ALFRED HITCHCOCK

ALIVE AND SCREAMING

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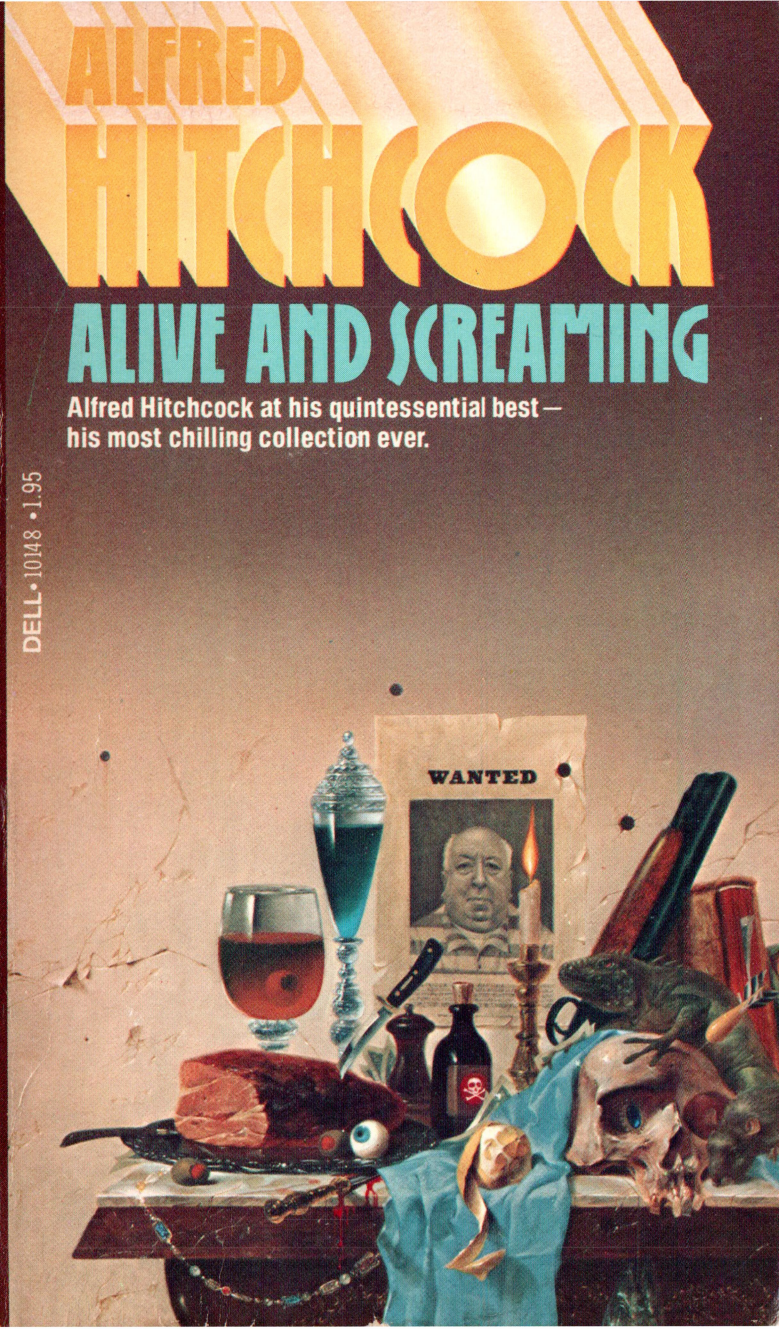

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ALIVE AND SCREAMING

Alfred Hitchcock

A DELL BOOK

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Introduction

One afternoon recently, when a few of us were sitting around the club library reading the label on the bottle from which the steward was pouring our gins, Fossingham mentioned that his eldest son—the one who falls off curbs—had invented a basket for the chopping block.

The announcement evoked a great deal of eyebrow raising. No one cared enough, however, to ask Fossingham why a chopping block would be better off with a basket attached. He told us, nevertheless. According to Fossingham's son, the inventor—the one who falls off curbs—it is impossible to chop on a chopping block without having chips of the item being chopped fly off the block. These chips—chips off the old block, as it were—invariably disappear under the refrigerator and are never recovered. The basket, the son believed, would eliminate the problem.

We all yawned and signaled to the steward to pour another round of gins.

The subject of inventions, though, had not been put to rest. A half hour or so later, Billingsgate brought it up again by wondering aloud what invention, after the wheel and prior to the chopping-block basket, had been most beneficial to mankind.

We all had our ideas—which we kept to ourselves

while we watched the steward pour another set of gins.

Billingsgate, however, persisted, addressing the question specifically to Woolsey.

Woolsey frowned deeply, but did not reply. We all assumed that he felt that the matter deserved further thought.

The query was then addressed to Brockton-Williams.

"The wireless," he stated. "Why only today I received information by wireless that my shares in Fish & Chips, Ltd. had gone up ten points. What could possibly be more beneficial that that?"

Yawning once more, we pondered his assertion. And, some time later, while the steward refilled our glasses, Hasselton offered a rebuttal.

"On the other hand," Hasselton said, "if it weren't for the invention of the wireless, we might not yet know about many of the world's great tragedies—the outbreak of those world wars, One and Two, the sinking of the *Titanic,* the great stock-market crash. It was that damn wireless, you know, that spread the word."

"A telling point," Billingsgate said. Billingsgate's Aunt Martha had gone down on the *Titanic.*

He then turned once more to Woolsey, inquiring again as to his opinion on the matter. Woolsey, apparently, was still mulling it over. At any rate, he did not respond.

That gave me the opportunity, a short time later, while the steward was pouring another round of gins, to plunge in with my nomination for the invention that had most benefited mankind.

"The printing press," I suggested. "Consider how it has increased the availability of great literature. If writers were still working with the quill, making

copies by hand, we would probably have no more than a half-dozen copies of, say, *Winnie the Pooh*, in print."

"On the other hand," Hasselton, a born dissenter, said, "we wouldn't be able to make out the figures on half the bills we receive. We could put off paying them on the grounds that the handwriting was illegible."

"A telling point," Billingsgate said. It is well-known that Billingsgate is heavily in debt.

He then directed the main question to Woolsey once more, raising his voice a bit this time and speaking directly into Woolsey's hearing aid. Woolsey, it seemed, was still pondering, however, since he did not reply.

"It's clear to me," Fossingham said, "that the invention that has done us all the most good is the covered buggy. Keeps the rain off, you know."

There was a long, long period of silence after that. The others of us were conscious of the fact that Fossingham had not been out of the club, nor even looked out a window, since the day he had been delivered to the door by hansom cab in 1850, and thus was not aware that the horse and carriage had been pretty much superseded by the automobile. None of us wanted to be the one to tell him. At Fossingham's age, any news of change can raise the blood pressure to the danger point.

It was Fossingham himself who finally spoke again. "Before the top was invented," he informed us, "the rain used to get the seats wet."

The longer the conversation continued in that direction, the greater became the threat that the news of the automobile would slip out. So, for the sake of Fossingham's health, Billingsgate focused our atten-

tion on Woolsey once again, this time fairly shouting the main question at him.

Woolsey merely frowned a little more deeply.

"I do believe—" Hasselton began, studying Woolsey closely.

There was no need for him to complete the conjecture. We all realized at that moment why there had been no response from Woolsey. He had his hearing aid turned off. He had missed the entire discussion.

It was then that we reached full agreement on the invention that has most benefited mankind. It is the "off" switch. It allows us to turn off the radio when the news is distressing; to turn off the telly when the program is inane; to switch off the automobile engine when we reach our destination; and, as in Woolsey's case, to turn off the hearing aid when the conversation begins to bore.

And now for some inventiveness that I assure you will not be boring—that which the writers of the stories that follow have used in plotting these tales of suspense that will set the nerves atingle and the spine ashiver.

—ALFRED HITCHCOCK

The Hand from the Past

CHRISTOPHER ANVIL

The police lieutenant, tall, well-built, his face unshaved and eyes red from lack of sleep, leaned across the desk.

"You've helped us before. Now we need your help again. We're up against a blank wall, with nothing to go on but this note!"

Richard Verner glanced at the slip of paper torn from a pad, with small circles and scratch marks in the corner where someone had worked a ball-point pen to start it writing; the note itself was in clear, angular handwriting.

"We got this note," said the lieutenant, "in this afternoon's mail. This is the first we've heard of Judge Cabe since hoodlums entered the courtroom yesterday morning and shot their way out, with him as a prisoner. Since then, we've scoured the city, but there is no trace whatever. We've got to find where they're holding him, but we don't know where to look next. And now we get this note."

"This is the judge's handwriting?"

"Yes. I recognize it myself, and Mrs. Cabe is positive it's his handwriting."

"But it's an odd note."

"That's another thing that bothers us. The hoods' purpose was to get a hostage in return for a prisoner.

That adds up. But Judge Cabe would never have written a note like that unless he was either out of his head or badly scared—and I've never seen him scared."

Verner, frowning, read the note:

> To Whom It May Concern:
>
> I, John R. Cabe, do hereby order, on my authority as an Officer of the Court, that the prisoner Roger Maynard be unconditionally released no later than six o'clock P.M. Thursday, the day of receipt of this Court Order.
>
> The prisoner is not to be tried, but is to be released in return for my own safe release.
>
> I must warn that my captors are heavily armed, resourceful, and utterly ruthless, and if this mandamus is not obeyed by six P.M. Thursday, I shall be executed.
>
> By order,
> Judge John R. Cabe, C.S.R.

Verner looked up, frowning, glanced again at the note, and then settled back.

The lieutenant looked up at the intent expression on the face of Richard Verner, then watched in amazement as Verner turned the note around, to look at it from all angles. The lieutenant glanced at his watch: 4:00 P.M. Again, Verner turned the paper. The lieutenant, scowling, began to speak, then shut his mouth, swallowed, and took out his wallet.

Verner glanced briefly at the back of the note, then put the note faceup on his desk, and again turned it, to examine it from various angles.

The lieutenant, remaining silent, took a calling card from his wallet. Under a piece of clear plastic was a newspaper clipping held to the card by trans-

parent tape. It was this newspaper article that had first attracted the lieutenant's attention to Verner, and he had kept it as a souvenir. Across the top of the card was printed, "When Desperate, Call—" Under that, was the clipping itself:

> ". . . instrumental in unraveling the mystery was Richard Verner, a new kind of specialist known as a 'heuristician.' Verner explained that a heuristician is a professional problem solver, who works with other experts. Nearly all problems, he said, can be cleared up by much the same techniques, provided the necessary expert knowledge is available."

The lieutenant put the card away, and observed that Verner had the note now at about a forty-degree angle. He was no longer reading the note but was now examining the marks where the judge had scratched his ball-point pen to start writing.

Suddenly the lieutenant could stand it no longer. "Listen," he said, "I didn't come here to ask you to figure out what kind of *pen* he used. We've *somehow* got to figure out *where he is being held*!"

Verner reached out to snap on the intercom. "Jean?"

A pleasant feminine voice replied, "Yes, Mr. Verner?"

"Could you come in here for a minute?"

"I'll be right there."

Verner glanced thoughtfully at the lieutenant. "You say the judge doesn't scare easily?"

"I've never seen him scared. He's tried some cases where every trick has been used—bribed jurors, 'bought' experts, political pressure, grandstand scenes in the courtroom, threatening phone calls to witnesses,

and finally crank letters to Judge Cabe himself. He's never wavered. The harder the pressure, the harder he concentrates on doing his job."

"How did he start out? That is, before he *was* a judge?" he asked.

"He worked his way through law school as a court reporter, to begin with." The lieutenant glanced at his watch. It was now a little after four. "How does this help us *find* him? At six they kill him."

"Is it likely that the people who abducted him would have *moved* him to another location? Or would he still be where they had him when he wrote this note?"

The lieutenant shook his head. "They wouldn't have wanted to take the risk of moving him. Besides, they had this well planned, and they don't *need* to move him. They won't leave us any opening to catch them that way."

There was a tap on the door, then Verner's secretary, Jean Benedict, stepped into the room. Verner glanced at the lieutenant and said, "What you need is his *location*? The address of the place where he is?"

"Yes!"

"But the only chance he had to get in touch with you is by this letter?"

"Such as it is, that's all."

Verner motioned to his secretary, who crossed the room with a swift tap of heels. Verner lifted the blotter on his desk, and put the note underneath, at a slight angle, leaving only the part showing where the pen had been started. "Read that," he said, watching her carefully.

She leaned over the desk, tilted her head, and there was a moment of silence.

"East," she said, frowning in concentration. "East—

side . . . Eastside. Now, is this 'okay'? No, *oak*. Eastside . . . Oak. Total? No . . . Oh, this is at an angle, and in the old style . . . *corner*." She looked up. "Some of these marks don't mean anything. They're just where someone started his pen. But this mark here is written twice, and it means *eastside*, and this means *oak*. This mark is at an angle to the others, but it means 'corner.' If this is an address, it must be 'corner of Eastside and Oak.' "

The lieutenant stared at the paper. "Do you mean those little scratches that would fit under your thumbnail make up a message? He said, *'Corner of Eastside and Oak'*—is that right?"

Eyes wide, Jean Benedict nodded, and the lieutenant whirled and went out. She glanced at Verner. "What—?"

He lifted the blotter to show her the rest of the paper, with its handwritten message.

That night, Verner was in his office when the phone rang, and the lieutenant said, "Still there? I'll be right over."

He came in with a tall white-haired man, who stretched out his hand and beamed.

"I'm John Cabe. I'm grateful *someone* could read my hen-scratches."

Verner smiled. "It was my secretary who read it. All I did was to realize there was something there *to* read."

"But," asked the lieutenant, "*how*? How did you know that? It was just a little scribble at the side, what anyone might do to start the pen flowing."

"Yes," said Verner, "but the longhand message didn't fit the judge's character, didn't fit legal procedure as I understand it, and must not be the message he was actually *trying* to send. But how could he send any other message? They would have been watching.

How could anyone write a message while he was being watched, without being detected? Only by using something the other person would never glance at twice, and could not recognize as a message if he did see it. Well, as a hint, there were those initials the judge must have earned a long time ago, and had written after his name. They told us what to look for."

"C.S.R.?" said the lieutenant.

The judge smiled. "Certified Shorthand Reporter."

The Confident Killer

TALMAGE POWELL

Mom Roddenberry took the news of her daughter's death like a durable hill woman. Her sallow, bony face went as gray as fog. Her slate-gray eyes went out of whack as she tried to keep on seeing me. Her gnarled hands lifted and grabbed her wrinkled cheeks, as if she could make a physical pain that would lessen the hellfire scorching her inside. A wail like a cat caught in a steel trap split her thin lips.

Then she steadied, pulled her shoulders together, stood gasping behind the counter in her café. "Gaither . . . Jerl Brownlee murdered my girl?"

"That's what I'm trying to say, ma'am."

She took off the clean white smock that she wore over her simple gray dress as her café uniform and came around the counter, a small, spry woman that the Smoky Mountain winters and endless toil had whittled down to a collection of hickory sticks and leather.

"Is Pretty at Doc Weatherly's undertaking parlor now, Gaither?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Will you walk over with me?"

"You know I will!"

"And tell me the whole of it." Her fingers were like

wires on my wrist. "Every last detail. You hear me, Gaither?"

She turned over the cardboard sign that hung inside the glass part of the café door. The sign said "Closed." We stepped onto the sidewalk. The old lady closed and locked the door, then stood a minute looking up and down the dusty street like she was a stranger, although she'd lived in the town of Comfort all her life.

"Not much here to satisfy a gal young'un who dreamed of fancy clothes and big-city excitement, Gaither."

"She wasn't a bad girl, ma'am."

"That she wasn't, Gaither. Just too innocent and ignorant of the ways of the world and too—attractive to men."

With me at her side, Mom Roddenberry thought of the short eighteen years of Pretty's life, I reckon, as she set off with a dogged hill-woman's stride. "I'm listening, Gaither," she prodded.

So I told her how Pretty Roddenberry had come to her end, as we tramped toward the old gingerbread house where Doc Weatherly lives upstairs and undertakes on the ground floor.

Pretty had met her death in a cruelly simple manner. She'd sneaked up to the Brownlee lodge to keep a date with Jerl. He was the last of the Brownlees, had inherited a timber and tobacco fortune, and figured he was cock of any walk he cared to set foot on.

Jerl didn't show up in Comfort often, preferring to spend his time and squander his money in resorts where fancy women were plentiful. With a bunch of friends, he had boozed it up at the UT-Clemson game last week, which took place in Knoxville. The swanky Brownlee lodge being on a thousand-acre estate across

the line in North Carolina, the gang had trekked over and kept the party roaring.

They caroused over land, lake, and mountainside for three days before they fizzled out. Finally Jerl was left alone, surly and restless. He got to thinking of that cute little trick he'd made a few passes at previously when he happened to be in Comfort, so he called her on the phone, and she was dumb enough to sneak up there.

Who knows what went through Pretty's excited mind as she dolled up in her best dress and perfume. Did she think she could tease her way into that rustic mansion and let it go at that? Did she think Jerl would actually take her away from the drabness and boredom of an isolated little mountain town such as Comfort? Did she kid herself into thinking she might even have a chance of marrying into the Brownlee millions?

Ever how her noggin worked, when the showdown came she just couldn't snatch off her clothes and jump into young Jerl's bed. But she'd called her shots all wrong. She hadn't figured on the size of Jerl's spoiled selfishness. His boozing had sharpened all the meanness in him. Even sober, he reckoned that anything he wanted should be his for the taking.

Pretty fought him. It must have been an unholy sight, Pretty struggling and begging for mercy, of which there was none in the inflamed face before her. She barked his shins and scratched his face; then he knocked her down and busted the back of her head. Maybe she struck the big fireplace or a piece of the heavy furniture.

Jerl thought he'd killed her then and there. He dragged her out, put her in his car, got in, and drove

a ways across the mountain until he was off the estate, then shoved her out. He must have thought he was reasonably safe. Days, even weeks, might pass before anybody found Pretty's body. By then, Jerl figured, it wouldn't matter what folks suspected. Suspecting and proving are two different matters. He'd just deny that she ever had come to the lodge. Nobody, he reckoned, could prove that some hill renegade hadn't seen her walking up the road and got passionate ideas.

Only thing, Jerl hadn't figured on a situation that the Brownlees themselves had set up. For years the Brownlee estate had been posted and the old man, before his death, had kept a mean caretaker up there to enforce the rule. As a result, the thousand acres teemed with game, and a mountain farmer with a taste for fresh meat had set out that morning to do a little poaching, thinking Jerl's drinking party had adjourned to the lowlands and wouldn't bother him.

The farmer heard Jerl's car booming around the curves on the gravel backroad, ducked into the timber, and his popping eyes witnessed Jerl's final act. The minute Jerl got back in his car and rounded a curve, the farmer went sliding and tumbling into the thicketed ravine where Pretty's body had come to rest.

A final flicker of life twitched through Pretty's china-blue eyes. Her silken mane of yellow hair was a bloody tangle about her face as she tried to speak. The farmer dropped his ear close to her lips and caught her final words. She told him what had happened, as if there was any doubt in his mind.

The farmer ran a shortcut to the lodge, broke a window to let himself in, and phoned the sheriff's office in Comfort. Sheriff Collie Loudermilk had flashed the word to the sheriffs of neighboring counties. Roadblocks were set up in minutes.

With Jerl Brownlee in the net, Collie had sent me, his deputy, to fetch down the body. I'd brought the poor broken thing to Doc Weatherly's, gritted my teeth, and dragged my feet to Comfort's only decent café, wishing it was just for a cup of Mom Roddenberry's good coffee.

Mom didn't interrupt my tale once. She had a good grip on herself now. She took my words like the seasoned willow takes the slashing sleet. Her suffering was too deep to show on the surface.

We stopped in the shadow of the porch that rambled across the front of Doc Weatherly's place. Mom Roddenberry lifted a hand and touched my cheek. "You're a good young man, Gaither Jones, and I'm beholden to you for telling me the straight of it."

"She was a sweet, human girl, Mom. She was tempted. And she tried to overcome. You always remember that."

"Yes, Gaither, I will."

"And be sure we'll get Jerl Brownlee, Mom."

She lifted her eyes slow-like, and they were the hoar frost that rimes distant peaks. "Yes, that is all that's left now, Gaither; justice; eye for eye, tooth for tooth. If Pretty is to rest easy in her grave, Jerl Brownlee must reap his due."

I didn't need to answer that one. We were both hill people.

"Again, I'm obliged to you, Gaither. Now, I know you got work to do. I'll just ease inside alone to spend a last minute with my daughter."

I watched her creep up the porch steps. Each one added about ten years to her narrow, bony shoulders. The door of the undertaking parlor opened, swallowed her. I turned, jammed my hands in the pockets of my tan twill, kicked some hollyhocks growing alongside

the walk, and cussed my way back up the street to the office.

The short-range walkie-talkie, which the taxpayers begrudged Collie and me out of the mail-order catalogue, was crackling when I walked in.

"Gaither, where in dad-blasted thunderation you been?" Collie Loudermilk howled through the static, sounding like a banshee.

"Playing pool and drinking beer," I said sourly, looking across the street at that "Closed" sign on the café door. "You bringing in Jerl Brownlee?"

The walkie-talkie like to have spit fire. "He spotted my car blocking Miden Falls road, skidded off the curve, turned over twice, straight down the mountainside."

"He's hurt? Maybe bleeding to death?" I inquired happily.

"He bounced out healthy as a jackrabbit and with the same ideas. I've lost him, Gaither, somewhere in the gorges above Cat Track Holler. If we don't flush him out of this wild country before nightfall, we lose him. He's got the whole compass to aim at, a good chance of making it out of these mountains. If he does that, well heeled as he is, next thing we know he may be playing with them French girls in that Riviera place."

"I reckon you need me and Red Runner and Old Bailey," I said.

"Naw," Collie growled, "I'm just fiddling with this gadget in hopes of communing with a braying jackass! *Will* you stop wasting time?"

"You're doing all the talking," I said, and cut him off.

I grabbed the two dog leashes off the wall peg, and skedaddled out of the office, around the old brick

building to the dog lot behind the jail. Old Bailey and Red Runner heard me rattling the gate open. They snuffled out of their kennels, long ears nearly dragging in the dust. Their baggy, forlorn eyes spotted the leashes, and a quiver went through both dogs. They perked up quick. I swear those bloodhounds can even smell out the prospect of smelling out a man.

A setting sun threw streamers of golden fire across the peaks in the west and twilight was settling in the valleys when me and the two dogs homed in on Collie Loudermilk's location.

Collie is a skinny, sandy man who looks like he couldn't last out a mountain winter in front of the fireplace, but he's the kind of gristle that can dull a knife. He's been sheriffing in Comfort for twenty years, and knowing him firsthand, it wouldn't surprise me if it's twenty more before I inherit his job.

While the hounds and I got our breath in the shadows of the gorges, Collie shook out a sports jacket that would have cost me a month's pay.

"Lying loose in the backseat of Jerl Brownlee's wrecked car," Collie said. "Let's hope it's his and that he's worn it recent before he pitched it back there."

Collie squatted before the excited dogs, held out the jacket, and they took a good long whiff. I stayed with them, keeping the leashes slack, as they sniffled around for a few seconds. Then with a howl fair to curdle the blood, both dogs hit the ends of the leashes, almost jerking me off my feet.

We tracked Jerl up a long hollow where the briars were as thick as riled-up bees, and across a long stretch of naked shale, where only a dog's pads had good footing. Collie slipped halfway across. He burned skin off his knees and elbows as he slid and rolled twenty feet down the slope. He got up cussing because

I was holding up the dogs, waiting for him to climb back to us.

Beyond the shale, Jerl had jumped a spring-fed creek, which held us up for a good ten minutes, and crossed a soggy meadow. Then he'd stumbled onto the dim remains of an old logging trail and picked that route up through the timber.

I didn't have a dry rag on me by this time, I was sweating so hard from the exertion. The dogs had lather on their flanks and wet tongues hanging from the sides of their mouths. Collie looked as fresh as a new-grown stinkweed, eyes anxious on the purple shadows that closed in about us.

As the dogs tugged me along I began to lose track of the number of gullies we crossed, the patches of underbrush we slammed through. My legs felt as if they had fallen off, and I looked down in the failing light to make sure they were still there, like a pair of pump handles underneath me.

Then of a sudden my glazing eyes glimpsed Collie's shadow shooting out ahead of us. I still didn't see the flicker of motion that had caught his attention. He splashed across a seep that would turn into a creek during a heavy rain, and dived into a canebreak. A minor hell erupted in there. Sawgrass and reeds rattled. A covey of birds sprayed out in all directions. Cattail fluff showered into the air.

Collie came out just as the dogs and I cleared the seep. He had Jerl Brownlee by the shirt collar, Jerl draped on the ground behind him.

"Got him, by gum," Collie said, backhanding an ooze of blood off his nose.

"You done all right, Sheriff," I said, nodding, "after me and the dogs cornered him for you."

Jerl was about the most bruised, scratched, begrimed, and generally trail-weary young punk you'd ever want to see. Collie and I and Jerl's rubbery legs finally got him back to the sheriff's car. We put the dogs in front with Collie. I got in back to guard the prisoner, who didn't look much like it was necessary. We'd come back for my car later.

Jerl didn't have a word to say all the way back to town. He was doing plenty of thinking, and by the time I shoved him in a jail cell, he'd about decided he was still Jerl Brownlee, cock of any walk.

He watched me lock the cell door with hooded eyes. Then his battered lips twisted in a sneer. "You yokels don't think for a minute this is going to work out your way, do you?"

"Looks like it might," I said.

"You dumb rube," he said. "With my dough, I'll have the choice of the finest legal brains from New York to Los Angeles. There are jurors to buy, judges for sale. There are a thousand loopholes in the law, and ten thousand technicalities. With my loot, I can fight this thing to the highest courts in the land, no matter how long it takes. So before you wallow in any naive sentiments about the workings of justice or pat yourself on the back, deputy-boy, just answer me one question. Have you ever heard of a millionaire ending up in the electric chair or gas chamber?"

His question was still rattling around in my head a few minutes later as I trudged across the dark street. The CLOSED sign was still on the door of Mom Roddenberry's café, but there were lights in the flat overhead where she and Pretty had lived. I fumbled for the bannister of the outside stairway that led up the side of the building to the flat.

The old lady answered my knock, searched my face for a minute, and invited me into a plain, but comfortable and clean parlor.

I sat down on a studio couch. Mom eased to the edge of a chair across from me. A hard stillness came to the apartment.

"Gaither," she said, "you did catch him. He's locked up. I've already heard."

"Yes, ma'am. But I got a dreadful feeling that rich boy will get out of this."

"Why, lad, we *know* he done it! Cold-blooded and mean. Pretty said he did—and she wouldn't tell a lie with her dying breath."

"I know, but we run up the first stump right there. We got a witness that says that she said it. They call it hearsay evidence. The lawyers he can afford will cut our case to nothing."

The old lady thought about it, hands crimping like talons. Then she raised her slate-gray eyes. "Might be a game two can play, Gaither."

I frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"Would a mountain jury convict an old woman if she was temporarily pixilated by the murder of her daughter?"

The hairs stiffened on the back of my neck as I began to get the drift.

She rose slowly. "Mom Roddenberry's café always supplies meals for the jail prisoners across the street. Tonight you got a prisoner. I'm going down now, Gaither, and fix his supper. I reckon that's why you came over, to fetch the prisoner his tray?"

I gulped. "Well, ma'am . . . come to think of it, yes."

"A real mouth-watering meal for the man . . ." She patted my shoulder in passing. "But don't you dast get

forgetful and throw the scraps to Red Runner and Old Bailey."

"No, ma'am," I promised. "I reckon such a fine pair of dogs deserve better than scraps tonight."

The Blue Man

WENZELL BROWN

There's a heap o' folk around Cripple's Bend as swears that Syd Tyson was the meanest man as ever lived in Pisquaticook County. Mebbe so and mebbe not. All I got to say is that in the whole thirty-three years I been sheriff in these parts I never run across no one quite so stingy and spiteful as Syd.

Warn't no good reason for it I could see. Syd's folks owned a right tidy farm about fifteen miles out along the Mill Road. It was good land for truck farmin' and the Tysons done all right by themselves. I ain't a-claimin' that Syd's paw warn't on the near side. He was tightfisted and tight-lipped but he never gave nobody no trouble.

Syd was a different kettle o' fish altogether. Ever since he was knee high to a chipmunk, he was in hot water. Let the other kids rag him a bit and he'd come after 'em with a baseball bat. In school he'd just sit dumb and glowerin', not speakin' a word most o' the time. The funny part about it was that Syd could be right pleasin' when he put his mind to it. That was the time to watch out for him, 'cause he never wasted a smile or a passin' word unless he had some trick up his sleeve he was waitin' to pull.

Syd was a well set-up lad, with black hair, big brown eyes, and dark, broodin' sort o' good looks, but there

warn't a girl within fifty miles o' Cripple's Bend that would date with him. Not when they remembered how he'd slapped Sally Masters's face at the church picnic, or the way he'd broken the back of Willy Hooper's hound because the pooch had taken a nip at the cuff of his pants.

When the old folks died, Syd inherited the farm and, like I said, it was a nice piece o' property for a man who could run it right. Syd had the know-how but he'd rather let the place fall to rack and ruin than to put a penny into sprucin' it up. Even the chickens run around loose, all peaked and scrawny like they hadn't had a square meal since the day they was born.

Seems like Syd was even mean to himself. There warn't an ounce o' fat on his carcass, his cheeks was all scooped out, and like as not he'd be wearin' clothes that warn't fit to stuff a ragbag. Nobody had much truck with Syd. His house was set well back from the road and his land posted with no trespassin' signs. Like as not if anyone came up to pay a sociable call, Syd would come out on the porch with his shotgun in his hand and warn 'em off.

It must be twelve years now, goin' on thirteen, since Syd got all dolled up in his Sunday best and made a trip out o' Cripple's Bend. He was gone nigh onto a week. Nobody paid much attention when he left but as soon as he was back, the whole town was buzzin' with the news that he'd gone and got himself hitched while he was away.

Millie Tyson warn't no prize as far as looks go, her best feature bein' her nice rosy complexion. Other than that, she was on the plump side, with a dumpy figure, mouse-colored hair, a loose, full mouth, and big, round eyes that always made her look like she

was ready to bust into tears. Mebbe she was, too. Life with Syd warn't likely to be no bed of roses.

Nobody had much chance to talk to Millie. Syd kept her cooped up on the farm and wouldn't let her come into Cripple's Bend even for Saturday night shoppin'. Two or three times some of the womenfolk tried to call on her but they didn't get far. Syd made it clear the NO WELCOME sign was still out, and Millie was so scared that, even if Syd was away, she'd beg them to leave.

Of course Maw had to get into the cat. Maw says she ain't nosy. But, bein' as how she's the sheriff's wife, she don't want to be taken by surprise by not knowin' what's goin' on around her. Besides, she was collectin' for the Community Chest and she don't see why Syd Tyson shouldn't give a donation.

So one day she takes the car and drives out to the Mill Road and smack up into the Tyson backyard without as much as a by your leave. Millie comes to the screen door. She don't unlatch it and she sort o' cringes behind it. She's lost a lot o' weight since she's come to Cripple's Bend. Her skin has turned an ashen color and her eyes are bigger'n ever.

Maw waltzes up on the porch and peers in. She makes believe she don't see nothin' queer in the way Millie's actin' and goes straight into her spiel about collectin' money.

Millie hears her out. Then she says, "I'd like to give something. I really would. But I wouldn't dare. Syd would be so mad, I don't know what he'd do."

Maw says, "I'm sorry. I reckon I shouldn't have come here. I sure don't want to make trouble for you with Syd."

She really means it and I guess that gets through to

Millie because when Maw turns to leave, Millie calls out, "Wait."

Millie unlatches the door and beckons for Maw to follow. They go into a kitchen that's spic and span. Without a word, Millie climbs up on a stepladder and lifts the lid off a flour tin on a high shelf. She rummages around inside and when she comes down, she's holdin' a half dollar and two quarters in her palm. She hands them over to Maw and says, "Will that do?"

Maw nods, and Millie says real quick, "Syd mustn't find out. I think he'd kill me if he knew. But it's my own money. I saved it before we were married."

Maw says, "He won't learn from me. You can bet on that."

Millie's breath is comin' hard and she's all trembly but she tries to smile. "Syd's in town and won't be back for a spell. I could make us a cup o' tea."

Maw manages to keep quiet till the steamin' cups are on the table, which is doin' pretty well for her. Then she goes to work to pry Millie's secrets out of her.

As stories go, Millie's don't amount to much. She's lived all her life in the country north of St. Onge, near the Canadian line. Her mother died when she was still in her teens, and from then on Millie's done nothin' but take care of her ailin' father. When he passed on, she was left alone with a nest egg of a few thousand dollars and not a friend in the world. She'd always wanted to get married but she reckons it's too late. Then one day her eye lights on an ad for a lonely hearts club in the back of a magazine. She's shy about answerin' but, after all, what's she stand to lose? That's how she come to meet Syd. And now that she's burned her bridges by marryin' him she rues the day she ever seen that ad.

"What about the nest egg?" Maw asks.

"I signed it over to Syd. What else could I do?"

Maw don't get no chance to answer that. Suddenly the screen door slams at her back and Syd Tyson looms up in the doorway. He must have seen Maw's car in the drive and stopped beneath the willers by the gate and walked the rest of the way along the grass to take her by surprise.

He don't say a word, just stands there, his eyes bulgin' and the blood darkenin' his face, makin' it look meaner than ever.

Millie whispers, "Please go—quick."

Maw gets up but Syd blocks her path. "You ain't welcome here. Not now. Not never. Is that plain?"

"Plain enough, Syd Tyson. Now clear out o' my way."

Syd stands aside and Maw sweeps past him. She can hear Millie a-sobbin' in back of her but there ain't a thing she can do without makin' matters worse.

It ain't till the followin' spring that I have any words with Syd Tyson.

To my surprise he comes a-stridin' into my office one day in the early afternoon. He raises his clenched hand almost like he was shakin' his fist at me. "Sheriff, I want you to arrest a man for trespass."

Syd ain't the kind o' feller to come runnin' to the law for help. I sit there gogglin' at him and wonderin' what tricks he's up to. Finally I says, "Who?"

"I don't know his name, but I can describe him. He ought to be easy enough to find."

I try to keep my voice mild. "Trespass ain't much of an offense, Syd. I ain't goin' to round up no posse to look for him."

Syd snarls, "Mebbe you better. He threatened my wife's life."

That's the first I ever hear of the Blue Man. Syd's right about one thing. Such a man ought to be easy to find.

Accordin' to Syd, he's seen the Blue Man hangin' around the Mill Road near his farm a couple o' times. He ain't no local but a city slicker type. He's tall, close to six foot, and everything about him is blue. He's got blue eyes and is wearin' a blue serge suit. His shirt's light blue with a dark-blue tie. Even the band of his summer-weight hat is blue and he's got blue veins in his nose.

I jot down the description on a pad. Syd stands spraddle-legged on the opposite side of my desk, glarin' at me. He says, "You better grab this guy quick."

"You say as he's been molestin' Millie?"

"That ain't what I said. He's been threatenin' her."

"Somebody she used to know?"

Syd shrugs. "She claims as how she's never laid eyes on him till he shows up in the backyard. But I ain't so sure. Millie could be lyin'."

"Just what did he do?"

"He must have waited around till he seen me headin' into town. Then he moseys up to the kitchen door and bangs on the screen till Millie shows up. He says he's goin' to kill her, break her neck or some such thing. Then Millie starts screamin' and he goes away, mumblin' he'll be back and next time he'll fix her good."

"So you leave her alone to come into town and tell me about it?"

Syd's eyes shift. "What else could I do? You know I ain't got no phone. I don't go in for new-fangled contraptions like that."

"You could have gone down the road to the Brodericks and phoned from there."

"You're talkin' like a fool, Sheriff. Me and old man Broderick ain't been on speakin' terms for years. He wouldn't as much as let me in the house."

"What about Millie? Seein' as how you're so worried about her, how come you didn't bring her along?"

Syd looks genuinely shocked. "With a stranger about! I couldn't do that. He's like to steal everything he can lay his hands on."

That sounds like Syd, thinkin' more about his property than his wife. I warn't puttin' much stock in his story but at that moment I come close to believin' him.

I hoist myself to my feet. "I reckon I better go out and have a few words with Millie."

"You won't get nothin' out o' her. She's so scared she's bawlin' her fool head off. Anyway, I told you all there is to know."

"Just the same, I'm comin' out to the farm. I ain't goin' to catch no Blue Man, warmin' up the seat o' this here chair."

To my surprise, Syd acts real docile. He says in tones that's gentle for him, "That's fine, Sheriff. But don't expect too much of Millie. She ain't too bright, you know."

