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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S BOYS AND GHOULS TOGETHER

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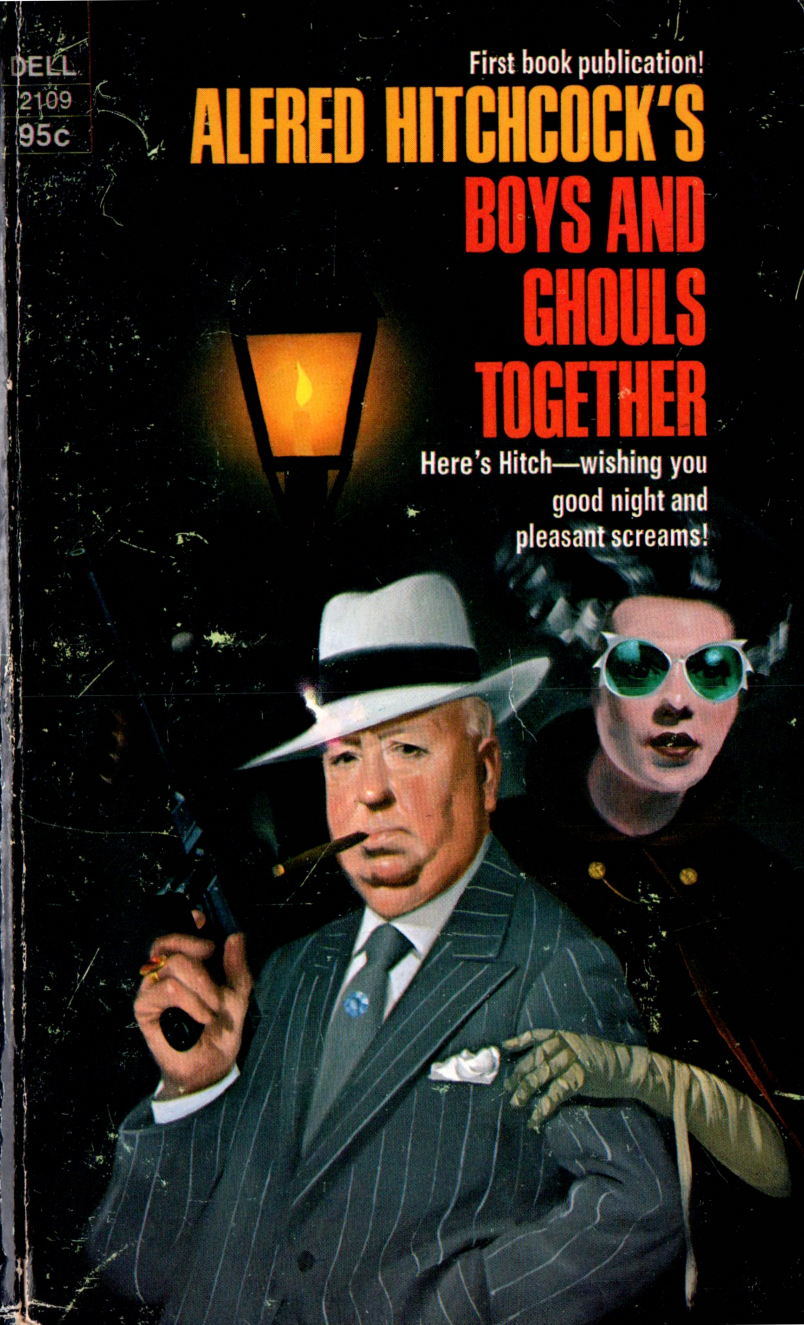

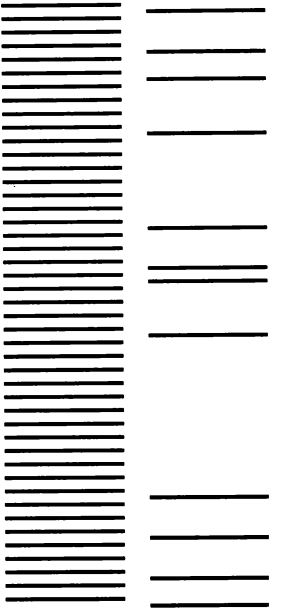

MR. HITCHCOCK ON THE INTERPRETATION OF SCREAMS

Alfred Hitchcock doesn't care for traditional melodies—but there is one sound that is always music to his ears.

