly. For the first time he had genuinely surprised her, as she had once surprised him.

"What do you mean?" she asked, just a little unsteadily.

"I mean five million's all right. But there are bigger amounts, too. And as I told you, Hazel, Olive stands in our way."

He hadn't really said anything definite, and yet he had said quite a lot, and boldly. It startled her, but as he had expected, it didn't shatter her. She recovered after a moment, and then her voice was as calm as ever.

"You're more ruthless than I imagined," she said.

"I'm completely ruthless."

"Do you prefer me to Olive?"

"I might."

"And you want to plot with me against Olive?"

"Oh no," he corrected her. "I didn't say that. I'm not going to plot anything with you. I've merely stated a few obvious facts. I'm ambitious. I'm ruthless. I'm also greedy. But I can already have my way, you see. But you can't. You're on the outside, at the moment anyway. So it's your problem. And I'm not going to tell you how to solve it."

Her stare was hateful now. "Olive is my sister," she began. "I'm fond of her."

"So fond that you'd like to steal me away from her."

"Yes, I would. But I don't want to harm her otherwise."

"Then we'll just let things stand as they are, shall we? And please don't ambush me in the halls any more. I'm rather pledged to your sister, you know. And we mustn't have any disloyalty in this house."

He strode past her, out of the conservatory, and back to his room to change into his swimming trunks. But he had accomplished what he'd wanted to accomplish. He'd planted the seed.

If anything further was to be done, as he'd told Hazel, it would have to be her doing. He was gambling enough as things stood already. He was betting five million he had for sure in order to make ten million. But he wasn't going to bet his life by committing murder.

Days passed. By common consent Geoffrey's week end lengthened into a semi-permanent stay. He continued his round of athletic activities with Olive, and their relationship ripened. He knew quite well she was awaiting his proposal

with ever increasing impatience, and that sooner or later, if he did not speak, she would.

For a week he scarcely spoke to Hazel, and never privately. But she caught him, finally, and he let her catch him because he wanted to learn her decision. They conversed in the library, frowned on by the high rows of old Mr. Akright's leather-bound books.

"I've been almost driven out of my mind," Hazel told him. "I have constant headaches, and I can't sleep, and none of my pills can help either situation. It's your fault, Geoffrey. It's that idea you gave me."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that you've thought about it."

"I've thought too much about it. I've even gone so far as to plan how to do it. The balcony outside the windows of Olive's bedroom. It's rather high there, and there's a flagstone terrace underneath. A fall would surely be fatal. And if anybody would be suspected, it would hardly be you, since the fall would be from the bedroom. So you'd be safe. And I don't even see how they could prove that I pushed her. The burden of proof would be on them, not on me."

"Good reasoning," he complimented her, genuinely pleased. "Now when are you going to do it?"

"I'm not."

"You're not!"

"I'm not a murderess to begin with. And Olive's my sister."

"Now you're belaboring the obvious, dear girl."

"I just can't do it, that's all." Suddenly she threw herself at him, twining her arms about his neck, and lifting her face up close to his. Her skin, where it touched his, was hot, as if she had a fever. "But I love you, Geoffrey," she pleaded. "Maybe you don't love me, but at least you prefer me to Olive. I just know you do. Marry me. I have as much money as she does. Marry me. Please, Geoffrey. . .me. . ."

Firmly, and not so gently, he disengaged himself from her, finally pushing her backward so hard that she nearly lost her balance. "All right," he said, "I'll take your word for it that you can't do it. So I don't care even to discuss it any more. Is that clear? It's quits between you and me."

One at a time. He didn't want them both trying to murder

each other simultaneously. But they wouldn't be doing that, he was certain. He'd misjudged Hazel. She didn't have the stuff in her to commit a cold, calculated, deliberate murder, not even for love.

According to his long previously conceived plan, he began working on Olive immediately after he'd failed with Hazel. The ground was already prepared. Olive was anxious for some kind of declaration of love, and he had given her nothing.

And now, instead of giving her that declaration, he propounded a difficulty. "Olive, I've presumed far too much on your hospitality. So I'm off tomorrow, and thank you so much. . ."

"Oh, no," she interrupted. "You mustn't go. You can't. . ." She floundered.

"I can't stay here like a parasite forever," he explained gently.

"But you're not a parasite." The pained look on his face made her stop. She stared at him, trying to guess the cause of that look. "Why should you feel like a parasite? This is such a big house." The look became even more eloquent. "This isn't Hazel's fault, is it?"

Now his look revealed that, even though he was trying to hide the fact, it was indeed Hazel's fault. He turned away.

"Has Hazel made you feel unwelcome here?" Olive demanded.

Now he turned back and confessed his passion, now that the psychologically proper moment had arrived. "She has, yes," he said, "but don't blame her. She sees what has been happening. She sees that I've fallen in love with you. She senses that some day I'll have the courage to ask you to marry me. And who knows what she sees when she thinks about your answer? But her way of life and security is threatened; naturally she's unfriendly to the interloper."

"But I won't allow it!" Olive almost shouted. "I won't allow Hazel to come between us!"

Geoffrey smiled wistfully, sadly. "I'm afraid she's already between us, darling. You're her sister, her only relative. She needs you. This is something that wealth can't alter. Hazel can't buy what she needs from you, love, companionship,

understanding. Oh, not that she gives you any of those things. But she's a sick woman, completely dependent. I don't know, of course, if she needs you more than I do."

"Geoffrey, dearest!" She came toward him, but he sidestepped neatly.

"Where would we live, Olive, if we married? Would we go somewhere else, and leave Hazel all alone in this big house? Or would she have to leave and find some place of her own? Don't you see? Either alternative is equally impossible."

"But, Geoffrey dear, I've already considered that. We would live here, and so would Hazel. This is the Akright home, for both Hazel and me."

He shook his head gently. "That would be the worst solution of all, my darling. Haven't you noticed anything? Hazel is in love with me."

Olive put fingers over her mouth to stop an incipient scream. "No!" she breathed.

"Oh yes. So my coming to live here as your husband would only make Hazel more jealous and unhappy than she is already."

Olive was wringing her hands in anguish now. "What can we do then? What can we do?" "We can't do anything," Geoffrey told her. "It's up to fate."

"Fate?"

"Hazel isn't a well woman. But you know that, of course, darling. And I've noticed her black, despairing moods, too. I'd keep an eye on her if I were you, or she'll do away with herself one of these days. But whatever happens, I'll come to you then, my dear, and I'll comfort you."

It was really a very good beginning.

And how good a beginning it was became evident during the next private conversation he had with Olive. He was on the phone, inquiring about train schedules, when she caught him by the arm and dragged him into the empty echoing great hall. "You were right, Geoffrey. Hazel is in love with you, and she is jealous."

"I told you that," he said.

"How ill do you think she really is?"

"I couldn't say. You should know better than I."

"The doctors say it's mostly her imagination."

"That's sometimes their way of saying an illness is one they don't understand."

"Oh, Geoffrey. . ."

"Yes, darling?"

"I don't want to do an injustice to my sister. And yet I must think of my own happiness, too. I do want to marry you. Do you still want to marry me?"

"More than anything else in the world, Olive."

So he didn't leave on the train that day. At Olive's insistence he stayed and waited. Another half week passed. He was a bit impatient, but confident. Then his confidence was abruptly shattered.

"I simply can't do it, Geoffrey."

At first he couldn't believe the evidence of his ears. Olive was completely infatuated with him. And she saw the problem clearly, that her dear sister was both ill and unhappy. Yet she refused to act!

But he kept up his play-acting, still desperately hopeful. "Of course you can't, my darling. You're such a sweet, gentle soul."

"But I agree, Geoffrey, that it should be done. For Hazel's sake as well as ours. And for Hazel's sake for two reasons. Her jealousy and her poor health. But I just can't bring myself to do it."

"I understand."

"You do it for me, Geoffrey."

"No!"

Almost frightened that she should even suggest such a thing, he turned away from her. And he was a little angry, too. At least Hazel had had the decency not to try to involve him in the murder directly.

If Geoffrey Grayne had not been a gambler by nature, and if he'd not been determined to become sole and absolute master of the Akright mansion, he might have settled for five million and either one of the Akright sisters. Probably Hazel, on the grounds that she was a bit more like himself than Olive was, and as she'd said, probably wouldn't live as long.

And he could always retreat to that position, he felt, of

being satisfied with half a loaf. Meanwhile, it behooved him to make every possible effort to win the double prize.

Accordingly, he announced once again his intention to leave Tanbury. Hazel received the news in sulky silence. Olive was more open in her grief. As they sat together at their luncheon, tears trickled down her healthy round cheeks.

"Where will you be going, Geoffrey?" she asked him.

"I'll probably hop another boat," was his prepared answer. "I won't much care where it happens to be going."

"Is that any solution?"

"It may be. Perhaps I'll meet adventure somewhere."

"Do you mean a woman?"

"Who knows?"

That kind of talk agitated both sisters, but he saw no immediate result. At three the chauffeur would drive him to the station; so right after lunch, he supervised the fellows loading his luggage into the trunk of the limousine.

It was while he was down there in the driveway that the hoped-for, the expected, the inevitable, finally happened. A scream pierced the still afternoon air. Geoffrey recognized the voice. Hazel's.

A moment later another sound followed. The sharp staccato of feminine heels on the pavement of the drive. Then Hazel herself came into view from around the corner, her hair flying, her eyes bulging, her face tragic and frightened. She gave another, quieter scream, and threw herself into Geoffrey's arms.

"It's Olive," she reported brokenly, "must have fallen . . .under her bedroom window. . .on the flagstones. . . bleeding. . .I think she's dead."

Geoffrey left the sobbing Hazel where she was, and together with the chauffeur ran toward the scene of the accident. They found Olive exactly as Hazel had described her, in a shapeless heap beneath the balcony of her bedroom window. And Hazel's diagnosis had been equally accurate. Olive Akright was undoubtedly dead.

While the butler was summoning the Tanbury police, Hazel joined Geoffrey in the great hall. The smile of triumph on her face mirrored a similar feeling in him. He

had gambled and won, and he was as good as master here already.

"You pushed her, of course, Hazel?" he began.

She nodded. There was no remorse in her face. "Yes, it was what you wanted me to do, wasn't it?"

"But you made it quite clear you weren't going to."

"Something happened to change my mind," she said enigmatically.

"Really? What?" He was genuinely puzzled.

"First," she answered, "I want my reward. You've never kissed me, Geoffrey. I think I deserve to be kissed now."

He was only too happy to oblige. He swept Hazel into his arms magnificently, using the technique he had perfected with so many women. Hazel responded flatteringly. She went limp in his arms.

He finished the kiss, then, still holding her, drew away and looked at her. She was quite pale, except for two bright spots burning in her cheeks. He smiled to himself. His love-making was even more skillful than he'd suspected. He should have kissed her before, and she'd have committed murder for him without any delay or argument.

"Are you happy, Geoffrey?" she asked with her eyes still closed. "Happy with your ten million?"

"Ecstatically happy," he told her. "But you haven't told me what changed your mind and made you do it."

She smiled. "I decided when I began to feel the pain."

"Pain? What pain?"

"From the poison Olive fed me at lunch. Then I realized you'd persuaded her to do what you'd failed to make me do." She giggled, and the sound of it came out grotesquely. "Then I didn't feel like a sister to Olive any more at all. I remembered what you'd wanted me to do. To push her off the balcony. So I did it." The giggle came again mocking, diabolical. Then it stopped as the girl in his arms became a dead weight.

The Tanbury police, arriving to have a look at one corpse, found two instead. And also a house guest named Geoffrey Grayne who could do nothing but mumble and stare blankly. Gone mad, they decided. With grief.

It's not the usual practice for an author to be represented in BEST DETECTIVE STORIES *by more than one story—unless a second one goes in through the back door under a pseudonym.*

But this year I can't resist publishing side by side two stories by Michael Zuroy. I believe you'll agree that I've exercised good judgment after you've read them both.

Michael Zuroy

HOW MUCH TO KILL?

"SO THIS IS IT," said Sam Tuttle, the public-relations man, casting diagnostic eyes over the development. From the road off which Cummins' car was parked they had walked about a half-mile into the property. "This is the dream stuff you want me to tout. A piece of Florida at a low, low price. Anybody can afford to be a landowner now. Take that first step towards independence and retirement. What's wrong with the deal, Sheldon? What's your gimmick?"

The unassailable dignity of Sheldon Cummins' square-cut face did not change, but he attempted no pretense with Tuttle; Tuttle had worked for him before. He merely replied, "That concern you, Sam?"

"It does. I'd like to know what kind of trouble I might get into."

"It's not too bad. Not bad at all. Nice-looking property, wouldn't you say? I've got roughly two thousand acres in here, mostly level, crossed by babbling brooks, dotted with charming little ponds, off a good U.S. highway, a short ride to beaches, resort areas, shopping towns and industry. Ideal location and a clear title; every buyer gets an ironclad deed. Minimum plot is one-eighth acre. Streets, as you see, are marked out."

Tuttle bent his head to let some of the rain water spill from his hat brim. For several days the weather had been unsettled, vacillating between fine drizzles and heavy downpours. The rain was falling harder now. Still fairly dry in their raincoats, the two men stepped beneath the shelter of a tree. Tuttle glanced at the occasional rough signs projecting from the brush and tall grass. The closest sign read, "Beachcomber Drive."

"Picturesque," observed Tuttle. "Who wouldn't want to live on that street? You going to actually build the streets, Sheldon?"

"Hell, no. I've had them surveyed and marked. That's it."

"Maybe some day the town that collects the taxes will build them, eh? Maybe some day next century, after a fat assessment. But meanwhile the streets are neatly drawn on your plot maps. Let the buyer beware. Well, that doesn't throw me, Sheldon, but I think there's more to your gimmick than that."

"Why so?"

"I look at it like this," said Tuttle. "Here's two thousand acres of good-looking land in one of Florida's more desirable locations. Empty. No buildings, no improvements on it. There are a lot of legitimate real-estate developers in Florida—if you'll pardon the distinction. Some of them sell mail-order. But none of them have touched this parcel, and they haven't just overlooked it. You picked it up for next to nothing, if I guess right. Something's extra special wrong about this land. What is it?"

Cummins looked at Tuttle, his thick eyebrows crawling a little closer to each other, like caterpillars. It wasn't Tuttle's curiosity he disliked as much as his attitude. He never had liked Tuttle, he remembered. For an instant he toyed with the idea of booting Tuttle off his property, but his keenly developed acumen as to his own self-interests stopped him. He needed the younger man right now. He needed favorable publicity. He didn't know another public-relations man as competent and as unscrupulous as Tuttle, and anyone who would take on this job would have to be unscrupulous.

There was a lot of money involved here. This was the

biggest operation he had ever promoted—by far. It was so big that it frightened him. No one would guess that under his distinguished front beat a frightened heart, but it was true. He was far out of his league—and alone. He didn't think there was anything as lonely as manipulating a million-dollar operation by yourself. Or as worrying.

How he worried! He'd worried every step of the way, over even the smallest decision, over every cent he'd put out. It would be a miracle if he came out of this without an ulcer.

But if things worked out he'd be a millionaire, actually a millionaire. The stake was worth the grief. If things went wrong, he was through. Everything he had and could raise was in this venture.

He said, "Sam, it's been raining a while now. Look there, at that wash coming along that little gully. Look beyond it, there's another one, and another one. Look there, at that brook. Notice how wide and rapid it's become? This is a flood basin, Sam."

Tuttle nodded comprehendingly. "Thought it was something like that."

"Ninety-five percent of the year this area's all right. The rest of the time it's flooded. You can't put a house on this property. The rains hit the hills, miles of them, and they all drain into this basin. Looks like Niagara Falls when the run-off is heavy. Flash floods hit every now and then."

Tuttle swiveled to face Cummins. "Hadn't we better get out of here then? I've read about these flash floods. Read where only a little while back a fellow in a car was swept off a road and drowned."

"Relax," said Cummins. "I know this property. There's a little ridge crossing it from the road, no more than fifty feet wide at best. It's the only ground that never gets flooded. You could hardly tell, but we're standing on it now. We're safe enough. There's even an old shack the surveyors have been using not far along the ridge."

"All right." Tuttle's sharp face went thoughtful. "So what are you asking for one of your damp-dry eighth-acre plots?"

"One hundred dollars."

Tuttle nodded. "Doesn't sound like much. Let's see, two

thousand acres at eight hundred an acre. . .” He whistled softly. “Better than a million and a half dollars!”

“Don’t forget the streets, Sam.”

“O.K. Subtract the streets. Subtract your land investment and all your expenses. Subtract say two hundred thousand give or take fifty all told. You’re still way over a million.”

Cummins said, “And capital gains taxes?”

“You ought to still clear over a million.”

Cummins again repressed his irritation with Tuttle. He lit a cigar. “You through figuring my deal, Sam?”

“Yes, I’m through. And in answer to your implied question, yes I’m interested. I don’t foresee trouble. It’s not too much of a swindle.”

“No swindle, Sam,” said Cummins slowly. “The customer gets the land. Maybe it’s a little shock when he finds out he can’t build on it, but he still owns the land. He’s only put a hundred dollars in it. He can pitch a tent in nice weather and go hunting or fishing. He can talk about his Florida property. Maybe some day a flood-control job will happen around here, and then the property will really be valuable.”

Tuttle snorted. “Flood control! I wouldn’t want to hold my breath until. But it’s not too bad a swindle, Sheldon. What do you want me to do?”

The rain turned abruptly into a heavy cascade that gushed through the foliage that had been sheltering them. “We’ll be drenched!” yelled Tuttle. “Let’s get back to the car.”

“Too far in this rain. The shack’s a lot closer. Come on.”

The two men pounded along the ridge, the hissing torrent driving through their raincoats in seconds. The shack showed up, and Cummins fiddled with the lock and they burst in.

The shack had once been used as a dwelling and contained several rooms in one of which the surveyors had stored some equipment. The floors sagged and were covered with dust, dried mud and wood debris, and the walls leaned, but the roof still managed to shed water, and the men took off their wet coats and hung them on a couple of the nails that bristled from the walls. They were silent a while, listening to the fury of the downpour, strumming on the roof shingles as it swept across, slapping at the crusted window

panes and leaving flowing streams of water that obscured the outside.

"We're liable to see some flooding before this is over," said Cummins. "But, to go on with our business, all I want from you, Sam, is a good press, and I mean nationwide. Most of this land is going to be sold mail-order. Sure, some buyers will come in person, but the odds are they'll see the property at its best, and for a hundred dollar investment they won't be doing much investigating. Mainly, it's the advertising campaign that'll be doing the sell, so it's got to be top-flight, and believe me, it is. It's wrapped up now, all set to go, waiting for the word from me. We ran a couple of test ads, and the percentage was pretty.

"But advertising needs support to gain public confidence. You know how it is, Mr. Doakes reads our ad and sits there dreaming how phenomenal the offer is, if he could believe it. Then he starts forgetting it, and turns some pages, and surprise, right before his eyes is a dignified little news article on our beautiful development. That does it. Doakes has learned to trust us. He digs for his money. That's where you come in, Sam. I want those dignified little articles."

"Can do," said Tuttle. "How much?"

"Five thousand now, two payments of ten thousand each as the work progresses."

"Not enough." Tuttle's reaction was automatic. "That's only twenty-five thousand. I'll take fifty."

Cummins glared. "Don't try to hold me up, Tuttle. The job's not worth that much. It's no sweat for you and I know it. I'm offering you more than enough."

"A job with a smell costs more. Let's hear another offer."

Cummins' resentment began to boil. Tuttle was a nasty little profiteer and a wise-guy to boot. If there were any handy alternative, he'd tell him off. He needed Tuttle all right, but he didn't appreciate being black-jacked, and maybe some day he could return the favor. Meanwhile, he forced himself to dissemble.

The bickering went on, seeming as endless almost as the hard driving rain, but at last they agreed on a figure of thirty-seven thousand. When it was settled, they grew impatient to get back to Cummins' car, but the rain refused to

let up, so they waited, until finally there came an abrupt cessation of its violence. Through the windows they saw the sky lighten a very little, and the sound outside changed to a delicate unsteady patter. They were donning their raincoats when the new sound began.

"My God!" said Tuttle. "What's that?"

It was a far-off roar that rushed rapidly and irresistibly, swelling as it came until it had grown to a frightening thunder that seemed to submerge and surround them, holding interminably, finally to lessen to a huge rustling.

Cummins watched Tuttle's paling face maliciously. He didn't feel too comfortable himself, but it was good to watch the man fighting against panic. "Flash flood," he explained at last.

"Well then, let's get the hell out of here! What are we waiting for?"

"According to my information this ridge has never been under water. This shack's been standing here a good fifty years, so we should be all right. Let's take a look."

The men went out, took a few steps and halted. The narrow strip of dry land which was the ridge still meandered before them, but everything else on either side was under water. It was as though they were standing within a restless lake across the surface of which white, foaming streams still rushed down from the heights.

"My God," repeated Tuttle. "And this is what you're selling! What makes it come so fast?"

"Same principle as a rolling snowball. Water flows together as it descends from a thousand different sources." Cummins headed back along the ridge, but unhurriedly, aware that Tuttle was still afraid, savoring and prolonging Tuttle's fear. Tuttle could not give up his dignity and run; he had to stick with this pace.

Therefore it was quite some time before the two men reached a view of what had happened out on the water.

Cummins saw it first, his suddenly rigid back bringing Tuttle to his side. Cummins' immediate reaction was that of a surprised bystander, but then the implications grew clear and a sick feeling pushed into his middle. Why? he thought. Why right now?

"Looks like kids!" Tuttle was shouting in his ear. "Two boys."

The figures stood a couple of hundred feet across the turbulent water on what had been a knoll, except that it was now about a foot under. The water raced and splashed over the boys' knees as they hung on to some brush. They began waving and calling frantically at sight of the men.

"How soon'll the water go down?" yelled Tuttle.

Cummins looked at him grimly, and pointed at the white streams still roaming over the lake, breaking into spray where they divided around the trees that rose from the flood. "Still going up."

"The kids will drown. We've got to get help."

Cummins grabbed Tuttle's arm. The blind fool, he thought. Doesn't he understand? "No time. It's up to us. The surveyors keep some line in the shack. Let's get it." He turned and ran heavily, aware that after a pause Tuttle followed.

When the line was secured and fastened to a tree at a point opposite the marooned boys, Cummins rapidly stripped. Tuttle eyed him with a peculiar expression. "You really going in, Sheldon?"

"What the hell does it look like?"

"I take my hat off to you. I didn't think you had it in you. I wouldn't step into that torrent for anything."

Cummins looped the line around his waist and ungracefully splashed into the flood. He gasped at the cold shock and struck into the turbulence. His muscles felt the strain at once and water surged into his nostrils. He was only a fair swimmer and he was too heavy but he forced his arms alternately ahead with savage persistence until it seemed that he had been swimming a very long time. Then he looked up and was stunned to discover that he had lost ground. The travelling water had moved him below the boys, although he was some distance from the ridge.

Cursing his stupidity in not allowing for the flow, he turned back, gained the ridge and flopped upon the ground, gasping, waiting until his breathing had slowed, paying no attention to Tuttle's talk.

When he was ready he plunged in again a good distance

above his first position. He noted that the boys were now submerged almost to their waists. He had to get them out on this try.

He swam powerfully, but tried to avoid haste, to conserve his strength. Soon his eyes lost all sight but that of the plunging water which struck at his face. There was no sound in his ears but the rushing and roaring of water.

While his body fought for its life, steadily losing power against the tireless water, his mind grew curiously calm and detached, as though this diminished world in which he struggled could make no demands upon it. Was he being a fool, he wondered? His mind deliberately weighed this, while he admired the clarity of his thinking. He had come to the fork in the road, his mind told him. He had rejected the easy path that led to—nothing. It was now all out, and nothing suffered to block him, even the risk of his own life. He was not being a fool.

Now it seemed impossible that he could lift each arm one more time. He was out past the edge of endurance, almost past the edge of consciousness, but the thought held fast: those kids must not drown.

He made it, of course, that single-minded purpose driving him to his object. After he dropped his feet onto the knoll, he fastened the line to the sturdiest and highest limbs he could find among the brush, praying that it would hold. He sized up the kids quickly and sent the larger and huskier of the two back along the line by himself.

He waited until he was sure the kid was making it, then started the other one off, staying right with him. Twice the force of the water began to tear the boy off the rope, but Cummins grabbed him and held him, bulling him along until he regained his grip.

"Why, you're a hero, a blasted hero," Tuttle told him when the boys were safe on the ridge, sitting huddled together, resting. "That was a fine thing to do, Sheldon."