I take the county car and trail Syd out along the Mill Road. A couple o' times I think I'll pass him but Syd don't take kindly to the idea. His battered secondhand car wouldn't win no beauty prize but it's got a lot o' power under its hood. I got it in my mind Syd ain't too anxious for me to have a chance to question Millie alone.

Millie's been cryin' all right. Her eyes is all swollen and her cheeks streaked with red. She gives me the same story as Syd, but every now and then she flicks

a look at her husband as if to ask if she's doin' all right.

When she's through, I says, "This man was all in blue. What about his hair? Was that blue too?"

Millie sort o' gasps and her eyes slide toward Syd, as if implorin' him for help. "Everything's blue," she mutters.

"You dang fool!" Syd chokes out. "He was wearin' a hat. You didn't see his hair."

"He was wearin' a hat," Millie repeats. Then she starts blubberin' and swings around and lumbers toward the house.

Syd squares off at me. "What are you tryin' to do, Sheriff, gettin' her all upset again? Ain't she had a bad enough scare without your bullraggin' her?"

"You're mighty considerate all of a sudden," I says. "I ain't aimin' to have her kilt, that's all. You start lookin' for the man. I'll tend to Millie."

I do plenty o' searchin' for the Blue Man but there ain't another soul in Cripple's Bend as has much as caught a glimpse of him. I keep on askin' but pretty soon they're makin' wisecracks in Gimpy's Diner whenever I show up there. You know the kind: "You caught up with the Blue Man yet, Sheriff? Sounds to me like mebbe he come from Mars."

I go to the Tyson place again to question Millie when Syd's out in the field. She's scareder'n ever but she's got her story down pat. And once she's run through it, she won't change a word. I keep at her, though I hate it, with her tremblin' and on the edge o' tears all the time.

Finally I says, "Millie, I want the truth. You're holdin' back on me and I want to know why."

She looks at me and opens her mouth and for a second I think she's goin' to come through. Then her

eyes grow bigger and rounder than ever, and I turn to Syd Tyson prowlin' around the corner of the house and I know I ain't goin' to get no more out o' Millie. Not that day anyhow.

I'm on my way back to Cripple's Bend when Rex Broderick hails me. He's Syd's next-door neighbor though, like Syd said, they don't have no truck with each other. I've talked with Rex earlier and he's scoffed at the idea of the Blue Man. "A feller like that would stick out like a camel on Main Street. Mebbe Syd has really gone off the rails and is seein' spooks, or mebbe he's up to more of his tricks. But there ain't no Blue Man. I'll lay you dollars to doughnuts on that."

But today he's singin' a different tune. He's got the wind up almost as bad as Syd. Seems the last couple o' nights he and his wife, Effie, have got the idea they're bein' spied on. Rex slides out on the back porch quick and sees a figure disappear into the shadows of the woods. He hollers, but there ain't no answer. He just catches a glimpse o' the man, enough to know he's tall and thin. Of course he could have been Syd, but Rex don't think so. Syd ain't one to go skulkin' around. He's always got a swagger to him.

Anyway, there's another part to the story. An hour or so before he seen me, Rex decides to go scoutin' around down in the woods. He goes as far as the crick that divides his land from Syd's, and the first thing he stumbles across is the ashes of a fire. Layin' around is a litter o' cans, beans, and coffee and such.

Rex leads me through the cuttin' toward the crick. There ain't no denyin' that it looks like somebody's been campin' out there. I root around a bit in the bushes and find a crude lean-to made o' pine boughs, with the huckleberry bushes crushed down beside it,

like a man's been sleepin' there. So mebbe I'm wrong, after all. Mebbe the Blue Man's real, though it's hard to see him roughin' it in a blue serge suit.

Then everybody in Cripple's Bend, even the summer folks, starts cuttin' in on the act. Every time anyone spies a shadow at night, they root me out o' bed and swear as how they seen the Blue Man.

That's the way things go for a month or more. Then one day around noon I'm in Gimpy's Diner polishin' off a stack o' flapjacks when Syd Tyson comes poundin' in. He grabs me by the shoulder and spins me around so I'm lookin' straight up into his face. His eyes is blazin' and his lips are workin' but he's slurrin' the words together so I can't hardly make them out.

"You stupid nincompoop!" he yells. "I been tellin' you, but you sit there shovin' food into your fat face and doin' nothin'. Now he's got Millie."

"Who has?"

"The Blue Man, you idiot. He's clubbed her and thrown her down the well."

I reckon the less I say the better, so I walk out and get into the county car and let Syd lead the way along the Mill Road toward his farm. Pretty soon there's another car falls in behind us, and then another, till there's a whole procession.

We rig up ropes and haul Millie out o' the well. Ain't no doubt she's dead, or that she was kilt before she hit the water. The whole back of her head is stove in. The murderer didn't even bother about concealin' the weapon. It's a rusted metal fence post and it's lyin' square up against the pump.

By the time we lay Millie out on the ground, there's at least twenty men and boys in the rough circle that's formed around the well. They're all mutterin' about the Blue Man, and then Syd Tyson's voice is raised

above the rest. He's swearin' a steady streak and tellin' the men to fan out and start scourin' the woods. The Blue Man can't be far away.

The next day I call in the State Police and they come with bloodhounds, but it ain't no use. If there'd been a trail, it's been trampled all over. There ain't a trace of the Blue Man neither. The fence post ain't got no fingerprints on it, and most anyone could have dug it up. Murder's been done but it looks like the killer's got away with it.

Syd Tyson raves and rants about me bein' a hick cop and how Cripple's Bend needs a new sheriff. I know what he's up to. If I try to pin the crime on him, he'll yell crooked politics. I'm convinced that he's the killer but I ain't got a shred of evidence to go on. Syd knows it and I can see him sneerin' at me. He's created a legend that's going to live for a long time in Cripple's Bend.

Two years slip by, and then Syd Tyson takes another trip. This time people know he's goin' and they ain't so surprised when he comes back with a second bride. Carol Tyson ain't no mousy creature like Millie was. There's something proud about her that takes your breath away. She's a tall, slim girl with straw-colored hair, a ridge of freckles 'cross her nose, and gray-blue eyes that are clear and steady. There's a love o' life in her that even livin' with Syd Tyson can't stifle.

Soon the word is passed around that Syd and Carol is fightin' like cat and dog. Effie Broderick claims as how she can hear 'em going great guns way down to her place. I suspect Effie is doin' a spot of eavesdroppin', but that ain't neither here nor there.

Seems like Syd met Carol through a lonely hearts club, same as he had with Millie. I reckon both of 'em

was gildin' the lily in their courtin' letters. Syd was makin' out like he was a gentleman farmer with a big estate, and Carol was pretendin' she had a sizable inheritance tucked away for a rainy day, while the truth of the matter is she was brought up in an orphanage and didn't have a nickle.

Everyone knows the marriage can't last. I'm hopin' Carol will clear out, bag and baggage. Standin' up to Syd and shoutin' him down is dangerous because, if I've got him tagged right, he's killed once and is like to try it again.

All the same I ain't prepared for what happens next, a repeat performance. One day Syd comes stridin' into my office with the news that the Blue Man is back and has been threatenin' Carol. Syd yells about me bein' incompetent, and how he wants the state cops in right from the start.

It ain't easy but I hold my temper. Once more we make the trip out to the Tyson farm, with Syd in the lead and me eatin' his dust. Carol runs through her story. She don't mumble and stammer like Millie. She speaks straight out. The Blue Man come to her door while Syd was in the fields. He screamed and shouted at her like crazy, makin' all sorts o' threats. But she don't panic. She keeps the door latched and tries to question him. He don't seem to like that and pretty soon he stamped away.

'Taint no time at all before the grapevine carries the news all over the country of the Blue Man's return. Most every day somebody claims to have seen him but, before I can show up on the scene, he's just plain disappeared. I'm turnin' pretty sour on the deal, when I get a phone call from Big Tim Hackett who runs the Temple Fillin' Station a piece down the road. He's excited as all get-out. Seems the Blue Man

stopped there for gas, and Tim and his two sons jump him. They got him hog-tied in the gents' room waitin' for me to come and fetch him. The way things turn out, this feller's a salesman from down Portland way. He's wearin' blue all right, even a blue tie and a blue band on his hat. But he's shorter'n average and on the paunchy side. A long-distance call to Portland puts him in the clear, and I have to set about unrufflin' his feathers so there won't be no suit for false arrest.

I'm runnin' around in circles, goin' without sleep and gettin' nowhere. I never did believe the Blue Man killed Millie Tyson, but now I ain't so sure. Carol is stickin' to her story, and that don't make no sense if it's a lie.

I have a talk with her when Syd ain't around. One thing's sure, she ain't scared o' Syd and she ain't wastin' no love on him neither.

Finally I lay it straight on the line. "You're fittin' yourself for a coffin, Carol. You can end up just like Millie."

She opens her eyes wide. "Do you think Syd would kill me? Why? I've got no money, nothing for him to inherit." Then her eyes open still wider. "Of course, there's the insurance."

"Insurance!" I yells. "Why the plum ding-dang didn't you tell me that before?"

Carol relaxes and smiles. "When we were married, me and Syd each took out a policy in the other's name. That's fair enough, isn't it?"

"Sure, and it's a perfect setup for murder too. Take my advice, Carol, and scoot out o' Cripple's Bend while you got the chance."

Carol looks thoughtful. "As a law enforcement officer, you're advisin' me to desert my husband. Is that right, Sheriff?"

She's got me stumped and she's laughin' at me. There ain't a word I can say, so I stamp away.

The end comes quicker'n I expect. Just two days later I get the word there's been another killin' out to the Tyson farm. This time the news is phoned in from Rex Broderick's place. Lew Satchell, who's actin' as my deputy that summer, takes the message. By the time he tracks me down at Gimpy's, it seems like he's managed to tell half the town. I hop into the county car and lead the way along the Mill Road. All the time, I'm cussin' to myself and swearin' Syd Tyson ain't gettin' away with murder a second time.

I head straight for the well, with Lew Satchell at my heels. There's a body in there, sure enough, all jackknifed up, and there's a bloodstained metal fence post propped against the pump just like before. But the body in the well ain't Carol's. It's a man—and I don't have to wait till he's hauled up to recognize him. He's Syd Tyson.

The same crowd is gatherin' as did two years ago, and there's the same mutterin' about the Blue Man. I face the lot of 'em over Syd's corpse, and when they want to form a posse to search the woods I don't raise no objections. I shrug and leave 'em to it.

I didn't expect they'd find no Blue Man, and they didn't. But I got a surprise comin' to me. When I make it down to Broderick's place to question Carol, there's Maw sittin' right beside her and holdin' her hand.

I put Carol through her story half a dozen times. There warn't much to it. She hadn't heard nothin' or seen nothin' out of the way, till she went to the well and found Syd's body. After that, she come straight to the Brodericks' and Rex phoned my office.

It was all simple and straightforward, but I don't

believe a word of it. Mebbe I could have broke Carol down if Maw hadn't set there, glarin' at me like a mother hen protectin' her lone chick. There warn't a single thing I could find wrong with the story, and neither could the State Police. As Maw kept remindin' me, Syd Tyson had complained about the Blue Man long before Carol had ever met him, so nobody could accuse her of making him up. Besides, there was plenty o' people around Cripple's Bend who'd claimed to have seen the Blue Man at one time or other and, even if none of 'em was too reliable, their testimony was mighty hard to refute.

So I goes through the motions of lookin' for the Blue Man all over again and, like before, I get nowhere. I'm pretty sure I know what happened. Carol Tyson learned that Syd was plannin' to kill her and had turned the tables on him, beatin' him to the gong. But there's one snag to my theory. Doc Smedley, the coroner, tells me a man must have done the killin'. It was a hard blow that had split Syd's skull. Even at her best, Doc didn't think Carol would have the strength for it and, at the time, he was treatin' her for a sprained wrist. Doc was prepared to go on the stand and swear she was unable to strike the heavy blow and then trundle Syd's body into the well.

Months go by and Carol's livin' all alone in the Tyson place. She's got her money from the insurance company that amounts to four thousand with the double indemnity clause. Syd died without no will, but there ain't no relatives to dispute that the place is hers.

Around Easter, Carol has a visitor, a feller named Larry Cutts. Actually Larry's stayin' with the Brodericks so there won't be no loose talk, but he's helpin' Carol fix up the farm. In no time flat the place begins

to look alive again, with a fresh coat of paint on the house and whitewash on the barn.

I do some checkin' on Larry, which ain't hard because he volunteers most of the answers before I ask the questions. He'd known Carol from way back when they were kids together in the orphanage. They'd always been sweet on each other but Larry wouldn't ask her to marry him, not till he could give her a home and security, and the best job he can get is part-time work in the cannery over to Glover's Bay. So Carol tires of waitin' for him and up and marries Syd. That's the last he's seen of her till he decides to look her up a few weeks ago.

I ask Larry if he was workin' the day Syd Tyson was killed. He shrugs. That's a long time ago and he can't remember, but the cannery has a time clock. Why don't I check the records? I do just that, drivin' down to Glover's Bay the next day. I learn that Larry's taken sick leave the day Syd died, but he's been seen late that same night in Jerry's Pool Hall. He's wearin' a muffler around his neck and complainin' about a sore throat, but he ain't too sick to shoot a couple o' games.

I time the drive back and forth to Glover's Bay. Larry could have made the trip, dumped Syd in the well, and shown up at the poolroom. The timin' was tight but it warn't impossible.

I reckon I have a case against Larry Cutts but I decide to try it out on Maw first.

Maw sits knittin' all the while she's listenin' to me. I can't tell a thing from her face, but when I'm through she says, "Larry ain't the Blue Man."

That's true enough. Larry Cutts is medium of height and no one would call him thin. He's broad-shouldered and stocky. 'Course anyone can wear a

blue suit, but Larry's dark-complected, with eyes like ripe olives. There just ain't nothin' blue about him.

I sigh. "I thought I made it clear there warn't no Blue Man. Syd Tyson made him up as a cover to kill Millie."

Maw gets a stupid look on her face. "Then how come that the Blue Man turns around and kills Syd?"

I start gettin' hot under the collar. But the more I yell and try to explain, the more mixed up I get.

Finally I realize Maw's mockin' me. She don't believe in the Blue Man no more than I do, but she ain't goin' to admit it. She says, "Mebbe you're right, Paw. But who's goin' to believe you? Syd Tyson invented his own killer and he didn't create him in the image of Larry Cutts."

I see her point all right. After all the fuss about the Blue Man, there ain't no jury in these parts will convict Larry and Carol of killin' Syd Tyson. I think it over for a while and decide I'd best leave matters alone and not start meddlin'. As things stand there's a justice of sorts.

Since then, Larry and Carol has got married and they've a couple o' young uns. The old Tyson place is prosperin', and there ain't a young couple nowhere around who's better liked than the Cutts.

As for the Blue Man, he ain't exactly been forgotten, but nobody in Cripple's Bend has seen hair nor hide of him since the day Syd Tyson died.

The Murderess

MAX VAN DERVEER

She had suffered enough. Lothario was to die.

Mona Rope purchased an inexpensive hat in a small shop, a tube of lipstick at a dime store, and the spade at a discount store. Then, moving swiftly and as if experienced in subterfuge, she walked in hot sunshine to the sedan she had rented earlier that afternoon. She appeared calm, but inside she was nervous. Now in the first critical stage of her scheme, she could not afford to be recognized by a passerby or become involved in an accident.

Her palms were moist as she drove carefully out of the business district and turned onto Riverview Boulevard. On her left, the showplace homes were spaced far apart on high green lawns. On her right, the ground dropped sharply away to the river's edge and the occasional glimpse of a bright roof through the large trees was the only indication that below the road, set back from the water, were more showplace homes.

She turned from the boulevard into the Barnhilt driveway and inched the sedan down the steep incline to brake before the closed doors of a double garage attached to a beautiful stone house. Quickly she found the key in her purse, opened the garage door, drove the sedan inside, then began her ascent to the boule-

vard. Once, in a flash of envy, she paused to look back on the house. How lucky Sally Lougherty, her friend since childhood, had been to marry Hugh Barnhilt! The Barnhilts were now in Europe on a summer business-vacation trip and, before leaving, Sally had insisted on the Ropes having a key to the house.

"Use it on weekends, anytime," Sally had said. "It isn't the Riviera, but it will be an escape from everyday living. You can swim, sun, host a party."

Mona continued up to the boulevard, managed to flag a cab, and twenty minutes later was downtown again. She walked swiftly the two blocks to her parked compact. So far everything was going to plan. She wiped her brow, frowned at the dampness left on the back of her hand, used the bathing suit on the seat beside her to dry it, then drove toward the house she had shared with Harry Rope the last sixteen years.

They were not to share much longer. The stage was set, and when Mona turned the compact into the driveway that led to a single-stall garage attached to the house, she knew the first headiness of having schemed meticulously. The Fairchilds were neighbors to the east and this afternoon Bette Fairchild—twenty-five, trim, browned, wearing yellow shorts and halter—was lazily using large shears on the hedge on the Fairchild side of the driveway.

Bette stopped snipping as Mona braked on the strip of yard between the drive and the house. "Hi," she said brightly when Mona had vacated the small car.

Mona resisted a snort of contempt. She managed an easy smile. "Hi."

"Hot, isn't it? Been swimming?"

It was with a great surge of carefully concealed triumph that Mona waved the swimsuit. How sweet were the spoils of forethought! Now it was assumedly

established that Mona Rope had spent this warm Wednesday afternoon at a swimming pool.

"At least, Officer, Mona had a bathing suit in her hand when she arrived home about five o'clock. I saw it. She waved it at me."

Mona kept her movement casual as she went into the garage and entered the house through the utility-room door, but out of Bette Fairchild's sight she became a flurry of action. Quickly she dampened the swimsuit at the kitchen sink and scurried back into the utility room to hang it. Then she risked a glance out a kitchen window. Bette Fairchild had returned to her snipping. Relief flooded Mona. She had expected inborn snoopiness to bring the little minx across the drive, and she had wanted a hanging suit to be damp to add credulity to the supposition that she had been at a pool.

She mixed a highball, lit a cigarette. Her eyes found the wall clock: five-fifteen. Approximately forty-five minutes yet before Harry's convertible would roll into the garage. She took the drink to the kitchen table, sat, crossed her knees. Her foot bobbed. She forced it to be still. The click of the air-conditioner thermostat startled her. She jerked. Her foot bobbed again. She let it bob, drank, looked at the wall clock. Five-sixteen. Forty-four minutes to go. Perspiration popped from her pores. She went to the sink, dampened her brow, let the stream of water cool her wrists. Lord, why was she perspiring so profusely? The house was cool. Or did all murderers perspire in anticipation?

She mixed a second highball, making the bourbon content much larger this time. Motive was what the police would seek out first after Harry's disappearance. Why had Harry Rope—sixteen years married to the same woman, eighteen years an accountant at Piper's,

the huge shoe-manufacturing firm—dropped out of sight? No creditors lurked like vultures on Harry Rope's threshold. The Ropes were financially sound. There was cash in a bank safety-deposit box, a joint checking account was reasonably healthy, and a house, its furnishings, and two cars were clear of mortgage. Harry Rope did not gamble, did not drink excessively, did not spend money flagrantly. On the surface, he appeared to have been living a normal, working man's life in a conventional, respectable neighborhood with a faithful wife who, at forty and plumping slightly, still remained a statuesque, somewhat sensuously attractive blonde, certainly not a woman difficult to live with.

Well, let's examine the wife for a moment. Was there any reason Mona Rope might *drive* Harry Rope from his home? Was there any reason she might even have *killed* her husband, secreted his body, and then reported him as a missing person? Combine the cash in the safety-deposit box and the joint checking account: the total would not make Mona Rope a fabulously rich widow. Life insurance? Harry Rope did not carry life insurance. So it seemed that, monetarily at least, Mona Rope did not gain by the disappearance or the death of her husband.

Now Mona grimaced and stared out the window. Bette Fairchild had quit snipping, but she remained in the yard. She was dallying and you didn't have to be a mind reader to know why. All you had to be was a wife-next-door. Harry was due home in the next five minutes.

The convertible, top down, rolled smoothly up the drive and into the garage. Then Harry and Bette Fairchild were at the hedge. Harry said something. Bette Fairchild arched her yellow halter and laughed.

Harry lifted a hand in a casual wave, turned back into the garage.

Mona had a fresh drink when he entered the kitchen. Tie down, collar open, coat on a fingertip across his shoulder, short, slight, hair fashioned in a crewcut, looking much younger and healthier than his forty years, he grinned and said, "Hi, sweets. Hey, make me one of those, huh?"

She moved to comply.

"You go to the pool this afternoon?"

"Yes."

He was already moving out of the kitchen. "Bring the drink into the bath, will you? I sweat like a trooper today."

Habit: five minutes after Harry entered the house, winter or summer, he was in the bathtub.

Mona clenched her fists, fighting to remain calm as she waited. She listened hard. There was no sound. She frowned, cautiously entered the living room. Opposite her, the bedroom door was open. What was Harry doing? Why wasn't he running his tub? Abruptly the sound of rushing water came to her and she sagged. She did not stir until the sound ended. Harry was in the tub.

Returning to the kitchen, she took the claw hammer from a drawer, kicked off her loafers, and moved into the bedroom on stealthy steps. The bathroom door was half closed. She heard her husband splashing. He would be to her left, away from the door, his back to her when she entered.

She stepped inside and brought the hammer down viciously against the top of his skull. He pitched forward, bending at the waist without a sound, and was facedown in the water. She struck him several blows before she was satisfied that he was dead.

Then she heard the deep voice: "Hey, anybody home?"

She blanched, staring dumbly.

"Hey, Royce here! Harry?"

Royce Fairchild!

Mona had no sense of vacating the bathroom but suddenly she discovered she was in the bedroom, the hammer clutched in her hand. She froze. The hammer could kill her, too!

"Harry?"

Mona jammed the hammer under the pillow on her bed. Royce Fairchild's voice seemed to come from the utility room. She summoned strength and said, "Coming, Royce." She moved numbly.

He was a young, tremendously tall man with a shock of unruly black hair and in his presence Mona always felt a bit overwhelmed by that height and his aggressiveness. Now he stood grinning outside the utility room screen door and she felt like a dwarf.

"Hi," he said affably.

"I was running a tub." She tried to smile. Somehow it seemed necessary to explain why she had not answered his summons immediately.

"You and Harry got anything planned for tonight?"

"No," she managed. "That is, Harry and I don't have plans. I'm going downtown shopping this evening—the stores are open Wednesday nights, you know—and then I'm going to a late movie with a friend."

It seemed an undue amount of explanation, but Royce's grin widened. "Thought Harry and I might go over to the driving range and hit a few balls."

"Well, I . . ."

Royce Fairchild frowned quickly at her hesitation and glanced over his shoulder at the convertible. "He's

here, isn't he? Bette said he drove in just ahead of me and I decided to run over and ask—"

"He walked down to the drugstore in the shopping center," Mona lied quickly.

"Oh?" Royce paused. "Funny, I didn't see him pass the house. Well, when he gets back tell him to yell at me."

"Uh—all right." She damned the catch in her voice. It stopped Royce in his departure.

"Is something wrong?" he asked, his brow abruptly pleated.

She shook her head weakly, struggling for sane words. "I'm not . . . I'm not feeling quite up to par. Too much sun at the pool this afternoon, I guess. Royce, will you . . . will you pull down the garage door?"

"Well, sure."

"It's just that . . . well, Harry is gone and I'm alone in the house, and I feel a little more secure if the door is—"

"Sure," Royce Fairchild said. He walked out of the garage. "Tell Harry to yell."

"Yes."

Then the garage door was closed and Mona sagged against the screen door. Her heart beat furiously, her legs felt rubbery. Her excuse to get the garage door closed had been lame, but she needed the security.

She had to move the body quickly now. Royce would return. Why, oh why, had he picked this night to want Harry to go to the driving range with him?

Mona shivered, grabbed an end of the long throw rug in the utility room, and ran to the bathroom. Harry's small size was another thing she had counted on, but she had difficulty rolling him from the tub.

He was much heavier than she had anticipated. She flopped him on the floor and used two towels to dry him, then she rolled him onto the throw rug and piled his discarded clothing on him. She removed the wallet from his pocket, took out all of the bills, twenty-three dollars, and returned the wallet.

She was perspiring again, but she felt stronger. Gradually she was regaining control of herself. Using the rug as a slide, she pulled Harry through the house out into the garage, where she used her set of convertible keys to open the trunk. How was she to get him inside? She now realized that he was far too heavy for her to lift as a whole.

She lifted his legs, putting his heels on the bumper. That was the easy part. Straddling him, she looped her arms around his lower spine and managed to heave him upward until his hips were caught on the edge of the trunk. He was upside down on his crushed head, now cocked at a crazy angle. She hooked her hands under his neck, lifted and pushed him into a sitting position on the edge. Then she shoved him forward and he flopped into a folded position.

She was breathing harshly and felt as if she had run a mile race as she pitched the clothing in on top of him, closed the trunk, and then spread the rug on the utility-room floor again. The rug was damp but would dry quickly. Now all she had to do was kill time.

It was agonizing. The waiting allowed her to think, to conjure all kinds of situations in which she might be trapped. She forced each thought from her mind. She was worrying without cause. The only tiny hitch thus far had been Royce Fairchild appearing at the door, but that was not disastrous.

Royce telephoned a few minutes before seven o'clock. Had she forgotten to tell Harry?

"No, Royce. He hasn't come back from the drugstore. He must have stopped at the bar. Gino's."

"Guess I'll call there, Mona."

When she put the telephone together she knew she had to advance her timetable by thirty minutes. She had not planned to leave the house until seven-thirty, but if she did not leave now Royce Fairchild might return to her door and she did not think she could face him another time.

She saw Royce looking at her from a window as she backed the convertible down the driveway, and panic nicked at her. There was temptation to gun the smooth motor, get on the highway, and just keep driving until she had put at least two states between herself and the city.

She gritted her teeth. She must not, she could not panic. Panic would trap her, send her to the death chamber. She forced herself to drive at a normal speed to the Barnhilt house where, braked beside the rental car inside the double garage, she transferred Harry's body and clothing to the trunk of the sedan, put the spade in the trunk, then took her other afternoon purchases to the convertible.

Downtown again, she passed a nervous hour window-shopping before entering a drugstore. It was eight-thirty. She still had thirty minutes to go before picking up her friend, Pat Dodson, but perhaps Pat was already waiting.

She telephoned from a booth and Pat Dodson triggered fresh panic when she pleaded, "Mona, can we skip the movie tonight? I've been trying to call you. I have a terrible headache."

Mona's legs quivered. Pat Dodson was to be her verified alibi if the need for an alibi ever arose. "C-can't—you—take—something?" she suggested, searching frantically for words. "Perhaps the ride downtown . . . the fresh air will help."

"Sleep, Mona, is what I need. Some other night, perhaps. Maybe tomorrow night."

"No." Mona hesitated, then attempted to smooth the curtness. "I'm going tonight, Pat. I'm in the mood."

"Well, all right. But I'll have to skip."

Mona felt ill when she left the drugstore. She walked two blocks quickly, aimlessly, her thoughts scrambled. She had to get a grip on herself. She had to think. She had to improvise.

She forced herself to slow her pace, to walk with purpose. She turned a corner and moved toward the theater. Suddenly there was reprieve. She paused with the thought, then hurried to the parked convertible, where she removed the two sacks from her afternoon shopping and moved off to the theater. At the ticket window she left the package containing the tube of lipstick on the window counter and entered the theater. The ticket girl opened a door in the back of her booth and called, "Ma'am?"

Mona turned, saw the girl extending the small sack. She smiled, thanked the girl, took the sack, and entered the darkness of the theater. She felt much better. Now, a ticket-seller would remember her.

The movie was a light comedy. Normally she would have enjoyed it, but when she walked out of the theater she discovered that what had been on the screen the last two hours was a blank. And there was more waiting ahead. Until tonight she had never realized just how nerve-racking killing time could be.

Nervously she flicked on the convertible radio and caught a news bulletin. The city had been placed under a severe weather alert for the next six hours. She frowned. Would a storm help or hinder her?

When Mona arrived home she saw a face in a lighted window of the Fairchild house and she smiled tautly. She had wanted Bette Fairchild to know when she returned from the movie. She put the car in the garage and entered the house with her packages. Thirty minutes later she turned off all of the lights and took up a station at a dark window where she could see the Fairchild house. She occasionally caught the image of Bette. She did not see Royce. It was after one o'clock in the morning now. Why was Bette still awake? Then she remembered. Bette Fairchild had an innate fear of storms and never retired if there were a chance of weather violence.

Mona pondered this twist of fate. She could not have Bette see her leave the house. And if there were violence, would the Fairchilds expect to see light in the Ropes's house during the storm?

Mona eased out the front door and through the shadows until she had the house between herself and any inquiring eyes that might peer from a Fairchild window. Then she crossed the yard and was on the sidewalk. Walking swiftly, she studied the sky anxiously. There were stars. Perhaps there would not be a storm.

She found a cab with a sleeping driver at the all-night stand in the shopping center and made what she fervently hoped was not too obvious an effort to shield her face as she ducked into the shadow of the backseat. Her spirits lifted slightly. The driver was so sleepy he gave her only a brief, over-the-shoulder glance as she spoke a Riverview Boulevard address. At

the destination she gave him the correct amount for the fare plus a fifty-cent tip, then started bravely up a walk toward a dark house while he drove away. When she was sure she no longer existed for the driver, she returned to the boulevard, crossed it, and went down the Barnhilt driveway.

She had selected Harry's burial plot weeks before during one of his whims, a pioneering Sunday afternoon drive into the country. The drive had taken them off a highway and down a narrow lane through trees and into a shallow ravine where the lane had ended abruptly.

Now the headlights of the rental car pierced the dark night as Mona eased along to the lane's end. She put out the lights and sat for a few moments breathing deeply while her eyes adjusted to the dark. Then she dug the shallow grave and rolled her husband and his clothing into it. Far away, back in the direction of the city, there was a flash of lightning and a faint roll of thunder. She shoveled swiftly as a new thought struck her. Tire tracks could be left in wet ground. She had to be on the highway before the rain came.

The car creaked and snapped protestingly as she bounced back along the lane. Easy, she told herself, take it easy. This is no time to have a breakdown, not out here in the middle of nowhere.

Mona drew a deep breath and increased her speed when she turned onto the highway. The storm was closer now. Lightning flashed often, jagged streaks of brilliance crossing the black sky. She saw the river bridge ahead. There were no headlights following or approaching and she felt exhilaration as she drove onto the bridge and stopped. Quickly she left the

sedan and pitched the spade over the railing. The dome the city lights made against the stormy sky was only two miles ahead now. Satisfied, she rolled toward it—and then her heart lurched.

There were other lights ahead where lights should not exist. They seemed to block the highway, and there was an eerie red beacon whirling against the night.

Police! Somehow she had been discovered and now the police were waiting for her return to the city!

She applied the brakes. Her eyes searched for a side road.

But how could the police have discovered her so quickly? She struggled for rationalization. They couldn't have! It had to be an accident ahead! That was it, someone had had a wreck.

She allowed the car to roll slowly. A uniformed man materialized in the headlights. He stood on the shoulder of the road and used a red light to motion her forward. Now she saw that only one side of the highway was blocked—traffic coming out of the city was stopped. Another red flashlight motioned to her to keep moving. She rolled through the roadblock and into the city. Lightning flashed and thunder cracked. She wanted to stop, catch her breath, allow her heart to settle, but she kept on, to the downtown theater parking lot she had selected earlier. Two blocks away was the car-rental agency; at the next corner was a cab stand. She left the car in the lot and found a cab to take her to the shopping center complex. A blast of wind swirled debris along the street and the first drops of rain began to splatter the sidewalk as she paid her fare. She dog-trotted the three blocks to her house. Rain came down in a gush just as she slid through the

front door. She collapsed in a deep chair. She suddenly was bone-weary, and felt as if she could sleep for a week.

But sleep would not come. She was too tied up in knots. There was too much behind her, too much ahead. She went through the darkness to the kitchen, where she looked out the window and saw the lights in the Fairchild house. Bette Fairchild was riding out the storm now. Should she also pretend she had been awakened? She reached for a light switch, then gasped at her near error. If Bette Fairchild looked out a window, looked in at her, saw her fully clothed . . .

Mona changed into pajamas and a robe and remembered the hammer under the pillow. Forcing herself to be calm, she took the hammer to the kitchen and put it in a drawer. Then she snapped on the light, lit a cigarette. Let Bette Fairchild look now. The only thing she would see was another woman who had been disturbed by the storm.

Mona made coffee and killed the next four hours smoking marijuana and sipping from a cup while she listened to the violence outside. The storm finally subsided around seven o'clock in the morning, became a gentle rain. A few minutes before eight o'clock, she heard Royce Fairchild drive away from the house next door. She forced herself to wait another twenty minutes before she dressed and left in the convertible. She saw Bette Fairchild watching her from a window. She drove to the theater parking lot, transferred to the rental car. This all seemed so detailed but it was the details that were to prevent discovery. Returning the rental car to the agency at 3:30 A.M. would have given her identity; returning it at 9:20 A.M. would not.

The attendant was a wide-shouldered, sloppy man

who looked as if he did not bathe. "Get all of the use out of it you needed, lady?"

Mona managed calmness. "Yes." She paid and started out of the office.

Then the man yelled after her, "Hey, wait a sec, lady! You got any idea where you might've lost the hubcap?"

Mona forced herself to stop and turn. The man was squatted beside the right front wheel of the car and peering at her hard. There was no hubcap on the wheel.

Mona said nothing. Her tongue seemed stuck to the roof of her mouth. Where had she lost the hubcap? At the grave? Somewhere along the rough lane? In the theater parking lot?

"Do . . . do you . . . want me to pay for it?" she asked.

The man's eyes flicked over her. He seemed to debate. Suddenly his thin lips twisted to one side, and he muttered, "Naw, you don't hafta pay. We got insurance."

Mona left the agency woodenly, returned to the convertible, and drove to the shopping-center supermarket, where she made several purchases without thinking. Then she was home again and had the large grocery sack in the kitchen. She wanted to scream. She had to get a grip on herself. She poured coffee with a shaking hand, sipped. Everything was still going smoothly in spite of the lost hubcap, and she still had one more detail to take care of before she summoned the police. It was ten-forty in the morning now, time she telephoned Piper's.

The voice at Piper's was curious. No, Mr. Rope had not come in to the office this morning and Mr.

Rope's absence was unusual. Mr. Rope never missed work without calling. Was there anything that could be done from Piper's?

There was nothing.

Mona telephoned the police department and asked for the Missing Persons Bureau. The voice on the other end of the line was bored and guardedly suggested that perhaps her husband would be coming home any minute now. Perhaps she had been emotionally upset by the storm and—

"This just isn't like Harry, Officer!"

"Well now, I guess we could send someone out there if you really think—"

"Will you? Please?"

They sent a sergeant named Banks. He surprised Mona. He was young, probably thirty, but he seemed to understand her plight. She decided she liked him as he asked questions. He took down a detailed description of Harry and then told her not to worry. Her husband probably would show up.

Twenty minutes after the sergeant had left the house Bette Fairchild was in the kitchen with Mona. She looked haggard, but she was curious and excited. "That car out front a few minutes ago! It looked so official! Are you okay?"

Mona explained.

Bette appeared shocked. "Harry didn't come home all night?"

"He left the house right after coming from work, saying he was going to the drugstore. I haven't seen him since."

"Well, where could he be?"

"I don't know, Bette."

"Have you called his office?"

Mona felt a twinge of satisfaction. "Yes, right after

I returned from the market this morning. I didn't want to . . . to call too early. I didn't want to spread a false alarm."

"Golly," breathed Bette, "everything is happening at once! A storm, the bank burglary, and now Harry—"

"Bank burglary?"

"Haven't you been listening to the radio? One of the downtown banks was robbed during the night. There are roadblocks set up all around the city and . . ."

The remainder of Bette Fairchild's words were lost on Mona. She felt an urge to laugh when she thought back on her near panic at the roadblock.

Bette asked, "Mona, why would Harry just up and disappear?"

Sergeant Banks returned the next day and asked the same question. Then, when she did not have an answer, he became blank-faced and said, "You know, of course, Mrs. Rope, your husband has been seeing other women."

Mona acted appropriately shocked.

"Young women," said Sergeant Banks. "Most seemed to be or have been employed at Piper's."

Mona became indignant.

"It's one of the first things we check in this kind of case," said Sergeant Banks. "Finances, marital happiness—"

Mona displayed anger. "Our finances are in order!"

"Yes."

"And Harry never would—"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Rope," the sergeant interrupted. He seemed to be a man who anticipated. "Our investigation shows that your husband has been keeping

company with a number of young women over a period of many months."

