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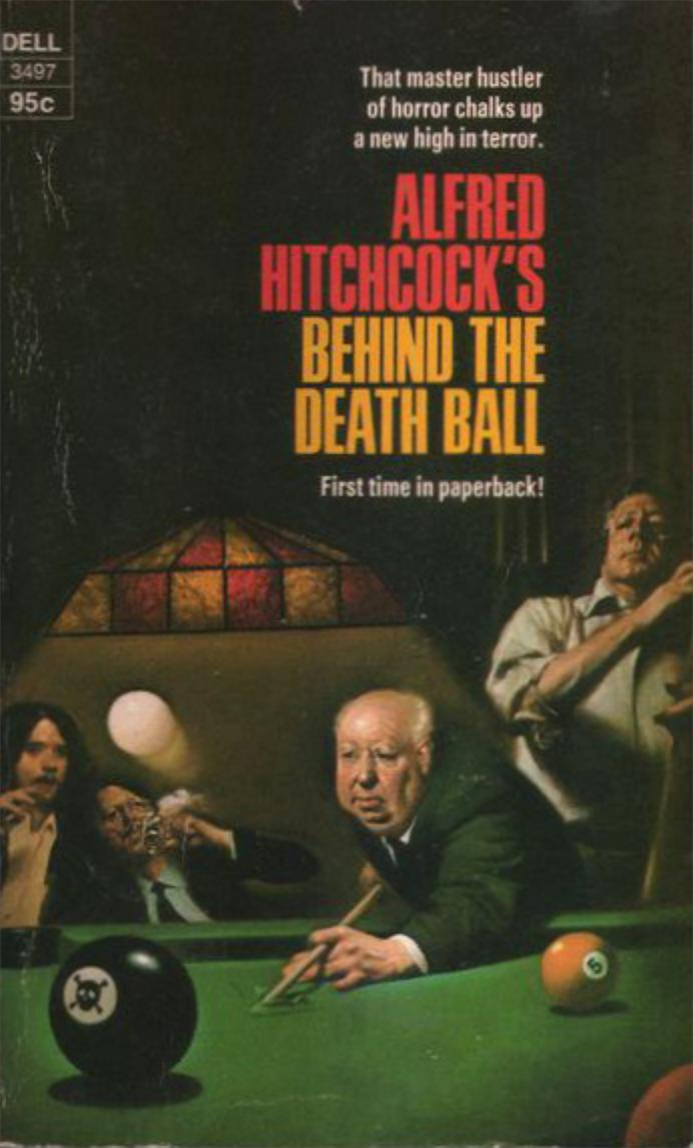

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BEHIND THE DEATH BALL

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EDITOR

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INTRODUCTION

by Alfred Hitchcock

My neighbor, Dr. Joab, telephoned me several months ago to ask me to drop in for tea and, incidentally, to learn about an experiment he intended to conduct, the purpose of which was to determine for once and all the validity of the theory of evolution.

Over oolong, he advised me that he had developed a method for speeding up the process by which, some claim, man has evolved from the ape. When I expressed mild doubt, he took me into his laboratory. There he showed me a machine that, had he not told me it was an evolution accelerator, I would have guessed to be an outsize pressure cooker.

I asked how it worked.

Joab is not one to burden the layman with scientific jargon. "Set the dial and flip the switch," he responded.

Taking me to the far side of the laboratory, he next showed me a young ape. It appeared to be an intelligent animal. At the moment it was attempting to pick the lock on its cage.

"In a period of less than a month," Dr. Joab told me, "I will subject this specimen to billions of years of evolutional development. When the job is done, he will be either a man—a bona fide human being—or he will remain an ape."

I pointed out that, according to statistics, there is already an excess of human beings and suggested that if he really wanted to create something worthwhile he try for an oak tree that was resistant to inch worms. But the good doctor had his heart set.

A few days later, I was summoned to Dr. Joab's laboratory again. I must admit that I was impressed by what he had so far achieved—possibly because I had expected nothing. The ape had grown consider-

ably, attaining the height of the average teenager, and was now standing upright.

I asked my neighbor if he felt it wise to continue, reminding him of the experience Dr. Frankenstein had with his monster. Dr. Joab was not in the least deterred.

Another week or so passed. This time I dropped by the lab of my own volition. I was amazed. The ape had lost most of his hair, becoming smooth-skinned. His facial structure had also altered considerably, taking on unmistakably human characteristics. Dr. Joab no longer had him confined to the cage. He had fitted him out in a sort of jump suit and was allowing him the freedom of the premises. Joab advised me that he planned now to teach the ape and/or man to perform simple tasks, such as taking out the garbage, loading the dishwasher, cleaning the lavatory bowls, and so forth.

When the third week had gone by, curiosity took me to the laboratory once more. I was astounded. The ape seemed no longer to exist. What had once been a primitive jungle animal was now a handsome young man. He was dressed in slacks, a colorful sports shirt and loafers.

"Perfection!" I said to Dr. Joab.

"Not quite," he replied. "He still puts the knives and forks in upside down in the dishwasher."

The doctor informed me that he was about to begin instructing his creation in the English language, dining out and social dancing. After that, Joab felt, he would be able to go out into the world and make his own way. I congratulated him, then departed. Since the experiment had proved out, my interest in it waned.

Some six months or so later, however, I was drawn into the affair once again. Dr. Joab telephoned me, excited, and asked me to join him at tea and witness the topping-off of his scientific project.

"Tonight," he told me, when I reached his quarters, "he's bringing home his intended bride. It's the final and conclusive proof. A woman could never be fooled. If he were still an ape, she would know."

"Have you met the lady?" I asked.

"Oh, no," the doctor replied. "He's completely independent—like a son grown to maturity. He went out into the world alone and dined and danced and wooed and won. Tonight he's bringing her home to meet me. Tomorrow we'll arrange for the ceremony."

"The children should be interesting," I commented.

Shortly thereafter, Joab's experiment appeared. He had indeed matured. He had the confident, casual manner of a young man of the world.

"Pop, she's outside," he said to Joab. "Shall I bring her in?"

"Do! Please do!" Joab responded, glowing.

The young man stepped from the room, then, a moment later, returned. He was carrying in his arms the loveliest stock of bananas it has ever been my pleasure to meet.

Let there be no confusion, though, about the tales which follow. They are exactly what you have come to expect from these collections—the best in horror and suspense.

PERFECT SHOT

by Lawrence Treat

Russel Grayson handled the Seaton Soap account, up at the Owen-Hacket advertising agency, and he told Tony exactly the kind of picture he wanted. Something to put fun in a shampoo. Something that would sell soap.

Tony Penner nodded. He had no studio of his own, but he lugged his equipment around as if its fifty pounds were a pleasure and a privilege. He had too many freckles and too much smile, and his hair was something between the color of a rotten apple and a very delicate blush. Moreover, he was just beginning to break into the big time, and this was a name account and the assignment meant a lot to him.

He knew he was good. He had a way of getting excited when he took a picture, and his creative frenzy sparked off his models and made them blaze. After the cold, perfect poses that Madison Avenue was used to, Tony Penner's work was a revelation.

Grayson, however, made it perfectly clear that he was doing Tony a favor. "I'm taking a chance on you," he said. "But if you follow my instructions, I think you can do the job."

Tony didn't like that, and he could see why they called Grayson the Tomahawk. You did what he told you to, or else he had your scalp. And he was impressive enough, tall and well-groomed and as keen of mind as he was fit in body. So what could Tony do?

"Sure," he said. "Glad to have your help."

"Then come up to my place in the country, Tony. I've got a model that's just right for this."

"Who?"

"My wife."

Tony had met her a couple of times, and he knew that Cora Grayson was smart and slim and beautiful. Maybe not the type Tony would have picked to shampoo a poodle, which was the subject of the ad; but, at any rate, the poodle was well-trained and the Grayson lawn made a nice background, as Tony found out the next day.

He got all wrapped up in the job, and he stormed around and called Cora Grayson darling and sweetheart and honey, though he had heard the talk that she was as bad as her husband—certainly as opportunistic. It was just that he addressed all his models in this way.

Now and then, as he moved his Rolleiflex or inserted a new roll or swore cheerfully at the poodle, it struck him that Russel's comments were not exactly helpful. Tony wished the guy would let him alone, get off the lawn and wait inside that ultra-contemporary house of his.

Russel, however, grew increasingly finicky and irritable. Tony cranked his shutter with less and less confidence, and more and more certainty that Russel was ruining the job. When it was over, the Graysons

invited Tony for a drink, and he lounged on the screened-in terrace and fiddled with a bourbon on the rocks which was much too strong for him. He downed half of the drink; then he left with misgivings.

Cora saw him out to the car, and whispered to him through the open window. "I hate him," she said fiercely. "He destroys everything. He'll destroy you, too."

Tony patted her shoulder. "Don't you worry, honey. Everything'll work out."

He did not show the contact sheets to Dot, his wife, nor did he know why he hadn't. But he studied the pictures of Cora's face carefully, and for a long time. The fine bones and the clear, delicate skin housed a smouldering repression that fascinated him. Love, hate—the camera had picked up something that no ordinary eye could glimpse.

Tony hid those contacts in his basement workshop, and selected the less personal of the pictures to show Russel.

Russel, seated in his office the next day, gazed at them coldly. "Lousy," he said.

Tony grinned. But he knew if Russel threw him off the job and used someone else, Russel would broadcast the failure to the entire industry. Another scalp in his belt, and good-by, Tony.

He destroys everything. He'll destroy you, too.

"To tell the truth," Tony said. "I'm not too satisfied, either."

"They stink," Russel said flatly. And then added, to Tony's surprise, "We'll have to try again."

"With Cora?"

"Naturally. Anything wrong with her?"

"Of course not. But listen, Russel—"

Tony stopped. He had plenty to say, but he bottled it up. The important thing was to get along with Russel.

"Well?" Russel said. "I'm listening."

"Skip it. When do you want me to come up?"

"Tomorrow. Two o'clock."

Tony told his wife about it that evening. "Dot, you

remember the Graysons, don't you? Russel Grayson, alias the Tomahawk."

"Of course I do. I've wondered how anybody with his personality could hold down a big job."

"He has his yes-yes-boys that butter him up. He does all right with them. Besides, he's competent enough to get by."

Dot wrinkled her nose. "How can his wife stand him?"

"I guess he wasn't always like he is," Tony said thoughtfully. "But then—who knows? Maybe she can't stand him."

Tony reached the Grayson house the next afternoon, right on time.

It occurred to Tony again that the Graysons were a handsome couple. And he couldn't help but notice their ten-year-old daughter, who was right at everyone's heels. Cora made it plain that nobody had asked the child to stay, and the child made it equally plain that this was her home and nobody could kick her out.

Tony studied the kid with a photographer's eye. She had a pert, cute, unloved face, and stringy braids that were like lengths of telephone cable. He liked her. She was his kind of rebel.

She curtsied when she was introduced to him, and he gave her a friendly pat on the top of her head. "Hello," he said. "What did you say your name was?"

"Marty."

"Marty," he repeated. "I always went for that name."

"I'll get my camera," she said.

"You will not," Cora announced. "And your name is Martha."

"Yes, Mummy," Marty said, and raced for the porch, where she'd left her cheap little Brownie.

She continued, of course, to be in everybody's way. She tripped over the quick-set tripod, and she blundered into the pictorial background two or three times. Tony merely waved her off and kept the Rollei going. The shots she'd spoilt weren't particularly

good, anyhow. In fact, none of the shots were.

What was wrong, was obvious to Tony right from the start. Right now, for example, when he had something lined up, Russel was saying, "Not like that, Tony. No. Your composition's off, too much air in it. Now if you'll stand up a little straighter, Cora, so that you fill that hole in the picture—"

Whereupon Cora stiffened, and Tony said, "Look, honey, get some soap suds in your eye; you look beautiful when you blink."

"Thank you," she said. "Martha, *will* you go inside with that silly camera of yours? Martha, *stop* that. Martha, just *try* not to be such a nuisance."

"Fine," Tony said. "Cora honey, lift your arm a little—there, that's it!"

Russel objected. "Tony, her arm's too far forward. It'll be out of focus. Especially with that lens you're using."

"Mebbe," Tony nodded. "And mebbe not. You never know."

"*I* know," Russel said. "Let me look through the viewer, will you? No sense shooting until we know what's there."

"Tony—Tony!" Martha screeched. "Wait a minute—I'm all out of film." And she ran into the house.

Cora sighed gratefully. "Now that *she's* gone, perhaps we can get some work done."

"Yeah," Tony said. "Sweetheart, pick up a big handful of suds and douse the dog again. Good—that's what I want."

"Wait a minute," Russel said, stepping in front of the camera. "The tripod slipped. You can't shoot if the camera's crooked."

Tony sweated and ranted and cranked away. Marty returned and flitted around erratically, but he paid little attention to her. Once, he thought he had a really good take in front of him, the figures placed just right, the suds full and fluffy, and Cora relaxed and almost enjoying herself. He was about to snap it, when Russel pushed him aside.

"Wait a minute, Tony. Let me check." Deliber-

ately, Russel fiddled with the focus, and Tony whirled angrily and raised his fist. He heard a click, and he turned and saw that Marty had just snapped a picture of Russel and himself.

Tony lowered his hand and shrugged. It was stupid to lose his temper, and it was lucky for him Russel hadn't noticed. Cora made no comment as Russel stepped back with a satisfied nod.

"Go ahead, Tony. Looks all right now."

But the poodle had moved, Cora's expression had changed, and the whole spirit of the pose was gone. Nevertheless, Tony kept trying to the bitter end. He had a kind of crazy hope that maybe one shot, by divine accident, might turn out the way he wanted it.

After he'd used up the tenth and last roll of film, Russel invited him to the screened-in terrace for a long, cool one. Tony picked up his camera and tripod and brought them inside. He needed a drink, and a strong one.

Marty, still carrying her Brownie, tagged after her mother. "Mummy, can I have a drink, too?"

Cora turned in cold fury. "You cannot. You've caused us enough trouble. Leave your camera here. Put it over there on the bar, and go up to your room and stay there until I give you permission to come down. Do you understand? *Do you?*"

Marty retreated in fear, as if she'd had experience with that particular tone of voice and knew better than to disobey. She turned humbly and left, the sound of her steps going up the stairs faded away. A door slammed, not too violently, and Cora shuddered.

"I'd better change and clean up," she said. "I'll have my drink later on."

She left the room. Russel, handsome and lethal and towering above Tony, asked scathingly, "I don't imagine you're very pleased with your work, are you?"

Tony set his glass down with a bang. He'd had it. "What are you trying to do?" he demanded hoarsely. "You knifed me on purpose, that's pretty obvious. But why? What for?"

"Suppose you tell me, Tony. I'd like to hear it from you—how interested you've become in your model, and she in you."

Tony swore. "This is ridiculous. Absolutely—"

"I wonder how much work you'll get, after I tell people how you fluffed this job. I'll keep a few prints, of course, to prove my point."

Tony made no comment. He was stunned. He sat in silence, feeling Russel's cold, jealous hostility. He drank sullenly, and he was feeling the effects when Cora, dressed in tight slacks and a white blouse, came out to the terrace.

"I feel better," she remarked. "Russ, suppose you fix me that drink now."

There was contempt in the way he stood up and walked over to the portable bar. Idly, Cora picked up the tripod. Then, as Russel bent down to locate a bottle, she struck him with the heavy end of the tripod.

The first blow staggered him and sent the bar crashing, the second one knocked him down, and the third, delivered with all her strength while he lay prone on the flagstones, smashed deep into his skull.

Cora dropped the tripod immediately, and turned and faced Tony. Her face was white, and she swayed on her feet. She had to steady herself by holding to a chair. "I hate him," she whispered. "Hate—hate—"

Then she rubbed her forehead. She seemed to summon up some reserves of strength, and her mouth tightened. "You shouldn't have done it," she said icily.

"What?" said Tony. "I—"

She let out a shriek and ran from the room. "Martha!" she screamed. "Martha—don't come down. *Martha!*"

Tony began to tremble. The raw horror of it sent him into shock, and he stepped forward and gazed numbly at the body. He picked up his tripod and noticed the blood, in which a few dark hairs were trapped.

He dropped the tripod with a clatter, and he was afraid he was going to be sick. In a daze, he spoke to himself, trying to bring reality back by some commonplace remark.

"I'll have to buy a new tripod," he said aloud. "I'm out twenty-five bucks, and nobody's going to believe this. Nobody."

Then he heard Cora's voice speaking on the phone upstairs. "Hello, police? Something terrible has happened, come quick. My husband—he's dead, killed. Oh, *help* me; I'm afraid for myself, and for my little girl. Because the murderer—he's still here!"

Trooper Bamberger, of the State Criminal Investigation Department, handled the case and wrapped it up the same day. It couldn't have been simpler. Tony Penner's fingerprints on the tripod, and an eye-witness to the killing.

The only thing that bothered Bamberger was that crazy story of Penner's, claiming Mrs. Grayson had killed her husband, coldly, matter-of-factly, with no buildup.

But people didn't do that. And the Graysons got along well enough, everybody said so. So why that cock-eyed story? Couldn't a smart cookie like Penner think up something better? Or was he just dumb, and off his rocker, besides?

Still, the case was cut and dried, and Bamberger felt pleased with his thoroughness, and with the way he'd questioned Mrs. Grayson. She'd been hysterical at first, and no wonder, after seeing her husband killed right in front of her.

Bamberger had had to calm her down and then pump her, but her story was pretty much what he'd expected. Her lover had come up on a picture assignment, and had given himself away during the course of the afternoon. When they'd finished their work, she'd gone upstairs to dress. The two guys had quarreled and were about ready to murder each other. Even Penner didn't deny that they'd quarreled a bit, though he maintained it was over the work they were doing.

Mrs Grayson was a little confused as to exactly how the murder had happened, but she was clear on the essentials. Penner had accused Grayson of ruining him. And with Grayson having the say-so, an ac-

count executive or something who could make or break Penner and was damn well going to break him, and said so—well, there was your motive. So as soon as Grayson turned his back to make that drink for his wife, Penner socked him with the heavy tripod. And then went into a fog. He'd still been dazed when the local police arrived.

Bamberger had gotten Mrs. Penner on the phone and established the importance of the pictures he was taking. And Penner himself admitted they were no good. Which seemed to hurt him more than anything else.

The kid, Martha, had been upstairs. Mrs. Grayson had sensed the tension and been afraid of trouble, and she'd wanted the kid out of the way. But the kid had heard the noise when Grayson fell and knocked over the bar, and she'd also heard her mother scream. So the child corroborated the main points.

The kid was a little mixed up, of course. She insisted that after the bar crashed, about a minute went by before her mother screamed. Still, Bamberger had kids of his own; he knew they had no sense of time, and so what a ten-year-old said didn't bother him.

It was funny, too, how those pictures tied in. A high-priced photographer like Penner—his camera got stuff that told the whole story. For instance, it showed that Mrs. Grayson was nuts about Penner, and was on edge because her husband was watching. So her husband had every reason to be jealous, and that was why he'd been out to get Penner, but good. And, finally, there were the pictures that Penner had hidden in his own house. One look at them, and you knew Mrs. Grayson was more interested in him than she was in her husband.

For awhile, Bamberger had wondered whether Penner and Mrs. Grayson had been in this thing together, but he'd discarded the theory because Penner's story was so thin. Besides, Penner seemed to be nuts about his own wife; he'd probably just been intrigued by Mrs. Grayson. What must have happened was, Penner had been drinking and he'd lost his head.

Well, that was that. The D. A. would take it from

here, and Bamberger had no more worries. He was just going up to the house to pick up the kid's box camera. Mrs. Grayson had called in this morning and told him how Martha had been dancing all over the lot and sort of imitating Penner, and by accident she'd gotten a shot of Penner ready to tee off on Grayson, earlier in the afternoon. If the picture came out good, it would be a nice piece of evidence.

Bamberger had checked out the camera itself. Martha had left it on the bar when she'd been sent upstairs, and it hadn't been used since.

He found it without any trouble, and left the house with it. Driving back to the barracks, he wondered what the pictures would be like. A ten-year-old with a cheap, box camera, and a pro with a four hundred dollar job. Joe, who was in charge of the photo lab, would be interested, too.

When Bamberger mentioned the angle, Joe laughed, but he said sure, it would be interesting, and he'd get right to work on it. So Bamberger had himself a sandwich and some coffee, and then he hung around, waiting.

Joe was excited when he called Bamberger into the lab and showed him the proofs. "There it is," he said "Get a load of it!"

Bamberger drew in his breath. "But how—how—"

"What must have happened," Joe said, "was when the camera fell off the bar, it hit something that triggered it off and took this one shot. Of the murder. Just look at her face, huh?"

Bamberger looked.

THE AMATEUR PHILOLOGIST

by August Derleth

My friend, Solar Pons, and I were discussing the trial of the French mass murderer, Landru, one May evening, when the outer door to our quarters opened,

and a ponderous step fell upon the stairs.

"Surely that can be no one but Inspector Jamison!" exclaimed Pons. "Perhaps he's bringing us some little problem too unimportant to engage the gentlemen at Scotland Yard."

"Elementary," I said. "It would be difficult to mistake Jamison's heavy tread."

"Would it not!" agreed my companion affably. "Or his knock."

The knock that fell upon the door was of such authority that one expected it to be followed by a demand that the door be opened in the name of the law.

"Come in, Inspector," called Pons.

Jamison thrust his portly figure into the room, his eyes quizzical, his round face touched by a light smile. "Good evening," he said amiably. "I'm surprised to find you at home."

"Ah, we are sometimes here, Parker and I," said Pons. "No young lady is demanding Parker's services, and nothing of a criminous nature has engaged my interest in the past day or two. Come, sit down, Inspector."

Jamison removed his bowler and topcoat, put them down on a chair, and came over to stand next to the mantel, near which Pons and I were sitting.

"I take it this isn't a social call, Jamison," said Pons.

Jamison smiled. "Well, you might say it is, and you might say it isn't. We're not exactly befuddled at the Yard, and we'll have the fellow who killed Max Markheim within twenty-four hours. But you're right, Pons, there's a bit of a puzzle troubling me. Ever hear of a man named Abraham Aubrey?"

"The name isn't entirely unfamiliar," said Pons thoughtfully. "He is the author of some trifling pieces on philological matters."

"That's the fellow. Has a place in Stepney—private house. Sells antiques and such. Dabbles in linguistics and philology. About fifty-five. One of our men reported that a thief he was watching went into his place of business. After reading his report, we de-

cided to go around and pay Aubrey a visit. We got there just as he was having a heart attack. We took him to a hospital. He's bad. Couldn't answer questions. There is one curious thing. He'd evidently just opened his mail, and he still had a letter clutched in his hand. We can't make head or tail out of it."

"You've brought it?"

Jamison took a plain envelope from his pocket and handed it to Pons. "I don't know that it had anything to do with his heart attack. Very likely not. We thought it might be in code, and our code men have had a go at it. Made nothing out of it. Doesn't seem to be any code we know, or any sort of cipher. Since I had to be in the vicinity this evening, I thought I'd just bring it along and show it to you. I know your interest in oddments of this sort."

Pons had taken from the envelope a folded piece of lined paper which still bore the creases of having been crushed in Aubrey's hand. His eyes lit, flickering over the message scrawled there; he looked up.

"It seems clearly an adjuration to Aubrey," he said, his lips trembling with withheld laughter.

"Aha, but what?" cried Jamison.

Pons handed the message to me. "Read it slowly aloud, Parker."

" 'Aubrey, thou fribbling dotard, get thee to thy pinquid pightle to dabble and stolch about next rodomel tosy in dark. And, 'ware the horrid hent!'— There's no signature."

"Aubrey must have known who wrote it," said Jamison. "And he must have known what it meant."

"I daresay he did, but it's hardly enough of a message to bring on a heart attack," said Pons dryly. "I have no doubt you already noticed that the paper is of the most common kind . . ."

"Of course."

"And precisely, too, that kind of paper issued to those unfortunates detained at His Majesty's pleasure."

Jamison nodded curtly. "The question is—what's it mean?"

"I daresay I'll have the answer to that in a few

days," said Pons crisply, "if you want it. Parker, be a good fellow, and copy this message."

I took the letter to the table and set to work copying it.

"There's no date on the letter; nothing to show when it was written," Jamison grumbled.

"But you found its envelope, which was not that in which you brought it. When and where was it posted?"

"Three days ago at Princetown, Devonshire."

Pons smiled enigmatically. "Now, then . . . Aubrey owns some property in the country. Do you know where it is?"

Jamison flashed a glance of momentary annoyance at Pons. "I don't know how you do these things, Pons. Hardly a minute ago you knew only that Aubrey wrote some philological papers. Now you know he owns property in the country."

"Ah, I submit that is, as Parker would say, elementary. You know where it is. Come, Jamison, don't waste time."

"He has about fifty acres near Stow. That's the Stow in Lincolnshire, near Stow Park, not far out of Lincoln." He grimaced. "I know that country well. We were all through it with a fine-toothed comb looking for Lady Canevin's jewels—ten thousand pounds gone!"

"Ah, the cat burglaries. Let me see—that would be seven years ago. You took in Archie Prior for that series of burglaries."

Jamison nodded. "And we're reasonably certain he took Lady Canevin's jewels, too. We were hot at his heels that night, but he slipped away from us, took to the fields when we had the roads watched. We caught him in the Dour house in Lincoln next day. We had his prints on a little job he'd done a week before. He got eight years. We never recovered more of his swag than he had on him or on his premises in London. And precious little that was."

Pons nodded thoughtfully. He sat for a few moments with eyes closed, his long lean fingers tented before him.

I finished copying the letter sent to Aubrey and gave the original back to Jamison.

Pons opened his eyes. "Tell me about Aubrey. Is he tall, fat, short?"

Jamison shrugged. "Average. About your height. A bit heavier. Lean-faced, wears a full beard."

"Capital!" cried Pons, his austere face becoming suddenly animated. "He lived alone?"

The Inspector nodded. "I suspect we saved his life, coming when we did."

"Then you have access to his premises?"

"We locked the house after him."

"Pray send around the key, Jamison, and a likeness of Aubrey. I expect to take possession during the night. I fancy there is little time to lose. Give me three days. At the end of that time, I submit it may be well worth your while to conduct a careful search of the premises."

Jamison stared at him for a few moments. Then, choking back the questions in his throat, he nodded. "I'll have the key here in an hour, and a photograph of Aubrey. Though I may regret it!"

He clapped his bowler to his head, shrugged into his coat, and bade us 'good evening.'

"I must confess," I said, "I made little sense out of that letter."

"Tut, tut! The message was plain as a pikestaff to anyone but those who looked for riddles in it," said Pons. "Its author stirs my admiration and fires my interest. And so, too, does Mr. Abraham Aubrey. I trust he will recover, though his heart attack would seem to be fortuitous for our little inquiry."

"It is certainly too much of a coincidence that he should have a heart attack on reading that message," I said.

"Ah, not on reading it so much as its receipt at all. There is no signature, as you've seen. Yet I submit that Aubrey knew at once who had sent it to him. He had not expected to hear from that source, I'll wager. Let me call to your attention the fact that the letter was sent from Princetown, which is the site of Dartmoor."

"It came from someone in prison."

"I should think that a sound deduction," said Pons.

"But its meaning—if it has any—escapes me."

"I daresay. It is one that a philologist might especially appreciate." He smiled. "But quite apart from its meaning, I submit it conveys certain facts. The writer, if not interested in linguistics or philology himself, has at least been intimately enough associated with Aubrey to have assimilated a ready familiarity with the subject. Presumably that association was broken. By what else if not by the jailing of the writer? Quite possibly, also, there had developed a rift between the two, which might account for Aubrey's shock at receiving this directive in the mail. These facts, slender as they are, arouse some interesting speculations about the precise nature of the association between Abraham Aubrey, antique dealer and amateur philologist, and an unknown lag who is almost certainly being detained at His Majesty's pleasure." He shrugged. "But let us speculate no more. We shall explore the problem all in good time."

True to his word, Inspector Jamison sent around the key to the Stepney house of Abraham Aubrey, and a photograph of the man himself, evidently one newly taken by someone at Scotland Yard, for it revealed Aubrey lying in his hospital bed. At once upon their arrival, Pons sprang into action. He retired to his chamber, and in less than half an hour emerged, wearing a beard, bushy eyebrows, and sideburns making him resemble Aubrey.

"Come along, Parker. The game's afoot. Mr. Abraham Aubrey is going home."

"Pons! You can't mean simply to walk into the man's home and take possession!" I protested.

"Ah, Parker, you have an uncanny faculty for reading my intentions," said Pons. "Perhaps you'd rather keep the peace at No. 7?" he prodded me interrogatively.

"Where is the place?" I asked, ignoring his thrust.

"In Alderney Road," he replied, consulting the tag affixed to the key.

"Stepney seems an unlikely setting for an antique shop."

"It may have certain advantages. It's frequented by seamen, and the sea is the source of many curios which could be profitably turned over by a dealer. If Aubrey is served there by a host of acquisitive seamen, it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that he found the means to turn a handsome profit on items about which no one was likely to ask embarassing questions. But, come. We'll go there openly. I hope —nay, I expect to be seen."

We took the underground at Paddington, and, by dint of changing at Fenchurch, found ourselves in half an hour emerging at the Stepney station on the Midland line. The Alderney Road address was within easy walking distance of the station, and we set out for it on foot, through dubious streets, frequently ill-lighted, and haunted by as diverse a variety of human beings as are to be found anywhere in London.

The house, when at last we came to it, was ordinary, neither as shabby as some of the neighboring dwellings, nor as prepossessing as it might have been. In the feebly lit darkness, an air of secrecy shrouded it, given emphasis by shuttered windows. Pons went briskly up on the little entrance porch, took out the key Jamison had sent to our quarters, and let himself in. He found a light switch and turned it.

The soft lamplight illuminated another world—one of artifacts and curios, vintage furniture, glassware, carvings—all set about on shelves, tables, on the floor among the ordinary furniture of Aubrey's daily use, a fantastically apportioned room which lay beyond a small vestibule, from which a narrow stairs led up to another story under the gables. Books, art treasures, handicraft, all wearing an aura of rarity, took on separate life in the dimly-lit room.

"Aubrey must be a wealthy man," I said.

"If wealth can be counted in possessions, yes," said Pons. "But for the moment I don't propose to make an inventory. We shall need to find a place to spend the night."

"Surely not here!" I cried.

"Where else? The role demands it," retorted Pons, chuckling.

A cursory exploration of the house revealed a bedroom upstairs, and a small alcove on the ground floor which had obviously served as Aubrey's bedroom; it contained a lounge with bedding piled at the foot, and was as orderly as the rest of the house was disorderly.

"This ought to make a comfortable bed for you, Parker. We've slept in our clothes before this," said Pons.

"What about you?"

"I'll take that easy chair in the central room!"

"Pons, you're expecting visitors?"

"I doubt it, at this point. Let us just see what tomorrow's adventure will bring."

So saying, he left me to the alcove. Lying on the lounge there, trying to relax, I heard Pons moving about for some time, upstairs and down; he was still at it, pulling open drawers, opening and closing cabinet doors, when at last I drifted off into an uncertain sleep.

Daylight made a kind of iridescence in the shuttered house when Pons woke me. "We have just time to find a trifle of food for breakfast, and get over to King's Cross for the train to Lincoln," he said.

I swung my feet to the floor and saw that he carried a stout sack, which hung from his hand laden with some heavy objects. I forebore asking what he carried, knowing his habit of putting me off, but the shape of the objects suggested metal of some kind.

We made a conspicuous exit from the house by the way we had entered it. Pons seemed to be in no haste to leave the porch, and when at last he sauntered out into the street, he stood for a few moments looking up and down, as if proud of his disguise, confirming my previous opinion that my companion took a singular, if somewhat juvenile, pleasure in disguising himself, which evidently fed upon a flair for the dramatic integral to his nature.

"I could sound a whistle to draw attention to us," I said dryly.

"Let us be seen, by all means, but not, thank you, by means of whistle or klaxon," said Pons.

So saying, we set off down the street.

Mid-morning found us on the train for the three-hour journey to Lincoln by way of Grantham.

"I heard you hunting about last night," I said, once we were moving through the countryside west of London. "What were you searching for?"

"Certain articles I thought I might need on today's journey," he answered. "In the course of my looking around, however, I learned that Aubrey was born in Stow, and came to London from there. Presumably the farm he owns out of Stow was his birthplace, and came down to him from his parents." His eyes twinkled. "If one can judge by the variety of his pieces, Aubrey is a man of parts."

He was not disposed to tell me more.

At Lincoln, three hours later, we changed to the Doncaster line for the brief ride to Stow Park, and there left the train for a walk of almost two miles to the hamlet of Stow.

The countryside was at its peak of green, and many blossoms shone in hedges and gardens. Chaffinches and larks sang, and the morning's mists had risen before the sun, bright in heaven. In shadowed places, light dew still gleamed on blade and leaf, and over the entire landscape lay a kind of shimmering pale green glow. Pons, I observed, walked without haste. The hour was now high noon, for the journey from Doncaster had taken only twenty minutes. He said little, save for making a momentary reference to the old Norman church at Stow, which lay just ahead. "A pity we hardly dare take the time to examine it," he said. "We can hardly be back in Lincoln for the 2:10, but we might make it in time for the 4:40. The last train leaves after six."

Not far past the church, Pons turned down a lane and came to a stop before a one-story farmhouse, set before a small group of outbuildings. He stood for a few moments surveying the scene.

"I fancy the area we want is well beyond those buildings, which will screen us from view," he said

presently. "Aubrey evidently has a tenant on his farm. Come, we'll make a little circuit."

He walked on past the farm buildings.

"What are we looking for?" I asked finally.

"For a small pond or brook near to which we're likely to find a bower of roses and some beehives, all set in the middle of a pasture or small field. Pasture, I think we'll find it." He gestured to our left. "And there, I daresay, is our pond."

He turned from the lane as he spoke.