Cummins regarded him contemptuously, and swiveled his head to make sure the boys were out of hearing range. "Save your praise, Sam," he said. "I did it for only one reason—a million dollars."

"Clear that up, will you."

"You slipping, Sam? You can't be that dense. Suppose the two little punks drowned on my property. That's news, isn't it? Headline news a lot of places. The national papers would carry something on it. Florida Flash Flood Drowns Two Youngsters in Real Estate Development. I might as well fold up and steal away after that. Nobody would pay a dime for this property. You don't think I want to spend my declining years selling insurance, do you?"

Tuttle bowed satirically. "Forgive me for misjudging you. Ever the promoter, eh Sheldon? As a public-relations man the aspect you mention should have occurred to me, but I was too concerned about the boys' danger. Foolish of me. I must be, as you say, slipping."

"Now, this way," went on Cummins, "it doesn't matter too much if the boys chatter about what happened. A close shave is hardly news. Oh, it might make a local paper or two, but that's about all. The kids are alive, that's the main thing. Corpses we don't need around here."

"I admire your logic," said Tuttle. He glanced at Cummins meditatively. "You'd do anything for money, wouldn't you, Sheldon?"

"For enough money. Like anybody else. Don't you go superior on me, Sam, we're all the same, all of us humans. The only difference is the price. Everybody has their price, five hundred, five thousand or five million. For me a million does it. I'd do anything for a million. You didn't jump in after those boys because there was only thirty-five thousand in it for you. Not enough."

"Plus the fact that I can't swim."

The rain began to patter down more strongly again, and Cummins looked worriedly over at the boys. Couldn't have them contracting pneumonia either; had to get them under shelter. They'd return to the shack.

When they were all inside the old building, Cummins regarded the youngsters keenly. They seemed to be about fifteen or sixteen years old, neither too well built although one was slightly taller. The taller one had a broad jaw, open blue eyes and freckles. The other was spindly-looking with sharp features and a narrow head and a weak button of a chin. His eyes seemed perpetually half-closed and flat.

"We want to thank you again for pulling us out of there, Mister," said the spindly one. He said it reluctantly, as though grudging the necessity.

"That's all right, that's all right," returned Cummins genially. "As long as you kids are safe. Where you from?"

"New York." The boy pulled up a leg of his worn jeans and scratched casually.

"New York. That's a long way off. What are you doing all the way down here?"

"Seeing the country."

"Where are your folks?"

The boy jerked a thumb at his companion. "Joe there, he doesn't have any. Mine are still in New York, I guess."

"You guess? What did you do, run away?"

The boy shrugged. "Nothing to run away from. The old man's a booze hound. My old lady, well let's forget her. They ain't missing me."

"What's your name?"

The boy's grin was almost a snarl. "Elias. Elias Smith. That's Joe Jones over there."

"Oh, come on!"

The boy nodded his head vigorously, grinning. "Sure, that's us. Smith and Jones. Jones and Smith." He laughed.

"Now don't get smart," said Cummins heavily. "What were you doing on this property?"

"Sight-seeing."

"I'm losing my patience," said Cummins.

"Well, for Chris-sake, what do you want, a big fancy story? We turned in off the road to sleep last night, that's all. Say, what are you, a cop or somethin', Mister?"

"No, I'm not a cop, I'd just like to know."

"Hey, he's just nosy," said the other boy.

The spindly one cackled. "Sure, nosy. So this is what happened, nosy. We couldn't stay dry account of the rain, so in the morning we walked in a ways looking for a better spot. We found one and settled down and all of a sudden there was this wall of water, looked about ten foot high coming down on us. Joe and me, we got to that little hill. The other guy didn't make it."

The silence stretched while Cummins absorbed the words.

"What other guy?" he asked slowly, at last.

"The other guy, the other guy. Herb, the other buddy. The water caught him."

"There were three of you? You're telling me that there were three of you?"

The boy appealed to Tuttle. "Hey, has this lad got all his marbles? Ain't I just finished tellin' him there was another guy?"

Suddenly Cummins struck the boy a back-handed blow across the cheek that sent him sprawling. "Enough of your sass. Talk straight, now. What happened to the third boy?"

The boy who called himself Smith lay on the floor as he had fallen, his eyes growing flatter and more heavy-lidded. He did not appear otherwise angered or surprised at the blow; he appeared used to blows. He said softly, "I guess Herb got drowned. That straight enough for you? Anything else you want to know?"

This was too much, Cummins thought. After all he'd been through, to end up with a drowning on his hands was too much. "Let's take a look around," he said to Tuttle dully. "You boys wait. We'll be back."

The men walked the ridge carefully, not speaking, watching the water and the ragged water line along the ridge. After a while they came upon it, as Cummins had known they would. It was a soaked blob of denims, and when Cummins turned it over with his foot, there was the young drowned face.

"Pity," said Tuttle.

"Yes, a pity," said Cummins bitterly, not meaning it the same way.

After a silence, Tuttle said, "I guess this blows your million all right."

Cummins was thinking hard. "I don't think I'm through yet, Sam." His mouth worked. "Suppose nobody finds out about this drowning?"

The two men stared at each other, each working out this line of thought in his own way.

"We bury the body in the muck," Cummins went on. "It'll never turn up. The kid was a nobody, like the other two. The chances are there'll never be any inquiry made after the

little bum. There isn't anybody gives a damn about kids like these or knows where they are. So another drifter disappears."

"You want me to keep quiet?"

"That's right."

"For a price?"

"That's right. You got a price, Sam."

Tuttle nodded. "Certainly I have. You know me that well, Sheldon. How much?"

"Seventy thousand."

Tuttle whistled. "Just for keeping my mouth shut. Well, well. It's tempting, but risky. What about the other two boys?"

"I admit that's a weak point. I was thinking we could give them some money and a couple of tickets out of the state."

Tuttle shook his head slowly. "No good. They can talk wherever they are. Sooner or later those boys are going to run foul of the police. How do you know what they'll say then? No, Sheldon, the story's too apt to come out."

Cummins looked at him broodingly.

"Count me out," Tuttle said regretfully. "It's a nice piece of change, but I don't want to be accused of hiding a body. Besides, if the story came out it would really queer your little deal, wouldn't it?"

"I agree with you, Sam," Cummins said in a strained voice. "It won't do. But there's another way to make sure the boys won't talk."

Tuttle grinned. "Oh, sure, we can. . ." But then he saw Cummins' eyes, and the grin died.

"Yes," said Cummins, "there's another way."

"Now don't be fantastic, Sheldon."

"Fantastic! I tell you, Sam, this means a million dollars to me. One million dollars! For that price I'll do it."

"Forget it, will you. You don't think for one moment I'd go along?"

"You've got a price for this too, Sam."

"Not for this."

"Less than an hour's work, Sam. Two lousy little bums. They're no use to themselves or anybody else anyway. We'd be doing society a favor. We could plant the three of them

so deep in the muck they might as well have vanished into thin air. Nobody's going to bother wondering about them. Hell, they'd be dead right now if I hadn't rescued them. So I made a mistake. I'll just correct that mistake."

"I wish you'd stop talking this way."

"What's the price, Sam? Two hundred thousand?"

"I admit I've pulled some shady stunts in my time," said Tuttle, "but I stop short at murder, at any price. Now cut it out, Sheldon. You're not a murderer and you know it."

"You're absolutely right," replied Cummins. "I have no desire to murder anybody. It makes me sick to think about it. But I'm telling you again, Sam, for this much money I'll kill. How about three hundred thousand?"

"Look, Sheldon, why don't you simmer down? Forget it, and I'll see what I can do about squashing the story."

Cummins shook his head. "There's nothing you can do or you would have mentioned it before. A kid drowned in a flood in a big real estate development? That story won't squash once it gets out. I'm convinced this is the only way. Don't try holding me up, Sam, I'm warning you. I'll go four hundred thousand and that's my limit. Are you going to accept it?"

"No."

"All right, Sam," said Cummins softly. "I gave you your chance." He raised his powerful hands and placed them on Tuttle's throat. Tuttle tried to jerk back, but the hands tightened. "You're crazy, Sheldon," Tuttle yelled and swung his fist against Cummins' head, but the blow seemed to make no impression.

Cummins began to squeeze, ignoring the man's struggles, and slowly Tuttle sank to his knees and his back arched, so that Cummins had to bend over him while he squeezed. Cummins went to his own knees to ease the uncomfortable position. After a while he took his hands away and rose to his feet and Tuttle's body collapsed on the ground.

It was the only solution, Cummins thought. It might be taking a chance, but he had chosen to go all out and he would have to accept the risk. He estimated that the odds were with him. Tuttle was a lone wolf, and since this job was on the shady side it was unlikely that he had discussed

it with anyone. He had no car here; he had arrived by plane. It would simply be a case of a man disappearing, a man whose connection with himself would remain private. If ever questioned he would give the proper answers. It would occur to no one to search this property, and in any case, Tuttle's body would never be found.

Next, the boys. Unfortunately, he had no weapon with him, but if necessary he would take care of them with his bare hands also. However, he seemed to remember something about the surveyor's supplies. He knitted his brow, trying to visualize. Yes, he remembered. There was an ax.

He decided on his course of action. When he entered the shack he would walk casually to the storeroom and get the ax. They would be unsuspecting, so that he could kill at least one of them without a struggle. After that, the ax would make short work of the other, even if he tried to fight.

Cummins reached the shack, opened the door and stepped in.

The kids were sitting on the floor, backs against the wall. "Hey!" said the skinny one. "Look who's here." He rose, grinning sarcastically and sidled over to Cummins. "Where's the other fellow?"

"He won't be back," Cummins said shortly. "Had some business."

The last thing Cummins saw was the knife the kid pulled. . .

When the body was still, the boy began going through the pockets. "I don't know if you shudda knocked him off," the taller boy said doubtfully.

"Why not? Looks well-heeled, don't he?"

"Yeah, but after all he saved our hides."

"Because he was a dope. If he wasn't a dope he wouldn't have got it now. That's what I keep tellin' you, don't be a dope. He rubbed me the wrong way anyhow." The boy came up with a fat wallet and cackled. He counted the money and looked up, his flat eyes taking on a glitter. "Two hundred and thirty-eight dollars," he said, awe creeping into his voice. "It was worth knocking him off. Jeez, for that much money I'd knock off anybody."

Now for a delightful change of pace. Of all the stories in this volume I honestly believe this one pleases me most.

I'm not going to say any more about it because I want you to savor it fully, and discover the charm of it for yourself.

Michael Zuroy

RETRIBUTION

"YOU'RE QUITE SURE?"

The president of the Chowder Falls National Bank stared unwaveringly at the auditor, his face expressionless. He was a large man whose features and bald head seemed formed out of one solid chunk of stone, unsoftened by the rigidly brushed and trimmed hair at the sides. The neat nameplate on the desk before him said in black and gold letters: Augustus Prescott, President.

"Quite sure," said Mr. Tunney, the auditor, matching Prescott's unemotional tone.

"Your figures show that something over forty thousand dollars is missing?"

"Exactly forty thousand, two hundred and eleven dollars," said Tunney, as though reading from a balance sheet. Tunney was a crisp, spare man with cool eyes behind rimless glasses. One could not picture him in anything but rimless glasses.

There was a silence. When Prescott spoke again, it was with a heavy deliberateness, as though he intended to make absolutely certain of one point before going on to the next. "Your audit also proves that one of our tellers, Robert Dorp, took the money?"

"That's right."

"There's no question about it?"

"None."

"Seems to me," said Prescott, "a difficult thing for an

audit to pinpoint the crook. Is that evidence conclusive enough to stand up in a court of law?"

"Absolutely." Tunney left his seat alongside Prescott's desk and strode to a long table, on which were spread out ledgers, balance sheets and work sheets. "These figures prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that the shortage originated with Dorp. Any C.P.A. in the country would agree with that."

"I don't want to prosecute the man unless we're certain."

"I repeat, this evidence is indisputable."

Prescott let out a weighty sigh, crossed the office and opened the door slightly so that the two men could look out at the banking floor. Dorp was at his cage several windows down, serving a woman depositor, smiling pleasantly. He was tall and lean with dark hair that held a trace of a curl.

"Fine-looking man," said Prescott.

"Yes. Attractive to the ladies."

Prescott and Tunney exchanged glances. "Too damn attractive," said Prescott.

Both men fell silent, wrapped up in their own thoughts. After a while, Tunney asked, "How's your daughter?"

"Eh? Oh, coming along, thanks."

"She still doesn't realize that you know?"

"She doesn't and never will, if I can help it. They call me a hard man, Tunney, but I'm soft when it comes to my daughter. I'd never hurt her—and I'd make anyone who tried to hurt her sorry."

"I'm sure," said Tunney. "By the way, how did you find out?"

"She confided in a girl friend of hers. The friend thought I ought to know."

"You are not one to advertise your feelings, "said Tunney, "but I know how you felt. I know that you worship the child."

"Don't get me wrong," said Prescott savagely. "I wouldn't stand in her way when the proper time comes and the proper person. I don't go for this father antagonism towards the lover, and I don't expect her to remain a virgin child forever. But she's barely sixteen now, and not ready for life. What happened to her was just a rotten seduction."

"Do you think she sees it that way?"

"I think she's beginning to feel that. There's a humiliated, shamed look about her. She's hurt. I think she's feeling that she's been used and discarded. You know the romantic illusions of a young girl. Instead of the adoring prince her lover's turned out to be a rutting goat that stayed for a few encounters and has gone looking for other females in heat."

Tunney nodded sympathetically. "She'll get over it. Time, you know."

"At her age it'll leave an emotional scar." Prescott lit a cigar and brooded over the smoke for a while. Then he shook his head, as though to shake the thing from his mind, and inquired of Tunney, "How's the wife?"

"Oh, all right, I suppose. She's at her mother's."

"Yes, of course."

"I don't feel that I want her at home just now."

"Yes."

"Give us both a chance to calm down, you see."

"What are your intentions?"

"I suppose I'll take her back. I think I can forgive her in view of her attitude."

"Oh?"

"Yes, she begged me for another chance. Swore that this was a temporary insanity, that the scoundrel was so persuasive that she couldn't help herself. She's considerably younger than I am, of course, and hot-blooded. But she claims she loves me and has never been unfaithful to me before, and never will again if I take her back."

"I see. And how did you find out?"

"I walked in on them."

"A shock, eh?"

"You can imagine. I'd finished an out-of-town audit unexpectedly soon, and decided not to stay away another night. It was a long drive home, and well past midnight when I arrived. I didn't want to disturb Ann so I was quiet. I was about to step through the bedroom door when I realized what kind of sounds I was hearing. I couldn't believe it. I waited, listening to the relentless sounds and to Ann's soft crying which I hear all too seldom myself. My eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, and the moonlight came

through the window. I saw Ann's naked form and glazed eyes and bared teeth. I saw the man's lithe, animal body, and in that instant I admit I envied him his youth and strength. It was only afterwards that I grew furious.

"I didn't know what to do. I backed away and left. I'd seen the man's face clearly in the moonlight, and I decided I could take measures later. Ann, of course, I sent packing the next day."

"And so he remains unaware of your knowledge?"

"Yes."

A long silence ensued. Finally, Tunney broke it. "What do you intend to do with the whip now?"

"The cat-o-nine tails? Keep it as a curio."

Tunney grimaced. "Nasty-looking thing. You could kill a man with it."

Prescott permitted himself a frosty smile. "Yes, I could. However—what about your gun?"

"I'm getting rid of that. I won't have any use for it now, any more than you'll have for that whip."

"In my opinion," said Prescott slowly, "it's extremely fortunate that we happened to begin exchanging confidences over a drink. Had we not uncovered the similarity of our situations, one of us would be in trouble now."

"Yes, and awful trouble. I would hate to be facing a murder charge."

"It's much better this way."

"Much better. Do you think he suspects anything?"

"Not a thing."

"Yes, he's a handsome fellow," said Tunney. "Real ladies' man."

"Well, let's get on with it." Prescott took a key from his pocket and unlocked the bottom drawer of the desk. He brought up two packages of currency and two shiny half-dollars. "That adds up to your figure. Twenty thousand, one hundred and five dollars apiece in bills, and a half-dollar apiece to make up the odd dollar."

The men pocketed the money.

Prescott said, "Once more, you're positive you've set up the audit to prove Dorp guilty beyond a doubt? No loopholes?"

"None whatsoever. These figures are incontestable. Remember my standing."

"Fine." Prescott puffed at his cigar. "Personally, I think he's getting off easy. I think we're being pretty fair."

"Under the circumstances I think we're being very fair."

"Well, might as well call the police."

He reached for the phone.

Theodore Sturgeon is better known to the reading public for his memorable and delightful stories of fantasy and science-fiction, but when he does turn to the mystery field it is cheering news to detective story fans.

As you read this story you'll know that Ted had fun writing it—something that happens too seldom when an author sits down in front of his typewriter.

Theodore Sturgeon

HOW TO KILL YOUR AUNTY

THE OLD LADY SAID admiringly, "Little devil," which was odd, because she detested squirrels, especially when they were after the birdseed and suet set out on the feeder. Birds make a great deal of difference to the bedridden. Yet now she found herself relenting. "Oh, but you *have* got a brain in your head," she murmured, for the squirrel, after two futile attempts to climb out to the feeder, was making for the slender branches directly above it.

Squirrels she detested, physical sloppiness, rice pudding, greed, advertising (especially TV commercials, of which she saw a great many), dull-wittedness and Hubert. Hubert, her nephew, was not a dish of rice pudding nor a squirrel, but he embodied everything else on the list that she abhorred.

Partly, at least.

Maybe that was it, she thought, admiring the detestable squirrel. Right down the line, from how Hubert looked to what he did. He was an assistant producer for a TV commercial packager. That is, he was its general factotum, bottle-washer, squeezer of shaving-cream onto whipped-cream desserts, source of *yes-sirs* for all the business and all the talent. Hubert was what she detested—partly.

That squirrel now, she thought, leaning out, and reaching up over the bed for the brass handle which swung there; that squirrel is *all* squirrel—the pretty, speedy little criminal. Letting her weight come on the handle, the old lady reached

for the loop of quarter-inch rope which hung from a brass fairlead sunk into the window frame. Holding it carefully, she worked her way back to the center of the bed, let go of the brass handle, and sat alertly watching the scene outside.

At the very instant the admirable, damnable squirrel dropped from the tree branches toward the feeding deck, the old lady pulled on the cord. And the feeder, sliding up its guy wires, moved out from under the animal, which snatched vainly at it, then hurtled down spraddle-legged to the lawn. It bounced like a rubber toy, then scampered angrily away, its tail drawing exact trajectories of each long bound, it legs a weaving blur of movement.

A little out of breath, the old lady swore cheerfully at it and released the rope, so that the feeder slid back to its resting place among the outer shoots of the birch tree. Like certain other devices around the place, the feeder was her deft idea and Hubert's ham-handed workmanship. There again, she reflected. He wasn't altogether three-thumbed. He *could* turn out a job of work. But he got things right only by trying every wrong way first.

She shuddered at the memory of the weeks of bullyragging she had put him through to get anything done. Anyway, the device worked, and could be drawn up to her window every morning to be filled.

She glanced at the clock and put her hand under her pillow for the remote control switch of the television. She saw a lot of television, and, unabashedly, she enjoyed it. Especially now. She enjoyed this particular television set even when it wasn't turned on. Hubert was trying to kill her with this television set, and she was knocking herself out trying to help him.

This was a totally different project from any bird-feeder. That had been done by nag and prod. The TV operation was far more subtle; suggestion, planned convenience, and an imitated stupidity on her part which Hubert was too stupid to know was imitated.

Hubert had first tried to kill her—oh, a long time ago now. It was because of Susie Karina. Well, perhaps there were other things, going back years, but Susie had brought it to a head. Susie was a housemaid, and like a fool the old

lady had let her live in, never dreaming that Hubert would make a fool of himself over any woman, but that if he did, it wouldn't be Susie.

Well, she'd been wrong about that. The old lady was never wrong about money or pulleys or birds or bonds or timing-gears. But in the course of her long and lively life she had bypassed the intricacies of this thing that seems to be going on between men and women all the time.

It was the one area where she could guess wrong, and she certainly had done so this time. Susie was a small, downcast, black-banged little thing with biteable lips and heart full of greed.

The old lady was not quite as wrong about Hubert. Ordinarily he wouldn't have dared to raise his hat to a doxie on a desert island, so certain was he of his unfailing unattractiveness to women. But neither he nor his aunt reckoned on Susie's barbarous ability to slide out of the camouflage and light fires with damp fuel.

The affair had actually gone on for months, right in her house, right under her nose. Hubert was so benumbed by the experience that even this intimate aunt could not evaluate the change in him. He did not begin to stay out nights, nor sit and moon any more than he usually did, and there were no financial flurries at all. Susie simply set her sights higher than her hat, even a new one—set them with cold calculation.

The old lady, of course, did not know this, even after the silent discovery and quiet excision of the menace. It was quite by accident that she glanced down the stairwell at half-past two one morning and saw her nephew emerging from, of all places, the dining room, and of all things—blowing kisses into it.

The old lady slipped back into the shadows and had ample opportunity to watch Hubert ascend, grinning fatuously and carrying not only his shoes but his underwear. He passed the thunderstruck watcher all unknowing and entered his room and shut the door, whereupon his aunt, a spry old girl and very fast on her feet, dusted down the stairs like a wind-blown oat-straw and appeared in the dining room door.

Four wide solid ancient chairs were placed side by side on the heavy rug, and at the near end of the row hung a dark blouse and a white brassiere. At the far end, for one brief second full of shock and scorching hate, stood Susie Karina, clad in the skirt which matched the blouse. The faint glow from the tiny night-light in the hall was enough to photograph the scene for both of them forever.

Susie melted backwards into the black shadows and disappeared. Without hesitation the aunt followed—it was the butler's pantry—and shot the heavy bolt on the dining room side. She then stepped round to the kitchen and locked the other pantry door. Not a word was spoken; save for the snicking of the bolts, there was no sound.

The aunt made the rounds downstairs, being sure that everything was locked up tight—except for the pantry window, which opened easily into the wide wide world. And then, taking the garments from the dining room between thumb and forefinger and holding them not quite at arm's length, she took them to the maid's quarters where she briskly and neatly packed all of the girl's possessions.

She secured, from the wall safe, two weeks' wages, added that to the luggage, and strapped it up. She took it to the kitchen, unlocked the back door, set the two suitcases upon and between the garbage cans, went inside, locked up and went to bed.

She did not know women, but she did know Hubert, and she knew Susie knew Hubert, and that Hubert's reaction to any scene, any emergency, would be blindly to do as he was told, and not by Susie. How long it took Susie to ponder this out she was never to know. But that Susie got the message was clear the next morning when the aunt looked out and saw the luggage gone.

Hubert still healthily slept. The aunt prepared breakfast and then called him commandingly. When, yawning and yapping, he entered the dining room, she said, "Put the chairs back, Hubert."

Hubert looked once into the kitchen, once at the spectacle of his aunt carrying a tray, and then the blood drained from his face. He put the chairs back. He sat on one. He ate his breakfast.

Actually the only thing that was ever said directly about the episode was said two nights later, when, after dinner, he rose casually and sauntered out to the hall tree where his hat hung. His aunt then spoke: "A private detective will follow you wherever you go. He reports to Mr. Silverstein."

Now it happened that Mr. Silverstein, who was the lawyer who changed bequests in wills and all that, was also the silent and controlling partner in the advertising agency in which Hubert had just then begun.

Hubert paused. His wage was small and his address excellent. His expenses were almost nothing and his comfort considerable. His ability to provide these things—or anything at all—for himself was negligible. He left his hat where it was and went upstairs without a word. In due course they retired for the night.

Now it must be said that up to this point the old lady's actions had most genuinely been motivated by concern for Hubert. He could certainly not pursue his career properly in a town this size in such company as Susie Karina, even if the arrangement were legitimized. He had too much going against him as it was. And she had no intention of punishing him. In her odd way, she felt the stirrings of respect for him—not for his specific acts, the charm of which was lost on her, but for his extraordinary success in pulling wool over her sharp old eyes.

Mrs. Carstairs, the new maid immediately took over Susie's place, space and responsibilities—a weary soul who wore an aura of such a nature that the less the distance from her, by the inverse square law, the more one felt one had been munching saltpetre. Mrs. Carstairs was upstairs asleep —actually, it was only her second night in the house—when it happened.

Again it was in the earliest hours of the morning, and again the big house was illuminated only by the speck of light glowing in the imitation brazier in the hall.

The aunt woke in that sudden, silent fashion which marks alertness to a sound which had now ceased. She heard a low, happy, whispering laugh. She barely heard it. It was unvoiced, and came from somewhere indeterminate.