Mona became the softly crying, scorned wife until Sergeant Banks left the house, then she went into the kitchen, poured coffee into her empty cup, added a lace of bourbon, and silently toasted a dead husband: Cheers, Lothario!

Saturday, Sergeant Banks unloaded a bomb. A preliminary audit of Harry's books at Piper's—it was routine when an accountant disappeared—had revealed what seemed to be a misappropriation of funds.

"H-how much is missing?" Mona asked.

"It looks like about ten thousand dollars."

"And you think Harry has run off with—"

"None of his recent women acquaintances are missing, but the money is."

"I see," said Mona. And she also saw how Harry Rope had been able to afford his women through the months. Then she looked the sergeant straight in the eye. "This is a terrible shock, of course."

He said nothing.

"I wonder . . ." She hesitated. The sergeant waited. "Well, I wonder if it would be out of line if I left the city for a while? Say a week? There will be publicity in the newspapers, I imagine. There is when money, and a man, is missing, and I think . . . well, I'd just like to be alone somewhere."

"Any particular place in mind, Mrs. Rope? We might need to be in touch."

"Are you familiar with Lake Charles?"

"Yes."

"There's a lodge there. Harry and I once . . . Well, never mind. There is a lodge, Shady Oaks."

"All right, Mrs. Rope."

"I can go?"

"Yes."

She drove out of the city that afternoon and was only twenty miles along the highway when her suspicion was confirmed. At Shady Oaks she found her police shadow to be a young man who was equally at home on a beach or in the cocktail lounge. Then on Monday afternoon he dropped all pretense, approached her boldly, and said they would have to return to the city.

"Do you mean because I haven't met Harry with his ten thousand dollars?" she asked caustically.

"Your husband has been found, Mrs. Rope. I'm afraid he was murdered."

Two policemen questioned her at headquarters. Sergeant Banks introduced the second policeman as a Lieutenant Poling, a rangy, mild-mannered man, who asked her politely to recall her whereabouts the night her husband had walked away from the house. She did, and was pleased with herself. She knew her story would be checked and verified. Bette Fairchild would testify that she had come home from swimming at a municipal pool around five o'clock that Wednesday afternoon and Royce Fairchild would tell them when she had driven away from the house. Then Pat Dodson could recount begging off of a movie date and a ticket-seller, her memory properly jostled, would remember a woman who had left a package after purchasing a theater ticket. Bette could account for the early morning hours when Mona had arrived home from the movie, when the storm had hit the city, the lights in the Rope house next door.

Mona was relaxed when Lieutenant Poling nodded and said gently, "You understand, Mrs. Rope, we have to question you."

"Certainly. There is the missing money. After all, I could have known Harry was stealing it."

"It is why we allowed you to go to Lake Charles," said Sergeant Banks.

"You thought I could be meeting Harry somewhere. I didn't know about the money, Sergeant. That was a shock."

"We think we know where most of it was spent," put in Lieutenant Poling.

"On Harry's . . . *girls,* you mean," said Mona.

He nodded. "We are working on the theory that one of them—some girl—hammered him to death."

Mona did not move.

"Can you take a rather brutal story, Mrs. Rope?"

She was not conscious of nodding but the lieutenant continued: "Our version of last Wednesday night is, your husband left the house on the pretext of going to the drugstore. Either by prearrangement or by chance he met a girl. They spent the evening together. Sometime during the evening the girl struck him down with a blunt instrument, probably a hammer. We won't know why until we find her. Then she took his body out of the city and buried it. He was nude when we unearthed him, but his clothing was in the grave. So was his wallet. It was empty."

"L-lieutenant," Mona stuttered, "you haven't told me just how . . . just how you found Harry."

"A kid's curiosity," he said grimly, "about a hubcap. A curious boy was prowling the countryside and found a shiny hubcap in some weeds in a ravine. Then he saw what looked like a fresh grave. He dug into the grave with his hands until he turned up a foot. Naturally, it frightened him."

"A . . . hubcap?" she murmured.

"We'd like to find the car it belonged on," he said flatly.

"C-Can you?"

"That, unfortunately, Mrs. Rope, is like expecting to find a given wiener in a hot-dog stand."

"But . . . but if you did find it?"

"We think we might have our girl."

The days passed excruciatingly slowly. Mona buried Harry again and there was newspaper sensationalism over Harry being found in a shallow grave, the police search for a car that had lost a hubcap, the money Harry was supposed to have stolen, her own picture in the paper. And there were Bette and Royce Fairchild, Bette's unrestrained excitement and Royce's genuine concern. But there was growing security, too, in each passing day. The police were getting nowhere in their investigation. Mona almost felt smug—until a new menace suddenly loomed.

He appeared on her doorstep with an evening light behind him. Wide in the shoulders, sloppy in dress, his mouth smirked behind a new cigar and his eyes inventoried boldly. There was a car in the driveway.

Mona feigned nonrecognition of both the man and the car. "Yes?" she said.

"Come off it, dolly. Name's Fred Taylor. You remember me—and the car you see parked out there."

She blanched against his bluntness.

"Look, I coulda run to the cops. I coulda told them a story about a dame who brings in a heap she's rented —minus a hubcap."

"Mr. Taylor, I—"

"Your picture was in the newspaper, dolly. So was a lot of other interesting things, like the hubcap thing —and like ten thousand smacks your sly old man heisted!"

Fred Taylor pushed inside, went to a deep chair, and sat. "Unlax, baby," he said. "Sit. We gotta talk."

"About what?" Mona snapped.

"The ten grand, that's what, honey. Five of it will keep my yap shut. That's just half. I'm bein' generous." He sucked on the cigar. "Look," he said, feigning patience, "I know how these things work. The wifey gets hubby to steal from the joint where he works. A nice little nest egg is put together. Then one day wifey says, 'Come on, hubby, let's go to South America.' Only hubby don't get out the door. Wifey clonks him on the noggin. Wifey is going alone."

"That's fantastic!"

"Is it?" Fred Taylor laughed without humor. Suddenly his face darkened. "Honey, I ain't got time to fool. I want five thou or I go to the cops!"

"Mr. Taylor, please . . ." Mona searched frantically for direction and words. This couldn't be happening to her! "Mr. T-Taylor," she heard herself repeat, "would you . . . would you care for a drink? I have to . . . well, collect myself."

He seemed surprised, but he also seemed to consider it. His eyes roved over her and he suddenly beamed. "Well now, dolly, that sounds better. You want to be friendly, huh? I guess I got time for that."

Mona went into the kitchen. He trailed her. She was frightened but she needed time to think. She had to rid herself of this menace. She got out the bottle of bourbon. He commented, "Good booze." Mona took two glasses from the cupboard, opened the ice compartment of the refrigerator. The cube tray was stuck. She struggled with it, then Fred Taylor was against her back and she wanted to scream at the touch of him, but he said, "Let me get them cubes, dolly. Hey, you got a lotta curves!"

She attempted to dip out from in front of him, but he caught her shoulders, bent to kiss her. She twisted her head. His mouth crossed her cheek and the smell of him was foul. Reflexively, she slammed her palms against his chest. He grunted and, surprisingly, released her. He glowered, his breathing heavy.

"Okay, dolly, so your kind of friendliness I can do without. But the dough I want! Get it!"

She stood numbed, wagging her head.

He caught her shoulders, shook her viciously. "You got it someplace in this joint!"

"Th–the . . . car," she whispered.

He stopped shaking, stared at her, and she moved mechanically, stepping around him, going through the utility room and out into the garage. She was functioning blindly. She did not know why she was in the garage unless it was a frantic effort to find a weapon. She needed something with which to fend him off, to rid herself of him. Was there such a weapon in the garage?

Her eyes searched without seeing, and then he was beside her, rasping, "The car. Okay. So?"

"Th–the trunk . . ." She found keys in her pocket, opened the trunk. It gaped back at her, the jack and lug wrench scattered on its floor.

"Baby—"

He cut off his words as she crawled into the trunk of the convertible and wrenched at the lining behind the backseat. She tugged. The lining would not give. Wasn't he going to help? Wasn't his greed to rule? She had to get him inside the trunk so she could slam the lid on him.

Then his hands were on her hips and he had yanked her out of the trunk and slammed her up against the garage door.

"The dough's in there, baby?" he said harshly. "Behind the lining?"

She nodded woodenly.

He peered into the trunk, crawled inside, was on his knees, tearing at the lining. The tire wrench loomed at her. She stepped forward, snatched it up, dug it into Fred Taylor's middle. He grunted and jerked. His head slammed against the trunk door. She brought the wrench around in a sweeping stroke and slammed it across the back of his thighs. He cried out and pitched forward, cursed, and was coming out when she brought the wrench down hard against his face. Panic ruled her then. She continued to beat his head until she knew he was dead.

She pitched the wrench in on top of him, slammed the trunk and sagged against it. Her breathing was in gasps and she felt as if all of her strength had been drained from her, but it was done. The man inside the trunk could no longer condemn her.

Mona staggered into the house and attempted to organize her thoughts. She had to rid herself of Fred Taylor's body. The river seemed a logical place. Was there a lonely stretch of riverbank somewhere?

The sound of the front doorbell brought a terrified yelp from her before she stood frozen, fingers against her cheek. She struggled for composure. Could she ignore the summons? The bell sounded again. She decided she could not. She breathed deeply, gritted her teeth, and went to the front door. When she opened it, she cut off the scream only by clamping her jaws.

Sergeant Banks frowned. "Evening, Mrs. Rope. Is something wrong?"

She struggled for composure. "No," she said, her voice breaking. "It's just that—" She cut off the words.

"You surprised me, that's all. I expected someone else."

"Oh?" He let it hang.

She indicated the car parked in the driveway. "There was a man here a few moments ago. A salesman. Not a very pleasant salesman. I sent him away, and when you rang I thought . . . well, I thought he had returned. I was prepared to give him a piece of my mind."

"He must still be in the neighborhood," said the sergeant. "That's a funny place to park. I'd say he took a liberty. He should have parked at the curb."

"He'll probably be leaving the area soon," Mona said. "Was there . . . is there something?"

"I wonder, Mrs. Rope, if I might have a drink of water?"

"Wha—Why, yes, certainly."

She took him into the kitchen, pondering this sudden and strange request, and got the glass of water. He drank, thanked her, then returned to the front door where he looked out at the car in the driveway again. "Do you want me to find that salesman and have him move his car?"

"No," Mona said, feeling as if she were going to explode. "No . . . it's . . . all right where it is."

"Well, good night, Mrs. Rope. I'll be in touch."

"Good night, Sergeant."

She watched him cross to the car in the drive. He opened the door, looked at the registrations, then went on to the street and looked in both directions. Finally he got into a black sedan at the curb and drove away.

There was only one course of action. *She* had to drive away from the house. If the sergeant were wait-

ing somewhere for a man to leave, he would not follow her. He would remain, watch the car in the driveway. Well, he could remain all night. The rental car would not be moved, and tomorrow she would stick with her story. A salesman had parked in her driveway, a salesman had come to her door, she had sent the salesman away; she assumed he had gone off to make other calls in the neighborhood, she did not know why he had not returned for his car.

Mona backed the convertible from the garage, maneuvered around the car in the driveway by backing across the front yard, and then was at the street entry when the black sedan eased in behind her and forced her to brake.

Sergeant Banks came to her open window. "Where is your boyfriend, Mrs. Rope?" he asked, stone-faced.

She gripped the steering wheel hard. "Sergeant, you're . . . confusing me."

"There isn't any salesman in the neighborhood, Mrs. Rope. And that's a rental car in your drive. I think there was a man hiding in your house. Infidelity is not practiced solely by men, you know. Is it possible you have had a lover for a long time? Is it also possible you and your lover planned your husband's death? Is it possible your lover executed the plan? These questions are clogging my mind, Mrs. Rope."

"Sergeant," she gasped, "you absolutely shock me! I can call your superior! I can—"

"Yes, Mrs. Rope," he interrupted, "you do that. You telephone Lieutenant Poling and tell him—"

"Oh, Sergeant, this is absurd!" She vacated the car.

"Your car keys, please."

"*What?*" Mona screeched wildly.

Sergeant Banks was scrutinizing the convertible minutely, and Mona's heart beat hard. Was there blood

leaking from the trunk? She didn't remember blood when Fred Taylor had died . . .

"The keys, Mrs. Rope?" Sergeant Banks extended a palm and waited.

Confused, Mona shook her head. "I—I don't understand."

"There's the possibility you are sneaking your boyfriend away from the house," he said. "He could be hiding in the trunk. He could return later for the car."

Mona screamed and turned to run, but Sergeant Banks was quick. He caught her wrist and slammed her body up against the convertible, pinning her with his weight. Then he reached through the open window, wrenched the key from the ignition switch, and took Mona to the back of the car. He found the trunk key, inserted it in the lock.

When the lid swung up he cursed, and Mona Rope collapsed in the street.

Light o' Love

FLETCHER FLORA

"Edward," said Carlotta, "I want a divorce."

It was teatime. Perhaps that was what made it more shocking than it might otherwise have been. For teatime, to Edward and Carlotta, had always been a precious fragment of their long days, a concession wrested from the rushing hours during which life reduced its swift pace to a sweet interlude of serenity between the irretrievable morning and the inevitable night. To violate it in this harsh manner by the introduction of a perturbing disclosure was surely a kind of sacrilege, like an obscene act of worship.

Edward set his cup, with a faint click, on its saucer. He set cup and saucer on the low table between his chair and Carlotta's. Rising, without immediately responding, he walked to the windows behind him on the west side of the room and stood looking out. The broad sweep of emerald lawn, four floors below, was bathed in the golden light of the midafternoon sun. There was the concrete path cutting a precise white slash across the lawn toward a planting of silvery Russian olives, dividing between here and there to encircle a fountain that rose from a tranquil pool to fling crystal shards into the somnolent air. It had been only yesterday, having wakened prematurely from an after-lunch nap, that he had stood here and watched

Carlotta and Rupert return along the path from a stroll to the olives; and it had been there, precisely there, this side of the fountain where the stone bench had been placed beside the path, that he had seen their near hands creep toward each other and clasp and cling for the duration of a dozen steps. He had known then, of course, the truth that he had only suspected before. He had lost Carlotta. She was in love with Rupert.

Despite the pain that struck his heart, the terrible sense of sudden loss and loneliness, the truth was not really unexpected. There had been signs. There had been gestures and inflections and the mute, lucid language of eyes. They had begun, these sure signs of love, shortly after Rupert had moved into 4C, three doors down the hall, some six months ago. Gradually becoming aware of them as they became gradually more apparent, Edward had nevertheless kept his overt peace, burying his knowledge in silence with his pain. After all, it was understandable that a warm and vital woman like Carlotta should be in a measure susceptible to the undeniable charm of a man like Rupert. Slender and erect, blessed with good looks and filled with grace, Rupert was indeed enough to turn the head and distract the heart of any discerning woman. The distraction would pass. In time, its defection unmarked, the love of Carlotta would return to Edward, where it belonged, without ever in effect having been away.

Yet it hadn't. It hadn't returned; and Carlotta, sipping tea, had said that she wanted a divorce. Edward, at the window, watched the crystal shards of the fountain fall without sound into the tranquil pool. Beyond, at the end of the concrete path, the olives shook their silver leaves in the languid, golden light. He

must, he knew, control himself. It was necessary, in the remnants of one's pride, to display somehow a decent front, however withered with pain the heart behind. As though to place and fix the time, he looked at his watch and saw that it was ten minutes after three. Tea had been served at three. It was always served early because lunch was always served early before it, and dinner was served early after. Turning away from the window, he returned to his chair and sat down and took up his cup.

"It's Rupert, I suppose," he said quietly.

"So you've guessed. Were we so obvious?"

"You are unpracticed in deception. Besides, I know you so well, Carlotta."

"I'm sorry, Edward. The last thing I want in the world is to cause you distress. Will you believe that I tried to avoid it?"

"I have no reason to believe otherwise."

"It was simply something that we couldn't help. It began in an instant and simply grew and grew."

The pain struck at his heart again with renewed fury. His heart was not strong, and he had recently had what he took to be minor attacks, but they had been nothing like this. In his anguish, he nearly cried aloud. He was afraid for a moment that he would collapse. Lifting his cup with his right hand, holding his saucer suspended in his left, he took a drink of tea. The tea was cold.

"Are you certain that it is not merely an infatuation?" he asked.

"Yes. Quite certain."

"In that case, there seems to be nothing more to say."

"You agree, then, to the divorce?"

"I will not stand in your way."

"Thank you, Edward. I knew that you would be a gentleman."

So there it was, all so simply and neatly ended. So capable of such monstrous dissimulation is the pliable human organism. So frail and transient upon earth are those values one thinks enduring. Words drifted like miniature cumuli out of nowhere into Edward's mind: . . . *ancient and holy things fade like a dream.* Replacing cup and saucer on the tea tray, he stood up.

"I think that I'll have a stroll and a cigar before dinner," he said. "Excuse me, please."

He put on his hat and took up his stick and went out. In the elevator he descended to the lobby, where he turned off into a passage that took him out onto a wide terrace at the rear of the building, which overlooked the expanse of emerald lawn he had looked down upon minutes earlier from the window four floors above. He went down a brief flight of shallow steps and strolled along the concrete path toward the fountain. Midway, he stopped and sat down on the stone bench beside the path. He laid his stick on the bench beside him and removed a cigar from the breast pocket of his jacket. He unwrapped the cigar, tidily stuffing the wrapper into another pocket, and carefully clipped off the end of the cigar with a small tool that had been a gift from Carlotta. When the cigar was evenly lighted and smoothly drawing, he leaned back and crossed his knees, extending his right arm along the back of the bench. The sun was warm, and he began to regret his jacket. Now, the fountain was not mute. He could hear the tiny silver sound of showered drops that was like the tinkling of a thousand antic bells. He could smell, penetrating the aroma of rich tobacco, the sweet, nostalgic odor of freshly mowed grass. He could see, looking up and

away over the top of a towering pine, a purple martin gliding with fluid grace against a blue-and-white sky.

How far had it gone? That was the thought that kept intruding into his mind and corrupting the quiet day. To what degree of intimacy had Carlotta and Rupert been seduced by their extravagant passion? What privacy had they been able to steal, under the circumstances, for the expression of love? A vision of embraced bodies flashed in Edward's heated imagination, and he was ill. It was intolerable. He must exercise some mental discipline. Retrieving his stick and rising, he strolled on to the fountain, where he paused to contemplate the crystal spray and observe the countless random dimples that formed and vanished on the shadowed surface of the pool. Rounding the pool, he continued slowly along the path to the distant group of Russian olives, where he found another stone bench and sat down and finished his cigar and sat on and on afterward while the shadows of the olives stretched longer to the east.

He returned in time for dinner, but he did not go. Carlotta went without him and was back an hour later. There seemed to be between them an unspoken pact that neither would speak of the matter on the minds of both. Edward sat by the window and tried to read, but the words had no power to project themselves through the lenses of his glasses, and his mind, in any event, had no power to give them order and meaning. Carlotta turned on the television set and sat in front of it, the volume reduced to avoid disturbing Edward, but she was blind to the shadows of figures performing to the accompaniment of whispers. Outside, the light drained slowly off the earth. Among the stars, the moon appeared where the sun had been. Edward's book lay closed in his lap. Carlotta got up,

turned off the television, and paused. Looking at Edward, she lifted one hand toward him in an odd little gesture of entreaty, but he did not look at her, and she did not speak. After a moment, she went silently to bed.

It was perhaps an hour later when Edward moved. He stood up abruptly, and the book, forgotten in his lap, fell to the floor with a thump. If he was aware of it, he ignored it. His head ached, and he felt a need to stretch his legs. He might even venture another cigar before retiring. Looking at his watch, he saw that it was not yet ten o'clock. The door to the terrace was not locked until ten, as he recalled. Good; he still had time for a stretch and a breath of fresh air and perhaps a smoke. Leaving the room, he turned to his right in the hall and walked quietly to the double glass doors at the far end.

At first he thought he had the terrace to himself, but then he saw that he did not. A glowing coal in the shadows betrayed a presence. Someone at the rear was sitting on one of the wide stone slabs topping the balusters that enclosed the terrace. Approaching through the shadows, Edward saw that it was Rupert. Between them, as the distance closed, there was a kind of taut line of communication in which nothing was said but everything was understood. The pain, aroused, was ripping again in fury at Edward's heart.

"Good evening, Rupert," he said.

"Good evening, Edward."

"Having a last smoke before bed?"

"As you see."

"I'll join you, if you don't mind."

He removed the wrapper from a cigar, stuffing it into the pocket that still contained the other. The little tool with which he prepared to clip the cigar

fell from his fingers to the floor of the terrace. He stooped to retrieve it. Even with his eyes, dangling, suddenly a focal point of terrible significance, was one of Rupert's smartly shod feet, and in Edward's brain, suddenly ringing with all the freshness of an innovation, was the trite old cry of vengeful lovers scorned from love's dim beginning: *If I can't have her, no one shall!*

Rising swiftly, fingers laced to form a stirrup, he caught Rupert's dangling foot and flipped him neatly backward off the balustrade. Far below, a concrete drive ran up to the building, which had been left open on the ground floor to form a kind of porte cochere sufficient to shelter a dozen cars. Rupert struck the concrete with a dull, definitive thud. Going down, he had time for no more than a single squawk of terror. Inside the building, sealed for air conditioning, no one heard. Apparently, no one saw. From a distance came the ghostly hooting of a forlorn owl. A breeze had risen to rustle softly in a million leaves of a thousand trees. In the darkness below, where the moonlight did not reach, Rupert lay broken in a seepage of blood, and there, with luck, he might lie till morning. His unsmoked cigar in his pocket, his little tool recovered from the terrace floor, Edward turned away from the balustrade and went inside and back to Carlotta.

She was awake, sitting up in bed.

"I woke up," she said, "and you were gone. I was a bit worried."

"Never mind," he said. "I wasn't far away."

"Where have you been?"

Watching her as an expression of vague alarm receded from her cherished face, he knew that he had fallen into an untenable position. It was almost cer-

tain that it would be assumed that Rupert had, for whatever reason, fallen by misadventure to his death from the terrace. If he, Edward, were now to lie to Carlotta with conviction, it was even possible that she might believe that it was true, or at least learn to live comfortably in time with the suspicion that it was not. The trouble was, Edward could not lie, not to Carlotta. He had always practiced perfect candor with her, and he knew that he could do no less in present circumstances. Nor did he wish to receive from her any favors that were won through deception. Where she was concerned, the pattern of his behavior was simply too firmly conditioned to be alerted. He went over and sat down beside her on the edge of the bed.

"I've been on the terrace," he said. "Rupert was there."

"Rupert?"

"Yes. Everything is settled between us."

"I'm glad. I hope that you will be friends."

"That will be impossible. Rupert's dead. I killed him."

She stared at him with an almost stupid expression, as if she hadn't heard, or having heard, hadn't understood.

"Dead? Killed? Did you say Rupert is dead, and you killed him?"

"Yes. It was an impetuous act, really. He was sitting on the balustrade, and I simply pushed him off. I have no excuse for my action, except that suddenly I just couldn't let him have you. I couldn't bear the thought of giving you up to him."

She continued to stare at him, mute and unmoving in her bed, her mouth hanging slightly open, her eyes bright and feverish. Her face, he perceived, in its swift and subtle succession of expressions, was like the

smooth surface of a dark pool on which overhead branches, stirring in the air and filtering the sun, created an infinite variety of shifting patterns. Stupefaction, incredulity, conviction, alarm, anger, a kind of incipient slyness—all passed in turn through her ductile face and drifted like shadows through her eyes. Then, to his horror, her face seemed to harden suddenly into lines of ghastly coquetry, and he had for an instant the impression, entirely illusory, that she had turned slightly away and was looking archly back at him over a shoulder and across the top of a fluttering fan. Leaning forward, she drew him to her and held his head against her breast.

"Edward, darling," she whispered, "I didn't dream that you cared so much. It will be all right, after all. You'll see. It will be all right."

For a moment he allowed his head to be cradled there in her hands, acutely aware of the warmth of flesh, the scent of lavender, the rapid pulsing of her heart. Then he pushed away and sat watching her steadily.

"You will, of course," he said, "do whatever you feel you must."

"Did anyone see you? Will anyone suspect?"

"I don't think so. It will look like an accident."

"Don't worry. It will be all right, Edward. You'll see. It will be all right."

He stood up, still watching her steadily, and said, "Go back to sleep now. We'll talk about it in the morning."

"I couldn't sleep. I couldn't possibly. I'm far too excited."

"Have you taken your sedative?"

"Yes, but it won't be enough. I'd need more."

"Have mine as well. There's no need for both of us to lie awake."

On the small table between her bed and his, he could see the small blue capsule, his nightly allotment, that had been put there for him earlier. Standing, he walked around the foot of her bed and up the narrow aisle that separated them in their sleeping hours. He handed her the capsule and poured her a glass of water.

"Two won't hurt you for once," he said. "Take it and go to sleep."

"I shan't be able," she said. "I'm sure I shan't."

But she was. Edward turned off her bed lamp, leaving the room lighted only by pale light from the descending moon, and went over and sat down in the moonlight by the windows. He sat there silently for a long time, staring out through glass that revealed only a shrunken scene of distorted shadows beyond his own faint reflection, and then, after the passing of time, the breathing of Carlotta took on the deep and cadenced sound of sleep, and he continued to sit, his head now turned slightly her way, and listened to her breathe. At last he stood up and walked over to her bed and turned on her light and stood looking down at her. The shadows of her lashes were on her waxen cheeks. Her thin hands held each other, as though for comfort, above her breast. Turning away, he went to his own bed and removed the pillow and returned with it. Gently, he laid the pillow over her face and then leaned upon it with the full weight of his body. She was frail, and hardly struggled, and died quickly.

Back by the window in the moonlit room, he sat on alone in the remnant of night, motionless through the thin, diminishing hours of morning on the dark side

of dawn. He was empty. His heart was dead. He kept seeing in the glass beside his own image her face fixed in that terrible, terminal expression of ghastly coquetry. He could not accept the truth that he had lived fifty years with a stranger.

Except for the infrequent whisper of gum-soled shoes as a night nurse passed in the hall outside his door, the geriatrics ward was silent.

Positive Print

RICHARD DEMING

Even from inside his nearly soundproof darkroom, Mark Corey could hear the whine of the penthouse elevator. He would have to make a personal complaint to the apartment-house manager, he thought irritably, because obviously Flora was never going to get around to it. Twelve-hundred-dollars-a-month rent, and his wife was too timid to report a noisy elevator.

Then he grinned and shrugged his heavy shoulders. Of course Flora was little more than a child, he thought, softening, less than a year older than his daughter by his first wife. It was only reasonable to allow her a little time to adjust to the responsibilities of her position as the second Mrs. Corey. Also, although they had now been married for six months, they had set up housekeeping in the Meredith Arms penthouse only two weeks previously. The first five and a half months of their marriage had been spent on a honeymoon cruise of the Carribbean.

At sixty Mark Corey was still a handsome man, with a heavy-framed but fatless body. Although his curling hair was snow-white, his complexion was smooth and unwrinkled. Corey was proud enough of his physical condition so that it never occurred to him that his new bride might have married him for money instead

of love. He had never suffered from an inferiority complex.

He finished washing and hanging the photographs he had just printed, then left the darkroom. As the darkroom had been converted from the penthouse apartment's den, this brought him directly into the front room.

Corey had assumed it was Flora coming up on the elevator, but it was his daughter and Charlie Merton.

Dixie Corey, at twenty-two, was a slim, coolly beautiful blonde with a carefully cultivated air of amused boredom. The first Mrs. Corey had died when Dixie was twelve, and her father had solved the problem of bringing her up without a mother by sending her to a private prep school for four years, then to Radcliffe for another four. Summers during her prep-school years she had gone to a girl's camp; during her college years she had toured Europe. As a result, Corey wasn't awfully well acquainted with his daughter. Her graduation from Radcliffe had coincided with his and Flora's return from their honeymoon, and Dixie had picked that awkward time to move home for the first time since she was a child.

With mild amusement Dixie said, "Hi, Dad. Developing your honeymoon pictures?"

Corey regarded her suspiciously. He was never sure whether Dixie was making fun of him or not, and he had no idea how she felt about his new bride. The two women seemed to get along amicably enough, although it seemed to Corey that Dixie was a bit too polite and that Flora acted a trifle wary of his daughter. Dixie had given no indication of either approval or disapproval, but sometimes Corey got the unsettling impression that she thought the marriage was hilariously funny.

Deciding not to look for hidden barbs, he said as pleasantly as he could manage, "No, I took these the other day." Glancing at his watch, he said to Charlie Merton, "Flora ought to be back from shopping any minute now. Stir up a pitcher of martinis."

"Sure, boss," Charlie said.

Charlie Merton was a dark, handsome, muscular man of about thirty. Five years earlier, when Mark Corey was still actively engaged in the rackets, Corey had moved him up from the position of hired gun to personal bodyguard to replace the previous bodyguard, who had unfortunately gotten in the way of a bullet intended for Corey from a business rival. Since his retirement, Corey really didn't need a bodyguard anymore, but he had kept Merton on from force of habit. He had even taken him along on the honeymoon cruise.

Although Corey still drew income from the criminal organization he had built, his status was now more that of honorary chairman of the board than as racket boss. His advice was frequently sought and heeded by those still active in the organization, but no ambitious hood would accomplish anything by having him killed. Leo Rutski, the man Corey had designated to take over the top spot upon his retirement, was the one who needed a bodyguard now.

Charlie Merton drew the same generous salary as he had as a bodyguard, but his duties were no longer very clearly defined. He served as a chauffeur, ran errands, and did odd jobs, but mostly he merely lounged around the penthouse awaiting orders from Corey.

Flora had not returned from her shopping trip by the time Charlie finished mixing the pitcher of martinis. Corey told him to pour four anyway, and put

Flora's in the freezer compartment of the refrigerator behind the bar.

A picture window ran the length of the front room directly across from the bar. Charlie Merton carried his drink over to the window and gazed at the fifteen-story office building across the street.

"That window third from the end, second story below the roof," he said, pointing. "I saw a guy smooching his secretary there yesterday."

Glancing down at her wristwatch, Dixie said, "Those offices are probably all closed by now. It's after five-thirty." Nevertheless, she crossed the room and peered interestedly at the indicated window.

Corey, leaning on one end of the bar, said, "How the hell could you see what was going on at that distance? Must be a hundred yards."

"Binoculars," Charlie said briefly.

"Why, you dirty old man!" Dixie said with a throaty little chuckle.

She started to turn from the window. Then the martini glass burst in her hand, spattering both her and the ex-bodyguard with liquid. Something hit the bar with a thump.

Dixie stared without comprehension at the glass stem remaining in her hand. Charlie's gaze flicked toward the picture window and, when he saw the small, neat hole in it, he dropped his glass, fell against Dixie, and pulled her to the floor alongside of him.

Corey, dropping to hands and knees, scurried across the thick carpeting to the window, grabbed the draw cord, and closed the drapes. Daylight still came through an archway into the dining room, but the room grew appreciably dimmer.

Rising to his feet, Corey put one eye to the crack at

the right edge of the drapes. Charlie helped Dixie to her feet.

"What—what—" the girl stammered, her eyes staring dully.

"Rifle," Charlie told her. He crossed to the bar to examine the small hole in the wood about halfway between its top and the footrail.

As comprehension hit Dixie, she said in a high voice, "I thought you were retired."

Her father glanced at her. Beyond informing her that he was retiring when he took that step, there had never been any discussion between them about what he did for a living. But since no one who read the local papers could fail to know what he was, he had always assumed she was aware of his connection with the rackets. Still, this seemed to him a violation of their tacit agreement to avoid the subject.

He said shortly, "I am. How do you know it isn't just some weirdo sniping at random targets?"

Returning his eye to the slit at the edge of the drapes, he announced, "Nobody on the roof. But maybe it was from one of those office windows."

Charlie said, "Open the drapes again and we'll figure it out."

Corey turned to look at him.

"You don't really think it's a nut, do you?" Charlie said. "If it was a pro, by now he's got that rifle apart and is halfway down to the street."

Corey said to his daughter, "Get out of the line of fire, Dixie."

The girl moved over against the front wall, to the left of the picture window. Standing out of view on his side, Corey reopened the drapes. Charlie Merton sat on the floor in front of the bar, leaned his head

back against the bullet hole in it and sighted at the hole in the picture window.

"Came from the roof," he announced. "About in the center. You can draw them again."

Corey drew the drapes, then went over and switched on a lamp. Charlie climbed to his feet, returned to the window, and picked up his glass, which had not broken on the soft carpeting. He recovered the olives from both spilled drinks, picked up the stem and base of Dixie's glass, then dubiously regarded the splinters of glass strewn over the rug.

Dixie, slightly pale, but having now recovered her poise, said, "Mrs. Lischer can get that with the vacuum cleaner."

Charlie went behind the bar, dropped the broken glass and two olives in a wastecan beneath it, and set his empty glass on the bar. He got the drink he had mixed for Flora from the freezer compartment and set it on the bar for Dixie. He started to mix himself a fresh drink.

"What the hell you think you're doing?" Corey said irritably. "Get yourself across the street and check out that roof."

Charlie gave him a startled look, said, "Oh, sure, boss," and hurriedly came from behind the bar again. He headed for the front door.

As the ex-bodyguard disappeared, the plump, middle-aged housekeeper-cook appeared in the archway from the dining room.

"Will you be ready for dinner by six, Mr. Corey?" she asked.

"If Mrs. Corey is home by then. We'll let you know as soon as she arrives."

Dixie said, "We accidentally broke a glass, Mrs.

Lischer, and small pieces are spread all over the rug. You'd better get out the vacuum."

The housekeeper went over to peer at the glass on the floor. "What are those liquid stains?" she asked.

"Gin and vermouth," Dixie told her.

"I'll get the rug shampoo too," Mrs. Lischer said with mild disapproval, and left the room again.

The girl said to her father, "Are you going to call the police?"

Corey went over to pick up the drink he had left on the end of the bar. "I have available an organization more efficient for investigations of this sort," he said dryly.

Mrs. Lischer had completed her tidying up, but Charlie Merton had not returned from his errand when Flora arrived home fifteen minutes later. Mark Corey's second wife was a breathtakingly lovely redhead of barely twenty-three. Corey had found her in the chorus line of a Las Vegas club owned in part by the organization, and had married her six weeks later.

Flora dumped the half dozen packages she was carrying onto the bar, gave Dixie a reserved greeting, and pecked her husband on the chin. She said, "Sorry I'm so late, Mark, but some practical joker put a smoke bomb under my hood. It nearly frightened me out of my wits."

Corey had moved behind the bar to mix his wife a cocktail. He paused with the gin bottle in his hand to frown at her. "A smoke bomb?"

"The filling-station man who checked the car said they're illegal, but some novelty stores sell them under the counter. They go off from the heat of the magnifold."

"Manifold," Dixie said with amusement. "You know

what she's talking about, Dad. They're harmless, but they make a hissing noise and pour out a lot of smoke. Somebody once put one under the hood of my convertible when I was in college."

"Sounds like a lousy joke to me," Corey growled. "Some kid did this, you think?"

Flora shrugged her lovely shoulders. "I had the car on that lot across from the Broadway. There's an attendant on duty there, but I suppose he was in his little house when someone attached the smoke bomb. It went off when I had driven about a block from the parking lot. I turned off the engine, jumped out of the car, and ran over to the sidewalk. Traffic was backed up for a block and a half before the police got there."

"Oh, the cops got in on it?" Corey said.

"Naturally. Somebody called the fire department, too, because of all the smoke. But before they got there, a man from the filling station on the corner lifted the hood and explained to the policemen what it was. As soon as they realized the car wasn't going to blow up, one of the policemen drove it into the filling station so that traffic could move, and they finished their questioning there."

"What questioning?"

"Oh, about whether I knew who the practical joker was, where I'd been parked, and so on."

Corey frowned again. "They made a formal police report about it, do you know?" he asked her.

"I suppose so," Flora said. Picking up her packages again, she said, "I'll run these to my room and take off my hat while you're mixing that drink. Does Mrs. Lischer have dinner ready?"

"Uh-huh," Corey said. "On your way by, tell her she can serve it in fifteen minutes."

As Flora disappeared through the dining-room arch-

way, Dixie said, "Are you going to tell her about the rifle bullet?"

"Why worry her?" Corey said with a shrug.

The loud whine of the private penthouse elevator presaged Charlie Merton's return. Having listened to it with increasing irritation when the ex-bodyguard was on his way down, and when Flora returned from shopping, this third time was the last straw for Corey. When Charlie came in, Corey was speaking on the bar phone to the apartment-house manager.

"I want that damned elevator fixed," he was saying. "It sounds like it's going to snap a cable and kill somebody."