Before us now lay a little pasture, not quite in the middle of which stood a grove of four trees, a bower of bushes, and the round tops of what must be beehives. Since the ground there fell away into a little swale, it was not unlikely that a pond lay in that spot, particularly since a slender brook could be seen meandering away, aimlessly, in the distance ahead.

We were not long in reaching the place, and there, just as Pons had foreseen, we saw that the bushes were indeed rose bushes, crowding upon a quintet of beehives. Pons put down the sack he carried and stood for a moment, briskly rubbing his hands together, his eyes twinkling.

"This, Parker, is a 'pightle' of land; or a 'pickel' or 'piddle' if you will have it so, of pasture land, moreover, or 'pinguid' land. A 'pinguid pightle,' " he said. "English is a noble, expressive language. A pity so many of its fine words have been relegated to oblivion."

"Capital!" I said, not without an edge to my voice. "And what, pray tell, led you to hives and rose bushes?"

"Another of those fine old words, my dear fellow—'rodomel.' This means, if I recall correctly, a mixture of honey and the juice of rose leaves, a poet's word. Or a philologist's. I have no doubt Aubrey apprehended instantly what it might mean." He bent to the sack. "Now let us just dabble and stolch about a little. That would be, I fear, in that muddy area between the water's edge and the grass."

He took from the bag, first, a pair of calf-height boots. Taking off his shoes, he put them on. Then he

removed from the bag the joints of a rod, which he proceeded to fit together.

"I take it," I said, watching him, "that 'stolch' means to walk about in mud or quagmire."

"Excellent, Parker. But we shall do a bit more than that."

He strode forward into the muck and began to probe it with the rod, which went down in some places for two feet. He kept at this for perhaps ten minutes before the rod struck something. He left it standing in the mud, and returned to the sack for a jointed shovel, with which he began to dig at the spot.

"Keep an eye open for strangers," said Pons.

"There's a farmer in the field across the lane back there."

"A native. We were observed both coming to Aubrey's house last night and leaving it this morning. We were also followed to King's Cross."

"I saw no one."

"Because you weren't looking for someone. I was. He gave up at King's Cross. I rather fancy he's back in Alderney Road with an eye on Aubrey's house."

Pons was digging as he spoke. Now he gave a curt exclamation of satisfaction, and with great care shoveled around the object in the muck before he dug under it and brought it up on the shovel. It appeared to be a bundle of leather, which had suffered some deterioration because of its immersion in the damp ground.

Pons carried it around to where the sack lay and deposited it carefully beside it, a broad smile on his face. Then he went around the muck to where the pond abutted upon a little bank. There he washed the shovel, the rod, and, after removing them, the boots. Only after he had finished with this task, and returned all the articles to the sack, did he carefully unfold the leather.

There lay revealed a sadly tarnished silver casket.

"Let me introduce you to Lady Canevin's jewel box, Parker," said Pons. "Somewhat the worse for circumstances, but with its contents, I am certain, un-

touched, just where Archie Prior hid it before he was taken."

He wrapped it carefully once more and thrust it, dirty as it was, into the sack on top of the paraphernalia he had brought with him.

"Now to get back to Aubrey's premises," he said. "We'll stop only long enough in Lincoln to send Jamison a wire."

We reached the house in Alderney Road in about mid-evening.

On the porch Pons paused and said, without turning his head, "A little man is walking down the other side of the street, Parker. I daresay we'll see more of him before very long."

Pons let us into the house.

"About time you came." Inspector Jamison's voice came to meet us out of the dusk inside.

"I trust you got in without being observed," said Pons.

"Came in from the rear, as you suggested," said Jamison. "Now, what's this?"

Pons dropped the sack he carried, opened it, and reached in for the leather-wound casket. He handed it to Jamison.

Jamison reached for it, then drew his hand back. "It's dirty!"

"What else could you expect, being buried for seven years?" asked Pons. He put it down on a sideboard against one wall and unwrapped it carefully. "Handle it with care, Jamison. There may still be prints on it. Unless I am very much mistaken, this is Lady Canevin's jewel casket."

An exclamation escaped Jamison.

"Buried where Archie Prior told Aubrey he'd put it," Pons went on. He took out his watch. "Nine forty-five," he murmured, looking up. "Are the police standing by?" he questioned Jamison.

Jamison nodded curtly.

"Good. We may expect that an attempt will be made to collect the jewel case tonight. The house has been under observation ever since we first reached it yesterday. ' 'Ware the horrid hent' means nothing less

than that the jewel box, once recovered and brought here by someone not likely to be under police surveillance, will be lifted—'hent'—by dark or night—'horrid.' "

"You broke the code!" cried Jamison.

"There was no code, but more of that later. For the nonce, let us just put out the light and wait upon events, without talking. We ought to be somewhat concealed. There's a spot under the highboy over there, and one of us can be concealed on the far side of the sideboard, and yet another behind the couch in the alcove."

Pons put out the lamp and we took our positions.

There began an interminable wait, which, to judge by his frequent movements, was most trying for Jamison, whose bulk made any crouching stance difficult to maintain for any length of time. The room gradually came back to life. Objects took on a shadowy existence in the wan light that filtered in from outside. Clocks ticked, at least half a dozen of them from Aubrey's collection of antique timepieces, and an overpowering, occasionally musky, atmosphere of very old things became manifest. Not a sound escaped Pons, and I held myself far quieter than I had thought I might.

It was after midnight when the sound of glass being cut fell to ear. Evidently our nocturnal visitor cut out a piece only large enough to enable him to slip his hand in and unlatch a window, for presently there came the sound of a window being cautiously raised. Then, after a few moments of silence, a thin beam of light invaded the room, flickering rapidly from one place to another, and coming to rest, at last, on the silver casket.

The beam converged upon the casket as our visitor closed in upon it. Just as he put forth a hand to seize it, Pons' hand closed like a vise on his wrist. At the same moment I turned up the light.

"Goldie Evers," said Pons. "Not long out of Dartmoor."

"And aching to go back," said Jamison, coming out of his hiding place.

Goldie Evers, a slight, short man, with very blonde hair, was literally paralyzed with surprise. "I ain't done nothing," he said at last.

"Breaking and entering," said Jamison. "That's enough to begin on."

He went into the adjoining room to the open window and blew his police whistle.

"We'll need that key, Pons," he said, "so the window can be repaired, and the house locked up again, until we have time to make an inventory here."

"You'll find, I think, that Aubrey has been serving as a fence for stolen goods for a long time," said Pons.

Jamison's constables came in by way of the front door, which had not been locked.

"Here he is, boys," said the Inspector. "Take him to the Yard, and take that silver casket along. Wrap it carefully, and take care not to touch it. Come along, Pons,—we'll take a police car back to No. 7B."

"There was very little mystery to the problem," Pons said, on the way back to our quarters, "though Archie Prior's note delighted me for its use of so many long-forgotten English words. Your code men were looking far deeper than they need have looked, for the message was plain. Can you repeat it, Parker?"

" 'Aubrey, thou fribbling dotard, get thee to thy pinquid pightle to dabble and stolch about next rodomel tosy in dark. And, 'ware the horrid hent,' " I repeated.

"Capital!" cried Pons. "Well, now, let us look at it in the light Aubrey was expected to read it, with his knowledge of the language. The adjuration is perfectly plain to anyone versed in philological matters. 'Thou fribbling dotard' is of no consequence; it means only 'you trifling old man,' and is not related to the direct message, which instructs Aubrey to go to his plot of pastureland, 'pinquid pightle', and look around in the mud next to bees and wild roses; the 'rodomel' of the message, where he might expect to

find something 'tosy in dark,' or snugly hidden in a safe, dark place, obviously in the ground before the beehives, which was just where we found it. Finally, of course, Aubrey is told that the casket, once retrieved, would be taken in the night. Presumably Aubrey would in some way be repaid for his services, though Prior makes no assurance of it.

"Now, then, obviously Prior, if released, will be kept under observation for some time. He cannot go to Lincolnshire, without immediately tipping his hand. Nor can someone who had been confided in, like Goldie Evers, for he might also be watched."

"He wasn't being watched," growled Jamison.

"No matter. When you were hot on Archie's heels, he had to hide the Canevin jewels. Since he was near Aubrey's land, of which he knew, he managed to bury them there. He very likely did not know the extent of your evidence against him when you took him at the Dour house, for he certainly contemplated retrieving Lady Canevin's jewel casket long before this. He finally hit upon the ingeniously worded message we have seen, and probably smuggled it out of Dartmoor with Goldie Evers."

He chuckled. "He'll be a long time enjoying the fruits of his ingenious labors. And I daresay, Aubrey, if he recovers, will have ample time to perfect his knowledge of philology."

THE GLINT

by Arthur Porges

Ed Bowen sat at the dusty window of his apartment, and watched Gilly Siebert going down the street. The hulking pinhead, with his shambling walk like a day-old calf, had always annoyed Bowen in the past. He'd felt that normal people shouldn't have to watch the boy, a deaf-mute and retarded, besides. Some day, he

often told himself smugly, the kid will run wild, committing murder, rape, and mayhem. After all, pinhead or not, he was sixteen or so, and bound to have swelling emotions typical of all adolescents.

To be sure, Gilly seemed almost unreasonably good-natured. He loved animals, and had gentle hands. If all the other children made fun of him, or used the boy, they had to respect his courage, because everybody knew Gilly would do anything on a dare; anything, that is, except to hurt people.

He was, of course, unable to read or write; and he made only gobbling sounds with his mouth, but he easily followed simple directions given through gestures and suitable drawings. With his capable hands, he could make superior kites and skate-boards, too, which gave him some standing even among the normal kids, more articulate and intelligent, perhaps, but not as handy.

At home, he had little for which to hope. Gilly's birth had almost destroyed his father, a clerk of bookish ambitions, who wanted more than anything else a son able to attend college and master such things as nuclear physics, thus bringing Myron Siebert the kudos he couldn't attain on his own. For sixteen years, the boy's father had ostentatiously ignored Gilly, making no attempt either to love or communicate with him. It was as if the Sieberts had no children at all.

Leona, Gilly's mother, was different, both as a woman and as the one who had carried Gilly. She was a grim, angular creature, juiceless, with a mouth so small she seemed to need a shoehorn to eat a pea. But insofar as she was capable of it, she cared for the boy. Completely non-intellectual herself, she didn't grieve over Gilly's illiteracy; instead, she did her best to develop his tactile facility, encouraging him to use his hands as much as possible in creative work.

Ed Bowen thought about these things, well known to the whole neighborhood, as Gilly lurched by. His attitude towards the boy had suddenly changed. This was due neither to compassion nor any sudden

growth of tolerance. Rather, he saw in the pinhead, by his very abnormalities, a perfect instrument of murder.

Up to now, Bowen had never killed anybody. But he was into his employers for over sixty thousand dollars, and faced a long term in prison when discovered, as he was bound to be soon unless, of course, Tim Collier should die. He was the Senior Accountant, and had been concentrating on the books in a way that meant certain trouble. With him silenced for good, it would be possible for Ed to escape the law. The company might be sure he was guilty, but on the surface, without Collier's evidence, either man could be the one. Bowen could brazen it out; there was no way to pin the missing money on him, since it had been spent in circumstances that left no traces. He was a gambler, an unlucky one, but always far from his natural haunts, and with simple disguises such as elevator shoes, a hairpiece, dark glasses, and pads in his cheeks. He'd be bounced, naturally, but that was nothing compared to prison.

Aside from removing Collier, Bowen could think of no other way to avoid conviction. And yet, to exchange a mere embezzlement rap for a chance at the Death Cell wasn't smart—unless a foolproof killing could be managed. That was where Gilly Siebert came in.

Bowen had never spoken to the boy. He had, it is true, commented occasionally in the liquor store and other places, like the *Tip Top Tavern,* that the kid should be put away before he hurt somebody; but that was all to the good. Not only would Ed be proven a veritable prophet, but nobody would expect him to be involved with the pinhead. Others had from time to time hired the boy for odd jobs, or had him make their kids a kite, but Bowen had never had such contacts.

Now, however, he had to deal with Gilly, but in secret; and that called for considerable ingenuity. Nor was there much time; Collier was bound to spot some discrepancies in the books any day soon.

The basic scheme was clear and simple in Bowen's

mind. He counted on Gilly's inability to refuse a dare, plus another characteristic that many people held to be admirable even in more valuable members of the community. This was the boy's dedication to any chore once undertaken. What Gilly Siebert promised to do, he did, no matter the cost to himself in bruises, broken bones, loss of income, or future embarrassment. When he accepted a dare to pull trick-or-treat on old lady McGonigle, who threw hot water and blistering maledictions at anybody that came to her door uninvited on Halloween, Gilly went through with it, even though everybody knew she had just acquired a large and surly bulldog. The pinhead got well nipped but accomplished his mission, if returning empty handed and drenched, dragging eighteen pounds of nasty canine by one's pants-seat, is an accomplishment.

Again, when none of the other kids dared hop the fast freight except where it slowed on the grade out of town, Gilly actually dropped to the top of a boxcar from Sullivan's Ridge, escaping serious injury by a miracle. But he had been dared, and his honor was at stake. It was to the credit of the kids that they now tended to discourage such challenges as unsporting, because "poor Gilly doesn't know the score—so lay off, you guys!"

With a character like that to work with, Ed Bowen felt he had it made. After pondering a number of angles, he hit on a perfect approach.

There are fake hand grenades for sale at every novelty store; they are used as paperweights, but also serve to scare people who don't have x-ray eyes and see only a deadly ovoid of corrugated metal exactly like the ones in Europe or Korea.

But a solid dummy wouldn't do; Gilly had to be sold on a trick, something funny but harmless. A search of various novelty shops well away from his own neighborhood, and in his pet disguise, finally turned up what Bowen needed, a facsimile grenade that held a pinch of black powder. It went off with a loud pop, showering bits of colored paper. Ed bought two, in case Gilly was hard to convince.

That much was easy, and no risk. Now he had to get the real thing.

There had been a time, five years earlier, when Bowen had joined the National Guard, hoping to use it for political purposes where he worked, since the boss was a colonel. He had found there was study and drill involved, but no preferment at the company, and had soon quit both organizations. But he remembered the Armory, and recalled glimpsing racks of guns, mortars, bazookas—and grenades—in the storeroom.

Dances were often held there, the Armory being ideal in terms of floor space, and cheap to rent. On such nights, a lot of people were in and around the building, so Ed could prowl without being questioned. He cased the Armory on a Saturday, when a dance was held, and although he had expected to make only a reconnaissance, was lucky enough to find a side door open. It led to a hall, which led in turn to a storeroom. Both were deserted. Using a thin-bladed knife he always carried, Bowen got into the storeroom. He quickly located the cases of grenades, and looked for an open one. It was best to leave no trace of thievery, even if it couldn't be connected with him. There was a box half-full; from it he took, his fingers shaking a little, one of the live and potent metal eggs. Hastily he slipped out, hearing a roar of laughter from the ballroom, locked the door, and slipped away into the night, damp with cold sweat, but exulting. The toughest part, he felt, was behind him now.

It remained only to work on Gilly, and as secretly as possible. Since the boy couldn't talk or write, he was a perfect ally, but Bowen meant to add other pressures as well.

Since the boy didn't go to school, he was in the habit of wandering about the neighborhood, often spending time in the park playground or the railroad yard. Bowen stayed home from work accordingly, phoning in to say he had a virus. From his window that morning, he watched hopefully until Gilly shambled by, heading for the freightyard. Quickly, Bowen

slipped out, and taking back streets easily intercepted the deaf-mute near the dump, where privacy was most likely of a morning.

He smiled at Gilly, who grinned back; his smile, like the legendary one of Davy Crockett, was enough to paralyze a 'coon, but amiability shone through it.

Bowen began by giving the boy a dollar, which generous gift won his regard immediately. He loved chocolate, and no doubt intended to buy some the first chance he got.

Then, Bowen took out one of the novelty grenades. He had removed most of the paper filling in order to add lead shot, since otherwise the thing lacked the heft of a real weapon. Making sure he had Gilly's attention, Ed pulled the pin, slowly released the lever, and handed the grenade to the boy. He took it gratefully, thinking it another gift. Ten seconds later it exploded, showering him with paper and lead shot, all quite harmlessly. Gilly gobbled in fright and dismay, but seeing that Bowen was laughing and offering him another bill, he made throaty sounds of glee.

After that, Bowen showed the boy a picture of Tim Collier, clipped from the company magazine. He explained very patiently, with gestures and sketches on a pad, just what he wanted. At five-thirty, he demonstrated with his watch, Tim Collier would leave the office and go down Harper Avenue. Ed showed Gilly a picture of the building. Gilly nodded vigorously, to show he knew the place. The boy was to meet him as he left, hand him a grenade, and wait for the explosion. No, he mustn't run; it was a dare. Play the trick, but don't run until after the explosion. If he did that, and told nobody in advance—here Bowen waved not a mere dollar bill, but a ten. Gilly's muddy brown eyes widened at the tempting sight. Most dares brought him nothing but prestige, and trouble. This was a pleasant change; this was a nice man.

Bowen made sure. He repeated the whole indoctrination. To his surprise, Gilly was not slow-witted after all. His head was just too small for his hulking torso; the kid was far from stupid. So much the better; he would follow instructions, hoping for ten dol-

lars. It was a relief to know Gilly had enough sense to do the job properly, but was still unable to blab about it.

As for the denouement, Bowen didn't much care. People would probably think that the boy found a grenade, a common occurrence judging from the papers, and was moved by some whim to "serve" it on Collier; perhaps Tim was just handy, and it could have been anybody. Or they might figure some kids egged Gilly into it, without themselves knowing the grenade was live. Whatever their notions, nobody could tie Ed Bowen to Collier's death. And nothing else mattered. Certainly the loss of this pinhead would not hurt society much.

Bowen nodded at the boy, shaking his head up and down to indicate a "yes," a strong affirmation expected. Gilly imitated the motion vigorously; his eyes shone with resolution. It was obvious that the stories were true: what this boy promised to do, he did; you could see the determined glint, all right. It couldn't have come from the wishy-washy father, Bowen thought. Maybe some ancestor had been strong-willed, and now his precious gene was futilely lodged in a deaf-mute monster.

Bowen left the boy. It was almost noon. He had stressed not only secrecy, but the importance of leaving the pin in position until the "trick" was to be played. No point in blowing up Gilly—not alone.

Ed went home as furtively as he had left, re-entering by the back door, and crept past the manager's apartment. After that, the hours dragged, the evening seemed a thousand years away.

At five-fifteen, Bowen opened the front window, although it was chilly out. The office was only three blocks away; perhaps one could hear a grenade that far. These new ones, he understood, were a good deal more powerful than those in World War II, some of which were weaker than firecrackers and harmed nerves and ears more than tissue.

Sure enough, he heard the explosion clearly, as did much of the town. Since so many people were hurrying towards the scene, he felt free to join them.

When he arrived at the office, he felt his pulse leap. The ambulance was there already, and two bodies, covered with reddening sheets. His plan, in spite of nagging doubts, had worked perfectly. Tim Collier was out of the way, and nobody could pin a thing on Ed Bowen.

He learned the next day that both victims had died on the spot, riddled by metal fragments. There were dozens of wild speculations going around, but none of them involved a third party. The consensus seemed to be that Gilly had found a grenade and handed it to Collier to scare him. It was obviously an unfortunate accident; Tim Collier certainly hadn't an enemy in the world.

At the *Tip Top Tavern,* Bowen agreed. Collier was a prince, and very competent, too. A drink to poor Tim.

It was several weeks before the embezzlement was discovered. Then Bowen had an uncomfortable session with old P. J., the vice-president.

"It had to be you or Tim," P. J. said, "and I know Tim was straight as a string all his life. I've never been very sure of you, but didn't have any proof."

"There isn't any," Bowen said, keeping his voice level. "I'm not guilty."

"That's brave, accusing a dead man."

"I accuse nobody; I just defend myself."

The officer was breathing heavily, his face flushed. "If we go to court, you'll tar Tim Collier, I suppose."

"I'll defend myself," Bowen repeated, feeling a glow of confidence. His psychology had been sound. They wouldn't prosecute.

"You're through here," P. J. said. "Your punishment will come sooner or later, be sure of that. But I won't prosecute; it would hurt Collier's family, and do no good. Some crooked lawyer would get you off. Get out of here, before I'm sick!"

Bowen cleaned out his desk and left. He was tempted to demand proper notice, but decided to leave and then write for two weeks' salary. He'd get it, too; they didn't want to tangle with him legally, that was plain.

When he got home, there was a woman in his apartment. He recognized her gaunt, stringy figure. It was Mrs. Siebert. He felt his stomach contract like a clenched fist.

"The manager let me in," she said. "I said I was your aunt."

"W-what do you want?" he stammered. "I don't know you."

"It wasn't easy to find you; I'm not smart. But finally I thought of the office where poor Mr. Collier worked. I didn't know no other place to try. I showed them the drawing. They told me who it was."

"What drawing?"

"My poor boy couldn't read or write—or talk, or even hear. But he was good with his hands, and I got him books from the library, with nice pictures. He was good with a pencil or crayons. See how he did your bushy eyebrows, the bump on your chin, the way your ears bend at the top. At the office they knew you right away, from this."

She held out the sheet; he took it numbly.

"He drew it that afternoon, before doing—doing what you made him do."

Bowen looked at the page of sketches, vaguely aware that Gilly, the deaf-mute, must have been a born caricaturist. Here was he, Bowen, and the undoubted face of Collier, all set out like a cartoon panel, and showing the whole frame-up. The grenade popping to spew paper, just as Gilly expected it to happen; the ten dollars promised, graphic and nasty for him in its implications. But she was a fool, no brighter than her son, to hand it to him like that. He tore it to bits, backing quickly out of her reach, but she made no move to stop him. Instead, she opened her great, shabby purse and took out a heavy revolver, an old-fashioned weapon of the horse-pistol type that was popular years ago. Bowen gulped at the sight of it.

"W-what you gonna do?" he quavered.

"Gilly was a good boy, a loving boy; he was all I had. My man's nothing—just nothing. Gilly couldn't talk, but we sat together, laughing, making pictures.

He was all I had, and you killed him. Well, mister, I'm going to kill you now."

"No!" Bowen begged, reaching out with pleading hands. Then he saw the glint in her eye, the proofmark of her iron determination, and knew the source of Gilly's glint.

That was Bowen's last thought. The huge pistol boomed three times in rapid succession.

THE SEVENTH MAN
(NOVELETTE)

by Helen Nielsen

Morning on the high desert was chilly even in August—early morning, when the day was still sprinkled with stars as big as baseballs and the rough-backed Sierras rimmed the landing strip like the backdrop for a Hollywood extravaganza. But the mountains were real, and so was the cold place in Harry McKay's stomach as he watched the wing lights of a small plane slip out of the baseball constellation and belly down on the landing strip. There wasn't another plane on the field with the engine running. It was a private airport, property of the High Valley Inn, an exclusive desert resort that featured hot and cold swimming pools, an eighteen hole golf course with its own pro, a well stocked stable for the equestrians and a Western band electronically equipped to swing into a-go-go if it so pleased the clientele. A collection of privately owned planes was gathered at one end of the field but, aside from a skeleton crew in the administration building, there was no sign of life anywhere except for McKay and his butterfly stomach.

The butterflies were active because Annie Benson Reed was bringing in a cargo of living explosive.

Women with three names usually resembled a before-taking dietetic ad and contributed poetry to metaphysical journals, but Annie resembled Miss Universe and her photo coverage of the world's con-

stantly erupting hotspots had kept ERA magazine at the top of its class for the past five years. Annie had nerves of steel, could write PhD after her name and knew more about femininity than Cleopatra at her prime. The sound of her sexy voice on a midnight telephone call from El Paso, and the request that he meet her at this unlikely place at five a.m., fired McKay's imagination with the hope of a gay holiday.

But Annie directed his attention to the latest edition of ERA and said, "This is confidential, McKay. I'm bringing a VIP guest. See page twenty-seven and then make like you bit off your tongue."

Being Annie, she then broke the connection and left McKay stomping about his West Hollywood penthouse in his hand-tailored shorts looking for a magazine. Page twenty-seven of the latest ERA carried a teaser-spread on a forthcoming photo series of Annie Benson Reed's recent trek to Castroland-by-the-sea, and a five-year-old shot of one of the men she hoped to contact, resistance leader Dr. Carlos Ruiz.

Ruiz, now forty-eight, was a husky intellectual with a lot of black hair and a determined chin. The Bearded One had placed a price of one hundred thousand American dollars on his luxuriously adorned skull, and that was an impressive status symbol in anybody's ideological war. McKay read all about it while dressing and had the car headed north on the freeway within the hour after Annie's call. Being Annie, it had been collect.

So it was five o'clock, exactly, and the small plane had completed a perfect landing and taxied to a stop at the near end of the runway. McKay discarded a cigarette he had forgotten to light and hurried forward as the door opened. It was a private plane hired in Miami, and Annie was the first to alight. Even in an army issue trench coat and flats she looked high fashion. She waved casually and turned her attention back to the plane.

"Please be careful with my uncle," she called into the cabin. "He was shot in the leg in a hunting accident."

It was only a partial lie. Annie didn't have an un-

cle, and the passenger in a wheelchair, who was now transferred to McKay's car, had been shot in a hunt—the object of which was himself.

Annie's explanation came when they were under way. She glanced at her watch. "Five-ten," she said. "Good. Dr. Ruiz is due at Santa Barbara at seven. Can you make it?" Annie could be as subtle as a depth charge.

"Ruiz?" McKay echoed. "Do you mean that you hustled me out at this uncivilized hour to chauffeur Carlos Ruiz, the tiger of counter-revolution?"

"You're stepping on my captions," Annie said. "Who else could I hustle? I helped Ruiz escape. I bribed the boat captain, paid a passport forger and hired the plane. Now I'm offering you ten thousand dollars to guard the living, breathing body until Dr. Ruiz completes his mission and returns from whence he came—still living and breathing."

The figure reflected in the rearview mirror wore dark glasses and a heavy growth of beard, but he smiled at the sound of the conversation, and it was the smile of a man who had cheated death and come up with a handful of trumps.

"If that really is Ruiz," McKay parried, "why isn't he at the ERA building in New York?"

"Where every Castro agent in New York would be looking for him?" Annie scoffed.

"There has to be something in it for you."

"I'm patriotic. Also, I get a Pulitzer Prize for my book when our side comes up a winner."

That was the way it was with Annie Benson Reed. You got a long distance call at midnight and then, instead of a little fun, ended up with a lapful of assassin bait.

Harry McKay considered the possible complications and said, "Make it twenty thousand dollars and you've got a deal."

"I'm not authorized to go over fifteen thousand," Annie countered.

"So why were you holding out the extra five?"

Annie leaned close to him and directed one soft hand into the inner pocket of his new Norfolk jacket.

She remembered where he kept his gold cigarette case and removed it with the dexterity of a professional dip. "I've been in the back country for a month," she said. "I need a new permanent wave."

At seven o'clock McKay delivered Ruiz, whose sole piece of luggage was a black leather medical bag, to an estate on the outskirts of Santa Barbara. This was rich, clean country where white stucco walls had no bullet holes and rubber hoses were used for watering lawns and rose bushes. The property was owned by a native Californian named Pete Morales, whose ancestors had owned half the county before Yankee imperialists requisitioned the area so future engineers would have room to build freeways.

Pete bore no scars of deprivation, but he had developed strong forearm muscles from carrying his share of the fruits of capitalism to the bank. He was a handsome, articulate man of about forty-five, a widower and father of an eighteen-year-old daughter, Nita, who majored in art and could have posed for the Aphrodite of Rhodes except that she was more expensively dressed. A Spanish-speaking housekeeper and a Japanese gardener who never spoke completed the household. These things McKay noted as Ruiz was being installed in the guest room of Morales' modest twelve-room hacienda.

Ruiz declined a doctor. He was himself a surgeon and had dressed his own wound. He asked for hot water, fresh bandages and a few hours' sleep. His room was on the second floor and the windows were protected by decorative grillwork. There was no reason to believe the house was being watched. Morales was politically mute. It was for this reason that he had been chosen as host for Ruiz. Furthermore, as a successful businessman he was accustomed to entertaining clients. Visitors would attract no attention.

These were things McKay learned from Annie when he drove her back to his apartment. She resented missing out on the story, but her face was appearing in the current issue of ERA, and one guest too many could spoil the party.

She entered the penthouse and yawned. "You've

had the place redecorated," she said. "I like the Mondrian. Where do I sleep?"

McKay took her to his bedroom where the sheets were still mussed from his own hurried departure, but Annie didn't mind. She took off the trench coat and dropped it on the floor, kicked off the flats and collapsed on the bed. She was wearing a green shirt and skirt and resembled a Girl Scout with battle fatigue.

"Some other time," she murmured, "I will listen to the story of your charming life, Harry McKay."

She pronounced it McKye, to rhyme with lie, which was correct. McKay pulled a blanket over her, and she was already asleep.

Annie Benson Reed knew the story of his life. It was as different from hers as Park Avenue is from South Figueroa. But Annie was no snob. McKay made certain his auto insurance was paid up and then left the keys to his car on the bedside table. A white convertible was conspicuous on a job like this. He called a rental agency to order a black sedan.

"We try harder—" the agency girl began.

"So do I," McKay said. "Hell, isn't it?"

Then he waited and wondered, as he checked the cartridge chamber in his snub-nosed police special, what his old boss, Lieutenant Sommers, would say if he knew Harry McKay was protecting the life of the most vulnerable visitor the state had entertained since Khrushchev didn't get to Disneyland, and nobody had alerted the boys in blue. McKay's conscience bothered him not at all. He had become a policeman after two years' service in Korea, and remained on the force just long enough to learn that opportunities were unlimited for a bright young man without a college degree if he kept his eyes and ears open and his mouth shut. The taxpayer couldn't afford much protection, but others, with interests sometimes contrary to the taxpayers, could and did. The war had taught McKay to live for the moment and to make that moment as pleasant as possible. The taxpayers, few of whom are noted for their gratitude, had taught him that being shot at for making fifty thousand dollars a year was no more dangerous than being shot at for

making nine thousand dollars a year. McKay didn't try to change the world; he just tried to survive in it.

When the car was delivered, McKay drove back to Morales' place and was installed in the unoccupied servants' quarters above Nita's studio. It gave him a good view of the approach to the house and an even better view of Nita who, in stretch pants and jersey, was something Annie Benson Reed would have hated on sight. But Nita was already spoken for—and loudly. From the stairway leading up to the loft, McKay eavesdropped on what had all the sound and fury of a lovers' quarrel.

"I don't care what your father thinks of me! It's not your father I get insomnia over!"

The voice was masculine; the viewpoint logical. McKay ventured a step farther down the stairs.

"It's not *you,*" Nita insisted, "and it's not Father. It's just that I don't want to commit myself."

"Since when? You were ready enough to commit yourself last summer when we were on the sit-ins!"

"To the *cause,*" Nita said, "but not to any personal commitment. I'm just not ready."

By this time McKay could see the male half of the couple. He, too, wore stretch pants and a jersey, but there the resemblance ended. He was at least six feet tall, had shaggy blond hair and a slight blond fuzz on his chin. He also had an intense gleam in his big blue eyes.

"Not personal!" he yelled. "Since when?"

"Roger, please! We have a house guest."

Nita spotted McKay on the stairs and a big cool came on. McKay turned up his coat collar and exited quickly in the direction of the main house. There he found Morales and learned that Roger Astin was a college friend of Nita's, active in campus leftist groups and considered harmless by the host.

"At his age I did the same things," Morales laughed. "It's a lot healthier than swallowing goldfish."

"I hope he doesn't know Ruiz is here," McKay said.

"Of course he doesn't! Neither does Nita. She

thinks he's a distant cousin. Relax, McKay. Nothing can happen here."

Morales' confidence reassured McKay not in the least. Fifteen thousand dollars was not the kind of fee a man drew when nothing happened.

He was right. Ruiz recovered quickly from his journey and demanded a conference that same evening. When McKay and Morales were in the room, the door securely locked behind them, he asked McKay to hand him the surgical case that had been left on the dresser. It was unusually heavy.

"What are you carrying in this bag?" McKay asked. "A bomb?"

Ruiz took the bag and smiled. He had bathed, shaved and borrowed one of Morales' clean white shirts. Except for understandable aging and a degree of emaciation, he was very much like the five-year-old photos Annie had taken.

"More powerful than a bomb, Senor McKay," he said. "What I carry in this bag is the implementation of an idea, and an idea is always the most powerful force in any age."

Then Ruiz opened the bag. It contained a tray filled with surgical instruments, antiseptics and drugs. He moved the tray and placed it on a table beside his wheelchair. Then, from under the tray, he removed a neatly wrapped stack of thousand-dollar bills.

"I have here fifteen thousand dollars in United States currency," he said. "Morales, I give this to you. It is McKay's fee. You will give him five thousand tonight and the rest when the mission is completed. This bag also contains forty more packets exactly like the one you have—$600,000 in all. It is what remains of almost $1,000,000 collected in private subscription before the revolution for the construction of a hospital in my village. Some of the money was spent for food and supplies for the resistance forces, some for transportation. What remains is to be distributed among the six most important men active in our behalf in this country, men who have escaped the tyranny to carry on the struggle here.

"Your assignment, McKay, is to contact these men and get them to this house. It must be done carefully. They are men with prices on their heads, too, but they have learned to avoid detection or, perhaps, the revolution has decided they are no longer important. Still, they may be watched. If it were known that they were coming here to meet me—well, do you have an imagination, Senor McKay?"

"A vivid one," McKay said.

"Yes. I see that you have, and so I will leave the *modus operandi* in your hands. But my own time is limited. I must have these men here as soon as arrangements can be made."

Ruiz then handed McKay a list of six names: Dr. Luis Cordova, Boston, Mass., Neurologist; Juan Allende, Washington, D.C., Journalist; Jaime Lopez, New York City, Decorator; Fernando Valdez, New Orleans, La., Lawyer; Ernesto Torres, Galveston, Texas, Importer; Ricardo Gutzman, San Francisco, Calif., Public Relations.