She rose to her feet, and again held her breath.

She heard that childish, effortful sound, of someone emphasizing a kiss: mmmm-*yuh*!

She ran on tiptoe to her door, across from which was the head of the stairs, and stopped again to listen.

What moved her, what sent her moving, sprinting, springing to the stairs was nothing at all. Actually *nothing*—not a sound, not a breath. She could have borne anything else, but not this waiting for the next sigh, smack, chuckling tongue-cluck.

She started to descend the stairs. And her first foot, the right foot, flew out and up, dragging the other with it, and she went somersaulting downward. After that the observations, the memories they painted, were not so sharp.

She was sure that something dark and rectangular flew away, out and down, as she turned about in the air. Then the cruel crash at the base of her spine and the small of her back and her elbows. But no no no pain, horribly no pain! And oh, that was the agony.

It was dark already but it did not grow dark for her. The dark grew black. But in the last clouded second before eclipse, she seemed to see a small someone dart from the dining room, scoop up the rectangular thing, a thing thicker than a briefcase, not as wide or long, and flick away with it. Then a flash of light as Mrs. Carstairs came fumbling into the hall—only a flash because of the greater flash of torture from her elbows, and the black.

Eleven years.

Eleven years she thought about it. You can think a lot in eleven years. You can think a lot in bed. You can think a whole lot in eleven bedridden years.

It doesn't have to drive you crazy, knowing you'll never walk again. But it could . . . it could . . . it could. . .

What happened that night? Was it what she remembered? She could never quite be sure. And what had happened that she did not see or know about? She'd never know. No one, after Mrs. Carstairs and Hubert came tumbling sleepily out —they always claimed they heard nothing but the fall—and the doctors and ambulance and police were in and out, nobody could possibly piece together which doors were locked, or whether the pantry window had been closed.

What she said about dark rectangles flying under her feet, about kissings and laughter somewhere—they listened so carefully to the way she talked that they frightened her, and she mentioned them no more. She might have, ten years later when Mrs. Carstairs, grown slow and hobbly, was cleaning out the pantry and found the old-fashioned carpet sweeper thrown far under the big solid maple butcher-table. It had no stick and the brushes were worn away, but it had four good wheels and it was just exactly large enough to hide in the shadows, say, on one step of a flight of stairs.

But the aunt never saw it, and Mrs. Carstairs never mentioned it. Why should she? It wasn't good for anything, and besides, it had a big dent in the top as if it had been stepped on. So she just threw it away and it lay for a day on the garbage cans, looking like a little suitcase.

Bedridden, the aunt now imprisoned Hubert. He had tried to kill her and for that she flung her coils around him, coils of business, of banking, of guilt and habit and demand.

Numb, bound, inarticulate, helpless, Hubert stayed. The only wrinkle in the gelid stream of his life was when he had left the low level of the advertising business which would have lasted the rest of his life had he stayed, for a lower level in television. And anyone but Hubert could see that in some years' time he would elevate himself to about where he had been in advertising, and stay *there* for the rest of his life.

And what did Hubert think about? It is quite possible he thought not at all, for he was equipped for that. But he could feel, and his aunt saw to it that he did. She wasped and prodded him and sat him down and walked him away. She would demand his presence and then not talk to him, but stare into the flat bland silver eye of the television to which she was addicted; if he shifted his feet she would shush him.

Or she would talk to him: "My, Hubert, how little it takes to kill a man, how much sometimes! Why, remember Doc Maginn, so hale and happy, stepped on a needle in the pile of his bedside rug, dead in a week. Yet I've seen basket cases from the First War, Hubert, everything shot away, legs, arms, eyes, voice, hearing; still they live.

"You can live a long time as a basket case, Hubert, or in a

bed. Keep yourself alert, keep busy doing something, keep your mind alive. Have someone to wait on you—why—you can last forever that way. Hubert, get up. Sit over there."

Hubert would get up and sit down again over there, moved because she felt like moving him. Oh, she hated him. Oh, she was going to kill him.

She was killing him, and the weapon she chose was time and abrasion. She was going to outlast him, she was going to hammer out the length of her life thin and sharp and long, and ease it into him up to the hilt till he was dead of it.

So every night he turned the TV to face her bed, he lowered the blinds, opened the drapes, opened or shut the window, checked the heat.

She knew how everything worked; he understood none of it. By how many leaves of the old-fashioned one-pipe steam radiator were hot, she could tell him where to set the thermostat downstairs. By the size of the picture on her TV she could tell how much voltage drop occurred in the line. And by the way it changed, she could tell what caused it. She knew the difference between the effect of Mrs. Carstairs' ironing downstairs, and the use of the rotisserie in their neighbor's house, a couple hundred yards away.

She could splice rope, and taught Hubert by the hour because he could not learn: "Worm and parcel with the lay, turn and serve the other way," she'd chant at him, and watch him do it wrong even while he repeated it.

She invented things and made him build them. She had him fix a brass handle to a rope from the beam overhead, so she could reach the window-sill or turn the TV to face the bed when he wasn't there, or, after the weeks it took him to rig it, the bird-feeder.

One day Hubert tried to kill her again. She saw it coming right from the very first, and just watched it come, wondering what on earth he was up to. He was sneaking into her room when she was in the bathroom, doing something, sneaking out. She soon found out what it was. He was loosening the screws in the back of the TV.

It took days. He seemed to be operating on four across the top, three down the side. She said nothing to him about it. He did nothing else differently. He sat and was read to and

cut his thumb on a spoke-shave, making her laugh. And later, when she came out of the bathroom on her wheelchair —it was more table than chair, for it hurt her to sit up, and she hated it—she would stop and check. Sure enough, he'd slipped in and loosened them a bit more.

She could have stopped him in a second, with a word, but she was fascinated. It went on for five days. On the morning of the sixth, after he had gone to work, she got settled for her morning of TV and found the set wouldn't work. With her ring-on-a-rope holding her up, she reached for the set and swivelled it around on its lazy-suzan base. She pulled out three of the loose screws and was able to bend the hard-board back plate far enough to peer inside.

Tubes were gone.

She lay and pondered that. Was he—tender gesture—trying masterfully to help her cut down on her excessive viewing? Or was this just a childish and spiteful annoyance? Surely even Hubert knew better than that! Why, for that he'd pay . . . oh Lord, for years he'd pay!

No, it was more than that. He was doing something in his bumbling way. Only there had to be more to it.

"Hubert," she said that evening after she had summoned him, "something's wrong with the TV."

He did not act surprised or try any play-acting, beyond saying with a rehearsed kind of promptness, "All right, I'll take it down to be fixed tomorrow," all in a flat, dutiful tone of voice. Then he sat down where she told him to. She talked to him and read to him, but there was a welcome difference in the air. Why, almost half the time she actually realized he was there.

In the morning he grunted and bumped it downstairs, and in the afternoon came bumping and grunting—a colored man helping him—with a new set. A new grey modern streamlined set with a bigger screen than the old one, and a smaller case rather unaccountably designed to offer the least possible resistance to wind.

"What on earth is that?"

"The other one is shot," Hubert informed her. "The man said so. I bought this one."

"It's horrible."

"I already bought it," said Hubert with a kind of faint doggedness.

She snorted and told him how to attach two wires to the back and how to stick the plug in the socket. It had a very nice remote control on it, with a station selector as well as volume, and on-off. She was mollified as far as the set was concerned; but what on earth was his play?

She found out the next afternoon when Mrs. Carstairs hobbled up with her arthritis and the mail. Alone with it, she found tucked among the ads and the bills and the magazines, a periodical which she knew, the instant she saw it, was late, though she had not missed it until now. It was a consumer's magazine—one of those outfits which tests goods bought on the open market. The old lady always read the very print off it. She spent her money, she used to say. She never threw it away.

Why late? And why had the little semi-circular seal that kept it closed in the mail been slit?

Hubert? Had he picked it up, kept it a while, then dropped it in the mailbox on his way to work? *Why?*

She riffled the pages. Soaps, hand-held can-openers, table-model TVs, an Italian vs. a French miniature car . . . *Table-model TV!* Oh, that was all. He just wanted to be sure and get one that was recommended.

She looked at the listing. It was there, all right. There was even a picture of it. As to the recommendation—it was heartily, earnestly, explicitly *not*. For this was the make and model, even (she checked this laboriously, swinging perilously at the edge of the bed by her strong right hand holding the ring from the ceiling) within a dozen digits of the serial number. The very same lethal contraption which, ungrounded and suffering slight damage from the overtightening of one hold-down screw between chassis and the metal case, had already killed a man and a boy.

She looked at the picture and the diagrams, and then at the set: "Oh!" she cried in sheerest delight, throwing the magazine high in the air, "How *cute*!"

Poor precious Hubert, nursing the place inside him where most people keep the embers of hate, but which, in him, must certainly be a clean little barely-warm pot of pasteur-

ized mush. Oh, how cute! numbly associating her with TV, TV with her, until one day—when was it? four, five months ago, he heard about this set in the news. Oh how he must have mumbled and gnoshed on the idea. How long must it have taken him to find one? How hard did he have to think before he plotted out the fiendishly clever idea of getting tubes out of her old set and claiming it was finished? Oh, she thought, the little darling. He's really trying.

That night, for the first time in years, his numbed shiny face seemed to move a little from inside, as if some good fluid were soaking the parched places under the moist skin; for she was kind to him. She was unquestionably laughing at him, but she was kind to him.

The next day, after Mrs. Carstairs had cleaned up, Hubert's aunt fumbled through her work-bench and tools and found a lamp socket and some heavy wire. She connected two foot-long leads and screwed in a bulb after testing it. She chuckled the whole time, even when she underwent the pain of bringing her wheelchair alongside and agonizingly rolling into it. Grunting with pain and chuckling with laughter, she got to the corner and put one wire against the steam pipe, the other against the metal side of the new set.

Nothing.

Using the remote control, she clicked the set on. Again she touched one wire to the set, the other to the pipe.

Still the bulb did not light. There was nothing wrong with this set.

Hubert . . . poor, poor old Hubert.

For a limp moment she ignored the pain and lay in the chair, wagging her head from side to side in wordless pity.

Didn't he know that to be electrocuted by house current, the electricity had to flow through the body? Stand in a puddle with a good iron drain in it, and stick your hand in a fuse-box. Then maybe. Or hold a water pipe and put a wet thumb in a socket—then perhaps. But he must, with millions of other people, share the notion that you could be killed by, for example, current running from one side of your fingertip to the other side of the same finger. Or maybe the poor thing just didn't have a notion at all.

Back in bed at last, and rested, she began to think of

Hubert with pity and tenderness. He'd worked *so* hard. . . and she wasn't thinking of lugging TV sets up and down stairs, either.

And such a clever idea, too, in its way. If he only knew what he was doing. . .

She thought about it, and about him, all day long. And when at last she knew what she was going to do, it was as if all the clocks in the world had stopped. Oh, how she ached for him to be here. Oh, how she wanted him near! Suddenly the world was bright again for her who had not realized how dark it had become. Here out of the gloom had come the loveliest . . . oh, the most wonderful thing to plan, to work on.

Hubert needed help.

He couldn't possibly do this by himself. He had to learn, to plan, to fix, to arrange . . . and above all he had to feel he was doing it by himself, because he wanted it that way so badly. Anyone who worked so hard had to want it very much. But it would be no good unless he was sure, all along the line, that every new adjustment was a by-product of his own skill and cunning.

So when he came upstairs that evening, and when she had portrayed enough surliness with him to make him unsuspicious, she began.

"Hu*bert*!" It was said with a slightly rising inflection; in the spectrum of her summonses, this one stood on the line that said "Get to work." He started uneasily.

"My ring," she said, pointing to her leather-handled, rope-dangled helper. "That rope stretches all the time."

He looked at it with dim eyes. "Looks okay."

"Well, you don't have to use it. I want you to put up something that won't stretch."

He tried hard. She could see him at it, like a toothless man gumming a steak. "Chain," he said at last.

She argued with him scornfully. Chain was pinchy and noisy. Wire rope would fray after a time, sharp and splintery. And at last she had led him to braided copper cable, which would be handsome, and though it would stretch, it would stretch just so much and no more. And then she led him like Socrates, asking, demanding, with argumentative

question after question, until he had no choice but to devise a big wide ring in the beam above, a second ring in the beam in the corner, and anchorage to something solid there. Thus the cable could be taken up as it stretched, until it would stretch no more.

Laboriously he wrote down his shopping list, and she spent a delicious night and day anticipating, and two more happy evenings hammering at him until he had it just right.

She had not felt like this in years. She had never felt like this. She *liked* it. She liked it so much she let the whole thing rest for two days, while happily she planned the next step the all-powerful male must take.

She held up the consumer's magazine.

"Oh . . . *Hu*bert!"

"Whuh? Whuh?" he said rapidly, worriedly.

"Of all the TV sets in the whole wide world, why did you buy this one?"

He wet his wet lips. "Seems pretty okay."

"Here!" she snapped (not even "come here"). He rolled to his feet and came, peering at the magazine. She demanded, "What are you trying to do—kill me?"

He opened his mouth, closed it, lifted his hands and let them fall. Finally he said, "Well, I got it awful cheap."

Aloud, she read the account of the deaths. "I don't doubt you got it cheap," she snorted. Then, her voice rising sharply, "How cheap?"

He said, "A hundred and twenty off list."

"Oh, well," she said; and inside she hugged herself. Oh, what fun!

She changed the subject. She said the rawhide on the brass handle hurt her hand, and she made him find her utility knife and cut it away. While he nicked and picked at it, she read aloud the other parts of the article, where it said that the set was otherwise very fine. She sounded almost as if she forgave him.

Anyway she let up on him, and with her remote unit, turned the set on and they watched a crime show. Or he did. She watched him. At the part in the TV play where the murderer accomplished his evil deed—and it happened to be an old woman—she could have sworn his dull eyes

acquired a dim shine.

He even stopped picking away at the rawhide and sat down to watch absorbedly. For once she let him, and it was all right. Of his own accord he went back to it after the show and finished the job. Oh you sweet boy, she thought, almost fondly, for once in your sloppy life you're *altogether* something. Why you dear, you're just full of this thing.

She turned off the sound, but left the set on—with her control—thereby wrenching him out of the Western which succeeded the murder play. He gaped at her. "You *could* have killed me," she said accusingly.

"There has to be something wrong with the set first," he said doggedly. "The set's all right, I tell you."

"That may be," she said. "But look." She reached for the brass handle above the bed and tugged at it. "Look, I'm grounded."

He shook his head, mystified.

"The radiator!" she yelped at him. "Why did you have to anchor the cable to the radiator?"

He scanned the cable, up from her hand, across from one beam to the next, down to the radiator in the corner, behind the TV set. He shrugged, not understanding. "You said anchor it to something solid."

She had said to anchor it to the radiator, but she didn't give him a chance to remember that. "Don't you see?" she shrilled. "Suppose there was a short circuit to the TV case, the way it tells about in the magazine, and suppose I had to touch it, say turn it toward the bed. Don't you see I'd be holding a grounded thing in one hand and touching a live one with the other? Don't you understand *anything*?"

She let him watch her cloudily, saw him swing his gaze from her to the cable, the TV set, back to her; saw the stirrings of that moment of revelation she had anticipated so much.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid!" she shrilled, "*this* is what I mean!" and she flung her weight on the handle and reached out for the TV set. "See?" she said, slapping it. "See?" she said, turning it on its swivel. She regained the bed.

How shiny his face was. Suddenly she wanted to mop up that dull excitement she could see moistening his parched

core. She said coldly, "Well anyway, I guess that proves the set's safe for now."

Through her lashes she watched him. For a split second she thought he was going to cry. Then Hubert slumped dejectedly and stared at the set. She knew what he was thinking as well as if his moist brow had been equipped with one of those electric signs with the moving letters. She knew he was thinking how close he had come, and how never in a thousand years would he be able to figure out the difference between this harmless object and the one he had hoped it would be.

She felt a thrill of anticipation. Get him scared. Oh fine. Fear will make him move. And worry. Let's make him worry a little. "Tomorrow," she said, "we'll just have to put up something else besides that copper cable. Just *too* dangerous."

And she saw him look down into his hands and pout miserably. Was he thinking *I'll never get a chance like this again?* Sure he was.

Oh, he looked so miserable! Oh, did any woman ever have such a toy as this? Let's bring back the hope now.

She swatted the magazine explosively, making him jump. "It shouldn't be allowed!"

"Oh," he mumbled, "the factory called them all back in. All they could find."

"I don't mean that," she said, and hit the magazine again. "This thing, with the photographs and diagrams and all. Why, you know what this amounts to, just this one picture of a screw tightened too much? Why, it's instructions, that's what it is. Any fool could take a safe set and make a killer out of it, just by reading this. It shouldn't be allowed!"

She took the magazine and flung it at his feet, making him jump again. "Take the filthy thing out of here!"

"Yes, Aunty," he said, his eyes on the magazine. He put it, rolled, into his back pocket, and rose.

"Put your old aunty to bed."

"All right." Preoccupied, he did all the things he had to do with the drapes, the shade, the heat, the TV, her covers, the lights. She was glad when he turned out the lights; it had been hurting her face not to smile openly.

What would he be thinking now? She knew: oh, she knew, especially because—"Hu*bert*!"—because, silhouetted in the door, he already had the magazine out of his pocket, though it was still rolled. Ah, he could barely wait! Imagine —Hubert eager, Hubert dedicated, Hubert excited . . . and Hubert certainly wondering how on earth he would get the chance to make that one little change, turn that one screw just far enough to break the insulating washer.

"*Hu*bert!"

"Yes, Aunty."

"In the morning ask Mrs. Carstairs to turn up the hot water heater right after breakfast. I'm going to have a good hot soak. This once I'm going to soak for a whole hour."

He thought he was answering but his voice was lost in a peculiar abrupt wheeze. Smiling in the darkness, she asked, "What, Hubert?"

"All right, Aunty; I'll tell her."

He went away.

She soaked for more than an hour. She drowsed, almost fell asleep in the tub. In the first place she had been awake almost all night, smiling most of the time, making little bets with herself. Even with a clear photograph and a concise explanation, would Hubert be able to find the right screw? Could there by any guarantee he'd turn it the right way? Would he wait so long for the coast to be clear that he wouldn't have time to do it at all?

She had forgotten, at first, about Mrs. Carstairs and the Saturday cleaning, which she would certainly do while the old lady was in the tub. She could all but see poor Hubert in his room down the hall, an ear cocked to the arthritic housekeeper's puttering about in his aunt's room, his eyes glued to the page in the consumer's magazine, reading it over and over, moving his lips. A killer.

Hubert, Hubert. Dear Hubert. Maybe the silly old thing wouldn't even try to fix the set. Mrs. Carstairs left at last. There was long, long silence. She began to doze.

A sharp sound snapped her out of it, and she literally clapped her soapy hand over her mouth to keep in the burst of shrill laughter that filled her mouth and throat. For dear dedicated worried fearful Hubert, with the bone head and

the ham hands, Hubert had dropped his screwdriver. The picture of him, round-eyed and whey-faced, staring in terror at the closed bathroom door, was almost more than she could bear.

More silence, a bit more hot water and another doze. She came to herself with a start, and looked with amused horror at her wrinkled finger pads. She was as waterlogged as Davy Jones' floor mop. She began the arduous process of draining, drying, dressing, and loading the useless parts of herself onto the wheelchair. She took as long as possible . . . long enough. He was not in the room when she opened the door.

Back in bed, she composed herself for her Saturday televiewing, and with her hand on the control, remembered. She laughed and clicked it on.

The sun was out. The birds were out. Hubert was out (she laughed) shopping for rope for her helper-handle, for no matter what, he had his orders. Oh the fool; what on earth does he think he could do with himself without *me*? But isn't he the one? Isn't he the gutsy boy, though? The TV was excellent, all of it, even the commercials. She thoroughly enjoyed her afternoon.

At last he came up. She did not greet him; she wondered too much what he would say. She had been philosophizing about murder and the murderer. At what exact point did a man become a murderer? According to the law, when the victim died, be it a microsecond or forty years after the attack. But was that really so? When a man pulls a trigger, and the bullet is on its way, and it's too late for anything but death to happen, is he not already a murderer?

Hubert now: Hubert had already pulled his trigger. She might have died any time today. As a matter of fact, she had lain impotently watching a big grey squirrel gobbling up all the suet from the feeder, because she had rather not take hold of that brass handle and swing herself so close to the TV in order to reach the feeder-rope.

And Hubert, out shopping; was he wondering if he would come home to a curious sidewalk and the white wailing of ambulances? She had purposely not called him, and he had delayed downstairs until quite late, doubtless screwing up his courage for the trip upstairs to find—what?—in her

room. Surely he had not reckoned on being the one to discover her. She could almost hear his half-articulate complaint: after all he had done, did he have to go through all that too?

She resisted a temptation to arrange herself sprawling on the carpet between the bed and the TV, to lie still until he bent over her, and then to start laughing. A sure instinct told her that this was the way, even with Hubert, to get herself not only murdered, but beaten to death along with it. She contented herself with lying as still and—what was the word? Waxen was the word—as possible, with her eyes closed, until he stood over the bed and murmured, "Aunty?"

She opened her eyes and he stepped back two paces and stood, not knowing what to do with his hands. Still she waited, to see what he would say next, and it was—clumsy, blundering dunderhead—"Watch some TV today, did you?"

She laughed and struggled up, elbow-walking back to her back-rest. "Lots, and it was fine . . . It's late."

"Yes, I . . . think I'll go turn in."

She tilted her head to one side and said, "Had a tough day, Hubert?" and smiled at him. The quick, passing contraction of his features convinced her he was shouting silently to himself, *She knows! She knows!*

"Well," she said, "you're going to put your old aunty to bed first."

Did he hesitate? Did he really? Did he dare? He seemed to be ready to turn and walk out . . . or did he turn to remind himself that downstairs the housekeeper kept a living ear, a remembering brain, and there must be no quarrel for her to remember? He said docilely, "All right, Aunty."

"I think," she said, "I'll watch the late show tonight. I had a nap."

"The late show, yes," he echoed. He did the window blind and window things, the drape things. Passing the TV, which faced her, he hit it with his hip. It swung to face the door.

She nodded approvingly. She couldn't have done better herself. She said, "Hubert—turn the TV to me."

"All right," he said. But instead he came over and straightened her covers. His face was especially shiny, and

she could see the dark marking of damp where his hands touched the bed-clothes.

She began to laugh.

For the first, and the last time in her life, she heard Hubert speak to her in the imperative: "Don't laugh," he said.

She subsided, but she took her time about it, laughing all the way. "Funny boy." Suddenly she cut it dead and said coldly, "Turn that TV to me."

His back was to the set: he stood between it and her. "You can see it all right from there." He held his right wrist hard with left hand. She could see the shiver of the fabric of his trousers as his knees trembled.

"We don't want a quarrel for Mrs. Carstairs to hear," she said carefully. "Oh gosh no," he said fervently.

A crazy situation. Extraordinary. Delightful. This, she thought, is living . . . "Turn the set, Hubert." She smiled. "It won't bite you. It isn't even on."

He wet his lips, so wet already. His hands were wet, his face and his mouth. His tears were wet, waiting to come. He whispered, "You can reach it."

"All right," she said suddenly, gently, with all the tones and overtones of complete capitulation.

"Well I." He said it as if it were a complete and sensible statement, turned and marched to the door.

"Hubert!"

He stopped as if she had roped him. He was in the doorway; he stayed where he was and did not turn. He was like a machine with brakes locked and the clutch disengaged. But one could feel the motor racing. In the split tatter of a second it would be gone from here screaming.

"Please," she said gently. "You forgot to check the heat. You'll do that for me, won't you?"

His shoulders slumped and he turned back into the room. "Oh, sure, I guess," he said wearily.

He crossed to the corner and leaned over and felt the radiator. It was the metal top of the TV set that he leaned over. His aunt moved her thumb *that* much on the remote control and turned the set on.

Hubert made the most horrible sound the aunt had ever heard. It was like a particularly raucous sneeze—*inward.*

She had read that sometimes when a jolt first hits them they swallow their tongues, and then suffocate on them.

That is what Hubert was doing. One stiff hooked arm rested on the top of the TV set, and the other stiff hooked arm rested on the radiator, and his legs stuck straight out behind him with the toes pointed, and quivered. Through the legs of his trousers, at the calves, could be seen muscle mounding up in cramps like golf balls.

"Kill *me,* will you?" croaked the aunt. But the set warmed up just then and roared and drowned her out. She turned the volume down and stared at Hubert's legs and pointing toes sticking out from behind the TV set, and knew with crushing certainty that from the very beginning she had set things up to come out this way.