After listening to the reply, he snapped, "You better, if you expect to collect any more rent," and hung up.

Dixie asked, "What did he say?"

"He'll have somebody look at it as soon as he can. Which probably means next month." Corey looked at Charlie. "Well?"

Charlie handed him an expended brass casing. "Thirty-thirty," he said. "Probably with a telescopic sight. What I can't figure is how he missed at only a hundred yards. With a decent rifle, I could knock the ash off your cigar at that range."

Corey merely grunted. After examining the casing, he dropped it into his pocket. "Any other signs?"

Charlie shook his head. "Nothing. A fire stairs goes up to the roof, so access is easy."

"Anybody see you nosing around?"

Charlie shook his head again. "A sign in the lobby says the building's open until seven, but most offices are already closed. The elevators are self-operating. I took one to the top floor, so I only had to climb one flight of stairs to the roof."

Corey returned to the bar and dialed a number on the bar phone. He asked for Leo.

When Leo Rutski's froggy voice said, "Yeah, Mark?" Corey said, "Leo, about a half hour ago somebody took a potshot at me with a thirty-thirty rifle, from the roof across the street. You heard any rumors you haven't told me?"

"Not about anything like that, Mark," Rutski said in a startled voice. "Why would anyone want to hit you?"

"What I wondered. You put out feelers, huh? You spread the word you want to know who has a grudge against me. Call me back when you learn."

"Sure, Mark. I'll put the whole organization on it right away."

Corey hung up as Flora came back into the room.

The following morning, which was Tuesday, Flora had a beauty-shop appointment, Dixie went to an art exhibit, and Mrs. Lischer was on her weekly grocery-shopping trip. Corey and Charlie Merton were the only ones home when the mail arrived.

Among the letters was a plain legal-size post-office envelope addressed to Mark Corey. The address was typed and there was no return address. The two-page letter inside was typed too. It read:

Dear Mr. Corey:

That bullet yesterday was aimed at your daughter's cocktail glass. Or, rather, at the olive in it, which I could see quite clearly through the telescopic sight.

I am also the one who set that smoke bomb under the hood of your wife's car.

Why?

Merely to demonstrate how easy it would be to

kill either or both of the women in your life. I could have put that bullet through your daughter's head. And it would have been just as easy to put a real bomb under the hood of your wife's car.

I've been casing your whole family ever since you got back from your honeymoon. I know the routine so well, I could kill either woman any time I wanted to. For instance, I know that your wife has a beauty appointment this morning and that your daughter has a ticket to the Metropolitan Art Exhibit. (Don't start looking for an inside informant. Your wife always has a Tuesday morning beauty appointment, and I was tailing your daughter when she bought the exhibit ticket.) I also know the mail is delivered to the Meredith Arms about 10:30 each morning, and your flunky goes down for it about fifteen minutes later.

About the time you read this, I will be stepping into the beauty shop where your wife is having her hair set. I will toss a dime in her lap, again just to illustrate how easy it would be.

About an hour before you read this, I will be at the Metropolitan Museum. When your daughter gets home, look for the spot of ink in the middle of her back.

Instead of a pen, I could just as easily have used a knife.

I have no intention of killing either woman, of course, if you obey instructions. The price is going to be $250,000. You can start getting it together in used, unmarked twenty-dollar bills. You will receive further instructions tomorrow.

I guarantee that this is a one-time touch. Pay

off and you'll never hear from me again. I also guarantee that if you don't pay off, both your new wife and your daughter are going to die.

In case you call the police about this, I will save the crime lab some time and trouble. This was typed on one of the rental typewriters at the main public library. There are ten such typewriters, each used by perhaps a dozen different people a day. Since all subsequent letters you will receive have already been typed and the envelopes are addressed, it will do you no good to have the library staked out.

Until tomorrow,
X

When he finished reading the letter, Corey handed it to Charlie Merton without comment. While the ex-bodyguard was reading it, Corey checked the phone book for the number of the beauty shop where Flora was having her hair done, dialed it from the bar, and got Flora on the phone.

"I was still under the dryer," she said. "Couldn't it wait? What is it?"

"Anything funny happen there?" he asked. "I mean like some guy coming in and doing something strange?"

"Why yes," she said. "How peculiar that you phoned to ask. How'd you know?"

"What happened?"

"Some man stepped into the shop, came over, and tossed a dime in my lap. Then he just walked out again."

Corey grunted. "What'd he look like?"

"I was under the dryer, reading a magazine. By the time I looked up, he was going out the door again. I

just caught a glimpse of his back. He was of average size, wore a dark suit and a gray felt hat. Otherwise I haven't the faintest idea of what he looked like or how old he was."

"Didn't you ask any of the other people there?" he inquired peevishly.

"You can't talk when you're under a dryer, Mark."

"Well, ask them now!" he yelled. "Get a description!"

"You don't have to shout," she said in an offended tone.

"Sorry," he said more quietly. "But see if you can get a description, honey, It's important."

"All right. You want to wait?"

"There's no rush, since he's long gone. Just bring it home with you."

"All right," she said. "I should be home about twelve-thirty. You want to tell me what this is all about?"

"When you get home," he said. "Bye."

He depressed the cutoff button, released it again, and dialed Leo Rutski. He instructed the racket boss to get over to the penthouse as fast as he could make it.

Rutski got there in fifteen minutes. The racketeer was a square-built, heavy-featured man in his early forties. He had his bodyguard with him, a tall, thin, cold-looking man of about thirty named Salvatore Celino.

Corey left Sal at the bar with Charlie Merton and took Rutski back to the kitchen, where they could talk privately. When they were seated across from each other at the kitchen table, Corey gave the racket boss the letter to read.

When he finished reading, Rutski handed the letter

back with a grunt. He said, "Guess I can pass the word to stop looking for somebody with a grudge against you."

"What do you make of the letter?"

Leo Rutski pursed his lips and thought for a moment before speaking. "Whoever wrote it is pretty well educated. Which automatically eliminates everybody in the organization. Just offhand I can't think of any of the boys who can even type."

"It doesn't have to be a one-man operation, Leo. Maybe one of the guys has a brainy friend. Or a girl friend who's a private secretary. I think it *has* to be somebody in the organization."

Rutski frowned. "How you figure?"

"Too much knowledge about Flora and Dixie. For instance, he says he knows about Flora's beauty appointment because she always has a Tuesday appointment, which is true. But we've only been back from our honeymoon two weeks, and today was only her second regular appointment. Also, there aren't a hell of a lot of people outside the organization who know Dixie's come here to live, or even know I have a daughter."

Rutski said, "Just because the letter tells you not to look for an inside informant doesn't mean there can't be one. How about your housekeeper?"

"Mrs. Lischer?" Corey said musingly. "That's a thought. Put a tail on her."

"All right. Anything else?"

"Yeah. Start getting together the two hundred and fifty grand in twenty-dollar bills. I'll settle with you later."

Leo Rutski raised his eyebrows. "You're going to pay off?"

"Of course. Like this guy says, he could kill my wife and daughter any time he wanted to."

"We could put them under guard."

Corey made an impatient gesture. "Even if that worked, who wants to spend the rest of his life under guard? Anyway, you know that if somebody's really out to get you, particularly a pro, he'll get you no matter how you're guarded."

"Yeah, I guess," Rutski agreed. "And two hundred and fifty grand is peanuts to you."

"Oh, I don't intend to let the guy keep it, if I can avoid it," Corey said. "I've got a plan in mind. But we'll pay off first, then work on the problem of getting it back after the girls are out of danger."

"All right," Rutski said, coming to his feet. "I'll get over to the bank right now and start arranging for the payoff money."

When Rutski and his bodyguard had left, Charlie Merton asked, "You tell Leo to put guards on the girls?"

"What for?" Corey inquired. "This guy isn't going to hurt them, because then he wouldn't have anything to sell."

After considering this doubtfully, Charlie said, "You going to warn the girls?"

"I'm not even going to mention it," Corey told him. "And neither are you."

When Flora got home at twelve-thirty, she said no one at the beauty shop had been able to give a description of the man who tossed a dime in her lap.

"You mean nobody noticed a man in the joint?" Corey demanded. "I should think it would be like a bull in a china shop."

"It isn't that exceptional," Flora said. "That's a

busy shop, and men frequently come in. There are cosmetic salesmen, and a lot of men come after their wives. The girls were all busy working on customers, and just didn't pay any attention to him. The dryers are near the door, so he only had to step inside. What's this all about anyway?"

"Just a silly bet I made with a guy," Corey said evasively. "Forget it."

At that moment Dixie returned from her art exhibit. When she paused to make a polite comment about Flora's new hairdo, Corey unobtrusively walked behind her.

Dixie was wearing a white dress. There was a round spot of blue ink on her left shoulder blade.

Wednesday morning another legal-size envelope from the extortionist came in the mail. The contents were stiff and unbending, and the envelope was heavy enough to have required two stamps. Inside was a single sheet of paper folded around a length of stiff cardboard. Scotch-taped to the cardboard was a silver-colored fireworks sparkler. The letter read:

Dear Mr. Corey:

It is now necessary to know if you are convinced and are ready to cooperate.

I was across the street with binoculars, watching the apartment-house lobby through its glass door, when your flunky picked up the mail. You have ten minutes from the time he picked it up to signal your acceptance of terms. The signal is to light the enclosed sparkler and hold it outside your front window while it burns. If you send your flunky back downstairs in an attempt to see who is observing your window, or I see anyone using binoculars from up there, I will consider

this a rejection of terms, even if you give the signal.

Your signal means that you agree to pay the money in used, unmarked twenty-dollar bills in the previously specified amount, that you will have the money available and packed in a single suitcase by the time the mail arrives tomorrow, and that you are willing to follow the delivery instructions you will receive in that mail.

Now, either give the signal or kiss your wife and daughter good-bye.

Until tomorrow, then, Mr. Corey,

X

Corey decided to give the signal. Fortunately, Flora and Dixie were both in their rooms and Mrs. Lischer was working in the kitchen, so he wasn't required to explain his peculiar action.

Afterward he phoned Leo Rutski. When the racketeer answered the phone, Corey said, "You get the money together?"

"Uh-huh," Rutski said. "You hear from the guy again?"

"Just now. Instructions for delivering the money will arrive in tomorrow's mail, which comes about ten-thirty. So bring it over about nine tonight. I want it all packed in one suitcase."

"All right, Mark. You still got no idea who's behind this?"

"No. You have anything to report on Mrs. Lischer?"

"Just a negative report," Rutski said. "She hasn't been in contact with anybody who could be our boy. I'll see you at nine."

"Check," Corey said, and hung up.

In order to avoid answering questions about the

suitcase Leo Rutski was going to deliver, Corey arranged for no one but himself to be home when it arrived. Bluntly announcing that he was having a business meeting that required privacy, he packed his wife and Dixie off to a movie with Charlie Merton as their escort, and suggested that Mrs. Lischer spend the evening out too. The housekeeper decided to visit a friend.

Rutski, as usual accompanied by his thin bodyguard, Sal, arrived promptly at nine with the suitcase. Corey took it from him and carried it into the photography darkroom. It was heavy, since it contained 125 packages of banded currency, but didn't feel as though it weighed more than twenty-five or thirty pounds.

Leaving the suitcase in the darkroom, Corey returned to the front room.

He said to Rutski, "I may want you to call a meeting of everybody in the organization about the day after tomorrow. How much notice will you need?"

"Couple of hours. Three to be on the safe side. What about?"

"I'll let you know at the meeting," Corey said.

When Rutski and his bodyguard had left, Corey returned to the darkroom and switched on the bright overhead light. Opening the suitcase, he laid the 125 packets of currency out on a counter in rows that touched each other. He arranged them in five rows of twenty-five each, which covered a counter area six and a half feet long by thirty inches wide.

When the money was all spread out, he took a pair of rubber gloves from a drawer and put them on. From a shelf he took a large bottle of white crystalline powder and sprinkled it liberally over each packet of currency. He repacked the money in the suitcase, then thoroughly washed the rubber gloves before taking

them off. He draped them over the print wire to dry.

He turned off the light, went out, and locked the darkroom behind him.

Thursday morning Corey was relieved that both Dixie and Flora were out of the house when the mail arrived. Dixie had decided to visit her college roommate in New England over the weekend, and Flora volunteered to drive her to the airport.

The usual legal-size envelope was in the mail, this time with only one stamp on it. The letter inside read:

> Dear Mr. Corey:
>
> Your flunky, Charlie Merton, is going to be the delivery boy.
>
> One block north of the front entrance to the Meredith Arms is an Owl drugstore with three phone booths. At exactly eleven-fifteen the center phone will ring. Charlie had better be there to answer.
>
> He also better have the suitcase with him, and he had better be alone, If he isn't, or is under observation, it is all off.
>
> In any event, you will hear from me only once more. If the transfer goes off smoothly, I'll drop you a note so that you can stop worrying about your women. If you don't get such a note, you'll know that Charlie goofed up, and you can really start worrying.
>
> X

Corey looked at his watch. The mail had been a few minutes late today, and it was now five to eleven.

"This guy doesn't allow much leeway," he complained. "You better get going."

He unlocked the darkroom and gave Charlie the

suitcase. "You goof and you'll wish you never were born," he informed the ex-bodyguard coldly. "Don't try any cute tricks. Just do whatever you're told."

"Sure, boss," Charlie said in a slightly offended tone. "I wouldn't put the girls in danger."

He was gone less than an hour. When he returned, he explained that the call had come to the drugstore booth exactly on schedule. A male, obviously disguised voice, had instructed him to catch the next southside bus that stopped just outside the drugstore, and was due in five minutes. He was to get off at Grand and Market, where there was an outdoor phone booth next to the bus stop. The bus trip should take no more than seven minutes, but the caller would allow three minutes leeway. The second phone would ring at eleven-thirty.

Charlie said he had waited only two minutes at the second booth before the phone rang. The same voice had instructed him to walk around the corner to a cabstand on Market and take a cab a block west to Spring Street, then turn left. Two and a half blocks south on Spring there was an alley. Charlie was to have the cabdriver stop, set the suitcase behind a trash barrel just inside the mouth of the alley, get back in the cab, and drive off.

He concluded, "There's three cabs that dispatch from that stand, so it was a pretty sure bet one at least would be there. Which is probably why he picked it. Anyway, I did like he said. Nobody was in sight when I left the money, but I suppose the guy was watching from somewhere."

"You did a good job," Corey told him. "I'll buy you a drink."

Corey didn't realize how tense he had been for the past few days until that evening, when the emotional

letdown set in. When Flora announced that she would like to see another movie, he simply wasn't up to it. She knew he hated movies anyway, he thought with a touch of irritation. Even when he felt at his best, he had to be dragged to them.

He delegated Charlie to take her and went to bed early. He went to sleep almost instantly and didn't even hear them come in.

Friday was Mrs. Lischer's day off. Both Flora and Charlie Merton were still in their rooms when Corey got up at eight A.M. and fixed himself breakfast.

An hour later he was reading the morning paper in the front room when Charlie Merton came in, shaved and dressed but in shirtsleeves. Charlie had never gotten out of the habit of carrying a gun, and as usual he was wearing a shoulder holster with a thirty-eight snub-nosed revolver in it.

He was rubbing his hands together and examining his fingers.

Glancing up, Corey asked, "What's the matter?"

"I've got some kind of black stain on my fingers that won't come off," Charlie said.

Corey folded his paper and rose to his feet. "I can fix it," he said amiably, crossed over to the darkroom door, and disappeared inside.

When he came out again, he had a forty-five automatic in his hand. He pointed it at Charlie, who gaped at him without understanding what it was all about.

"If you had any brains, you would have related your black fingers to handling the money you were supposed to deliver yesterday," Corey told him. "I sprinkled it with silver nitrate. The first time you washed your hands, you formed a silver nitrate solution, and some of it got in your pores. The minute light hit it,

your skin turned black. Eventually that blackened skin would die and peel off, if you lived a couple of months longer, which you won't and you would grow new skin. But otherwise you couldn't get rid of that stain any more than you could erase a photograph. That's what you are: a living positive print."

Charlie licked his lips and said nothing.

"I should have guessed it when you didn't show any indignation about being called a flunky in those letters. Your partner must have a sense of humor. Who is he, incidentally?"

Charlie still said nothing.

At that moment Flora came through the archway from the dining room, dressed to go out in a plaid suit, a small white hat, and white gloves. Her eyes widened when she saw the gun in her husband's hand.

"Morning, honey," Corey said as though there was nothing unusual about the situation. Gesturing with the gun, he said to Charlie, "Hands against the bar, feet back away from it."

When Charlie obediently assumed the position, Corey said to Flora, "Get his gun."

Carefully staying out of the line of fire, Flora removed the gun from Charlie's holster. Walking behind her husband, she cocked it and pressed it into his back.

"Put your gun on the bar, Mark," she said quietly.

Corey gave a startled glance over his shoulder. When he saw his wife's flared-nostril expression, he slowly obeyed. Straightening away from the bar, Charlie picked up the automatic, set the safety, and thrust it into his right hip pocket. He walked behind Corey, recovered his own gun from Flora, and told Corey to turn around.

When Corey faced the pair, Flora was peeling off

her gloves. As she tossed them on the bar, he regarded her blackened fingers without expression.

"Instead of going to a movie last night you two were counting the money, huh?" he said tonelessly. "Where'd you learn to shoot a rifle like that, Flora?"

"Charlie taught me."

Corey grunted. "I suppose you just made up the stories about the smoke bomb and the guy with the dime, but how'd you get that ink spot on Dixie's back?"

"I put it there before she left home that morning," Flora told him.

"What made you two think you could get away with it? You couldn't run far enough for me not to find you."

"You weren't ever supposed to know," Flora said without emotion. "Charlie was going to stick around another couple of months, then get an unexpectedly good job offer from the west coast and quit to take it. I was going to wait an additional two months before telling you I wanted a divorce. I knew I'd never get a settlement out of you, so we needed a stake. If you hadn't made me sign that premarital agreement waiving all rights to your estate, we would simply have arranged to make me a rich widow. But that paper was your life insurance. There was no point in making me a penniless widow."

Charlie said with thoughtful glumness, "Guess we'll have to make a widow of you anyway, now, baby. We'd never be able to outrun the organization."

Corey said coldly, "That would really cook you, dummy. You think Leo wouldn't hunt you down?"

"He wouldn't if it was an accident, dear," Flora said sweetly. To Charlie she said, "He's been complaining about that elevator ever since we moved in."

"Yeah," Charlie said, his eyes lighting. "He even phoned the apartment-house manager that he was afraid the cable might snap and kill somebody."

"Think you could make it snap?"

"I'm kind of mechanically inclined," Charlie said modestly. "I probably could figure a way."

Walking behind Corey, he smashed him over the head with his gun barrel.

Mark Corey came dazedly awake just long enough to realize, in the last moments of his life, that Charlie had managed to work out the problem. The elevator was hurtling downward in its fifteen-story shaft with sickening speed.

A Weighty Promotion

BRUCE HUNSBERGER

Charlie couldn't help clucking and shaking his head in disbelief. Here he was, an intelligent, educated, practical businessman, living in twentieth century America, and driving through the scenic Pennsylvania Dutch countryside looking for a witch doctor.

There was something paradoxical in spending a bright, sunny afternoon seeking a master of the black arts and, as Charlie drove past the neat barns with their gayly painted hex signs, he ruminated on how it all began that afternoon several weeks ago when he and Phil Burns had stopped at the Yardley Lounge for a late-afternoon pick-me-up. It was the afternoon when the grapevine had it that Stew Goetz was the man to be promoted into that vacant room at the top, the room that Charlie wanted.

"I can't understand it, Phil. I'm a better man than Stew Goetz," Charlie assured his good friend.

"Sure you are." Phil popped an olive into his mouth. "Everybody knows that."

"Then why is he getting that promotion?"

"Have another martini," Phil said dryly. "Take your mind off it."

"I don't want my mind off it. I want to know why I'm not getting that promotion."

Phil signaled for more drinks, then said, "Really

want to know? I'm not sure you can take the truth."

"Phil, I've always thrived on creative criticism. Tell me what I'm doing wrong and I'll straighten out."

"Charlie, it's not you."

"No? Then what is it?"

"Not *what,* Charlie. *Who.* It's your wife."

"My wife?" Charlie blurted. "What has Alice got to do with it?"

"Charlie, she's fat."

"FAT?"

"Yes, fat." Phil blushed as the lounge patrons, accustomed to having their drinks in a less emotional atmosphere, turned to stare. "I'm sorry, Charlie."

"That's the silliest thing I've ever heard. I can't see what effect that would have on my promotion."

"Charlie, you know as well as I that it's the wives who pick the men for promotions. Being the best man for the job is no guarantee you'll get the gravy. If your wife doesn't fit in at the afternoon garden party, you're out in the cold."

"That's not fair," Charlie complained.

"Fair, shmair, what's the difference? That's the way the cookie crumbles." Phil dispatched another olive with lip-smacking zest. "We all know you deserve that promotion, Charlie; but Alice just doesn't fit in."

"Why not? She's intelligent, witty, a wonderful wife and mother, a—"

"Charlie, I told you. She's fat. Look, you've been moving up the ladder pretty well till now, but that's to be expected. Nobody with real talent stays at ground level. You've climbed halfway on your own merit, but you've been so busy working that you haven't had time to relax and look around, to *analyze* Success. Reaching the top, Charlie, is a team effort. That team is you and your wife. To make it all the

way a man needs a wife who's acceptable to the other wives, who socializes, because promotions are voted by wives at parties. A man isn't voted a position; his wife is voted into the garden club. And if she won't fit . . ."

Phil drained his martini.

"Now," he went on, "look at your wife objectively. You say she's intelligent. That means she spends time reading; the other girls watch television. You say she's witty; the other girls are catty. You say she's a good housekeeper; that means she's at home instead of out socializing. As for being a good wife and mother . . . Charlie, this is the twentieth century. Nobody expects Alice to be either a good wife or a good mother. Your sense of values needs updating."

"But Phil—"

"However, these so-called virtues your wife possesses are not the real reason she doesn't fit in. Believe me, a few months with the other girls and she'd be just like them. You'd be paying for a maid, a nanny, a . . . but why go on? You get the picture."

"I never knew . . ."

"Yes," Phil said. "I speak from experience. My wife is a harpy, a vixen, and a wolverine. But—and this makes all the difference—she's a *thin* harpy, a *thin* vixen, and a *thin* wolverine. I think it's because she's thin that she is that way. She's half-starved, has that wild look in her eyes; mad at the world. Anybody on a permanent hunger strike is the same. Look at her friends."

"Then why doesn't she eat?" Charlie asked. "It's that simple."

"And be fat and happy like—"

"Like Alice. Like my wife. Always smiling, loving, a joy to me and the kids."

"Charlie, I did tell you. It isn't nice to be fat."

"You're crazy."

"No, I'm realistic. Check the fashion books, the women's magazines, the television ads. The girls all look like refugees from a famine area. Being thin, chum, is *in*."

"Who makes these rules?"

"It doesn't matter. All women feel that way, and if your wife won't go along with the crowd, you don't get promoted."

"I can't accept that."

"Then think about how the other wives are starved to the point of desperation, depriving themselves of food and drink, while your wife eats and drinks anything she pleases. They're jealous and they're angry. Since they know she doesn't care, they take out their frustrations on you. Charlie, as long as your wife is fat and happy, you'll never get a promotion."

"You speak with the voice of authority."

"I told you, my wife fits in. That's why my star is rising. That's why after next week I won't be able to stop in here after the salt mine for a little pick-me-up with you."

"Phil!" Charlie started, aghast.

"That's right, Charlie. Stew Goetz isn't getting that promotion. I am. Midge worked it out with Arlene, Mr. Ferris's wife. I'll be one rung above you and won't be able to be seen with you anymore. Fraternizing with underlings would make me look bad. Up, Charlie, that's where a man's got to set his sights. That's about the size of it, Charlie. Intelligence, good taste, virtue—all these can be forgiven in a woman if she's thin. But chubbiness! It's just too much."

Charlie rubbed his hands. "What can I do, Phil?"

"Get your wife on a crash diet or your career will crash."

"But, Phil, I like her just the way she is. I like her fat."

"You do, but you don't count. It's what the other wives want. Take my word for it. Start her counting calories tonight. Well," he checked his watch, "I've got to run. It was nice knowing you, Charlie."

At supper that evening Charlie, envious of Phil's good luck, stared at Alice angrily, but she was so busy keeping him and their four kids in lasagna that she didn't have time to notice. It annoyed him to see her laughing and joking, and the way she relished each mouthful of the high-calorie food fest irritated him until he growled.

"What's the matter, honey?" she cooed. "Want more lasagna? Better save room for dessert, strawberry shortcake with plenty of whipped cream."

"Look, Alice," he said. "This food binge has got to stop. We've got to draw the line somewhere."

"Why?" She chuckled through her lasagna. "This is America, land of plenty. Eat hearty, there's lots more."

"I'm not kidding! You are going on a diet. You are entirely too heavy. You look ready to pop."

"Me!" she laughed. "Speak for yourself, Charlie. Look at that spare tire you have around your middle."

"I know," he admitted, "but I don't count."

"I don't count either," she said. "Calories, that is. How about that shortcake? Now or later? Want to rest that tire before dessert?"

"No," Charlie sighed, "bring it on now." He was drooling already.

"We'll save some for a midnight snack." Alice grinned over her shoulder as she disappeared into the depths of the refrigerator. "Unless you'd rather send out for pizza."

So that's the way it was. He absolutely could not ask her to go on a diet, and felt guilty even thinking about it. Anyway, he told himself, what did he care what the other wives thought or even whether he got the promotion. He had a wonderful, happy wife, and that was all that mattered.

That's what he told himself. The truth was, he began snarling around the office at the slightest provocation and snarling around the house at no provocation at all. The very thought of Alice filled him with anger and frustration. His career was at a standstill because he'd married a fat, happy woman.

Those guys with skinny, snarling wives didn't know how lucky they were!

The Friday Phil's promotion was formally announced, Charlie felt especially blue. The entire department took off early for a little celebration at the Yardley Lounge. Charlie had intended to go too, but instead, because the weather was so perfect, he simply began driving, out of the city into the countryside.

Some miles from town Charlie spied a country inn and decided to stop for a beer. The barroom was empty, the beer delicious, and after several Charlie felt his face sagging, the muscles tired of smiling. When the bartender saw Charlie's face collapse, he knew a confession was due and moved in closer to lend an ear. With a catch in his throat, Charlie told him the whole sad story.

"All because your wife is fat?" the barkeep sympathized.

"Because she loves to eat," Charlie corrected. "If she could eat without getting fat, everything would be all right, but it would take a magician to do that."

"Oh?" the barkeep arched his brows. "Then maybe I can help."

"You?" Charlie laughed. "I know bartenders are supposed to be amateur psychologists. Don't tell me you are also a medical doctor?" He gestured for a refill.

"No, but my brother is. Also a hex doctor. Powwow doctor. You mentioned a magician. Maybe he can help."

"I don't believe in hocus-pocus."

"You don't have to. It works whether you believe or not."

Charlie brooded over his beer. Imagine him, an educated man, even listening to nonsense like this. It was ridiculous, stupid. Still in all, maybe there was something to it.

"You'd say he's your brother?" Charlie queried. "Tell me a little about him."

"He's a country doctor in New Holland. For the modern people, he's straight medicine; for the country people, he gives 'em a little 'hocus-pocus' as you call it. He must be good, people keep going back to him. Last year I was having some trouble. No doctor in town could put his finger on it, but my brother said I was liver-growed and straightened me out in no time. Once I had warts and he chased 'em for me. With potatoes, no less."

"Is he in today?" Charlie saw no harm in at least talking to the man.

"You want to see him? I'll call him and let him know you're coming over."

"As soon as you give me directions, I'm on my way."

That's how it happened and now here he was, driving through the lush, rolling hills of Lancaster County, past well-kept farms with brightly painted barns displaying the traditional geometric hex signs,

looking for a powwow doctor—in twentieth century America. It was silly.

He found the doctor's house in the village and parked his car in the driveway. The doctor, a little white-haired man with wire frame spectacles, met him at the door. Inside was a typical country doctor's office, a bit musty and reeking heavily of medicines and ointments.

"My brother told me your story over the phone," the doctor said. "My advice is to put your wife on a diet."

"That's just what I don't want to do."

"I know it's difficult, but it's the safest way."

"You didn't say the *only* way."

"I said the safest. There are other ways."

"Like hocus-pocus," Charlie said, laughing.

"On your way out here," the doctor said quietly, "did you notice the hex signs on the barns?"

"Yes," said Charlie. "They're very colorful, very decorative."

"They are all of that," the doctor said, nodding. "However, they are not 'just for nice' as the locals would put it. Their function is much more important than mere esthetics. They are painted on farm buildings to keep away the bad spirits that spoil crops. Before you dismiss their purpose as mere superstition, consider carefully the facts: These farmers are hundreds of years behind the times; they use no gasoline-powered vehicles, no electricity, no modern farm techniques. Yet, besides enjoying a life of serenity and union with nature, they produce one of the highest crop yields per acre in the United States. Obviously, they have something going for them that the modern farmers lack. Perhaps it's the absence of evil spirits."

"I'm sorry," Charlie said. "It's just that in our day

and age people don't believe in spirits or hocus-pocus. I'm not accustomed to hearing anyone speak seriously about such matters."

"People have found answers to their problems in sorcery for several thousand years. It's an old and honorable tradition. Certainly older than medicine or agronomy."

"Perhaps the answer to my problem is there, too."

"Possibly," the doctor said. "How badly do you want that promotion?"

"More than anything in the world."

The doctor stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Usually I resort to hexerei only when other techniques have failed. It is an extreme measure, you know. Nothing to trifle with. But you seem so distraught, I'll dispense with the preliminaries and explain what I can do. First, bear in mind that we are dealing in this case with physical properties. Evil spirits will play no part in this treatment. Losing weight means losing fat. Since matter cannot be destroyed, fat is *converted* to energy under normal dieting conditions. Even in sorcery these physical laws hold true. Your wife can't simply lose her fat. Since it is not going to be *converted* to energy, it will have to be *transferred* to someone else. Whatever weight she loses, someone else will have to gain."

"Transferred to whom?"

"Anyone you like."

"But how?"

"That is none of your business. However, I will tell you this much: I need a photograph of the two parties involved and I must know their names."

"Do you make voodoo dolls?" asked Charlie.

"I told you it was none of your business."

The slow grin creeping over Charlie's face was a

manifestation of the devilish idea forming in his mind. He cackled satanically when the idea jelled, and made his move.

Digging quickly into his wallet, he withdrew a photograph taken at a Christmas party the year before, a picture of Charlie flanked by his wife, Alice, and Phil Burns's wife, Midge. Phil wasn't in the photo for he had held the camera.

Charlie handed the photo to the doctor, "My wife, Alice, is on the right. That skinny woman on the left is Midge Burns. She looks like she could stand a little extra beef. Could you transfer my wife's weight to her?"

"No trouble at all," the doctor smiled. "When shall we begin?"

"You can do it?"

"Yes, but it takes time; a couple pounds a week, as in a normal diet pattern. Is that satisfactory?"

"It's splendid!"

"I think it important to warn you there may be complications as in any medical treatment. They can be serious."

Charlie was too eager to let it worry him. "Doctor, just go full steam ahead. This is the happiest day of my life!"

The doctor smiled. "I hope things work out to your satisfaction. I'll give you my number so you can keep in touch."

At the door, Charlie again brought out his wallet. "Doctor, what do I owe you?"

"Oh, I don't know," he blushed. "I'm not used to dealing with city folks. I sometimes get paid in eggs and butter. Anyway, don't pay me now. Give it a few weeks trial, then forward whatever you feel you owe me."

"I'll owe you my life," Charlie grinned, slapping the doctor's back and shaking his hand at the same time. "I'll contact you in a couple weeks."

The doctor nodded solemnly as Charlie danced down the front-porch steps, skipped across the lawn to his car, and spun the rear wheels recklessly on the loose driveway stones as he roared away toward home.

He was a happy man.

For several weeks nothing happened, and Charlie berated himself for wasting his time on "that quack." Hexes! Powwow doctors! Imagine the stupidity of anyone who took such nonsense seriously. Still in all, it had been an afternoon's entertainment and hadn't cost anything, so he decided to forget about it.

At supper, about a week after he'd last thought of the hex business, his wife tugged at her dress to show how loose it was around the waist.

"Honey," she said, "I don't want to alarm you, but I think I'm losing weight."

He leaped from his chair and hugged her tightly. "I love you!"

"If this keeps up there won't be much of me left to love."

"I'll love you even more!"

"I can't understand it. I haven't been trying to lose weight."

"Of course not. I don't want you to try. Just live it up."

"But it worries me, Charlie. I think I must be sick."

"There's nothing wrong. Take my word for it."

"Mama always said if you're fat, you're healthy."

"Mama's from the old country. Take my word, everything is okay." He pinched her cheek. "I love you!"

"I'm worried, Charlie."

"Let's send out for some pizza and drown our worries."

At the office Charlie was a changed man. No more snarls, no fits of depression. Once again he was the kind of guy people liked to be around, a born leader.

He was even more jovial when reports began leaking down from the top that Phil Burns was becoming an ogre, a monster, calling everyone on the carpet for the most minor infractions—and sometimes for no infraction at all. It was plain to see Phil was a tormented man.

Charlie cherished every scrap of information the grapevine brought concerning Phil's sudden change of character. He knew what it would mean for him, jobwise.

Yet as the weeks rolled by, Charlie's high spirits sank when he came home. He was happy that Alice was getting thinner, but not so happy that she was also becoming nervous and irritable. No matter how much she ate, she kept losing weight, and this convinced her that she was dreadfully sick. Their family doctor's complete physical checkup and subsequent clean bill of health did nothing to change her mind. Her smiling face was a thing of the past. She scowled and growled, and spent less and less time in the kitchen. Half her time was spent being nasty to Charlie, and the other half being nasty to the kids.

Finally she announced she was sick of spending her life locked inside the same four walls; she hired a housekeeper, and a nanny, and then joined the afternoon garden club which, coincidentally, happened to have a membership opening. It seemed that Midge Burns had quit the week before. She was getting so fat none of her clothes fit and, now that her husband's

job was in jeopardy, she couldn't spend money on a new wardrobe.

When Charlie heard that news, he grinned like the Cheshire cat. At last, Phil had fallen out of favor with the powers that be! Since his promotion had been only tentative, a sort of trial period, he would no doubt be demoted, and once again that room at the top would be available.

And so it was. Phil, with a haunted look in his eyes, returned to his old department, and Charlie, without so much as a curt "hello," passed him in the hall on his way to the room at the top. It was indeed a moment of triumph.

However, things weren't right at home. Charlie didn't see much of his wife anymore and when he did, he got out of the way as quickly as possible—she'd become a she-wolf over the past months. But he did see enough of her to know she had lost entirely too much weight. In fact, she was wasting away. During these past pleasure-filled months he'd forgotten about the country doctor, but now decided to make time in his busy schedule to give the old bird a call and see what had gone wrong.

The day Charlie decided to phone, Phil Burns dropped in to say good-bye.

"Good-bye?" Charlie lit a two-dollar cigar. "What for?"

"I'm quitting the rat race, Charlie. This is no life for me." He was vibrant, the haunted look gone from his eyes. "Midge made me see the light. When she started gaining weight despite her dieting, she began eating sensibly again, regained her sense of humor, and we've had a ball ever since. We've always wanted to travel, and now that I've lost the promotion we're packing up and moving west."

"Do you have a job?"

"It doesn't worry me. I'll find something. So long, Charlie. I hope your wife likes the garden club."

After Phil left, Charlie's cigar lost its flavor. The tables were turned. Charlie envied Phil's happiness. After all, what good is a job if you don't have a happy family to come home to? He wanted Alice to be fat and happy again, and decided to call the doctor.

"Hello," the doctor said brightly. "How's everything?"

"Not so good. Frankly, I'm worried about my wife. She's lost entirely too much weight. I think it's time to call off the hex or whatever it is. Just let me know how much I owe you and I'll have a check in the mail this afternoon."

"I'm afraid I can't do that."

"You mean figure the cost? Then I'll send a blank check. You fill it in. Anything within reason."

"I mean call off the hex. I can't do it."

"What? You're kidding."

"No, I'm afraid not. Hexing is not something you shut off and on like a water spigot. Once you go ahead, turn it on, it stays on."

"Forever?" Charlie gasped.

"Well . . . until somebody dies."

"Dies! Good grief, man, you never told me that!"

"I tried, but you were so excited about your wife losing weight you didn't have time to listen."

"You should have made me listen! It was a matter of life and death!"

"In my business," the doctor said wearily, "it's *always* a matter of life and death. That's probably why I didn't press the point with you. People are dying all the time. There's nothing to get excited about."

"But it's my wife!"