That was the job. While Annie pounded her lovely pink ear on Harry McKay's percale pillowcases, Harry McKay had nothing to do but locate six hot refugees and set up a meeting of the alumni in Pete Morales' guest room. No indication was given as to whether or not the names and occupations were genuine or assumed as cover for other activities, and there were no addresses.

"You forgot General Garcia," McKay said, but Ruiz was in no mood for levity. He reached back into the bag and took out a small key ring from which hung seven safe keys. Carefully detaching six of the keys, he gave them to McKay.

"At one time," he explained, "each of these men had access to the money in this bag. It was then in a safe in a warehouse that belonged to my older brother, Tomas Ruiz. My brother was killed, but not before he could send these keys to me. That is how I was able to recover the money. Now you have the keys to establish identification. Proceed, Senor McKay."

The interview was over. McKay considered the

problem over a bloody mary and scrambled egg lunch. He wasn't being paid to mail six keys to six men. He had to make positive identification, and that meant personal contact. He drove back to West Hollywood where he knew a job shop printer who would work around the clock with proper incentive. After placing his order, he spent the rest of the day trying to lure Annie out of a beauty salon. He succeeded in time for dinner at a Strip restaurant, followed by a grand tour of the ingroup niteries which brought them back to the penthouse shortly before dawn.

Annie looked like an angel and smelled like the duty-free level of Le Bourget Airport. McKay buried his face in her hair and began dancing toward the bedroom. She smiled coyly.

"The wages of sin are death," she said.

"I know," McKay murmured, "but think of the fringe benefits."

She was thinking when the telephone broke in. McKay answered.

The printer said, "The forms you ordered are ready, Mr. McKay."

That was the trouble with job printers. They took their work too seriously. The mood was broken. Annie had to know what he was planning to do and, by the time he told her, it was daylight and he had just enough time for a shower and a quick change of clothes before collecting the forms and catching the early plane for Boston.

He checked out Cordova's address from a medical directory and presented himself at the doctor's door, pencil and survey sheet in hand.

"Dr. Cordova," he began, "I represent the National Home Owner's Institute Survey. I want to ask a few questions."

Cordova was a muscular, lantern-jawed individual who resembled a professional wrestler more than a physician. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm not in practice anymore, and I don't own a house."

"Great!" McKay exclaimed. "That's one of the facts the survey wants to know. Now, if you did own a house, where would you like to have it located?

Boston? New York? Havana?"

Cordova's eyes reacted to Havana, and so McKay took one of the keys from his pocket. This time there was no mistake. Recognition was instantaneous. McKay lettered a note on the pad and then ripped out the sheet under the carbon and handed it, together with the key, to Cordova.

"Your receipt," he said, "and thank you for your cooperation. The Institute will be waiting to hear from you."

There was safety in minimal conversation. McKay left Cordova staring at the piece of paper on which was printed; P. MORALES, RAT & INSECT EXTERMINATOR, Morales' Santa Barbara address, and the time at which Cordova was expected. The note was signed: C. Ruiz, Exterminating Engineer.

McKay then caught a cab to the airport and flew to New York where he repeated the process at the shop of Jaime Lopez. He took a late plane to Washington, slept at the city terminal hotel and located Allende at his morning coffee break. Journalists are nosy people, but McKay was still careful not to risk remarks that might be recorded if the office were bugged. He got away in good time on his New Orleans flight. A wild wind was blowing at the airport. There was talk of a hurricane that everybody hoped would detour the coast, but McKay had no time for weather. He located Valdez' office in the Latin Quarter and delivered his survey speech, the receipt and the key. He returned to the airport to find the planes still flying, and within minutes was on his way to Galveston. It was a night flight. He slept some on the plane and a few hours more in the city. Then, after friendly banter with the dark-eyed receptionist in Torres' office, learned on what golf course he could be found with what foursome. He intercepted his man at the clubhouse, completed his mission and caught the next plane to San Francisco. Gutzman was the sixth man. Polished and cool, he developed sweat glands at the mere sight of the safe key. Six tries and six bull's-eyes. McKay left his little note and planed

back to Los Angeles International where he picked up another car.

"And don't tell me how hard you try," he warned the girl at the rental desk, "or I may cry all over your lovely shoulder."

Then he drove back to Morales' estate and reported to Ruiz.

"You have done well," Ruiz acknowledged, "but for one thing. You didn't learn by what means and routes my brother's friends are coming."

"I didn't want to know," McKay said. "What I don't know, I can't tell. Have you ever had your arm twisted by an expert, Senor Ruiz?"

Ruiz' humorless smile was sufficient answer. He again asked for the heavyweight bag on the dresser, and McKay left him clutching it to his chest. He probably had a sentimental attachment for that $600,000. McKay had nothing to do now for the next twenty-four hours, or until H-hour for Ruiz' exclusive key club, but listen to Nita explain the difference between cubism and abstract expressionism, or, how to dig chaos and learn to love it. McKay would rather have dug Nita, but her lightly bearded swain developed a protective instinct that bristled at the sight of him. Archly, and in a manner indicating his own intellectual superiority, Roger queried McKay's attitude on Vietnam, proliferation and the abuse of Communist terrorists by resentful victims.

"I have a simple foreign policy," McKay answered. "When in Rome, don't feed the lions."

Persona non grata at ground level, McKay ascended to the loft apartment and stretched out on the bed. He was tired, but he wouldn't completely relax until the six men had come and gone. He ran the job over in his mind. He had sent no wires, no letters and engaged in no conversation that would have made sense to an eavesdropper. He had not communicated with Morales while he was away, or left any detail in the hands of a subordinate. International intrigue wasn't the forte of an ex-cop, but if he translated the patriots and the Commies into clients and criminals it

was all the same. The time for the reunion was eight p.m. PST of the following day, which gave everybody ample time. McKay checked his gun again, kicked off his shoes and slept until midnight.

But his mind never slept. McKay awakened because the wind was blowing, and something in his nervous system remembered wind and was uneasy. He got out of bed and stumbled about in his stocking feet until he found the bar tucked in one end of a coffee table. Morales was a man after his own taste. McKay dumped an imitation rose out of a decorative brandy snifter and put it to more practical use. The mellow warmth dissolved the last fragment of sleep and left him wondering why his nerve ends were vibrating like a shim steel coil. Intuition, somebody had said, was wisdom in a hurry. He located a radio disguised as a Spanish sea chest and tuned in a late newscast. The hurricane hadn't bypassed Louisiana. The airport was closed and nobody was flying in or out.

It was worse in the morning. Galveston was getting a piece of the action, and flight schedules were erratic as far east as Washington, D. C. Ruiz didn't like the development at all. It was his party and he wanted all the guests to arrive at one time.

"Cool it," McKay suggested. "Even Harry McKay can't control the weather. If we have stragglers, keep the party going a few days."

But Ruiz had been shot at too many times to retain a sense of humor.

Ricardo Gutzman was the first to arrive. He came in his own car, a frosted blue sedan with a black vinyl top. He wore the Italian silk suit and the bland smile that symbolized his profession, but the fighter look was back in his eyes. Cordova and Lopez arrived together, having taken the same plane from the east coast and hired a limousine at the airport. Morales' courtyard was beginning to resemble a used car lot in Hollywood, and bugles were blowing in the guest room. Three of Ruiz' keys had been returned. H-hour arrived, and busy men couldn't wait. McKay cooled his heels in the courtyard while Ruiz explained

his plans and distributed the money. What was said between them was something he would never know, and that was fine with McKay. He wasn't interested in sharing secrets. He was interested in the rest of his fee.

Two hours later, Gutzman, Cordova and Lopez returned to the courtyard. They chatted quietly in Spanish and then paired off, with Dr. Cordova driving to San Francisco with Gutzman, and Lopez returning to the airport in the limousine. Nobody paid any attention to McKay, and he noted the departure only because it brought him halfway home to ten thousand dollars.

He didn't feel so smug about it in the morning. By that time Gutzman, Cordova and Lopez were dead.

There was more than one kind of hurricane. The second one hit McKay at five a.m. when he was still working on the brandy and trying to convince himself there was no reason for his edgy nerves. An all night disc jockey who played an occasional recording between commercials gave hourly newscasts. At that hour the top story was the crash of an eastbound airliner at St. Louis with all aboard killed and Jaime Lopez of New York City listed as a victim. McKay capped the brandy bottle and hurried downstairs. A light was still showing in Nita's studio, and Roger Astin's battered sports car was parked in the driveway. Morales had to be awakened in order to get word to Ruiz, and Ruiz, when he heard the news, took it quite like the stoic he was.

"It may be incidental," McKay said, "but I have to ask a question. Was Lopez carrying $100,000?"

Ruiz nodded. "In a black attache case," he acknowledged. "Initialed. Jaime Lopez was a bit theatrical."

"Then I have to leave you nice people," McKay concluded.

He drove back to the West Hollywood penthouse and hustled Annie out of bed. Annie Benson Reed of ERA could get more information on that wrecked liner than Harry McKay. The first stop was the telephoto machine at Annie's west coast office. The plane

had exploded as it took off after a scheduled stop. The cockpit and most of the fuselage resembled a badly opened sardine can, but firefighting equipment had been handy enough to keep it from being gutted.

They caught the next plane to St. Louis, and Annie asked the right questions of the right people. They examined the baggage recovered from the crash—both checked and hand baggage. There was no black attache case, initialed or otherwise. They checked out the morgue and found recognizable pieces of Lopez, plus fragments of a dark suit, a broken wristwatch and a completely intact wallet and key holder. There were eighty-seven dollars in the wallet and a set of auto keys, door keys and one small luggage key in the holder.

"Attache case?" Annie suggested.

"Probably. Lopez made a fast trip. An electric shaver and a clean shirt were about all he needed in the way of luggage."

"Do you think the plane was sabotaged so somebody could cop Jaime's $100,000?" she asked.

"No. If the plane were sabotaged, it was so somebody could eliminate Jaime."

They checked the airline passenger lists and learned that five passengers had alighted at St. Louis. McKay got their names and contacted a local detective agency for a preliminary check. By that time Annie had them both booked on a return flight to Los Angeles, and the Gulf area was picking itself out of the hurricane ruins and getting back to normal. The significant thing, although McKay didn't mention this to Annie, was that no locker key was found on Lopez' body. He hadn't left the case in safekeeping anywhere en route. He hadn't been worried, and that was a mistake—a big mistake.

McKay didn't realize how big until he deposited Annie at the penthouse and drove back to Morales' estate. It seemed that Ricardo Gutzman had a wife. When her husband failed to return after telephoning from a roadside pay phone that he was on his way home with an old college friend, she notified the police. The highway patrol located the frosted blue

sedan in a ravine on the Gaviota Pass. It appeared to have been sideswiped by a speeding object in the Queen Mary class, and both Gutzman and Cordova were dead.

McKay had just completed questioning the authorities about what was found on the bodies of the dead men when Lieutenant Sommers made the scene. Sommers' area was Los Angeles, but Dr. Cordova had arrived at International on the same flight with Jaime Lopez who later died in a crash at St. Louis. Moreover, the two men had hired a limousine at the same airport rental agency that supplied McKay's car. A coincidence like that roused the lieutenant's curiosity.

"I thought you were writing your memoirs," Sommers said acidly.

To Lieutenant Sommers, McKay had been a traitor from the day he turned in his badge for the more lucrative profession of guarding the bodies, possessions and extracurricular activities of the carriage trade.

"I can't finish," McKay said. "I need a smash ending."

"You may get it sooner than you think. What do you know about Gutzman and Cordova?"

"They're dead," McKay answered.

"Why?"

"Ask the coroner."

"That's not what I mean and you know it! My office received a call from Washington about these men. The FBI is sending out a special investigator on the next flight."

Washington. The hurricane was over and the airlines were operating on schedule again. There was no time to lose.

"Excuse me," McKay said. "I'm overparked. Drop by my apartment someday and we'll talk about it."

Fast legwork got him back to his car before Sommers could react. The coroner would attribute the deaths to a hit and run accident, but McKay knew better. Somebody had reached the car after the crash and removed $200,000.

Ruiz took the news hard. "Of course I gave Cordova and Gutzman money," he said. "Gutzman was

especially important. A man in his field makes important connections."

"He connected all right," McKay mused. "Gaviota Pass isn't a thirty minute drive from this house. Even if he spent ten minutes in that phone booth, he still had to be set up for the wreck from the minute he pulled out of this driveway. Why was Cordova with him?"

"They were old friends. Cordova decided to spend a few days in San Francisco and fly back to Boston from there. Lopez had a business conference in New York City and had to return immediately. Three men have been killed, Senor McKay. Do you realize what this means?"

"It means three down and three to go," McKay said.

There had been a leak. McKay checked Ruiz' room carefully. There was no telephone and no intercom equipment. It wasn't bugged, and heavy drapes had been drawn during the meeting making it impossible for anyone to see through the windows even with high-powered binoculars. Morales had two servants, the housekeeper and the gardener. The gardener was a non-resident employee who hadn't been near the property the day of the meeting, and the housekeeper spent her free time enthusiastically watching the television set in her room in spite of, and perhaps because of, an inability to understand more than the most basic English. She couldn't identify Ruiz' callers by name, and was under the impression that the house guest was a relative from some country in South America.

"You can't suspect Maria!" Morales insisted. "She's never even been in the room with Ruiz. She prepares his food and I take it up to him—or Nita does."

"Nita?" McKay reflected.

"Of course, you may suspect me. I could have offered my house to Ruiz in order to lure the counter-revolutionaries to their deaths. The flaw in that theory is that I had no idea what Ruiz meant to do here, and I didn't see his list of names until you did."

"About Nita," McKay said. "How serious is this thing she has going with Roger Astin?"

Morales looked bewildered. A parent was always the last to know. McKay decided not to mention the sports car in the driveway at five a.m., and continued his investigation elsewhere.

Astin did have a police record. He had been picked up in a couple of sit-ins and narrowly escaped a felony charge when one demonstration turned into a riot. His draft card was intact, but some of his campus associates were now on the attorney general's subversive list, and young blood flows hot and heedless. Astin wouldn't be the first idealist used by a ruthless power group.

But Roger Astin had never seen the list of names, and he couldn't have known where McKay had gone on his brief roundup. Furthermore, the killers of Cordova, Lopez and Gutzman weren't campus theorists; they were fanatics who didn't mind destroying a planeload of passengers to kill one man. And they still had three men to kill.

McKay returned to his quarters over the garage. He checked and, finding it free from bugs, put in a call to the detective agency in St. Louis. His man there had a report on the five passengers who left the plane before the crash. Four were solid citizens. The fifth, one Edward Smith, had ticketed in Los Angeles, giving a fictitious home address. McKay decided to leave Mr. Smith to the CAA and put in a second call to Annie.

"Drop whatever you're doing," he said, "and look in the lower right-hand drawer of my desk. You'll find a small leather kit—brown leather. Handle with care and bring it up to the Biltmore bar at four this afternoon. I'll buy you a drink."

Annie was reliable. Her fancy hairdo was a mess after the St. Louis escapade, but her spirits were high. They were even higher after a brace of whisky sours.

"You never did tell me how you met Ruiz in Cuba," McKay said.

"You can read about it in my book," Annie answered playfully.

"But somebody had to make the introduction and set up the escape."

"Several men with beards. All bearded men look alike to me."

"One of them could have known about the $600,000 and the list of names," McKay insisted.

Annie didn't need a diagram. "Do you think Ruiz was allowed to escape just so he could finger the hot and elusive 'secret six'?"

"It's possible. I've been thinking about that list. Each of the men I contacted was located in a major port of entry to the United States. I think the names and professions are fronts to cover anti-Castro activities in progress for some time. Only the keys to a dead man's safe could smoke them out. Do you know what Ruiz' plans were if this operation had gone off as scheduled?"

"To return to Cuba as soon as possible. He asked me to arrange for another plane to be waiting."

"Don't," McKay said. "I'm sentimental. I like you all in one piece—not scattered about like Lopez."

He opened the leather case she had brought him and inspected the electronic equipment it contained. Ruiz' room wasn't bugged, but that didn't mean it couldn't be bugged. Logically, the three men who hadn't made the first meeting would now be en route. McKay had to know what would be said in the meeting with Ruiz.

"But shouldn't we warn them not to come?" Annie suggested.

"I don't think there's time. And who would we warn? How do we know that Allende, or Valdez, or Torres isn't playing both sides of the fence? There has to be a contact in the States who knew about that eight o'clock conference. The killings that followed weren't spontaneous."

"Then it's lucky there was a hurricane," Annie said, "or it would have been all over the first night."

McKay bought Annie two cups of coffee after that remark. A woman who could think so clearly on a few whisky sours might lose the knack with one more.

That night McKay bribed Maria with a little Scottish flattery couched in high school Spanish and took up the dinner tray himself. Once in the room with Ruiz, it was easy to divert his attention and install the bugging device. Then he chatted for a while over a free Havana cigar.

"I don't hold you responsible for what has happened, Senor McKay," Ruiz explained. "You followed my instructions exactly."

"But I have pride," McKay said. "I don't like it when a job blows up in my face. And I don't intend to lose the last three men. Why don't you hold back on the money, Dr. Ruiz? I could put the bag in a safety deposit box—"

McKay merely gestured toward the bag; he didn't touch it, but suddenly there was something so close to madness in the doctor's eyes that McKay was left wondering how much privation and torture a human could endure without mental damage. He didn't mention the money in the bag again. He only hoped Ruiz would reconsider.

He returned to his room and tested the receiver. He could hear Ruiz moving about; a faucet ran in the bathroom; a door opened and closed. The equipment was working. McKay switched off the receiver and watched the driveway for a few minutes. Too tense to remain motionless, he switched on the radio hoping to get a newscast, but now there was no sound but static on the entire waveband. It was expensive equipment—too complicated for an amateur to adjust. He switched the set off and on several times but the static remained. It was getting dark. McKay smoked a cigarette and watched the driveway for a while, and then he tested the transmitter in Ruiz' room again. Now he heard a man's voice speaking in too precise English:

"Yes, I heard it all. There was $150,000 recovered from a locker in the New York City air terminal—as promised. One half of the contract has been completed . . . No, I see no reason not to continue. Police investigations are slow. We have time on our side. Stand by for further instructions."

There was no further dialogue. McKay heard less

shocking sounds: a lock snapped shut, a wheelchair rolled across the floor, then silence. He switched off the receiver and stared at the pattern in the rug until his mind could cope with what he had heard. There was no telephone in the room, but Ruiz had been talking to someone. He tried the radio once more. Now there was no static. The electronic interference was gone. There was only one explanation for that.

McKay was reaching for the telephone when headlights appeared in the driveway below. It was too late then to call for help. The lights blinked off and he watched three men walk to the front door of Morales' house. McKay switched on his receiver again and followed as much of the conversation between Ruiz and his three callers as his limited Spanish would allow. All it really meant was that three more men were being fitted for quick coffins. He switched off the receiver and took out his gun. He walked downstairs to where Nita was stretching canvas over a wooden frame. Luckily, her semi-bearded swain was nowhere in sight.

"What you're doing can wait," McKay said quietly. "I need a guide. Is there a rear stairway to Ruiz' room?"

There was a rear stairway. McKay wanted to avoid meeting Morales. There was not time for explanations. He took Nita with him and made her answer the query from within when he rapped on the door.

"It's Nita Morales," she said. "I must see Dr. Ruiz at once. My father says it's important."

It was important. McKay's gun was pointed at the small of her back. When the door opened, he pushed her aside and shifted his aim to the rib cage of the startled Ernesto Torres of Galveston.

"But you're the one who brought the key!" Torres gasped. "Who is this devil of a man, Dr. Ruiz?"

"I can think of a better question," McKay said. "Who is Ruiz, and why does he have a radio transmitter hidden in the bottom of that three-tiered surgical kit?"

McKay was watching the face of the man who called himself Carlos Ruiz; that was why he didn't see

the gun in Allende's hand. And Allende wasn't listening. He was reacting. He pushed Torres aside and fired just as McKay's gun lashed down across his wrist. The shot went wild and the gun clattered to the floor. Now the only weapon in the room was in McKay's hand.

"Open the bag, Ruiz, and contact the man you were speaking to just before company came," he ordered. "Talk to him some more about the $150,000 stashed away in a locker in the New York City air terminal."

McKay said it nicely, but suddenly the bag was hurtling toward his head, the wheelchair was rolling toward the doorway and the floor was rushing up to meet his eyeballs. He rolled sideways and fired at the chair. Ruiz was no longer in it. Incredibly, he was stumbling down the front stairs on one wounded leg. Morales was waiting below. Pushing him aside, Ruiz wrenched open the front door and ran out into the night. Halfway to the rented sedan he was drenched with light.

"Stop or I'll shoot!" Lieutenant Sommers ordered.

Ruiz stopped. For a moment he was blinded by the light, and then he must have seen Sommers and the uniformed man moving toward him. He whirled about. Now McKay stood in the lighted doorway. Ruiz was trapped. His body sagged submissively and one hand flicked toward his mouth. When he collapsed it was for the last time. He had taken cyanide.

Hours later McKay relaxed in his own bed with an ice bag covering the lump on his head left by the loaded medical kit, and his eyes fixed on the angelic face of Annie Benson Reed. He almost wished that Allende's shot had nicked him. Annie was being all woman. He hadn't known about the Florence Nightingale side of her nature.

"I got some terrific shots of Ruiz taking the cyanide," she said. "Right from the instant his hand went to his mouth until the instant he died."

Florence Nightingale vanished.

"Syndicate them and make a comic strip," McKay suggested. "And he wasn't Carlos Ruiz."

"I know. Carlos is dead. Our Ruiz was Tomas, the brother. They are on opposite sides. Carlos raised the money for the hospital, and when he was finally killed the names of his friends and the six extra keys were found with the funds. Then I came along looking for the legendary Carlos, and Tomas conceived the idea of using me to get him into the States and liquidate the men on the list. He even let himself be wounded in the leg to make it look good . . . Does your head still hurt?"

"Only when I think," McKay said. "How did you learn all this?"

"From Sommers. He has a one-track mind. He watched that car leasing agency at International. When three more men with Spanish names rented a sedan he tailed them. That's how he happened to be waiting outside when Tomas tried to escape."

"And you?"

"I followed you. Annie Where-The-Action-Is Reed, they call me. The FBI found that locker in the New York air terminal and caught the man who came to pick up the $150,000. He was one of Tomas' agents. He made a deal with some professional killers even before the rigged escape from Cuba. It was cute. Tomas gave $100,000 each to Cordova, Lopez and Gutzman, and then contacted the killers by radio as soon as the three men left Morales' place. The killers did their work, relieved the victims of the loot and then had one half the sum deposited in the locker as a guarantee the job was completed."

"Then the dead men paid their own executioners," McKay reflected. "Why didn't the killers keep all the money?"

"And ruin their image? Harry McKay, I'm ashamed of you! They were businessmen, and a contract is a contract. Which reminds me, I have your $10,000. Morales was delighted to get rid of it."

McKay could believe that. And now he could understand why Ruiz had been so anxious to get all six men at the house on the same night. If it hadn't been for a hurricane they would all be dead, and Annie Benson Reed would be hustling the wrong Ruiz out of

the country to save his worthless life.

"How is Nita?" he asked.

Annie stopped smiling. "With her hirsute friend," she said, "still dreaming of a painless paradise where freedom comes with two box tops or a reasonable facsimile. She's not your type, Harry. I know these arty college girls. Naive. Simple. Dull."

McKay drew Annie down on the bed with him. She was jealous, and that made her much more attractive than Florence Nightingale.

"The time has come," he murmured in her pink ear, "to tell you the story of my life . . ."

VOODOO DOLL

by Henry Slesar

Amalie was busy all evening, running into the study with steaming cups of coffee and muttering mysterious Jamaican oaths. Claire Pfeifer, knowing that her servant was happiest when grumbling about the indignities of her employment, took no notice of it, except to pop her head into the study at eleven-thirty and remind her husband and his partner that the coffee supply wasn't inexhaustible.

Bill Pfeifer didn't even answer her, but Joey Krantz looked up with guilt on his boyish face and apologized for keeping everybody awake. Mrs. Pfeifer shushed Joey and waved her hand. She was accustomed to these late night sessions; there had been plenty of them since the toy and novelty firm came into existence. Bill said it was one of the penalties of working for yourself; you couldn't keep employees' hours. She didn't really mind; the air crackled when the two of them were enthusing over some new project; there had never been such an atmosphere when Bill had earned bread-and-potato money as a toy salesman. And besides, the business was profitable. One glance at her clothes closet told her

that. Smiling, Claire hurried up the stairs to take one last motherly look at Poppy's angelic face in the nursery.

In the study, Joey Krantz wasn't smiling; he was shaking his head stubbornly.

"You and your imagination," he said bitterly. "Isn't it about time we soft-pedaled the imagination bit and put out a *sensible* line?"

"What's the matter with you?" His partner swept his fingers through his lank hair; he was eight years older than Joey, but sometimes Joey acted ninety. "Tell me, how'd we get our start, if it wasn't with imagination? We would have been just another two-bit toy outfit without the Haunted House, you ought to know that. And this gimmick's *better,* Joey, I feel it here." He thumped his broad chest.

"And I feel it here," Joey said, patting his wallet. "All these sick novelties are just a passing fad; we need something substantial. Action toys. Maybe a couple of good games."

"Your arteries are hardening. Two years in business, and you go conservative on me."

"But this idea's not just *sick.* It's downright morbid." He picked up the large sheet of white paper on which Bill Pfeifer had made his pencil sketch. "A voodoo doll, for pete's sake! What kind of nut would buy a thing like that?"

"The same kind of nut that bought the Haunted House," Bill said patiently. "The same kind of nut that spends a million bucks a year on sick greeting cards and stuff like that. But you don't get the point, Joey, this is no piece of manufactured junk. Hell, I don't think we'd sell a gross if we'd had 'em made in Syracuse. These will be *real* voodoo dolls, made in Haiti."

"I thought your gal was from Jamaica."

"Amalie? She is, but she knows all about this stuff, too. They call it obeah there, but it's the same idea."

Joey grunted. "Getting ideas from maids. Boy, we must be getting desperate."

"The idea's mine. I got it from listening to Amalie talk, but the idea's mine." He picked up his coffee

cup and downed the contents in three gulps. "Listen," he said, still swallowing, "I've already looked into the possibility of getting the dolls made for us by the Crosby Company—they've got a lot of interests in Haiti, importing mostly for France. They can be turned out by the natives for practically pennies, and they'll be as genuine as you can ask."

"I thought these dolls had to *look* like the victim."

"Not necessarily. I mean, if you want to be technical, they ought to contain some hair and fingernail clippings from the guy you're voodooing. But what the hell, Joey, it's only a *gag*. We can give 'em a little instruction sheet, some funny stuff, you know what I mean. And we can sell the whole works for a buck ninety-eight. Even after duty, you realize the kind of profit we can make at a buck ninety-eight?"

Joey Krantz continued to look doubtful, but he was a bookkeeper at heart. He rubbed his chin, scratched the back of his neck, and then finished his coffee. By the time he'd put the cup down, Bill knew he'd been won over.

"The whole thing gives me the creeps, if you want the truth. But if you're so hot on it, I guess I'll go along."

"That's my old partner talking," Bill said jovially.

It was after one-thirty when he slipped noiselessly into the bedroom. As he pulled back the sheet, Claire muttered something and he patted her shoulder. She punched the pillow vigorously, and said: "Poppy wants another lamb."

"Hm?"

"She wants you to bring her another lamb tomorrow; she broke the one you brought. The musical one."

He chuckled. "I don't know why I bring that kid anything. We ought to use her in our testing department."

"Did Joey go home, or is he staying the night?"

"He went home."

"We ought to get Joey married," she said comfortably, hugging the pillow. "I don't think he's happy being a bachelor."

"I'll tell him that he's unhappy."

"He's making enough money now. Why doesn't he marry that Stillwell girl?"

"Dunno. Guess she hasn't asked him yet."

"Oh, you. You—toymaker."

He kissed her ear. "That's for being so nice. And for hiring Amalie."

"Huh?"

"Goodnight," Bill Pfeifer said contentedly.

In the morning, he cornered Amalie in the kitchen and asked her the question. She shook her head and rolled her eyes in exaggerated fright, but Bill knew she was agreeable. "You can get it, Amalie," he said confidently. "Tell your friend that I'll pay him ten—no fifteen dollars for the doll."

"My friend's a real *strange* one, Mister Pfeifer."

"Make it twenty-five then."

"Oh, I don't mean strange like *that.* I mean, he's a man of *principle;* he don't want people fooling around with things they don't understand."

"Well, you tell your friend that I won't put a spell on anybody; I just want to have a doll. He'll trust *you,* won't he?"

Amalie giggled, and Bill patted her fleshy arm.

He found Joey already in the office, and in a cheerful mood. At first, he thought it was the happy results that Joey was getting on his comptometer, but later that morning, he learned the real reason. Joey hadn't gone home right away the night before; he had made a late-hour call on Sally Stillwell and found himself proposing marriage. Bill congratulated him, insisted on buying him lunch, and telephoned Claire to tell her the good news. His wife burst into tears, and he decided that he would never understand women—at least not Claire.

The day remained perfect, because Amalie had succeeded with her uptown "friend" and produced the prototype that Bill wanted. He whooped with delight when she presented it to him, carefully wrapped in newspaper. It wasn't particularly impressive, but its very crudity gave it a look of authenticity. It was about eight inches high and made of dark blue cloth;

colored thread had been stitched with a thick needle to give definition to its face and hands. It was only a rag doll, but it was *alien* enough to make Bill sure that it would be accepted for what it was. Of course, there would have to be a "Made in Haiti" label attached, and a guarantee of its genuineness. He began to wonder if $1.98 was low.

At nine, Joey Krantz came over and brought Sally with him. Claire and the bride-to-be wept in each others' arms for awhile and then went into the kitchen to exchange tribal secrets. Bill hurried Joey into the study and produced the doll. Joey's expression was odd.

"What's wrong?" Bill said.

"I dunno." He curled his lip. "I just don't *like* the thing, that's all."

"It's authentic—"

"I didn't say it wasn't. Only it gives me goose flesh. Things like that always do."

Bill chuckled uncertainly. "Hey. You don't really believe in this junk, do you?"

"No, of course not."

"So?"

"I'm not sure what I feel. Personally, I don't believe it. But who am I? I've never been out of New York in my life, except for four months at Fort Benning. What do I know from voodoo dolls? What right have *I* got to say they don't work?"

His partner laughed. "Well, this is a new bit. I knew you were cool on the gimmick, but I didn't think it was for any reason like that."

"Okay, so I'm a nut. So sue me."

"No, no, I go along with you, Joey. I mean, I can respect the way you feel. I'm no expert on superstitions, either. I think it's a lot of baloney, but you ever see me knock over salt? Zip, zip, right over the shoulder. Only, for the love of mike, a *voodoo* doll—"

"Would you do me one favor?" Joey said suddenly. "It's gonna sound crazy."

"Ask."

"Let's try the damn thing out."

"What?"

"Let's try it out. Right now."

"How do you mean, try it out?"

"I'll volunteer myself. I'll give you some fingernail and some hair, and you shove them in that damned rag doll and we see what happens."

"Are you out of your head?"

"Okay, I'm out of my head," Joey frowned. "Only just to satisfy me, just for the record, I want to be a volunteer. We'll make it a real voodoo doll and you'll stick a little pin in it; if I don't go ouch, I'll feel better about the whole proposition."

Bill looked at him for awhile, as if trying to decide how serious he was. When Joey's face didn't change, he shrugged and went to the desk drawer. He found a small scissors in the back, and brought it to his partner. Gravely, Joey clipped off some slivers of fingernail from his left hand, and then snipped off a small lock of his blond hair. Bill examined the doll for a moment, and then parted the blue cloth in front to reach the stuffing in the interior. He inserted the hair and fingernail clippings, and tightened the cloth around them.

"Okay," he said. "So now what?"

"You got a pin?"

Bill searched, but his cluttered desk held everything but a pin. Eventually, he was forced to interrupt the whispered conference in the kitchen and asked Claire for a straight pin. Without breaking into her sentences, she plucked one from the apron she wore and handed it to him. He brought it back to the study, and found Joey right where he left him, sitting in an easy chair.

Bill took the doll in his left hand.

"Where do you want it?" he said flippantly.

"In the leg. And do it easy, for pete's sake; I get jittery just thinking about it."

Bill lifted the pin. He brought it slowly towards the effigy's cloth leg, and touched it lightly with the sharp point.

Joey drew his breath in sharply.

"You felt it?" Bill gasped.

Joey was rubbing his right leg.

"No," he said, raising an eyebrow. "As a matter of fact, I didn't feel a thing."

Bill sighed with relief, and then laughed. "For a minute, buster . . ."

"Let's try it again. Give it a good jab this time."

Bill obliged, watching his partner's face. When Joey didn't react, he got bolder, and stabbed the doll in the right shoulder. Still nothing. Then he poked it all the way through the cloth body.

"Boy," Joey said. "Do I feel like a fool." Then he laughed aloud. Bill joined him, and they didn't stop laughing until the women, curious, came trooping into the study to find out why they had been excluded from all the funny stuff.

The next day was Saturday, but despite Claire's lengthy list of household chores she had been saving for him all week, Bill spent all afternoon at his drawing board, sketching out plans for a military toy line. Claire gave up finally, and took Amalie with her to the supermarket; they came home two hours later with an unending parade of grocery bags. The busy noises they made were a pleasant background to his labors. At six o'clock, Amalie came into the study and asked if he wanted any coffee. He grinned and said yes, then called her back.

"Say, Amalie," he told her. "You sure that friend of yours didn't put something over on you?"

"What do you mean, Mr. Pfeifer?"

He told her about the experiment, but Amalie didn't seem disturbed.

"That was different," she said.

"Different how?"

"Well, you just wasn't the type, Mr. Pfeifer, that's all there is to it. Obeah, it won't work for you."

"What's wrong with me?" Bill said. "I'm over twenty-one."