She didn't recall having purposely, consciously done so. She knew only that she must have. She glared at the legs and said, "But you broke my back!"

All in all, that was a pretty good day. And night. Living; really living. One of the best parts of all had to do with the police, who took all of fifteen seconds to sniff out that there was more to this "accident" than met the eye. There was a young man with two deep measures of vivid intelligence for eyes, and a quick quiet voice.

He asked almost exclusively important questions, one right after the other. Who brought that set in here? Who hung that cable from the radiator to a point over the bed? Well, if it was rope before, who substituted woven copper? Who took the leather grip off the brass handle?

Hubert, Hubert, Hubert.

Men came up and brushed fine white dust around the TV, and took off the back and brushed dust inside, and photographed everything. Whose fingerprints?

Finally, and funniest of all, was the man who regretted the accident, who assured her that the police expert had removed the short circuit, making the set now quite safe, but at the same time warning her to get rid of it, just in case. Lastly, he hemmed and he hawed and he suggested in extremely careful language that she not attempt to bring an action against the set manufacturer in this particular case, in view of certain technicalities which—"we needn't go into

at such a time as this, but I faithfully assure you that if you don't take my advice you will only wish you had, and you will find out at great—ah—trouble to yourself that I was right."

In short, it was unanimously agreed to conceal from this little old bedridden lady that her nephew had gotten himself caught in the vicious trap he laid for her. Why bother her with it? The only thing that would ever force her to know it would be if she started lawsuits; lying there like a real little old protected female woman, waxen as possible, she agreed in a faint voice that they were right and she trusted them all.

It was grand fun. Her finish didn't come until the next afternoon, when a sniffing Mrs. Carstairs brought her the things out of Hubert's room to sort. There wasn't much, and among the few papers was the copy of the consumer's magazine, still folded back open to the article about the metal-cased TV set.

Over this Hubert had pondered and waited, and while waiting, had doodled, filling O's and putting mustaches on the faces of the consumers' electronicians in the photos. He had also written a sentence and a word.

It was as if Hubert had been denied understanding and intelligence and the ability to articulate, all his life, the formless clouds of feeling within him, in just and equal compensation for this single, simple, devastating insight. He had written: *Without me she is nothing but an old woman.*

And under that, in very large, careful letters: OLD.

His aunt read this and closed her eyes to consider it, and that was the finish for her. When she opened her eyes again she looked at her hands, skinny and crooken-a-clawed, and she pulled at her sparse white hair, drawing it forward over her face to be able to look at it, through it.

All her life she had been too busy to be loved, too busy to be liked. She had been too busy to have a childhood and she had been too busy to be old.

Not any more. The Hubert business was the last thing she had to be busy about; for years it had been everything and the only thing, and now she'd finished it, and though she lingered on for a long while, it was the finish for her.

I'm sure that a great many people were saddened by the death of Craig Rice. Not only those of us who knew her personally, but also millions of readers who realized that with her passing must pass John J. Malone along with her.

Craig Rice was quite a gal; and Malone was quite a guy. Together with Joe the Angel, they formed a trio that will not be soon forgotten by mystery readers. This may be Craig's last printed story. If so, I am pleased to see it preserved between hard covers.

Craig Rice

HARD SELL

"MALONE," THE VOICE said, "you've got to help me."

The little lawyer waggled a finger at Joe the Angel and sat impassive while the bartender poured another double shot of rye. Then he swallowed the rye, reflecting thoughtfully that clients were always turning up when you needed them the least. "I don't have to help you," he said without bothering to turn around. "My office rent is paid a month in advance. My secretary is paid a week in advance. My bar tab is paid several drinks in advance. So go away."

"Money," said the voice, "is no object."

"That's what I've been trying to tell you," Malone said. "Besides, if you want me, why don't you call me at my office?"

"I tried," the voice admitted. "I talked to a girl named Maggie. She said *this* was your office."

Malone turned around, deciding firmly that Maggie would never again be paid anything in advance. He found himself looking at a large man with iron-gray hair, blue eyes, and a prominent chin. The man looked so healthy that

Malone wanted to turn away again. "Go ahead," he said. "Tell me all about it."

"Can't we go some place private?"

"This is my office," Malone reminded him. "How private can you get?"

The man looked around vacantly, then back at Malone. "My name is Gunderson," he said. "Frank Gunderson. Mean anything to you?"

"Nothing," Malone said. "So far."

"I sell magazine subscriptions," Gunderson announced.

"That's nice," Malone said pleasantly. "Working your way through college?"

Gunderson looked very unhappy. "I don't exactly sell them," he explained. "I employ salesmen. Gunderson Sales, Inc. Door-to-door sales of leading magazines. A customer buys one or two magazines and gets another free. It's a very attractive offer."

"I'm sure it is," the little lawyer agreed. "But I can't read. So you're wasting your time."

"You don't understand," Gunderson said. "It's like this, Malone. Somebody's been killing my salesmen. One after the other, day by day, my men have been murdered."

"By prospective customers?"

"By a fiend," Gunderson said. "First Joe Tallmer, struck down brutally by a hit-and-run driver. That was a week ago. Then, two days later, Leon Prince was pushed into an empty elevator shaft. The very next day Howie Kirschmeyer was shoved from an elevated platform and mangled by an oncoming train. And—"

Malone held up a hand, both to silence Gunderson and to summon Joe the Angel. He downed the double rye that Joe poured and fixed sad eyes on Gunderson.

"Accidents," he said soberly, "can happen."

"But, Malone—"

"Three accidents," he went on. "The first one got hit by a car. The second one was too dumb to wait for the elevator. The third one tried to walk across the tracks. It figures, in a way. Anyone dumb enough to sell magazines for a living—"

"You don't understand," Gunderson cut in. "There was a fourth one. Just this morning."

"What happened to him?"

"He was shot through the head with a .45," Gunderson said. "He's dead," he added unnecessarily.

John J. Malone suddenly felt very tired. "Sounds like murder," he admitted. "But I'm sure the police can take care of it."

"I don't see how," Gunderson said. "The man's name was Henry Littleton. He was sitting over coffee while his wife was upstairs making the beds or something. Somebody came in, shot him, and left."

"The gun?"

"It was on the breakfast-room table. No prints, no registration."

"Hmmmm," Malone said.

"You see," Gunderson continued, "the police can do nothing. Littleton wasn't murdered by someone who knew him. He was murdered for the same reason as Tallmer and Prince and Kirschmeyer."

"And why were *they* murdered?"

"I wish I knew," Gunderson said. "I wish I knew."

Malone paused to light a cigar. "Come, now," he said gently. "You must have some idea. Otherwise you wouldn't be here annoying me."

Gunderson hesitated. "Malone," he said, "I don't want to sound paranoid. Not good, sounding paranoid. But I think someone is trying to ruin me, Malone. Killing my men one after the other. Crippling my sales force. Two of my men quit me today, Malone. Left me cold. Told me they couldn't take the chance of working for me. One of 'em said he had a wife and kid. Hell, *I've* got a wife and kid. Two kids, as a matter of fact. And—"

"Shut up for a minute," the little lawyer said absently. "Who would want to cripple your sales force? You have any competition in this little con game of yours?"

Gunderson colored. "It's not a con game. But I do have a competitor."

"Does he have a name?"

"Tru-Val Subscriptions," Gunderson said.

Malone sighed. "That's a strange name for a man," he remarked. "What do they call him for short? Troovie?"

"That's the company name, Malone. The man's name is Harold Cowperthwaite."

Malone looked around vacantly. He could understand the murder of door-to-door salesmen, especially if such murder were performed by dissident customers. But he didn't *want* to understand, not now. He didn't want the case at all.

"Malone? Here's a check. Twenty-five hundred dollars. I'll have another check for twenty-five hundred for you when you clear this up. Plus expenses, of course. Will that be sufficient?"

Malone took the check and found a place for it in his wallet. He nodded pleasantly at Gunderson and watched the man leave the City Hall Bar, walking with a firm stride, arms swinging, chest out. Then he looked around until he found Joe the Angel again and pointed to his empty glass. It was, he decided, time to begin piling up expenses for Gunderson.

Harold Cowperthwaite was not helpful. He looked as sickly as Gunderson looked vigorous, and was just about as much fun to be with. Malone decided that he disliked them both equally.

"—incredible accusation!" Cowperthwaite had just finished shouting. "Couple of his doorbell punchers keel over and he blames me for it! Blames me for everything! Ought to sue him for libel! Serve him right!"

Malone sighed, wishing the little man wouldn't talk exclusively in exclamation points. "Then you didn't kill them," he suggested.

"Kill them!" boomed Cowperthwaite. "Course I didn't kill them! I wanted to kill anybody, I'd kill Gunderson! Know what I think, Malone?"

Malone was totally unprepared for the question mark. "Hmmm," he said, "what *do* you think?"

"Think he killed 'em himself!" Cowperthwaite shouted.

"Throw suspicion on me! Make trouble for me! People bothering me all the time!"

"Oh," said Malone. "No, he couldn't have done that."

"No?"

"Of course not," Malone said. "He's my client."

Cowperthwaite's words followed the lawyer out of the door marked *Tru-Val Subscriptions.* Malone managed to close the door before the man reached the exclamation point. It was, he decided, a day for small triumphs.

"The way I see it," von Flanagan said, "we wait until he kills another one. Then maybe he leaves a clue."

"He?" Malone said, lost. "Who he?"

"The killer," the big cop said. "The bird who killed Littleton and the others without leaving a trace. Pretty soon he'll find another magazine salesman and kill him. Maybe we get lucky and catch him in the act. Wouldn't that be nice?"

"For everybody but the magazine salesman," Malone agreed. "You don't seem to be taking much of an interest in this one. Something wrong?"

"Plenty," von Flanagan said. "For one thing, it's an impossible one to solve. For another, I don't want to solve it."

"Why not?"

Von Flanagan shook his head wearily. "Malone," he said, "have you ever had a run-in with a magazine salesman? Have you ever had one of those little monsters stick his foot in your door and tell you how much you needed his rotten magazines? Have you, Malone?"

Malone nodded.

"They should kill every last one of them," von Flanagan said. "I mean it, Malone. Anybody kills a magazine salesman, he deserves a medal."

Malone sighed. "The case," he reminded von Flanagan. "Let's talk about the case. Tell me all about it. Everything."

"There's not much to tell," von Flanagan said, relaxing into a chair. "This Littleton is thirty-three years old, has a wife and two kids. One is a boy and the other—"

"—is a girl," Malone guessed.

"You know the story? Then why bother me?"

"I'm sorry," Malone said, sorry. "Please go on."

"He's a hustler," said von Flanagan. "Holds down two jobs at once. Works real hard. Sells magazines evenings for this Gunderson character and works nine to five in a garage. Hasn't got any money, though. He's had a tough run of luck lately. Doctor bills, things going wrong with the kids, you know. But he's not in debt either. A good, steady guy. A guy you might like if he wasn't a magazine salesman."

"The crime," Malone said gently.

"Murder," von Flanagan said. "Not by the wife, either. I thought of that, Malone. I didn't want to because she's such a sweet little woman. A doll. But she was upstairs with the kids at the time. The kids said so. They wouldn't lie. Too young to lie."

Malone lit a cigar. "He was shot by somebody inside the house?"

Von Flanagan nodded. "At close range," he said. "It almost looked as though the killer wanted to make it look like suicide. But he didn't try very hard. No powder burns, for one thing, and the gun was lying near Littleton's left hand. And he was right-handed. We checked."

"Clever of you," the lawyer said. "So it was murder, and not by the wife. How about the other salesmen? Tallmer and Prince and Kirkenberger?"

"Kirschmeyer," von Flanagan corrected. "That's the funny part of it. Tallmer was a typical hit-and-run. Prince and Kirschmeyer look more like accidents than most accidents. But with them all coming together like this—"

"I know," Malone said gloomily. "Did Littleton have any insurance?"

"Insurance?" von Flanagan looked lost. "Oh," he said. "Littleton, insurance. Yeah. A big policy. But that's out, Malone. The wife is the only beneficiary and she's clear. So that's out."

"Thanks," Malone said. "So am I."

"So are you what?"

"Out," Malone said. "For a drink."

With two double ryes under his belt and a pair of beer chasers keeping them company, Malone felt in condition to use the phone. He called Charlie Stein, a useful little

man who served as Dun and Bradstreet for a world far removed from Wall Street, running credit checks for gamblers and similarly unsavory elements.

"Take your time on this one," he told Stein. "Nothing urgent. I want to find out if there's anything around on a man named Henry Littleton. And," he added sadly, "there probably isn't."

"You're wrong," Stein said. "There is."

Malone came back to life. "Go on," he said. "Talk to me."

"Henry Littleton," Stein said. "He's into Max Hook for seventy-five grand. That all you want to know?"

"That's impossible," Malone said. "I mean—"

"Impossible but true."

"Oh," Malone said. "Well, you better cross him off, Charlie. Somebody shot him in the head."

Malone hung up quickly, then lifted the receiver again and put through a call to Max Hook. The gambler picked up the phone almost at once. "Malone, Max," Malone said cheerfully. "You didn't order a hit for a guy named Henry Littleton, did you?"

"Littleton? That's the fink who owes me seventy-five grand. Seventy-five grand he owes me and a nickel at a time he pays me. That guy." There was a pause. Then, with the air of someone just now hearing what Malone said in the first place, Hook said: "You saying somebody chilled him?"

"This morning. It wasn't you, was it?"

"Of course not," Hook said. "Why kill somebody who owes me money? That doesn't make sense, Malone."

"I didn't think it did," Malone said pleasantly. "Just checking, Max." He put the receiver on the hook and made his way back to the bar.

"You don't look so hot," Joe the Angel said thoughtfully. "You want me to leave the bottle?"

Malone sighed. "Don't be ridiculous," he said. "Then I wouldn't have anybody to talk to." He closed his eyes and tried to think. This Littleton had been hard-working, honest, and seventy-five thousand dollars in debt. Hook hadn't killed him, and Cowperthwaite hadn't killed him, and his

wife hadn't killed him, and he hadn't committed suicide. The whole thing was terrifying.

"I'm glad I found you," von Flanagan was saying. "You're drunk, but I'm still glad I found you. I want to tell you you've been wasting your time. We thought there was a connection between the salesmen. But there isn't."

"You're wrong," Malone said magnificently. "But go on anyway."

"Tallmer," von Flanagan said, ignoring the interruption. "The first one. A guy walked into the station-house and said he was the hitter-and-runner. Conscience was bothering him. And there was no connection between him and the rest. Accidents. Like we figured."

"Wrong," said Malone sadly. "Completely wrong."

"Huh?"

"I'll explain," said Malone. "I will tell all. I sort of thought something like this would happen." He sighed. "Tallmer was a typical hit-and-run. That much you know."

"That much I just told you."

Malone nodded. "Prince and Kirschenblum—"

"Kirschmeyer."

"To hell with it," said Malone. "Anyway, the two of them were murdered. By the same person who killed Littleton."

"If you're so smart," said von Flanagan, "then you can tell me that person's name. The one who killed them all."

"Simple," said Malone. "The name is Littleton."

He explained while von Flanagan sat there gaping. "Littleton was in debt," he said. "Seventy-five grand in debt. With no way out. Then Tallmer got hit by a car."

"Precisely," said von Flanagan.

"And Littleton got an idea," he said. "He wanted to kill himself but he didn't want his wife to lose the insurance. So he killed himself and made it look like murder."

Malone lit a fresh cigar. "He set up a chain," he went on. "Chucked Prince down an elevator shaft and heaved Kirschengruber in front of the elevated."

"Kirschmeyer."

"You know who I mean. Anyway, Littleton did this, and set up a chain. A subtle chain. Then he shot himself."

"Left-handed? From a distance?"

"Of course," Malone said. "If you wanted to make it look like murder, would you use your right hand and put the gun in your mouth? See?"

Von Flanagan thought it over. "So it's suicide," he said. "And we write it off as murder and suicide, with Littleton the murderer. Right?"

"Wrong," Malone said. "You write Prince and Kickle-button off as accidents and Littleton as murder by person or persons unknown. If he went to all that trouble there's no sense in conning the wife and kids out of the insurance. Besides, you'd never get a suicide verdict. Not unless I persuaded the coroner's inquest. And I won't."

Von Flanagan shrugged. "How are you going to collect your fee?"

"I'll tell Gunderson his salesmen are safe," Malone said. "I'll offer to repay the fee in full if another one gets murdered. And if that's not enough for him, he can keep the twenty-five hundred he owes me. Remember, I didn't want this case in the first place."

I have known Richard Deming's work for a long time, and I have followed his career with enthusiasm. Thus, I was delighted when I came across this story of his.

It is a sprightly piece, with beautiful characterization; a quiet and tender story of marital love that will warm the cockles of many hearts.

I heartily recommend it.

Richard Deming

SECOND HONEYMOON

HIS NEXT DOOR neighbors were out working in the yard when Herbert May came home from work. He stopped to chat with them. Glad of a respite, John Henderson lay down his pruning shears and lit a pipe. Mrs. Henderson drew off her work gloves and patted her face with a handkerchief. "Hot," she commented.

Herbert May agreed that it was. John Henderson nodded as though his wife had made some profound remark. He continued to puff on his pipe, with an air of relaxation.

"You're looking so much better these last few weeks, Mr. May," Mrs. Henderson said.

Herbert looked surprised. "You sound as though I were a convalescent, Mrs. Henderson. I haven't been ill."

The woman seemed vaguely uncomfortable. "I mean you're so much more relaxed and cheerful. You used to hurry on by with barely a nod, always in a rush. Not that we thought you were unneighborly, Mr. May. We understand why you're usually eager to get home."

"Oh?" Herbert said.

"We really admire your attentiveness to your wife, Mr. May. It must be difficult, having to run home from the store every hour or so to make sure she's all right. And

never being able to leave her side from the time you get home until you go off to work again the next morning. Yet you never complain."

Herbert blushed. "I only do my duty. It's harder on Miranda than it is on me."

"That's what I mean," Mrs. Henderson said admiringly. "You're so unselfish. Even in her condition I sometimes envy her when I see you wheel her out on your porch each evening for your bedtime cup of tea."

She frowned at her husband. "I wonder how many other men would sacrifice their whole lives to waiting hand and foot on a paralyzed wife."

John Henderson said defensively, "It's hardly likely you'll ever become paralyzed, dear. You know you have the constitution of a horse."

Mrs. Henderson turned her attention back to Herbert. "Anyway, it's nice to see you more relaxed, Mr. May. Is your wife better?"

"She hasn't been in pain for some weeks, I'm happy to say. As a matter of fact, she hasn't had any complaints at all recently."

"How wonderful. Is she well enough for visitors?"

"Well, you know how she is about seeing people," Herbert said cautiously. "She can't stand pity, and she thinks people come to see her only out of compassion. I'm afraid callers might upset her and bring on a relapse just now. I'd rather you'd wait until we see how permanent her improvement is."

"Of course, Mr. May. You'll let us know the minute you feel she can have visitors, though?"

Promising that he would, Herbert May moved on, a round little man with a round little paunch which jiggled slightly as he walked. Looking after him, Mrs. Henderson again remarked the notable improvement in his appearance over the past few weeks. He used to hurry into his house as though plunging into cold water, she thought, his expression almost one of dread. Today he bounced up his front porch steps with the cheeriness of a new bridegroom coming home to his bride.

Mrs. Henderson was glad his wife felt so much better.

Inside the house Herbert, as always, checked on Miranda before he did anything else. She lay on her back with her knees elevated in exactly the same position she had been when he had run home from the store to check on her an hour and a half earlier. She couldn't, of course, change position without help.

"You're not comfortable, are you, dear?" he asked considerately, easing her onto her side. "There. Is that better?"

A few weeks earlier Miranda would have complained bitterly that no position was better than any other. But in their new, happier relationship, she no longer rewarded his every little attention with recrimination.

"It's actually become a pleasure to come home to you these past few weeks, dear," he told her fondly. "You see how much it means to a man just not to be nagged at? It was never your illness I resented. It was just the 'Herbert do this,' and 'Herbert do that,' from the moment I walked in the house. Don't you agree that we're both much happier since you've given up all that nagging?"

Miranda didn't deny it.

"I don't think I could have stood it much longer," he said. "A man reaches the point where—" He sighed and let the words trail off. Miranda seemed to understand, for she said nothing in reply.

Herbert set about his daily chores with the methodicalness of a man who has gone through the same motions for so many years that he can perform mechanically, without thinking. Briskly, he went through the house, dusting and running the vacuum cleaner.

It was past six by the time the house was in order. By the time he had prepared dinner, later had done the dishes and put them away, it was nearly seven-thirty. Now came the pleasant, relaxing part of his and Miranda's evenings together.

Though he was not a strong man, Herbert lifted Miranda into the wheelchair with ease. Her thin frame weighed barely a hundred pounds, and he had years of practice in lifting it. Considerately he draped a shawl across her bony shoulders before wheeling her out onto the screened-in front porch.

Dusk was just beginning to fall, but there was still enough visibility to make out Mr. and Mrs. Henderson seated on the porch next door. Mrs. Henderson waved to them and Herbert waved back.

"Mrs. Henderson inquired about you this afternoon, Miranda," Herbert said. "She noticed that I seem in better spirits lately, and wondered if you were better. Even the neighbors can see the change since we've been getting along so much nicer. We *are* happier, aren't we?"

He adjusted Miranda a little more comfortably in her wheelchair before going back inside to brew their nightly pot of tea. A few minutes later he wheeled out a tea cart containing two cups, a teapot, a sugar bowl, milk pitcher and some lemon slices on a plate. There was also a small plate of cookies.

Placing the cart alongside the wheelchair, he pulled a porch chair to the other side of it, seated himself and poured two cups of tea. Adding a single lump of sugar and a little lemon to Miranda's, he carefully stirred it.

"There you are," he said cheerfully, setting it on the side of the tea cart nearest her.

Then he proceeded to fix his own cup. Dropping in a lump of sugar, he stirred it until it was completely dissolved, then added another and repeated the process. As he dropped in a third, his eyes twinkled at Miranda.

"Remember how you used to fuss when I used so much sugar, dear?" he inquired. "As though more than one lump was some kind of horrible extravagance. For ten years I contented myself with a single lump in my tea, just to save trouble, when all the time I wanted it much sweeter. It's such a relief not to be nagged at for things like that any more. It's funny—but it's the little things which build up the most unbearable tensions. Tensions almost bad enough to drive a man mad."

He added lemon, then a little milk, and suddenly chuckled. "How many times do you suppose you've fussed at me for using both lemon and milk, Miranda? Several thousand times over the years, I should imagine." In a high-pitched voice he mimicked, "The lemon will curdle the milk, you fool!"

Then more kindly, Herbert went on, "I shouldn't bring up those old bad times, you know, now that we're happy again. But it's good not to be called names any more, Miranda. There were times when I was actually afraid I'd do something desperate. But why talk about that? It's all in the past now. I've actually begun to fall in love with you all over again these past few weeks. It's like a second honeymoon."

He drank his tea, nibbling on cookies between sips. As soon as his cup was empty, he rose to his feet.

"I don't think we'd better keep you out any longer, dear," he said. "Not in this temperature." He peered across at the Hendersons, who were rapidly becoming invisible in the gathering dusk. "Probably I shouldn't bring you out at all when it's this hot, but the Hendersons might wonder why we suddenly abandoned our nightly ritual of tea on the porch. And we wouldn't want them dropping over to inquire, would we?"

He pushed the tea cart into the house and on through into the kitchen. He emptied the teapot into the sink, then emptied Miranda's cup too. The latter hadn't been touched. Quickly he washed the dishes and put them away.

When he got back to the porch, it was now too dark to see his neighbors on the next door porch at all. He wheeled Miranda inside and on through the front room into the kitchen. After contemplating her for a moment, he took a cigar from his pocket and lit it.

"Little pleasures such as this cigar make all the difference in the world, dear," he said, contentedly puffing. "You can't imagine what enjoyment there is in just being able to smoke in your own house. I don't believe the curtains really absorb the smoke and keep the odor of stale tobacco in the house, as you always insisted. That was just an argument to keep me from having the pleasure of smoking, wasn't it?"

After a smiling wait for an answer which wasn't forthcoming, he set his cigar on the edge of the sink and his smile faded. He examined Miranda moodily.

"The only thing wrong in our new relationship is that you don't talk to me at all any more," he said on a faint note of complaint. "After doing nothing but listen for ten

years, it's strange to have to do all the talking. Sometimes I actually miss your nagging, Miranda. At least it was conversation of a sort."