"They're always somebody's wife or husband, or something."

"Look, Doctor, there must be something you can do! If the hex is still on, just switch it around! Get my wife's weight back from Midge Burns. You can do that, can't you?"

"I'm afraid not. The reaction isn't reversible. Mrs. Burns will keep gaining your wife's weight until your wife withers away and dies."

"You monster!"

"Don't go calling me names. You're the one who ordered it. By the way, did you get your promotion?"

"Yes, I did."

"Then what are you complaining about? That's what you wanted, wasn't it?"

"Not over my wife's dead body!"

"You said you wanted that promotion more than anything in the world. I took you at your word."

"Then there's nothing you can do?"

"There might be. Are you sure you want your wife fat again?"

"More than anything in the world."

"Then I just might be able to start your wife gaining someone else's weight. Not Mrs. Burns's though. As I said, it's not reversible. But if it works, this is absolutely the last time I can tinker with that hex. Whoever loses weight this time goes all the way."

"Do it!" Charlie cried. "Do it!"

"All right. I'll see what I can do. Good-bye."

Charlie wiped the cold sweat from his brow. If he hadn't made that phone call Alice would have died. But now everything would be all right. In a couple weeks things would be back to normal—better than normal—for now he had moved up the ladder.

* * *

And so it was—Alice getting fatter and happier, the kids responding in kind, and Charlie at last, on cloud nine—until that morning he noticed his suits were getting too big . . .

Death, the Black-eyed Denominator

ED LACY

I didn't have the smallest idea why I was wanted in District Detective Command office, but I didn't walk in worried. If there weren't any halos over my head, neither were there any beefs.

Inspector Buckley was bulling a wiry old guy whose neat clothes were on the worn side. Pumping my hand as if we were great pals, the inspector introduced us. "Detective Jacob Silverman. Jake, meet Chief Howard Benson, head of the Island County Homicide Bureau. Howie and I have been friends since school days. He's in need of a crack homicide man, so you'll be on fly assignment with him—for a while."

"Yes, sir." That "friends since school days" bit told me all I had to know, although how I could be sent on fly out of the city. . . ?

Buckley must have read my mind. He added, "Officially, you'll be checking a few of our open cases. Unofficially, you're going to have a vacation. I've taken care of all the leave details. Howie, Chief Benson, will explain the rest."

I said yes, sir, again.

Benson got to his feet. He was about six feet five, face tense and weather-beaten. Putting an old straw hat on his gray crewcut, he asked, "Care to have coffee with me, Jake?"

"Yes, sir."

When we were out on the sidewalk Benson slipped me a corny wink. "Jake, if you'd rather make it a beer. . . ?"

"Whatever you like, sir."

"Can the 'sir' stuff," he said, as we walked into a bar opposite Headquarters. "I don't make your salary, and you're looking at the *entire* Homicide Bureau of Island County, which is why I asked Buck for a helping hand."

"A murder case on the Island?" I asked politely, as we squeezed into a booth and he ordered brews.

"Jake, I don't know what I have going, except there's too damn many coincidences floating around. Buck let me go through his files. You fit a type man I need. You're forty-six, a vet, and single. Correct?"

I nodded.

"Understand you were a good amateur pug, Jake."

"Golden Glove and Diamond Belt middleweight champ. Might have turned pro if the war hadn't come along."

"Just as well. I'm told you live alone, haven't any close relatives?"

"Going to be that kind of a case?" I asked.

Benson toyed with his beer glass, then combed his gray crewcut with long fingers. "No, I doubt there will be any danger involved. Here's what I have on my hands; the Island is made up of a number of villages and townships, rich and poor, each having its own police force. However, any homicide, from manslaughter to murder, comes under county jurisdiction, to me. I either have three murders to solve, or I'm off on a wild goose chase."

"*Three* killings?"

Benson nodded. "About four months ago, in the

marsh near Harbor View, a corpse was found. Harry Williams—we identified him by his prints—had been dead for about a week. Medical Examiner listed heart failure as the cause of death. Despite the crabs having eaten away most of his face, it was obvious Williams had a hell of a black eye before he died. There was five hundred dollars in cash in his pockets. I learned he was fifty years old, a vet, and a widower. Up to a year ago, before suffering a heart attack, Williams had been a clam digger. Even in death he was still a heavy-muscled man. After his illness, since he could no longer dig clams, it was rough going. He owned a little shack, raised vegetables. In the summer he made a few bucks repairing outboards. Although I listed his death as due to natural causes, the black eye troubled me. That was number one.

"Two months ago, in the village of Sandy Bays, a fellow named Wallace Carson was found dead in his bed. His cabin door was locked—from the inside. The barking of his hungry dog attracted people. This was in March; Carson had spent the winter as caretaker for a group of summer cottages. He was forty-eight when he died, born on a Kansas farm, traveled about the world as a sailor, saw combat in the infantry, married once but his wife died in childbirth. Kid died, too. No police record, although in Sandy Bays he'd once cleaned out a bar in a drunken brawl—was known as a quiet character, but handy with his dukes when drunk. He, too, had suffered a heart attack, coronary thrombosis, two years ago; had another mild attack six months before his death. Being a caretaker suited him fine—free rent, a small salary, and plenty of quiet—liked to drink alone. The day before he died he had deposited seven hundred dollars in cash in the bank. Although there weren't any signs of a struggle

in the cabin, Carson's face was badly bruised, including a puffed black eye and a thick lip. The Medical Examiner said he had been in a fight approximately fifteen hours before he died, but nobody in Sandy Bays knew of any brawl."

"They list his death due to natural causes?" I asked.

Benson nodded. "The doc was certain Carson had a final heart attack . . . but I kept thinking about two corpses with black eyes." He waved a long finger toward the waiter to refill our glasses.

"Jake, I live in Hampton Sound, a small village surrounded by potato farms and big estates. The news-and-soda store is owned by Pat James. His folks, like mine, have lived in Hampton for generations. Pat married a girl from New York City, a fine woman named Eva, and they have two girls going to college. Eva had a twin brother named Lew Sloan. I saw him a few times in recent months. Big, rough-looking fellow with a busted nose, played pro football a long time ago. Lew was a drifter, a horse player, had worked as a bartender all over the country. Only time Eva heard from him was a card at Christmas. Back in January he came to the James house for a rest. He had been in a vet hospital with—"

"Heart attack?" I cut in, brightly.

"Aha. Stayed with Pat and Eva for a few weeks, could have remained there forever, but Lew was restless. Returning to New York City, he worked as a part-time bartender to make ends meet. When Pat heard from one of the yacht captains about a fishing station for sale down in Florida, it seemed the perfect setup for Lew. There was a cottage, mild climate, light work selling bait and fishing gear. Pat wrote the owner, learned he wanted four thousand dollars, half in cash."

"Sounds pretty tame for this Lew," I said, as the waiter brought our refills.

"Lew liked the idea but he didn't have a dime, and with the strain of putting their kids through college, Pat could only spare six hundred dollars. Seemed hopeless until last week when Lew phoned Eva from New York City, sounding all excited. Said he had a deal cooking that would bring him a fast thousand bucks. Wouldn't tell Eva what the deal was about, except to say it wasn't shady and would be a cinch. The grand would be in the mail Friday. Pat was to see if the owner would take sixteen hundred dollars, and close the sale. Saturday morning Eva received a letter for Lew, in care of her, with twenty fifty dollar bills in it. No note or return address, wasn't even sent registered mail, and the address was printed. Eva waited for Lew to call, to tell him they'd phoned Florida and the deal was set. Sunday Eva called Lew's flea-bag hotel. They hadn't seen him since he left Friday morning. He hadn't checked out, and they said he seemed in a gay mood."

Benson paused to sip his drink. I asked, "Where did they find Lew's body?"

"Fished out of the water on the other side of the Sound, Saturday morning. Took time for the Connecticut police to learn his identity, again by checking prints. Pattern the same—heart failure. But Lew's nose was broken, ribs fractured, cuts over his eye, and a knuckle on his right hand smashed. The Connecticut police figure he was thrown from a boat or car, and washed off the beach. Their medical report stated Lew was dead when he hit the beach, and the fall may have caused the busted ribs, but the other bruises were made several hours *before* he died. That's the

picture, three corpses, all with black eyes, all found on or near the Island. How does it strike you, Jake?"

It struck me I was due for many days away from Vilma, which was hardly my idea of a "vacation." "I don't know. Doesn't seem to be any motive. I suppose you checked on insurance, all that?"

"Of course. Absolutely no motive in sight, but there has to be a reason for murder—a big reason for three of them."

"Why *murder*?" I asked, trying to talk myself off the case. "We have three heart cases who died of just that; could have fallen dead anytime. The first one . . ."

"Harry Williams."

"He might have had an attack while walking in the marsh. Carson was found in his own cabin, so unless you like locked-room mysteries, he merely died in his sleep. As for this Lew, assuming he was tossed from a car, if the doc says he was already dead, Lew may have been on a bender and his pals got the wind up when he had an attack, threw him—"

"You forget the black eyes on all three, the other bruises," Benson cut in. "I don't buy coincidences."

I wiped the cold mist from the side of my beer glass. "Look, three men living in different towns, dying at different times, of natural causes, and having no connection with the other, far as you know. Except they all had shiners. I mean, why and how, does that add to murder?"

Benson gave me a big grin. For a man his age he had strong teeth. "On the contrary, the connection between them forms a sort of . . . of . . . common denominator, a link I'm counting on to bring us the motive. The victims were all strong men, in middle age, heart cases, vets, lived alone, broke, or on the

verge of being broke, and all ended up with a modest bundle of money."

"Sure, and they also had two arms and two legs, too. Sir . . . Howie, seems to me we could dig into this for the rest of our lives and then find it *isn't* murder!"

"I think you can learn whether we're dealing with murder or not in a matter of weeks. Jake, you're the right age, single, a vet, and muscular."

"I haven't had a shiner in years and I hope my ticker is okay," I said, knowing I was stuck.

"One more link, an important one—all three men were treated at the Sands Hill Veterans' Hospital, although not at the same time, of course. Our first step will be for you to enter the hospital as a heart case. In short, you start traveling the same road the other three did, see what gives. Your occupation . . . a chauffeur."

I wanted to shout that there had to be *hundreds* of heart cases entering and leaving a hospital big as Sands Hill every week, but I knew it would be a waste of words. Instead, I asked, "Do you know a doctor there? How are we going to set up the heart-attack bit?"

"While the hospital would certainly cooperate with us, we can't risk it. For all we know now, one of their doctors could be the killer. But my own doctor tells me not enough is known about heart conditions to say positively a person has or hasn't a damaged heart. Just rattle off the symptoms—shortness of breath, chest pains, your left arm hurts, etc., etc., and they'll list you as a heart victim."

"And how do I bluff the cardiograph machine?" I asked, feeling I was working with a nut.

"According to my doc, a cardiogram doesn't prove a thing. You can pass the test and drop dead the follow-

ing second. Or, even if the graph does show something wrong, that doesn't mean your ticker is sick. Flex your fists, breathe deeply, while taking the test; drink a cold glass of water just before they examine you; all throw the graph off. It will be simple. Jake, I'll be at your apartment by five P.M. Have your chauffeur background ready. At five-thirty you'll suffer an 'attack,' and phone for a city ambulance. You should be in Sands Hill by morning. What's your home address?"

Leaving Benson I called Vilma's office. She blew sky-high when I told her of my new assignment. "But, Jake, you have your fifty-six-hour swing coming up this Thursday and—"

"Hon, what could I do, he's the big brass's buddy-buddy? Only be a few days," I added gently, knowing it would be longer. "Eh . . . Vilma, be best if you move out of the apartment while I'm gone. Go to your sister's. I don't expect any trouble, but working undercover, one never knows."

Vilma really exploded all over the phone. It would look like we were busting up, start a lot of "I-told-you-so" chatter from her sister's big mouth.

We talked through a dozen requests for more dimes from the operator as I tried to explain the deal, and ended with the usual dream talk about our Bermuda honeymoon, if Vilma's lawyers ever got going.

Chief Benson was in my apartment at 5 P.M. sharp to fill me in on coronary symptoms, the alleged boss I'd been driving for. An hour later he phoned for an ambulance and left me. I reached a city hospital at 6:38 P.M.

Fooling the doc was so damn easy I began to worry; perhaps my pump *really* was on the blink. When I told the young doctor of the "heartburn" in my chest,

the toothache pain traveling my left arm, the dizzy feeling, he had me *wheeled* into a small room, tenderly lifted onto a table. While an attendant left to bring the cardiograph machine and straps, I did a dozen push-ups, and according to the worried doc the graph showed my heart was "pumping unevenly and like crazy." Being a vet, he told me I'd be sent to Sands Hill in the morning for an examination by heart specialists. In the meantime I was not to leave my bed. He gave me a pill, which I tossed into the trash basket, and after a supper of bland hospital chow, reminding me of Vilma's spicy Greek cooking because it was so different, at 9 P.M. I went to sleep.

Sands Hill is large and cheerful, looking more like a country club than a hospital. I arrived in a station wagon-ambulance with two other vets, soggy old jokers who felt they *had* to talk about their "war experiences" of nearly a quarter of a century ago. The only combat they'd seen was in PX bars.

We were processed by two clerks, one a burly old man with a wonderful tin ear and the scar-tissue ridged eyebrows of a pug. His desk plate read: MR. JAMES LEWIS, and as he copied the info about my name, age, etc., from the hospital card, I tried to recall any heavyweights with his handle.

While waiting for a wheelchair I asked where he'd boxed. Mr. Lewis rubbed his prune-ear, gave me a sore-tooth grin. "Battled around the midwest, back in the early thirties. Lasted six rounds with Jack Sharkey. But nobody ever heard of me, remembers me—now."

"I was an amateur slugger, Golden Glove champ myself, years ago."

I was assigned to a room on the ground floor, another patient in with me, a fat old guy with a dread-

fully extended stomach that was always making noises. Except for telling me his name was Pete, he seemed to be in a stupor, rarely talked.

I was examined by several doctors, recited my symptoms, kept flexing my fists while taking a cardiogram. They announced I had a "coronary occlusion" and put me on a strict diet, with absolute bed rest for two weeks.

In the course of being a cop I've staked out in the rain and snow for hours, frozen on roofs, sweated in stinking cellars, but none of it was as bad as merely lying in bed!

The first day I read so much my eyes hurt and by night I was restless as a cat, and sick of the tiny meals of rice and skimmed milk. I kept tossing all the pills I was supposed to take into the bed pan, and by the second day I was so bored, wanted a smoke so badly, was so damn starved, I was ready for a straitjacket. After the third day, I knew I couldn't take anymore. Benson could have this job. I'd had the "bed rest," and listening to the old volcano in the next bed. My clothes were in the closet and after the midnight rounds of the nurse, I put on slippers and my coat and stepped out of the window. Keeping to the shadows, I trotted all over the hospital grounds. I smoked a cigarette, without getting the charge I expected, then raced around the grounds until I found what I was looking for, a public phone booth. Keeping the door open so the light wouldn't go on, I got Benson's home number from long distance, phoned him, collect.

When his sleepy voice finally asked, "Where the hell you calling from, Jake?" I felt fine at the thought I'd taken him out of a deep slumber. I explained about bed rest driving me nuts, how I'd sneaked out of the room. Howie told me, "I didn't want to visit you as I

might be recognized. And talking over the hospital phones the switchboard operator might be listening in. I was waiting until another officer came off vacation, to have him visit you, as your employer. Anything breaking?"

"I've been beaten, stabbed, and shot at, but this is the first time I'll ever get bed sores on a case."

"Take it easy, Jake."

"Howie, I'm sick of taking it easy!"

"Nobody shown any interest in you?"

'I haven't seen a soul except the windy guy in the next bed, a couple of docs, nurses—and admitting clerk, an ex-pug who—"

"A former pug?" Benson cut in. "Fits another common denominator in our case; violence, beatings. You know his name, Jake?"

I wondered if Benson was in love with that phrase, common denominator. I told him James Lewis's name and Howie said he'd check. I was to phone him again in two nights, if it was safe to get out.

I ran around some more, the idiot athlete, considered phoning Vilma, and finally sneaked back into my room. I was so bushed I fell off into a hard sleep, only to be awakened at 6 A.M. by an orderly goosing me with a thermometer. The exercise left me with a walloping appetite and I argued in vain for more breakfast. Could have put away a dozen plates of the tasteless stuff they insisted was food.

I slept again in the afternoon, couldn't wait for my midnight gallop. I trotted among the trees like a ghost, saw a candy-vending machine near the main entrance, stuffed myself with two chocolate bars, returned to my room feeling pleased as a backward child.

A doc came in the following morning to check me

over, said my pulse was "very uneven," and looked so worried I began to sweat. But after midnight I was racing over the grounds again before phoning Benson. Howie excitedly told me, "Listen to this—Jim Lewis was a pork-and-beaner heavy. Been working at the hospital since nineteen forty-eight, lives on the grounds. Moved in after his wife died five years ago. Last month he purchased a new cabin cruiser!"

"So what?"

"His salary is under five thousand dollars yearly, his wife's illness left him in debt, but he paid six grand in cash for the boat! Jake, keep an eye on him."

"You kidding, Howie? I'm locked up in bed all day."

"Jake, we have to play by hospital rules. In fact, this calling me at night is too risky; don't do it again unless it's damn important. I'll have a man contact you sometime next week."

I remained in the phone booth for a moment, debating whether to phone Vilma, then ran over to the vending machine for my nightly supply of candy. I crouched in the bushes, having a smoke when I finished the candy. Didn't realize I was being watched until a voice above me asked, "*Living dangerously?*"

A window above me shut but I didn't see anybody. I walked back to my room slowly, wondering if I'd blown the case.

The balance of the two dull weeks passed, somehow. I had to keep running at night, or go nuts, but I never went back to the candy machines. Actually, with my running, resting all days, devouring the snacks they kept insisting were meals, no booze or beer, I'd dropped seventeen pounds, felt in tip-top shape. The docs gave me a break, let me out of bed at the end of the thirteenth day in the hospital. I was allowed to

walk to the bathroom, to the TV lounge. I didn't see Lewis's thick ear around and when I asked about him, saying I was interested because of my own amateur fights, nobody knew a thing, except he'd been a pug and kept to himself, was a fishing bug.

Three days later—I'd stopped fooling around when taking the cardiograms—I was called into a doctor's office shortly after breakfast, given a fifteen-minute lecture on what *not* to eat, rest, smoking, and even on sex; told I could go home. I quickly dressed, hoping Lewis would handle my discharge papers, but another clerk took care of me.

When the station wagon-ambulance left me at my door, I rushed into the nearest restaurant and had a hell of a steak for lunch. The apartment looked great, after the bareness of the hospital. I phoned Vilma and she wanted to move her things back at once, but settled on having supper together. When I called Benson he seemed disappointed I hadn't talked to Lewis—dug up anything.

"When are you supposed to return to Sands Hill, Jake?"

"I'm to rest at home and return in a month for a checkup, unless I start feeling 'sick.' "

"Let's play along. Hang around your apartment, see what breaks. Maybe after a week, you'll have an attack, return to the hospital."

For the first few days it almost was like a "vacation." I did nothing but sleep late, listen to my stereo or watch TV, and Vilma came over every night to make supper. I worked out with my weights. Some mornings I even sneaked out to a movie, but I began getting that restless, stir-batty feeling again. Howie called me each day, which made it difficult to duck out of the apartment.

Thursday afternoon Benson dropped in and when he suggested I fake an attack, return to Sands Hill, I got into a lather. "Sir—Howie, we're up a blind alley! Returning to that damn bed rest would make me flip! Let's face it. You had a theory about there being a connection between three black-eyed stiffs; we gave it a good try—nothing popped."

Benson gave his crewcut a finger-brushing. "Growing cold on the case, Jake?" he growled.

I got my voice in check, tried another angle. "Howie, I'm not in charge; it isn't up to me to turn hot or cold. If I remember rightly, none of the men died until months after they'd left Sands Hill. I've already put in a month on this, you want to make it longer. That's up to you and Inspector Buckley."

He got the message. Buckley's superiors might beef if they learned a New York City dick had been on fly assignment for so long a time, without results. The old boy nodded. "Jake, tomorrow you go back to the hospital, tell 'em you're feeling okay but have a little tightness in your chest. You don't want to stay there, merely a checkup. After that, you'll keep to your apartment for a week. Then we've had it."

Friday morning I was back at Sands Hill, and learned among other things it was Lewis's day off. A doc told me to stop worrying about myself, and late that afternoon I was back in my apartment.

Vilma came over for the weekend, angry we couldn't go out. Saturday was a hot, muggy day and she wanted to drive to the beach but I expected a call from Benson. We spent the whole day sweating around the apartment, snapping at each other, watching the ball game on TV. Vilma threw a crummy supper together and we saw more TV.

The phone ringing dragged me up from a deep

sleep. It was ten minutes past midnight. I mumbled a couple of sleepy hellos, without getting any reply, but I heard somebody breathing and listening on the other end of the wire.

When I hung up, Vilma stretched, asked, "Wrong number?"

"Maybe. Honey, start dressing."

Vilma sat up as if she was attached to a spring. "Jake Silverman, are you out of your weak mind? What will my sister and her simple husband think at my returning home in the middle of the night?"

"Stop it, hon, where are you supposed to be—in an all-night movie?" I asked, bending down to kiss her nice lips.

She whispered, "Oh, come to bed. One wrong number and you make like Dick Tracy."

"Vilma, if it was a wrong number, the other party would have at least said something."

"Jake, you know the old joke, if a man answers . . ."

My doorbell rang, gently.

I whispered in Vilma's ear, "Take your clothes, hop into the closet—quickly!"

"Really, Jake, you're being—"

"Dammit, darling, I may be tangling with a murderer! Get in the closet and stay there, no matter what happens!"

The bell rang again, a short, easy ring. I went into the living room, snapped on the light, asked at the door, "What is it?"

"Sands Hill Hospital, Mr. Silverman," a man's voice answered.

Opening the door I saw James Lewis looking burly in a soggy summer suit, a faint odor of beer about him. Smiling, he waved a thick hand and said, "Remember me?"

"Sure. I never forget a tin ear. They want me at the hospital?"

"You alone, Silverman?"

I nodded.

"Okay if I come in?" he asked, pushing by me, glancing around the living room. He was a real giant, at least two hundred and sixty pounds.

I yawned. "Come in."

"Nice place you have," he said, sitting on my couch. He took out a pack of butts, offered me one. I shook my head. Lewis chuckled. "This isn't an official visit, Silverman. Happened to be in the neighborhood, remembered your address. Dropped in to see you about money."

"Money?" I repeated, wondering how dumb I should play it. "If you're out for a touch, things have been rough with me and—"

He held up a thick hand. "No, I'm here to help you. I imagine few people will hire a chauffeur with a bad heart." He lit his cigarette, tossed the pack at me. "I saw you at the hospital candy machine, smoking, one night when you were supposed to have been in the sack."

"That," I said, cautiously. "I don't take this heart bit too seriously. I mean, if your number is up, it's up."

He nodded his big head. I was only wearing shorts and his eyes seemed to rest on my stomach muscles. "A very sensible attitude, which is why I thought you might be interested in making a thousand dollars."

"A grand? Legit?" I didn't have to act surprised.

"Nothing crooked. Only take a few hours and it will all be yours."

"When?"

"Right now."

"Now? It's almost one A.M., Lewis, if all this is on the level, why talk in riddles? What do I have to do for the loot?"

"Nothing much. I have a friend who's interested in helping heart cases, sort of his hobby. He'll show you how to make a thousand dollars in a few minutes."

"Is he a doctor, going to experiment on me?"

Lewis shook his big head, flicked the ashes from his cigarette into one of my Italian ashtrays. I started to sweat, wondered if he had noticed Vilma's lipstick-smeared butts on the tray. I said quickly, "This sure sounds odd, in the middle of the night, a thousand bucks . . ."

Lewis got to his feet. "Suppose you come and talk to him, Silverman? You don't have to take his money. Get dressed."

I hesitated. Lewis started for the door. "Forget I ever came here. Good night, Silverman."

"Wait—I'll go!" I went into the bedroom, started dressing. The old heavyweight stood in the doorway, smoking another cigarette. Opening the closet to get a shirt, I winked at a pale and nearly hysterical Vilma, said loudly as I closed the door, "We going back to Sands Hill Hospital, Mr. Lewis? Where do I get this thousand, this easy money?" I wanted to make certain Vilma heard that.

"Told you before, this has nothing to do with the hospital."

"I forgot, Mr. Lewis. What's your first name?" I asked, dressing quickly, knowing I couldn't risk taking my gun.

"You can call me Jimmy."

"Okay, Jimmy. Where we headed for?"

"Not far. About eighty miles out on the island, Harrison Smith's place."

"And I get a grand—in cash?" I repeated, again for Vilma's ears, praying she'd phone the precinct the second we left.

"That's the deal. Let's go."

Lewis had an old car parked downstairs and as I sat beside him I told myself that when—and if—Vilma phoned the precinct house, somebody should know I was on assignment with Benson, contact him. *But would she phone?* Put Vilma in a hell of a spot, having to explain she'd been spending the night with me. Might even ruin the divorce, although her dumb husband seemed willing enough to part with Vilma.

Lewis drove across town and down to the bridge, then out to the Island. We stopped for a red light and I could have called the traffic cop, but it was far too early in the game for a collar. I wanted to learn who he was errand-boying for.

Once on the Island Parkway he drove with expert speed, the road almost empty in the early morning. About an hour, and eighty miles, later we turned off the parkway, sped by a few small towns along the Sound, then into a driveway winding through well-kept lawns to a large house, all the windows dark. A couple of dogs barked as we drove around the house to a big garage, its second floor lit up. The ground behind sloped to a white beach and dock, everything like a stage set in the pale moonlight.

Several large dogs sniffed us, backed away at Lewis's command. I followed him into the garage, where two foreign cars were parked, and up a short flight of stairs, remembering my heart act, taking the steps slowly. We came into a completely furnished gym, including a regulation ring and, as the TV private eyes say, at that instant "all the pieces fell into place" . . . Well, almost all.

An oddball was doing belly exercises on a rubbing table. He sported a small dark beard, ragged mustache, completely shaved dome, and was dressed only in ring shoes and red trunks, hands covered with boxing bandages. He was a lean, well-built joker, about one hundred and fifty pounds of flat muscle, suntanned skin smooth as a kid's, not a hair on his deep chest. And he was also about thirty-five to forty years old.

Casually waving a bandaged mitt at us, weirdie went on with his middle-of-the-night exercises. Leaning against the ring apron, I studied the gym, didn't see a phone. After a couple of minutes the nut jumped off the rubbing table, threw a towel around his good shoulders as he walked toward us. He had pigskin leather punching-bag gloves stuck inside the waist of his ring trunks. Holding out his left hand, he said, "I'm Harrison Smith, the third. Welcome, Mr. Silverman." His voice was practiced and precise.

I shook his hand lightly. Up close the beard was far too black. It was dyed, so perhaps he was older than forty, although there weren't any telltale veins on his sturdy legs.

Lewis flopped on a chair as Harrison Smith, the third, told me, "You must be wondering what this is all about, Mr. Silverman."

"I've a fair idea. You're a boxing buff."

"A shade higher than that, Mr. Silverman. While I've never been a professional, nor an amateur—in younger days I was far too busy making my fortune—I think I would have gone far in the ring, perhaps on the world-champion level. I've worked out with several famous pros, all of whom sincerely complimented my ring skill. I understand you were an amateur champion?"

"Yeah, a long time ago."

"Then I'm certain you have some of my feeling about the sport, that boxing represents the utmost in hand-to-hand combat, the ultimate thrill in personal courage and skill. All strictly in keeping with nature's first law, survival. We like to think we have 'advanced' from the jungle days, but we haven't. On the contrary, in place of individual combat we resort to mass killing, via wars and our bombs. I've made a thorough study of the matter. Any civilization that abandoned personal combat soon perished from the face of our planet. Polynesians of the South Pacific are a fine example. As warriors they were a splendid race, but once they turned to peace they found themselves vanquished by the common diseases and fists of drunken whalers, and are now reduced to being a pitiful tourist attraction. The once-fierce Aztecs of Mexico are another example. But you see my point, Mr. Silverman?"

I nodded, studying his eyes. He didn't seem to be drugged.

"Now, let us come to the business at hand. Jimmy has told you of my offer . . ." He pointed toward a set of boxing gloves hanging on the ring ropes. "I will pay you one thousand dollars for going ten minutes, or less, with me. We shall use regulation six-ounce gloves. The thousand will be given you in advance."

There was a moment of thin silence in the gym as Smith, the third, and Lewis waited for my answer. I thought I could even hear the breaking of the waves on the beach below us. "Suppose I don't buy?"

"Nobody has turned me down, yet. However, in that event, Jimmy will drive you to the bus station. Consider, one hundred dollars a minute. Few pros make that much."

"You know I have a bad heart?" I asked.

He nodded his sweating billiard-ball dome. "That makes it thrilling, for so have I! Although my methods of cure are hardly approved by the medical powers that be, they work—for me. Exercise is the answer, more exercise to strengthen that heart instead of rest and . . . But you're not here for a lecture. We both have sick hearts and—"

"Might die," I added.

Smith, the third's, eyes grew bright with excitement. "Exactly what makes it so special! Man enjoys cruelty, even though we love to kid ourselves to the contrary. The hard truth is, millions were thrilled at seeing Benny 'Kid' Paret beaten to death on their TV screens, no matter what the editorials claim. Death is the great attraction, from Roman circus days to modern drag races! You and I will literally be tasting the spice of life, and death! Silverman, you may die, I may die. Or nothing much may happen. You will be paid a thousand whether you come out with a mere black eye or are kayoed."

"Like the shiners Williams, Carson, and Lew Sloan had?" I asked softly, fed up with his silly chatter.

Lewis jumped to his feet but Smith, the third, didn't move an eye as he told me, "I haven't any idea what you are talking about, Silverman. You disappoint me. I thought you a man of action, not a talker."

"Cut the corny act!" I snapped, yanking out my wallet, flashing my badge. "I'm a New York City police officer, arresting you and your errand boy for murder!"

Lewis came at me, moving fast for his fat and age. I weaved under his right, banged his medicine-ball

gut with my own right hook, a hell of a solid belt. As the old fighter tumbled to his knees, gasping, I spun toward Smith, the third.

He was watching me with a tight smile on his odd puss. "You have fast hands. Jimmy was a pro!"

"Stop it! There's nothing to clouting an *old* man! You're both under arrest."

"Aren't you being melodramatic, Silverman? Exactly what crime am I being charged with?"

"Murder in the ring is still murder! You got Williams, Carson, and Sloan in the ring, beat them to death!"

He gave me his tight smile again. "I don't know what you're talking about. But suppose, as now, I hire you to spar with me. Remember, I said hire you. I'm not forcing you to box me. If you should die as a result, what crime have I committed? Also, let me remind you this is the Island. A New York City detective hasn't jurisdiction here."

"I'm a Peace Officer any place within the state," I said, a little confused, still watching Lewis groaning on the floor, both hands pressed to his belly, and Smith. "I'm bringing you in for manslaughter. You haven't a bad heart or you couldn't be exercising this way."

"I have a doctor's statement concerning my heart."

"Which doesn't mean a damn thing. I have one, too!" I snapped. "I'm taking you both in. The old boy here is guilty of assault. And throwing bodies about the countryside is a violation of—"

"What bodies? Really, I don't know what you're talking about."

"Also, the men were never paid, so—"I began, trying a wild shot.

"That is a damn lie!" Smith, the third, cut me off with a shout. "I paid them every dollar, I—"

He stopped talking so abruptly he looked comical, with his bearded mouth hanging open. I laughed at him. "Okay, that's enough of a confession for me. You'll probably be sent to a mental institution, but that's up to the court. Let's go!"

"Mental institution? Most interesting. Are you now seeking a bribe, to make up a yarn about my being crazy?"

"I don't have to make up a word. Merely repeat that shoe polish about nature's laws and you'll land in the loony bin. Help Lewis to his feet; we're going out of here."

I stepped toward him but he danced around me, suddenly jumped into the ring. Slipping on his fancy punching-bag gloves, Smith, the third, leaned over the ropes, moved his tricky mustache with another hard smile. "If you think you can take me in, Silverman, try it!"

I shook my head. "Baldy, you're real gone. You can stay up in that ring all night. I'm phoning for more police."

He chuckled. "I hate phones; there's none in the gym. Nor would I advise trying to leave without me or Jimmy. My dogs will tear you to shreds. Mr. Policeman, if you want me, you'll have to take me!"

I wasn't being brave. I had no choice. Unless I got him fast Lewis would be up and I'd have to face the two of them. Also, with Smith, the third, being a nut, I was sure his boxing ability was pure gas. I stepped up into the ring, facing him with my bare mitts.

Coming in fast, right hand out, he clouted me with

a rifling left hook to the chin as I missed a jab at his black beard. The punch shook me, made me realize I was against a real boxer!

Feinting with my left, I shot over a hard right. Southpaws are supposed to be suckers for a right. Smith grinned as he blocked my punch with his right, crossed another left which made my noggin ring. I tried to clinch but he moved away. Rushing in, I ripped a good right below his belt, nearly busting my hand on his protector. He grunted, "You're a dirty fighter," and cut my eye with another slashing left.

Breathing hard, I stepped back. Two thoughts were buzzing in my numbed head. I knew I was in for a pasting—sure death, and I was frightened. But my main thought was anger! After all the days I'd wasted on bed rest, the other stuff, I'd walked into this alone, like a cocky TV private eye.

Smith came at me, right hand flicking my bloody eye. I tried bullying him to the ropes, wanted to wrestle, but he neatly spun me around, banged a left to the body, which seemed to come out my back. I landed a short right to his midsection; it felt like slamming a stone wall with full force.

Gasping for air, blood from my cut eye streaming down the side of my face, I backed away. Smith suddenly glanced off to his right, shouted, "Keep out of this!" For a second I suspected a sucker move to take my good eye off his hands until I saw Jimmy Lewis climbing through the ropes.

In a shrill voice Smith, the third, screamed, "I can take him, you fool!"

"We'll both take him," Lewis grunted. "I ain't standing still for no murder rap!"

"I don't need help. Leave this ring immediately!" Smith yelled, like a spoiled brat.

I moved off the ropes as Lewis came rushing at me, cursing. Halfway across the ring Smith stepped in, cut him off with a terrific left hook to the ear, the tin ear. The old heavy had run into the punch, was stiff as he started to fall.

I went after Smith. He spun around to face me, hands high, but I dived for his legs, brought him down with a flying tackle. The nut actually screamed, "That's *illegal*! Not allowed in boxing!" before I slammed his beard into the bloody canvas, slipped a choke hold on his bull neck.

He managed to bang the side of my face with his elbow, sending my numb skull into orbit. I couldn't see through the blood in my cut eye and for a moment it seemed Smith's bald dome was so slippery with my blood . . . I'd lost him . . . until I got my knee working between his legs. Smith the third was a cute boxer but when it came to street brawling I could give him lessons.

They were both out cold on the dirty ring canvas; Lewis still stiff; blood gushing from Smith's open mouth over his silly beard, legs trembling, pop-eyes glassy as marbles. Climbing to my feet, on the brink of blacking out myself, I fell against the ropes. Rubbing my swollen knuckles, I waited for my wind to return.

Finally, I slowly climbed through the ropes and jumped off the ring apron, came down face first. Blood squirted out of my nose but the jar of the fall cleared the cobwebs in my whirling brain. Staggering to my feet, I lumbered around the gym like a bloody drunk until I found a couple of jumping ropes. I managed to tie Smith and Lewis up okay.

I was sitting on the ring apron, holding a handkerchief to the cut above my eye. I'd been sitting there

for nearly a half hour, worrying about those damn dogs outside, and if Vilma had ever called the precinct house, when I heard the sound of cars braking, dogs barking, then a brace of shots, followed by dog-screams of pain.

Waiting for Benson and his men to come up, I tried to grin but my entire face hurt too damn much.

Beware the Righteous Man

DICK ELLIS

Patrolman Rath glanced at the mailboxes in the apartment-building foyer. He tramped in and up a flight of stairs to the second floor, and found apartment sixteen. Beside the door was a bell push and a small white card, engraved MISS J. CAMPBELL.

Rath punched the bell and waited. He took off his uniform cap and placed it beneath his arm, straightened the knot of his dark-blue tie. Now the door opened a scant inch and a worried eye peered out at him.

"Miss Campbell? I'm Patrolman Rath. I have orders to check with you about some complaint you—"

"Oh, yes," the woman behind the eye said. "Just a second while I take the chain off."

There was a metallic rattle, then the door swung wide.

"I'm Jeanne Campbell," the woman said. "Come in. I've seen you. Aren't you the officer who walks the beat along the avenue? Yes, of course."