"Maybe that's your trouble, Mr. Pfeifer. I mean, the people that do the obeah, they don't have all those grownup ideas you do, you know what I mean? You're too—" she gestured helplessly with her thick fingers.

"Sophisticated? Or maybe cynical is the right word?"

"Whatever you call it, Mr. Pfeifer." She sighed, and took one step back into the living room. "You want just a cup, or should I make a pot?"

"Make a pot," Bill said cheerfully. "Mr. Krantz will be here in fifteen minutes."

"I better make *two* pots," Amalie grumbled.

It was a good prediction; Joey arrived in exactly that time, and delighted Bill by waxing enthusiastic over his military sketches. Bill had been a soldier buff ever since he was a child, and he knew his weapons. There were some thirty drawings in the pile, and Joey wanted to look at them all. Bill left him in the easy chair with a pot of coffee on the floor and went to see what Claire was doing in the kitchen. She was talking earnestly with the maid, and Amalie walked out when Bill entered. "Amalie was just telling me about the voodoo doll," she said. "I didn't even know that's what this new toy of yours was."

"It's a voodoo doll, all right," he smiled, kissing her cheek. "The genuine article. Say, where is the thing, anyway?"

"I found it in the study this morning. I wondered about it."

"Did you leave it there? I didn't see it on my desk."

"No, Poppy was trailing me around all morning, and she got excited when she saw it. Can you beat that little monkey? You bring her home thirty dollar dolls and she gets all worked up over a little rag thing. We really shouldn't waste money on her; she only breaks the good toys."

"Poppy?" Bill said. "Poppy has the doll?"

"Yes, she has it. She's been playing with it all day. Is anything wrong with that?"

"Poppy has it?" Bill repeated, his voice strange, his feet and hands turning cold. He turned around and faced the doorway, as if undecided what to do first. Then he walked back into the living room, and Claire followed him.

"What's wrong Bill? What's wrong with that?"

He paused at the foot of the stairs and looked upwards, then he decided to go back to the study. He opened the door. Joey Krantz's hands were still holding the sketches, and his body was still slouched casually in the easy chair. That was the worst part of it, the most horrible part. But perhaps equally awful was the fact that there was still a small, studious frown on his young face, on the head that was lying on the carpet midway between the chair and the door.

A FRIENDLY EXORCISE

by Talmage Powell

I was putting up the traverse rods for the livingroom draperies when Judy let out a screech. She sounded like a woman who'd had the world's biggest mouse scurry between her feet.

The sound lifted me off the hassock where I'd been standing to add height to my somewhat bony six-one. I jetted toward the source of the sound, skidding off the hallway into the empty bedroom.

Judy, the delectable, hadn't been frightened by a mouse. Instead, the culprit was a sweatsock. That's right, an ordinary white woolen sweatsock, misshapen and slightly bedraggled from having been laundered many times. It lay in the middle of the bare floor, and it had to be the source of her trouble. Besides Judy there was nothing else in the room. She stood pressed against the wall, elfin face pale, blue eyes round. Pointing at the sock, she tried to talk, getting hung up on the "J" in my name.

"J-J-J-Jim, that darn thing floated out of the closet and g-g-g-gave me a hug across the face!"

She was making no sense whatever to me. I gawked at her, and the expression on my face bugged some of the fright out of her. Her eyes began to flash.

"Don't you care that an old sweatsock floats out of a closet, halfway across an empty room, and nuzzles

up to your bride, Jim Thornton?"

"Well, I . . . uh . . . Sure I care! But how could it have happened?"

"You tell me. You're the brain. All I know is what happened. When I'd finished putting things away in the bedroom, I came in here. I was thinking how we'd fix this room for a nursery some day. Then that sock . . ." She shuddered. "I wouldn't let my baby take a twenty minute nap in this room."

I detoured the sock, grinning at her. "Baby? Judy, you're pregnant already!"

She shook off my clutching hands. "Don't be silly! We've been married less than a month. I haven't had time to know if I'm pregnant or not. But when we do have a baby, James Arnold Thornton, you'd better have an explanation for anti-gravity sweatsocks, if we stay in this house."

I turned and sank to one knee beside the sock. I poked it with a finger. Nothing supernatural occurred. The sock was as commonplace and ordinary as . . . well, as old sweatsocks.

"When the Bicklefords moved out," I pronounced, "the sock was overlooked. It was probably in a dark corner of the closet shelf."

"Brilliant," said Judy, putting her sunny blonde head next to my drab brown thatch. "Of course it was overlooked by their movers."

"And a breeze happened to blow it across your face."

"Breeze?"

"Capricious breeze."

She tilted her head and gave me a look. "Capricious breeze in an empty room with the windows closed."

Her matter of fact tone was worse than sarcasm. My male ego recoiled. "Naturally," I said with a certain hauteur, "the first home I finagle with a mortgage company for my wife has to be fouled up with a poltergeist!"

She gingerly picked up the sock, stood, held the sock dangling at arm's length. "Now you're a little closer to the beam."

I stood up beside her, dusting my hands. "Come on, you can't be serious. You don't believe in zombies or voices from beyond the grave."

"Nope," she said, "but this sock is real as life. And poltergeists are too well authenticated to deny that *something* every now and then acts up in somebody's house. There have been any number of cases in England. And how about those people in Massachusetts whose house made the newspapers? And the house on Long Island—or was it in the Bronx—that was shown on the television newscast? Crockery flying all over the place in that one—and a team of tough New York cops staked out the joint and saw some of it happen! You going to fly in the face of hard-bitten, super-realistic New York cops?"

"Not me," I said helplessly.

"So there," Judy said. She had riveted her gaze on the sock all this while. Now a strange mood seemed to have overtaken all of her initial fright. "You know, I really don't think he was trying to frighten me. The touch of the sock was ever so gentle, a caress. I think he was trying to say hello and make friends. Still," she glanced about, "I'm not sure we should plan a nursery in here."

That's where the subject rested for the moment. I wandered back to work, more concerned than I cared to show. In our recent college days, Judy and I had both been as far from the LSD crowd as you could polarize. Just a couple of the hard-studying non-jets that made up ninety-five percent of the student body, sans publicity, and floating sweatsocks didn't fit into our pattern of living at all.

I finished hanging the livingroom draperies, heard Judy safely rattling pots, pans, and crockery from their packing crates in the kitchen, and ambled quietly out the front door.

If it hadn't been for that sweatsock, the day would have been perfect. Even if secondhand, the house was a cozy picture of antique brick and redwood. Judy and I hadn't dared hope to start off so well. It had been pure luck that we'd picked up the house for practically nothing down and payments no higher

than rent on a decent apartment. Wedding gifts and credit provided enough furniture to keep us from sleeping on the floor as a starter. Great luck, I'd thought. Now I was having second thoughts. Frankly, I was wondering why that Bickleford fellow had been so anxious to get out.

The house next door, to the west of us, was as quietly white collar as the rest of the neighborhood. The nameplate over the bell button said, "Tate Curzon."

I used the button, and chimes sounded inside. The door opened a few inches and stopped.

"Yes?" he said. He had a voice like a loose violin string being stroked with a scratch bow.

"Mr. Tate Curzon?"

"So what if I am?"

The door offered no further welcome, remaining just slightly open. From what I could see of him, he was a wiry, narrow shouldered little guy in his late forties or early fifties. He had a long red neck rising out of his starched white collar, a narrow and cruel looking face, and a pinched-up bald pate that was so freckled it looked bloody. It was easy to behold the snappish visage and imagine a vulture's head.

I shuffled a bit uncomfortably. "Just thought I'd say hello. We're your new neighbors, James and Judy Thornton."

He looked me up and down, without approval. "I don't loan tools, carpet sweepers, fuse plugs or lawn mowers."

"No, sir." I jammed my hands into my slacks pockets. "I didn't want to borrow anything."

"Then you're not disappointed. You got any kids?"

"Not yet, Mr. Curzon."

"Good thing. I hate brats. Always breaking down my rose arbor and throwing trash in my fish pond."

"Yes, well . . . I guess the Bicklefords had kids?"

"One. Stupid oaf. Boy. Eighteen. Always roaring in and out of the driveway in that stupid sports car of his."

"Yes, sir," I said, agreeable as butter. "I guess all boys are that way with their first car."

"His first and last," Mr. Tate Curzon said on a note of malice.

"You mean—he smashed it up?"

"And himself with it. Skidded one rainy night and went over the cliffs south of town. They picked up Andrew Bickleford—and his sports car—in little pieces."

"Gee, that's too bad!"

Mr. Curzon's eyes beaded. "You should care. Andy's mother had a nervous breakdown, and that nincompoop father couldn't put the house on the market fast enough."

The inference that I'd profited by a young stranger's death caused the heat to rise. I felt red from cheek to jowl. I let my eyes give Mr. Curzon's gimlet gaze tit for tat, and said stiffly, "Good day."

He slammed the door.

When I carried my burn back into my own premises I heard a couple of female voices in the kitchen. Judy and a blowsy and slightly brassy redhead of middle age were dunking teabags in Judy's new cups.

"Oh, hi, Jim. This is our neighbor, came over to say hello."

"Mrs. Curzon?" I asked, moving out of the doorway toward the kitchen table.

"Heavens, no," the woman laughed. "I'm Mabel Gosness. I live on the other side of you."

She chatted through the ritual of sipping tea and departed with the remark that it was wonderful to have young people in the neighborhood.

Judy carried the cups to the sink and began washing them. "We had real talk before the male presence befell us."

"Did you now?"

"She seemed terribly lonely, eager for someone to talk with. She lives alone—her husband ran away with another woman nearly a year ago."

"Maybe one who talked less."

Judy looked over her shoulder long enough to stick out her tongue. "And guess what else?"

"I give. What?"

"On the other side of us is a mean little man named Tate Curzon. He hates everybody. Had four wives, no less, children by one of them. But even his own kids—they're grown up now—never go near him. Mrs. Gosness says we're to have nothing to do with him."

"Thanks for the advice, but I've met the gentleman."

"Honest?"

"Sure," I said, taking the cups and saucers from her to dry. "Went over and said hello. Wondered if he could tell me why Bickleford was so anxious to sell this house."

Judy practically wriggled. "And did you find out?"

I hesitated, balanced on the point of a fib, then realized she would find out from Mrs. Gosness anyway. So I told her about young Andy Bickleford who'd been picked up in pieces and a mother whose mind hadn't been able to take it and a father-husband to whom the end of the world had come.

"I'll bet that sock was Andy's. The room must have been his." A suspicion of tears touched Judy's eyes.

By bedtime, our first day of settling into our new home had got our minds off the tragic Bicklefords. They were, after all, strangers, and the present was much too vivid. I lounged in the master bedroom in shorts, my sleeping apparel, nonchalantly pretending to read with the pillow stuffed behind my head. Actually I had the dressing room doorway framed in my vision over the edge of the book; and then the door opened and Judy stepped into the soft bedroom lighting wearing a nylon nightgown that was next to nothing. My civilized veneer barely stifled a roar of pleasure.

Hair brushed about her shoulders and a little smile of mystery playing across her mouth, she seemed to glide toward me. A remark on my pulse rate would be needless.

Then as she passed the bureau, a strange thing happened. A ten by twelve inch picture of me which Judy had framed suddenly rose, hurled itself across the room, and smashed against the wall.

The picture fell to the floor. There was a moment of dead silence, then a whispered tinkle as a bit of glass settled in the wreckage.

I sat up with the dream movements of a man swimming through molasses. Judy and I knelt beside the picture, neither wanting to touch it.

"Your gown must have brushed against it," I mumbled.

"And knocked it all the way across the room?" Judy said with fearful logic.

I gathered the bits of broken glass, piled them on the picture, and carried the wreckage to the bureau. Judy watched me, wide-eyed and steeped in her own thoughts.

As I turned from the bureau, the murder mystery I'd been pretending to read jumped up and down on the bedside table. The edge of the book cover jarred against the lampshade. The lamp teetered, fell with a crash. Darkness flooded the room.

I wasn't sure whether Judy or I moved first, but in an instant we were standing in shivery embrace.

"Maybe we should check into a motel for the night," I suggested through chattering teeth.

Judy's warmth stirred in my arms. "Nope," she said, "I'm not being chased so easily out of our own house. Anyway, our poltergeist doesn't want to hurt us."

"What makes you so sure?"

"He hasn't thrown anything at us or on us," she said with supreme female logic. "He could have socked you with the picture frame if he were antagonistic."

"He's a sadist," I said, "who'd rather scare people to death a little at a time."

"Or a lonely fellow who's trying to tell us something," Judy mused. "He's certainly picking out a variety of items to toss around, which means he has method and purpose. If we could just get the message, I'm sure he'd go away and rest in peace."

Red-eyed and haggard, I muddled through my junior accountant's job the next day. I was worried about Judy's almost natural acceptance of the exis-

tence of a poltergeist. In the warm light of day, I just didn't believe what I had seen for myself. There had to be an explanation, like the juxtaposition of magnetic forces at the spot where our house stood.

I would have welcomed some advice, but could think of no source. My hard-headed, realistic boss was definitely out. If I went to the cops, the newspapers would pick it off the public record. We'd be subjected to the same glare of publicity that had roasted every other family so rash as to reveal acquaintance with a poltergeist. I wondered how many, like myself, had preferred to suffer the inexplicable in silence.

The house looked as normal as peaches and cream when I hurried up the front walk. A bouncy and smiling Judy had a not-very-dry martini waiting, the kind I like. She'd also fractured her grocery budget with a two-inch-thick T-bone steak, but I applauded her.

"No flying crockery today?" I asked as she slipped the steak under the broiler.

"Not even a saucer," she said.

"Maybe the strain proved too much for him," I said hopefully, munching the olive marinated in vermouth and gin.

We dined elegantly by candlelight, the table graced with snowy linen that had been a wedding present from my Aunt Ellen.

I'd had no appetite for lunch, but I worked like a scavenger on the steak. Judy served coffee, and we eyed each other across the table in affectionate silence.

The steak bone made like a Mexican jumping bean all of a sudden, rapping against the plate.

Judy blinked. I jumped. My chair tipped over backward. I grabbed the edge of the table and hung there, watching the bone jump up and down at eye level.

The bone made no threatening motions, but it was a desecration of our privacy. "Enough is enough," I snarled. I rose, cupped my hands, and pounced on the bone. It offered no resistance as I smacked it against the plate. I raised my fingers one at a time,

and was a little miffed when the bone just lay there after it was freed.

I sneaked a glance at Judy. "You did see that, too, didn't you?"

Judy nodded an affirmative, her eyes glinting. "I wonder what he meant?"

"Maybe that he's hungry," I growled. "Maybe you should brew him up a spot of newt's eyes over some sulphur and brimstone."

"Don't be facetious, Jim!"

"Facetious? I'm not even rational any longer."

While Judy washed the dishes and tidied up after dinner, I did a sneaky search of the house from attic to basement. I didn't find any wires, magnets, or other device remotely resembling the tools of a screwball practical joker.

When I went upstairs from the basement, Judy was curled in our new wing chair before the television set.

"You might have saved your time," she said with wifely forbearance. "I covered every nook and crack myself today. Not that I needed any more proof that we really have a poltergeist."

"I favor selling," I said. "I could put the place on the market by phoning the real estate agent at his home right now."

She sat up. "Don't you dare, Jim Thornton! This poor fellow got stuck here, and when he gets unstuck he will go away and leave us alone."

"Oh, yeah? And I suppose you still think he's trying to deliver a message?"

"More than ever. That rattling bone meant something . . . if I could just figure out what. Why'd he wait all day until he had the bone to rattle, if he wasn't trying to tell us something?"

I eased to a sitting position on the hassock before her. "Judy," I said gently, "I think I'd better get you out of here before we spend another night in this place."

"Don't be silly! It's a perfectly lovely house."

"But all this talk . . ."

"He's a perfectly nice poltergeist—and I'm not going to leave." She smiled, leaned forward to pat my

cheek. "Be a darling and flip the tuner to channel twelve. There's an hour-long comedy special coming up in about five minutes."

I not only switched the TV, I went and made myself a double-barreled martini, very dry this time. I sipped it and also its big brother while the hour-long was on. Six ounces of nearly straight gin later, I settled back in the recliner, a wedding gift of Judy's cousin Ned. I clasped my hands across my midriff comfortably and prepared to think it out.

The TV music faded. The draperies seemed to waver and shake as my heavy lids blotted them out. Lousy draperies, I thought vaguely, with their floral pattern of red roses. Just like Judy's Uncle Horace to give them to us . . .

I awoke with a muscular jerk that popped a crick out of my neck. I dropped the recliner to sitting position, running my tongue around the inside of my gin-wool mouth. A late newscast was on the television. A crashing mortar attack by guerrillas against an American base overseas seemed to have awakened me.

"Judy?" I said.

She was nowhere in the livingroom, bedroom, or kitchen. I made the circuit, beginning to sweat hard by the time I'd come full circle.

The emptiness and silence of the house (except for the insistent TV) began to smother me. I turned off the set with a vicious flip of fingers that were trembling.

"Easy," I ordered myself. "If anything had happened, you'd have heard the ruckus."

Maybe she'd stepped next door to chin a little with Mrs. Gosness and break the boredom of listening to a husband's snore.

I hurried to the east window, pulled the drapery aside; no lights over there. Mrs. Gosness was already off to dreamland, not sipping tea with a next-door neighbor.

I took jerky steps back to the middle of the room. My skin was turning icy and exuding a steam of sweat at one and the same time. If the house hadn't

been haunted before, it certainly felt so now. The empty wing chair where Judy had been sitting seemed to throb in my vision. Then I saw that something new had been added. On the hassock before the chair, she'd laid a piece of paper, a pencil, and the magazine she'd used for a backing as she'd written.

I snatched up the paper. She hadn't left me a note. Instead, it was a record of her thoughts while I'd slept. Around the margin were curlicues where she'd doodled between words, sentences, phrases.

She'd written:

"The hints . . . sock . . . smashed picture . . . mystery novel . . . broken lamp . . . rattling bone . . . agitation rose-patterned drapes."

So the drapes had really shaken. I steadied the paper and kept reading.

"Sock . . . friendly . . . friendly Andy Bickleford . . . but picture smashed with a great deal of violence . . . picture of Jim . . . Jim's a male. . . only picture of male in house . . male smashed by violence! Friendly Andy trying to say he was smashed violently? Not killed accidentally at all! Slugged, put in sports car, pushed over cliffs! . . . Why? Because of something he'd done? . . . done bone . . . bone did . . . bone does . . . darn you, bone! . . . Well, let's see . . . If Andy didn't do anything, maybe he was undone because of something he'd witnessed . . . see bone . . . bone from T-bone steak, useless . . . except to a doggie . . . doggie would go out and bury bone . . . BURIED BONE . . . hidden weapon? . . . Buried weapon that killed Andy before he was stuffed in sports car and driven to those dreadful cliffs? . . . Buried where . . . Next hint, final clue, quaking draperies . . . draped for burial . . . nope . . . bedroom draperies weren't chosen . . . specific draperies . . . those in the livingroom with roses . . . buried with roses . . . buried under roses . . . weapon buried under only rose arbor in neighborhood!"

I dropped the paper. The gimlet eyes and the scratchy violin-string voice flashed through my mind, ". . . hate brats. Always throwing trash in my fish

pond and breaking my rose arbor."

The night coolness washed across my face before I even realized I'd run outside. A pale moon bathed our backyards, ours and Mr. Tate Curzon's. I slipped through the shadows cast by our house, my eyes seeking and searching.

Then I heard a muffled cry and jerked my attention from the rose arbor next door. I saw the struggling shadows near Mr. Curzon's basement door. He heard my pounding footsteps, and as my presence loomed over him, Curzon shoved Judy sprawling and laid a hard little fist in my kisser.

My knees buckled and my nose dug a furrow. He kicked me hard in the ribs. Breath whoofed out, but as he spun and started to run away, my grabbing hand found an ankle. I yanked, and this time Mr. Curzon fell. He writhed around and started lashing me with his fists. I disliked picking on such a little fellow, but he ignored my orders to lie still, so I grabbed him by his thin neck and popped his head against the hard ground. It proved to be an anesthetizing measure. He would remain unconscious for several minutes at least.

Judy grabbed my arms, helped me to my feet. Then she put her arms around me and collapsed against my chest.

"Oh, Jim! I was peeping about his rose arbor and suddenly he was there. He grabbed me, and I screamed just once before he—"

I tipped her face up and kissed her. She began to sob with relief. I picked her up and my shoulder was a very nice cradle for her head.

"I think we'd better call the police," I said.

We thought it discreet to omit mention of the poltergeist, inferring to the police that Mr. Curzon had been acting strangely around his roses and launched his murderous attack when Judy's curiosity got the better of her.

It turned out that the police had previously questioned Mr. Curzon in the disappearance of one of his wives. Their probe of the rose arbor turned up the remains of the fourth Mrs. Curzon. Perhaps it was sus-

picion or evidence of this that led to Andy Bickleford's untimely demise.

We can't know for sure. The poltergeist hasn't been around since that fateful night, and if the subject came up, Judy and I would be first to agree that nobody in his right mind could believe in poltergeists. Like all the silent others who've shared similar experiences, we don't want our friends thinking we are soft in the head.

I do, however, feel the poltergeist should have assisted a bit longer. An army of cops and insurance investigators are going nuts trying to find out what happened to Mrs. Curzons, numbers one, two, three.

MANY WOMEN TOO MANY

by C. B. Gilford

His name was Willis Mack, and he sat hunched in the straightbacked chair, staring directly ahead, but unseeing. He did not seem more than half the size of the beefy-faced detective who sat next to him. The handcuffs no longer coupled them, so that now, after being such bosom companions during the trip, they were individuals again, separate, alone, scarcely interested in each other any more.

The grizzled guard, old and shrunken in his blue uniform, came out of the door and closed it after him. "The warden will see you in a minute," he announced. He spoke to the detective, not to Willis.

The guard seemed to be a sort of receptionist-secretary. He had a desk there in front of the warden's door, but he didn't seem to have much work to do. He didn't go back to the desk. Instead he strolled toward Willis, stopped finally about six feet away from him. He gazed down at him with lackadaisical curiosity.

"Murderer, isn't he?" he asked. Of the detective.

"That's right," the detective grunted.

"He looks harmless."

"He didn't give me any trouble."

"Murderers are foolers though. Lots of times they look like this one here. Look like they wouldn't hurt a fly." The guard was loquacious. Probably he didn't have too many opportunities to talk to people. "But I don't go by their looks. 'Cause their record is against 'em. 'Cause I always say if they can get violent once, they can get violent again."

"Oh sure," the detective grunted. "Can't afford to take chances with 'em."

The guard bent down a little, putting the palms of his hands on his knees, so that he could gaze more closely into Willis' face. "By the way," he wanted to know, "how many did this one murder?"

Willis looked up, and it was he who answered. "Just one," he said. "A woman." And to the guard's obvious surprise, he smiled . . .

. . . But there had been many women in his life, Willis reflected. There had been the little girls first, giggling and squealing piercingly. He had been the only boy in a dancing class full of them. And then the women came, one after another, in a seemingly endless procession. So many, in fact, that it was hard to remember all of them. That was odd in itself, wasn't it? Already they had begun to fade, to seem a little unreal. Not much more than mere names now.

Stella, for instance. Stella Vecker. She'd been one of the first, hadn't she? One of the early ones who had given Willis a foretaste of what his life was going to be like.

He had had enough experience with others, even previous to Stella, to be able to spot her type. In Stella's case, however, his sharp ears had been enough to warn him.

"Now tell me," Stella had asked another girl on her very first day in the office, "which of the men are married and which are bachelors. I have principles, you know. I wouldn't try to break up a home to land

the best man in the world."

They were conversing in whispers, but they were just two desks behind him, so that Willis could hear every word. He tried not to listen, as an ostrich will put its head in the sand.

"The men here are just about all married," the other girl said.

"Oh dear." Stella sounded glum. But then she perked up. "But there are some bachelors, aren't there?"

"There's one."

"Which one?"

"Willis Mack."

Stella was silent for a long time. "You mean . . . ?"

"That's right. Him."

They were undoubtedly engaged in pointing. Willis could almost feel the sharp nails on the tips of their index fingers.

"I wouldn't even count him," Stella said.

"Well, he certainly ain't much," came the agreeable answer.

Willis felt hopeful. If that other girl would just be vehement enough about it, she might convince this Stella of the accuracy of her opinion.

"He's so little," Stella said.

"Heavens yes."

"I never could stand a man who was smaller than I am. I'll bet I'm twenty pounds heavier than he is." Then she added hastily, "And I'm certainly not big and fat."

"He's ugly too," the other girl pointed out. "He's not old, but look at that hair line. He's one of those they call 'prematurely going to bald.' And those awful glasses don't help any."

Bless your heart, Willis said silently to that other girl. If she succeeded in discouraging this Stella, he would send her a box of candy anonymously.

But that box of candy was never bought, never sent. "You know something?" Stella said. "I don't know what it is . . . maybe it's his size . . . but there's something boyish about him . . ."

"Boyish? Willis? With the receding hair line?" Val-

iant attempt, but a lost cause.

"Oh, you can't judge a book by its cover," Stella answered sagely.

Well, that was the way it began, and Willis knew from that moment the fate that lay waiting for him in ambush. He did not know the time, place, or method of the attack, but he was certain there would be one. When it came, it was as well planned and as swiftly executed as a panzer onslaught.

Stella Vecker had started working there on a Monday. During the week she got introduced properly to Willis and began greeting him by name every morning. Other than that, she committed no overt action. But he knew she was only biding her time. Because he caught her eyeing him at least thirty times every day. There was in her eyes the benign, patient look of the vulture. But then whenever he caught her at it, she would hastily glance away with a guilty little smile. By Thursday she had added a maidenly blush to the routine. And the offensive began on Friday.

It rained all day on Friday. Stella watched the weather through the window, and in fact seemed more interested in it than in Willis. A fact which puzzled but did not comfort him.

When five o'clock arrived and Stella departed with her umbrella, Willis definitely breathed a sigh of relief. The rain had interfered with her plans somehow, he thought, and I am safe for the week end. But he dawdled anyway, to make sure she was out of the building. He left at five-thirty, finally, over-confident and unaware. She was waiting for him down on the sidewalk under the marquee.

"Why, hello there, Willis," she said brightly, as if surprised to see him.

"What are you doing here?" he asked stupidly.

"I was hoping the rain would stop."

"Why? You have an umbrella."

"And I see you don't, Willis!" Her eyes fairly glowed with the light of Christian charity. She entwined her arm with his in an inescapable grip. "You can share mine!"

They were off. Where, he didn't know, but cer-

tainly not in a direction he had chosen. He was completely her prisoner. They were about equal in height, but she was certainly the heavier and brawnier. It would not have been gentlemanly for him to struggle there on the street. And as they went along, he found his meager strength waning. Enclosed with her in that little tent whose roof was the umbrella and whose walls were the pelting rain, he had to breathe and live in an atmosphere that was all and only Stella. Her perfume and the exhalations of her generous body choked him. The warmth and closeness of her brought out sweat on his forehead. Nausea rose inside him, and he might have fainted ignominiously in some gutter running with rain water.

So it was that he was actually grateful and ready to settle for any compromise situation, when she guided their steps into the little restaurant with the dim lighting.

"This is a cozy little place," she explained. "I've been coming here every evening after work. But I just hate to eat alone, don't you, Willis? And I know you must eat alone. Because I've heard you're a bachelor. What do you think of this as a place to eat? We'll go Dutch, of course."

He was too sick to argue, too anxious to find a place to sit down, and he was doubly grateful when Stella chose to sit opposite him in the booth rather than next to him. In a choice of evils, he preferred having her staring at him rather than enduring her physical contact.

And she certainly did stare. Her broad, round, white face hung there like a moon in the shadowy dimness of the booth. She was placid, now that she had him captured, and her heavily lidded eyes drank him in like he were the first course on the menu.

She chatted gaily through the meal, never stopping it seemed, but managing to eat voraciously. He watched her helplessly, the mouse appalled by the appetite of the cat.

"So you're a bachelor, Willis." She got around to it again, finally.

"Yes," he choked.

"You know, I just can't understand that. How old are you, Willis?"

"Twenty-nine."

He was sure that she hesitated for just an infinitesimal moment, and just as sure that she was older than he was. "Oh, that's a nice age," she said then. "But just imagine, almost thirty, and no lucky woman has snared you yet. That's just amazing, I think."

He was about to explain that he didn't want to be "snared," but she had gulped down her mouthful and was ahead of him. "You're very appealing to women," she said, "did you ever realize that, Willis?"

"Oh no, I couldn't possibly be . . ."

"Oh yes, you are, sweetie. You just don't understand women. Oh, I know there are lots of low types of women who are impressed by wide shoulders and muscles and Roman noses and curly hair, but they are low types, Willis. The high type girl like me looks for different things in a man. Do you know what those things are, Willis?"

Despite himself, he was fascinated by her approach. He had to shake his head and murmur, "No."

She leaned her ample bosom across the table in her enthusiasm, and the moon face hovered right in front of his eyes. "I like a man who is high-minded . . . and hard-working . . . and quiet . . . and gentlemanly . . . and there's one other awfully important thing . . ."

He couldn't help asking the question. "What?"

"I like the kind of man who *needs* a woman."

Willis suddenly felt like fainting again. The huge moon filled his field of vision and swam in front of his eyes. It became a mother-image, dominating, devouring. "I don't need anybody!" It came from within him as a scream, but filtered out as a frightened whisper.

"Oh yes, you do, sweetie. Someone to cook for you and put a little meat on those bones."

"Food doesn't mean anything to me," he gasped out. "Sandwiches . . ."

"And take care of your clothes. I'll bet you have

holes in both your socks right now."

"Of course I do. But what difference . . . ?"

"And someone waiting for you when you come home at night, someone you can watch television with."

"I hate television. I like to read. I'm in the middle of *The Last of the Mohicans . . .*"

"Someone you can talk to."

"I don't want to talk. I like to think . . ."

She smiled at him, grimly jovial, unimpressed. "That only goes to prove," she said, "that you have too many bad habits."

The grotesque meal at the restaurant was only the beginning, however. Coyly, yet with relentless purpose, Stella wove the web. Next stop was a movie. Willis found himself standing in a line to buy tickets, toying with the idea of slipping into the crowd and losing himself somehow, but without the nerve to attempt it. Then he was plunged into the fetid darkness of the theater's interior, squeezed into seats so close together that he had to touch shoulders either with Stella or a much more enormous lady on the other side.

He shivered and the panic of claustrophobia seized him. He had the feeling of a man who had been thrown into a black pit where serpents lay in wait for him. Then the serpent came, and there was no escape. Stella's hand, traveling his sleeve, groping for his hand. A warm serpent, pudgy, perspiring, deceptively soft.

"Oh, you naughty boy," Stella whispered out of the gloom. And she giggled.

How had he endured those awful three hours? How had his heart survived such a prolonged period of mortal terror? He would have welcomed an immediate cessation of its beating.

Then terror piled upon terror, torture upon torture. Riding in the cab with Stella. Her fat hand clasping his, her shoulder against him, her breath hot upon his cheek. Getting out. Walking up the steps. Pausing at Stella's door.

"I'll bet you want to kiss me good night," Stella said.

No, he screamed, I would rather die. But the scream only rang through the cavern of his skull, echoing and re-echoing. It never reached Stella. He didn't kiss her. And yet he did. He must have. She arranged it somehow. Their mouths came together. Hers was horribly red, horribly wet, horribly soft, like jelly. Without opening, her lips nevertheless sucked him in like quicksand, till only the hard wall of her teeth stopped further descent . . .

. . . He could still shudder at the memory of Stella all right. Because that memory was so especially clear. But there had been many others.

He had escaped Stella in the only possible way. That Friday night, back in his own apartment, he packed two suitcases. His trunk which would have held his most precious but less necessary possessions, he had to abandon, because he dared not leave a forwarding address with the landlord. He likewise abandoned his job and his accrued salary. He took the suitcases, bought a train ticket, and fled.

That was the beginning of his period of wandering. He held all sorts of different jobs, mostly in offices. Once, however, he was reduced to dishwashing in a hotel restaurant, because there was some difficulty about his references. But wherever it was, the ending was always the same. The appearance of some motherly woman on the scene, her gradual attraction to him, his ignoring her—always futile—and then the pounce. Then ignominious flight, and starting all over again.

It went on like that. For the best years of Willis' life. Some of the women were better than Stella, some worse. Some more clever, some less. Gradually, he grew more adept in dealing with them. Sometimes they never got close enough, as Stella had, to lay a hand on him. Like a suspicious wild thing, he was off and traveling before the hunter was really set to spring.

And he would have grown to peaceful old age, per-

haps eventually losing his devastating charm, if it hadn't been for Fern Crenshaw.

Fern was just smarter than the others, that's all. She actually succeeded in deceiving Willis. She was a widow. Therefore she had previously had a man to fuss over and mother, and having lost him the year before, she desperately wanted another. Willis didn't realize that. She fooled him into believing she was all cut up and mourning for her first husband. So Willis let down his guard. With fatal consequences. Not figuratively speaking. Really fatal.

Fern Crenshaw was rich. In fact, she owned, since the death of Mr. Crenshaw, the real estate company where Willis worked. She came down to the office frequently because, as she said, she was lonely. Since Willis attributed this to her devotion to her dead husband, he took no alarm. Besides, Fern was tall and spare, and definitely not the buxom type Willis had learned to associate with frustrated motherly affection.

That type was, however, present on the scene. Celestine Carter by name. Celestine was Stella all over again as far as looks were concerned, but not at all like Stella in strategy. Where Stella had been overeager and headlong, Celestine was devious and patient. But Willis, who knew all the telltale signs by this time, kept an eye on her and decided not to leave until he had to. Except for Celestine, Crenshaw's was a nice place to work.

Fern Crenshaw must have been keeping an eye on Celestine, too. Because, as it turned out, when Celestine made her move, Fern was as aware of it as Willis was.