He moved toward her. "Well, back you go for another twenty-four hours, my dear. I really can't risk leaving you in this temperature any longer."

As he reached to lift her from the wheelchair, his wrist brushed the haft of the icepick protruding from the center of her chest. He paused to consider it.

"I suppose I should pull that out, my dear," he said contemplatively. "But it gives me an odd sort of lift to see it there. You looked so surprised when you glanced down and realized what I had done, Miranda. It was really quite funny, in a macabre sort of way. For the only time in your life you were speechless. You couldn't think of a single thing to say, could you?"

Pulling the shawl from around her shoulders and hanging it on a wall hook, he heaved her into his arms. Her body remained rigid, the knees raised as though she were still seated in some invisible chair, her hands sedately folded.

With effort he lowered her into the empty freezer until she lay on her back with her knees still awkwardly elevated. Taking a dish cloth, he carefully wiped the moisture from her face and hands where the frost had melted from contact with the warm outside air.

"Are you comfortable on your back, my dear?" he inquired. "Or would you rather lie on your side?"

He waited, as though expecting an answer. When none came, he said cheerily, "Good night, my dear. See you in the morning."

Gently he closed the freezer lid, lifted his cigar from the sink and walked into the front room, contentedly puffing it. He smiled when some ashes fell on the rug.

He didn't bother to clean them up. Miranda would have started screeching before they even hit the floor, but he didn't have to be so careful of his every move now.

He would clean up the ashes when he did his regular house-cleaning the following evening.

This is a peculiarly haunting story. All through the year as I searched assiduously through the new magazines for stories I liked, the memory of this one (read very early in the year) kept recurring, and I knew it would have to be included among the Best.

Miracles should happen the night before Christmas, and I'm grateful to Mr. Fitzsimmons for this one.

Paul M. Fitzsimmons

THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS

AT TEN MINUTES past two on Christmas Eve, Rodemeyer bobbed up so suddenly out of a snooze that he believed the phone had rung. When it did not sound again, he lifted the receiver and listened. No one was on the line.

Yawning and blinking, he shoved back the big chair, stood up and stretched. Ten past two. Cripes. The night hardly half over and he had to sit in till four the coming afternoon.

What a tomb the jailhouse was tonight. The office, the vestibule, the corridor, the four cells—all empty—silent. Not even a drunk for company. And young Kilmer in the cruiser would not stop by until four. Aggh—might as well be guarding a graveyard.

At times like this Rodemeyer would get twinges in his tantalum kneecap, which prompted recollections of night-duty at a mid-Manhattan precinct house. Always something coming in, starting up, stirring round—making the hours move on. And Christmas Eves had been real crackerjacks.

However, he would always reflect, in the city I might never of made sergeant—*here* I'm chief of the whole damn force.

That the "force" consisted of eight men sworn and four sometimes deputized, did not in the least affect his pride. The important thing was to be "in charge," especially to a man like Rodemeyer who had a lot of confidence in his way of doing things.

For instance, for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day he was keeping one man only on each watch, while standing the whole tour—4-12, 12-8, 8-4—himself. Harold Renken had phoned "off" at a quarter to twelve and now Rodemeyer and young Kilmer were the only men on duty.

Rodemeyer went outdoors. The cold air was like a quick shower. The wind had calmed and the snow, no longer flurrying and drifting, fell in large wet flakes, weighing down the thick blanket that had fallen since midnight last.

There wasn't a stir from the town. Or a sound.

Toward the north side of Broad Street where the "business" section became neighborhood, a few lone lights, looking old and yellow, made small warm squares in the weathered wood-frame houses.

To the south side, beyond the corner of Cross, beyond the last street lamp, all was dark.

No. Not quite. Now what the devil was *that*?

Dimly, in the whereabouts of the Presbyterian church whose bulk he could not make out, Rodemeyer discerned a glowing, faintly silvered by the falling snow. He puzzled half a minute over it and then decided that the side lawn "Scene of the Nativity," which he had noted a few days before, had been illuminated for the Christmas night. Sure. That was it. Funny, the things that could give you a start.

He stood a few minutes more, began a cigarette but tossed it quickly away, preferring to savor the night air which, though cold and keen, was curiously soft.

His eyelids felt like stove lids. He blinked hard and long. Almost losing balance, he began taking deep breaths. After five or six he heard the jangling of the phone. No doubt about it this time. At the top step he kicked the snow from his high shoes and trudged inside.

"I don't know as I ought to bother you, chief," came the voice, its politeness peculiar. "Doctor Albertson, here."

"Evening, Reverend," said Rodemeyer. "Or, guess I ought to say 'good morning.' What can we do for you?"

"Well—I—I don't exactly know," the Reverend Doctor Rodney Albertson began. "You see, well—I'll tell you. We're a little alarmed here."

Rodemeyer picked up a pencil and scribbled from time to time as he listened attentively.

At a little before ten o'clock that evening (Rodemeyer wrote 9:50), the Reverend's son, Edward, and the Reverend's housekeeper's daughter, Emily Anne, had set out for the town of Stoughton, twelve miles distant, in the "church wagon" (station wagon, Rodemeyer noted). They had presents to deliver to the vicar there, Mr. Mackey, a late visit to make to an old family acquaintance, Miss Hewitt—and were to have returned in time for midnight services.

From his home at one o'clock the Reverend had telephoned Stoughton. Mr. Mackey had been visited by the couple; Miss Hewitt had not. The Reverend could not say positively whether they had attended midnight services, but they certainly had *not* been in the family pew.

Although Rodemeyer knew the church wagon by sight—a 1955 blue Ford—he properly asked for the owner's description and the license-plate number. Equipped with chains? Yes. Heater? Oh, yes, blankets, too. Gas? Tank at least three-fourths full—filled at four o'clock that day. Son licensed? Certainly. The girl? No. She was only fifteen, but had taken lessons and could operate a car.

Jotting all the while, Rodemeyer now inquired what the couple had been wearing.

"Oh, for goodness sake, Rodemeyer," the Reverend protested. "Is all this questioning necessary? Really, you're not in New York any more. Everyone in town knows Edward, everyone in town knows Emily. All I'm asking is that you scout around for them. You don't have to know what they had for breakfast."

"Well now, Reverend," said Rodemeyer softly, "first thing I'm going to do is notify the police in Stoughton and the first thing they're going to do is ask for a description."

Somewhat acidly then, the Reverend went into detail. The boy was eighteen, five eleven, one hundred sixty-five

pounds, blue eyes, blond hair, wearing brown shoes, brown trousers, a white sweater under a light brown suede jacket and no hat. The girl was fifteen, five three, about one hundred ten pounds, blue eyes, blond hair, wearing a white cloth coat over a blue skirt and white blouse. No hat, but a large, rather fancy, silver barrette.

During the colloquy, Rodemeyer heard the phone hushed several times. He reasoned that during these pauses the Reverend was talking to the much alarmed mothers. Rodemeyer felt sympathy for them.

The Reverend then disclosed that he had been over the road to Stoughton between one-fifteen and two. Had seen nothing of the station wagon or of any disabled cars. Had driven all around town. Had telephoned several friends and relatives.

At this recital Rodemeyer became concerned, for his first confident thoughts had been that the station wagon had broken down on the way back from Stoughton, short of the town limits Kilmer was supposed to travel to.

Still, he said, "Reverend, I figure they stalled somewhere or got stranded. Probably got a push or a tow to some highway house that doesn't have a phone. There's been no accidents, I can tell you that."

"Should I come down to the station?" the Reverend asked.

"No, no need at all," Rodemeyer assured him lightly, not wanting it known how short-handed he had left himself. "I'll get the boys here busy on it right away. You sit tight. We'll turn 'em up in no time. Call you back in about an hour. All right?"

"Whatever you think best, Mr. Rodemeyer. Whatever you think best."

Cripes almighty, thought Rodemeyer, hanging up. Where in hell could a couple of kids have gotten to in a couple of hours? And on Christmas night.

He telephoned Stoughton and told Scobie the particulars. Scobie's morbid guess was that they had gone off the road somewhere, maybe a smash-up. He would check with his highway bunch. He would send a car slowly along the line.

Rodemeyer put his knee boots and his woolen sweater on.

With a flip, he unhooked his heavy jacket from the wall stand. In the wide alley between the jailhouse and the hardware store he started up his Buick, set the wipers to flailing, checked his chains and took swipes at the snow on the hood. First of all, he was going to find Kilmer, and the rookie had better be cruising. If he found him laying up on a night like this, he'd stuff him in a snowbank.

As the motor warmed he wondered if he ought to call in Barry or Constantin to cover. Not just yet, he decided.

He had the car door open and was stooping to sit in when he heard the phone again. The Reverend? Whew, he thought. Lucky one. Ten seconds more and I'd a' been gone.

Kilmer's voice was hoarse with importance. He was calling from old man Webb's place, he declared, a few miles out on the Stoughton road.

His next long sentence was like slow lightning. In its flash, as in a revelation, Rodemeyer saw the sorry mess to come. Under his badge he felt his heart surge and stiffen.

"Shut up, Jack!" he shouted. "Shut up!"

"Huh?" said Kilmer, in a mystified tone.

"Listen to me," Rodemeyer hissed, needlessly lowering his own voice. "Where's Webb?"

"Gone back to bed."

"You *sure*?"

"Well he's upstairs anyway," Kilmer reported. "I can hear him moving right over me."

"Did you say anything to him?"

"No. Just could I use his phone."

"All right. That's all I want to know. Now listen, you're not to stop or say a word to anyone, understand? Get right back down there and keep busy. I'm on my way."

Rodemeyer slammed the phone down and ran. His thoughts were not at all on what Kilmer had told him. Excepting a miracle, that part of the tragedy was over. His hope now was to prevent the shameful ending and the wretched results.

Outdoors, a sudden gust blew a drift of snow in his face. To Rodemeyer it was like the slap of a cold, hard hand waking him from feelings and concerns to facts and cases

and now his conscience, that old sergeant, having brought him up short, began snapping orders.

Get back to the desk, my fine hearty.

Ring the firehouse, get a wagon started down there with oxygen and what all. Just a show we know, but it will make you look good. Call Barry, Constantin, Sweeney and Willis in on the double. Call Scobie again for Dr. Kendall, the county coroner. Call George Travers of the Compton Press, or if you must, young Eilers, who is eager and deserves a chance. You can show him what pictures to take. Call the attendant at the Baxter Funeral Home. There'll be lights on in the back room tonight. And then you tin-jointed sentimentalist, if you're still feeling so goddamn friendly to mankind, you can get your amiable ass over to the Albertsons, announce the glad tidings to them in your gentlest manner and under your guiding star shepherd them to the death scene. Come on, get cracking.

Rodemeyer shook his head as if to clear his ears and continued to the car. He was going to do wrong, he knew, but he didn't know why. For the life of him he couldn't explain the impulse that was prompting him to turn against all he had been taught, particularly the proper police procedure for which he had ingrained respect, if not real reverence.

Lights out, he backed the Buick silently into the street, swung left and, feeling eyes upon him from every darkened window, went up Broad Street at barely fifteen miles per hour, blessing the quiet of the motor, cursing the crunch of the chains.

Not until he was well clear of town did he switch on his road lights and jam the accelerator to the floor.

Three miles out he crossed Kilmer's curve out of Webb's and followed his track. A half mile farther he slowed, turned in the quarry road, doused his lights, got out and walked back. The twenty-foot gate, swung wide, was jammed hard in a snowdrift. It took some tugging, but at last he freed it. As he brought it round to the stanchion he noticed the iron sign:

TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED.

Making a half hitch with the rusted chain, he noticed the spread link, parted about a foot beyond the still-secured padlock. He tested the open prongs and grimaced. Why, with a pair of pliers any kid in town could make signet rings of the stuff.

Driving down the quarry road, lights on again, he found it well protected from the day-long snowfall. The high ridge on the right had sheltered it perfectly. Only as he approached the pits and began to wind out from the woods was the going at all difficult.

At last, a hundred yards before him he saw the outline of the work shack, the two cars partly protruding, front to back, the glare of the cruiser headlights yellowing the unearthliness of the scene.

Appalled, Rodemeyer drove into the grading area. Impatient, he forced himself to stop, back around and park his car neatly, facing the driveway, but well clear of it.

Walking past the station wagon he didn't so much as glance at it. Going around the cruiser into the light he came upon Kilmer. The young trooper was on his knees over the naked boy whose white face seemed asleep on the folded arm. Kilmer was heaving and grunting, his large hands compressing, releasing, the boy's rib cage.

Rodemeyer said nothing but went to the girl and kneeling, turned her over. Her golden hair was matted and drifted with snow, her otherwise pretty face morbidly ablaze with pink splotches. The closed eyelids were a livid violet, the full mouth forlornly slack, the off-green drool from it smearing cheek and chin—as if she had dribbled a spoonful of lime gelatin.

Rodemeyer took her arm and put his thick thumb lightly to the underside of the lean wrist. In half a minute he set it down again. Bending he put his ear between the small, spiring breasts.

In half a minute he got up, went over to Kilmer and put his hand on the rookie's shoulder.

"All right, Jack. That's enough. They're done for."

Kilmer was dead-beat. He staggered up, lurched to the open tail gate of the station wagon and sat heavily upon it, huffing and puffing.

Rodemeyer bent to the boy. Turned him over. Felt a long while for a pulse. Listened a long while for a heartbeat. Lifted an eyelid. Let it go.

As he got up he saw Kilmer trudging away. Shortly from the other side of the shanty he heard sounds of retching. Rodemeyer got the flashlight from the cruiser and wriggled under the rear of the station wagon. He gave the tail pipe a shake, felt flakes of rust on his face and some in his mouth. He spat, pulled. The tail pipe bent. He wrenched. It came off in his hand. Disgusted, he dragged himself out.

Kilmer came back wiping his mouth.

"You okay?" Rodemeyer asked.

"Uh—huh," said Kilmer tiredly.

"Sit down," said Rodemeyer. "Have a smoke."

He sat beside Kilmer on the tail gate, offered him a cigarette, lit it for him and then his own.

They blew smoke into the snowy air a while and then Rodemeyer said, "Let's have it."

"Well," Kilmer began, "when I relieved Hall he had just checked the Stoughton road, so I just cruised around town for half an hour. I went out Number Sixteen as far as Howard Johnsons. When I came back, church was getting out on the south side. I gave old lady London a lift home. And her sister. That was about quarter to one. I figure to go over the road then, but the highway crew came in and they said everything was okay, so we had coffee at the garage and I drove the Indian home."

Rodemeyer was quite used to this sort of sloppy report. After eight years it still rankled, but the last thing he wanted to do now was offend or alienate young Kilmer in any way.

"So," said Kilmer, "I didn't start out toward Stoughton til about—oh, I don't know—half-past one, quarter of two. Don't know what made me check the quarry gate. Force of habit from the summer, I guess. You know."

Rodemeyer nodded.

"The gate looked locked," said Kilmer, "but I saw tire tracks going in and none coming out. They were snowed over some, but they were still plain. I don't know as I would of bothered, but when I found the chain parted I figure I ought to take a look. What I usually do if I spot anybody, I

lean on the horn a couple or three times and beat it for five or ten minutes like you said. If they ain't out when I come back, well, like you said, I make a little fuss."

"Go on," said Rodemeyer.

"I drove all the way down. Didn't see a thing. Didn't suspect a thing. Only difference is, instead of backing and turning the way you did I made a swing around the shack. Lights didn't hit the station wagon till the last second. The shack mostly blocks it. Car looked empty but when I shut my engine off I heard theirs going, so I got out."

Kilmer sighed.

"Jesus, Chief," he said. "To put the flash on them in back like that after driving up with my lights on and—they didn't move! I rapped on the window and I yelled. And I got so goddamn shook. Whew!"

"I get the picture," said Rodemeyer dryly. "Go on."

"I shut off the engine, dropped the tail gate, climbed in and dragged them out. No signs of life. I tried respiration. Prone, mouth to mouth, slapping them, shaking them—Christ, I went back and forth like mad between the two of them till I got to feeling I was abusing the dead. I beat it up to Webb's then. After calling you I came down and tried some more."

Kilmer took a final suck on the cigarette, sighed a cloud of smoke and flipped the butt away.

Rodemeyer stood up. Going between the bodies he walked way beyond the illuminated area, almost to the edge of the quarry pits and stood a long while with his back turned.

The deep darkness was easy on his eyes. He seemed to be oblivious, but behind his abstracted stare his mind was clicking off times, car tracks, distances and depths of snow, his memory playing back reports and phone calls like a recorder while here and there his cop's conscience was blowing a shrill whistle.

Don't do it, Rodemeyer, don't do it. You're off on the wrong foot already, but if you stop now you'll still be in the clear. You're a policeman. I *remind* you. You're *paid* to be a policeman. You're *depended on* to be a policeman, and

you're *trusted in* to be a policeman. So do your job, damnit; who are you to play God?

Ah, get off my back, Rodemeyer protested to his conscience. It's *you* that's trying to play God. I'm just trying to do a decent thing.

His conscience scoffed at him. He cursed at his conscience. Time was wasting. He turned and walked into the light again.

"What time is it?" he asked Kilmer.

"Five of three."

"Let's get busy. You got a towel in the car?"

"A towel?"

"Yeah, yeah," he said irritably, "a towel."

"I got some rags."

"They clean?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Get 'em."

Kilmer went for them. Rodemeyer bent suddenly to the girl. Flexed her left arm. Her left leg. Turned her head gently from side to side.

That her joints and muscles seemed to be stiffening scared the hell out of him. Was it the cold or what? He knew that carbon monoxide asphyxiation affected the onset of *rigor mortis,* but damned if he could recall whether it hastened or retarded it. That's what a soft job does to you, he cursed. To your soft head.

"Hurry up," he growled at Kilmer. "Set 'em inside there. Further in. Don't want 'em wet. All right, let's lift her up."

"Hey, Chief," said Kilmer, balking in amazement. "What in hell are you trying to do? We're not supposed to—"

Rodemeyer tried to keep his voice soft but he was aware of the strain in it, the anxious pitch.

"Do as I tell you," he ordered, "and don't interrupt. You're a good guy, Kilmer, and a swell cop, and if it wasn't for you these kids wouldn't have a chance. So now please don't spoil things; just follow orders. If you've got any complaints, save 'em till the show's over. Okay?"

Kilmer nodded dumb compliance.

They lifted the girl's body.

"Sit her, *sit* her," said Rodemeyer. "That's it, all right now, *hold* her."

He reached for the rags. Stuffed a couple in his pocket. With the others he began to wipe and dry her forehead, face, neck, shoulders, back, bosom and waist. This done, he rubbed and tousled her dripping hair.

Carefully, he delved into the rumple of clothes in the rear of the wagon. Began to dress her. His hands were cold now, his fingers half numb. Panties and slip were easy enough, he was lucky with the hooks on her bra, but the slippery pearl of the tiny blouse buttons like to drove him crazy.

"All right," he said at last to the staring Kilmer. "Take her over your shoulder. C'mon. C'mon. Here. Take her wrists. That's it. Now stand up. Way over." He boosted the body. "That's it."

"Christ," said Kilmer.

"What's the matter," said Rodemeyer. "You disgusted with her because she's dead?"

The skirt was a cinch but the close-fitting shoes—and the tiny buckles—and, the longer he took, the more snow fell upon her and with no body heat—someone, mother, father, cop, coroner—hell, anyone at all might wonder at the dampness.

Her white coat had been folded over the driver's seat. They brought her in front before fitting it onto her, tugging a bit, trying not to smudge or wrinkle.

Her head fell against Rodemeyer's face. Oh brother, was his reaction, that hair will never do.

Handsome Kilmer had a comb. Rodemeyer switched on the dome light and impatiently raked, routing snarl after wet snarl and, just as impatiently, picking tooth after plastic tooth from the twisted strands.

Finishing, he was at a loss to set the hair in any decent fashion or even to keep the forelocks from falling over the girl's face. Here ironically the Reverend's report came to his rescue. The barrette, he remembered, the barrette.

"Here," said Kilmer, handing it to him from the driver's door. "This was under the tail gate. Must have come off when I dragged her out."

Rodemeyer squeezed it. Good, he thought. Things were going to go his way.

Propping the girl he took a long close look and was satisfied.

"How much gas?" he asked Kilmer.

Kilmer sat in, turned the ignition key, switched on the dash lights.

"Better than half."

"Start her up and put the heater on."

Kilmer started the engine and sat back.

"Put the damn heater on!" Rodemeyer repeated.

"Take it easy, will you, Chief. It's *on*. That's why they're dead, ain't it?"

"Oh—sorry," said Rodemeyer. "C'mon . . . let's make time."

The boy, though much harder to manage, was much easier to dress. Six, seven minutes later Rodemeyer zipped the suede jacket up within an inch of the sagging chin.

Kilmer had closed the tail gate, the interior of the station wagon was warming. Rodemeyer was pouring sweat, screaming orders.

"Where's the flash? What's in the back? Here, gimme it. Go kick up the snow. The hell with foot prints, just don't leave no body marks."

Squatting in the rear he started to fold up the forgotten blankets. Stopped. Put the flash on them. Sure enough, on the downier one he found the smear. He felt a curious satisfaction in seeing it. Death was always a damn shame, but here—he was almost happy about it—death had come not before, not during, but after.

He stepped away to the rear of the patrol car, Kilmer idling after him.

"You see what we got here now?" Rodemeyer asked, gesturing.

"No, Chief, I don't. Trouble, that's all."

"You know these kids?"

"I know the boy. He's Albertson's kid. The Reverend."

"How about the girl?"

"She's a cousin or something, I think. I know she lives with them." Here Kilmer looked befuddled and put his hand

to his head as if the sudden thought hurt him. "Gee, Chief, she ain't his sister, is she? Is that it?"

"No," Rodemeyer snorted. "She ain't his sister, but it couldn't be much worse if she was. She was brought up with the Albertsons. Her mother is the widow who keeps house for them—a wonderful woman. And the Albertsons are fine people, too. The Reverend can be a perpendicular pain in the ass now and then, but because of him there's not a shack in town won't have turkey on the table today and that ain't the half of it."

He was silent a moment, looking closely at Kilmer. Was the rookie catching on? Better make it plain.

"I don't want no stink," Rodemeyer declared. "I don't want these kids to stink. I don't want their folks to stink and I don't want no stink around town. You and me are going to see to that, savvy?"

"Geez, Chief," said Kilmer. "I tell you. It's too much for me. Honest, I been kind of dizzy since I first came down here. You do what you figure is best and I'll—I'll back you up, that's all."

"There's not much more *to* do," said Rodemeyer. "Just sneak them back in town, park them out of the way some place."

He paused.

"Yeah," said Kilmer, "and what then?"

"And *then*," Rodemeyer grinned, "you find them all over again."

The boldness of the idea, if not the beauty of it, broke through to Kilmer. His face brightened into almost a smile, as if he suddenly appreciated a perfect piece of mischief. His tone was that of a boy as he declared, "Wow! Chief, d'you think we can swing it?"

"We'd better or it'll swing us. C'mon. You get out to the road. Park across from the gate with your lights off. Anybody shows either way, switch 'em on and start cruising. Scobie's got a car working down from Stoughton. Prob'ly gone back by now tho'. After I get clear, close the gates and come after me. Lay off a good ways, though."

"How about *your* car, Chief?"

"If we work this right, it ain't important," said Rodemeyer. "If we don't, I won't be needin' it."

"Where you gonna park the station wagon?"

"What difference does it make? First place that strikes me right."

"How about by the church?" Kilmer suggested, warming to the plot. "That figures, don't it? Like they couldn't get started after services. There was a couple of cars had trouble."

Rodemeyer saw the glowing again at the side of the church. Only now it wasn't a mystery to him—it was a solution.

"Beautiful, Kilmer," he said. "Beautiful. That's what I'll do. I'll leave 'em on Maple near the top of the grade. You give me a minute to get away, give a good look around, and go into your act. And don't do a thing different than you did before."

"Okay," said Kilmer. "But, boy, I'm gonna hate wakin' old man Webb up again."

"You what!" Rodemeyer nearly yelled. He recovered, then. "Kilmer, you're way ahead of me. I won't hope to make jokes for a month of Sundays."

"Relax, Chief. We'll pull it off."

"If we do, you're promoted to days."

"There ain't no openings."

"I'll make one if I have to retire to do it and, I'm telling you—after tonight I'll be plenty ready. C'mon, let's shake a leg."

Kilmer gunned the motor and was gone. Rodemeyer stood in the dark beside the station wagon regarding the limp silhouettes inside. At last he got into the driver's seat, lowered the window and shifted into reverse.