Rath tramped inside. He cast a glance around a small, rather messy living room, and turned to the woman. "As I understand it," he said, "you've been receiving some annoying phone calls."

"Annoying! That's putting it mildly."

Jeanne Campbell gestured the patrolman to a chair, then went to turn off a radio playing softly across the room. She was a small, fluffy-haired woman, little more than a girl, really, though the curves beneath her tight-fitting housecoat were mature enough.

Rath waited until she was seated on a sofa, then he sat down on the extreme edge of a chair facing her. He took out notebook and pencil.

"They started about three weeks ago," Jeanne Campbell said. "The phone calls, I mean. I'd been living here only a few days. In fact, I still don't understand how this—this character got my phone number. It isn't listed yet, of course."

Rath rubbed his blunt chin with the eraser of his pencil. "Well, there are several ways. Perhaps this man followed you home, got your name off the mailbox, and the address. Then called information, and asked for your number."

"Oh, I see." She shuddered, reached for a cigarette, and lit it with trembling fingers. "It's kind of—scary, to think this man might be following me around here."

"I wouldn't let that bother me, miss. This type of person is usually harmless."

"You haven't listened to him—his voice on the phone, and the things he says."

"Yes?"

"The first time, he started off by saying he was a preacher. Then he started asking me questions. He wasn't any preacher, believe me."

Rath was watching her alertly now. "Go on, please."

"Well, to put it as politely as possible, he—he was very interested in my sex life. And mixed in with these very intimate questions, he gave me a lecture—that's the only word for it—on the wages of sin. Real

wild. I told him where he could go, and hung up on him."

Patrolman Rath made a note, looked up at her.

She went on, "Couple nights later he called again. Same pious, kind of shrill voice. Took up right where he'd left off, only more so. Awfull"

"The preacher," Rath said softly.

"Huh?"

"I'll explain in a minute. Please go on."

"Well, it's been like that ever since. He calls two or three times a week, ranting and raving. The last time was about eight o'clock this evening, less than an hour ago. I hung up and called the police. I mean, enough's enough." She stabbed out her cigarette in an ashtray.

Rath studied her flushed face. He said, "Miss Campbell, for about the last six or seven months, there have been a lot of phone calls like these to young, single women, living alone, like yourself, all in this general neighborhood. It's pretty certain all were made by the same man. We, the department, even have a name for him. 'The preacher.' "

The girl stared. "You mean—but why haven't you caught him? A creep like that shouldn't be allowed to run loose."

"It's very difficult to catch a person like this," Rath said. "We've tried, you can be sure of that. A couple of women who have been bothered by this man agreed to work with us. They arranged meetings with him, but he didn't show up. He's careful never to say anything that would give a hint as to who he is, or what he does for a living."

"But that's awful," the girl said angrily.

Rath nodded. He got to his feet. "I'll turn in my

report," he said. "Men from the precinct detective squad will contact you tomorrow."

"Detectives!" she exclaimed. Her lips tightened. "What will they do, hold my hand? They should be out trying to catch this creep, before he hurts somebody."

Rath, who had been tramping toward the door, stopped suddenly. He turned to the girl. "Why do you say that?"

"Good gosh, isn't it obvious? A nut like that, he might do anything."

For the first time an expression of uncertainty crossed the policeman's big, jowly face. Finally he said, "I didn't want to alarm you, but maybe I should. About a month ago a young woman was murdered in this neighborhood, Miss Campbell. We found out from a friend of hers that she had been getting these phone calls. She hadn't reported them to the police. There's a good chance that's got nothing to do with her murder, of course, but—"

"My gosh," Jeanne Campbell breathed. She got up shakily, crossed to the windows overlooking the street, and stared out at the dark night, then abruptly pulled down the shades. She asked, "How did she die?"

Rath shuffled his big feet uneasily. "She was beaten to death, Miss Campbell."

She turned, her face pale.

"As I said, there's better than an even chance that the calls had nothing to do with her murder," Rath told her.

"But—there might be."

The patrolman didn't answer. He went to the door and opened it. Jeanne Campbell followed, nervously clenching and unclenching her fingers.

"Will you be home tomorrow?" Rath asked.

"What? Oh, yes, tomorrow's Saturday. I don't have to work. I'm a secretary, you know, at an office downtown."

"Yes. Well, the detectives will probably get here in the morning sometime. Until then, try not to worry. Keep your doors and windows locked, and—"

"There's just this door, and no way for anyone to reach the windows," the woman said vaguely. "Thank goodness for that."

"Good." Rath put on his cap, nodded, and headed for the staircase.

The girl watched him. She called, "At least I'll feel better, knowing you're out there on the avenue walking your beat, in case I want to yell for help."

Rath nodded again. He turned down the stairs. Behind him he heard the girl close her door. He paused until he heard the clink of the door chain being put in place, then went on down and out of the building.

On the street he looked right and left. He started for the nearest call box, a block away. He walked with his usual slow, regular pace. It was just nine o'clock. Many of the stores and shops along the street were still open. Automatically he checked each place as he passed.

Reaching the call box, he keyed it open and got the precinct house on the line. A voice growled, "Sergeant Graham."

"This is Rath. I checked out this Campbell woman. About the same story as with the other complaints we've had."

The sergeant swore. "This 'preacher' character again?"

"Sounds like it."

"That makes—what? About half a dozen different dames the 'preacher' is calling." Graham paused, then muttered, "I just hope we don't end up with two or three more dead women on our hands before we nail the bum."

"Yes. Anything new on the girl who was killed last week?"

"Not a whisper," Graham said.

"Well, I'll check in at ten."

"Right. Keep your eyes open down there, Rath."

Rath put the phone back in the box, locked it, and moved on along his beat. He stopped for coffee at a corner diner at nine-thirty. Shortly after ten he flushed a young boy and girl out of a darkened entranceway of an apartment building near the far end of the beat. He gave them a stern lecture and sent them on their way.

Slowly, methodically, he moved around the sixteen blocks that made up his beat. Each time he passed the building where Jeanne Campbell lived, he glanced up at her closely shaded windows. Once he saw her shadow moving across the shades.

Finally midnight came, and with it his relief. He talked a few minutes with the man who had the midnight to eight shift. He told him angrily about the young couple he'd found necking in the apartment-building entrance.

The other man laughed. "You're just jealous. What you need is to get married again. Just because it didn't work the first time, that doesn't mean—hey, what's with you?"

Rath had turned and was walking rapidly away.

The man called after him, "Heck, I didn't mean anything."

Rath didn't pause or look back. He was still fuming inwardly when he reached the precinct house and changed from his uniform into street clothes, and checked out for the night. He got his car from the parking lot and drove through the now nearly deserted streets.

It had been a year since he had divorced his wife, but still people brought it up, laughing about it, rubbing it in, the way he'd been taken by a cheap little hustler; and the way she'd left him flat once she'd drained his bank account.

He wished he could find her again, now. He'd give her what she deserved. But she had vanished months ago, and he hadn't been able to trace her.

There were plenty just like her around. He saw them every night as he walked his beat; cheap, wearing too much makeup, with demure smiles and knowing eyes.

Five minutes later he rang the bell at the Campbell woman's apartment. He'd left his car on a side street and walked from there. No one had seen him. No one would.

Except Jeanne Campbell.

He heard her frightened voice inside the door. "Who?"

"Patrolman Rath. I was here earlier."

Slowly, she opened the door. "Has something happened?"

He pushed inside, shut the door, and put his broad back against it. He said, "You're dirt. You don't deserve to live." His voice was very different from his usual voice. So was his face. The girl retreated into the room.

"You!" she gasped. "But you're a policeman."

He nodded. He moved toward her. "That's right. Part of my job is getting rid of scum like you. I thought maybe I could scare you—all the tramps like you—out of my district, with the phone calls. That didn't work. So . . ."

He moved nearer, doubling his fists.

"You killed that girl last week!" she screamed.

His eyes glistened in the lamplight. He was breathing heavily. "She deserved what she got. So do you."

He lunged, but as he swung his fist, the girl ducked to one side. Then she came up, grasping his arm and giving it a twist and a flip. Rath's own momentum sent him crashing headfirst into the wall across the room.

When he came to, he was lying facedown on the rug, his arms handcuffed behind him. He heard a familiar voice.

". . . Yeah, we've had an eye on Rath for some time," Sergeant Graham was saying. "He was always a little too self-righteous for comfort, and since his wife left him, he's been getting more and more like a fanatic. You know?"

"I know," Jeanne Campbell said dryly. "My mother used to tell me not to worry about the bums in the world, but beware the righteous man. He's the one likely to blow up in your face."

Rath groaned. He twisted his head around, looked toward the sergeant and the girl. They were standing over by the phone.

Graham snapped, "Stay put, Rath. The wagon will be here for you in a couple minutes."

"What—how—"

"Oh, by the way," Graham said, "let me introduce you to Sergeant Jeanne Campbell. Headquarters sent

her to our precinct to see if she could smoke out 'the preacher.' Did a good job, didn't she?"

Rath didn't answer. He pressed his face back down into the dusty carpet. Tears came to his eyes; he felt betrayed. You just couldn't trust anyone these days.

A Message from Marsha

JAMES HOLDING

It was exactly eleven-four P.M. and Gilmore was swearing softly under his breath when he came back and got into his car at the curb. He was still carrying the fat brown envelope. He slammed the car door in a temper and pulled away from the curb.

I got up onto my knees from my crouching position in the back of his car, and let him hear the sound of the gun being cocked right beside his ear. Then I put the end of the pistol barrel against the back of his neck and said in a whisper, "Just drive down Fifth to City Line and take a left, friend. And if you're a good boy, I won't shoot you."

He jumped about two inches in sheer surprise, gave a big gasp of fear, and nodded his head violently to show he would be a good boy. He drove sedately down Fifth without even daring to lift his eyes to his rearview mirror. He wouldn't have learned anything from it anyway. I had on a Dracula mask from the toy department, and even without it, he probably wouldn't have known me. Who notices a stock boy in a department store?

When I was sure he wasn't going to act up, I reached into the front seat and took the brown envelope. I was feeling good; everything was working out just the way I'd planned it. I was not only getting

the money, but Marsha as well, which was the best part of the deal, the way I looked at it.

I told myself it wasn't over yet, not to relax too soon, yet I couldn't help feeling great. I whispered to Gilmore, "Here's City Line. Take a left, slow and easy."

Gilmore took a left. His hands were shaking on the wheel. I could see them by the glow of the dashboard lights. Man, he was really scared. That made me feel good, too, because everybody around the store thought old Gilmore was a pretty tough monkey.

We drove along City Line for two or three miles, with Gilmore obeying every order I gave him like a new kid in school obeys the teacher the first few days. I didn't let up with the gun barrel on his neck; I wanted him to stay scared until we got out of the center of town. After that, it wouldn't make much difference because there wouldn't be anybody around to help him, even if he yelled for help.

When we came to Country Club Road, I told him to take a right, and he did. We drove on that for a while, getting farther and farther out into the country all the time. We didn't pass more than half-a-dozen cars altogether until we came to the unused dirt road that led to the old, abandoned Maclaren quarry. Not another car was in sight, front or back, so I told Gilmore to take a left on the dirt road, pull up, and turn out his lights. He did it without a word. After a minute or two, figuring his eyes were used to the faint starlight by then, I said, "Now, go ahead, slow and easy."

The dirt road—it didn't go anywhere except to the abandoned quarry and wasn't used anymore—was full of ruts and dried mudholes, so Gilmore couldn't have gone very fast anyway without headlights, but I didn't

want him breaking any axles or anything right then, even by accident, because I had to use his car after I'd taken care of him.

Four miles down the dirt road we came to the turnaround at the quarry, where the trucks used to load up. "Turn in," I said. A faded sign still stood at the entrance, saying MACLAREN'S QUARRY. Well, when Gilmore saw that, and realized where I'd brought him, he went straight up. He must have thought I meant to kill him and sink his body in the quarry pond, because he said in a strangled voice, "Oh, please . . . what. . . ?" and choked on it.

"Pull up and get out of the car," I said, trying to make my whisper sound hard as nails. Did you ever try to talk tough in a whisper? It isn't easy.

Anyway, he pulled up. "Now get out," I said. Through the open car window, I kept the gun pointed at him while he did it. "Now walk away from the car over there to the quarry sign." I was sure the light was too bad for him to see that my pistol was a harmless plastic job, so I waved it at the sign, and when he turned to walk over there, I jumped out of the back of his car and got behind the wheel. I put the automatic transmission into drive and followed him slowly around the turnaround till he got to the sign and stood still, waiting for my next order.

I stopped beside him, and whispered harshly, "Listen, I'm not going to hurt you. It's eight miles to town. You can start walking anytime. Okay?"

Relief straightened him up like a cold martini on a hot day. "Okay," he managed to sputter.

I drove off, back down the dirt road the way we'd come. I took off the Dracula mask before I got to Country Club Road and tossed it into the ditch.

On the way back to town I didn't even stop to

count the money in Gilmore's envelope, I was so anxious to join up with Marsha and get started for St. Louis, where we'd decided to get married. I was on top of the world.

Who wouldn't be? Marsha was a dish, any way you looked at her, and I knew she loved me because she was willing to marry me, in spite of a promise to her dead mother. It was definitely against her principles to break promises, and it was also against her principles for me to earn money for our honeymoon the way I was earning it, so that was another thing that showed she loved me.

I'd known Marsha for only five weeks. I'd gone for her . . . zap! . . . the first time I walked into Joe's Grill and Marsha had taken my dinner order. That first sight of her turned me on like a neon sign. She was a brownette with bleached streaks in her long hair, and she was very shy and kind of standoffish for a waitress in a joint like Joe's Grill. She didn't even raise her eyes to look at me when I gave her my order, but I looked at *her* plenty, I can tell you. When she walked away from me to place my order in the kitchen, man, she really walked, if you know what I mean.

I asked her for a date after work that first night, but she brushed me off. After I came in for dinner every night for a week, though, and always asked for a table at her station, she finally agreed to a date. That's when I knew she was beginning to like me, on that first date, because she asked me all about my job and everything, and was really interested. Then she asked me about my family, and I said I hadn't any, that I was an orphan since I was sixteen. She said she was, too; well, not really an orphan, because her old man was probably still alive somewhere. He'd run out on Marsha and her mother without a word the year

before, and Marsha's mother had died, probably of a broken heart, Marsha said, and so Marsha was practically an orphan, too.

Well, that made us feel like old friends right away, you know how it is, both being in the same boat. We had a date every night after that, when she finished work, except for Wednesdays, when Jackson's Department Store stayed open till ten o'clock and I had to work until after eleven, cleaning up and renewing stock and everything after a big evening. I was a stock boy at Jackson's—did I tell you that? Believe me, the money was strictly nowhere—about sixty a week after withholding—but it was enough for me to get along on okay if I was careful, and even to own a third-hand jalopy.

I knew I shouldn't even think of asking Marsha to marry me when I was only taking down sixty a week—she was making more than that herself, for gosh sakes—but she got to me in a very special way that I'd never felt before. So, I asked her anyway, one Tuesday night after she got off work and we were having a few beers together out at Frenchy's on City Line. I couldn't keep my eyes off her, or my hands either, you know the way you've got to at least *touch* a girl like Marsha to know she's for real.

When I asked her, she put down her glass of beer and looked at me with those big blue eyes, put her hand on top of mine, and said in a husky voice, "Oh, Larry, that's the nicest thing that's ever happened to me! You want me to marry, you!"

"I'm nothing," I said, feeling embarrassed. "You're the greatest girl in the world."

"Do you love me?" she said then.

"Like crazy, Marsha. Why else would I ask you to marry me?"

"Well, it's not for my money, I know that!" She gave me a grin. Then she sobered up and said, Larry, dear, I'm honored by your asking me, but I can't do it."

My chest got this kind of caved-in feeling when she said that. I don't quit easy, though. "Why not?" I asked her. "You like me at least a little bit, don't you?"

"Like you! I love you, you nut! But I can't marry you, all the same. I promised."

"You promised who?"

"My dead mother," Marsha says, and her eyes are now looking very sad.

So there it was, right out on the table with the beer. I said unbelievingly, "You mean your dead mother made you promise not to get married? A gorgeous chick like you?"

"I promised her I wouldn't get married until I was twenty-one," Marsha said, "and I'm only nineteen so far."

I was surprised. She looked at least twenty-two to me. "Well, well," I said, "then we only have to wait two more years, is that it?"

"That's it." Her eyes filled up with tears. She wiped them away and took another sip of beer—dead serious.

"Two years is a long time, Marsha. Why'd your mother make you give her a stupid promise like that?"

"Because *she* married my father when she was eighteen, and she thought that's why their marriage was so lousy," Marsha explained. "Mom said she should have waited until she was at least twenty-one before she got married, when she was older and wiser, and all. Then she wouldn't have made such a bad mistake as to marry my father."

"She wanted to make sure that *you'd* be older and wiser when you got married?"

"She made me promise her. Not a day before I'm twenty-one. By then I'll be a lot more mature than I am now."

I looked at her blouse above the tabletop. "You're mature enough for me right now, baby. If you got any more mature, I couldn't stand it!"

She gave me a weak smile. She didn't think that was very funny and neither did I.

I said, more seriously, "I know it's pretty hard to break a solemn promise like that, but it has been done, you know. Living people ought to know more about what's good for them than dead people, I always say. Don't you think so?"

She shook her head. "I promised, so I'm stuck with it. I don't believe in breaking promises, Larry. It's against my principles, see? I'm terribly sorry, because I *do* love you, Larry, and I'll marry you, of course. But not till I'm twenty-one."

I didn't give up yet. I said, "Okay, baby, who needs to get married? Hardly anybody gets married anymore, anyway. We can move into my pad for two years, and keep our jobs, and then when you're twenty-one—"

"Stop!" she broke in. "That's disgusting, to suggest a thing like that! Can't we just go along the way we are and wait for two years?"

Without thinking, I said, "No. I tried that with Gloria and it didn't work out."

"Gloria?" Marsha sat up straight with a jerk.

I said, "Yeah, a girl I've known for three or four years. She's a B-girl over at the Cozy Club."

"And you asked *her* to marry you?"

"Never. I just meant we tried going along for a

while like, you know, good friends, but it didn't work out, so—"

"Are you still seeing this . . . this Gloria woman, Larry?"

"Not since I met you, honey. She keeps calling me a lot, though, wondering what's happened that I don't come around to the club anymore . . ."

"You never told me about *her*," Marsha said accusingly. "Did you ever tell her you loved her?"

I hooted. "Who, Gloria? Forget it. She's a perfect blank. All she's got is a beautiful body and an affectionate nature—"

"Stop it!" Marsha looked gravely into my eyes. "If I don't marry you, or move in with you right now, you'll go back to this . . . this B-girl, is that what you're trying to say to me, Larry?"

"Hell, no!" I put my heart in it. "Not that at all! I love *you*, Marsha, and I'm perfectly willing to do anything you say on account of the promise you made to your dead mother. But—"

"You don't mean that!" she flashed at me. She'd convinced herself already. "You'll go running back to that floozy the minute my back is turned!"

I put on a little pressure, seeing as how the Gloria thing was working out so well. "Well," I said, "I suppose I *could* start seeing Gloria again if you don't marry me. Not because I'd want to, understand, but probably just out of frustration. It's pretty hard to be in love with a person, and just sit around in a restaurant ordering roast beef rare from her every night, instead of having your own home and being together at the hot plate while she cooks your steak herself . . . and—"

She stopped me cold. "I'll marry you, Larry," she said. Her eyes weren't filled with tears now, they

were shooting fire. "In spite of my promise to Mom I'll marry you. I won't let that—that B-girl get her hands on you again if I can help it! Even if I have to break my promise to my mother!"

"That's the way to talk!" I said. "Now you're making sense, baby." I squeezed her hand. "When?"

"Anytime, darling. Where'll we go on our honeymoon?"

I gulped. "Honeymoon? I didn't think about a honeymoon, Marsha. I haven't any money saved up, have you?"

"Not a cent. All I have are my salary and tips at Joe's Grill."

"Well," I said, "let's forget a honeymoon till later and both keep our jobs until the financial situation is a little easier. What do you say?"

Marsha got a stubborn look on her face. "I say no," she said firmly. "I won't break my promise to Mom and then not even get a honeymoon out of it! Mom always thought one reason her marriage went sour was because *she* didn't have a honeymoon. She and my father just went on working, as though nothing had happened."

"*You* happened," I pointed out to her. "That's something."

She blushed. I told you she was kind of shy. "I don't mean that, Larry. I mean a honeymoon makes you understand each other right from the start, much, much better than if you don't have one, don't you see?"

"Sure I see. But where are we going to find enough money for a honeymoon? I already owe more than next month's salary."

"I guess that's your problem," Marsha said, smiling but still stubborn.

After a minute, I said, "I'll get the money somewhere, Marsha, don't you worry. I'll steal it if I have to."

"Larry!"

"I'm not going to let you get away from me now, baby."

Well, I stayed awake most of the night, dreaming up a way to scrape together some money for a honeymoon. I came up with a sweet idea in the end and told Marsha about it the next night.

"It wouldn't be stealing, really," I said. "Everybody's insured, all the way around. Nobody would lose anything except the insurance company."

"It's still stealing." Marsha got that stubborn look on her face again.

"But so safe and easy, Marsha. We could have a really great honeymoon on three or four thousand dollars, couldn't we?"

"We could retire on that much," Marsha murmured, impressed.

"We could go to Saint Louis and get married there. We could—"

"Don't tell me about it," Marsha says, weakening.

"Listen," I went on, "Jackson's stays open every Wednesday night, right? And after we close at ten, Mr. Gilmore—"

"Who's he?"

"Our treasurer. He collects all the night's receipts and deposits them in the night depository box of the Columbia Bank on his way home, about eleven o'clock."

"How do you know that?"

"Because Gilmore gave four of us wage-slaves a ride downtown after work one Wednesday night and that's what he did—stopped and opened the Colum-

bia night depository with his key and put in the store's money."

Marsha sneered. "And I suppose you think you could rob the bank's night box?"

"Sure. With a couple of toothpicks."

"Be serious, Larry." She laughed.

"I am serious. A couple of toothpicks."

That made her curious. "How?"

"I get to the bank before Mr. Gilmore Wednesday night. I push a couple of toothpicks into the keyhole of the night box and break them off so they jam the lock. When Gilmore tries to unlock the box to make his deposit, he can't get his key into the keyhole. So he has to take the store's money home with him or back to the store or someplace until next morning, see? Only, while he's trying to get the box unlocked, I sneak into the back of his car from the opposite side. When he comes back with the money and gets in, I'm waiting for him. I hold him up with a toy gun—no danger there, is there?—and take the money. I make him drive me somewhere lonely, let him go, and then drive his car back to town, pick you up in *my* car, and we take off for Saint Louis before old Gilmore's even halfway to a phone to call the cops. And he'll never suspect it was me that robbed him. I'll wear a mask. Now, is that neat, or not?"

Marsha was listening with her mouth open; but she was listening. She said, "He'll recognize your voice, Larry."

"I thought of that. I'll whisper. You can't recognize a whisper."

Marsha drew a big breath. "It's a disgusting criminal plan!" she said. "I won't allow you to do such an awful thing just to get money for our honeymoon."

That burned me a little as I thought my plan was

pretty solid. I said, "Well, okay, but my plan would work, honey. I *know* that. Most girls wouldn't hang back when it was a question of getting married or not getting married to the man they love. Gloria wouldn't hesitate for a second, I'll bet you four to one." I watched her closely. "Gloria is—"

"A total blank, except for a beautiful body and an affectionate nature," Marsha snapped. Her eyes were flashing again. She was silent for what seemed a long time. Finally she said in a small voice, "Well, all right, Larry. I *do* love you and I want to marry you."

That settled it. The time was set for the following Wednesday night.

"What about our jobs?" Marsha asked.

"Take our vacations beginning next Wednesday. If that doesn't work, we'll quit."

We decided that Marsha would drive me in my car to the Columbia Bank, drop me off a few minutes before eleven on Wednesday night, then drive to Kelly Square, park the car, and wait for me to meet her there after I'd got Gilmore's money and left him out in the country somewhere.

So, now that I'd left Gilmore at Maclaren quarry and was on my way to meet Marsha with our honeymoon money, you can see why I was on top of the world. I patted the fat brown envelope. There ought to be three or four thousand there at the very least, I thought.

It was a quarter past twelve when I drove Gilmore's car into Kelly Square. There were only four or five cars parked against the curb, and my old car, all turned up for our trip to Saint Louis, was one of them.

I pulled up across the street from it, shut off Gilmore's engine, and doused the lights. I left his keys in the ignition. Then, with the envelope of money under

one arm, I left Gilmore's car, crossed the street, and did a quickstep up the sidewalk to where my own car was parked. I was anxious to count the money and to tell Marsha about my first crack at crime.

I couldn't tell her, though, because when I got to my car and looked inside, Marsha wasn't there. I grabbed the door handle to pull open the door for a closer look, and the door was locked.

Where was she? I felt my heart start to hammer and my stomach jumped up into my throat. I was scared.

Then I figured, why sure, she's probably having a doughnut and coffee around the corner, or something to kill time till I got here—and she's locked the car because all our clothes and stuff for the honeymoon are in there.

Only they weren't. I took another look through the window and saw that Marsha's suitcase was gone. Mine was still there, but hers was gone.

I began to feel panicky then, all right. If Marsha had changed her mind at the last minute about marrying me and had pulled out, okay; but why would she leave me with stolen money on my hands, a stolen car fifty feet away, my car locked up tight, and not even a message from her to explain it? I suddenly knew I'd better get out of Kelly Square as fast as I could.

I remembered that I kept a spare car key in a magnetized case behind the front bumper. I went and snatched it out and came back to the driver's door and stuck the key into the keyhole. That is, I tried to. The key wouldn't go in. Something was blocking it. I ran around the car to the other door and tried the lock on that side. That keyhole was blocked, too.

I was still fumbling at it desperately when I heard footsteps. I turned my head just enough to see two

uniformed cops, who had got out of the unmarked car behind mine, coming toward me. They weren't hurrying, but they weren't loafing, either. One of them was unbuttoning his pistol holster.

Then, at last, I got it. Marsha had left me a message, after all. I stooped down and looked into the keyhole of the car door. There they were: two toothpicks shoved into the keyhole and broken off to jam the lock.

Isn't that wild? I was fit to be tied at first. Those cops had obviously known beforehand that I was coming to Kelly Square and were waiting for me, so it wasn't hard to figure what Marsha meant by the broken-off toothpicks.

As clear as though she'd left me a written note, Marsha was saying to me, "Larry dear, this is the only way I can think of to keep you away from that . . . that B-girl, Gloria, until I'm twenty-one. If you still feel like it, ask me again to marry you in a couple of years."

You know something? I just might do it, at that, when I get out.

Any girl who will go to all that trouble to keep a promise to her dead mother can't be all bad.

Seven Million Suspects

FRANKLIN M. DAVIS, JR.

Assassination. Now, there's a glamorous word. And only a rare few may participate in all it signifies. Most ordinary folk must be content with being just a plain old murderer or a mere nondescript victim.

Above the broad and busy avenue, high enough so the obligato of the traffic reached the hotel room as a merely faint whisper, the two men sat facing each other knee-to-knee. In their dark, rather poorly fitted suits, their bodies were so frail and slender as to barely dent the cheap cotton spreads of the shabby cots upon which they sat. One man swiftly poured plum brandy into water glasses. Eyes glowing, he proposed a toast, speaking in the harsh, slurring syllables of his homeland: "To you, Miljos! You shall be a hero!"

Miljos, two spots of color bright on his sallow, high-boned cheeks, grabbed his companion's wrist. The words hissed between his clenched teeth, "No, Stefan! No hero, is that understood? Rather am I an instrument, do you hear? An instrument!" He shook Stefan's arm roughly, then he dropped it and raised his hand, his emotion tightening the skin on his face and slitting his eyes. "This I swear; by the Crown and the Hand, and yes—yes, in the name of Porgof and

Coreau I swear. I shall not fail." Then he raised the glass. "I shall not fail. We drink to success."

Sourly, MacCurdy looked at the special agent. One of them Ivy Leaguers, he thought. What's the matter, they don't get them tough and meat-eating down there any more? Look at him, sitting there in my chair, butter won't melt in his mouth. Ha.

And as the special agent continued to watch MacCurdy's men file into the narrow briefing room, he relaxed noticeably, stopped fidgeting with his glasses. It was as if this was just one more class at the Police Academy instead of something special. MacCurdy covered his annoyance by checking the setup on the platform. He knew everything would be there: city-plan blowup; the diagram on a tissue-paper overlay; china marking pencil for changes; chalk; pointer. All the implements of the classroom and the briefing were there all right. But because he was uncomfortable in the presence of this smart young kid, MacCurdy tugged his watch from under his slight paunch, giving the shoestring chain he carried the watch on a good yank to get it out of his pocket. The watch came free suddenly, almost striking the blackboard.

"Watch out for the turnip, Mac! You got thirty days before they give you another one!" This raucous crack from Scanlon in the front row.

MacCurdy turned, swiveling the full weight of his scorn on Scanlon, young and eager and feeling his new stripes. "I'd bet you'd be counting the days," MacCurdy said scathingly. "Retired in thirty days I will be. Retired right now I'm not. So shut up and pay attention. Already we're three minutes late." Then, addressing the room with a sharp glance from

under his heavy, lowering brows that brought the shuffles and whispers to a dead silence, MacCurdy took a quick roll call and then turned to the special agent. "All yours, Mr. Kennicutt. All yours." And when the agent stepped up to the board to talk, MacCurdy took over the chair, settling his bulk comfortably in its familiar embrace, clasping his blunt-knuckled hands over his belly, and cocking his head to watch and listen to Ivy League.

The agent's voice was brisk, pleasant, and he enunciated very clearly. Public-speech training, probably. MacCurdy snorted critically, but he listened.

"Thank you, Lieutenant MacCurdy." The agent attempted a brief smile, then turned to the thirty-odd men crowding the briefing room. "You know why I'm here. Coordination. But before I begin, let me ask you one question: is there any man here who for personal reasons, political beliefs, or any other reason, whatever it might be, feels he can't give the full weight and attention of his mind, body, and spirit to this vital mission of guarding the security of—of our distinguished visitor?"

Kennicutt looked expectantly around the room. So did MacCurdy. Let one of these yahoos open his mouth just one little bit—! What was the matter with Ivy League? Did he think he was working with a bunch of rookies? MacCurdy scowled at Kennicutt who continued pleasantly.

"I'm not being overly melodramatic," he said. "I know you all appreciate how serious this is. You can just imagine the position we'd be in if somebody—a crank, a nut, anyone—got by our guard and our visitor was hurt. Even an unsuccessful attempt at harm could do untold damage to our country. Untold." Kennicutt paused to let that sink in, then gestured

at the city plan on the blackboard behind him. "Yet, look at the size of the city. Look at the routes of the various movements on the itinerary." He turned to face the group again. "But you've gone through this kind of thing before." So he gave them some credit, MacCurdy thought. But then he destroyed that by continuing, "Nonetheless, there's never been anyone of quite this—this magnitude who is the target of such universal malevolence. So this multiplies the problem, you see, and makes it more difficult."

MacCurdy didn't see. He was still a guy entitled to maximum security, just like they put out for the president. So where was the multiplication?

Kennicutt amplified his point. "You will find it hard to believe the tension this visit will generate in some quarters. I tell you this because you can't lull yourselves into thinking that past measures and past attitudes will be enough. You must treat this visit like a new and special problem. This is how we're treating it; this is how all the other government agencies involved in the personal security aspect are treating it. Am I clear on that?"

Like a bell. Like a ding-dong bell. Get on with it, Ivy League.

Kennicut must have read MacCurdy's thoughts, because he said, "Lieutenant, would you mind reviewing things? Up to the point of the coordination of the itinerary movements themselves. That is to say, up to A-Time." He smiled. "Arrival time."

MacCurdy half-closed his eyes, reviewing his memory. A month short of thirty years, he'd spent on the job. Two days after Nibs left town, he'd be done, retired, finished. So this was going to be a good one. Done right. The plans had been brewing for weeks —ever since they'd known the city was on Nibs's

itinerary. MacCurdy had schemed and planned and he'd done it well. Now he made his spiel. "Our plan is in four parts," he rumbled. His voice sounded harsh in his own ears; no public speech training like Ivy League, but plenty of time spent in yelling. Yeah. Plenty. "We got a segment for now, that's preliminary. That's going on now. That's screening known meatballs, for example. Anybody hasn't got a full string of lights or all his marbles, we make sure he's taken care of. Also initial route survey. Bomb squad details go out; we survey all locations for that stuff. We check the places where a guy might hide with a big rifle, let's say. Meanwhile, we bring in special reserves, start screening and training them." He droned on in his heavy voice. MacCurdy knew, as they all knew, that it was a tight detail; when you were charged with the personal security of the most-feared, and probably the most-hated, man in the world, well, you had to be tight.

But much of it was just plain old-fashioned police work. And MacCurdy thought, after they'd hashed and rehashed the preliminary, the A-Time Minus three-week, Minus two-week, A-Day itself and then even the after-departure handling of the crowds, that Kennicut was a little contemptuous.

The two men stood at the blackboard, the detail chiefs gone now, their cigar smoke still wreathing the air, the chairs jumbled in the room, the headquarters still echoing to the thunder of big police feet on the stairs. "I'm worried about imagination," Kennicutt said, stroking his kid's jaw and looking sharply at MacCurdy. "We've got to use imagination."

MacCurdy growled, jamming his big fists into the lumpy pockets of his coat. "It ain't imagination pays

off," he said. "It's good solid police work. We done all this before, you know."

Kennicutt stared at the brilliant lithography of the city plan, still fingering his jaw. "Never for this man," he said. "Never for anyone like this."

"I'll tell you something, jazzbo," MacCurdy said, not covering his irritation. "I been a cop for close to thirty years and I been in on some tough ones. I know this one's the biggest. And it's my last one. I want to go out looking good. It's a thing with me, you know? So I got the same interest in this you have. Maybe more even. Because it's my last one. A man wants to finish on top, you know? But I'll tell you this: You can imagine all you want and it'll still be police organization and police alertness that'll do the job. Protection. That's our business. So we make good solid plans. And we carry them out." *And we pray a little too,* MacCurdy added silently.

Kennicutt tapped the map. "I'm not worried about the reception itself, the luncheons, the dinners, the plant visits, the speeches, any of that. Not really. Because we can put two men in each place for every visitor and guest. What I am worrying about is the traveling. In the open. What do you have here, about six million people?"

MacCurdy snorted. "Over seven million in the city. But they ain't all going to be on the streets at one time, and they sure all ain't going to be in my precinct. You got your imagination working overtime, friend."

Kennicutt frowned and went back to rubbing his chin. "Of course. I know we're not actively concerned in our area with that many. My point is though, that this man is going to pull record crowds wherever he

goes. And we can't cover crowds a hundred percent. No matter how we do it. So that's the weakness, don't you see, Lieutenant? If somebody's made up their mind to an assassination, the chances are it'll be done during the traveling. Because it's easier in every way then."

"I don't know." MacCurdy took the opposite view for the sake of arguing. "We'll have men on the streets; so'll you. They won't be standing there with their hats over their eyes, you know."

Kennicutt shook his head. "I know, I know. But every building looks down on the route, for example. Anyone that wants to drop a bomb can do it. They won't worry about innocent bystanders. Not with this kind of target."

"You forget they could use helicopters. The Department's got plenty of them. So's the assassins, I bet."

Kennicutt looked sharply at MacCurdy, but didn't say anything.

Sure I'm pulling your leg, junior. MacCurdy didn't express that thought; instead he said, "Look, I got a kid's a bombardier; Offutt Air Force Base. You got any idea how hard it is to hit a moving target, throwing any kind of bomb from a window?"

Kennicutt shrugged. "I'm just worried about possibilities. I think—"

"You really thought about the kind of surveillance we'll have when Nibs is traveling? You really imagined it?" MacCurdy laughed. "Listen, Iv—Kennicutt, they ain't anyone going to be able to make a false move without some cop, uniformed or plain, seeing him. No matter what. He's got people too, the OKMNX or whatever. Nope, you can bet—"

"Yes, yes," Kennicutt interrupted hastily. "I know, I know. But I can't help worrying."

"Puts you in your grave ahead of your time," MacCurdy said. Then he added virtuously, "I'm not worried, not about this precinct. Of course, I can't speak for all the others."

"Nor can I, Lieutenant. But I'd like to feel we had left absolutely no point uncovered or unconsidered. From the madman who's willing to sacrifice himself and countless bystanders to accomplish his dirty purpose, to the brilliant schemer who wants to accomplish the act undetected." Kennicutt was silent a minute, then said, very softly, "Has it ever occurred to you that there might be people within his own regime who'd consider it advantageous to do him in while he's here?"