Celestine, for all her patience, wasn't clever in the long run. She merely maneuvered the office Christmas party into a kissing game, and then maneuvered Willis into kissing her. Or tried to, that is. While Celestine was blindfolded, Willis slipped out of the office, took a taxi home, and packed his bags. He kept the taxi waiting outside while he packed, then rode in it to the railroad station.

Fern Crenshaw was there waiting for him.

He was both surprised and ashamed of himself when he saw her there. After all, he was an ungrateful employee running off without giving the proper two weeks' notice. So he was too shocked, too scared, to run off. When she gave him an imperious nod, he walked over to her, still carrying his suitcases.

"What's the meaning of this, Willis?" she wanted to know.

"I'm leaving," he blurted.

"All on account of Celestine Carter?"

He was too surprised at that to reply with a single word.

"I might as well admit, Willis," she went on, "that I know a lot more about you than you realize. I've had you investigated, as a matter of fact. So I happen to know that you've run out on quite a few jobs. And I also happen to know the reason. So I have a proposition to make to you, Willis. You'd better sit down first."

Obediently, automatically, a man in a trance, he walked to the nearest bench, deposited his bags, and sat. Fern Crenshaw followed and sat down beside him, close enough to be heard when speaking in a low voice, but not nearly close enough to touch him.

"I'm asking you to marry me, Willis."

He sat there frozen, staring, but his mind, under the impulse of terror, was beginning to function again. Where to run . . . abandon the suitcases . . . hop a freight . . . thumb a ride . . . hole up in some slum dive . . .

But her voice droned on, and part of him listened to what she was saying. "I'm not in love with you, Willis Mack. Don't mistake me on that score. I'm still devoted to my dear departed Horace. But marrying you would be quite convenient for me. I need a certain amount of companionship and someone to accompany me to public functions. Also I think you could assist me in the affairs of the Crenshaw Realty Company. So it would be entirely a business arrangement, Willis. Let me assure you of that."

The terror in him subsided a little. She seemed to be completely sincere and genuine. Despite himself,

his mind began to explore the possibilities of Fern's proposal. Then came the clincher.

"Being married to me, Willis, would have another important advantage to you. These silly women like Celestine and all the ones before her would stop chasing you . . ."

He had been wrong in marrying Fern Crenshaw, of course. He had no one to blame but himself, however. He should have known better. He should have known not to trust any woman. He should have known that beneath the skin, whether taut and full or loose and wrinkled, they were essentially all alike. Devils.

Marrying Fern was indenturing himself as a lifelong slave. It was a slavery that was complete and utterly degrading. And there was no escape from it.

Not that he hadn't tried. He remembered that attempt well. It had been a bit more clever than his usual. Hitchhiking to the next town. Then a bus going in an opposite direction. More hitchhiking. Finally a plane headed for Mexico. And there at the airport the two burly private detectives whom Fern had hired. That was his first and also final attempt.

Fern hadn't wanted him to help her run Crenshaw Realty. She did that very well all by herself. She merely wanted someone to listen to her tell how clever she was in the masculine business world. She hated men, he found out. And especially she hated the late Horace Crenshaw. Mostly she seemed to want a husband so she could revenge herself on Horace's sex, for all of poor Horace's crimes.

And she didn't want him for companionship, whether at home or in public. She wanted someone to insult frankly at home and more politely and subtly in public. She was happiest, however, when she was humiliating him in front of other people. The more the merrier. She had plenty of ammunition. His thinness. His awful glasses. His meek manner. His bald head.

It was entirely out of resentment then, entirely out of a desire for freedom for its own sake, that Willis

accepted the attentions—whenever he could—of Sarah Treadwell.

Sarah was their next-door neighbor—if the person occupying the ten acres next to your ten acres can be called a next-door neighbor. She was also a rich widow. But she wasn't like Fern in build or manner. She was like Stella and Celestine and all those others. Sarah was full-bodied, full-faced, and full of maternal love for Willis despite his marital ties.

"Willis," she would say to him across the fence between their acreages, "why do you go on living with that old spider? You hate her, don't you?"

"Yes, I hate her," he'd answer, truthfully enough.

"Then why don't you and I run away together, Willis?"

Would I be any better off, he'd ask himself. "Well, I don't know about that . . ."

"Kiss me, Willis. Please kiss me."

He would have liked to, in the hope that his wife would be watching from a window. But he couldn't bring himself to touching his own lips to Sarah's big, red, heavily lipsticked mouth. He'd have to be content with his wife's seeing him talking to "the other woman."

And it was that "other woman" who was responsible for what happened on that fateful day. The day when his wife, Fern, finally caught him chatting with Sarah Treadwell.

"Willis, come into the house!" Fern's eagle-like scream shattered the peace of the woodsy acres.

Horror-stricken, he realized then that he had gone too far, been too bold. Cold fear gripped him so tightly that his teeth began to chatter. "She's seen us," he told Sarah.

"I'm glad," Sarah answered. "Then you can go in and tell her that you're leaving her. I'll go and pack a suitcase. One suitcase is all I'll need . . ."

"No . . . don't do that . . . I can't . . ."

"I'll protect you from that harpy, Willis. Wouldn't you rather have me than her?"

Ye gods . . . how could he answer that? . . . was there any choice? Was that his only escape? From the

bony talons of Fern to Sarah's fat, suffocating embrace? He was a man balanced on a knife-edge, with a pit yawning on either side of him? To whom should he leap? To the tiger or to the boa constrictor?

"Willis!"

The command was too terrifying to be ignored any longer. He turned from Sarah and ran. He didn't stop running even when he got inside the house. Fern wasn't in the kitchen. He ran all the way into the living room. And he found her there.

Taller than himself, dressed all in black, her arms folded across her chest, her face dark as a thundercloud and her eyes flashing lightning from out of it, she was a figure to frighten a better man than Willis Mack. Willis came to an abrupt, panting halt. The room was silent except for the sound of his labored breathing. His nemesis did not seem to breathe at all.

"Well?" she asked finally.

He had no answer to such an all-inclusive question.

"I know how you feel about women, Willis. You were talking to that creature out there just to make me unhappy, weren't you?"

"No!" he lied desperately. His mind tried to anticipate her, to discover what revenge she was already devising for him.

She began to pace, back and forth across his vision. Her brows lowered, indicating she was in deep thought. Probably thinking just the things he thought she was thinking. He watched her, unhappily awaiting her next move.

"Ungrateful pup!" she spat at him several times, in the brief pauses while she turned to pace in the opposite direction.

It was at one of those times that he noticed it, the fact that she was pacing back and forth across the throw-rug in front of the fireplace. The fact that the throw-rug covered an area of highly polished wooden floor. The fact that each time she stepped from the floor to the rug, the rug slid a little. Not much, just a little. So little that, concentrating on something else as she was, she was completely unaware of the tiny movement underfoot.

What if that rug took a really big slide? Just as she had one foot on it and the other foot not on anything at all? Would she fall? How would she land? What part of her would hit? And how hard? Would her head hit first, for instance? And would it by any chance strike one of those huge, jutting andirons?

Visions. Lovely visions. Of Fern's head resting in a pool of blood against one of those andirons. And beyond that . . . freedom. If only he were the man to stoop and give that rug a little jerk at just the right moment. . .

"Willis!"

"Yes . . ." He swallowed hard.

"Yes *what?*"

"Yes, my love." The words choked him.

"Willis, come here to me."

She was standing motionless now, a little to one side of the fireplace, off the rug, both her feet on the polished, shining wood. But she was beckoning for him to cross the rug to her.

"Willis, come here."

Glancing at her hands suddenly, he saw them clench into fists. His fear of her had always been of a physical sort, but now it assumed a new dimension. Her fists were clenched to strike him.

"Willis!"

Well, he would not allow her to strike him. He had suffered all other possible indignities, but somewhere one must draw a line. He would not submit to a beating. And certainly not by a woman.

"No," he said. And his voice sounded almost calm, almost strong.

He was already backing away warily when she moved. Like the tiger he always likened her to, she sprang toward him, right fist upraised. And it was the very suddenness and energy of that movement which was her undoing. Her foot hit the rug, which skated out from under her like a bar of soap on wet tile. Both her feet flew up, and her head smashed down with the same sickening speed. Down on the jutting andiron.

And there she lay. A lovely vision. Her head rest-

ing in a pool of blood. The most beautiful red he had ever seen.

But best of all, and the final, loveliest touch of all—it had been an accident, and he hadn't had to commit a murder.

It was then, as he stood there, with the smell of blood in his nostrils that was the smell of freedom, that he heard the pounding on the front door. And the voice of Sarah. "Willis, let me in! I've come to rescue you!"

The vision changed. Sarah now. All Sarah. With her fat arms, and her fat cheeks, and her fat lips. Like Stella. Like all the other women whose names he couldn't remember now.

He didn't hesitate a moment. His decision was swift, and the execution of his plan sure and practical. He had to tug at Fern's body a little to get her head away from the andiron. But he had the strength of sudden courage. When he had pulled the body a little aside, he took his handkerchief and wiped all the blood off the andiron. He got some blood on himself, but that was all right. Then he picked up the poker, grasping it by the handle, and he rubbed the business end of it into the fatal wound in Fern's skull. He applied the tool until it was nicely smeared with blood.

"Willis, let me in!" Sarah was calling from outside.

He carried the poker with him when he went to open the door. And he still carried it when he flung the door open and stood there in the threshold and confronted the astonished Sarah.

Poor Sarah. The look on her face was positively comical. And especially the way she looked at the poker, and then over Willis' shoulder into the living room, and to the fireplace, and to what lay in front of the fireplace.

"Murder!" She screamed as she fled the scene. "Murder! Help, police!"

He let her go. He just stood in the door and waited . . .

The door opened and the grizzled guard said, "The warden wants to see you now."

Willis Mack rose stiffly from the chair, and walked into the office. He walked straight to the desk and stood there waiting to be told to sit down.

He wasn't. The warden, a bulldog of a man, glanced up at his new guest with an unfriendly frown. "You're Willis Mack?" he began.

"Yes, sir."

"You murdered your wife, huh?"

"That's right, sir."

"Sentence of ninety-nine years, is that right?"

"That's right, sir," Willis agreed, and he smiled. "I'm forty-one now. I guess I can depend upon being in here the rest of my life, can't I?"

TILL DEATH
(NOVELETTE)

by Fletcher Flora

It was an old building, thin as a slat in graceless dotage. At one side, with a private door on the street, an enclosed stairway ascended to a narrow hall. The ground floor, as flaked lettering on the display window signified, was a delicatessen.

Lieutenant Joseph Marcus plodded up the stairs, Sergeant Bobo Fuller plodding behind. In the narrow hall he paused, Fuller coming abreast. Outside the nearer of two doors, at ease with his legs spread and his hands clasped behind his substantial stern, was a uniformed watchdog who had been diverted in emergency from his routine beat. Marcus and Fuller, tug and tow, approached. Marcus, as he arrived, spoke a word of greeting. The watchdog acknowledged the word by touching his cap. He opened the door and stood aside. Marcus passed through with Fuller on his heels.

They were in a livingroom which, deprived of windows, depended for daylight upon a glazed skylight overhead. A door in the wall to the left, at the front of the building, opened to the bedroom, which had a

couple of windows onto the street; the one to the right, at the rear, led to the kitchen, which had a couple of windows onto the alley. Borrowed from a corner of the improvised kitchen, its location dictated by prior plumbing installed for the delicatessen below, was a cramped bathroom. Marcus was depressed. The principal pieces of furniture in the room, a lumpy sofa and two squat chairs with soiled cretonne covers, seemed to encroach and threaten to smother him under a plethora of faded roses with the faint fragrance of rancid fat. He walked over to the door on the left, which was open, and entered the bedroom.

To supplement the pale light that entered from the street through the windows, a bulb in a plastic shade, suspended from the ceiling, had been turned on and left burning. The floor was covered by an ancient rug, worn through the pile to the fiber backing in a sizable spot at the foot of a double bed. On the bed, crosswise on her back, lay the body of a woman. She was wearing a pink nightgown that was hiked in disorder around her hips, the consequence of thresh-ing legs. Her eyes were open, bulging from their sockets. So was her mouth, revealing a blackened tongue. She had been strangled to death, longer ago than a little. She had been, Marcus guessed, in her early thirties. Neither a doll nor a dog, she had never been in the running for Miss Something-or-other of any year whatever, but she had possessed, nevertheless, a kind of plentiful prettiness. That was the judgment, of course, under the harsh light of the merciless bulb, her face distorted by violent death, of a practiced imagination. Marcus touched a thigh with fingertips. Cold, pliable; rigor mortis had come and gone.

"Dead awhile," he said. "I'd guess a day or two."

"That's quite a spread," said Fuller.

"Never mind." Marcus turned away, wiping his fingertips with unconscious fastidiousness on the leg of his pants. "The medical examiner will narrow it."

He took a tour around the room. Standing in a corner, in lieu of a closet, was a large wardrobe with double doors latched in the center. Opening both

doors, he examined the contents. In a his-and-hers arrangement, hanging on one side, were a meager selection of dresses, half a dozen skirts, a light cloth coat for spring or fall and a heavier one for winter; on the other, a man's gray suit and a tan cardigan sweater, nothing more. Marcus, passing on, wondered about that. He stopped at a window and stared for a moment down into the street. On the far side, in front of a barber shop, a small group of kibitzers, attracted by the police car in which he and Fuller had arrived, had gathered to speculate and ogle. Marcus, moving away, completed his tour and ended up at Fuller's shoulder.

"Fuller," he said, "go over the place, this room and the others. See if you can find something to point us somewhere. The crew should be here soon. Meanwhile, I'll go ask some questions here and there."

"Right," said Fuller, his voice bland with cautious amity. At the moment, in fact, his private and undeclared war with Marcus was in a state of armistice, if not actual peace. He didn't quite know why. Maybe it was because the case in hand appeared to be a routine bit of nastiness that would be resolved shortly and in good order, thereby depriving Marcus of an opportunity to engage in flummery or otherwise to show off. Maybe it was simply because it was Tuesday, and Tuesday was the day that Fat Ferd had boiled ham hocks and beans on his luncheon menu. Fuller was fond of ham hocks and beans. He was invariably tempted to have seconds when seconds were offered, and he had every hope of getting to the counter before the pot was empty. Therefore, shored by this hope, he turned amiably to the task that Marcus assigned.

Marcus, unaware of Fuller's modest euphoria, crossed the livingroom and went out into the hall. The cop on duty stiffened and repeated his earlier semi-salute, relaxing again when Marcus made a truncated gesture in return that brushed formalities aside.

"I don't believe I know your name," Marcus said.

"It's Ramsay, sir."

"All right, Ramsay. Just tell me how you got onto this business."

"Well, I was on my beat, same as always, and I happened to be passing along the street outside when old Socrates shot out of the door down there at the foot of the stairs and began bawling bloody murder."

"Socrates?"

"That's what we call him along the street. His real name is Glaucus. He's the Greek who runs the delicatessen. Owns this building."

"The dead woman's landlord?"

"That's right. When I understood what he was saying, I came up here and found the body like you saw it. Glaucus had tagged along after me, and I sent him back down to call headquarters while I stood guard. I've been here all the time."

"How did Glaucus happen to find the body?"

"He didn't. A woman named Blanche Slocum found it."

"Where is she?"

"Downstairs in the delicatessen. That's where she ran when she found the body. To tell old Glaucus. She's still there. Or better be. I told Glaucus to keep her on ice."

"What was this Slocum woman doing here? Never mind, I'll ask her myself. Good work, Ramsay. You may as well stay here until the crew arrives. They'll be along any minute. Then you can go back to your beat. I'll talk with you again later if I need to."

The establishment of Mr. Glaucus, called Socrates along the street, had surely not changed in character for half a century. On the floor, clean and polished as a hound's tooth, was a black-and-white checked linoleum. In cases of antique origin, refrigerated or otherwise, were arranged on display the succulent items of Mr. Glaucus' trade—baked and boiled hams, cold chicken and baked beans, meat loaf and potato salad, cole slaw and breads and cakes and all the rest, or close to it, of delicatessen's seductive inventory, but it was not all this, entrancing as it was, that delighted the heart of Joseph Marcus and whisked him in reverse through four decades in an instant. Not for Mr.

Glaucus, God preserve him, the complexities and uncertainties of modern air-conditioning. Dependent from the high ceiling, revolving leisurely with measured slapping sounds, were three large two-bladed fans, gently stirring the air and discouraging flies.

Hoover was in the White House, and Marcus was in heaven; or he was a kid again with a dime in his pocket, which is another way, perhaps, of saying the same thing. To be strictly accurate, it had not been a delicatessen to which Marcus had gone in the old days when he'd come into a fortune. It had been, rather, a confectionery, for the sweet tooth of youth, as everyone knows, prefers fudge to beans; but the flapping fans were the same, the almost illicit anticipation of glorious gluttony was the same, and it took little imagination for a sensitive cop to sniff delicatessen and smell vanilla.

The salesroom was unattended, but as Marcus moved toward the rear, his shoes thumping on the black-and-white linoleum, Mr. Glaucus himself appeared suddenly in the entrance to a back room and came forward. At least, Marcus assumed with good reason that it was Mr. Glaucus. He looked, Marcus decided, somewhat like an overgrown gnome, with glabrous scalp stretched tight as a drumhead over a skull as round as a ball; big ears standing outright on either side of an oddly puckered face in which two wicked little eyes glittered with a kind of puckish good humor; arms and torso too long for bandy-legs. He was an old man, surely near seventy, but Marcus had the absurd notion that he might at any moment break into a cackle and a caper with a clicking of heels.

"Mr. Glaucus, eh?" Marcus said.

"That's right. Alexander Glaucus at your pleasure. You're from the police, I assume."

"Yes. Lieutenant Joseph Marcus. Is there a Blanche Slocum here?"

"In the back. She's been gibbering like a lunatic, the silly woman. I've dosed her liberally with white wine, but I think she's still sober enough to make

sense if you don't set her off again. Follow me, Lieutenant."

Marcus followed and was led to the far rear, where Blanche Slocum, fortified by white wine, was uneasily awaiting her ordeal in an old-fashioned rocking chair beside an alley window. Like the dead woman upstairs, she appeared to be in her early thirties. Unlike the dead woman, who had possessed a modest prettiness alive, discernible beneath the ugliness of her particular death, this one didn't, although she tried. Cosmetics and dye and diet availed her nothing. Her eyes were too small for her face, and her teeth were too big for her mouth. The rocker was stuffed with her ample bottom. Marcus sat down on a wooden crate that had been turned on end nearby.

"Blanche Slocum?" he said.

"Yes."

"Is it miss or missus?"

"Miss."

"All right, Miss Slocum. No need to get excited. The worst of this is over, so far as you're concerned. Just tell me about it."

"There isn't much to tell. I hadn't seen Loretta—Mrs. Peabody, that is—since last week—Thursday, I think it was—because her husband was home for the weekend—Harley, that is—and so I came to see her today, knowing that Harley would be gone and all. I knocked on the door, but Loretta didn't seem to be home, because she didn't answer, and so I just opened the door and went in, which I always do, being a good friend. If the door is unlocked, I mean, which it usually is. I looked in the bedroom, just to see if Loretta was in there asleep or something, and there she was on the bed, and I could see that she'd been strangled, and so I started to scream and ran out and down the stairs and in here to tell Mr. Glaucus, and Mr. Glaucus went up to see for himself. I don't know exactly what happened after that, except Mr. Glaucus came back after a while and called the police."

She ended this monologue with a kind of squawk

and a gulp, as if someone had jabbed her in the solar plexis, which Mr. Glaucus seemed tempted to do. Marcus, dreading a resumption of gibbering, spoke in a voice he hoped was a palliative.

"What reason did you have for calling on Mrs. Peabody this particular morning?"

"No special reason. We were good friends, that's all. We spent a lot of time together when Harley—Mr. Peabody—was on the road."

"On the road?"

"Harley's a salesman. He sells toys and games and things like that."

"I see. And he was home this past weekend?"

"I guess so. I didn't see him, but Loretta said he was coming home."

"Does he come home every weekend?"

"No. Sometimes not for two or three in a row. He has a big territory."

Marcus looked at Glaucus.

"Did you see Mr. Peabody around here this weekend, Mr. Glaucus?"

"He was here, all right. He came in for some ham and potato salad Saturday evening. I didn't see him Sunday."

"When did he leave again?"

"I don't know. Maybe Sunday. Maybe Monday morning. When he left depended on where he was going the first day. How far, I mean."

Marcus turned back to Blanche Slocum. "Do you happen to know when he left here, Miss Slocum?"

"No." She shook her head. "Except that Mr. Glaucus says so, I don't even know for sure he was here. Sometimes he was supposed to come and didn't. Loretta used to complain about it."

"Well, we'll have to try to run him down before this thing breaks in the news. It would be quite a shock to a man to read about his wife's murder in a newspaper or hear it on a broadcast or something. Do you know where he might be?"

"I don't have any idea. I don't know anything about where he went."

"How long have Mr. and Mrs. Peabody been married?"

"Three or four years. Nearer three, I think."

"Did they get along all right?"

"As good as most, I guess."

"How long has Mr. Peabody been a salesman?"

"I'm not sure. For a long time before he and Loretta were married anyhow. He's quite a bit older than she was. Maybe fifteen years. I heard him say once that he'd always worked for the same company. Different territories, but the same company."

"Oh? Seems a steady sort of fellow. You said you were Mrs. Peabody's good friend. For how long?"

"Since before she was married. Five, six years. We used to work in the same place. A department store. Loretta was ladies' lingerie, and I was notions."

"Did she have other friends?"

"Oh, yes. Not so many after she got married, though. You know how it is. A married girl sort of drops out of things. Other interests and all."

"Men friends?"

"She had her share when she was single."

"How about after she was married?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. I mean a young woman left alone so much probably gets bored and lonely. She must be subjected to a lot of temptations that she wouldn't have if her husband was around."

Blanche Slocum's face had acquired an unpleasant mottled look, as if she were suffering from instant liver splotches. Marcus, observing her with interest, could not decide if she was angry at the implied slander of Loretta Peabody's conjugal conduct, or if her stagnant juices had been brought to a simmer by a prod in the imagination. Some of these deprived gals had low boiling points, susceptible to suggestion and conditioned to vicarious kicks. Whichever, she was clearly agitated, and he hoped she didn't begin to gibber again. She didn't. She sat silent for a moment, her lips drawn together over her protuberant teeth, and then she responded with a faint note of defensive belligerence in her voice.

"What of it? What do you think Harley Peabody's been doing all these years, away from home two or three weeks on end, living in hotels and motels and taking women buyers out for a good time to butter them up for a fat sale? You can't tell me about some of these salesmen and the women buyers. I know all about them. So did Loretta."

"Well, that's the other side of the coin. At the moment we're not interested in the possible peccadilloes of Harley Peabody. We're interested in Loretta Peabody. I asked you, I believe, if she had any men friends after her marriage."

"She knew a few men. What's the harm in knowing a few men?"

"None whatever, unless it turns out that you get yourself strangled by one of them. I'm not talking about casual friends. I'm not talking about the kind she spoke to on the street or maybe let buy her a drink or two in the neighborhood tavern. You know the kind I mean. You were her friend. You said the two of you saw a lot of each other. If she had the kind of man I mean on the string, she must have told you about him. You probably saw them together here and there."

Blanche Slocum's faint belligerence had set in an expression of sullen stubbornness. "It's not my nature to peddle tales," she said. "I don't want to get anybody into a lot of trouble."

"Let me remind you of something," Marcus said. "Let me remind you that Loretta Peabody has been murdered. Let me remind you that anyone who deliberately withholds material evidence about the murder is guilty of a serious offense. If you aren't careful, Miss Slocum, you may find yourself in more trouble than you're keeping someone else out of. Loretta Peabody was involved with a man. That's plain. I want to know who."

"His name is Ernest Gibbons. Loretta had been seeing him the last year or so, when Harley was on the road."

"That's a good girl. Just tell it like it was. Where does this Gibbons live?"

"He has a room in the Congress Hotel. It's over on Elder."

"I know where it is. Where does he work?"

"He tends bar there, in the bar of the Congress. That's where Loretta met him. She happened to stop in for a drink once."

"Good. I'll stop in myself pretty soon. You heard Mr. Glaucus say that Peabody sometimes left on his sales route Sunday afternoon. Do you know if he left then this past Sunday?"

"No."

"Take your time. Think about it. Did Loretta Peabody say anything at all to you that might have suggested when he was going to leave?"

"No, she didn't. Loretta never knew herself most of the time. Harley just left when he was good and ready. Sometimes late Sunday. Sometimes early Monday."

"You're sure? It could be very important, depending on when, exactly, Loretta Peabody was murdered."

"I know what you're thinking. You're thinking maybe she was murdered Sunday night. You want to know who was with her that night."

"You're a bright girl, Miss Slocum. I can see you're going to be a big help to me."

"Not if you think I'm going to tell you if it was Harley or Ernie. I don't know. How many times do I have to tell you I don't know?"

"All right, Miss Slocum. That's enough." Marcus slapped his knees and stood up. "I'll take your address, in case I need to see you again, and you can go."

He entered the address in a notebook, which he returned to the pocket from which it came, and Blanche Slocum, rising from the rocker, patted her hips and tugged at a skirt that was too short for her fat thighs and started to leave. At the doorway to the front room, she hesitated and looked back at Marcus.

"It was Harley," she said. "If you want to know what I think, it was that stinking Harley Peabody."

"That," said Marcus, "is an opinion."

"Well, it's mine, and I've got a right to it. Every-

body's got a right to his opinion."

"True. No right, however, to go around broadcasting it indescriminately if it happens to turn out criminal slander. Between you and me, okay. Otherwise, you'd better keep it to yourself. A bright girl like you can see that."

The bright girl disappeared through the doorway with a gelatinous wobbling of glutei, and Marcus sat down again on the upturned crate and helped himself to a cigarette.

"There goes," he said, "a stupid female. That's my opinion, and I've got a right to it."

Mr. Alexander Glaucus claimed the rocker. He rocked forward, hands on knees, and stared at Marcus with little eyes glittering with a kind of merry malice in his puckered face. Marcus could hear overhead, above the high ceiling, the sporadic thumping of heavy heels. The crew had arrived. Loretta Peabody, faithless mate and luckless lover, was being processed, in a manner of speaking, out of a wicked world.

"I've seen him come and go all hours of day and night," said Mr. Glaucus with a certain cheerful relish. "I didn't know his name was Ernie."

"You're an observant man, Mr. Glaucus."

"I occupy, you might say, a strategic position. Operating my establishment by myself, I stay open for late trade. Being a widower, I sometimes spend the night. I see what I see, and—" Mr. Glaucus cocked a meaningful eye at the ceiling, "I hear what I hear."

"Did you ever feel an obligation to report your observations to Mr. Peabody?"

"Not I. The rent was paid monthly, and it's the same for three as two. No extra charge for overnight guests."

"You are more than an observant man, Mr. Glaucus. You are, as we say, worldly. Am I correct in remembering that you disclaimed any knowledge of whether Mr. Peabody spent last Sunday night in his own bed?"

"You are."

"That's too bad of you, Mr. Glaucus. Your admi-

rable talent for observation fails just when it might prove most useful. Tell me something. Do you agree with Miss Slocum that Mr. Peabody is our murderer?"

"Miss Slocum's head is as fat as her tail, but on this point she may be right. On another point, however, she is dead wrong. Mr. Harley Peabody, I say, never engaged in the tumbling of female buyers or any other willing women in motels and hotels all over his territory. Mr. Peabody is a miserable little blue-nose. Mr. Peabody does not drink or smoke or tell dirty stories. In my opinion, for what it's worth to you, neither does he fornicate."

Mr. Glaucus delivered himself of the opinion, as if he were reporting a contemptible character fault, with a glitter of derision in his eyes and an expression of scorn among the puckers of his engaging face.

Marcus watched him, entranced. "But capable, nevertheless, of committing murder?" he asked.

"You are a professional sleuth, Lieutenant. Surely you are a student of crime. Murder frequently seems to be compatible with righteousness. Remember, for example, Judd Gray."

"Ah, yes. The corset salesman. A celebrated case of the roaring twenties. But Judd fornicated. It was fornication, indeed, that led him by his blue nose to murder."

"That is so." Mr. Glaucus' expression became one of almost comic distress. "I chose an unfortunate example. I must think of a better."

Marcus had finished his cigarette. Lacking a receptable, he rubbed out the coal on the sole of a shoe and dropped the butt temporarily into a coat pocket.

"While you're thinking," he said, "I'll be about my business. Thanks, Mr. Glaucus. It's been a pleasure meeting you."

Mr. Glaucus returned the amenity, and they shook hands, and Marcus went out through the delicatessen beneath the lazily flapping fans.

He left Fuller with the crew and drove alone to the Congress Hotel on Elder Street. It wasn't much. No prestige hostelry by a long shot, neither was it, on the

other hand, a flophouse, but just a place where you could get a clean bed in privacy for a reasonable piece of your bankroll. In the middle of the block, flanked left and right by an independent coffee shop and a newsstand, it flaunted no canopy, no red carpet, no doorman. There was a revolving door from the sidewalk that deposited guests, after they had found their own way in, in a small foyer with a small lobby beyond. The foyer was furnished with a sofa and two chairs and decorated with a potted plant. On the right of the foyer was an entrance to the bar, which also had a door directly to the street. Marcus, spewed out of the revolving door into the foyer, turned right.

The bar was also small but its custom was apparently large, for it was arranged to accommodate a crowd. There was a row of booths along the draped windows of the streetside wall, and between the booths and the bar was a congestion of tiny tables with chairs jammed around them to create a condition conducive to the knocking of knees. Along the bar, high stools were aligned in a rank so closed as to make inevitable the knocking of elbows. Right now, however, the booths were empty, the tables unoccupied, the stools unclaimed. The place had only recently opened for the day's business. It was still a bit early for thirsty lunchers from nearby establishments. The only other person in the room besides Marcus was an elderly bartender whom Marcus immediately discounted as even an occasional bedroom acrobat, and whom he therefore eliminated as a possible Ernest Gibbons. His reasoning was sound. Ernest Gibbons wasn't around. Ernest was scheduled this week for the night shift.

"Do you know where I could find him?" Marcus asked.

He could most likely find him sacked out in his room upstairs.

"Do you know his room number?" Marcus asked.

The elderly bartender didn't. The desk clerk surely did. Marcus, if he wished, could ask at the desk.

Marcus wished, and did. In order to do so, he was

forced to face the withering superiority of the clerk. Even in this dump, Marcus thought with resignation. It must be a kind of universal mystique or something. Were hotel clerks ordained, or did they succeed by divine right? Surely they were not merely hired. To give himself an outside chance and bolster his confidence, Marcus displayed official credentials.

"I would like to see Mr. Ernest Gibbons," he said.

The clerk said that Mr. Gibbons did not wish to be disturbed this early. Perhaps Marcus could return later.

Marcus said he couldn't. "What's his number?" he asked.

The clerk said that Mr. Gibbons, having worked late the previous night, was surely still sound asleep.

"In that case, I'll wake him," Marcus said.

"Room 412," the clerk said.

"What a hell of a hassle just to see a bartender," Marcus said.

He found the elevators and went up four floors. He started to the left, detected his error, returned to the right. He found a door with the specified numbers and pounded on it. No one answered, and so he pounded again and kept on pounding until the door was jerked suddenly away from his persistent fist. A man in a pair of Jockey shorts stood glaring out at him through what was obviously a thick and personal fog. His chest was matted, his ribs were prominent, his legs were spindly. Marcus, who preferred his nudity on the distaff side, was vaguely offended. He thanked whatever gods there were that Mr. Gibbons did not sleep wholly raw.

"Who the hell are you," said Mr. Gibbons succinctly, "and what the hell do you want?"

"My name is Marcus, and I want Ernest Gibbons."

"Ernest Gibbons isn't here. He's gone to Siberia. Get lost, brother. Come back next year."

"I'll wait."

"Like hell."

"Marcus, I said. Lieutenant Joseph Marcus. Police. Thanks for asking me in. I appreciate it."

Marcus entered, waving credentials in passing. The

room was a mess. He removed a jacket and a necktie from a chair and sat down. Ernest Gibbons, just back from Siberia, closed the door and fumbled in a litter of discarded clothes on the floor and came up with a pair of pants. He dragged on the pants, standing precariously on first one leg and then the other. Dropping limply onto the side of the bed with a screech of springs, he raked fingers through hair that went in all directions, staring the while at Marcus.

"Did you say the police?"

"That's what I said."

"Whatever the beef, I'm clean. I haven't even had a parking ticket for a year. I haven't been drunk for a month or disorderly since Christmas."

"How long since you slept out?"

"What?"

"Specifically, as the guest of a woman named Loretta Peabody."

The guy was either innocent or an actor. Marcus could see nothing on his face or in his eyes, now clearing of the personal fog, except puzzlement qualified by the slightest sign of creeping wariness, as if he suspected cards up Marcus' sleeve.

"Loretta? What the hell do you care about her?"

"You didn't answer my question. What was the last night you spent with her?"

"Last night is right. The dumb broad was beginning to bug me. I've split."

"That's interesting. What night? I'd rather not ask you again."

"Thursday. The end. Never again. A nice, quiet little private party. Pretty dull, as a matter of fact. Nothing to disturb the neighbors or interest the cops."

"I'm a cop, and I'm interested. Not in Thursday. Sunday. Where were you Sunday night? Include Monday, just to cover the ground."

"Sunday night I went down to the corner for some short-order garbage. I sat through a movie and came back here and went to bed. All dull and square, like a good citizen. I didn't go to church, though. You want to arrest me because I didn't go to church?"

"What movie did you attend?"

"The Empress. Peter Sellers in *The Party*. You want me to tell you about it?"

"Never mind. You could have seen it before or after."

"Before or after what?"

"Before or after Sunday night. What about Monday?"

"Monday I killed time. Monday night I worked."

"You sure you didn't drop in on Loretta Peabody Sunday night?"