On the way back to town he had a hard time of it. The crazy stunt he was trying grew more and more impossible in his mind. Again and again he had to shoulder the boy away, finally with such a shove that he toppled across the girl's lap and Rodemeyer nearly ran off the road.

As on a teletype, alarming messages came to mind: The busted tail pipe. Where had he tossed it? The blankets. Were they properly folded? Customarily kept on the floor.

Would anyone dream of inspecting them? What to tell Scobie or the Reverend or anyone at all who may have telephoned during his absence. What complexities might come into the simple story he and Kilmer intended to tell? Himself asleep in one of the cell bunks. Kilmer cruising around. But had his "office" been visited? And, who else might have been cruising around? What had been noticed in the night that it was too late to cover up or impossible to allow for?

But he was entering the outskirts to town now. Too late to turn back. Ugh, he growled at himself, stop your griping and get it over with.

He went left on Clary Street. Right on Wood Avenue.

If ever a place was fast asleep, this little old town sure was. Nothing stirring but the snow. Nothing awake but the air.

Sure. All he had to worry about was drunks, insomniacs, celebrants getting home late from Troy, milkmen, lovers, those with big noses, those with big ears and those with big windows on the way to the bathroom.

Coming to Maple, he slowed to turn right. Too slow. The motor knocked and nearly died.

"That's all I need," he swore, gassing it gently, shifting into second.

Going upgrade, the houses on his left were black. "Get your sleep, you sons o' guns," he directed as he approached the brightness on the right. "Suck it up! Soak it up! Smother in it!

"Snow like hell!" he implored the falling skies. "Sink the joint! Bury it!"

He wanted inches more on the roof and fenders, the inches that had slewed off on the way back from the quarry.

But as he eased into the curbing and pulled at the parking brake he felt an immense relief. A relief that had certainty pulsing in it, positive and sharp. A confidence that nothing else could or would matter now that he had them here. Come what might, he knew now, he could contend with it.

For here "they" were. Returned from heavy going on a hazardous road. A bit late for services and somewhat embarrassed about it. Mother might not mind but Father would be mortified. Best not go tramping into the middle of

things. They would sit here in view of the Nativity scene. How natural it looked with the snow falling around. And how nice and warm it was, where they were.

Rodemeyer hauled the boy behind the wheel. He gave a last glance at the girl slumped in the corner, closed the door and stepped across the street.

Moments later at the top of the walk, he paused and looked far down the square. As far as he could make out the station house was quiet. No cars outside, no shadows within. Turning, he looked downhill, waited half a minute and saw Kilmer turn slowly, carefully into his tracks.

He hurried across the avenue, inspirited with happy feelings at having accomplished a tremendous good. Yet misgivings began to gnaw at him, cruel technicalities to his clean triumph—the oath of office he had broken—the huge lie he was giving life to—the young officer he had involved in it—and, over all, the offended eye of his God, who to him was a vague chief of all police.

So that at least, stamping his feet at the steps of the station house, Rodemeyer swung angrily round and addressed the white drifting of the dark sky.

"For Christ's sake!" he roared. "It's Christmas, ain't it?"

All of us are aware that modern police procedure and the art of criminal detection have advanced tremendously in the past few decades—what with all the advances in science and the addition of college-trained psychologists to investigative agencies throughout the country.

So, if you are a criminal this should be a heartening story. If not, I hope it will bring a wry smile to your lips.

Steve O'Connell

PUT TOGETHER A MAN

SERGEANT WALTERS faced the Police Academy class. "As far as we know, we've never seen him, and yet we think we know what the bomber is and what he looks like." He smiled. "All we have to do is find him."

He turned to the blackboard and chalked the numerals. "Four bombs have exploded. Three people have been killed. Six suffered major injuries and twenty-three minor."

His eyes went back to the officers seated before him. "You have often heard that you cannot judge a book by its cover, and yet we find that criminals, within certain crime areas, are often remarkably alike mentally, emotionally, and even physically."

Sergeant Walters glanced at the wall clock. It was three minutes after eight A.M. "We know, for instance, that petty check forgers usually have a strong desire to be apprehended and *returned* to prison. They find a certain type of homogenous society more congenial than the world at large."

The sergeant was a thin man in an impeccably tailored and pressed uniform. "And we know certain things about bombers." He turned to the blackboard again and wrote. "There are approximately 4,000,000 people in this metropolitan area."

He crossed out that figure and put "2,000,000" underneath.

Then he smiled. "We can immediately eliminate approximately 2,000,000 people. The bomber is a male."

I examined the contact points. They were clean and free of corrosion and the timing mechanism worked perfectly.

I nodded to myself. Yes, the failure hadn't been mechanical. The flashlight batteries were to blame. They had been just too weak to create the necessary voltage for detonation.

Usually the date of effective use is stamped on the cardboard casing, but the ones I had purchased this time were an inferior brand and had probably been lying on that display counter for some time.

My sister Paula's sharp voice searched down the basement stairs. "Harold, breakfast's on the table."

I put a dust cover over the bomb, snapped out the light over my workbench, and went upstairs.

"Wash your hands," my mother said. "You've got dirt all over them."

I went to the bathroom and when I returned, I sat down at the table. "I'm not too hungry this morning, mother."

"You eat all of your breakfast," she directed. "There's nothing like a good breakfast to start the day. Drink your orange juice . . ."

"We can eliminate perhaps a million and a half more people," Sergeant Walters said. "The bomber is an adult and he is between the ages of forty-five and sixty-five."

One of the front row students raised his hand. "What about the Johnson boy? He was just nineteen."

"True enough, O'Brien," the sergeant conceded. "But in his case he bombed only police stations. Nothing else. He had been in trouble since the age of twelve and he formed the opinion that all the police hated and persecuted him and he struck back at them. But only youth is so blunt and direct."

Walters put the chalk back on the blackboard tray and wiped his fingers with a white handkerchief. "However, in this case we have a bomber who strikes out indiscriminately. He leaves his packages in subways, in buses, in any place where people tend to congregate."

O'Brien was red-haired and had a slight squint. "But why particularly must he be between the ages of forty-five and sixty-five?"

"All our experiences with this type of a crime lead us to that conclusion." Walters shrugged. "We don't know exactly why their age is confined to that period, but we rather suspect that before forty-five they are optimistic that their troubles will resolve themselves, and after sixty-five they simply don't care."

My sister reads the paper at the breakfast table. "Nothing more about the bombing on the front page," she said.

I put down my empty orange juice glass. "Why should there be? There hasn't been a bombing in eight days."

"Harold," my mother said, "what do you want for your birthday?"

"Mother, I'm going to be forty-six. I think it's really about time we forgot about my birthday."

"I believe in asking people what they'd like for their birthdays," my mother said. "That way they get what they want. I think you could use a couple of white shirts."

Paula turned to the inside of the paper. "Here's something, but it's only a re-hash."

"Don't use so much sugar, Harold," my mother said.

Paula would have been supremely happy as a suffragist. "Why does everybody think that it has to be a man?"

I sipped my coffee. "Because people think that women have gentler, finer natures."

Paula glared at me. "Are you *trying* to be sarcastic?"

"Children," my mother said. "I'll have no squabbling at the breakfast table. Paula, put that paper away."

O'Brien raised his hand again. "Why couldn't it be a woman?"

The sergeant smiled. "Women may endanger society by carrying typhoid, but they do not carry bombs."

Sergeant Walters brushed chalk dust from his cuff. "We can safely speculate further. The bomber is a bachelor. He probably lives with his mother, or with older sisters, or aunts. He is a man no one particularly notices, but when he is noticed it is only because he seems to be so polite, so

considerate of others. He is always willing to do little favors. In fact, he might live next door to any one of us. He probably doesn't smoke and he almost never drinks."

O'Brien grinned. "I'd think he'd take a few drops to build up his courage to plant the bombs."

The sergeant shook his head. "No. His type either becomes sick or sleepy if it has a drink. He is a plump man, a pampered man."

"Why would he want to kill innocent people?"

"He doesn't think of them at all. He isn't striking at them. He thinks that in some way he's hitting back at the company that fired him, or the banker he thinks cheated him, or at the firm that failed to give him the promotion he thought he deserved."

"This evening we'll go over to Uncle Martin's," my mother said. "We haven't seen him for a week and we must remember to pay him regular visits."

"Uncle Martin is old and boring," Paula said.

My mother poured coffee. "I know, Paula, but we must remember that he has no interests but us and his Turkish baths."

"I may have to work late tonight, mother," I said. "I have to finish the Evans account today and I don't know if I can before five."

Paula smiled thinly. "I heard that Corrigan was promoted last week. I gather they passed over you again."

"I gather they did," I said drily.

"Politics," my mother said.

"You're almost forty-six," Paula said. "Do you think you'll ever amount to anything?"

"We have our hopes."

"You know what?" Paula said. "You just didn't have any backbone. That's why you didn't get ahead."

"You let people step on you," my mother agreed. "You let them take advantage of your good nature. Corrigan got the job you should have had."

"It doesn't make any difference to me now," I said. "And Corrigan's a good man." But I didn't believe that. If ever a man lacked accounting ability, he was the one. The promo-

tion was sheer office politics. I wondered if it were the same in every firm.

"Eat all of your bacon and eggs, Harold," my mother said.

Paula laughed wickedly. "He's a butterball already."

"I am not a butterball," I said.

"Do we—does the department—have anything concrete?" O'Brien asked. "I mean, like clues? Something besides just speculation?"

Sergeant Walters was faintly irritated. "Besides 'speculation,' we have nothing."

"No fingerprints?"

Walters laughed. "If we had fingerprints, do you think that the bomber would still be at large?"

"I just meant that maybe there were fingerprints and we just didn't have a record of them anywhere. Even in Washington."

"No. There were no fingerprints. We examined every bomb scrap we could find. And the bits of wrapping paper and the fragments of string told us nothing."

O'Brien pursued the subject. "Weren't the Tyson bombings solved by fingerprints?"

Walters nodded. "Yes. But in that case we recovered a whole bomb—one that had failed to explode. We found a thumb and a forefinger print on one of the flashlight batteries."

The sergeant thought about the case for a moment. "They weren't Tyson's prints. However, they belonged to the clerk in a hardware store where Tyson had purchased the batteries. We traced the clerk and then simply waited and investigated any customer who purchased flashlight batteries."

Walters grinned. "Tyson was fifty-two, plump, mild, and lived with two maiden aunts. In his basement, we found a roll of butcher's wrapping paper and the last piece torn from it had been used to wrap the bomb which sent him to the chair. The edges matched perfectly."

Sergeant Walters sighed. "If only we could get hold of one of this bomber's contraptions before it exploded."

There are certain physical types which quite naturally require a few extra pounds. I am certain I am one of them. "Just what makes you think you're such a joy to behold?" I asked Paula. "You're tall and skinny and forty-two and I support you."

Two spots of color appeared on Paula's cheeks. "I am *not* skinny. I simply watch my weight."

"I fail to see why," I said pleasantly. "Apparently no man looks at you anyway."

"Butterball," she hissed.

"You'd have to buy a husband," I said, smiling faintly. "Is that what you plan to do some day?"

"Children, children," my mother scolded. "Must you always squabble?" She rapped the table with a spoon. "Harold, drink your coffee. It's almost time for you to leave."

I glanced at my watch. It was eight-fifteen. "Do we have a flashlight in the house?"

"I think so," my mother said. "It should be in the utility closet."

I found the flashlight, removed the two batteries, and went downstairs into the basement.

The bomb had been set to go off at four-thirty yesterday, but when I had heard no news concerning it either on television or the radio, I finally came to the conclusion that it had failed to go off.

I had been forced to go to the Twelfth Avenue bus terminal and retrieve it. The police have ingenious laboratory techniques and I certainly didn't want them to recover a whole bomb. There was no telling what it might reveal to them.

Now I substituted the two batteries and tried the mechanism. Yes, this time it worked perfectly. I wiped all the parts of the bomb with my handkerchief and then put on gloves to reassemble it. I set the timer for one-thirty in the afternoon and put the bomb in a cardboard shoe box. I tore a section of paper from the roll of butcher's wrapping paper, and securely wrapped and bound the package.

I suspected that I would have to waterproof my next bomb.

The package was perfectly safe to handle, but neverthe-

less I carried it gingerly upstairs and put it on the breakfast table. "Take this to the Sixty-Eighth Avenue Bus Terminal. It's set to go off at one-thirty."

Paula grimaced. "Couldn't you choose a better neighborhood? That's practically Skid Row. A woman isn't safe on the streets."

"You'll have nothing to worry about," I said acidly.

My mother sighed. "How long before we blow up Uncle Martin?"

"I'll do that next week," I said. "But even after that we'll have to distribute a few more bombs. We don't want the police to suspect that there is a logical motive for the bombings. After all, we stand to inherit almost a million dollars."

"I wish you'd let *me* blow up Uncle Martin," Paula said wistfully.

I suspected that there was something Freudian in that.

"No," I said sternly. "We all know that the only place Uncle Martin ever goes to is the Turkish bath. *I* will plant that bomb."

"About how many men do you think fit the picture?" O'Brien asked.

"That's hard to say. It would be nice if we had cards on everybody in this area and could just run them through an IBM machine. But I'd estimate about thirty thousand."

"That's still a lot of people and they're scattered all over."

Walters conceded that.

I did manage to do the Evans account by five o'clock.

When I arrived home at quarter to six, Sergeant Walters had just finished putting his car in the garage.

I don't know too much about him except that he seems to have some kind of a desk job with the police force.

He nodded to me and went on to the house.

We have been sharing the same garage and living in the same duplex for ten years and yet I doubt if he would recognize me on the street.

It is one of the pathetic aspects of my life.

No one seems to notice me.

With Henry Slesar's tremendous output of short stories it would be difficult not to find at least one of his deserving a place among the Best.

He is one of the two writers who is repeated from last year. I'M BETTER THAN YOU *is a taut, dramatic story with a theatrical background, in which Mr. Slesar is very much at home. If he does as well next year I expect to find him in that volume also.*

Henry Slesar

I'M BETTER THAN YOU

NICKI WASN'T HOME when the telephone call came and the roommate who took the message was too flustered to make a coherent report. She wasn't sure about *where* Mr. Wolfe had seen Nicki perform: summer stock or the two-minute walk-on in *Gypsy* or the television commercial for that upholstery cleanser; but what was the difference? Nicki was supposed to go to the Broadhurst Theatre at four *prompt*, if she wanted a reading. Nicki was so flustered that she burst out of the rooming house without even passing a comb through her tangled blonde hair. She walked the thirteen blocks to the theatre, not allowing herself the indulgence of a taxi ride. It might be a job, sure, but the casting had been in progress for over a month, and nothing could be left but the smallest of parts.

There were only five people on stage when Nicki walked in, and four of them barely glanced up when she stepped hesitantly onto the boards. The fifth, a youngish, bony-headed man in a pullover, grinned and came over. She knew it was Wolfe, the director, an import from a downtown theatre who was making his Broadway start with a new comedy.

"I know you," he said. "You're Nicki Porter. Thanks for coming."

"Thank *you,* Mr. Wolfe," she said shyly, using her full-throated voice well. Nicki wasn't outstandingly pretty or even provocatively plain; her best feature was her voice.

"I'll tell you what this is," Wolfe said. "There's a young widow in this play, very young, not exactly the mourner type. The part's pretty small, but it's the kind of thing that gets noticed. Hey, Jerry," he called to the heavy-set man talking earnestly to a handsome woman in blue slacks. "Toss me a script."

Nicki fingered the pages eagerly, and the director said, "Try the speech on page twelve, Mary Lou's speech. She's a Southern type, but we don't want any fried-chicken accent." He started to walk off, but stopped to say, "Oh, look, Nicki, I want to make something clear. Frankly, we stopped casting the show last Friday. The only part I was dubious about was Mary Lou's, and we sort of settled on somebody. Then I remembered seeing you in something or other at Watkins Glen—"

"The Voice of the Turtle."

"That's right. Anyway, you kind of *looked* like Mary Lou in that, so I traced you through Equity. But don't get *too* hopeful about this, because who knows?" He shrugged, sharing with her his understanding of the theatre's uncertainty.

The speech on page twelve was meaty. She knew she was reading well, and when she was through, the woman in the blue slacks struck her hands together in light, approving applause.

"Well, fine," Wolfe said with a sigh. "That's just fine, Nicki. We won't keep you waiting for the decision very long; rehearsals have to start next week." He flashed a smile. "Where's my manners? Want you to meet the gang." He propelled her towards the group, and tossed off the prominent theatrical names as if they were casual guests in somebody's living room. Nicki shook hands, fighting the flush that was rising and spreading to the tips of her exposed ears. She was always this way, shy and tongue-tied before the easy-mannered people who knew the rewards of theatrical

success. They were the anchored ones, solidly fixed on what seemed to her to be a capricious and treacherous ocean. As she left the theatre, she felt like a small craft drifting out to sea.

But the watery analogies that filled her mind vanished once the stage door closed behind her. The solid reality of the sidewalk brought her with a bump to the realization that she had been liked, really liked, and that the part was going to be hers. She turned and looked again at the theatre posters, and when she saw the young, dark-haired girl coming out of the lobby pause to look at her, she felt an impulse to run up to this stranger and babble out the story of her sudden hopefulness. Instead, she turned and headed for the cafeteria on the corner.

She was about ready for her second cup of coffee when she spotted the dark-haired girl just three tables away, looking as if she expected an invitation. Nicki smiled, just a small smile that could be construed as a private pleasantry or an acknowledgment. The girl must have taken it the latter way; she picked up her purse and came over.

"May I sit down?" she said. There was a breathless quality in her voice, and her white teeth were biting her lower lip. She was pretty, Nicki thought, in a pinched-face Julie Harris way, but her eyes were swollen, even protruding. "I'd like to talk to you a minute," she said.

"Sure," Nicki said, moving things closer to her side of the small table. "I think I saw you at the theatre."

"Yes," she said, sitting down. "I was there, but please don't mention it, not to Mr. Wolfe, I mean. You see, I'm Jill Yarborough, maybe Mr. Wolfe mentioned me."

"No, he didn't."

"Not even that?" She made herself laugh, and it struck Nicki as being theatrical.

"Are you an actress?"

"That's what I keep telling them. I was sitting in the back of the theatre during your reading. You were pretty good, I thought. I couldn't hear you too well, you weren't projecting, but I think you were good."

"Thanks," Nicki said, stirring uncomfortably and suddenly afraid of the heat content in the girl's eyes.

"I'm surprised Mr. Wolfe didn't say anything about me, because he practically promised me the part last Friday. The Mary Lou part. You wouldn't know it to listen to me, but I'm from the South, deep South, that is, but I've been North so long you can hardly tell by my accent. Can you?"

"No."

"Well, I worked like crazy to get rid of my drawl, and then *this* thing comes along. Wouldn't it kill you?" She put a gloved hand to her lips as if to stifle a giggle, but there wasn't any. "I haven't had a *real* job, an acting job I mean, for almost a year. When Wolfe said I was just what he was looking for, I could have crowed like a rooster. Only then he called me Saturday morning and said he wasn't sure yet. That was a lousy Saturday morning, let me tell you."

"I'm sorry, Miss—"

"Yarborough. Only call me Jill. Your name's Nicki?"

"Yes."

"Well, I didn't turn on the oven or anything," Jill Yarborough said, her eyes staring through Nicki's forehead. "But I didn't crow any more either. I thought I'd hang around the theatre today, just to see what would happen. And I saw."

Nicki wanted to touch the girl's hand, or do something to mitigate the pain in her voice. But all she could do was answer in choked tones.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I know how it is, too. I've been sitting in casting offices for the last eight months myself. But I don't think anything's definite about this—"

Jill Yarborough laughed. "Oh, come on. You ought to be able to tell. He *likes* you, Nicki. That's for sure." The smile went. "Only I'm better than you are. Better for the part, better in every way."

Nicki, embarrassed, looked into her empty cup. The girl didn't say anything else for a while, but her swollen eyes were still on Nicki's face, and she could hear her breath clearly, even in the clatter of the restaurant. Then she said, her voice so low that Nicki had to strain to hear:

"Don't take the job, Nicki. Tell him you can't take it."

"What?"

"Don't take the part. Call up Mr. Wolfe and tell him you

don't want it. That there's something else you have to do, that you've got a conflict."

It was a shock to hear the blatant words, the unashamed suggestion.

"You can't be serious?"

"I am. I *am*. I'm better than you are, Nicki, I've worked harder. You don't deserve it the way I do."

"But *I* need the work, too. You can't—"

"Not like I need it. Not the way I do. You couldn't." The girl shut her eyes, and the action was merciful, like a shade pulled down over a glaring window light. Then her eyes opened and she said, "If you take the part, I'll kill you. So help me, Nicki, that's what I'll do."

Nicki gasped and scraped back her chair.

"I'll kill you and then I'll kill myself. I've thought of doing that for a long time anyway. I gave myself this one last chance, and that's all. I was going to take this."

She fumbled in her purse. Half-hidden in her trembling fingers, she exposed a small, dark brown bottle, the skull and crossbones clearly outlined at the bottom of the label.

"You can't threaten me," Nicki said in a whisper. "I won't let you scare me out of taking the—"

"I'm not trying to scare you. I'm just telling you the fact. You say yes to Wolfe and we both die. If you want to tell the police about this, you go ahead and see what it gets you. I'll laugh my head off and say that you're crazy, see what good it does you."

She rose swiftly from the table, turning her head as if to avoid a display of tears, and gathered up her purse and the single glove she had yanked off her hand in her nervousness. Then she dropped half a dollar on the table and went hurriedly to the revolving doors.

It wasn't a matter of calculating her decision. It was being made for Nicki in some busy chamber of her mind, all the time she walked back to the rooming house, and all through the excited conversation with Theresa, the friend who shared her room and her aspirations. She didn't even mention Jill Yarborough; she wasn't going to be bluffed out of her first real break in almost a year.

At eight-thirty the next morning, the telephone rang.

Nicki pushed pillows off her bed and fumbled for the receiver.

"Nicki? This is Carl Wolfe—"

She shut her eyes and prayed.

"If you like us, we like you," the director said. "We're having the first meeting of the cast Tuesday morning at ten. Can you be there?"

"Oh, sure," Nicki said casually. Then she hung up, walked nonchalantly around the bed, picked up a pillow, and thumped the back of her sleeping roommate. "Wake up, you fool!" she screamed ecstatically. "I got the job!"

She forgot about Jill Yarborough. Memorizing her three-page part made her forget. Carl Wolfe, gracious, demanding, and biting at the first meeting she attended, made her forget. And then, a faltering first-time "blocking" rehearsal, followed by a triumphant run-through that Wolfe grudgingly called "pretty near perfect," made her forget the burning, protruding eyes, the small brown bottle, the agony and threat of Jill Yarborough.

On Wednesday night, she walked home from the theatre at seven-thirty, tired but still elated. Theresa had wanted them to go out that evening; she had a boy friend named Freddy, and Freddy had a friend who'd *love* to meet an honest-to-God working actress, but Nicki had refused. When she used the key to the apartment, she walked into darkness and solitude. She undressed, washed her hair, put on a housecoat, and flopped on the sofa with a book. When the doorbell rang, she got up to answer it without hesitation, because Nicki had forgotten about Jill Yarborough.

She was wearing a long black coat with a fake fur collar high around the neck, clasped by a nervously-working hand. She said Nicki's name, and Nicki almost moved to slam the door on her, but she didn't. The girl walked in.

"Wasn't easy finding you," she said. "I had to ask the stage doorman . . ."

"Please don't make any trouble," Nicki said wearily. "It's all settled now. There's no need to make a scene, Miss Yarborough—"

"Call me Jill," the girl said. She looked around the apartment briefly, and then moved to take off her coat. For a

moment, Nicki thought it was going to be all right. Her manner was relaxed, casual. She dropped the coat on a chair. "It's a nice place," she said. "Do you live here alone?"

"I have a roommate. She should be back any minute . . ."

Jill Yarborough smiled. "I'll bet she won't. I'll bet she's got a date, and you haven't. I know how it is when you're working. You don't even care if there's a man in your life. Isn't that true?"

"I—was too tired to go out tonight."

"Naturally." The girl sat, folding her hands primly in her lap; until then, Nicki had been afraid to meet her eyes. Now she did, and saw that their hot light was undiminished since the time of their first meeting. "How did the first rehearsal go?" she said lightly.

"All right, I suppose."

"He's a funny guy, isn't he? That Carl Wolfe, I mean. One minute he's sweet as pie; the next, he's chewing you out like a top sergeant. I've heard about him."

"He's really very nice."

The girl smiled again, sleepily. "I'll bet you thought I didn't mean what I said to you that time. Did you?"