MacCurdy blinked. The prospect of something like that staggered him. But he spoke up stoutly. "I can't see any point," he said, "in trying to dream up the strategy someone'll use against Nibs. We got to deal in possibilities. And what my kid calls capabilities. We cover everything they *can* do." He wasn't sure this would be clear to Kennicutt, but it was the best he could do.

But Kennicutt was delighted. "Capabilities," he said. "Exactly." He smacked the map with slender fingers. "Now let's go over the route. What do you consider the critical points, from the capabilities point of view, that is?"

"I show you again. First, this intersection here. Why? Because this triangle's going to be choked with people. Can't help it. The public's entitled to see Nibs. Like this hotel here. See that side? Think about them windows . . ."

Miljos leaned out the window, making room for Stefan. For a moment he sucked the cool night air into his lungs, then he said quietly, "Look at below, my friend. Carefully. Now do you have doubts?" Gently, Miljos spit into the street, arching his head to watch the descent of the spit. Beside him, Stefan spoke urgently, Miljos shaking his head slowly, negatively, all the time.

His conference with Kennicutt over, MacCurdy moved heavily down the headquarter's staircase. I better quit getting sore at him, he thought. Better I invite him to come bunk with me. We'll be seeing that much of each other before Nibs shakes the dust of this town from his heels. I wonder does he play cribbage? Or ain't that an Ivy League sport? Imagination, my foot!

Downstairs, he flagged a squad car from the motor pool. "Hello, Ryan," he told the rookie driver behind the wheel. "How's for running me up to my place?"

At the cheap hotel where MacCurdy hung his hat now that there wasn't much left of the family, and that scattered to the four winds, he undertook his daily joust with the desk clerk. "Mail for me?"

The clerk made a pretense of checking the boxes, but he was giving his answer before he turned his head. "Sorry, Lieutenant. Not a thing."

"You get three deliveries a day here. Nothing in any of them?" It wasn't that the MacCurdy kids didn't write their old man; it was the U. S. Post Office. Raise the rates and slow the mails. Worked every time.

"All three came in," the clerk announced happily. "Ten, two, and four." He smiled thinly. "Nothing for you."

MacCurdy headed for the elevator. It didn't take much imagination to really know what happened to his mail. Why didn't they use the extra postage to put on more help in the ding-dong post office?

Upstairs, in the sterile comfort of his narrow room, he shucked off his coat and his shoes, put his gun and its leather in the nightstand drawer, took off his tie, and stretched out on the bed. For a while he thought about his kids. Maybe he'd make the big loop after he retired, see the grandchildren. Hell's fire, it was going to be hard to hang up the old buzzer. And take Nibs now. The man had grandchildren, he'd heard that somewhere. And he was past retirement age—police regulations age anyway. Ha, maybe that was an answer. All the old retired crocks—both them that were official retired and the ones that should be ought to get together and swap lies about their grandchildren and settle the cares of the world at the same time. What'd he told Kennicutt? Hard police work, that was the answer. It was the answer to a lot of things, hard work. He checked the time, pulling out the watch on the shoestring chain. That damned Scanlon. Maybe the Department wouldn't even give him a watch. Worry about that one when the time came. Ha. Time was right. Time to hit the rack. Swiftly, MacCurdy completed his preparations for sleep; then, in his ankle-length nightshirt, he settled into bed. And for a few minutes, as was his custom before he switched off the light, he read from the Gideon on the nightstand.

Miljos spit into the street again. Now he was agreeing with Stefan. "You are clever, Stefan. Clever indeed. But can you obtain such things?" Stefan nodded his head quickly. "But of course, Miljos.

Here, with money, you can buy anything. Anything at all." Miljos looked down into the street, laughing. "You know, Stefan, when I think what will happen down there, I can only laugh and be happy. I do not care one whit what becomes of me afterward."

In spite of the flawless rehearsal, Kennicutt was unhappy.

"What's the matter?" MacCurdy asked the question sharply. "Everything worked just right. Now you're putting up a beef. Everything worked. Just like it was supposed to. So what do you want? Two heads on your beer?"

"No, Lieutenant, nothing that simple. It's just a feeling I have. I had it before, you know. You like to know when?" Kennicutt was looking at him, eyes solemn behind his glasses. "Can you guess?"

MacCurdy blinked. He wasn't one to smack down another man's hunches. But what'd the man want, anyway? The rehearsal was perfect; the cars making up the dummy party, escort vehicles and all, rolled through on the tick. Traffic details, sidewalk barrier details, surveillance, radio communications, helicopter on top, roof and window details, everybody was on the stick. "I'll bite," MacCurdy said dryly. "When?"

"Cermak. When they tried to get Roosevelt. I was there—"

"There?" MacCurdy asked the question incredulously. "That was, let's see, that was yeah a good twenty-five, twenty-six years ago. You must've been just a kid, wasn't you?"

"Just a kid," Kennicutt said quietly. "But I never forgot it. That's what put me in this business, really." He looked at MacCurdy, his glance level. "I told my

father, he took me there that time, I felt funny, that something was going to happen. I have the same feeling now." He smiled quickly, suddenly more boyish than ever. "Silly, isn't it? I know it is. As you say, good police work is what you've got to rely on."

"Yeah," MacCurdy said quickly. He could understand something like the dedication the man felt; it was a thing to admire, yeah, and to envy. To respect. So you had to give him a leg up. "Yeah," he repeated more cheerfully. "Good police work will do it. And that we got plenty of. You want to run the critique for the detail chiefs, or do I?"

Maybe Kennicutt wasn't any warmer than he'd sounded before, all along, but the way he said it made you think so. "You handle it, Lieutenant. I'll come in on the tail end. It's police business."

MacCurdy started off by warning the group, "Now don't think that crowd out there today was any sample of what you'll get when Nibs comes through. This was ordinary today; they didn't have no clue to what was going on and they didn't care. But it'll be different next time, when Nibs is in that party." MacCurdy glowered around the room. He could tell from the serious and thoughtful expressions on the various faces that he was off to a good start. . . .

In the hotel room, Miljos watched Stefan unwrap the packages. "I have bought each item in a different part of the city, Miljos. Regard." As Stefan spread the items on the bed, Miljos chuckled. "Veritable cloak of invisibility, Stefan. I'm proud of you."

It was hard for MacCurdy not to show the tension he felt. *He* felt—why, they all felt it. But a lieutenant couldn't let on. Not much anyway. But as Nibs's day

—they were calling it that now—drew nearer, the separate and collective nerves of the precinct police thrummed and vibrated.

Part of the trouble was Kennicutt. He was too blamed smart. He thought of all kinds of weird angles. He worried out loud. "Nothing?" he asked. "No tips at all? Not a damn word?" The *damn* was proof enough of his irritation; the bags under his eyes behind the glasses was even more. "Nothing?" His voice went up. "I can't believe it."

"Look," MacCurdy said wearily. "I can't speak for the whole city. Of course, I know some nut from another precinct could come over and mess us up. And I ain't responsible for checking out the crank letters. That belongs to the stupid post-office department." MacCurdy scowled. "Your buddies in the government. All I'm telling you is we've checked weapon sales, demolitions sales, even—so help me—insecticides and rat poisons, and we've twisted the arm on every stoolie we ever knew. And there's nothing." MacCurdy paused, then banged a fist into his palm. "For the love of heaven, what makes you so sure there's any problem? You act like it'd already happened and we can't find out who did it."

Kennicutt ran a hand through his close-cropped hair. Then he laughed ruefully. "I know I'm a worrier, no question about it. I'm a born worrier."

"Well quit worrying. You get ulcers that way. And you're too young for 'em. Leave it to us old crocks."

"The weapon, Stefan. The weapon!" Miljos's eyes glittered. "I must try it, you see."

Shortly, Stefan produced the gleaming pistol from its hiding place in the toilet cabinet. "See, Miljos,"

he exclaimed proudly. "It is one of their own manufacture. This is true justice, is it not?"

Wordlessly, Miljos fondled the pistol. He cupped it in his hands, then started to laugh, silently, laughing without sound until the tears streaked his cheeks.

Eventually Nibs Day arrived. And even MacCurdy, with his long experience, was startled at the temper and breadth of the holiday spirit that pervaded the city. "It ain't right, you know that?" He growled the comment to Kennicutt as they drifted in a squad car down the cleared avenue, the crowd a surging, noisy mass around them. "These people shouldn't be so interested in Nibs. It's practically morbid, I'd say. And you know something? I think it's the biggest crowd I ever seen. By golly, I bet it beats the VE day bunch."

Kennicutt's voice sounded forlorn and somehow lacking in his usual brisk confidence. "Yes," he said, "there's something almost obscene about it. Romanesque, I'd say. It's one thing to give a courteous welcome, but this—this—" he waved a hand wordlessly at the thronged sidewalks, the policemen straining at the barriers, the jammed windows, the holiday streamers, placards, the whole panoply of celebration. "It's as if no one realized the dark side of what this man represents. Why, it's positively frightening."

And when the squad car was pulled into its special reserved slot near the key intersection, for what MacCurdy was sure was the hundredth time, Kennicutt said, "You sure this is the best place for us?"

With patience that had every right to be threadbare—did this guy think it didn't all get to the oldtimers too?—MacCurdy said wearily, "This is the best

place. If anyone's going to get close to Nibs, in this precinct, it has to be right along in here."

In the massive crowd, Miljos held his place at the restraining rope. The cloak of invisibility, he thought. How many are looking at me and cannot see me? He knew he shouldn't laugh, but the temptation was strong. And some suggestion of humor must have crossed his face because a nearby policeman, arms locked on the rope at the curb, winked at him. "No work today for you guys, huh? We shoulda drafted you for help." Miljos, wise by now to these Americans, simply grinned and adjusted the bag on his shoulder. Gently, he tested the bottom, seeking against its softness the weight of the pistol. He experienced a deep and thrilling exhilaration. . . .

Standing at the edge of the curb, one hand on the cool finish of the squad car, McCurdy thought that probably the crowd up the line was getting a disappointment. Listening to the chatter on the radio, hearing the reports and coordination orders called off, you could tell it was really a waste of time for anyone to be out on the avenue, this long, standing, losing time from work and duties, just for a glimpse of Nibs in a big car whizzing up the street in the midst of the escort party. Like the ball games, you'd get a better view of the whole thing on TV. But people were funny. So you kept your eye on them. Restlessly, he checked all of the area he could see, one ear continually alerted to the radio. On the other side of the car, Kennicutt eyed the street too.

MacCurdy grinned; the kid was really sweating. Good thing, too. Make him a better cop in the long run. He moved over to him. "Details all check out,"

he said softly. "See up aloft? Rooftop, fire escapes, windows. We got people all over. The place to watch is the crowd. I'll tip you how I do it, Kennicutt. I watch for sudden movements. Crowd moves are slow, deliberate, time like this. It's the quick moves you got to watch out for. *"Oh, oh,"* the radio exclaimed suddenly. *"Here he comes. Here's Nibs."*

A swelling murmur started in the crowd, and far up the avenue there was a glimpse of the hurrying motorcade. And MacCurdy watched the crowd with wise old eyes. *Now there's something,* he told himself. *Look at that. Looks all right, but then it's not. Now why don't I like what I see?*

And then he had it. And moved. Moved without a word to Kennicutt. Driving under the restraining rope, he caught a man just as the motorcade swung past, just as the man tried to fire a shot at Nibs. MacCurdy nailed him, the big policeman hands going onto the man's skinny arms—and, so fast that only the nearest spectators had much idea of what was happening, MacCurdy had cuffs on, of all things, a U. S. mailman. A post office mailman. "Kennicutt! Quick! Let's go!" MacCurdy flung the man into the rear of the police car, twisted his leather mailman's bag on top of him, and was ordering the driver to move out even as Kennicutt was scrambling in the door, Nibs and the motorcade now long past.

Afterward, when it was all over, the booking and the mugging and the rest of the rigmarole started. MacCurdy held well-deserved court in the briefing room. "Come on, tell us," came a chorus led by Scanlon, while Kennicutt listened, grinning. "How'd you figure it was that nut, anyway?"

"Easy." MacCurdy put his hands behind his head,

sorely tempted to ham it up by rubbing fingernails in his lapel. "What time did Nibs go through?" He didn't wait for an answer. "There's not a letter carrier on the street in the precinct that ain't got a load of mail. *And this clown had an empty sack!*"

The silence of the group, stunned, awed, was reward enough. MacCurdy knew he could retire on top of them all, on top of everything. It was a good feeling. Even if he didn't get no watch. He turned to Kennicutt, grinning. Slapping old Ivy League on the shoulder, MacCurdy said, "Know something? I never even got a look at Nibs. Not one lousy look."

But Scanlon had a last word, overriding Kennicutt's responding grin. "Hey Mac," he said slyly. "Think what a favor you could've done the world, did you let that meatball give Nibs the works. You ever think of that?"

MacCurdy knew there was a lot he could say to that; but he cut Scanlon up with a soft answer. "Read your Gideon sometime, Scanlon. 'Judge not lest ye be judged.' That answer your question?"

Heaven is a Frame of Mind

RICHARD HARDWICK

Contrary to Arthur Prentiss's lifelong belief and fear, dying was not at all bad. Other than the painful and panicky moments just preceding it, the transition from the world of the quick to that of the dead was no more traumatic than dozing off and waking after a catnap. In fact, at the very moment it took place he had experienced a certain excitement, reminiscent of those Christmas mornings in his boyhood.

"Art?" said a voice. "Art Prentiss? Is that you?"

Prentiss pulled his wits together and looked about curiously. A vague shape seemed to be drifting there a dozen paces from him.

"By golly!" the voice continued. "It *is* you, Art!"

Prentiss blinked and rubbed his eyes. The figure seemed to be Clem Bagley, which was momentarily quite confusing, as Prentiss clearly remembered having served as a pallbearer at Clem's funeral eight years ago.

"Clem. . . ?"

Bagley smiled and drifted toward him in the swirling ankle-deep mist. "Take your time, Art. There's no rush. Like they say, you're a long time dead."

"Then I . . . I *did* die?" He touched his cheek tentatively, looked down at his hands. "I'm . . . really dead?"

Bagley nodded. "As a mackerel."

Strange, Prentiss thought. Very strange. Just like in the movies . . . swirling mist, the flowing white garment Clem wore, and wasn't that the faintest sound of harp music coming from someplace. . . ?

He turned back to his late friend. "It's good to see you, Clem. At least, I suppose it is. How've . . . how've you been?"

Bagley smiled and gave a little shrug to his shoulders, an act which brought to Prentiss's attention that the part about the wings had been incorrect. Clem was wingless. "I'm fine," he said. "Everybody here is fine all the time." His smile faded momentarily, replaced by a vague wistfulness. "To tell the truth, I'd give a lot to see just one good old rotten gallbladder."

"I suppose so," Prentiss replied, recalling that his friend had been a surgeon.

"And now that you're here, you and I have a little unfinished business, in case you've forgotten."

Prentiss regarded the doctor strangely, watching as he reached down into the heavy mist and pulled up a small gilt table and a pair of folding chairs.

"We were halfway through a game of gin rummy when my coronary hit me," Bagley said by way of explanation.

"Don't I have to check in or something?"

"Plenty of time for formalities. It's your deal." He opened a deck of cards and handed them to Prentiss.

The newcomer smiled and sat down. "Okay. My deal."

For a moment the doctor watched his friend shuffle the cards. Then he said, "Just what happened to you, Art? I don't think you were more than thirty when I died, were you?"

Prentiss put the deck on the table, Bagley cut, and

Prentiss began to deal. "I'm thirty-eight now, that's right." He paused and rubbed a hand thoughtfully across his mouth. "Actually, I . . . I don't really know what happened to me, Clem."

"An accident? Auto wreck?"

Prentiss shook his head. "No. Let's see, I'd just gotten home from the office, and it wasn't long before I began to feel like the very devil. Started vomiting, blacking out, you know, really sick. Yes . . . and I remember distinctly, very distinctly, that I was terribly afraid . . . as if I knew I was going to die!"

Bagley pursed his lips professionally. "Nausea, blacking out, extreme anxiety. Until you came home you felt alright?"

Prentiss nodded.

"And you just came home and began to feel this way?"

"Yes . . . well, no . . . not exactly that. I did have a drink. But I had one every evening when I got home."

Bagley nodded and after a moment said, "You prepared the drink yourself?"

Prentiss dealt a single card and stopped, scrutinizing his friend's face carefully. A smile started and failed. "Actually . . . Ella fixed the drink. Sort of a habit, you know. A custom. I'd come home from the wars and Ella'd meet me with a kiss and a drink." He gazed blankly at the partially dealt hand on the table. "Seems the kisses were getting colder and the drinks warmer . . ." He lifted his eyes suddenly. "What are you driving at, Clem? Get to the point!"

"I think you know what it is."

"Something was in the drink. Is that it? That's absolute nonsense!"

Bagley bent his head slightly. "The symptoms can't be ignored, Art. I'll say one thing—I'd love to have

a peek inside your body, run a few tests. Of course, in a case such as this there're bound to be questions. If anything fishy happened, it'll turn up. The toxicologist doesn't fool easily. By the way, how'd you and Ella get on these past eight years? I recall you two used to battle quite a bit."

"It's been rough. No denying it. About five years ago I started moving up with the company." His face brightened momentarily. "I'm executive vice president now."

"You *were* executive vice president," Bagley reminded him.

"Yes. Anyhow, as soon as I began making good money, Ella began spending more. I was making more and enjoying it less, in hock up to here all the time. We had to keep up appearances, she said. The good times were fewer and farther apart . . ." His voice trailed off and a faraway look glazed his eyes. Then he bent a serious gaze on the doctor. "Laugh if you like, Clem, but six months ago I got myself a private eye. I had an anonymous phone call that Ella was running around, and I had this fellow trail her for a couple of months." He finished dealing the cards and picked up his hand. For several seconds he slipped cards in and out, then fanned them together. "Nothing. He reported that she only went to a doctor's office three, four times a week, beauty parlor, bridge club, golf . . ."

Clem Bagley looked up curiously when his friend's words trailed off once more.

"I wonder. . . ?" Prentiss murmured. "Sure . . . it has to be! That's it!"

"What's it?"

"Chris Turner! Do you remember Chris Turner?"

"A not-too-successful gynecologist, wasn't he?"

"That's the boy. And I thought Ella was just on some female trouble kick. What a *fool* I've been!"

"Wait a second now, Art. Don't jump to conclusions."

"Me? You're the one who started picking at the symptoms." A knowing grin passed slowly over his face. "Oh, I see. Even after they're dead the doctors stick up for each other, is that it?" Then his expression began to change. He rubbed one hand back and forth across his forehead and closed his eyes, as if trying to summon some elusive memory. "There's something else, Clem. Something I seem to remember . . . I suppose it was just a few minutes ago. I was having this excruciating pain, but I do remember now . . . someone was there."

"Ella?"

"And someone else. She was talking to him. They were standing beside me . . . over me, really. Ella said . . . 'Is it going to work?' and I heard him answer her—and it *was* Chris Turner's voice—and he laughed and said, 'It has worked, baby! It *has* worked!' and the next thing I knew you were calling my name."

They sat silently for a time, the mist swirling slowly, soundlessly about them, the piped harp music floating ethereally.

"They'll get away with it," Prentiss said at last. "Chris was there, and he'll put on a long face and say it was a heart attack."

Bagley sighed. "I suppose it will go something like that."

Prentiss picked up his cards disconsolately. "I had a potful of insurance. That must have had a lot to do with it."

Bagley nodded. "As I recall, Chris had a weakness for horses and the like."

Prentiss's lips drew taut across his teeth. Bagley discarded and Prentiss drew. The game proceeded in silence, without interest, and after a time Bagley spread his cards. "Gin."

"Just not my day all around," Prentiss said with a weak smile.

"Art . . ." Bagley began gathering in the cards, "Art, it might be wise to wait until you cool off, but a thing like this, well, it's pretty obvious from this end what happened to you. What I'm getting at is that there is something you can do, if you choose."

"Something I can *do*?"

The medic nodded. "There's a sort of court we have. There has to be a hearing, of course, but in this case that would be almost a formality. They'll give you a crack at Ella and Chris, if you want it."

"You mean–I can do something *to* them?"

"That's it. Yes."

Prentiss moistened his lips. "I could make Ella die if I wanted to?" he queried.

"Or Chris, or even both of them. There're limits, of course. Can't tamper too much with the course of events, no torture, that sort of thing. You can understand that."

"Yes! Yes!" he broke in impatiently, "but I *can* have them killed?"

"Definitely."

Prentiss grinned broadly and rubbed his hands together. "Wonderful! Ella will go straight to hell for what she did to me. Wonderful. She'll—"

"Hold it, old boy. I hate to disillusion you, but there is no hell."

Prentiss's face fell. "No hell?"

"No hell. Seems the old tentmaker was right after all. If you have Ella attended to, she'll come here.

Oh, not that you have to see her or be bothered by her. After all, this is a pretty good-sized place, and just about everybody from the start of time is here."

Prentiss frowned deeply. "It . . . it just doesn't seem right. There must be something. I've got to do something. I've got to!" Ella and Chris were down there cackling with glee this very minute, getting set to collect the insurance money and live it up, dance on his grave, neither of them with any more conscience than an alleycat. There *had* to be a way.

Clem Bagley put a hand on his friend's arm. "Let it ride for now, Art. There's time. Here—" he stood up, folded the table, and slipped it back down into the mist, "I'll walk you over to Registration and then show you around a bit. Sort of help you get your bearings."

"But—"

"You'll think of something, Art. You always were a resourceful sort."

Time passed pleasantly, so much so that Prentiss was glad he had not acted hastily at the beginning and brought Ella and Chris here.

He received word that the insurance company had paid off without a hitch, and after a sensible and respectable time, Chris and Ella were married. Soon, they would fall into the routine of every day life. Chris would come home from the office or the hospital. They would have a couple of drinks, perhaps sit around the pool and talk, maybe cook steaks on the grill. There would be the usual parties.

Yes, in time Chris would take his place completely.

Prentiss began to dwell on this thought. Habits would persist. Chris would, as a matter of course, have a cocktail when he came home in the evening, and after a time, being a reasoning creature, wouldn't

Chris begin to regard the glass with just a hint of suspicion? By then the honeymoon would have been swallowed up in the past. The bickering would have begun—Prentiss knew Ella well enough for that—the carping, the disagreements.

And Ella—aware of Chris's professional knowledge and easy access to all those chemicals and drugs that a doctor has access to—wouldn't Ella begin to imagine a peculiar taste to her food? And wouldn't she perhaps begin to sleep with one eye open, expecting the tiny prick of a hypodermic? They would never be able to erase the memory of the pact they had made, nor the sight of Arthur Prentiss in his death agony.

Prentiss and Clem Bagley had a gin-rummy date a few days later. "You look like a man who has come to a decision," the surgeon remarked. "Does it concern Ella and Chris?"

"Ella and Chris," Prentiss said. "Where do I go to see about having it carried out?"

"After the game. Now sit down." Bagley began to shuffle the cards and placed them before Prentiss for the cut. "What'd you come up with?"

"I think I told you they got married, didn't I?"

"You did. So?"

Grinning, he thought of the homecomings, the customary cocktails, the quiet dinners with just the two of them, the suspicion growing like a canker day by day, year by year.

He cut the cards with a flourish. "I've a little surprise for Ella and Chris. They're going to live to be the oldest married couple on the face of the earth!"

He sat down in the little golden chair and began to pick up his cards one by one.

The Eye of the Pigeon

EDWARD D. HOCH

Tommy came awake suddenly, as he always did, trying for an instant to remember where he was. He knew from the softness of the mattress that it was not a jail cell, nor his old flat back in North Beach, and almost as quickly as these thoughts passed through his mind he remembered that it was Sarah's place. Good old Sarah—she'd always had the softest bed in town.

"You awake?"

He opened one eyelid and saw her standing by the side of the bed, wrapping the familiar faded housecoat around her ample thighs. "Yeah," he mumbled into the pillow. "I'm awake."

"You getting up? Want me to fix breakfast?"

"Yeah." He sighed and closed the eye again. It had been a good many years since he'd hopped out of bed the first thing in the morning; it had been a good many years since he'd held a job that demanded it. Tommy Far was middle-aged at thirty-eight, a small balding man with a weak chin. People rarely looked twice at him, which was often an advantage.

"Come on, Tommy. Coffee's on!"

Finally he rolled out of the bed and rubbed the sleep from his eye. He had only one eye now. The other had been lost one hot afternoon in the exercise yard at State Prison, when a man he didn't even

know had kicked him in the face during a brawl. "All right, all right," he mumbled. "Let me brush my teeth and stuff, huh?"

She was waiting with the coffee when he reached the table, and he sat in his soiled undershirt drinking it. He'd known Sarah Banburg off and on for the past five years, ever since he'd got out of prison the last time. He supposed she'd been good for him. Certainly she'd fed him and loved him, and talked him into getting a glass eye instead of the patch he'd wanted to wear. In many ways she was like him, one of the ugly people who lived by their wits on the fringes of society. He sometimes tried to picture her as a young girl, but that was impossible. People like Sarah Banburg had been old all their lives.

"You going to get us some money today?" she asked him from the stove. The scent of frying bacon was heavy in the air. "The money from my check's just about gone."

"I'll get some," he told her through a mouthful of toast. "Some good horses running at Aqueduct today."

"I'll need money for food tonight, Tommy. If you're going to stay here you gotta pay your way! Not like last time!"

"I'll get the money. Stop bugging me so early in the morning."

He left her after breakfast, breathing in the crisp spring air as he walked quickly past the brownstone fronts along Clark Avenue. When he reached the bowling alley, a few of the regulars were already there, studying the day's forms over coffee. Tommy spoke to a couple of them and then went through to the rear, where Big John was racking up the balls for a game of pool.

"You're out early," he said to Tommy.

"I'm staying with Sarah for a few days. She's just down the street. What looks good at Aqueduct today, John?"

"You know as much as I do. Some of the boys are getting down on Tough Tiger in the fifth."

Big John Miller was a giant of a man who had run the bowling alley and pool hall on Clark Avenue for more years than anybody could remember. None of the kids came there any more, because Big John had never tried to compete with the color and chrome of the new places in the shopping centers. He didn't seem to mind. He was content with customers like Tommy Far and the others.

"Maybe I'll shoot a game with you," Tommy said. He liked pool, because his eye was no handicap.

"Sure," Big John told him.

They were halfway through the third game when the call came for Tommy. He took it in a musty phone booth that smelled of stale cigarette smoke. "This is Tommy."

A familiar voice spoke softly into his ear. "Need some dough these days, chum?" Tommy grunted in recognition and the voice went on. "Be in the parking lot over at the New Century Theatre in ten minutes." Then the line went dead.

Tommy Far strolled back to the table. "I gotta go out for a while, John. If I'm not back by post time, put two bucks on Tough Tiger to win."

It took him nearly ten minutes to walk the eight short blocks to the New Century Theatre. Like most of the newer shopping-center movie houses, it was open only in the evening on weeknights. Now, before noon, there was only a single car in the parking lot, snugged against one brick wall of the theatre like some wounded animal in hiding. Tommy knew the

car, even though it carried no unusual markings. He walked to it and got in on the passenger's side.

"How you been, Tommy?" the driver asked.

"Pretty good, Craidy."

Sam Craidy was a hard-looking man with steel-gray eyes and a heavy hand. Though he always dressed well, there was a suspicious look of uncertainty about his clothes, as if they didn't quite fit him, or as if he'd borrowed them from a friend. Tommy had never known him to laugh, or even smile. He might have been a truck driver on his day off. He wasn't. He was a detective who operated out of the Tenth Precinct.

"Got a job for you, if you need a little cash."

Tommy Far rubbed his damp palms against the rough cloth of his trouser legs. "I'm not so good at this stuff anymore. I been losing my contacts."

"Fifty bucks, Tommy."

"For what?"

Sam Craidy wasn't looking at him. He was staring straight ahead, across the empty parking lot. "Last night, a little after midnight, a kid was mugged and rolled outside the High Spot bar. He's in the hospital with a badly fractured skull. The doctors think there might be some brain damage."

"Happens every day," Tommy said, letting his hand rest for a moment on his artificial eye.

"The kid was on his way home from a college dance. His name's Jim Peterson. His father is managing editor of the *Morning Standard.*"

Tommy Far nodded. There was always an angle. "What do you want?"

Craidy sighed, his hands tight on the steering wheel. "It's just about noon. I want the names of the guys who did it by tonight, before the *Standard* goes to

press with its morning edition. That's about nine-thirty."

"I don't know if I can," Tommy said. "I don't have the contacts like I used to."

"Fifty bucks, Tommy. By tonight."

"I'll see."

"You do that. You know how to reach me."

Tommy slid out of the car and started walking. He didn't look back when the detective gunned the motor and shot out of the black-topped lot in the opposite direction.

Tommy Far had done this sort of work for Craidy in the past. It was a regular source of income, and one never had to worry about taxes. He didn't like to think of himself as a "stool pigeon" or police informer. He was just doing a job, and once the money was in his pocket he didn't think twice about its source. Tonight, with fifty dollars, he knew he could make Sarah happy. The two of them could live on that much for a week or longer, and with a bit of luck he might be able to boost Craidy to seventy-five. Perhaps Sarah could even find a new dress for herself.

Tommy strolled over to the High Spot, a little bar off Clark Avenue where the jazzy crowd gathered. By night it was all neon and noise, and he never went near it, but during the day it wasn't so bad. You could even get a pretty good ham sandwich there at noon.

"I hear you had a little trouble here last night," Tommy said when the bartender had brought his sandwich.

"Messy," the man said. His name was Fred something, and Tommy knew him slightly. "Kid got his skull cracked open out in the parking lot. I had the

cops here all morning. Son of the newspaper editor. Them cops are quaking in their boots. I can see the headlines now."

"They're trying hard to crack it, huh?"

"Damn right. The paper's been riding them about crime and stuff already. You know—not-safe-to-walk-the-streets—that sort of thing. You can imagine what they'll say now."

Tommy grunted and went back to his sandwich. "You know the kid?"

"He's been in before. Nice fellow."

"Early for him to be leaving a college dance. Girl with him?"

"No. He was alone. Looking for somebody, I guess."

"Who worked him over?"

"Got me. Place was crowded. I didn't see a thing."

Tommy finished his sandwich and tossed some money on the bar for a draft beer. "Who all was around last night? Anybody I know?"

"The usual crowd. We get a lot of kids with this jazz. And older folks too, who don't dig the discotheques." He went back to polishing glasses. "Friend of yours was here," he added as an afterthought. "Big John Miller, from the bowling alley."

"Yeah?"

"He was with a couple of fellows I didn't know. You sure notice Big John, even in a crowd."

Tommy finished his beer and left the High Spot, heading back along Clark to Big John's place. He knew a dozen—a score—of fringe characters who might have knocked the kid on the head for a few dollars. Still, it sounded more like a fight of some sort, a stepping outside after a disagreement at the bar. If that were the case, Big John might well have noticed

something. He knew everybody in the neighborhood by his first name, and very little escaped him.

"You're back," John said. "I just phoned in your bet on Tough Tiger."

"Thanks," Tommy told him. "Want to shoot some more pool?"

Big John shook his head. "I gotta take care of the alleys. We got a few customers on them."

Tommy glanced out and saw a group of housewives in slacks getting ready to bowl, wondered why they'd picked this place rather than a shopping center. "I hear there was some excitement over at the High Spot last night," he said casually.

"The kid who got bashed? Yeah." John started down the steps to the level of the alleys.

"Who conked him? Anybody I know?"

Big John shot him an odd look. "No. Nobody you know, Tommy."

"You were there, huh?"

"I was there."

"How did it happen? What was the action?" Tommy was beginning to taste the fifty dollars.

"You're asking a hell of a lot of questions today, ain't you?" Big John moved away from him and talked to the housewives. He watched the first one throw a gutter ball, then walked back to where Tommy was standing.

"I like to see these fresh college kids get their lumps," Tommy said.

"He got his, all right. One of the guys crowned him with a tire iron."

"Who where they?" Tommy asked again.

Big John was watching the bowlers. "Huh? I don't know their names. Three guys. One of them plays

piano at the High Spot sometimes. Little guy with a broken nose."

"Next time I see him I'll have to congratulate him."

John glanced sideways at him. "Don't fool with them fellows, Tommy. They're out of your league." He stared back at the bowlers and finally he added, "If they thought you were a stool pigeon, you might lose that other eye."

"I'm no—"

"I know, I know. But they might not. Stay away from them, Tommy."

"What's such a big deal about a mugging outside a bar, anyway? It happens every night in this town. What'd they get—twenty bucks?"

Big John glanced around to make certain they were not overheard. "Nothing like that, Tommy. The kid had over a thousand in cash on him."

It took Tommy Far most of the afternoon to track down the little piano player with the broken nose. The bartender named Fred had obviously known him, but just as obviously wasn't about to talk. Tommy talked to a blonde named Maggie and the fellow she was living with, then to a sax player who sometimes played with the group. Maggie told him the piano player's first name was Felix, and the sax player supplied the rest of it.

"Felix Faust. He used to play piano there on weekends, till the jazz stuff caught on. He doesn't work anywhere right now. Lives with a couple other guys at the Greenwright Hotel."

Tommy knew the Greenwright. He'd stayed there more than once when he was especially down on his luck. It was a dead-end for most of the regulars, the

prostitutes and pimps and queers and addicts, who inhabited the depths of his world. He remembered those days when he'd run with the crowd, remembered the night the cops had picked him up for stealing that car. He hadn't been so old then. The two years in prison had passed quickly, and then he'd come back to the Greenwright and met Sarah. He'd lost twenty pounds and his right eye in prison, but he didn't hold any grudges. Nobody went through life without a few hard knocks.

Tommy crossed the grassy square that faced the Greenwright, wondering how it had been in better days. Now the turf was worn thin, and the pigeons pecked up the grass seed, and the bums slept there under the stars at night. He could tell from its lobby that the Greenwright had once faced better times, even though the high gilt ceiling was now cracked and peeling.

"I'd like some information," he told the room clerk.

"Wouldn't we all?" He was a young fellow with slicked-down hair and a high-pitched voice. "You a cop?"

"Do I look like a cop?" Tommy brought out a crumpled dollar bill and passed it across the counter. "I'm looking for my girl. I think she might be shacked up with a guy named Felix Faust."

The fellow's eyes brightened. He wasn't the sort who saw a dollar every day. "You're all wrong," he told Tommy as the bill vanished into his pocket. "Faust is here, but not with any girl. He's got a room with two other guys."

"I don't believe that."

"Here's the registration," the room clerk said, flip-

ping through the tin file box on the counter. "Felix Faust, Robert Salamagan, Jonathan Gazag. They're in room 305."

"You're sure?"

The clerk glanced toward the doorway. "Don't turn around, but Gazag just came in. That fellow with the luggage."

Tommy picked up a blank registration card and pretended to study it, turning half away as Gazag stopped at the desk for his key. He was a medium-sized young man, with nervous hands that trembled a bit as he set down two suitcases to accept the room key. The suitcases were brand new and very expensive.

"Does he always wear the dark glasses?" Tommy asked when the young man had gone upstairs.

The clerk shrugged. "Who knows? They've all been 'high' for three days."

Tommy slipped the clerk another dollar as he left the lobby. He could afford it. He was going to make himself some money before the night was over, for sure.

He phoned Sarah to tell her he'd be home before dark. "Around eight o'clock," he said. "And pick up around the place. We'll probably have a very important visitor."

After talking to Sarah, he bought an evening paper and read through it while he had a bowl of soup and a sandwich for supper. The assault on young Jim Peterson was a page-one story, even in the opposition newspaper. He was still in poor condition in the hospital. The article said he'd been robbed of twenty-three dollars and a wristwatch.

Tommy finished his soup, then found a phone booth. He called the special number and was told that Sam Craidy was out but would be calling in

shortly. "He'll know who this is," Tommy said, speaking low into the phone. "Tell him I have the information he wants and the price is one hundred dollars. Have him call me at this number around eight o'clock." He gave Sarah's phone number, and then hung up.

As the sun hung low in the sky, the chill he'd experienced in early morning returned. Summer was still a long way off. He wondered if it would ever come.

Sarah was waiting for him at her apartment. "Did you eat supper?" she asked.

"I had some soup and a sandwich. That's all I need. Anybody call?"

"No. Who's the visitor we're expecting?"

Tommy glanced at the kitchen clock. It was nearly eight. "A man with some money. A lot of money."

The telephone rang and he went to answer it. Craidy's voice came to him from the other end. "You got something for me, chum?"

"Three names and the address where they're staying. All yours for a hundred bucks."

"We agreed on fifty."

"It got bigger than I figured. There's more to it."

"Let's have the information."