"I told you. I'd split. Besides, her old man was supposed to be home. Look, Lieutenant, I'm a little stupid, but I'm not exactly a low-grade moron. Cops with rank don't get in an uproar over nothing, and they sure as hell don't care if a tired bartender gets entertained now and then by an amateur hooker, married or single. Something's up. I've answered your questions without a beef, and you haven't even had to shine a light in my eyes or hit me over the head with a sockful of feathers. Now it's your turn. I won't even ask how you got onto me. There's a dozen ways. All I want to know is, what's up with Loretta? Has the dumb broad swallowed a handful of pills or stuck her head in the oven or something?"

"She didn't have to. Someone strangled her to death. I thought maybe it was you."

"Oh, no! You think again, Lieutenant. You think about her old man. He was supposed to be home over the weekend."

"I'm thinking about him. He's a traveling saleman, very convenient for you, and he seems to be out on the road again. You know where?"

"Under the circumstances, he's probably in Mexico by this time."

"That's all right. We've got an extradition treaty with Mexico. He peddles toys and games, I understand. You know what outfit?"

"Sure. A guy naturally picks up a little dope on the sap he's cuckolding. The Fun House. That's the name of the outfit. Factory in Akron, Ohio."

"Thanks." Marcus stood up. "Stick around town,

Ernie. I may get an urge to see you again."

Marcus let himself out. It was time for lunch, and he was hungry. He wondered if Fuller had made it back to Fat Ferd's for ham hocks and beans.

Some patient plodding in the neighborhood of the delicatessen left Marcus where he was. Fuller shared the footwork and came up with the same result: nothing, or so precious little as hardly to count. They were able to verify the information that Harley Peabody had been home for the weekend, because he parked his car, when he was home, in a lot on the other side of the block, and the attendant said that the car, a 1967 Ford sedan, was left there by Harley late Friday afternoon and had remained until Saturday midnight at least. The attendant went off duty at midnight, and the lot was left unattended from that hour until six o'clock Monday morning, at which time the car was gone. Leaving unanswered, of course, precisely the question that needed answering. What time did Harley go?

Folk along Harley's side of the block were no help. In fact, none of them, not one, excluding Mr. Glaucus, who had sold him baked ham and potato salad, was absolutely sure that Harley had been home at all. Harley, it seemed, was that kind of guy; quiet, nondescript, the little man who *may* have been there. It was hard to remember. Some of the neighboring tenants or entrepreneurs seemed to remember seeing him around, but on second thought it might have been a week ago, or two, or anyhow some other time. They might have been able to remember if his car was there or not, because the car was more distinctive than Harley, even though it was nothing but a standard sedan, but there was no standing at the curb for certain hours of the day, and so Harley had an arrangement with the parking lot to leave his car there, where it couldn't be seen. That's the way it was. Sorry, Officer.

Back in his cubbyhole at headquarters, Marcus removed his shoes and rubbed his feet. Fuller watched

with a mixture of envy and animosity. The day had been long, the pavements had been hard, and Fuller's feet also were hot and hurting, especially the left foot with the corn. There was no good reason why Fuller shouldn't have removed his own shoes and rubbed his feet, but Fuller didn't for the simple bad reason that Marcus did. He'd be damned if he'd do anything whatever to suggest that he, Fuller, was emulating the aggravating Marcus. It was a misfortune of Fuller's position that he frequently felt compelled to cut off his nose to spite his face.

"We seem to have here," said Marcus, massaging his toes, "a case of Chesterton's postman."

"Whose what?" said Fuller.

"Never mind. The analogy is not valid anyhow. Chesterton's postman was not remarked because he was an accepted and expected phenomenon. Our friend Harley was not remarked, I gather, simply because he's something of a cipher."

"That's fascinating," said Fuller, "and very enlightening."

Which was his way of saying that he, for one, was still in the dark, and would lay long odds that Marcus, for another, was likewise. Fuller was not, to tell the truth, in a good humor. Besides having a red-hot corn, he had missed his ham hocks and beans, and his belly was growling. He was in no mood to agitate his brain about phenomena and ciphers, or to sustain a proper tolerance of the phony erudition of a cocky cop who happened, worse luck, to be his superior. Marcus, aware of all this, was perversely pleased. He had a weakness for Fuller. From Fuller's bristles he derived a kind of satisfaction, like a hound having his ears scratched.

"Fuller," he said, "it's been a hard day. Why don't you take off?"

Fuller went, limping. When he was gone, Marcus used the phone and got some surprising news; surprising and thought-provoking. No car was registered in the name of Harley Peabody. There was, therefore, no license number to which to alert city and

county cops and state patrols. Marcus, at once provoked to thought and profanity, pulled on his shoes while indulging in both.

The next morning he was early on the job. At his desk, he got an outside line and dialed 1-216-555-1212, and quicker than you could say electrons or protons or possibly positrons, he was talking with Information in Akron, Ohio. Information talked sexy. Her voice had red hair. Considering that she spoke crisply about nothing more intimate than arabic digits, this was a kind of miracle of modern communication. She gave Marcus a number, which he jotted on a pad. Marcus broke the connection and then dialed the number. After a lot of futile ringing which apparently no one in all of Akron heard, he hung up. Well, it was early. He'd try again in an hour. He spent half the hour boondoggling. The other half, as his brain warmed up, he spent thinking.

The story of the murder of Loretta Peabody had made yesterday's papers. Being a murder of no great importance to anybody except Loretta herself and maybe as many others as you could count on your thumbs, it had been crowded by wars and riots and political buncombe into the inside pages without pictures, and even this niggardly treatment had surely been restricted to local editions. It had probably been too late to make the earlier editions trucked to the provinces. In brief, it was unlikely that Harley Peabody, sitting down to dinner in some rustic restaurant or relaxing before bed in some wayside hostelry, had unfolded a newspaper and read about the murder of his own wife. Therefore, even if the murder was news, which it might not be, it could hardly be anticipated that Harley was already, or would soon be, burning up the highway toward home. There was still the problem of finding and fetching him. Was he off taking orders for toys and games in the blissful innocence of ignorance? Or had he fled with the dreadful knowledge of his guilt to Tijuana or Winnipeg or some city between? Time would tell. Meanwhile, Marcus could again dial the number he had got from the redheaded voice in Akron.

This time he got an answer. After minor problems and a short delay, he got someone on the line who could give him the answers he needed. A Mr. Himmelman, it was, director of Fun House sales representatives.

Marcus? Detective-Lieutenant Marcus? What could he do to help the lieutenant?

He could give the lieutenant any information in his files about a Mr. Harley Peabody, who was employed by Mr. Himmelman's company.

Peabody? Was that P-e-a-b-o-d-y? came the interrogative reply.

That was right. Pea, as in a pod. Body, as in a morgue. Mr. Peabody was the Fun House sales representative for the district from which he, Marcus, was calling.

Was there, perhaps, some particular information in which the lieutenant was interested?

Anything available, but the lieutenant would particularly like to know if Mr. Himmelman would have any way of knowing what route Mr. Peabody would be taking this week.

Mr. Himmelman wouldn't. Mr. Himmelman was sorry. The Fun House sales representatives were not regulated by a strict schedule. They were allowed great latitude in covering their territories.

Well, never mind. Just any pertinent information.

Very well. One moment, please. Mr. Himmelman would get Mr. Peabody's file.

Marcus waited. Fuller wandered into the room, and Marcus lifted his free hand in greeting. Fuller grunted and nodded and hung around. Mr. Himmelman in Akron returned.

"This explains it," said Mr. Himmelman.

"Explains what?"

"I couldn't understand why I felt a little vague when you kept referring to Mr. Peabody. Now I understand. Not *Peabody. Peacock.* Mr. Horace *Peacock.*"

"Are you sure?"

"Oh, quite. Mr. Peacock has been our sales representative in your territory for some fifteen years.

Quite a go-getter. Excellent record."

"Could you tell me where he lives? Permanent address, I mean."

"Certainly. If he hasn't moved without notifying us, he resides at 1013 Westcrest Drive. Your city, of course.

"Of course."

"Is there any more information I can give you?"

"No, thanks. That's plenty."

"Are you allowed to tell me why you are interested in Mr. Peacock?"

"Sorry," said Marcus. "Thanks again."

He hung up. On his pad he had noted the Westcrest Drive address. Under the address he wrote: *Harley Peabody*. Under that he wrote: *Horace Peacock*. Under the two capital H's he drew heavy lines. Also under the two Pea's. Usually it was just initials. In this case, it was an initial and a whole damned syllable.

"They'll do it every time," he said.

"They who?" said Fuller. "Do what?"

Marcus, distracted, didn't hear. "As Mr. Himmelman said," he said, "this explains it."

"Who's Mr. Himmelman?" asked Fuller. "Explains what?"

This time Fuller got through. At least his final question did.

"I've been wondering," Marcus said, "why a salesman of considerable experience would live in an improvised pad over a delicatessen with a few sticks of furniture that look like 1932 Salvation Army rejects. A salesman doesn't ordinarily get filthy rich, but on the other hand he's seldom a candidate for the poverty program. Now I've got an idea. As Mr. Himmelman said, this explains it."

Maybe it explained it to Mr. Himmelman and to Marcus, but it didn't explain it to Sergeant Bobo Fuller. Not by a jugful.

"That's fine," said Fuller. "I'm happy to hear it."

Marcus, at the moment insensitive to Fuller's caustic inflection, was making moves to indicate imminent departure. "Fuller," he said, "I've got an errand to

run. Meanwhile, I've got another one for you. Run down the license number on a Ford registered in the name of Horace Peacock. When you've got the number, have an alert sent out to have the driver of the car apprehended and held. I'm on my way now. See you later."

Marcus, knowledgeable as he was about the city he prowled in the practice of his trade, had to consult a map to locate Westcrest Drive. He found it on the far western edge in a middle class suburbia, a meandering road less than a mile long on the plumbing frontier. He put the map in his pocket, his hat on his head, and started out. On the way, he cornered Fuller, who was still around.

"Fuller," he said, "after you've got out that alert, you can do something else. There's this bartender in the bar of the Congress, over on Elder. His name's Ernest Gibbons. He's the guy who was playing part-time house with Loretta Peabody. He has a room in the Congress. He claims he spent last Sunday night watching Peter Sellers at the Empress and alone in bed in his room afterward. You go over there and check it out. See if you can find anyone who can help support his story. Try the hashhouse on the corner, try the theater, try the hotel, try anyone you can think of who might have seen him and remembers it. It wouldn't give him a clean bill, unless he took someone to bed with him, which he doesn't claim, but at least it would be something. Get on it, Fuller. You know your business. You don't need me to tell you."

"Thanks," said Fuller, adding in his own mind an appropriate noun and a string of vivid adjectives.

Marcus went out and got into his car and headed west by north. He got onto a boulevard that cut across town in the general direction. After driving about half a dozen miles on the boulevard he pulled off into the drive of a gas station and consulted his map again. With an index finger he traced his route, making mental notes of street names and numbers. Under way again, he continued briefly on the boulevard, made a right turn and followed thereafter the route he had traced, keeping an eye out for the mark-

ers at intersections. Westcrest Drive was there, all right, right where the map had said it would be. Marcus, by nature suspicious of maps, gadgets and all devices calculated to impede and befuddle what should be unobstructed and clear, was surprised and thankful. He drove slowly along black macadam, peering at house numbers, and pretty soon there it was: 1013 Westcrest Drive, a modest frame house set behind a small lawn across which a flagstone walk ran up to the front door between a pair of matching locust trees. Marcus went up the walk to the door and rang the bell.

Someone inside was operating a vacuum sweeper. Marcus could hear the bell faintly over the sweeper's whine, but the operator apparently couldn't. The whine kept on, and the door stayed closed. Marcus waited patiently until the sweeper abruptly stopped, then he prodded the bell-button again. The door was opened, after a few seconds, by a woman about forty years old, imitation blonde, who was dressed in a green synthetic blouse and a pair of brown slacks. Between her lips was a cigarette from which smoke curled up into one eye, which she squinted. After inspecting Marcus, she removed the cigarette.

"Yes?" she said.

"Mrs. Peacock?" Marcus countered.

"That's right. What do you want?"

"I'd like to talk with you, if you don't mind." Marcus showed credentials. "My name is Marcus. Lieutenant Joseph Marcus."

"What about? I'm very busy this morning."

"If you'll let me come in, I'll explain. I'll try not to take too much of your time."

Mrs. Peacock nodded and stepped aside, and Marcus advanced into a small foyer. Hat in hand, he followed Mrs. Peacock into the livingroom. The sweeper, still attached by its cord to an outlet, was standing idle in the middle of a beige carpet. Marcus, invited, sat down in a chair and hung his hat on his knee. Mrs. Peacock sat on the edge of a sofa, her impatience implicit in her posture.

"Now, Lieutenant," she said, "what do you want to talk with me about?"

To tell the truth, Marcus didn't quite know what to say. At this stage of the game he could hardly tell the woman baldly that he suspected her presumed husband of leading a double life in which he might be a bigamist at best, depending on whether or not he had actually married Loretta Peabody, or a murderer at worst, depending on where he was at what time, or a bigamist and murderer both, which was not out of the question. On the other hand, it was essential to sort out Peabody from Peacock and find out where both of them was—an ungrammatical way to put it but nevertheless the only way, Marcus suspected, which conformed to the truth as it would probably turn out. There it was, and Marcus was stuck with it.

"Actually," he said, "it's your husband I'd rather talk with. Can you tell me where to find him?"

"I'm sorry. My husband is a traveling salesman and hasn't been home for nearly two weeks. He has a large territory and is usually gone for quite protracted periods."

"I was told that. That he's a salesman, I mean. Toys and games, as I recall. His firm is Fun House, is it not?"

"That's right. He's worked for it for many years."

"When are you expecting him home?"

"This coming weekend. At least, he will be here if at all possible. There's a meeting of deacons at our church Sunday afternoon. Horace—Mr. Peacock—is a deacon, you see. He's a very devoted worker in the church."

The hell he is! thought Marcus.

"In that case," he said, "perhaps I'd just better wait and talk with Mr. Peacock directly. I'm sorry to have interrupted your work."

"What is it you want to see my husband about? I can't imagine what business he could have with the police."

"It's just a routine matter. Your husband can inform you after I've seen him." Marcus, who had

risen, moved ahead of her into the foyer, where he turned. "You have a very attractive house here," he said.

"It's quite nice. Small, of course, only two bedrooms, but we don't need much room for only the two of us, and Horace away from home so much."

Marcus agreed and took his leave. Going down the flagstone walk to his car, he congratulated himself. He'd come out of that neatly, no doubt about that, and he hadn't had to tell even one lie. If you were willing to allow, that is, that a murder investigation was a routine matter.

No wonder that Deacon Peacock had maintained very unequal establishments. It must be a strain, supporting two homes on a modest income. One of them had inevitably to suffer. He supposed that Mrs. Peacock had priority over Mrs. Peabody, and therefore naturally got the better of it.

It was on the way back to headquarters that lightning struck him.

Could it be that Mrs. Peacock was a consummate actress?

Could it be that she had somehow discovered the existence of Mrs. Peabody and had taken action, to end a sticky situation?

Could it be that he, Marcus, had another suspect on his hands? Then, by the time he reached headquarters, he had persuaded himself that the culpability of Mrs. Peacock was the most remote of possibilities.

At his desk, he read the autopsy report, which was waiting for him.

Loretta Peabody had died of suffocation as a result of being strangled. No news to Marcus.

When found, she had been dead thirty to thirty-six hours, which was a considerable spread, and Marcus split the difference for convenience at thirty-three. She had been found by Blanche Slocum at approximately nine o'clock Tuesday morning, and so arbitrarily had died at approximately midnight Sunday, an appropriate hour for murder. On the basis of present evidence, it did not preclude the eligibility of

either Harley Peabody or Ernest Gibbons. Or, to be impartial, of Mrs. Horace Peacock or Blanche Slocum or Alexander Glaucus or any joker in the deck you might care to mention; another lover, for instance, or a stray sex fiend or a meter reader who just lost control of himself. But Marcus was not impartial. He was betting on Peabody or Gibbons. Even money and take your pick.

Loretta had been three months pregnant, poor girl.

This was news. Marcus read it once. He read it twice. He reflected a moment and read it again.

Well, it was nothing unusual for a wife to be pregnant even if, under the persnickety terms of the law, she was no wife at all, but that depended, of course, upon who made her pregnant. If Harley was responsible, making up for lost time on one of his rare domestic weekends, everything was hunky-dory. If, on the other hand, Loretta had forgotten her pill or slipped her rhythm, thereby hooking Ernie, everything was a bit more complicated. But why? There was surely no way that Loretta could have told for certain, Harley or Ernie, so why not take the easy way out and lay it in Harley's lap? For that matter, even if it was Ernie for sure, why not lay it in Harley's lap anyhow? Unless Loretta had taken a notion to move Harley out and Ernie in; unless, in other words, she had put the heat on Ernie to stand by for marriage. To judge from the character of his reference to Loretta in his room at the Congress, that would have certainly aroused in Ernie a certain reluctance. It might even have moved him to temporary insanity and murderous rage. Maybe even money wasn't so wise. Maybe the odds should be on Ernie. Maybe Fuller, when he returned from his assignment, would have something to report affecting the matter.

Fuller, unfortunately, didn't. It was recalled by the cashier in the coffee shop next door to the Congress that Ernie had been in Sunday evening for chow. She thought it was around six. Something like that. He'd stopped to pay his check on the way out and had bought a package of cigarettes, six cents worth of chocolate mint patties at two cents each, and had lin-

gered a few moments to comment on the state of the world, which was bad. She remembered about the mint patties because Ernie invariably bought the exact same number when he paid his check, no exceptions, and he never had them added to his check, like other customers, but always paid for them out of pocket with exact change, either a nickel and a copper or six coppers. Always the precisely exact change. It was some kind of hangup or something.

No one at the Empress remembered him, Ernie not really being very memorable, but the night clerk at the Congress remembered his stopping at the desk to get his key and making several favorable comments about how funny Peter Sellers was, which Mr. Sellers would no doubt have appreciated greatly if he had been able to hear. The clerk assumed that Ernie had gone directly up to his room after getting his key, but he couldn't swear to it, of course, not having paid any particular attention, Ernie being the kind of guy who didn't *attract* any particular attention. This was some time between ten and eleven; say, ten-thirty, more or less. Fuller, having very little to report, reported in detail.

Anyhow, it left Ernie in contention and Marcus exactly where he was. He was still playing eeny-meeny-miney-mo.

"Fuller," he said, "there's something else I want you to check out for me."

"What's that?"

"Find out if a marriage license was ever issued to Harley Peabody and Loretta whatever-her-name was. I'm guessing that you won't find any record of it."

"You think they were just shacked up? What makes you think so?"

"I don't think so, as a matter of fact. I've just got a notion that they got married somewhere else."

"How the hell would you know? Intuition? Clairvoyance? You having hot flashes or something?"

"Not quite. If they hadn't been married, I've got a notion Blanche Slocum would have known it. And if she'd known it, I've got a notion Blanche Slocum would have said so. On the other hand, a guy who al-

ready had a wife would probably exercise a little discretion in taking another. Of course, it would be possible for him to get married again in the same town where his legal wife was living, especially if he used another name on the license, but chances are he would have gone to another town or another state. You know. Just as an added precaution."

Here it went again! Another rabbit out of the hat. That was just like Marcus, always getting hold of something, some information or evidence or piece of fancy speculation, and then springing it all at once for effect, like a magic trick. All devised, of course, for no other reason than to confound Fuller and make his mouth hang open, as Fuller's mouth, in fact, was hanging.

"Are you trying to tell me," he said, "that Harley Peabody's got another wife?"

"That's right, Fuller. Mrs. Horace Peacock. She had a legal piece of Horace long before Loretta established her claim to a piece of Harley. Very complicated. You might even call it a plain mess."

"Living right here in town?"

"Right here. Way over on the other side, of course; on Westcrest Drive, to be exact, in a nice little house in a nice little neighborhood. Her piece of Horace is obviously somewhat bigger than Loretta's piece of Harley was. You might say that she's been getting the chops, while Loretta was eating sausage."

"I don't believe it. I don't believe that any guy's crazy enough to have two wives at the same time and keep them both in the same town."

"Harley-Horace, I suspect, is a bigamist. Go find out for me, Fuller. There's a good fellow. Maybe you can prove me wrong."

Having sufficiently annoyed Fuller, Marcus turned to other matters. Fuller, the good fellow, departed, bitterly hoping that Marcus was wrong indeed, but he doubted bleakly that Marcus was.

"By the way," he said, sticking his head back into the cubbyhole from the hall, "there was a Ford registered to a Peacock, all right. The alert's out."

There it rested for the remainder of that day and

the most of the next. Having nowhere new to go, and lacking anything better to do, Marcus returned to the neighborhood of Alexander Glaucus' delicatessen. He climbed the narrow stairs to the improvised apartment overhead and prowled through the file of dreary rooms, poking here and there and exploring drawers.

He was oppressed and frustrated by a glaring deficiency in the little store of knowledge that he had gathered about Harley Peabody, or Horace Peacock, or whoever Harley or Horace was in fact. He was a bigamist certainly and a murderer possibly, or even probably, but he remained, in spite of this, a strangely obscure figure, created by hearsay and constructed of shadows. Except for the thumbnail sketch by Mr. Glaucus, that Harley Peabody was a miserable little bluenose, which evoked a certain image, Marcus had no clear notion of what he looked like. No picture of him had turned up, not even a snapshot, and Marcus, who was naturally curious, was presently searching again with no better luck. Bigamists, as well as other offenders fearful of detection, may be expected to develop an allergy to cameras.

Giving up, Marcus descended to the street and entered the establishment of Mr. Glaucus. As he had indicated before by his ready reference to the Snyder-Gray case of the twenties, Mr. Glaucus was a student of murder, domestic and foreign, and had reached his own solutions to practically all the celebrated cases, these solutions being at odds in an alarming number of instances to official verdicts. Marcus spent an entertaining time, the better part of an hour, discussing Lizzie Borden, who had been declared innocent and was guilty, and Edith Thompson, who had been declared guilty and was innocent. Afterward, before he parted from Mr. Glaucus and his enchanting establishment, he was invited to devour a chicken salad sandwich and a dish of cole slaw on the house, an invitation which he accepted gratefully, saving himself thereby the price of a lunch.

He dropped by the Congress and had a beer in the bar, considering while he had it the advantages to be derived, if any, from going upstairs and harassing Er-

nest Gibbons again. He decided against it. In the first place, the prospect of a session with Ernie was singularly uninviting. In the second place, he had nothing significant to ask that hadn't been asked already, and Ernie surely had nothing to say that he hadn't already said. Short of a confession, that is, which could hardly at this stage be expected. So Marcus returned to headquarters and busied himself with this and that. Having no appetite to lure him out to eat and no pressing motive to drive him home unfed to his bachelor's pad, he lingered on, boondoggling, after hours.

Then, in the lees of the day or the shank of the night, there was a call from the chief of police of a city in the neighboring state north. The call was switched to Marcus at his desk. The chief's name was Dolan. He and Marcus had met. They exchanged amenities.

"I think I've got the man you're after," Dolan said. "Then, again, maybe I haven't. What I've got is the man who owns the Ford with the license you're after."

"Maybe you'd better run that past again," Marcus said.

"I'll take it from the beginning. A pair of my men were in a prowl car over on the east side of town; slum area, Deep East, we call it. Anyhow, they caught this car in a minor traffic violation and hauled it over to the curb. Just a lucky break. There's not much doubt that the driver's the man you want, but there are a couple of problems."

"What problems?"

"The guy claims his name's not Peacock. Claims it's Percy. Harold Percy."

"Is Percy the name on his driver's license?"

"That's it. Harold Percy. Local address. Of course, he could have got a license in your state and another in ours, using a different name on each."

"What about registration?"

"Same goes. Registration in order. Nothing to keep him from registering the car in both states."

"In that case, the registration and the license tag wouldn't match."

"Right. Unless, of course, he switched tags when he crossed the state line. Which is what he'd done."

"How do you know?"

"I'm telling you. Deep East's a trouble area, with muggings, armed robberies, the works. We had a small riot there a year ago, and we can smell another in the air, maybe a big one, so we take precautions. We stop a car for any reason in that area, we make a routine check. Search the trunk and so on. That's how we got him, Peacock or Percy or whoever he is. In the trunk was an extra license tag for your state. The one you're looking for."

"Good. So what's the problem?"

"You say you want this guy for questioning in the murder of his wife. Well, his wife happens to be the liveliest corpse I've ever seen. Mrs. Harold Percy in the flesh. Legal spouse. We've checked it out."

"What did you say?"

"Well, Mrs. Percy's raising bloody hell. What you want us to do with this guy?"

"Hold him. If he won't waive extradition, we'll start proceedings."

"He says he'll waive. Eager to straighten out any misunderstanding, he says. Which only means he's hooked and knows there's no use fighting it. He swears he'll head straight your way if we let him go."

"We'll pick him up, just in case he might get lost between there and here."

"The sooner the better. We'll be looking for you."

Marcus thanked him and hung up. He rocked back and put his feet on his desk and closed his eyes. There was something wrong with this case, something abnormal—not counting bigamy and murder, which were themselves abnormal enough. No, something else, a kind of discrepancy; but discrepancy means difference, something present or missing that shouldn't be. Difference from what? As compared with what else? Something, Marcus felt uneasily, as obvious and irking as a gnat in the eye.

Then, suddenly, he had it. He had the discrepancy, the difference, the gnat in his eye—and he had, sure as sure, his murderer.

Mr. Harley Horace Harold Peabody Peacock Percy, arriving at Marcus' door under escort, was released at that point to find his way alone to a chair before Marcus' desk. He hitched his pants at the knees and sat down with a suggestion of finicking hesitancy. He was a thin man, slightly under average height, with thin sandy hair, thin bloodless lips, and a thin pointed nose. His Adam's apple, which was prominent, bobbed when he swallowed. Marcus guessed his age at forty. Fuller, who was standing aside, was transfixed with incredulity, outright disbelief, a kind of wild, wild wonder at the monstrous implausibility of the palpable.

"Well, Mr. Peabody," said Marcus, "we have been put to some trouble in getting hold of you. Have I called you correctly, by the way? Would you prefer Peacock or Percy to Peabody?"

"My father's name was Peacock."

The man's voice was as mild as his manner, slightly lilting and touched with sadness. He cupped his knees in his hands and stared wistfully at his private vision over Marcus' right shoulder.

"That being settled, Mr. Peacock," Marcus said, "I am curious to know if you are aware that it's against the law in this country, and most others, to have more than one wife at a time?"

"Oh, yes. I know that. I know the law."

"You don't deny, then, that you willfully broke it?"

"I'm sure, Lieutenant, that there would be no point in a denial. You have found me out. I concede it."

"Perhaps, in that event, you would be willing to tell me your reasons."

"I'll try, gladly, although I despair, I must admit, of your understanding. I am a man of lusty appetites. However, I am not a libertine. I am, in truth, something of a puritan, a term currently, and unfortunately, in disrepute. Philandering is offensive to my nature. As I saw it in my own case, the alternative to philandering was marriage. So I married. I married in good faith, and I was true to my wives. I never indulged myself with any woman who declined to marry me. I took my vows seriously, you see, a relatively

rare thing these days. Do you follow me?"

Marcus was having his troubles. Fuller was lost almost before he'd started. In fact, Fuller seemed in danger of exploding.

"It strikes me," said Marcus mildly, "that such a program, however admirable, would have encountered serious social and economic problems."

"That's true. Only too true. I had to ration my time with each wife rather severely, and also my worldly goods. As you say, there were problems."

"Maybe you decided to weed them out a little. Your wives, I mean. Sort of relieve the pressure."

Mr. Peacock's son removed his gaze from his vision and studied his hands. He lifted, after a moment, his eyes toward heaven. Just discernibly, his thin lips quivered.

"You are referring, of course, to the unhappy end of poor Loretta," he said.

"I am," said Marcus.

"Too bad." Mr. Peacock sighed. "Most unfortunate."

"Did you know that she had a lover?"

"Yes. I knew."

"Did she tell you so?"

"No."

"Then how did you know she had one?"

"I knew. Never mind how. I knew."

It was Marcus' turn to sigh. He looked almost sympathetic.

"Mr. Peacock," he said, "you had three wives. Is that correct?"

"Yes. Three."

"You had been married to all three for periods ranging from three to fifteen years. Am I right?" Marcus persisted.

"You are."

"But, Mr. Peacock, according to my information, *you had no offspring.* Neither chick nor child. For a man of lusty appetites and opportunity times three, that seems odd. Can you explain it?"

"Is it necessary to explain it? It's apparent that you know the reason."

"Yes. I know, and you know, but Loretta Peabody didn't know. Probably none of your wives knew. Husbands are often shy about confessing such deficiencies to their wives. That's why Loretta felt no apprehension in telling you that she was pregnant, was it not?"

"She told me that the child was mine."

"And she was entirely mistaken."

"Yes."

"And so you killed her."

"Yes."

"That was around Sunday midnight. Afterward, you packed your bag and got your car and left town."

"Yes."

"Hold the comfort of one small thought, Mr. Peacock." Marcus' voice may have been slightly bitter. "You were faithful in your fashion, as your vows put it, till death."

Mr. Peacock was again staring at his hands. Perhaps he was seeing them around a throat.

"I cannot abide infidelity," he said.

It was much later when Fuller, who had delivered Mr. Peacock to his keeper, came back. Marcus, to the naked eye, had not moved.

"Why the hell," said Fuller, "would a guy with three wives get in an uproar because one of them had a boyfriend? It's not reasonable."

"Well," said Marcus, "I never heard of the sheik holding open house in the harem."

"What's more," said Fuller, "how the hell did that little monster ever *get* three wives? Who would ever suspect an anemic runt like him of being a lousy Bluebeard?"

Marcus heard the lazy flapping of fans. He sniffed the fragrance of delicatessen. In his grateful heart he gave Mr. Alexander Glaucus A-plus for percipience.

"Not beard, Fuller. Nose. Blue*nose*."

THE HITCHHIKERS

by Bruce Hunsberger

The late model sedan drew to a halt at the side of the road, and the two teen-aged boys who had been hitchhiking ran to get in. One, a sturdily built eighteen-year-old, climbed into the front seat beside the driver, and his companion, a soft-looking youth of seventeen who had not yet lost his baby fat, got in the back. With a crunching of gravel and a slight spinning of tires the car slipped quickly out into the stream of traffic.

"Where are you headed?" the driver asked them, a friendly grin playing across his square, rugged face.

"Up this road a couple miles," the sturdy one answered, "to a dance."

"Gonna have a good time?"

"We intend to have a ball," he said, then turned to his buddy in the back. "How about it, Butch?"

"Yeah," Butch answered nervously, "a real ball."

"Your name's Butch?" the driver asked. "My name's Williams, Bill Williams. They used to call me Butch," he said, and without taking his eyes from the road, reached his open hand back over the seat. Butch touched it in greeting.

"And yours?" he asked the other boy.

"Vince." They clasped hands.

Twilight was rapidly deepening into darkness and several cars had already turned on their lights. Williams switched on his and said, "You know, most people won't turn their headlights on until it's so dark they can't see ten feet in front of the car. Not me. I turn 'em on as soon as the sun starts to set. Twilight is the most dangerous time of the day. Did you know that?"

"Yes," said Vince, "somebody did say something

like that to me once. Did you know twilight was dangerous, Butch?"

Butch coughed in reply.

They drove on for several miles, through suburbia and out into the countryside beyond, Williams chatting amiably and the boys grunting replies. As they entered a stretch of road bordered by tall pines and firs, Vince said, "You can pull over here."

It was now completely dark, and no other cars were on the road.

"Here?" Williams asked. "Son, there's no dance around here. This is the middle of nowhere."

"*Here,* I said." Vince was holding a very long, thin stiletto in his left hand. He jabbed it against Williams's ribs, making an indentation in his sport coat.

"Whatever you say," Williams said, his eyes big as golf balls as he beheld the savage-looking knife, "only don't hurt me, please!"

He brought the car to a halt well off the road behind some tall bushes. "What do you want?" he asked, his voice trembling. "Is it the car? Do you want the car? You can have it! Look, here are the keys!" He pulled them from the ignition and thrust them toward Vince. "Take the car, but don't hurt me, please!"

"We don't want the car," Vince said coldly.

"Then what do you want?"

"Kicks."

"I don't understand."

"Kicks. You know. You must've read in the papers that kids like to get their kicks in weird ways—like killing people. Butch and me thought we'd like to kill somebody just for kicks, just to see how it feels. Right, Butch?"

Butch sat rigidly in the back seat and said nothing.

"I said 'right, Butch?' " Vince said menacingly and glared at his friend. "Now don't tell me you went and turned chicken on me, because I don't want to hear that noise. We're going to kill this guy for kicks. Me *and* you. It's too late to back out."

"Look," Williams said, "is it money? Do you want money? Sure you want money. Fine young men like yourselves can always use a few dollars spending money. I'll give you my money, I'll . . ."

"We don't want money, man," Vince laughed. "Why, Butch's old man has all the money in the world. He's a millionaire, ain't he, Butch? He's a big shot lawyer in these parts. Maybe you even heard of him?"

"Shut up!" Butch shrieked. "Shut up, do you hear! Don't go dragging my father's name into this thing! It's bad enough that you talked me into this nightmare."

"Yeah," Vince said, "I talked you into it, but you *are* in it. And now there's no turning back. You see, even if we let this joker go, he'd get us into all kinds of trouble."

"No, no, I wouldn't," Williams pleaded. "I wouldn't say a word. I don't even know your names."

"You mean you don't know I'm Vince Kline and he's Butch Fetterman, and that his old man is the big shot lawyer, Carl Fetterman? You didn't know that?"

"Why did you tell him that!" Butch was hysterical. "Why did you have to tell him that!"

"I told him so you couldn't chicken out. Now he knows who we are and who your father is, and don't think he won't tell the world all about it if we let him go. Butch, we got to kill him now. We got no choice."

"No," Williams began to sob, "No, don't kill me, please!"