"You were upset that day—"

Jill Yarborough shifted the coat onto her lap. Her hand dipped into a pocket. Nicki, on the sofa, stiffened. The hand came out with the brown bottle.

"Oh, I meant it," the girl said dreamily. "I meant every word. I was going to kill you, and then myself."

"Please," Nicki said anxiously. "Don't do anything foolish that—"

"You thought I was only bluffing, but I wasn't. I was right for that part. I'm a better actress than you are, a whole lot better. You know what's wrong with you?" she asked, matter-of-factly. "You're all voice and no body. You only act with your larynx." She turned the bottle around in her hand. "I'm going to make you drink this," she said.

Nicki squirmed to the edge of the sofa and stood up. "I'll scream," she whispered. "If you try anything I'll scream the house down. There are people right next door . . ."

"You don't have what it takes," Jill Yarborough said bitterly. "You're not willing to fight for a part, not the way

I am. To get some place in the theatre, you have to be a little mad, and you have to be able to fight every step of the way. That's why I'm better than you, Nicki."

She uncorked the bottle.

"Get out of here!" Nicki yelled.

Jill Yarborough grinned, and stood up. She came forward, her shoulders hunched, her eyes and teeth grotesquely white in her dark, tormented face. She moved slowly, a dream figure, nightmarish.

"This is for you, Nicki," she said, holding up the bottle. "For you . . ."

Nicki screamed.

The girl stopped, and her face changed. She put her shaking hand to her forehead; the heat in her eyes faded. Then she caught her breath, and tipped the mouth of the small bottle to her lips. She threw back her head, and the contents disappeared down her throat. She swallowed hard, painfully, and let the bottle drop from her fingers and bounce on the carpet. Nicki screamed again and covered her eyes; when she looked once more, Jill Yarborough hadn't moved, stunned by her own action. Nicki, sobbing, went to her.

"Get away from me," the girl said hoarsely. "You got what you wanted, get away." She took a step, and her knees buckled. "Oh, God, it hurts," she said, holding her stomach.

"I'll get a doctor—"

"Stay where you are!"

"You've got to let me help you!"

Jill Yarborough went to the sofa, leaning against its arm. She began to retch, and sank to her knees. It was then that Nicki grabbed the telephone.

The internes who took Jill Yarborough into Nicki's bedroom were both young, cool, and taciturn. There were strangled sounds behind the closed bedroom door for almost half an hour; Nicki sat quaking on the sofa in the living room, waiting for word.

Finally, one of the internes emerged, a crisp young man with blond hair. The ordeal over, he was more willing to

be friendly. When Nicki babbled her questions at him, he grinned.

"She'll be okay," he said. "Good as new in a day or two. We used the stomach pump and gave her a sedative." He sat down and lit a cigarette. "There's something I have to ask you now. Something rather important."

"Yes?"

"The girl claims she thought she was drinking cough syrup, that the whole business was a mistake. Were you here at the time it happened?"

"Yes, I was."

He considered her thoughtfully. "You know, if she swallowed that stuff deliberately, we'd have to report it to the police. Suicide's a crime in this state."

"You mean, she'd be arrested?"

"Not as bad as all that. She'd be sent to an observation ward in one of the city hospitals, so we'd keep an eye on her, give a psychiatric checkup. These suicide types, they don't quit on the first try." He eyed her speculatively. "Could you corroborate her story, Miss?"

"Yes," Nicki said, looking away. "It was purely an accident. She had no reason to commit suicide, none at all."

When the ambulance had gone, Nicki tried calling the Broadhurst, but there was no answer. She found Carl Wolfe's telephone number in the directory and, luckily, he was home. He listened to her opening statements in silence.

"It's just something I can't help," she said. "I'll have to be out of town for the next few weeks, and that means I won't be available for rehearsals. So maybe it's best we call it off."

"I understand," Wolfe said, finally. "I'm sorry about this, Nicki. I think you were right for the part. Maybe some other time . . ."

"You have someone else in mind, don't you? I wouldn't want you to be stranded or anything like that."

"Yes," Wolfe said, "we do have another candidate. The one I was giving the part to, until you came along."

Thank God, Nicki thought. Then she said a quick good-by and hung up.

She tiptoed quietly into the bedroom. The girl was still

asleep, but she stirred and opened her eyes as Nicki approached the bed.

"I've called Carl Wolfe," Nicki said coldly. "Can you hear me, Jill? I called Carl Wolfe and said I didn't want the part. It's all yours," she said bitterly. "I don't want it half as much as you do."

Jill Yarborough smiled. "I'm better than you are," she said softly. "I deserve the part. Didn't I prove it to you? Didn't I?"

"What do you mean?"

"I nearly died," Jill Yarborough said, and then laughed raspingly. "Could you swallow water and nearly die? That's all it was, you know. Water! Could you do it? Could you?" She struggled to sit up, and Nicki backed away from the bed. "Could you?" Jill Yarborough screamed at her, in rage, in righteousness, and in exultant triumph.

As I said in my foreword, I'm disappointed that there aren't more women writers represented in this collection but delighted with the ones we have.

You'll find yourself sympathizing with Jared Sloane at exactly the same time that he's chilling your blood—and this is no mean feat for an author to pull off.

Miriam Allen deFord

A DEATH IN THE FAMILY

AT FIFTY-EIGHT, Jared Sloane had the settled habits of a lifelong bachelor. At six o'clock in summer and seven in winter, he put out the lights, locked up and went back to his living quarters. He showered and shaved and put on clothes less formal than his profession demanded, then cooked his supper and cleared it away.

Then he laid the phone extension on the bedroom floor where he would be sure to hear it if it rang, unlocked the tight-fitting door leading from the kitchen, and went downstairs for the evening with his family.

Old Mr. Shallcross, from whom he had bought the building twenty years before, had used the cellar only for storage. But every man who was young and on his own in the big Depression acquired a smattering of many skills, and Jared was no exception; he had sawed and hammered and painted, and what had once been a cellar was now a big, comfortable sitting room, its two small high-up windows always covered with heavy curtains. He was not competent to install electric lights, but he had run a pipe from the kitchen range to the old gas chandelier which, like most of the furniture he had repainted and re-upholstered, had come from a glorified junk shop he patronized in McMinnville, the county seat. The room was always cool, and in

winter it was so chilly that he had to wear his overcoat, but that was necessary and he no longer noticed it.

They were always there, waiting for him. Dad was in the big easy chair, reading the Middleton *Gazette*. Mother was knitting a sock. Grandma was dozing on the couch—she dozed all the time; she was nearly ninety. Brother Ben and sister Emma were playing whist, sitting in straight chairs at the little table, the cards held cannily against Ben's white shirt and Emma's ruffled foulard print. Gussie, Jared's wife, sat at the piano, her fingers arrested on the keys, her head turned to smile at him as he entered. Luke, his ten-year-old son, sat on the floor, a half-built model ship before him.

Jared would sit down in the one vacant place, a big comfortable club chair upholstered in plum-colored plush, and would chat with them until bedtime. He told them all the day's doings upstairs, commented on news of the town and of the people they knew, repeated stories and jokes (carefully expurgated) he had heard from salesmen, expressed his views and opinions on any subject that came into his mind. They never argued or contradicted him. They never answered.

Their clothes changed with the seasons and the styles; otherwise, the scene never altered. When bedtime came, Jared yawned, stretched, said, "Well, goodnight all—pleasant dreams," turned out the overhead light, climbed the stairs, locked the door behind him and went to bed. For a while he had always kissed his wife on the forehead for goodnight, but he felt that the others might be jealous, and now he showed no favoritism.

The family had not always played their present roles. Once they had all had different names. They had been other people's grandmother and father and mother and sister and brother and wife and son. Now they were his.

He had waited a long time for some of them—for relatives of just the right age, with the right family resemblance. Gussie he had loved, quietly and patiently, for years before she became his wife; she had been Mrs. Ralph Stiegeler then, the wife of the Middleton Drugstore owner, and she had never guessed that Jared Sloane was in love with her. Her name really was Gussie; Ben and Emma and Luke just had

names he liked. She was the nucleus of the family; all the others had been added later, one by one. Grandma, strange to say, had been with them the shortest time—little more than a year. All the family needed now to be complete was a daughter, and Jared had already picked her name—she would be called Martha. He liked old-fashioned names; they belonged to the past, to his lonely boyhood in the orphan asylum where he had lived all his life until he was sixteen.

He still remembered bitterly how the others had jeered at him, a foundling whose very name had been given at the whim of the superintendent after he had been found, wrapped in a torn sheet, on the asylum steps. The others were orphans, but they knew who they were; they had aunts and uncles and cousins who wrote them letters and came to see them and sent them presents at Christmas and birthdays, whom they visited sometimes and who often paid for all or part of their keep. Jared Sloane had nobody.

That was why he had wanted so large a family. Every evening now he was a man with parents, a brother, a sister, a wife and child. (Grandma was a lucky fluke; he had kept an eye on old Mrs. Atkinson and it had paid off.) There was no more room for another adult member of the family, but Martha, when he found her, could sit on a cushion on the floor beside her brother, and play with a doll he would buy for her or do something else domestic and childish and feminine. He decided that she should be younger than Luke —say seven or eight, old enough to enjoy her father's conversation, not so young as to need the care called for by a small child.

Every night, in bed, before he set the alarm and put his teeth in the tumbler, Jared Sloane uttered a grateful little unvoiced prayer to someone or something—perhaps to himself—a prayer of thanks for the wonderful, unheard-of idea that had come to him ten years ago when, in the middle of a sleepless, mourning night, he had suddenly realized how he could make Gussie his wife and keep her with him as long as he himself lived. Ralph Stiegeler had called him only that afternoon. Out of nowhere there had come to him the daring, frightening scheme, full-fledged as Pallas Athene from the head of Zeus.

He had gambled on discovery, ruin, imprisonment, disgrace, against the fulfillment of his dearest and most secret dream—to have a family of his own. And he had won. After Gussie, the rest had been easy. He could not foresee, but he could choose. He blessed Middleton for being a small town where there was need for only one man of his profession, and he could get all the business there was. He had hesitated when first he came here, fresh from college, fearing there would not be a livelihood for him in the town and the farms around it. But he was frugal, he loved quiet, and he dreaded the scramble and competition of a big city firm; here he would be on his own from the beginning. When he had learned through a notice in a trade paper that old Mr. Shallcross wanted to sell his establishment and good will and retire, Jared had answered him.

To his happiness he had found that the little nest egg he had accumulated by hard labor all through his younger years—he had been too young for one war and too old for the other—which had enabled him to be trained in the one profession that had always attracted him, would stretch to cover Mr. Shallcross's modest demands. Within a week the business had changed hands. Now he had long been a settled feature of Middleton; and if he had never been a mixer or made any close friends, he was well-known, respected—and, beyond all, above suspicion.

Everything was always done just as the mourners wished. The funeral was held from the home of the deceased or from his own beautifully redecorated chapel, as they preferred. (That had been his chief terror about Gussie, but everything went his way—Ralph immediately asked for the chapel. He remembered with chagrin how, later on, he had lost a splendid former candidate for brother Ben, because Charles Holden's mother insisted on having the services at the farmhouse.) The deceased, a work of art by a fine embalmer worthy of any big city funeral parlor, lay dressed in his best in the casket, surrounded by flowers and wreaths and set pieces. When the minister had finished, Miss Hattie Blackstock played the organ softly, and then at Jared Sloane's signal the company passed in single file for the last look. The immediate relatives came last. Then they all filed

out to enter the waiting cars for the trip to the cemetery. (No one who was to be cremated instead of buried could ever become a member of Jared's family, of course.)

Then came the crucial moment. Most vividly Jared remembered that first time, when it was Gussie, when everything depended on timing and resolution and luck.

The pallbearers waited for him to close the casket, so that they could carry it out to the hearse. In a city funeral, the assistants would have been taking the flowers out, but Jared had no assistant. In that small town, where he knew everybody and everybody knew him, it was natural to say: "Look, fellows, I don't want to hold things up too long; it's hard enough on her folks as it is. I've taken the cards off all the floral offerings; would you mind carrying them to the hearse, all of you, and putting them around the bier? Then by the time you get back I'll have the casket closed and ready for you."

If just one person had said: "I can't get near the roses—they make me sneeze," or "You don't need us all; I'll wait here and rest my bad knee," or "That's not a good idea, Jared—the casket will crush them if we put them in first"—if that had happened, then the whole desperate gamble would have been lost. Gussie would never have been his wife; the rest of his family would never have come to read and knit and play cards and build model ships in the big sitting room. But from Gussie to Grandma, it had worked.

The instant the last back was turned, bending under its load of flowers, Jared moved like lightning. Quick—lift the body out of the casket. Quick—lay it on the couch concealed behind the heavy velvet curtains. Quick—bring out the life size, carefully weighted dummy prepared and ready, and put it in place. Quick—close the lid and fasten it. It all took between two and three minutes. When the first pallbearer returned, everything was set. Nobody ever knew what rode out to the cemetery, what was lowered into the grave.

He himself drove the hearse, of course. The funeral parlor was safely locked until he returned. Then, with the last sober, sympathetic handshake, he was left alone.

Once inside, he did nothing until closing time. Then,

with the office and display room and slumber room and chapel dark, he went behind the velvet curtain and lifted the new member of his family respectfully and tenderly from the couch and took him or her back to the preparation room. Nobody could ever have claimed that the embalming job already done was not as good as anyone could wish for. But now came the last extra refinements of his art —the special preservative he had perfected, the cosmetic changes which increased the resemblances of kindred, the new clothes he had bought in a fast trip to McMinnville. The clothing provided by the "former family"—that was how he always thought of them—he put thriftily away to help stuff the next dummy; if Jared Sloane had been given to frivolity, which he was not, he might have found amusement in the thought that, for instance, the "former" sister Emma's last garments now occupied the coffin of the "former" dad. Last of all, he arranged the new member in the pose which he had decided on for his or her future in the family gathering in the sitting room. Then he carried his newly acquired relative downstairs. No introductions were necessary; it was to be assumed that the Sloane family knew one another. Jared got to bed late on those seven red-letter evenings; it was hard to tear himself away from the companionship of his augmented family circle and go to his lonely room.

As the years went by, he ceased to fret and worry and fear for weeks or months afterward, as he had done at first. After all, he averaged about fifty funerals a year, counting the country around Middleton and occasional Middleton-born people who had left town but were brought home for burial. In ten years that meant some five hundred and out of all these he had taken the big gamble only seven times.

Some day, of course, he himself would die, and then inevitably the discovery would be made. But by that time he would be past caring, and the scandal and excitement and newspaper headlines would be of no concern to him. He was only fifty-eight, and he had never been ill a day in his life; he would count on twenty or twenty-five years more—the only man in Middleton who would never have to dread a lonely old age. He remembered his terribly lonely child-

hood and youth, and to his grateful little silent prayer he added thanks that by his own efforts he had compensated for it. He was grateful for another thing, too—that the fate that had deprived him of mother-love as a helpless infant had seemed to paralyze his emotional nature; never in his life had he felt or understood what seemed to him the disgusting sexual impulses of other men. Even his long love of Gussie Stiegeler had been made up—as it was now that she was Gussie Sloane—wholly of tenderness and protectiveness and dependency.

Once in a book on psychology he had read about a horrible perversion called necrophilia, and had shuddered. He tried, with an attempt at understanding, to imagine himself taking Gussie—his lovely, precious Gussie, whom he dressed in silk and pearls, for whom he had bought the piano that the "former" Gussie had played so well—away from her piano and into his narrow bed, kissing her, embracing her . . . He felt sick. For days thereafter it embarrassed him even to look at Gussie; he blushed at the thought that she might have guessed what foul fancies he had permitted to enter his mind.

He loved his family because they *were* his family, because they were his and no one else's, because with them he could expand and be himself and know that they would always belong to him. He was doing their former selves and their former dear ones no injury. He loved dad and mother and Grandma filially, he loved sister Emma and brother Ben as an older brother should, he adored Gussie and little Luke. All he needed now for perfect happiness was a sweet little daughter; it wasn't good for a boy like Luke to be the only child.

Naturally he couldn't look around and pick and choose or even speculate—good heavens, only a ghoul would do that! He must wait, as with the others, until just the right opportunity came—a seven- or eight-year-old girl, with dark hair (both he and Gussie were dark), a pretty little girl because her mother was pretty, provided for him by good fortune and the kindness of heaven, as all the rest of the family had been. There was no hurry; Luke would always stay ten years old, just as Grandma would always be

eighty-nine. Jared would have shrunk from feeling interest or curiosity if he had been told of the illness of somebody's little daughter. He could wait. But his heart gave a little excited jump every time he got a call from a household where there were children, until he learned—as he always did—that it was grandfather or uncle William or old cousin Sarah in whose behalf his services were required. Twice he handled the funerals of little girls, but one was a scrawny, homely blonde brat, and the other had been killed in an auto accident and was dreadfully mangled.

In the early hours of March 31st Jared Sloane was wakened from a sound sleep by a loud knock at the front door. That happened sometimes—people came instead of phoning; like a doctor he was inured to night calls, and he shrugged drowsily into bathrobe and slippers. As he switched on the lights in the front he heard a car driving away; when he opened the door, the street—the main business street of Middleton was part of a state highway—was dark and deserted.

Then his eyes fell to a little bundle, wrapped in a blanket, lying on the porch at his feet. He stooped and picked it up, knowing at once what it must be. Inside, he drew the blanket away from the little corpse.

Even with the head hanging limp on the broken neck, he recognized her at once—the papers had been full of her photographs. It was the Manning child. Manning had disobeyed orders and notified the police, and the kidnappers had brutally made good their threat.

Why they had deposited their victim on the doorstep of a country undertaker two hundred miles away, in another state from the city where the millionaire's child had been snatched, Jared Sloane could not imagine. Probably, making good their escape with the ransom money, they had chanced on the sign as they drove through Middleton, and as a bit of macabre humor had presented him with the body. Much as he disliked the idea of being brought to public notice and having FBI men and police officers and reporters invading his privacy, Jared knew his duty; he must telephone at once to the sheriff's office in McMinnville.

Then he looked down at the blanket and what it held.

Diana Manning had been nine, but she was small for her age. She had been a pretty, delicately cared for child. Her hair was long and soft and dark, the blank eyes staring up at him were brown.

He stood for a long time, pondering. Then quietly he lifted Diana and carried her back to the preparation room. Before he returned to bed, he took all her clothing and the thin old blanket out to the incinerator in the back yard, near the garage; he could not arouse suspicion by lighting a fire at three o'clock in the morning, but he burned trash every few days.

The next evening, for the first time since Grandma, Jared dropped in on the family only long enough to tell them the good news. He was moved; he whispered it to Gussie first. After all, Martha was going to be her daughter. He worked till late, then hid Martha carefully away. He had no funeral scheduled for the rest of the week, and there was nobody in the slumber room whom relatives and friends would be coming to visit; he could leave a sign in the door around noon and drive to McMinnville for a wardrobe and a big doll for his little girl. He always did the shopping for the family in McMinnville, which was large enough for him to be a stranger.

There was nothing new in the paper or on the radio about the Manning case. Perhaps the father, poor fool, was still dreaming he could get his daughter back by paying the ransom, and had asked too late for silence and secrecy.

That night Jared Sloane sat in his plum-colored chair and beamed at little Martha, perched on a cushion near her brother, smiling up at her mother at the piano. The family was complete. He was the happiest man on earth.

Three days later, as he worked in his office on accounts, the front door opened and a tall young man entered, carrying a brief case. Jared adjusted his expression to greet a salesman instead of a client.

"Mr. Sloane?" the young man asked amiably. Jared nodded. "Can you spare me a moment?"

"I don't know that there's anything I need right now, thanks."

"Need? Oh," he laughed. "I'm not a salesman."

He opened his wallet and showed a badge and a card. Investigator. His name was Ennis.

Jared slumped in his chair, gripping the arms to hide the sudden shaking of his hands. Ennis seated himself opposite without an invitation.

"About the Manning child's body," he said easily.

Jared had control of himself now. He stared at Ennis with a puzzled frown.

"The Manning child? The one that was kidnapped? Have they found her?"

"Now, Mr. Sloane—" The man glanced around him at the small, tidy office, at the respectable elderly undertaker in his neat black suit. He seemed disconcerted. Then he leaned forward confidentially.

"Perhaps there's been some mistake," he said. "This isn't for publication yet, but we have a man in custody—a man who's a very hot suspect."

"Good. I hope you nail him. Anybody who would kidnap a child, let alone murder her, killing's too good for him."

"Did I say she was murdered?"

"You said 'the Manning child's body'."

"So I did. Well, I'll level with you, Mr. Sloane. This man —we've had him for two days now, and he's begun to talk. In fact, to be frank, we have a full confession. And he says that on March 30th he drove through Middleton with the body in his car, and left it on the porch in front of a funeral parlor just off the highway. He told us the name on the sign was Sloane."

"Nobody left any remains or anything else on my porch on the night of March 30th," Jared said steadily. It was perfectly true; it had been quarter to three on the morning of March 31st.

"Now look, Mr. Sloane, please understand we're not accusing you of anything. Of course concealment of a dead body is a criminal offense, but we're not disposed to be tough about it. I can understand very well what a shock it must have been, and that you might want a little while to make up your mind what to do about it—after all, it isn't pleasant to have a lot of that kind of publicity turned on you through no fault of your own. I'll give you my word—

you let us take the child away quietly and we may never have to make public at all where we found the body."

If you had come that very day, Jared thought, I might have done it. Then he had a vision of Martha, in her short pink dress, her dark hair tied with a big pink ribbon, fondling her doll and smiling at her mother. He shook his head stubbornly.

"The man is lying to you," he said. "He must have noticed my sign as he passed through here and sent you on a wild goose chase. I've been in business in Middleton for twenty years, everybody knows me. Do you think I'd be likely to help a kidnapper by hiding the evidence against him? Besides—"

It had been on the tip of his tongue to add that he had a little girl of his own; he stopped himself just in time.

"Besides," he went on, "nobody would know better than a man in my profession that it's a crime to dispose of remains illegally. It's the last thing I'd do."

"Well, you may be right, Mr. Sloane. We'll go over it with him again. So, just for the record, let me have a look around your place so I can report that the body's not here, and we may never have to bother you again. You surely have no objection to that."

Jared felt himself turning pale. He had a sudden swift picture of Ennis, finding the display room and the slumber room and the preparation room and the chapel all empty, asking next to go through his living quarters—and in the kitchen saying: "Where does that door lead to?"

"What are you aiming to do?" he asked sarcastically. "Dig up my back yard to see if I've buried Diana Manning in it for no reason under the sun? Yes, I do object. This is my home as well as my place of business. I know my rights as a citizen. I'm not going to have anybody snooping through my private property without a search warrant—and I take it you haven't got that."

"No, I haven't, Mr. Sloane." The young man's friendly eyes had turned cold, and his voice was hard. "If that's the way you feel about it, I can go to McMinnville and get one, and be back here with it and the sheriff within an hour. I don't know why a respectable business man like you should

want to obstruct justice and help a dirty rat like the man we've got in custody, but that's what it amounts to.

"Very well, I'll see you an hour from now. And if you've got that body here and make any attempt to hide it or take it away somewhere in your hearse, we'll find that out, too." He paused. His voice grew more conciliatory. "If you want to change your mind—" he said. Jared shook his head again. Ennis picked up his brief case and marched out of the building. Jared watched him climb into the car parked in front and make a U-turn back toward McMinnville.

He stood still for a long minute. Then he picked up the sign which said: "Closed—Be Back Soon," and stuck it in the front door and locked up. He went back to the kitchen and unlocked the door to the sitting room, and this time he took out the key and relocked it on the inside. Then slowly, he walked downstairs to the family.

He reached up and pulled the curtain open on the two windows—the first time they had ever been opened since the room had been furnished for Gussie. It was a risk, though a small one, but it had to be taken for a few moments.

In the white light of day there was something bleak and forlorn about the cozy scene. Dad was reading the paper, mother knitting, grandma dozing, Ben and Emma playing cards, Luke working on his model ship, Gussie at the piano, just as always. Somehow they seemed a little withered, less like living people than like mummies—even darling Gussie, in her new blue dress. Only Martha, the newcomer, looked as fresh and blooming as they all had been in the warm gaslight of his happy evenings.

He sighed deeply. He reached up to the chandelier, and turned on all the jets. Then he sat down in his chair.

He loved them so much. They were his, they belonged to him and he belonged to them. An orphan and a foundling but he had a family, he had not gone lonely through all his life. A man not made like other men, yet he had loved a woman, and for ten years now she had been his dearly beloved wife.

On an impulse, still half-embarrassed by the eyes of the others on him, he went to the piano bench, put his arms around Gussie, and for the first time kissed her on the lips.