"You come here. With the money." Tommy gave him the address. "Park on the next street and come in the back door."

"I don't want any of your games, chum. It's getting close to nine-thirty."

"You'll have them in time, don't worry. But they'll probably be gone by tomorrow." He was remembering the suitcases.

"All right," Craidy sighed.

Tommy Far was smiling when he hung up. Things were going his way.

"Why are you bringing him here?" Sarah said.

"I want to make sure I get my hundred. And I don't want to meet him on the street somewhere."

The telephone rang again. This time Sarah answered it, then turned to Tommy. "It's for you. Big John, down at the bowling alley. He sounds . . . funny."

Tommy took the receiver from her and listened to Big John's voice. "You're in trouble, Tommy. I tried to warn you. They know you been asking questions."

"Who?"

"Faust and his friends. The room clerk at the hotel told them. They were just here looking for you."

"You didn't tell them where I was?"

John's voice faltered. "I got a business to think of, Tommy. I—I'm sorry."

"How long ago did they leave?"

"Just now. You got maybe five minutes if you get out of there fast."

"Yeah."

"Tommy . . ." His voice hesitated. "One other thing."

"What?"

"That horse you bet on this afternoon, he finished last."

As Tommy ran down the back stairs, a number of thoughts crowded into his mind. The bartender at the High Spot had known Faust's name, and Big John had known Faust's name, but they'd both denied it. Nobody wanted to get involved anymore. That was why people like Craidy had to pay people like Tommy for information. That was why . . .

"Tommy Far!"

He turned in the doorway at the sound of his name, vulnerable to the darkness on his right side. "Who—?" Startled, he stopped.

"You been asking questions about me and my friends. Too many questions."

Tommy saw them then, standing very close, still wearing their dark glasses despite the night. There were two of them, with the third acting as lookout. *Too soon, too soon.* Big John had lied about that too. He hadn't called Tommy right away. "I don't know you guys," he said.

"You wouldn't be thinking of telling the cops what you know, would you?"

"No, no!"

The little one hit him, hard, and Tommy went down in the dirt, automatically shielding his good eye. One of them kicked him in the stomach. "You won't be talking to anybody when we get done with you."

"My eye!"

"You shoulda thought about that sooner."

Tommy rolled over in the dirt, feeling the kicks to his body, remembering how it had been that day in the exercise yard at the State Prison. All his life, people had been kicking at him. All his life . . .

At first the eye would not open, and even when it did the scene was all blurred and white. Then it gradually cleared, and Tommy saw Sam Craidy standing over him. He was in a bed—not Sarah's, but a hospital bed.

"How you feeling, chum?" Craidy asked.

"Lousy."

"We got them all. I pulled up in the car just as they were about to finish you off."

"Will I get my hundred?"

"Sure you will. That gal Sarah's waiting outside to see you, too."

"How's the kid—Peterson?"

"The doctor thinks he'll be all right."

Tommy tried to lift himself in the bed. "It was in time for the morning editions?"

"It was in time. Lie back, fella."

"I have to tell you the rest of it, Craidy. I have to give you your hundred-bucks worth."

"What rest of it?"

"The kid, Peterson. He left the college dance early, and he didn't have his girl with him."

"So?"

"He lied about the twenty-three dollars. He had over a thousand on him, and they got it all."

"What are you talking about?"

"All that money, and he came to the High Spot to find someone like Faust. All that money, and then he was going back to the dance. Don't you see, Craidy? He took up a collection among the other kids. Rich kids. They sent him down to buy dope. Only Faust and his friends were the wrong ones to ask, when you're flashing a roll like that. They took the money and kept the stuff for themselves. They knew the kid couldn't tell the truth."

Above the bed, Craidy looked bleak. "What in hell am I supposed to do with information like that?"

"Check it out. Forget it. I don't care—as long as I get my hundred."

"You'll get it," the detective said. He turned to leave. "It looks like I've got some more questions to ask."

"And Craidy . . ."

"Yeah?"

Tommy Far relaxed against the pillow and closed his eye. "Send Sarah in. Even she's going to look good to me tonight."

The Tuesday Club

C. B. GILFORD

Would it be paranoid, perhaps, to suggest that parapsychological insight might be construed as invasion of privacy?

Leona Coston would never have returned to the house if she hadn't forgotten something. And if she hadn't returned, she would never have dreamed what her husband was up to. And likewise, she would never have contemplated murder.

She had meant to bring along that cute little piece of Danish pottery she'd discovered in that out-of-the-way shop. Alice's birthday was on Friday, but the girls were going to celebrate on this, their regular Tuesday night out, and here she had gone off and left her little present, gift wrapped and everything.

She didn't want to drive alone, but Alice was coming straight from visiting her sister, who was ill, and Faye had been shopping, and Vivian had a late-afternoon appointment with that dreadful dentist, so it wasn't convenient for any of them to come by and pick her up. Halfway downtown when she remembered the pottery, Leona turned around immediately and started back.

Stewart had assured her that he was very tired this evening, that he might watch a bit of television or

read, and that he intended to go to bed early. Stewart usually said something like that, probably so she wouldn't feel badly going out and leaving him alone on Tuesday nights. Not that she did feel badly about it, but he'd most definitely said he was going to spend a quiet restful evening, and now there was the garage door opening and the car backing out.

Leona reacted hastily, instinctively. Instead of turning into the driveway, she drove straight past, then half a block down the street she stopped and watched through the rear-view mirror.

Of course Stewart was merely going to the drugstore for cigarettes, or something of that sort, but he had made such a point of how tired he was, and he wasn't terribly addicted to cigarettes. She waited with a strange uneasiness. It was dusk, but she could see Stewart's car back into the street while the automatic door was closing.

She responded without thinking, made a quick U-turn in her own car, and within five seconds was tailing Stewart's cream-colored sedan. He would turn off in about four blocks, she told herself, and cross over to Fontaine Avenue. There were several drug stores on Fontaine. As soon as she saw him go into one of them, she'd realize how silly this all was and hurry on downtown to meet the girls.

Well, he turned, but not toward Fontaine Avenue. He turned left instead. Leona followed him, intent now, with increasing certainty that he was going somewhere he ought not to be going. She paid but slight attention to direction and distances, concentrating only on keeping his car in sight, but without letting its driver know he was being followed. She did it expertly. At traffic lights she hung back, letting another car slip in between them. Then when he

was away again, she was within half a block, alert to any sudden maneuvers.

Quite suddenly the sedan pulled over to a curb and stopped. She was ready for him. She slipped quickly into a parking space, slid over to the opposite side of the seat, and peered out.

She saw they were in an area of neat, but not sumptuous, garden apartments. The street was well lighted, so she could see clearly as Stewart hopped out of the car and started toward one of the buildings.

He's dressed up, was her first thought, in his blue suit, his new blue suit. His walk was rapid, rather jaunty. And he had said how tired he was!

Leona was puzzled, angry, brimful of suspicions, but she did not act rashly. She waited till he had gone into the building, waited even longer, hoping against hope that this was a quick stop, that Stewart would be coming right out again, heading back home.

But ten minutes passed, and he did not come out. Leona climbed out of her car then, though still uncertain of what she should do. She walked toward the building, ready to turn and hide should Stewart suddenly emerge. She got all the way to the front entrance, and finally she went inside.

There were four individual apartments, two up and two down, with a little hall and stairway serving all of them. No sound came from anywhere. Leona hesitated. Should she pound on one door after another, demanding to know if her husband were inside? And what if she found her husband sitting in one of those apartments discussing perhaps . . . buying more life insurance, for instance? Wouldn't she feel silly then! And Stewart would never be done laughing at her.

The fact of the matter was that she simply couldn't

find out which apartment he was in, and whom he was visiting. She couldn't loiter here in this hallway till he came out. She couldn't peek in windows—they were too high—and she didn't have a ladder, and the whole notion was too utterly ridiculous.

She ended by jotting down the four names on the mailboxes—Simon, Prentice, Greis, Miller, and the street address of the building: 7733 Princeton Court. Then she turned to her car, drove downtown, parked in the usual garage, and hurried to the Brittany Restaurant. There she repaired first to the powder room, where for a minute or so she consulted the mirror.

In it she saw Leona Coston, aged thirty-nine (honestly), tightly girdled but still rather obviously inclined toward corpulence, neatly, expertly cosmeticked and coiffed, but yet not able to hide the fact that what had never been really beautiful, or perhaps even attractive, had begun to age somewhat and deteriorate. But then Stewart hadn't married her just for her looks. He'd married her because she . . .

Her thoughts halted suddenly on the precipice. *Why had Stewart married her?* She retreated hastily. She had many good qualities: she dressed in good taste; their home was furnished in good taste; she read all the latest popular novels; she played bridge well; conversed wittily; staged exquisite little parties to which she invited only the most charming people. She drank only sparingly, was never vulgar, loud.

No, she mustn't think this way. There was nothing proven yet, and she mustn't let the girls see she was upset. One must maintain one's pride. The mirror showed her to be pale. She'd have to have a story ready for them. She marched out, head held high, self-possessed, gay, smiling.

The girls were at a table almost in the center of

the room, in the midst of things where they liked to be. Paul always gave them a good table. Alice was in a new green dress, Faye in her black, Vivian in that rather gaudy chartreuse. *My dear, dearest friends,* she thought as she approached them, as they saw her coming and waved. *Surely Stewart couldn't possibly resent these dear friends of mine.* They met, of course, every Tuesday like this, for dinner, and then afterward a concert, an art show, an opera, a play, a lecture, whatever was available. Stewart didn't care to attend affairs like that, so actually by going with the girls she was sparing him. Stewart simply didn't care for culture. Should he resent the fact that she was a cultured, sensitive, informed woman?

"Darling, what *is* the matter?"

The question came from Faye, always alert to parapsychological impulses, always observant, picking up little clues, reading little signs.

"Why, I'm late of course," Leona began.

Faye stared at her with wide blue eyes. As Leona sat down in the empty chair, Faye reached across the table and squeezed her hand sympathetically. "Leona dear," she said, "tell us all about it."

"I'd like a martini," Leona said.

"Of course, dear."

Paul was signaled, and the martini was quickly produced. Leona took off her gloves, and fiddled with her purse, and tried to pretend the others weren't staring at her.

"I had a time starting the car; had to call the service station." She tried the lie for size.

"We're your friends, aren't we?" Vivian coaxed.

"Well, what makes you all so sure there's something wrong?"

"My dear," Alice answered, "it's written all over your face. You're pale."

"Am I?"

"And you have sort of an empty stare," Faye went on, "as if you've just had a dreadful shock."

Leona drank her martini, and finally she told them. They sat in stunned silence, without once interrupting, which was most unusual.

"Of course," she finished, "there could be almost any explanation for it."

"He lied to you," Alice said. "He told you he was tired."

"Perhaps it's something," Leona answered, "that Stewart just doesn't want to worry me about."

"Like what?"

"Well, I don't know offhand."

"Husbands shouldn't keep any kind of secrets from their wives," Vivian said, "pleasant or unpleasant."

"We all know," Faye said, "what the explanation really is."

"Absolutely."

"Of course."

Leona nodded.

"It's another woman."

There was a silence of acquiescence all around. Paul brought the menus. Faye and Alice chose steak, Vivian decided on lobster, and Leona opted for the prime rib.

"But we'll have another round of drinks first," Vivian announced.

Paul discreetly removed the empty glasses.

"Yes, we should have a toast to Alice's birthday," Leona said gallantly.

But Alice was equally magnanimous. "Never mind my birthday. Leona's problem takes precedence."

"How do you feel about it, Leona?" Faye wanted to know.

"Well, I'd like to be sure . . ."

"Well of course one ought to be sure."

"Darling," Alice assured her, "we all have all the sympathy in the world for you. We're all in the same boat, you know. We all have husbands, we're in our late thirties, getting a little seedy."

"Alice dear, is that how an approaching birthday makes you feel?"

"Well, you know how men are."

"Yes, don't we all!"

"Basically polygamous."

"So it's really not Leona's fault at all if Stewart is throwing over the traces."

"Heavens no, I'm not trying to excuse the male sex. I think it's perfectly dreadful. What can a woman do? Cry? Make a scene? Walk out?"

"Walk out? Never! Throw the man out!"

"Then milk him dry!"

Paul brought the steaks, the lobster, and the prime rib. There was perhaps a hint of viciousness in the way the girls attacked the food.

"It makes me mad," Leona said after a while.

"Dear, I don't blame you one bit."

"I should say not. A woman gives the best years of her life to a man, then he feels no . . . no . . ."

"No loyalty."

"They're animals. They really are."

"Do you think so?"

"Absolutely. I watch mine like a hawk."

"What would you do?" Leona said. "I mean, if you knew—if you knew for sure . . ."

"I know what I'd do," Faye answered without hesitation. "I'd kill him."

* * *

They went, the next morning about ten, all four of them in one car, to 7733 Princeton Court. The first time they just cruised by.

"That's the place," Leona said.

In daylight it looked less sinister, a rather plain brick-and-frame building, one of a dozen or so set in a small plot of grass and concrete parking areas. No human beings were in sight.

They let Vivian off half a block away. She carried her little black attaché case with her. Vivian had once been, for about a week, a representative of Futura Products, and she still had her kit. This morning she would represent Futura briefly again. She would knock on all four doors at 7733 Princeton Court, and see what was behind them.

The car was parked out of sight of the building, and the three women watched Vivian turn the corner and vanish. Settling down to wait, they smoked cigarettes and tried not to talk about what was in all their minds. Leona was nervous and fidgety.

"That husband of mine was sound asleep when I came home," she confided finally, "and he never woke up. But I didn't sleep a wink."

"You poor thing," Alice commented.

"You didn't give yourself away at breakfast, I hope," Faye said.

"No, I didn't. And neither did he."

Vivian was gone about forty-five minutes, but she returned with a triumphant smile. "The Simons," she reported, "are a couple in their sixties. Across the hall are the Millers, two small children, and Mr. Miller was definitely home last night. Upstairs are Mr. and Mrs. Greis. If you'd take one look at her, you'd know that Stewart would be safe there."

"Prentice?" Leona asked eagerly.

"*Mrs.* Prentice. She lives alone. Probably a divorcee."

"Well, go on, Vivian!"

"She's blond. Not over thirty. A good figure."

Leona turned pale and ground out her cigarette fiercely. "That's the one then. Prentice."

Vivian nodded. "If it's what we think it is."

But the girls wanted to make sure. They waited till the following Tuesday.

It was a week of dreadful suspense for Leona. Stewart acted throughout with distressing normalcy. Sometimes in the evenings he read, the same cheap magazines that he always read, or he watched television, the same dull programs. On Saturday he dutifully cut the grass. On Sunday he even accompanied Leona to a flower show. He gave no trouble at all, but that was Stewart. He had never given any trouble.

All week Leona was vigilant, but could detect no signs of betrayal. On Tuesday evening, when he came home from work, she was especially watchful. If an assignation were indeed in prospect, would he be excited in anticipation?

"Where to tonight, dear?" he asked when he arrived, and kissed her dispassionately on the cheek.

"Who?" She couldn't resist the temptation to pretend to be dense.

"Why you, of course. This is Tuesday, your night out, isn't it?"

His face, a little jowly now at forty, was absolutely placid. His eyes, soft and brown behind his glasses, were only politely inquiring. He needed a haircut, the gray was showing. Or was he letting it grow longer, to look more romantic?

"You are going out tonight, aren't you?"

"I don't know."

"What's the matter?" Was he alarmed?

"Sometimes I feel I shouldn't go out so often and leave you alone."

"Nonsense. Going out is good for you."

"Perhaps we should have people in oftener."

"Well, that's all well and good, but you also need your nights out with the girls." He went toward the bedroom to change his clothes.

It all fitted, everything he said fitted the pattern. She would have liked to torture him by staying home, but she had previous, better plans. She put on her hat, picked up her purse and gloves, and called out to him sweetly, "I'm going to the Bach concert tonight, dear. Bye-bye."

"Have a good time," he called back. "Bye, and drive carefully."

Leona drove her car to the prearranged corner where Alice's car, with Alice at the wheel and Faye and Vivian in the rear, was waiting. She parked her own car, locked it, and climbed in with the girls. She recounted the conversation she'd just had with Stewart.

"There's no doubt," Vivian said, "he intends to go out tonight."

They drove by a circuitous route to a spot half a block down the street from Leona's house, and parked facing the direction Stewart would take if he were heading toward 7733 Princeton Court. There they waited, and watched.

About forty minutes after Leona's departure from the premises, the Costonses' automatic garage door opened and the cream-colored sedan backed out. Then it drove off predictably.

"Let's go," Leona said. "You won't have to stay too

close to him. I know this time where he's going."

They went, silent and seething, Valkyries in angry pursuit of the victim marked by the gods. The sedan was easy to follow. When they arrived at Princeton Court, they parked at a safe distance and gave Stewart plenty of time to get into the building.

Vivian got ready with her Futura kit. "What if he should come out suddenly and see me in the hall?" she asked.

"He won't," Leona assured her. "But if he should, he'll be the one to be embarrassed. You'll still be a Futura representative."

"But I'm supposed to be with you on Tuesday evenings. Stewart knows that."

"Tonight you had a few late calls to make."

"All right." Vivian hopped out.

The others waited. The plan was simple. Knock on the Simon, Greis, and Miller doors. Tell them this is a "call-back." You may get thrown out for being so persistent a saleswoman, but get in first, and make sure if Stewart is in any of those apartments. If he isn't, then he's with Mrs. Prentice.

It took Vivian only fifteen minutes. She returned almost running. "I got inside all my three apartments," she reported quickly. "He wasn't in any of those."

"All right," Leona said with remarkable calm. "Let's go to dinner."

At the Brittany they had two leisurely rounds of cocktails, and then dined sumptuously. Each had her own thoughts, but they were a long time getting around to a direct discussion.

"Well, now you have the facts, Leona," Faye said at last. "Every Tuesday, when he knows you're safely out of the way for the whole evening, Stewart goes to visit Mrs. Prentice."

"We've been getting together on Tuesdays for a long time," Alice said. "He may have known Mrs. Prentice for just as long. It's very cozy for him, isn't it?"

"Very cozy," Leona agreed bitterly.

"Of course the obvious thing," Alice offered, "is to break up our Tuesday Club."

"Why should we?" Leona demanded.

"For your sake, dear."

"Stewart would find some other time."

"But he can't, don't you see? He can't sneak away from the office during the day. If he goes on an errand over the weekend, he has to account for his time. But by taking a free night, you've given him a free night."

"Well, we hardly use our free nights in the same way."

"What does a woman do?" Faye wondered. "What can she do? Throw the husband out? Get a divorce?"

Leona shook her head. "Then he'd have every evening to spend with that hussy."

Faye nodded. "Even with alimony, the wife always gets the worst of the deal, because the new wife always manages to control the husband. I've seen it happen too often."

"Then what's the answer?" Alice asked.

"One could always confront him with the facts," Vivian suggested. "He might come crawling back."

Leona sipped her after-dinner crème de menthe. "I'd like to see him crawl," she said, "but I'm not sure that I want him back."

"What do you want, dear?"

"What good is it to possess a man who really doesn't want you? Who has deceived and lied to you for weeks . . . months . . . possibly years. Who has

been disloyal, untrue. I don't want a man like that. I want only . . ." Leona tossed off the rest of the crème de menthe. There was a slight tinge of green on her lips.

"What do you want, Leona?"

"I don't know exactly. To get even, I suppose."

"A lover?"

"Hardly that. I'm not very fond of men at the moment."

"What then?"

Leona leaned forward over the table, and the others leaned in toward her. "When a woman has been treated as I have been treated," she told them, "she has a right to get even in any way she pleases."

They nodded in agreement. "Whatever you decide to do, Leona," Alice said, "we'll all back you up. You can depend on that."

"More than that," Faye corrected, "we'll help you."

"All the way," said Vivian.

Tuesday, a fortnight later, was the night they set. The plan was the essence of simplicity, depending only upon the single-mindedness of four people. These four ladies were indeed single-minded about their project.

It began as Tuesdays had been in the habit of beginning. Stewart Coston arrived home just at six. Leona, her hat on, was primping before the hall mirror.

"My, don't we look pretty tonight," Stewart said, and kissed her lightly on the cheek.

"Thank you," she answered.

"Where are we off to tonight?"

"*La Traviata.*"

"One of your favorites, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well, I probably won't be awake for your inevitable reactions when you get home. I'm rather tired, and you're usually pretty late on opera nights."

She smiled understandingly. "Poor dear, you're tired so often lately. No, don't bother to wait up for me."

He went to the bedroom. She watched his receding back. He didn't appear a bit tired; rather the opposite. She was quite positive where he'd be tonight.

A horn sounded from the street. "Bye now, dear," she shouted toward the bedroom. "Alice is picking me up."

"Bye," he answered faintly.

Outside all three girls were waiting for her. As she climbed in, Faye asked, "Is he going out tonight?"

"He could hardly wait for me to leave to start sprucing up," she answered.

They drove to their usual rendezvous, the Brittany, ate and drank heartily. Paul was to notice that all the ladies, especially Leona, were in good spirits this evening, and nothing was amiss. Bubbly and bright, they left the Brittany for the Majestic Theatre.

There they made it a point to chat with the manager, Mr. Tomaso, whom they knew by sight and name. Mr. Tomaso would now remember, it was hoped, that all four ladies were present this evening. They made a special effort also to chat with the young usher, but he was a stranger and unreliable.

When they settled in their seats, they looked around carefully. Nobody was in sight whom they recognized. That was good because, otherwise, someone might notice and remember that during the latter part of the show one of the quartet had been missing.

"I'll leave at intermission," Leona told them as they consulted in whispers. "And remember, don't go

searching for acquaintances then, and don't stay in one group, because then somebody could recall that there were only three of us, not four."

"Are you sure," Vivian asked, "that intermission time will be soon enough to catch him?"

"My guess is," Leona answered, "that he stays as long as he can. He checked with me tonight on this being a late night. Besides, if I miss him tonight, there's always next week."

The first act went by splendidly. As the house lights came up, they hit the aisles with the rest of the crowd, making sure to disperse immediately. Leona didn't hesitate. She headed straight for the exit.

She kept a sharp lookout, and was certain that nobody whom she knew saw her leave. Outside, of course, she had to walk alone to Alice's car. Being alone in the downtown area at night was a bit risky, but the stakes were well worth it.

They'd parked in the street, a bit away from the theater, because in a lot a parking attendant might remember that a woman had come all by herself to pick up a car before the show was over.

Leona made it to the car without mishap. She had familiarized herself with it during the previous week, so she had no trouble handling it. She felt exhilarated once she was under way. She had no qualms, only a feeling of serene justification, and drove to Princeton Court without a quiver of doubt.

There was the sedan, parked not too far away from the entrance of 7733. How brazen Stewart was! But she didn't waste time thinking about that. She parked her own car—Alice's rather—out of sight, then walked boldly back toward the sedan.

No one was in sight. Actually, Princeton Court was a rather quiet neighborhood. Leona looked up to-

ward the Prentice apartment. One window showed a light, but since she didn't know the pattern of rooms, she couldn't deduce much from that fact. It didn't trouble her, however. Vengeance was in the offing.

She unlocked Stewart's car with the spare keys. Wearing gloves, she left no fresh fingerprints. She wriggled inside, locked the door again, then wedged herself down on the floor of the backseat.

The wait could be long, so she did her best to make herself comfortable, then checked her equipment. There was really only one item, a piece of heavy iron pipe about eighteen inches long. It had been in the basement for years, behind the furnace, forgotten, dusty. She was quite certain there was no way for the police to check where an old piece of pipe had come from.

She was ready. She might have been nervous, but she wasn't. A steady supply of indignation, anger, and resentment fueled her determination. Her mind wandered to Stewart and Mrs. Prentice occasionally, but she was long past the stage of mere jealousy. She only speculated upon what state Stewart would be in when he returned to the car. A state of euphoria, unsuspicious, his senses dulled, his reactions slow? She hoped so. It would make her task easier. But easy or difficult, she would do it.

Time passed, but she wasn't worried. It was Stewart who had to keep track of the time. Then she heard him, or someone. Footsteps on the sidewalk, Stewart himself! A key was fumbling in the door lock.

It was very dark. She knew he couldn't see her. Even with the dome light on, the back seat floor was in deep shadow. Besides, he wasn't expecting anyone to be there. He was humming a little tune, unrecognizable because he was doing such a bad job of it.

In fact, Leona was quite certain from the sound of him that he'd been drinking.

He got the door open. The dome light came on. The humming was punctuated by small grunts as Stewart squeezed himself into the car and slid along the leather seat. The door closed. The light went off again. Now there was more fumbling. He seemed to be trying to reach his car keys, immersed in some inaccessible pocket.

Leona had no trouble raising herself quietly off the floor. She had rehearsed the precise movements in the rear of her own car. Up on the left elbow . . . get one's knees under one's body . . . lift the weight slowly . . . peek over the top of the front seat . . . line up the target . . . just a little higher, but not nearly high enough to be spied in the rearview mirror . . . fine . . . he doesn't see or hear anything . . . oblivious . . . bring up the pipe . . . cock the right arm far back . . . and remember, when you swing, don't be chicken, give it everything you've got.

Leona gave it everything she had.

Afterward she searched inside Stewart's jacket for his wallet. She also removed the small diamond ring her husband sported. The crime was to look like a robbery, of course.

There was the tiny chance that Mrs. Prentice would be watching from a window to see the sedan leave. Leona climbed into the front seat, got the car started, and drove away, but she went only a block or so, out of sight of 7733 Princeton Court. She found another parking space, left the car there with its grisly contents, and walked back to Alice's car.

A very few minutes later she picked the girls up in front of the Majestic Theatre.

"Now let's remember," Leona told them when they

were all gathered in the Coston living room. "You brought me home, then I invited all of you in for coffee, we came in, I went into the bedroom to see if Stewart were asleep. But he wasn't there, and the car wasn't in the garage."

They all nodded in understanding, silently approving the plan.

"He left no note," Leona went on, "and he'd never done a thing like this before, so naturally I was worried and so I wanted to contact the police immediately."

They nodded again.

Leona picked up the telephone, and dialed the number they had already looked up. "Police," she said in a distraught voice, "my husband is gone . . ."

Lieutenant Joe Godney had seen enough corpses in his day. He looked at the one in the cream-colored sedan, and came to several rather quick conclusions.

Robbery seemed to have been the motive. A ring had apparently been forcibly pulled off a finger—there was a bruised knuckle, and a welt where the ring had been worn—and the man's wallet was missing. The weapon was in plain sight, a short piece of iron pipe. From the looks of things the murder had been committed inside the car, with the murderer either in the backseat or in the front seat beside the victim, rather than the body's having been dragged from somewhere else and put into the car.

Matching this corpse with reports of missing persons was a simple enough procedure. The widow routinely identified the body as that of her husband, Stewart Coston, and to Joe Godney fell the job of questioning her.

She'd been out with her girl friends on Tuesday

evening, a rather regular habit of hers on Tuesdays. She had presumed her husband intended to remain at home. Why or where he went she had no idea. Had her husband had any enemies? No, not to her knowledge. What was he doing in Princeton Court? Again, Mrs. Coston wasn't helpful. She herself knew nobody in Princeton Court.

Joe Godney came away from the interview with a strange uneasiness. Mrs. Coston was outwardly a typically bereaved widow. There'd been tears in her eyes all the time he'd been talking to her, yet he had the feeling that beneath the emotion there was something else, a placidity, almost a satisfaction.

The lieutenant stayed with the case. The Police Department didn't like homicides, tried its best to prevent them, and if that failed, to solve them. Joe Godney was a devoted cop.

Now the murder of Stewart Coston had all the appearances of a routine strong-arm robbery which had ended in the ultimate violence. Mrs. Coston had described the lost ring, so of course the word went out to pawn shops, informers, and similar institutions and individuals, to watch out for that ring. Meanwhile, however, Godney pursued his own little inclinations.

Mrs. Coston had said she'd been surprised to find her husband gone from the house. Why had he gone? Where? To see whom?

First of all, the corpse had been rather well dressed. It was unlikely that a man would get togged out like that of an evening to go to the drugstore or to mail a letter. He'd been visiting someone then. For business? Or pleasure?

The murder could have been committed somewhere else, and the car driven to Princeton Court, or Stew-

art Coston could have been killed right where he and his car were found. In the second instance, he could have been visiting someone in the neighborhood, or for that matter, the same someone could have murdered him. It was worth investigating.

Godney preferred to do this kind of leg work himself. It was a matter of visiting all the residences in the area, showing his identification, and asking the right questions. It all went quickly, methodically, but not too promisingly. Nobody seemed to have known Stewart Coston. But all the time the lieutenant was asking questions of the residents, there was the question in his own mind. Where does a man go, all dressed up, on his wife's night out?

7733 Princeton Court was one of the last places the lieutenant tried. It was over a block away from the spot where Stewart Coston's car had been found, but if Coston had been rather cautious, he might have parked at some distance and walked to his final destination.

On the second floor of 7733 Godney found Maxine Prentice. She wore tight slacks and a gaudy blouse. She was very blonde, and she exuded the kind of sensuality that made Godney think to himself, *If Coston had been visiting a woman in this neighborhood, this was a candidate to be that woman.*

"Lieutenant Godney," he announced, showing his card. "Homicide Squad."

He was watching her green-blue eyes, and he saw a flicker there—of fear? No, of a sudden realization of a need to be wary.

"Come in," she said casually.

Ordinarily he didn't accept such invitations, but this time he did. It gave him a glimpse of the interior of the apartment. Gaudy, like her blouse, wild colors

everywhere, strange art objects, unusual furniture. She offered him a chair, and he sat in it gingerly.

"There was a man named Stewart Coston found murdered a block from here," he began.

"Yes, I know." She perched on a bench opposite him. "Is that—"

"This happened Tuesday night," he went on. "Did you or your husband see or hear anything?"

"I don't have a husband." That was good, careful of her, in case he already knew or would check.

"Then did you see or hear anything?"

"No."

He took a stab, asked a question he had no right to ask. "Mrs. Prentice, what were you doing Tuesday evening?"

Again there was something in her eyes, the passage of a shadow. It was as if the woman were asking herself questions. Here's a cop, he's inevstigating Stewart Coston. How much does he know? Does he know about me? Then the shadow passed, and she smiled, a hard, wise little smile.

"What is this, Lieutenant?" she asked him. "Am I being officially questioned in connection with this murder case? Should I hire myself a lawyer?"

He shook his head and got up. "Sorry. I thought maybe you could help us."

She got up too, and stood close to him. "I wish I could help you, Lieutenant. I don't like the idea of murders happening around my neighborhood."

He said good-bye and left then, and he wasn't sure of a thing. He'd have to have a lot more than he had now before he could pull Mrs. Prentice in for questioning. All he had was a vague, vague hunch, a wild, wild guess, and that wasn't enough.

He went back to see Leona Coston again. He made

his apologies for bothering her in her time of grief, and she assured him she understood it was necessary.

"I feel, Mrs. Coston," he said, "that what we need to find out is why your husband left the house Tuesday night. He was well dressed, indicating he had an appointment. Did your husband ever have evening business appointments?"

"Not in his line of work, Lieutenant."

He considered her. She wasn't what he thought of as an attractive woman. She was vain, selfish, somehow suggesting whatever was deadly in the female of the species.

"Mrs. Coston, I hate to mention this at this time, but perhaps it has crossed your mind too. Would it have been possible that your husband had gone out to meet a woman?"

She looked back at him squarely, and it seemed to him that her mask of sorrow and mourning slipped just a little askew. "I hardly think so," she answered, "but I realize anything is possible. I don't believe Stewart was untrue to me. I always knew him as a faithful husband, and I shall continue to think of him as that in death—unless you find something to prove otherwise, Lieutenant."

He left, knowing there was nothing to be gained from further questions. His hunch was still intact, stronger than ever. Supposing, just supposing, that Stewart Coston had been seeing Maxine Prentice on the Tuesday evenings that his wife went out, and supposing that Leona Coston had found out about it? What would a woman like her have done, a woman who now acted so piously sure of her husband's fidelity?

He went to see Alice Harter. Alice, very distraught, took great pains to recount to him the glorious eve-

ning the girls had had together, dinner, then *La Traviata,* and then—then the tragic ending of the evening. The lieutenant had a question to ask, "Was Leona Coston with you all evening?" Of course he asked it only indirectly, but the answer was clear enough. Yes, indeed she was.

The lieutenant visited Vivian Roth too. Vivian's story was identical with Alice's—dinner at the Brittany, the opera at the Majestic, while somebody was murdering Stewart Coston.

The lieutenant didn't neglect Faye Ledford. Faye corroborated the story told by the others. But with Faye, Joe Godney tried a little harder. "What about Stewart Coston?" he asked.

"What do you mean, Lieutenant?"

"Off the record now. I won't mention this to Mrs. Coston. What do you suppose her husband was up to going out last Tuesday night?"

"I have no idea."

"Did you know him?"

"Not very well."

"He was dressed up. He had an appointment of some kind. Could it have been with a woman?"

Faye Ledford considered for a moment. "I don't really know," she said at last, "but if that were the case, then I'd say he deserved to be murdered. Don't you agree, Lieutenant?"

Godney departed without committing himself on that point. He went to the Brittany Restaurant and talked to a waiter named Paul, an obsequious fellow whose body seemed bent in a perpetual, slavish bow. Oh, yes, the four ladies dined at the Brittany last Tuesday evening, as they did almost every Tuesday evening. *All four.* Always four.

At the Majestic Theatre, Godney encountered the

manager. Did he by any chance remember last Tuesday, four ladies? Oh, but yes. Mr. Tomaso was very certain and clear. The four ladies were good customers. They attended everything. They were so cultured, so refined.

"Mrs. Coston was definitely here last Tuesday?"

"But certainly. I greeted them personally in the lobby."

"Before the performance?"

"Of course."

"How did they like it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Did you check with them afterward to see if they liked it?"

"I don't remember that. I don't think so . . ."

"Then you're not sure whether all four stayed through the show? Whether Mrs. Coston stayed, for instance?"

"Mrs. Coston walk out on *La Traviata*? She is an opera lover, a lady of great culture and refinement."

The lieutenant left Mr. Tomaso remonstrating in his lobby and went home.

But he didn't give up on the case. He continued, at least, to theorize. There were no useful fingerprints on the sedan, not even smudges. Not many strong-arm robbers wear gloves, but this one apparently had—which fact argued for premeditation. The manner in which the fatal blows had been delivered indicated that the murderer had struck from behind, and even a bit below, as if he had perhaps waited in ambush, crouched low in the backseat of the car. How did the murderer get into the car? Only the driver's door had been found unlocked, the other door locked. Probably Coston had left his car locked, and the murderer knew how to unlock car doors—or had

had a set of keys. But if the murderer had waited in ambush, how had he known that the driver of the sedan would return during the evening, rather than the next morning? Interesting theories . . .

He kept some track of the ladies involved. Maxine Prentice seemed to stay home alone on Tuesday nights, then finally took up with a chap named Claude Wesley. The girls of the Tuesday Club, after a decent interim of mourning lasting one week, resumed their regular nights out. Leona Coston collected a hundred thousand dollars in life insurance, and continued to enjoy the same standard of living as when her husband was alive.

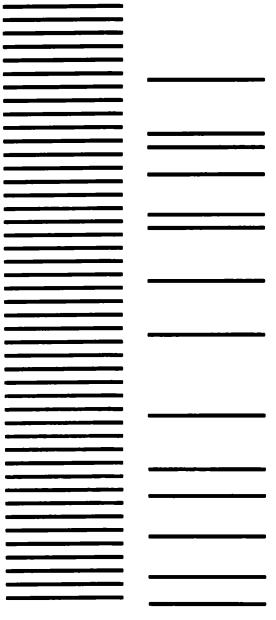
Stewart Coston's wallet and diamond ring never showed up anywhere. The case was put in the "Unsolved" file.

This bothered Joe Godney, and frightened him a little too. Not that he was in sympathy with the male point of view that men are entitled to certain illicit pleasures, but neither could he approve of extreme retaliatory measures on the part of the female population. If all the philanderers of the world were to meet a fate similar to Stewart Coston's, well it could get pretty tough for detectives in Homicide.

The girls were dining at the Brittany, and then were going to attend a production of *Tosca* at the Majestic. Faye was half an hour late, and when she finally arrived she looked pale and upset.

Leona was sensitive to the small parapsychological signals. "Faye, dear, what is it?"

"Order me a double martini," Faye said, and looked around at the little circle for a long minute. "I think Bruce is out with another woman tonight."



CONNOISSEUR OF EVIL

There is nothing the Master so relishes as a crime that transcends the bounds of ordinary terror and suspense. Hitchcock's standards, after all, are high as a scaffold, and his eye is as sharp as a stiletto. Woe, therefore, to the story-teller who fails to chill to the bone.

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