Vince giggled with delight as he pushed the knife a little harder into Williams's side.

"Beg, man," Vince sneered. "Plead for your ratty old life. That's what we want to hear. That's why we're killing you, to hear you plead and beg, to hear what you'll say when you know that you're going to be cut up into little pieces. What should we do first, Butch? Should we slit his throat and let him bleed a little, or should we shove the blade into his guts a few times to stir things up inside? I bet that'd be more painful, huh?"

Butch had his face buried in his hands, sobbing

and refusing to look. "I don't want any part of this thing!"

"Oh, you'll get part of it, Buddy Boy," Vince laughed. "I'm gonna cut some fingers off for souvenirs, and you're gonna get one to carry in your pocket for good luck. How about it?"

"You're a maniac!" Butch screamed.

"Now is that any way to talk about an old school chum? Call him nasty names?"

"I got money!" Williams screamed. "I'll give you my money."

"I told you we don't want your lousy money," Vince said disgustedly. "You can't buy your life, man; you're as good as dead right now! It's all over but the pain." Then he laughed. "Did you hear that, Butch? It's all over but the pain!"

Williams began to sob, "Take my money, please take my money. I want you to have it."

"We'll get it anyway after you're gone." Vince turned to Butch. "Hey, that's a song, Butch, 'After You're Gone.' Sing it for us Butch; let me hear that sweet voice of yours."

"I want you to have my money!" Williams hollered.

"OK, OK," Vince said. "A dying man is entitled to a last request. If you're so stuck on giving me your money, then let me have it."

"My wallet's in my breast pocket," Williams said. "You'll have to lower your knife for a moment."

When Vince did this, Williams reached into his inner coat pocket, withdrew a snub-nosed revolver and, as Vince stared stricken with horror and disbelief, fired three times. Vince groaned and then rolled forward and slumped to the floor; the knife dropped from his hand. Butch looked up, bleached and pale, into the smoking barrel of the revolver which Williams was pointing at his face.

"Sort of puts the shoe on the other foot, doesn't it?" Williams grinned.

"You're not going to kill me, are you?" Butch cried.

"Oh, let's not go through that routine again,"

Williams moaned. "Look, sonny, I've got no intention of killing you. Your friend asked for it, but I can see that you were conned into this deal. You're a nice kid who got himself mixed up with the wrong company, that's all. Nevertheless, you are in a jam. I'm clean because I shot your friend in self-defense. But you? You're his accomplice. You're as guilty as he was about threatening my life. Still in all, I like you and I'd hate to see you get into bad trouble. One little mix-up like this could ruin your whole life—and destroy your father's career, too. Maybe we could work something out."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I've got to report this thing to the police right away, you see, but there's no reason why I'd have to tell them there were two boys involved. I mean, you didn't actually take part in the threats, so why should you suffer?"

"Do you mean that you won't mention my name? You won't tell them I was along?" Butch sat forward excitedly, "I'd really appreciate that, mister, and so would my father."

"Would he appreciate it fifty thousand dollars worth?"

Butch was stunned.

"Let's face it, sonny," Williams said, "I'm giving you your future. Fifty grand isn't too much to ask to sort of balance the scale, is it?"

"He won't do it," Butch said.

Williams started the car and backed out onto the highway. "Then I guess we'll drive on down to the state police barracks and report this whole mess."

"Wait," Butch said. "We'll see what my father has to say. After all, he's a lawyer."

"You're the boss," Williams smiled. "Anything you say."

Butch gave the road directions and in a few minutes they were motoring up the long poplar-lined driveway to Carl Fetterman's mansion, the tires humming softly on the smooth tarmac. After parking the car under a covered portico at the rear of the large residence, Williams asked, "Is your father alone?"

"Yes. My mother doesn't live with us, and the servants are off tonight."

As they entered the house Butch said, "I'll tell you what. My father's in the study. You'd better wait in the hall and let me go in and tell him the whole story. I think it would be best that way. If he wants to talk to you, I'll come out and get you."

Williams agreed to the plan, and Butch went into the study. Williams heard the father's voice raised in anger, and the boy pleading for understanding. Then things quieted down. In a few minutes Butch came out into the hall and beckoned to Williams to come into the study.

"You realize, Mr. Williams, that you are proposing blackmail?" asked Carl Fetterman sternly.

"I don't call it that," Williams said earnestly. "I call it a balance of payments. Your son's future can't be measured in dollars and cents, can it?"

"If his future is going to be anything like his past, I could do him no greater service than let him be locked in jail. He's a disgrace to me and to his whole family. He's no good! He's worthless!" Fetterman was becoming excited, heaping insults upon his son.

The boy stood with bowed head, tears running down his face.

"Yes, this is the last straw—mixed up in murder. Boy, have you no sense of decency whatsoever? If you have no regard for yourself, at least have some for your father. I'm in the public eye; I have a reputation to uphold."

"That's why I thought you'd find my proposal to your liking," interrupted Williams.

"But fifty thousand dollars! Where could I get cash like that on such short notice?"

"I'm sure you must have a few extra dollars lying around," Williams said, "a few tax free, unreported dollars."

"Are you casting aspersions on my integrity?" Fetterman roared. "Are you accusing me of tax evasion, of dishonest dealings?"

"It isn't my place to accuse you of anything. I'm

simply telling you that if you don't produce that money in five minutes I'm driving down to the state police barracks and tell them my story."

"Ah," said Fetterman, "but my son is at home now, and I'll swear that he's been home all evening. How will you explain that?"

"I'll tell them the truth: That your son said he wanted to talk to your first, and that you offered me money not to implicate him."

"Dad," Butch pleaded, "we'd better get him the money and let him go. Don't get him mad."

"Your son's right, Mr. Fetterman. Get the money."

Fetterman looked at his son, "I should let them have you, but I can't. I'll get the money."

He left the study and Butch followed him. Williams sat in a large leather chair and took a real Havana cigar from Fetterman's humidor. After lighting it with an expensive lighter, he dropped the lighter into his pocket. "A little bonus," he chuckled, and cocked his feet up on the solid mahogany desk. He was blowing smoke rings when Butch returned with the money in a paper bag.

"Here's the money," he said. "Now get out."

Williams counted the cash and then, taking a fistful of cigars, he left. When he was off the grounds and wheeling down the highway he said, "OK, Vince, you can get up now."

Vince climbed up onto the seat.

"Man, that was cramped. And that floor! Don't you ever clean this heap? It's filthy!"

"With this bundle of paper, I'll buy a new one!"

"You got it?" Vince grinned. "Let me see."

Williams tossed the bag to Vince, and he rooted in it gleefully. "Yow! Then they fell for it, hook, line and sinker!"

"Yes, you really picked a patsy. Where did you meet that kid?"

"At school. He's one of those rich kids that thinks it's cool to hang around with hoods."

"That's quite a place his old man has there. I'll bet we could have burned him for twice this much."

"We can always go back," Vince said.

Williams laughed, "You have a point there, a real good point. Some other time, maybe."

"Yeah, it's like having money in the bank," Vince laughed. "Hey, by the way, let me have the gun back, will you?"

Williams tossed him the revolver.

"In a month or so," Williams said, "we can take a sneak up there and hit the place. The old man must keep a lot of paper laying around to be able to put his hands on fifty grand so quick."

"Bill," Vince asked, "are we near the place where you were supposed to have shot me?"

"Sure, right down the road here. Why?"

"I want you to stop. I can't find my knife. I think it must've bounced out the window when I went into my act."

Williams swung the car off the road, "Right here it was."

"Kill the lights and let me have the flashlight," Vince said as he got out.

Williams came around the front of the car with a flashlight. Vince took the light from him then, and poked him in the chest with the gun.

"Stand back a little, Bill. This has got to be from about ten feet."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm going to shoot you," Vince smiled.

"With blanks?" Williams said. "Let's stop playing games and find your knife."

"Oh, I know where the knife is. Butch has it. He's using it on his dad."

Williams went cold, "What do you mean?"

"Butch is killing his dad right now. Then after I blast you, I'm taking your body back to Butch's place and dumping it in the study. It'll look like you killed the old man and were robbing the place, and Butch interrupted you. Naturally, when you came at him he had to kill you. And with your record, who will doubt him?"

"With your gun? It'll look phony!"

"This is the old man's gun. Butch took it from his bureau drawer yesterday when we planned this whole

thing. You see, Butch doesn't like his old man and was trying to work out a way to get rid of him for months. The problem was to make it look like an accident so there wouldn't be any tie-up in the estate. Of course, he's got to wait a few years until he's old enough to inherit the whole works, but that's when that fifty grand in cash is going to come in handy, to tide him over those lean years."

"And you conned me into picking you up on the highway! Made all those plans with me, and all the time you and that kid were in this deal together! Why you lousy bum, I'll take you apart!"

He lunged at Vince, and Vince fired twice, both times catching Williams in the chest.

"Blanks?" Williams gasped in disbelief.

"No," Vince laughed. "They didn't feel like blanks, did they? They were the real thing."

He caught Williams before he fell and carried him around to the back of the car, where he pulled a plastic bag over him and then dumped him into the trunk. A few minutes later he pulled up to the back door at Fetterman's, where Butch greeted him.

"Everything go all right, Vince?"

"Smooth," Vince said. "No sweat at all."

Butch helped Vince drag Williams's body down the hall and into the study. The old man's corpse was in the big leather chair, the long gleaming handle of the stiletto jutting out of his chest. They removed the plastic bag and dumped Williams's body face down.

"I'll get rid of this bag while you go out to the car and bring the money in," Butch said. "And don't forget the gun. I'll need it."

When they met again in the study, Butch took a last minute check to see if everything was in order, the safe still open, and the bodies in proper position.

"How about the money?" asked Vince. "They'll check the finances pretty close, and they'll want to know what happened to the scratch."

"Nobody knows the old man had the money, so how are they going to know it's missing? Let me have the old man's gun now."

"Oh, yeah, I almost forgot." Vince handed the gun

to Butch. "Now what about my cut. Are you going to give me mine now or later?"

"Now," Butch said, and squeezed off the remaining bullets into Vince's belly.

Vince tumbled forward onto his knees, clutching his abdomen, "You shot me!"

"Naturally," Butch said, "I couldn't let a goon like you loose with money in your pocket. You'd get half-a-load on somewhere and spill the whole story."

Vince pitched face down onto the rug. Butch surveyed the scene and couldn't help laughing. In fact, he laughed so hard that he cried and then in tears of delirium, he phoned the police.

STORE COP

by Ed Lacy

"Mr. Albert? I'm here in answer to your ad for a temporary store guard."

He was a little man with a soft voice, looking about fifty or over, on the stocky side. His slacks and windbreaker were worn, while the bland, plump face held pale blue eyes and a very clear skin. He might have looked downright boyish except for his bald head.

You see, that's the trouble: hire a uniformed guard from one of the large detective agencies and they send over an ape—out of place in my little card and gift shop. Advertise, and you get these old men with no experience. I tried to let him down gently as I said, "This job is only for the Christmas rush, a week or more. In a store like this, selling cards, we're packed from five p.m. to nine. That will be the hours, six days a week. Only four hours a day, so—"

He nodded his bald dome. "And you're paying $2.50 an hour?"

"That's right. I usually hire a guard from an agency but, frankly, I don't like their men. They look

like goons in uniforms. After all, I don't have any real trouble here—some petty shoplifting and maybe a Christmas drunk wanders in, or people push each other reaching for a card. The mere sight of a uniformed officer is sufficient to keep folks in line. However, I'm afraid you're too—"

"That's a good slant, Mr. Albert. I hate violence myself."

"Really?" I noticed he wasn't quite as short as I'd first thought. He was about my height, five feet seven, although his wide shoulders made him seem shorter. "I suppose it must be boring merely to stand around, I mean, most of the store guards I've had—well, they gave me the impression they were hoping for a little excitement."

"Not me, Mr. Albert. There's so much senseless and—and—just dumb violence around these days, it makes me sick. The whole bit about being tough, that's crazy."

"Exactly my attitude; and in a card and gift shop any rough stuff is not only poor publicity, but wrecks my stands. However, Mr.—"

"Lund. Harry Lund it is, sir."

"Well, Mr. Lund, I'd like an experienced man, so—"

"I've been a security guard at the Willard Moore factory for the past seven years. Here's my ID card. I knock off at eight a.m., so I'll be able to get some sleep before reporting here, and I don't have to be at the plant until midnight. The hours are fine and I can use the extra money."

He was such a well-mannered man and, since he had experience, I changed my mind, decided to hire him. "I've rented a cap and uniform jacket, Mr. Lund. If you have your own nightstick, that's okay, but never use it. And of course, absolutely no gun."

"I never carry a club or a gun." He rubbed his thick hands nervously. "Mr. Albert, I might as well tell you this now: I was on the police force, detective first class, for over fifteen years. I was . . . dismissed, because I just couldn't take the violence."

"I understand. You must have seen plenty of it," I

said. News stories of police brutality always disturb me.

"Yeah. I was a good officer but I saw enough violence to drive me almost to a nervous breakdown. Not that I ever had one, but I was glad to get off the force. I wanted you to know my complete background. It's fair you should."

"Thank you for telling me, Mr. Lund. I'm sure, with your experience, you'll work out fine here. Harry, suppose you report this Monday at four forty-five p.m.?"

"Yes, sir."

When he left I phoned the Moore factory, was informed Lund was an excellent guard, sober and steady. On Monday he was at my store at four-thirty. The uniform jacket I'd rented was a trifle comical on him, so tight across the shoulders he couldn't close the top buttons, and far too loose at the waist. Harry was really compactly built. When I asked how he kept so lean and hard at his age—my potbelly bugs me—Harry told me he had played pro football, done some boxing in his younger days, and still worked out. Looking at his plump, almost baby face, I didn't quite believe that, but in every other aspect I found Harry honest, intelligent, and very capable. He was polite with the customers, moving about the crowded store carefully. He learned our stock quickly, never fooled around with my two salesgirls, and always called me Mr. Albert, not Al.

On Wednesday a drunk staggered in from some office party, and Harry walked him out and up the street before the lush knew what happened. Whenever greeting cards fell on the floor, Harry was quick to pick them up, and in his spare moments he kept the stock neatly arranged. Harry knew his business: on Thursday he saw an elderly woman pocket a paperback book. He merely waited for her at the door and asked, "Would you like a bag for that book you're buying, madam?"

"Oh my, I'm so forgetful. I didn't pay, did I?" the biddy said, obviously a lie.

"That will be fifty-two cents with the tax, and

here's a bag for the book," Harry said smoothly, giving her a soft smile.

When we closed on Christmas Eve, Harry said, "I guess this wraps up my job, Mr. Albert."

"While we won't be so busy, I'd like you to come in next week," I told him. "We do a fair New Year's card business, and some folks start buying cards for next Christmas, at reduced rates."

Christmas fell on a Saturday, and Monday was very slow, but Harry volunteered to help stock our regular birthday and get-well card displays, and set up the boxed Christmas cards on the fifty-percent-off table. It was so slow I sent the girls home at six p.m., told Harry I'd close at seven, but I'd pay him for his regular time.

It was just about then that *trouble* walked in.

When you've dealt with the public as long as I have, you get this special sense about trouble, can spot it at once. *Trouble* this time was four teenagers, beefy boys of about eighteen, in tight dungarees, jack boots, windbreakers, and the long and carefully brushed hair bit. I knew the type, always out for "kicks."

They glanced at the cards while the tallest one asked me, "Man, you got any Christmas cards left? I forgot to send my folks one."

I showed him several cards while his three pals examined our birthday cards, reading the greetings aloud, and making obscene remarks about "all this square shoe polish." Out of the corner of my eye I noticed Harry watching them, a scowl on his round face. Finally he told one of them, "You're leaving fingerprints on the cards, ruining them."

"Me? That's what I'm doing?" the stocky teenager asked in a shrill voice. "You saying I got dirty hands, pop?"

"Yeah, your hands need washing. If you want a card, tell me which one you want to see. Otherwise, keep your hands off the cards." Harry's voice was low and deep, almost a growl.

"Hey now, we got us a store cop who don't like my mitts!" shrill voice said. The one I was waiting on

turned to join his three buddies, facing Harry. They glared at him.

Making sure the cash register was shut, I came around the counter quickly. "Come on, fellows, no hard feelings. You see, if a card is soiled we can't—"

"Shut up, fatso," the biggest one, the fellow I'd been waiting on, snapped, thumbs in his belt, eyes strangely bright.

Moving over so he was in front of me, Harry whispered, "I'll handle this, Mr. Albert." Then he told the four punks, "We're closing. You want a card, buy one. If not, move out!"

"I do believe the store copper is giving us the brush," the shrill one said, a cocky smile on his intense face. "Ain't you kind of old for such big talk, pops?"

"Listen, I don't want any trouble," Harry said, voice suddenly smooth again. "Either buy or take a walk, so we can close. Please."

The tallest one winked at his pals. "Ol' daddy with his tin badge is chickening out. I bet his flat feet are killing him."

One of them said. "Aw come on, this store stinks. Who the hell wants a corny card anyway?"

"No, no, we got to settle this first," shrill voice said. He picked up a card, pressed his thumb on it, then pointed to the smudge. "Hey, too bad you can't peddle this as one of them *dirty* cards, you know?" He giggled at his stupid crack. "But I guess it's worthless now, huh, copper?"

"That's your card now, pay for it," Harry said, his lips barely moving, voice harsh.

"No, pops, I don't want it, it's dirty! I'm merely helping you get rid of useless stuff." He slowly tore up the card, tossed the pieces at Harry.

I said, "Fellows, you've had your fun. I'm a tired storekeeper and I don't want any fuss. We'll forget about the card. Now please, let us close and—"

"Punk, that will be twenty-six cents with the tax!" Harry snapped.

"You hear, old boxtop badge wants me to pay for that dirty old card. And he called me a punk. You

think pops is down for a little action?"

"All I want is for you to pay for the card and get out of here!" Harry growled.

"And, uh, like if we don't, you'll put us out, baldy?" another of the four asked.

"If that's the way you two-bit jerks want it," Harry said, moving toward them.

The two boys nearest him threw punches at Harry. What happened after that was all so fast I couldn't believe my eyes. Harry went kind of crazy.

He took one punch on his shoulder, the other on his mouth as he kneed the closest tough in the groin, backing his elbow into the belly of another at the same time. Then he slammed the third in the face with a right hook and grabbed the tallest punk's arm as he started to pull a knife out of his boot. Harry backhanded him across his nose, breaking it. He turned to the first two, who were now bent over in pain, gasping for air; he smashed their heads together, making a horrible sound. He spun around and hit the one with the broken nose a terrible wallop in the stomach, neatly kicking his legs out as he fell, so the tough didn't hit my reduced Christmas card table.

The punk Harry had belted on the jaw was sitting up on the floor, looking about with glassy eyes. Harry jerked him up by his hair, was set to punch him again, when I threw myself against Harry, holding his free arm as I wailed, "Harry, stop it! You'll kill them!"

For a split second Harry's pale blue eyes stared at me, and I had a sickening feeling he was going to punch me too. Then I felt the muscles in the arm I was holding relax as Harry mumbled, *"I hate this violence! I hate it!"*

"Harry, control yourself! You nearly killed them!"

He let the punk drop to the floor, and pushed me away gently. "I'm sorry, Mr. Albert, I lost my head. I can't stand this dumb, arrogant violence, these cocky punks ready to kill over a lousy card. There'll be no trouble now."

Staring at the four toughs on the floor, moaning and bleeding, I whispered, "Harry, they were in the

wrong and . . . and you had to defend yourself, but—look at them!"

"They were asking for it. Mr. Albert, you'd better call the police," Harry said, calmly pulling the shade down over the door.

"Well, yes," I said, dazed, picking up the phone. Within minutes a radio car braked in front of the store and two young policemen came in. I explained exactly what had happened, and all the time Harry stood in the back of the shop, head down, as if ashamed of what he'd done.

One officer phoned for an ambulance while the other, who had his notebook out, asked, "You mean this old guy did all this damage singlehanded? What did he work these slobs over with, a lead pipe?"

"No sir, officer, he only used his hands. After they rushed him, punched him, pulled a knife, Harry *had* to defend himself. A bunch of thrill-happy kids, starting something over nothing."

"Kids?" the cop grunted. "Each of them weighs in at close to two hundred pounds." He grinned at Harry. "You sure can handle yourself, mister."

Harry didn't answer, but kept staring at the floor, the uniform jacket hanging on him as if his shoulders had somehow shrunk. The officer asked if I wanted the punks arrested for disorderly conduct, and when I said I didn't want any more trouble, Harry suddenly called out, "Have them arrested, Mr. Albert, otherwise they might sue you. You can also book the tall one for assault with a deadly weapon, officer."

An ambulance took three of the punks away and the police took the fourth one off in their radio car. I was glad it was over, and not much of a crowd outside. Except for some blood on the floor, my stock was okay. Harry got a wet rag and started to clean up the blood spots. I'd told him to leave it and go; I'd lock up. He said softly, "This will only take a second. Dried blood is rough to clean up. I suppose you don't want me back tomorrow, Mr. Albert?" He continued to swab.

I didn't, but I said, "Of course I do. It wasn't your fault, Harry. You were only defending yourself. But

we might have talked them out of—"

"No, they weren't talkers. Punks never listen, Mr. Albert."

Harry left, and some ten minutes later as I was locking my door, a car drew up and a large, gray-haired man, with detective written all over his hard face, stepped out. Flashing a shield he asked, "Where's Harry?"

"He's gone. Listen, I own the store, saw it all. You can't arrest Harry for—"

The detective gave me a tight grin. "I didn't come to collar Harry, merely to say hello. He used to be my partner, until he was kicked off the force on a brutality beef. Will he be around tomorrow?"

"Brutality?" I repeated. "Why Harry Lund is a mild man who hates violence."

"That's a fact, Harry sure hates rough stuff. Harry hates violence so damn much those punks are lucky to be alive!"

DOOM SIGNAL

by John Lutz

The two men crouched on the wooded hillside, their dark overcoat collars turned up against the brisk autumn air. In their neat suits and polished shoes they looked out of place in the brilliantly dappled woods, but this didn't seem to concern them. The man on the left was peering intently through a pair of binoculars, and both men were listening to a sound that was as incongruous as themselves to their wooded surroundings.

The recorder and speakers were too far away to catch every word, and the nasal voice from the loudspeakers rolled like the incoherent voice of some ancient god over the hills. Now and then a word or a phrase stood out in the brittle air: ". . . Freedom . . . Cause for concern . . . Without another hope . . ."

"Here it comes," said the man without the binoculars, turning his head to one side.

Straining to hear, they barely caught the wavering words, " . . . The death throes of a dying era . . ."

The man with the binoculars steadied himself and leaned slightly forward. He saw a raised wooden platform on which stood a dressed straw dummy. Well to the side of the platform stood a sandy-haired man in an orange hunting jacket. About fifty feet from the platform sat a large, jet black Doberman pinscher.

As the last word rolled from the speakers the sleek dog erupted into action. Its lithe muscles working like machinery, it shot toward the platform, leaped, and hit the straw man's throat like a missile. Straw flew, and the force of the Doberman's charge carried it past the platform, wisps of straw still clutched in its white teeth. It turned, pivoting beautifully in mid-air, and in the space of a second struck again. This time the head of the dummy toppled to the ground. The Doberman shook himself, disinterested now, and walked away to sit and wait for his pat on the head and his morsel of food. The man in the orange jacket gave him both.

"He's getting better." The man who'd been watching through the binoculars let them fall against his chest and dangle by their leather strap.

"They don't have much time left," his partner said. Gray hair showed at his temples, below the brim of his conservative dark hat. His face was average, with eyes that might have been gray or blue. A markedly unnoticeable man.

The man with the binoculars took a quick look back at the clearing in the woods. "He's starting the routine all over again," he said. "Must take patience."

The gray-haired man nodded. "Shall we see this man Atwater?"

"It's the best advice we've had."

"The only advice."

They straightened, backed away until they were below the slight rise from where they'd watched, then they walked down the dirt road toward their late-model gray sedan. Behind them the distant, nasal

drone of the loudspeakers began again.

The two men introduced themselves to Atwater as Sam Chambers and Ed Klein. They also introduced themselves as FBI agents.

"We understand the local police consult you on just about everything concerning animals," said Chambers, the gray-haired man.

"I help them from time to time," Bob Atwater said. He was of medium height, with a shock of red hair and a ready smile. He poured three cups of coffee and set them on a long table. The furnishings in his livingroom were expensive and vaguely oriental. It wasn't the kind of place behind which you'd expect to find a kennel.

"Now," Atwater said, lowering himself onto the sofa with a sigh, "what's this one about?"

"We understand you used to train animals for television," Klein said, sipping his coffee and grimacing at its strength.

"For a while," Atwater replied. "You remember Rollo the Wonder Dog?"

"Sure," Chambers said with a smile. "But I'm afraid we have another sort of wonder dog on our hands, a dog trained to kill."

"To kill whom?"

"Attorney General David Ransone."

"Why?" Atwater asked, surprising them with his lack of reaction. "Political?"

"He's an attorney general," Chambers said, "running for senator."

"Who wants to kill him?"

"A man named Joe M'Cord, from upstate. He's training a big Doberman pinscher to attack him on the speaker's platform when he comes here this weekend."

"How big?" Atwater asked.

"About ninety pounds. Big enough."

Atwater nodded. "Why don't you arrest him, or at least tell him that you're wise to what he's doing?"

Klein spoke up. "Oh, he'd be easy enough to stop. We can't arrest him, of course, because he hasn't bro-

ken any law, but if he knew we were watching him he'd give up his plan."

Atwater twirled the coffee in his cup. "Then why don't you do that?"

"Because he'd devise another plan," Chambers said. "We can't watch him forever."

"What you want to do," Atwater said, "is not so much stop him as catch him in the act."

"Exactly," Klein said. "And we want to do it in such a way that we have a case. The problem is that the only way to do that is to let him go through with the plan to the last possible second, and we can't endanger the attorney general's life by letting a dog attack him and gamble that we can shoot it in time or pull it off. Besides, we can't go opening fire in that crowd. We can't do anything that might panic that crowd."

"You want it done unobtrusively," Atwater said.

"If possible."

"Ransone's going to speak at the West County Shopping Center parking lot," Klein said. "They figure to have well over two thousand people."

"What's the dog's signal to attack?" Atwater asked.

"A phrase in the speech," Klein said. "You've probably heard it. Ransone uses it in almost every speech to describe the actions of the incumbent senator and his staff: 'The death throes of a dying era.' "

Atwater nodded and thought a moment. "The dog wouldn't be signaled by the entire phrase," he said. "One word is a primer, to alert him, probably 'throes,' then on the actual command word, 'era,' he'd attack. I choose throes and era because they're the least common words and have the correct time lapse between them."

"You'll help us out on this then?" Chambers asked.

"I think I have an idea," Atwater said, "that will stop the plan and give you all the evidence you need. Besides, I plan to vote for Ransone."

The big red and white Ransone campaign bus pulled into the shopping center parking lot at three o'clock sharp. There were well over two thousand people on

hand, Atwater estimated, as he stood back against the window of a men's shop about a hundred feet from the speaker's platform. M'Cord, with his Doberman pinscher, had not yet made his appearance.

The loudspeakers mounted on the roof of the bus were blaring almost unintelligible campaign slogans as it rolled toward the flag-draped speaker's platform amid cheers and pennant and sign waving.

The Ransone girls got out of the bus first, forming a very beautiful aisle for Ransone and his traveling constituents. Ransone was the third man out of the bus. He was a smaller man than his photographs suggested, about five-six, with the clean-cut youthfulness that could help propel him to higher office. *Charisma,* Atwater thought with a smile.

Still louder cheers accompanied the men as they climbed the wooden steps to the platform. The cheering continued until County Supervisor Grogan raised his hands for silence. Then, with a smile, he began his long and carefully prepared introduction of Attorney General Ransone.

Atwater turned his head as he saw M'Cord threading his way through the crowd with the Doberman. He had figured M'Cord would place his dog about here. It was the location Atwater would have chosen, a short, straight run to the speaker's platform, with the minimum number of people in the way. M'Cord walked slowly to the doorway of a defunct health club and hand-commanded the dog to sit. It obeyed perfectly, of course. Atwater had observed it once before, with the FBI agents in the woods, but up close the animal was even more impressive. Every bit of ninety pounds, it had the sleek litheness and square sturdiness of a good show dog.

A shame, Atwater thought, that such a fine animal was being used for such an evil purpose. Of course the dog had no evil intent. To him it was merely an exercise, something he'd been trained to do by a loved master. The dog couldn't care less if it was the straw dummy or Attorney General Ransone whose throat he ripped out. He only wanted his morsel and his pat on the head when he was finished.

Ransone was beginning his speech now, in his distinctive nasal voice. Atwater looked around and saw Chambers and Klein. He nodded to them and turned the copy of Ransone's speech they had given him to the page with the phrase underlined in red pencil. He hoped that Klein and Chambers trusted him implicitly.

M'Cord gave the dog a firm hand signal and walked casually away, attracting no attention in his plain hat and light-colored raincoat. As the raincoat disappeared into the thick of the crowd, Atwater saw Chambers follow. Both men would be over a mile away when the fateful words were uttered.

Atwater looked at the dog. It was sitting easily, without motion or sign of tension. It remained like that for the next five minutes.

The words spilling loquaciously from Ransone's lips were appearing on Atwater's printed page now, the one with the red underlines. He saw the attorney general's personal guards, who had been alerted, shift uneasily. Hands went beneath suitcoats and topcoats.

"Ladies and gentlemen, what we are witnessing . . ."

The eyes of every security man on the platform were trained on the sleek dog.

On the word 'throes' the Doberman stiffened and strained forward, its expression intent.

Then it relaxed, cocked its head and resumed its easy sitting position.

Ransone continued his speech. One of his personal guards smiled, and Klein nodded to Atwater without expression. One more paragraph and Ransone's speech was finished.

"Frankly," Klein said to Atwater, "I wasn't sure it would work."

Atwater smiled, fingering the ultra-high pitched 'silent' dog whistle in his hand. "There's only one way to get a well trained dog to disobey a signal," he said, "and that is to arrange it so he can't hear that signal. When the signal word was spoken, the dog heard nothing but a shrill whistle that only his ears could pick up." Atwater looked over at the Doberman, still

obediently sitting in the stay position. "Now we go about building our case."

The Ransone campaign bus had left, and almost all of the crowd was off the parking lot. Even now the local police were sealing off the lot and setting up their cameras.

When the lot was empty except for the police and cameramen, Atwater removed the straw dummy from the back of his station wagon and set it up on the speaker's platform while the camera's rolled. Then he stood well back and waited.

The loudspeakers buzzed and broke into the nasal, recorded voice of Attorney General Ransone, the part of the speech he'd just made containing the signal words.

On the word 'throes' the dog strained forward as before. On 'era' he broke for the platform, and in a whir of motion the dummy's straw throat was ripped out as the cameras recorded everything. The dog leaped back to complete the job on the now prostrate dummy.

"The exact location," Atwater said, "the exact speech, almost the exact hour in front of witnesses and cameras. And plenty of people can testify that M'Cord was the one who placed the dog there. That should prove he was training him for the specific purpose of murdering Ransone."

Klein grinned and nodded. "And with your testimony that you blew that silent whistle the first time to prevent this from actually happening, M'Cord should be put safely away for a long time." He glanced at his watch. "Chambers should be arresting him just about now." He looked again at Atwater. "The government will see that you're well compensated for this, Bob."

"By way of thanks," Atwater said, "they can arrange it so I'll get the dog. He's a beauty, and I think I can untrain him in no time."

SEE WHAT'S IN THE BAG

by Hal Ellson

The Black Cat was crowded as usual, but much too quiet, and for good reason. Jesus Miranda was out; five years of his life wasted in prison. Victor Fiala had put him there, arrested him in this very place, and Miranda had sworn to kill him. Now Fiala moved to the bar, and Pancho, the owner, greeted him with a frown. "Miranda was here," he said.

Fiala shrugged. The news didn't surprise him. "A small one," he said.

Pancho opened a bottle of Carta Blanca and placed it on the bar. "Better be careful, Victor."

"I'm always careful. What did Miranda have to say?"

"Nothing concerning you, but he means business."

"Till he makes a move, there's nothing I can do."

"By then it may be too late."

"I know." Fiala tasted his beer. It was flat to his tongue, and not the fault of the brew, but himself. A bad case of the jitters. Five years may not have changed Jesus Miranda, but it had changed him. There was gray at his temples and fat around his waist; age had caught up with him, aches didn't go away and his body was no longer his to command. That was the worst of it, and the doubts it aroused. *Fifty-five years old,* he thought, as Pancho whispered, "Miranda's brother just came in."

Below the bar, Fiala touched his gun, for the brother had also sworn to get him. Two men of the same blood, same mind. He finished his glass and shook his head when Pancho looked at him. "No more. I'm going home."

"Careful, Victor."

He nodded, turned, felt the tension in the place, the deadly silence; every eye was focused on him ex-

cept for Miranda's brother, who sat alone at a table. He let out his breath, stepped forward, passed Miranda and went out the door.

It was black outside, as black as he'd ever seen it; a car across the street and a man behind the wheel . . . Jesus Miranda? His own car was around the corner. *Bad,* he thought, and turned his back on the one in the car, a target impossible to miss.

Twenty paces to the corner. He took them, waiting for the shot. None came. He turned the corner, sweating, his stomach a knot of constricted muscles. *Safe.* He climbed into his car and drove for home without being followed.

Home. A feeling of relief flooded him. He opened the door quietly, went directly to the patio and sat down. Sweat was still running from him, his hand trembled as he lit a cigarette. A bad sign; age creeping up on him. He shook his head and the screen door opened at the side of the house. Maria, his daughter, looked at him and said, "Is something wrong?"

"Nothing," he answered.

"It's always nothing with you," she scolded.

"You know I never lie," he said, grinning at her.

"Hmph, not much. You sneak in and say nothing. Well, I know I won't get it out of you. And I don't suppose you want to eat."

"You know what I want."