Her mouth was cold and dry, but he had never known it warm and moist. Then he went back to sit in his chair.

After a while he began to smell the gas—it was natural gas, but they put something in it to warn people if it was turned on by accident. When waves of giddiness began to flow over him, he knew the room was full. He must not delay until he was too sick and dizzy.

He reached into his coat pocket, took out a kitchen match and struck it on the sole of his shoe.

Probably the most difficult thing to accomplish in the writing of mystery fiction is to do a humorous story that is so believable it has real suspense.

Somehow, humor and suspense just don't mix very well.

But Mack Reynolds manages it beautifully here, and I'm pleased to wind up the volume on this lighter note.

Mack Reynolds

TALE FROM TANGIER

THE FUNKED OUT KID stared gloomily down into his absinthe. "Tangier is going to the dogs," he said.

"An observation," the Professor said, "which has undoubtedly been repeated since the days of Hannibal the Carthaginian."

Paul, the emaciated Vandyke-bearded bartender, made with a worn bar rag briefly and ineffectively, and tossed it back under the counter. He said, "Now there's a grifter I don't think I ever heard of, and I thought I knew them all. What was his handle again?"

"Hannibal," the Professor said. "He tried to take Rome."

"Them Latin cops are tough," the Funked Out Kid observed before going back to his peeve. "If things don't look up around here, I think maybe I'll take off."

Paul snorted. "Take off for where, Kid? You wouldn't get any further than Gibraltar before Interpol'd put the arm on you."

The Kid was petulant. "I ain't as warm as all that. I could go to . . . well, say Istanbul."

Paul said earnestly, "Look Kid, forget about it. Turkey's got extradition laws. You wouldn't be there a week before one of the consulates of one of the countries where you're

warm would make you, and before you knew it, the Turk Johns would hand you over. Tangier's safe, Kid."

"Yeah," the Kid said gloomily. "But dead these days."

The door of the little hole-in-the-wall bar opened and two conservatively dressed, prosperous-looking strangers entered. Both were in their late thirties.

Silence fell, except for Paul who said professionally, "Howdy, gentlemen."

The eyes of the newcomers went about the small room. Six or eight stools, three tables with chairs. On the walls, newspaper clippings covering Paul's exploits in the old days when he was variously a screwsman, a grifter, a smuggler, alternated with pin-ups from American men's magazines. From the ceiling hung a fisherman's net and a ship's wheel which doubled as a chandelier—a vain attempt to give Paul's Bar a nautical décor.

They stepped up to the bar and the one whose face had a permanently set hail-fellow-well-met expression said, "You Paul?"

"That's right," Paul said cautiously.

The other put a hand over the bar to be shaken. "Richard Weaver," he said. "And this is Theodore Tracy. Arkansas Red said if we ever got to Tangier to look you up."

Paul shook and cast his eyes unseeingly up at the ceiling. "Smiley Weaver and Rocks Tracy," he said, remembering. "Used to work the wire game out in Denver with Arkansas Red and the Four Spades Kid until one day the Kid didn't cool out a winchell right and he was sneezed." He brought his eyes back to the present and said, "How's Red these days?"

The newcomers both scowled and looked at the bar's other occupants.

Paul grinned sardonically and said, "You're with friends, gents. This here's the Professor and this is the Funked Out Kid. You must've heard of them."

Hands were shaken around and Smiley Weaver said, "I'll buy a drink."

Rocks Tracy said to the Funked Out Kid, "I heard about you being in Miami before the fix soured there. The Johns are still looking for you, Kid."

Paul snorted. "The Kid's popular just about everywhere. That's what we were just talking about."

Rocks Tracy said, "Make mine bonded bourbon, I can't go for any of this foreign slop." He was stockily built; a hard-faced man who carried his weight as though he'd spent some time in the ring.

The Professor said mildly, "You have expensive tastes, sir. In Tangier you can drink Fundador for twenty cents per portion, good bourbon is nearer to a dollar."

Tracy took in the older man's threadbare suit, his less than recently laundered shirt. He said condescendingly, "The taw's in pretty good shape, Pop."

"You're fortunate, sir," the Professor said.

When the drinks had been poured all around, the emaciated Paul leaned on the bar before them and said conversationally, "You gents on the run? This here's the place for it. Sometimes I think half the grifters in the world hang out in Tangier. We oughtta form a club."

The Funked Out Kid snorted. "What d'ya think this bar is?"

The Professor said mildly, "Please, Kid, don't give our good Boniface ideas. By George, Paul will start charging admission to the members."

The laugh was general.

Smiley Weaver chuckled with the rest, a humorless, unconvincing chuckle considering his profession. He said, "No, we're not warm. Rocks and I are clean as hounds' teeth, as the expression goes, these days. We're here on business, boys."

There was an uncomfortable silence.

Smiley raised his eyebrows. "Did I say something?"

"What d'ya mean business?" the Funked Out Kid asked, his voice flat.

Rocks Tracy growled, "What kind of question is that for one con man to ask another?"

Paul said, evenly, "I'm afraid I'm asking it too, gents."

The newcomers looked at Paul and the others. "What the hell's the matter here?" Rocks grumbled, irritated. He shifted his heavy shoulders in his jacket.

The Professor said, mildly, "We're wondering what you

mean when you say you're here on business. Obviously, no one is concerned if your business involves taking some mark in Spain, Gibraltar, or anywhere else—outside Tangier."

Smiley, his face still registering bonhomie in spite of his words, said, "Whose business is it, except ours?"

The Funked Out Kid put in reasonably, "Look, this town's the end of the road for a lot of grifters. There's no extradition laws, see? We wouldn't want somebody coming in here and curdling the fix."

Rocks scoffed. "In Tangier? Everybody knows anything goes in this town."

Paul said, "Rocks, in some ways Tangier's got a poxy reputation it don't deserve. Sure, the smugglers are like tolerated. They're even respected citizens. They buy up tax-free cigarettes and kinda export them up to Spain or maybe Italy. They don't break no laws here.

"Blackmarket? Sure," Paul went on, "this is a free port. The blackmarket's legal. Narcotics? Sure, if you got a monkey on your back you can walk into any drugstore in town and buy whatever you're on without no prescription —just like you could in the States back before the First War. No law against it. That's the thing about Tangier, there's not many laws. But those there are get pretty much observed."

The Professor injected mildly, "The crime rate is one of the lowest in the world."

"Sure," Paul said. "And as far as we're concerned, we wanta keep it that way. Like the Kid here says, this is the end of the road. We can't afford to foul our own nest, like."

Smiley said, "Okay, okay, we aren't going to stick up any banks."

Rocks looked at his watch. "Come on, Smiley, let's take it on the heel and toe. We got to get rolling."

They paid for the drinks, said their goodbyes and left, Smiley waving pleasantly as he passed through the door.

Paul looked after them, his eyes thoughtful. "Kid," he said, "I think we better watch those gents."

The Funked Out Kid slipped from his stool and faded through the door.

Paul looked at the Professor who said in mild objection,

"Did you notice the prosperous condescension in Mr. Tracy's voice when he noted my present state of finance? By George, I was scoring regularly when the gentleman was in rompers."

There was a meeting of the old hands about a month later. In addition to Paul, the Professor and the Funked Out Kid, were Big Charlie Greaves, the British con man, and the wizened little Australian, Whitey Frew.

Whitey said, "What's been going on? I been in Casablanca."

Paul said, "That's the trouble. We don't know. Let's bring Whitey up to date, gents."

The Funked Out Kid said worriedly, "Well, these two come drifting into town last month. Me and Paul decide we better keep an eye on them. Friendly like, of course. I introduced them to Big Charlie as the guy who knows all the ropes in town."

Big Charlie Greaves took over. "They wanted a small office but in some good address building. So I took them over to the Pan-Africa Building on Pasteur Boulevard. Got them all fixed up."

Whitey said, "On the second floor?"

"Of course," Big Charlie Greaves said. "The best. Then they wanted a printer. I fixed them up there too. Took them to Lew the Penman's shop."

"Lew did me up an excellent passport on one occasion," the Professor said reminiscently.

"What'd they want printed?" Whitey grunted.

Big Charlie looked around at the rest. "Stationery for the *Moroccan and South American Bank*. I checked with Lew later. He gave me copies of everything."

"That's a new one," Whitey said. "What's the *Moroccan and South American Bank?*"

"Not what, who," Big Charlie Greaves said. "They are. Smiley and Rocks. They've got the name on the office door, too. They've opened a bank."

"Opened a bank?" Whitey said blankly. "Fair Dinkum? Why?"

Paul looked at him. "Yeah," he said. "We don't know why either."

The Professor said thoughtfully, "No great undertaking in Tangier. The statutes covering banking are the most elastic in the world. Indeed, for all practical purposes there are none. For two hundred dollars, any lawyer in town will form a corporation for you, fill out all the forms, abide by all requirements. If you wish to call your corporation a bank—that's your privilege. If you're capable of making out the forms yourself, you can beat that price. Of course, renting the office, printing stationery, having lettering done on the door, renting furniture from Denny Lawson, runs it up. But they still haven't expended more than half a grand, at most."

"I don't like it," the Funked Out Kid growled. "All they hafta do is pull some king-size caper and the new government down in Rabat will draw up a flock of new laws and Interpol will be in here the next day rounding us up."

Paul said wanly, "Another year in the Nick and that'd be the end of me."

The Funked Out Kid laughed without humor. "How many countries waiting around that you owe at least a year to, Paul?"

Whitey's wrinkled little face wore an unwontedly cold expression. He said quietly, "I know a couple of Algerian heavies, refugees from the French. They could use a few thousand francs, and might enjoy roughing these two up a bit."

Paul was shaking his head. "I don't know if any of the rest of you noticed, but that Rocky is carrying heat under his left arm. He wouldn't rough up easy."

The Professor added, "And our employing a couple of hooligans might wind up with shooting. The Moroccan Bureau de Police isn't going to put up with that."

Big Charlie Greaves said, "We've got to figure out what these chaps are up to. They've been here a month now and haven't done anything yet, except start their bank. They've leased themselves an apartment in the Miramonte building. They take it easy. No ladies, and they never get tipsy enough to talk about their business."

The Funked Out Kid said hopefully, "Maybe they're legit. Maybe it's all on the up and up."

Nobody even bothered to answer that.

The Professor said slowly, "What is the derivation of Mr. Tracy's name?"

Paul ran his hand over his Vandyke, and cast his memory back. "Rocks," he said. "Once he used to be a fence in Frisco. Specialized in rocks, especially diamonds."

The Professor said, "And Mr. Weaver. Do we know anything about him?"

Paul said, "Smiley's famous for never taking a fall. He never goes into a con game unless he's got it all down pat." Paul thought some more. The others watched him, the living encyclopedia of the world of the grifter. He added, finally, "He's never messed around with the small con. Always the wire, the rag, or the payoff. Usually worked with a Big Store. One thing about Smiley, he never gets in a hurry. He's willing to wait as long as necessary to con a mark, but when he takes a score it's a big one."

"Well, he's evidently waiting now," the Funked Out Kid said gloomily. "And I got a sneaking suspicion it's going to be the biggest score taken in Tangier since Serge Rubenstein figured out the deal that collapsed the Japanese yen."

The Professor said, "The trouble is, Rubenstein might have concocted his scheme while sitting at the Central Café in the Petit Zocco, but the scene of the action was Tokyo, Zürich and New York. I suspect that the scene of action in this case is going to be our adopted home, Tangier."

Whitey Frew said, "Yeah, and in Rubenstein's case somebody finally gave it to him in New York, but in this case Smiley and Rocks can make a get over the straits to Spain or Gibraltar and be gone, while we stay here. And pretty soon a ton of bricks falls on us."

Paul and the Professor were having a glass of mint tea at the Café de Paris, on the Plaza de France, the square that marks the division line between the medina and the European section of town. To the right, on the Rue de la Liberté, streams of jebala-clad Arabs or gaudily costumed Rifs bustled up from, or down to, the native section. To the left

on Boulevard Pasteur, whooshed Thunderbirds, Mercedes, Jaguars and Fiats, whilst on the sidewalk Frenchwomen, every pore in place, gray miniature poodles on leash, shopped North Africa's most luxurious stores.

"A quaint town, this of ours," the Professor said comfortably.

"Yeah," Paul said. "No place like it. Along here it's maybe Florida or California. Walk down there and in three minutes you're in like Baghdad, maybe a thousand years ago." He added quietly, "I'd sure as hell hate to leave here."

The Professor said, "Here comes friend Whitey. He seems to be in a hurry, and what is that under his arm, a dictionary? A bit incongruous for our Aussie."

Whitey Frew, his wizened little face anxious, slipped into a chair at their table. He cast a quick glance around at their neighbors, evidently decided it was safe to talk. "I was coming down to your place, Paul," he said.

Paul said, "What's that you got?"

Whitey put the volume on the table. "It's the new issue of Rand McNally's *International Banker's Directory*."

They looked at him.

"I was in the post office when Rocks came in and goes over to the package window, and he's kind of jittering around like a joey in the bush. I kind of slipped back of a column to see what he's picking up. He gets this package, takes it off to one side and opens it. It's a book. He thumbs through it, finds the page he's looking for and looks pleased as if he's just got a reprieve. I figure I ought to see just what book it is. So I come up behind him, slap him on the back, and say, 'Hi Rocks' and take a quick squint before he can hide it." Whitey stopped, dramatically.

Paul scowled at him. "So?"

"So this is the book. I've just been down to the American Information Center and picked up a copy." Whitey thumbed through the pages, found the Tangier section, spread it open before them.

There was an impressive third of a page advertisement for the *Moroccan and South American Bank*.

Paul stroked his Vandyke.

"By George, imposing," the Professor muttered. "It's the

largest advertisement run by a Tangier institution, and this is one of the largest banking centers in the world."

Whitey said, "What's more I looked up a copy of the *Banker's Almanac*. All these outfits come out twice a year with new editions. They're in that, too. Full page ad in that one."

The Professor pursed his lips. "A rather expensive proposition, and Messrs. Tracy and Weaver do not seem to be the types to throw their funds to the winds."

Paul said, "On a guess, I'll bet they're in every other banker's publication going. Smiley and Rocks been in town for almost seven months now. I got a suspicion that whatever they been waiting for is about set up now."

The Professor said thoughtfully, as he stared down at the directory, "Do you notice that few of these advertisements carry the year of the founding of the bank being advertised? In short, there is no reason for anyone perusing this volume not to believe that the *Moroccan and South American Bank* is an old established institution."

When the lightning struck, it came and was over in short order.

Most of the old hands were sitting around Paul's when Smiley and Rocks, in high good humor and already flushed with liquor, entered.

Smiley gestured sweepingly. "Fellow grifters, both active and retired, the drinks are on us. Belly up, as the expression goes, and wassail away on the best in the house. Celebration is called for."

Rocks sneered, "And none of this Spanish or French slop, Paul. Ring out the bourbon. I don't imagine you got any champagne in this crummy dump."

"As a matter of fact," Paul said expressionlessly, "I believe there's a couple bottles in the poxy refrigerator." He began reaching for glasses.

The Professor and Big Charlie Greaves had been sitting at one of the tables. Both of them approached.

The Professor said quietly, "Celebration, gentlemen? Good news, then, I assume."

Smiley imitated the old man's tone, mockingly, "A million dollars worth of good news, my has-been friend."

Paul had returned from the ice box, two magnums of vintage wine in his hands. As he began to twist the wire from the bottles' necks, he said, his voice also quiet, "You boys sound like you've copped a pretty good score."

Rocks took up his glass of bourbon. "The biggest score I heard of in years. And safe. Nobody even to have to cool out. This one'll make history."

Smiley said, "You talk too much, Rocks."

The Funked Out Kid was seated at the end of the bar. He said, thickly, "You grifters pulled something here in Tangier?"

Rocks ignored him and said to Smiley, "What's the difference? This con's a one shot. They'll tighten up, now that we've pulled it off." He filled his glass again, from the bottle Paul had left on the bar before him. "Drink up, boys. In the safe back in the office, there's a package containing exactly one million dollars worth of the DeBière Corporation's blue diamonds."

Smiley didn't like it, but he shrugged and took up one of the glasses of champagne. "Drink up, everybody," he called. "Your last chance to freeload on Smiley and Rocks. Tomorrow we're off for Amsterdam to fence the take."

The Funked Out Kid, his face screwed up in rage, got off his stool and strode toward the door. "Sure," he said. "Now you've done it. You've loused up the whole town for all of us. A big outfit like that's going to throw a beef to the Moroccan government. We'll all have to clear out. The hell with your celebration!" He slammed out the door.

Smiley chuckled after him. "The Kid doesn't seem to like us, Rocks."

Rocks grunted contempt. "Let him go. He's just being a sorehead. Jealous because you've took a score," Paul said. He leaned on the bar, looked at them admiringly. "You boys really seem to have pulled it off. What's the story?"

Rocks grinned at him. "Smiley, here, worked out most of it. A real genius. We start up this bank, see? No place in the world where it's easier to do."

"You're correct there," the Professor said, letting an element of admiration creep into his voice too.

Big Charlie Greaves said, "I wondered about you chaps starting up that bank front."

"It wasn't just a front," Rocks crowed. "It was a real, legit bank. And we stuck ads in all the bank directories going. Then we got some more stationery printed up like we're in the jewelry wholesaling dodge. So on this jewelry outfit stationery, we write down to the DeBière Corporation in South Africa, biggest diamond outfit in the world, and we tell them we want to buy a million bucks worth of blue diamonds. We ask them what kind of a deal we can get, and what the quantity will be, and the quality, and all these technical bits.

"A natural," Rocks crowed. "You can't knock a mark that's four thousand miles away."

Smiley grinned modestly.

"Go on, Rocks," Paul said. "Here, let me fill them glasses."

Rocks said, "So they write back, of course. Real anxious to sell us the million bucks worth of diamonds. And they want to know where they can send them for our inspection. So we write back on the jewelry stationery and suggest that they be sent to the *Moroccan and South American Bank* which has the facilities, we say, for the protection of the shipment."

Rocks took another pull at his drink before going on. "So pretty soon comes a letter to our bank, asking whether we have the facilities to receive a shipment of diamonds, protect them, and show them to a prospective customer. So, of course, the president of the bank writes back and says yes."

Smiley couldn't hold it any longer. "So they send them!" he exclaimed happily. "Today, a messenger comes from the post office to our office. We simply sign the receipt, and stick the package in the safe."

Big Charlie Greaves said blankly, "I don't understand the need for the ads in the banking directories."

Rocks looked at him condescendingly. "Smarten up, Charlie. As soon as they got our letter suggesting the diamonds be sent to the *Moroccan and South American Bank*

they looked the place up in their bank directory. And there we are, listed with a big ad. Looks like a big established outfit. Obviously safe for their diamonds."

The Professor shook his head admiringly. "You gentlemen certainly scored. However, I think you're correct. Strictly a one shot. Now that it's been accomplished, steps will be taken to see it is never repeated."

Smiley grinned happily. "Which is okay with us. With a taw like this, me and Rocks can retire."

Rocks said, "Come on, boys, drink up. We been sitting on the edge of our chairs for seven or eight months waiting for this to jell. Tonight's the night to howl. Fill 'em up, Paul."

"Right you are, gents," Paul said.

In the morning, Paul, the Professor, Whitey Frew and Big Charlie Greaves saw them off on the ferry for Gibraltar. Smiley Weaver and Rocks Tracy both looked a little the worse for wear, but from the deck of the small ship they waved back to the small delegation that was seeing them on their way.

As the lines were cast off, the Professor gave a last friendly wave. He said to the others, "Sometimes I despair of the second class citizens our profession seems to attract. Now there are two of the most objectionable rascals I have encountered for many a day. They had no compunction about possibly curdling the fix here in Tangier, and ruining the situation for us all."

Big Charlie Greaves gave a final friendly wave himself to the ferry which was now under way. "You're right," he said, "a couple of real wrongies."

They began to stroll back toward town, passing the long rows of smuggler craft, former German E-Boats, American P-T Boats, British Fairmilds and H. D. Boats—now all converted for the cigarette run to Spain, Italy and France.

They met the Funked Out Kid by the time they got to the Avenue de España and the foot of the hill leading up to the Casbah. He had several sheets of paper in hand.

"Everything all set?" Paul asked him.

The Funked Out Kid wore an expression of soulful satis-

faction. "Right," he said. "Here's the stationery." He handed copies around.

"Very impressive job Lew has done," the Professor nodded. He read the letterhead aloud. *"The Tangier Confidential Investigations Organization,* sub head, *Private Detectives.* Address, *25 Rue Dr. Fumey, Tangier, Morocco. President, Warren Dempsey Witherson."* The Professor raised his eyebrows. "Who owns that imposing moniker?"

"That's me," the Funked Out Kid said modestly.

Big Charlie Greaves said, "Have any trouble last night?"

The Kid shook his head in scorn. "Naw, just a matter of speed, mostly. I didn't know how long you could hold them in Paul's. Soon as I got out of the bar, I located the Greek and got a kilo of paste diamonds from him. Then I hustled over to their offices. Having the keys to the door and the combination to the safe hurried things up. Those two were real winchells ever letting Big Charlie find that office for them. At least they shoulda changed the door locks and the safe's combination. I made the switch and left the place looking exactly the same as before I got in."

"So," Paul said, stroking his Vandyke. "We now got a million bucks worth of rocks, and they got a couple dollars worth of paste." He snorted. "Those grifters are gonna be mighty disappointed when they try to fence that stuff in Amsterdam."

They had made their way up the Rue Siaghines, past the endless tiny Indian shops with their cameras, handicrafts, watches, souvenirs and other tax-free tourist items, past the Petit Zocco, finally to emerge in the Grand Zocco. Paul unlocked the door of his hole-in-the-wall bar and they filed in.

The Professor took a stool, brought a pen from his pocket and said, "Now, then, the task is to compose a letter from the *Tangier Confidential Investigations* to the DeBière Corporation explaining that we have rescued their diamond shipment from a group of charlatans and are now ready to return it, by insured post." The Professor cleared his throat. "I suppose we should drop a broad hint, that a reward should be in order, beyond just our private-eye fees."

Paul scratched an ear. "Maybe we oughta just hold onto the rocks, until we make a deal with them, or with their in-

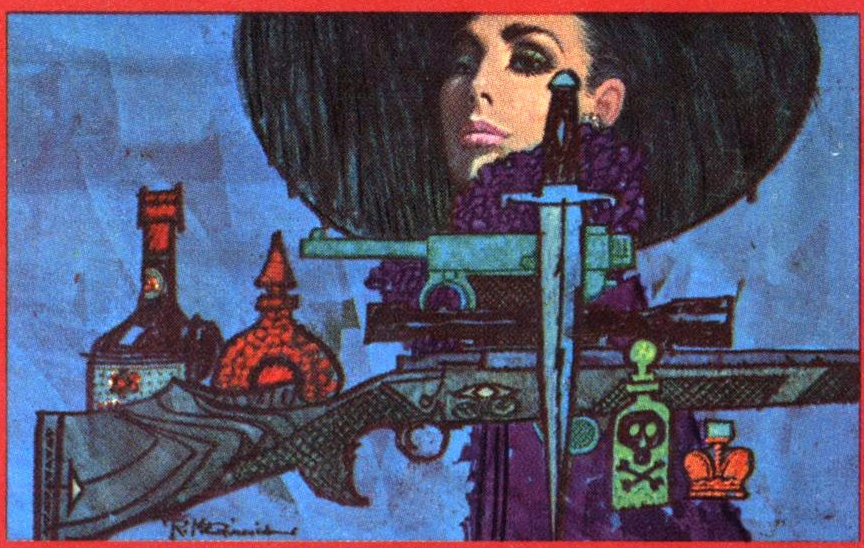
surance company, or whatever. Give 'em the impression that we know where the rocks are, but we need some reward money before we can bribe 'em back from the crooks."

Big Charlie Greaves shook his head. "You know, the grifter in me rebels against sending all of those gems back to South Africa."

Paul had circled around behind the bar and was popping open bottles of African Star Beer. "Don't be square, Charlie. You take them rocks up to Amsterdam and fence them and how much you think you'd get? A fence is the biggest crook in the world. You're lucky if you get five percent on the dollar—maybe fifty grand. As it is, we'll probably get that big a reward and all legit. And no complaints made from the South Africans to the Moroccan police about Tangier being a poxy hotbed of crime."

"Sure," the Funked Out Kid said. "I feel kind of patriotic. We like saved our town from getting loused up by them two."

"Ummmm," said the Professor dryly. "I'd hate to see Tangier get a bad name. I'd really hate to see that."



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