"There's none left. Anyway, beer makes you fat," she scolded. She slammed the screen door, vanished and reappeared, holding a bottle. "The last," she announced with a twinkle in her eye.

"Who's lying now?" he said, taking the bottle. The phone rang in the house. *Damn.* He placed the bottle on the ground, arose and hurried inside.

Maria was in the kitchen when he finished the phone call. "I'm leaving," he said.

"Something important?"

"No, nothing like that."

"Of course not. That's why you're not drinking your beer."

"Put the cap back on. I'll have it later," he said,

starting for the front door.

"What time will you be back?"

"Soon, I hope," he answered, but he wondered, and outside in his car he wondered again if he'd ever get back, for the phone call had shaken him. It had come from an informer called Sanabria. The man had proved useful in the past, but one like that who sold others out . . . ?

Sanabria was waiting at the counter in the Blue Moon restaurant close to police headquarters. Fiala took a stool to his left and ordered coffee. "Well?" he said when it came.

Sanabria hesitated. His small, black, shifty eyes surveyed the restaurant, then he lifted his cup, as if to drink. "San Luis," he whispered. "A fellow named Monti. He has the stuff. See him tonight if you expect any action."

Fiala nodded, and Sanabria slid from his stool, started for the door. Fiala watched him in the mirror behind the counter and wondered again if he could trust him, or was a trap in the making, with Miranda in the background? *Don't go, Don't go . . .*

Out to the street he hurried to question Sanabria. Too late. The informer had vanished. Fiala went to his car and weighed Sanabria's tip. San Luis, a town in the mountains, but Monti? The name was unfamiliar. A new dealer, willing to risk prison in order to sell his wares? There were always new ones, but Fiala wondered if he could trust Sanabria. Yet what if the tip were good?

There was no way of knowing but to go to San Luis. Once, he would have welcomed the risk; now he hesitated. Finally he drove off.

Soon the lights of Montes fell behind, a dark road climbed steadily into the mountains toward distant San Luis, which he might never reach. An ambush on a sharp turn, a boulder dropped from a cliff, or . . . He slowed the car.

Go back. Go back, he told himself, but there was no going back. If Jesus Miranda awaited him in San Luis, then better be done with him.

Four hours of driving on a road without lights and,

at last, high in the mountains, San Luis, a small town notorious for its traffic in drugs. He drove to the plaza. No one on its benches, no one in sight, but loud voices came from two cantinas. He stepped from the car, lit a cigarette, crossed the plaza and stood in front of one of the cantinas. The chill mountain air sent him inside. A group of men stood against the bar. They glanced at him and continued drinking.

"Mescal," he said to the barman.

The man poured and raised his brows: "Is that all, Señor?"

"Do you know a man named Monti?"

"You might find him in the Green Parrot."

"Thanks." Fiala finished his drink and stepped outside. The Green Parrot . . . Perhaps Monti was there—or Miranda? Miranda dealt in dope. Five years in prison, and now he was out.

Fiala looked toward his car. It wasn't too late to go back. His daughter and grandchildren were waiting for him. What if he never got back to them? He quailed at the thought, started for the car and, halfway to it, stopped. If he went back, he was finished.

Four men wearing sombreros were playing cards in the Green Parrot; a rough-looking group for country fellows. "Señor," the barman, a dark, pockmarked fat man with enormous jowls, nodded to Fiala.

Another mescal? he wondered. It wouldn't hurt. "Mescal," he said, and an old man rose from a bench in a corner. A sharp tapping sounded from the floor—a blind man with a stick. A trembling hand reached for the bar.

"Welcome to San Luis, Señor."

"Thank you," Fiala said.

The barman explained, "He knows you're a stranger by the sound of your footsteps."

The blind man smiled. "It is always night," he said with a shrug, "but I've learned to see in the dark, and San Luis is small. Why shouldn't I know the tread of those who live here and those who are strangers? Will you buy me a drink, Señor?"

"The barman is at your command."

"I smell mescal. I will drink the same as you."

The barman poured, and the blind man reached for the glass. *Is he really blind, or here for a purpose?* Fiala wondered.

The blind man raised his glass. "Salute, Señor!"

"Salute," said Fiala and down went the fire of the mescal to chase the mountain chill from his flesh.

"Tell me something, Señor," the blind man said, "you bought me this drink because you felt sorry for me?"

"If I said that, I'd be lying," Fiala answered. "Besides, who can feel sorry for one who can see in the dark?"

"Ah, well put." The blind man chuckled and then lowered his voice: "Another stranger's in town tonight."

A warning, or what? "Does he call himself Monti?" asked Fiala.

"He calls himself that."

"I would like to meet him."

"Better if you didn't, Señor. He's a stranger, perhaps a swindler, possibly a policeman. Who can say?"

"One must take risks."

"You're armed, Señor?"

"And able to take care of myself should it become necessary."

"Good, but be careful."

"I was told I'd find him here."

"No, not here." The blind man nodded. "Even if you do business with him, there are other risks. No one is to be trusted in San Luis. A man will sell to you, then inform the police and you'll be picked up on the way down the mountain. That's how it goes. Or someone who knows of the deal will inform."

"I'll take the risk," said Fiala.

"As you wish, Señor." The blind man smiled, gave thanks for the drink and turned away. His stick probed the concrete floor to the door.

As he stepped outside, one of the card players rose from the table. Drunk, he lurched toward the bar and into Fiala, pardoned himself, then lifted the brim of his sombrero—his eyes were clear and alert. "You're

waiting to see someone?" he asked.

Fiala tensed and nodded.

"Good. Go outside. You will be taken care of."

The man moved off. Fiala lit a cigarette, ordered another mescal, emptied the glass and dropped his cigarette.

"Good night, Señor." The barman's voice trailed him to the door. He stepped outside, oozing sweat; the chill mountain air touched him and iced his flesh.

Across the gutter a man "slept" on a plaza bench. A whistle from within the bar brought him to his feet. He crossed the gutter, nodded to Fiala. "Follow me, Señor." He turned his back and Fiala trailed him from the dark plaza to a darker street, past grim adobes, past the edge of the town down a curve of the road. The guide halted, gestured, and Fiala saw the house below the roadbed, a crude edifice with a thatched roof.

The guide left, vanished in the dark. Silence now. Not a glimmer of light nor a sound from the house. This was the place, but who awaited him? Miranda with a gun, or one called Monti who trafficked in drugs?

Fiala hesitated, thought of his car back in the plaza. There was still time to run—the one thing he could never do.

An oil lamp burned on a table inside the house, a crude piece of furniture with primitive chairs. Otherwise, the room was bare. Fiala stood in the doorway. Monti sat at the far end of the table smoking a cigarette. He nodded to a chair, noted the sweat on Fiala's forehead and said, "You must have come a long way in a hurry."

"A long way," Fiala answered, glancing at the canvas bag on the table and frowning. *Why of canvas?* he wondered.

"You're ready to do business, Señor?"

"Yes. That's it in the bag?"

"Where else would it be?"

Again Fiala frowned, and Monti smiled. "Perhaps you were expecting something else, but this is marihuana. Of course, if you're not interested . . ."

"I am."

"Good. It's the best, but don't take my word. Look and make sure." Casually, Monti pushed the bag across the table, but Fiala made no move to examine its contents.

"Suppose *you* look," he said. "Put your hand inside. No?" Fiala's hand moved, vanished below the table, reappeared with a gun. "See what's in the bag, Señor."

"Mother of God, no!"

"What's there that makes you afraid?"

Silence.

"All right. Let's try something else. You know who I am? You were expecting me?"

"Yes."

"And Miranda?"

Silence.

"Where is he?"

"Who is Señor Miranda?"

"So, you don't know him, and don't know what's in the bag. Ah, you lie badly, Monti, but let's give you the benefit of the doubt concerning the contents of the bag."

"I don't know what's in it. I swear to that."

"In that case, loosen the string and put your hand inside."

"I can't, Señor." Monti's voice rasped with terror.

"And you don't know Miranda?"

"No," said Monti, but the gun would frighten him and make him talk. Slowly Fiala raised it and fired. Two shots rang out, deafening in the small room, and back went Monti. Wild-eyed, he came off the floor, a knife flashed in his hand. Kill, or be killed. Fiala fired, Monti dropped. Running steps sounded outside and into the room burst Miranda. Once more Fiala fired. A long silence followed the shot. . .

Two bodies sprawled on the floor. Fiala stared at them, prodded each with his shoe, then turned to the table and the canvas bag. What did it contain? Carefully he loosened the string, stepped back, waited.

An empty bag? No. Something within it stirred. He held his breath. What had Miranda prepared for

him? The canvas moved, and Fiala shuddered when a deadly coral snake poked its head from the bag and writhed across the table.

FAT JOW AND THE WALKING WOMAN

by Robert Alan Blair

Ng Har, the fowl merchant, appeared early at the herb shop, while Fat Jow still prepared for the day's business.

"My brother Ng Chak has dissappeared," announced Ng Har.

Fat Jow's only response was a grunt, as he continued his small tasks. Ng Chak was a conscienceless opportunist who lived, not by working hard or gambling wisely, but by exploiting weaknesses. Occidentals would call him a swindler, but as yet he remained within the law.

"I know you do not like him," went on Ng Har, "nor indeed do I; but family loyalty requires my concern. A month has passed without word since he took an apartment on the other side of the hill, believing that his landlady concealed her wealth somewhere in the house. Never has Ng Chak let more than two weeks pass without coming to borrow money." Ng Har's weakness was his inability to say no.

"Perhaps," said Fat Jow drily, "he found his landlady's wealth, and no longer needs to borrow. What have I to do with it?"

"I come to you, because his landlady is the walking woman."

Who in this section of San Francisco has not seen the walking woman, somewhere on her daily circuit on Van Ness to Bay, and on Powell to Clay? Out of another century she comes, erect and resolutely striding, her fine strong hands swinging freely at her sides, clenched as though disapproving the world through which she sweeps.

Her ankle-length gown of black alpaca, with touches of black lace at wrists and throat, meets black high-buttoned shoes. A black sealskin jacket and a great picture-hat atop massed white hair complete her outfit. A stern, square jaw, and direct eyes meet one not vacantly but fiercely.

His interest sharpening, Fat Jow stopped work and faced Ng Har. "She was in my shop not long ago."

"I know. She was seen by others. What can she, a foreigner, find to buy from a Chinese herbalist?"

"It is not the first time that she has stopped here. She appears to have a considerable knowledge of herbs and their properties. She buys preparations for the stomach, for pain, for sleep."

Ng Har asked softly, "And for death?"

"In sufficient quantity, many may be fatal." Fat Jow opened the shop door. "Go your way. I shall learn what I can."

For most of the morning Fat Jow attempted to dismiss the thoughts aroused by Ng Har's grim imagination, but at midday, aware that he could not put them aside without seeking light, he closed the shop and strolled across the hill. The day was pleasantly cool, and the sun was beginning to burn off the morning fog.

The house lay not far off Van Ness, among the westerly lapping waves of Chinatown that wash unevenly down the slope from the double crest of Nob and Russian hills. It was an island of angular antiquity in a sea of box-like apartments, a narrow three-story pile of Victorian elegance, all in excellent repair. A giant palm tree, surely as old as the city, shaded a patch of front yard, crowding out the grass and heaving sod and sidewalk alike into a slanting mound at its roots.

An "apartment for rent" sign hanging in a window to the left of the heavy front door suggested his direction. He mounted three steps to the broad-roofed veranda, and from the polished brass plate beside the door selected the lower-most of six doorbells, one marked "Adah Baxter, Manager."

She was even more imposing here in her own

domain. A closer look at her face revealed a tracery of fine lines which could have been the tracks of a hundred years.

"I come about the apartment," said Fat Jow.

Her voice was deep and smooth. "I know you. You're the man from the herb shop." She opened the door wider. "Please come in."

Fat Jow stepped into splendor undimmed by years, a vast foyer soaring the full three stories to a stained-glass dome which filtered the sunlight into cascading rainbows. He stood upon a polished parquet floor of a basketweave pattern, surrounded by richly-dark woodwork and paneling of redwood. Carpeted twin staircases rose upon either side to a balconied landing, thence in converging angles to the upper stories.

"You're impressed," she said. "Good. You know already why I try to choose my tenants. This house is my life. I can't ask people to love it as I do, but I demand respect."

His eyes continued to rove the far recesses of the foyer. He was becoming far more interested in Adah Baxter and her house than in the missing Ng Chak. "But it is a house eminently worthy of love," he said sincerely. "It breathes the old city, the city that lived before the fire."

The stern old face softened; he could not recall ever seeing her smile before.

"I think you'll do," she said, turning toward a door on the right of the foyer. "Let's go in my place and talk."

Her parlor was as sentimentally reminiscent as she: oriental rug, fireplace of yellow Italian tile, black-draped oil portrait of a mustachioed relative, green tufted horsehair sofa and chair, platform rocker, lion-ball table with marble top, globe-shaded lamp converted from kerosene to electricity.

She motioned him to a chair, planted herself before the fireplace with arms folded. "You'll have to forgive me if I seem to pry, but I have a sound reason. Do you live alone?"

A cautious, "Yes . . ." If he expected answers later, he must be candid now.

"Are you fairly well-off financially?"

"Modestly so. My wants are few. Acquisition of material substance has no appeal, for it exalts the sham values of position and possessions. In my own eyes, I am a success . . . and of that, I am the sole judge."

She studied him for a long thoughtful moment. "I wish you'd turned up long ago. I want somebody in there who's not after my money. And I prefer an oriental gentleman. Mine is the only other apartment on the ground floor, and you know how tongues wag."

Eyes lidded, he nodded almost imperceptibly. "I understand. And your former tenant—was he an oriental gentleman?"

She said distastefully, "Only half right. Oriental, yes."

Fat Jow placed his fingertips together. "Ah . . . ? You had difficulty with him?"

"No real difficulty. When I found him snooping around, I just had to get rid of him. I can't stand for that, you know." She moved to the door. "Come see the apartment."

She took him through curtained French doors at the left of the foyer into what had been the ballroom of the mansion. Here, still, were the dais for the orchestra, the crystal chandelier, the mirrored ceiling and walls reflecting all.

She pointed to a cracked wall panel. "That's been there since 1906, my souvenir of the earthquake. I never could bear to have it fixed. It wouldn't have been the same, with a brand-new pane of glass in there. I like to believe these mirrors are priceless with the trapped images of all that's gone on here."

Fat Jow was entranced. "These walls, and you, must tell a fascinating story."

She sighed, turned away to show him the rest of the apartment. "I suppose so—but a story nearly ended."

Then she told him of the Baxters, who had mingled

casually with early giants like Crocker, Flood, Stanford, Vallejo. They had seen the Embarcadero black with forests of sail-rigging, had helped build the young and boisterous California. That foyer had welcomed Robert Louis Stevenson, Ulysses Grant, Sam Clemens, Enrico Caruso, Jack London. There had been receptions, balls, lectures, recitals, with carriages drawing up in file before the palm tree to discharge jeweled ladies and whiskered gentlemen, and through it all, a small girl, who was supposed to be in bed, had watched from the third-floor landing.

They returned to the foyer, and Adah Baxter said pensively, "All very lovely, but it spoiled me. My silly little head got so stuffed with reflected glamor that I quite forgot about me, and lived the dreamlives of all those glittering people. Finally, I looked around and everybody was gone; I was grownup and alone, and life had passed me by. Do you know why I always walk along the streets?"

"Many have wondered," murmured Fat Jow.

"I can't meet people. I'm really terrified of the world outside my house; it's still a mystery and a threat. For more years than I care to remember, I've forced myself away from the house, to walk through the city. But if somebody speaks to me on the street, I want to drop through the ground. So I glare them down, and pass on. The only place I feel safe is here." She nodded toward the door of her apartment. "Four rooms . . . the last sanctuary I can call entirely my own, when once the house was mine to roam. I try to preserve it, but when I'm gone . . . who knows? They'll probably pull down the old place and put up more apartment buildings. Builders have tried to buy it out from under me. Ghouls! I'm just glad I won't be here to see what they do with it. I'm the last of the Baxters, no one to leave it to."

Fat Jow clucked in sympathy. "Have you no attorney, no banker, to protect your interest?"

She stiffened. "I trust no one. They're all out to get what they can. And because I'm old, and individualistic, and rich, they think there's easy pickings. Well, I'm not stupid. I've seen them come and go, and I've

proved them wrong. They don't touch me. My father taught me well. 'Never give'em a chance,' he said. 'Trust betrayed is the one unforgivable sin.' "

"A remarkable man," observed Fat Jow, "for his day—but he was a product of the frontier, where each man must be a law unto himself. And is not that day gone? What you fear for the house will surely come, if you do not provide for its use now. I strongly advise you to consult an attorney."

She cocked her head and peered speculatively at him. "You have a feeling for the house. How about you?"

"You flatter me, but the responsibility would weigh far too heavily. I would not attempt to manage your affairs . . ." he smiled, ". . . lest I betray your trust."

She startled him with a full-throated laugh that echoed high under the dome. "Better and better! You and I will get along."

Fat Jow expressed, tentatively, an idea which had just occurred to him: "Although I might buy—"

"Buy? You?" She was not rejecting, merely testing. "Well, now I think of it, there's no one I'd rather sell to—if I decide to sell."

"With a clause in the contract obliging me to maintain the property as it is."

"*If* I decide to sell," she repeated firmly.

Fat Jow spread his hands. "Until you decide, let me be simply your tenant."

Her eyes lighted. "You'll take the apartment?"

"It may be foolishness. I have been quite comfortable where I am for many years, but your house radiates a charm I cannot resist."

She grasped his hand between both of hers. "You can't know what a comfort it will be to have someone here who doesn't *want* anything from me."

A faint twinge of conscience? "Different people want different things," he said vaguely.

"I was about to offer you tea but this calls for something stronger. Come, you must see my father's wine cellar." She led him between the staircases to a corridor serving the rear of the house. "He stocked it

with imported wines and brandies a hundred years old and more. I've had little enough use out of them, don't believe in drinking alone. A single woman has to be careful."

The door opened on narrow dark steps, going down. She reached in to switch on a dim light below. "There's plenty of room, if you have any trunks or boxes you don't care to keep in your apartment. But watch for dampness, or things will mildew."

They descended into an atmosphere compounded of dust, dampness, fuel oil, and the heavy-sweet scent of ancient wine. The basement was a single large enclosure, dotted by thick redwood posts supporting the beams of the house. Its only light was the bulb hanging above the foot of the steps. Fat Jow could not have explained why his quest for Ng Chak, gradually banished to a remote area of his mind, came forward now with an annoying impetus of its own. He resented Ng Chak the more. What right had that despicable one to victimize an incomparable person like Adah Baxter?

They were barely down the steps when a harsh buzzing sounded from somewhere above. She turned back. "Oh, it's the grocery boy. I'll have to let him in."

"May I go?" offered Fat Jow.

She pattered up the steps. "No, no. I still owe them from last week." At the top, she turned in the open doorway. "The wine cellar's straight ahead of you. Pick out a likely bottle and bring it up, will you?"

He heard her withdrawing along the carpeted corridor, and his attention wandered away from the rows of dusty, cobwebbed bottles to survey the gloom of the cavernous basement. Another scent now intruded, one which disturbed him: fresh cement.

Slowly, he wandered from one foundation wall to the other, head down as in deep thought, hands clasped behind him. What he sought he would not consciously admit, but he found it in a shadowy corner at the rear, a new patch of silver-gray in the agedarkened concrete floor, measuring roughly six feet by two.

Several innocent possibilities presented themselves—faulty plumbing, broken floor, blocked drain, cave-in—yet he felt that it was none of these, and that he now had an answer for Ng Har.

He stood rigid as a chill touched his shoulders, and the pounding of his heart was the only sound in the world. But fear had an antagonist, sorrow; not for Ng Chak but for Adah Baxter, and for what Fat Jow must now do to her. He wished fervently to retrace steps, to reclaim moments. For Ng Chak, he had only anger, for having placed him in this painful situation.

The single dim light winked out, engulfing him in infinite blackness unrelieved by a tiny grime-coated window high in the far wall. Involuntarily Fat Jow cried out, then checked himself. He dared not move. His imagination, suddenly sensitive, placed her within arm's reach. Perverse justice, perhaps; was he not planning, though reluctantly, to betray her trust?

Adah Baxter's deep voice floated down from above. "Oh, are you still down there?" The light came on again, and she stood in the doorway at the head of the steps, her hand still on the switch, her face blank. "I'm sorry. I thought you had come up."

Fat Jow summoned enough courage and strength to come hesitantly up the steps. "It is no matter." The words bobbed erratically in his throat, but he made no excuse, for it would have been as transparent as the fear behind it.

She said only. "You didn't bring the wine."

Anger? Disappointment? He tried to read what passed in her mind, but frequently the occidental face was inscrutable to him.

He fought to control his voice. "I find that I cannot stay, after all." He reached the top, and she stepped aside to allow him access to the corridor. The foyer and front door still seemed a great distance away, and she was a larger and stronger, though older, person than he.

She asked, "You haven't changed your mind, have you?"

"I must go." He sidled away from her, and she

made no move to hinder him. Encouraged, he walked faster, and then she followed quietly, echoing his steps.

From the softness of the corridor to the bare wood of the foyer, their footfalls tapped across the parquet floor. Only when Fat Jow's hand touched the cold reassurance of the front doorknob, and he pulled the door wide to the free bracing air, did he turn. He winced at the obvious hurt in her face. "I am indeed sorry," he said.

"Please, is something wrong? Have I said anything?"

He could deceive her no longer, but he must have a ready route of retreat. Emerging from the hush of the foyer into the brilliance of day, where the basement and its secret faded into unreality, he drew a deep breath, then asked gently, "This I must know, Miss Baxter. Where is Ng Chak?"

She stopped upon the threshhold, eyes widening in genuine surprise. "You know him?"

"As well as I care to. His brother is my honored friend."

She fluttered a hand. "But he's not worth bothering about."

"I agree, but I have given the brother my promise. Where is Ng Chak?"

She said easily, "Downstairs, of course. I told you I'd got rid of him."

Fat Jow stared. "But how?" he whispered.

She patted his arm and smiled. "Your herbs—they're most effective in tea, I find. Cream and sugar and lemon quite cover the taste."

The sorrow swelled within him, along with some uneasiness that he was her unknowing accomplice. Her method, he allowed, was discreet and refined, appropriate for one as meticulous as she. He said sadly, "I shall have to inform the authorities."

She was her old warm self. "Oh, if that's all that's bothering you, they already know. I reported it the minute it happened. I'm a law-abiding citizen; I wouldn't withhold information from the police. What a relief! I thought you weren't going to take the

apartment, and I've been looking forward to your moving in."

She was quite mad, Fat Jow allowed. Muttering, "I shall call you," he hurried down the porch steps.

She called after him, "I don't have a phone, but come anytime. Your apartment will be ready."

He could not face her again. When he looked back from the corner of Van Ness, she still stood on the porch, waving.

At once Fat Jow hunted a public booth, and telephoned the police. He asked for his friend Detective-Lieutenant Cogswell, for who else would believe him? After a delay, Cogswell came on and listened to Fat Jow's frantic report with characteristic understanding silence.

Finally Cogswell said, "I wouldn't worry about it. She's just a harmless old eccentric. The Department has a file on Adah Baxter going back fifty years. Every few years she goes through this same routine. Calls the police, hates to bother us again, but she's had to dispose of another tenant—in the usual way. Check that basement closer—and you'll find half-a-dozen other 'graves' that she's prepared, to convince herself it's all real. We always thank her kindly for her public-spirited concern, and assure her we'll file a confidential report to avoid embarrassing her. That seems to keep her happy for another few years."

"But where is Ng Chak?" demanded Fat Jow.

Cogswell laughed. "Probably hasn't stopped running yet. Guilt can prod a man into a fair show of speed. She scared *you* into a near heart attack, didn't she? And you weren't doing anything. What if you'd been after her money? Oh, and that money of hers is just as much a delusion as her buried tenants. She has nothing. Charges rents that went out of style before the first world war, and lives on the income. She's nearly bankrupt, but her creditors all carry her, out of sentiment. She's a city institution; the place wouldn't be the same without the walking woman. Let her have her fun."

Fat Jow stood before the silent telephone while he collected his shattered thoughts. He was at once

ashamed of his macabre suspicion, and glad that he might now indulge his whim of living amid the nostalgic opulence of the Baxter ballroom. He would insist upon paying her a realistic rental and, at leisure, would discuss with her the terms of purchase, for he was confident that she would sell.

A burden gone from his heart, Fat Jow returned to Chinatown, to its commercial Grant avenue, which was beginning to clog with weekend sightseers and shoppers. Ordinarily he avoided the bustle and crush of foreigners in the narrow one-way street, but this afternoon he had a certain responsibility to discharge at the fowl market of Ng Har.

As soon as he could disengage himself from a customer, Ng Har approached, wiping his hands upon his soiled apron. "You have word?"

Briefly, Fat Jow related what he had learned. As he repeated Cogswell's remarks, Ng Har burst into shrill laughter.

"Ng Chak has lost face," he crowed, "by bolting in terror from the walking woman. He will not soon again show it in Chinatown."

Fat Jow shrugged. "He will not be missed."

He moved into his new apartment early the following week, and was warmed by the frank pleasure with which Adah Baxter welcomed him. Knowing that she would not accept a check, he had obtained a $100 bill at his bank for the first month's rent. The unfortunate woman could not have seen a bill of such size since the lavish days of her father, yet it caused no visible reaction, and she resisted only slightly his insistence that the money be not two months' rent, as she had suggested, but one.

After he was partially settled, and while he sorted items into a trunk and several boxes for storage in the basement, she rapped at the open French doors. "I'll have to bother you now and then," she apologized. "Always before, I've had to wait to get at my hiding-place until the tenant went out, but now I don't have to worry." She then removed a large triangular fragment from the cracked panel, uncovering a large hollow space behind. "I think it's rather an

ironic touch, don't you, keeping it here under their noses?"

She lifted out a brown steel filebox, and Fat Jow saw at least two others remaining. Setting the box on the dais, she unlocked it with a key on a chain around her neck, and raised the lid.

Fat Jow felt the benevolence drain from his face. The $100 bill he had given her went to join unguessed numbers of its fellows which filled the box to bulging.

Adah Baxter replaced the box in its cranny, wiped the smudges from the glass. As she went out, she turned, saying, "I know you'll be very comfortable here."

Fat Jow stood long without moving, under the crystal chandelier.

Presently, Fat Jow has made room in the apartment for the trunk and boxes, therefore has no occasion to go near the basement. He asks no further questions, whether of Adah Baxter, the police, or himself, for fear of answers he prefers not to hear.

Deliberately he ponders how best to approach the subject of purchasing, without offending, without upsetting. He is not in haste, for he assures himself that his major task as owner (but only after Adah Baxter is gone) must be to re-pave the basement floor.

Meanwhile, unless he happens to see Ng Chak sound and well, he takes tea with his landlady only when he prepares it himself . . . and wine, not at all.

THE GHOST AND MR. GREBNER

by Syd Hoff

Sigmund Grebner was ready to pop the question. Just as soon as Mrs. Kornish returned from the next room, he'd ask her to marry him. "Mrs. Kornish," he'd say, "you've been a widow eighteen years, I've

been alone just about as long. What do you say we go down to City Hall and make it number two for both of us?"

Before Mrs. Kornish could return, the window curtain fluttered and when the smoke from Mr. Grebner's cigar cleared, he beheld his beloved wife standing in front of the sofa, wearing a white flowing gown similar to the ones she wore long ago when they attended weddings and bar mitzvahs.

"Gertrude, you look marvelous," said Mr. Grebner. "Have you been dieting lately?"

It was a white lie. His wife looked as fat as ever, but Mr. Grebner saw her so infrequently he felt it incumbent upon him to say something nice.

"Sigmund," she said, and the voice was unmistakable, "I want you to put out of your head this instant any notion of taking a second wife. I want you to go on being faithful to me."

"But, Gertrude, you've been gone seventeen and a half years," said Mr. Grebner. "Our children are grown up and married. When I go to visit them, they have little time for me. Our grandchildren are in high school and I can't dangle them on my knee anymore. It's not easy being alone, Gertrude. I have to take my own shirts to the laundry, sew on my own buttons, stand in line myself in the markets . . ."

He didn't want to tell her the worst; that sometimes old people's senses desert them, they don't know what they are doing, and that lately it was happening to him more and more often.

"Sigmund, do you remembers kashe varnishkes, stuffed derma, gefilte fish with horse-radish?"

Mr. Grebner breathed deeply, could almost smell the cooking in an apartment long forsaken.

"Flanken, Sigmund, split pea soup with a big bone in it, brisket, tzimmes . . ."

"Stop, Gertrude! In heaven's name, say no more! You're torturing me! I haven't eaten a home-cooked meal since they took you away to the hospital that last time with a gallstone attack."

"Then don't marry this woman, Sigmund! She's all

wrong for you. Look in her kitchen. The oven has never been used, there isn't even a jar of sour cream or an egg in her refrigerator. She eats out, Sigmund. Restaurants is where you'll spend the rest of your life with her. You're hungry? Read a menu, she'll tell you."

"But, Gertrude, anything is better than being alone, isn't it? I can't go on like this. I'm afraid, afraid . . ."

"Nevertheless, I won't stand for somebody else taking my place, and that's final," said the late Mrs. Grebner.

She straightened a cushion behind his head, swept up some ashes he had dropped on the coffee table in front of him, and vanished through the window as Mrs. Kornish returned to the room.

"Were you saying something just now, Mr. Grebner?" she asked, sitting down opposite him.

"Huh? No, Mrs. Kornish. That is, I was merely thinking out loud."

"Ah! A very good sign, Mr. Grebner, a sign of character. It gives a person a chance to hear what's on his mind, to see if what he's thinking sounds like good sense. I always say when you keep things locked up inside your brains, they get all confused and you can't tell right from wrong. That's why I'm so glad . . ."

"Glad?"

"Yes, I'm glad you came along, because I've been doing some thinking of my own."

"What kind of thinking, Mrs. Kornish?"

"I've been thinking what a strange way fate has of working. Here we are, a man and a woman in the twilight of life, two people who should have met maybe forty or fifty years ago. But we didn't. So, now, what is there left in store for us? We sit in the park together. Sometimes I invite you up here for both of us to sit and watch the clock tick away. Then good-bye, every evening good-bye."

Mr. Grebner dropped his cigar and sprang to her side with the agility of a man half his age. "Say no more, Mrs. Kornish—Selma," he said. "We don't

have to watch the clock just tick away any longer. We can make time stand still in its ceaseless flight. Yes, there is something I've been mulling over in my mind for a long time and now I know what I want. I want you. Will you marry me?"

"Of course, Mr. Grebner—Sigmund."

They embraced. Perhaps Mr. Grebner tried too hard to show how tightly he could squeeze a woman long ago.

"Sigmund, I have a wonderful idea," said Mrs. Kornish finally, pulling away and going to the window for some air. "This occasion calls for something special. How about a good dinner and a bottle of wine, right here, just the two of us, alone?"

Mr. Grebner wanted to cry from the happiness that engulfed him.

"You see, you were wrong about this woman," he almost shouted. "She's like you, Gertrude, exactly like you—a cook, a homebody, a *baleboosteh.*"

"Please don't bother," said Mr. Grebner.

"No bother at all, Sigmund dear."

"But the fuss in the kitchen, the cooking, the preparing, the dishes to wash and clean afterward . . ."

"Who's going to fuss? Hand me the phone. The delicatessen delivers."

Mr. Grebner thought he heard his wife laughing, pushed the curtains to keep her from coming through the window again, pushed Mrs. Kornish instead, pushed very hard with both his hands.

"I still say don't bother, Selma," he called after her.

Then he picked up his cigar, took his hat, and left the apartment. Yes, sometimes old people's senses desert them and they don't quite know what they are doing. When Mr. Grebner got downstairs he couldn't understand what that body was doing on the pavement with all the people standing around it.

Mr. Grebner went home, wondering if he'd ever meet another woman his late wife would like.

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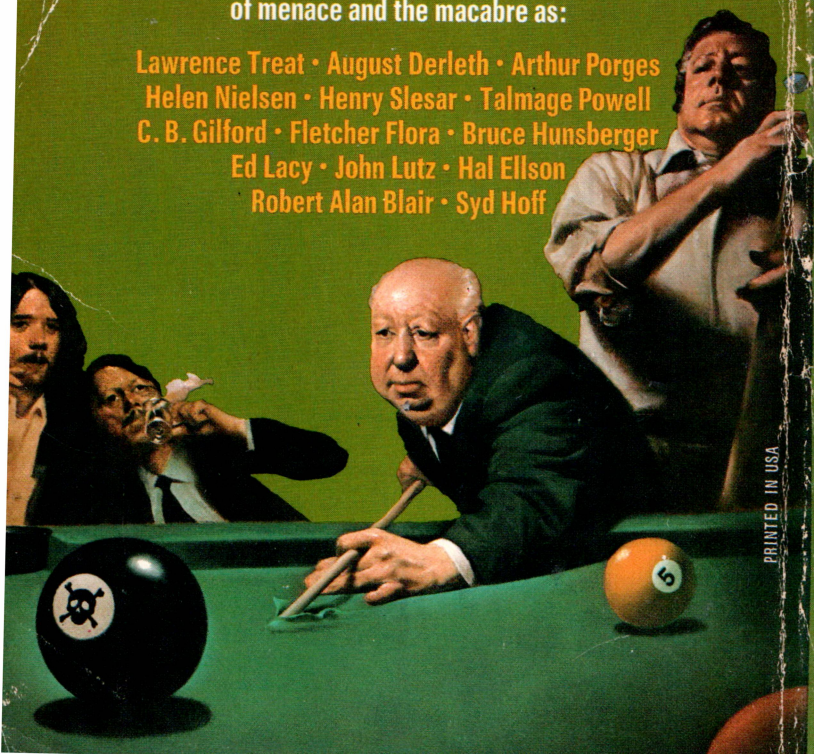

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