For Hitch, nothing can match the human voice raised in a piercing shriek of terror by the expert handling of an instrument of evil.

With his eyes closed, Hitch can identify that instrument, whether it be a knife in the back, a skull glowing in the dark, a corpse toppling out of a closet, the sudden feel of a cord around the neck.

And now Hitch is sitting back to enjoy a superb symphony of screams. Whose?

Why, yours, dear reader, yours. . . .

BOYS AND GHOULS TOGETHER

ALFRED HITCHCOCK
EDITOR

A DELL BOOK

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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

From time to time I have informed my readers of the latest developments in the various fields of crime, and the recent flurry of excitement over the disappearance of Ulla Bergsen, the venerable Swedish film director, prompts me to bring to your attention the fantastic story of what really befell Ulla.

I'm sure that most of you are familiar with Ulla's works, but for those few who are not, Ulla won international acclaim with his motion picture *Divorce Me or I'll Kill You,* which was about a happily married couple whose marriage falls apart when it is unexpectedly subjected to various unrelated pressures and strains. I saw the film about six months ago and left the theater completely perplexed as to what it was all about. Frankly, it left me irritated. Of course I did hear someone say that its meaning was obvious; however, it was not obvious to me, and ever since viewing the film I had it in mind to pay a call on Ulla.

When I learned soon afterward that Ulla was in town for a reception in his honor I arranged for a meeting. My idea was to find out more about the film from the man who had directed it.

I arrived at his hotel at eight thirty that evening and found the Swedish film maker surrounded by Suzy Wrench, who had starred in *Divorce Me or I'll Kill You,*

and a clutter of Hollywood characters, actors, some directors and assistant directors, all laughing uproariously. When I asked one of the actors what the occasion for the laughter was, he nodded his head toward Ulla and said, "It's Ulla's refreshing viewpoints. I've never heard anything like them."

Presently the gathering broke up and I walked over and said hello to Ulla and I got right down to business and explained the reason for my visit.

He was a heavyset man with a bushy handlebar mustache and dark glasses. He shrugged his shoulders and smiled comfortably. *"Divorce Me or I'll Kill You* is about realism and life."

"What does that mean?"

"It's simple. I made a film without a plot and completely unrehearsed. We chose two happily married people who'd never acted before to star, and it was filmed entirely in their apartment. The only provision I made was that they had to constantly play practical jokes on each other. She awakened him one morning by pouring ice water on him. He wired the outside doorknob and arranged a substantial electrical shock for her. She threw a shovel of sand on him while he shaved. He placed salt in the sugar bowl. Then Suzy ingeniously arranged a small explosive charge when John opened the refrigerator door for a midnight snack."

"This is realism? This is life?" I asked.

He explained, choosing his words carefully, that the unexpected was what life was all about. "Can a man look into the sky and know that a thunderbolt is about to strike him down? In this sense *Divorce Me or I'll Kill You* captures the everyday relation to daily life as we know it. It is the unexpected that the people have to confront."

"Absurd," I replied.

"Absurd, is it?" he said, and beckoned to Suzy, who sauntered over immediately. "Suzy," he said. "Will you tell this gentleman what your plans are."

"I'm divorcing John and marrying Ulla," she said, beaming.

"There, you see?" Ulla said, emphatically striking his head. "I took two happily married people and confronted them with the unexpected and they got on each other's nerves, and it got to the point where mere acting became very real. You already know the results of that marriage."

"Amazing. I wouldn't believe it if I hadn't heard and seen it for myself," I murmured.

Of course you've all read in the newspapers about how Ulla and Suzy were married on the George Washington Bridge in a "happening" wedding and honeymooned in Fort Lee, New Jersey. It was generally known that Ulla and Suzy were at each other's throats in short order, and in no time at all they were divorced.

For Suzy it was her second and for Ulla his sixth. He declared that Suzy had caused the breakup. It seemed that she had poured ice water on him while he slept to test whether or not their marriage could survive under unfavorable conditions. It couldn't. As the story went, Ulla, sputtering and fuming, threw her out of their second story bedroom window. Luckily for her she landed atop a milkman, which saved her from serious injury.

Ulla immediately announced to the press that while he saw no harm in men and women socializing, he was irrevocably through with marriage, and furthermore he saw no reason for the state of marriage in the first place.

I completely forgot about Ulla until he telephoned one evening and told me that he wanted me to meet Rhonda Aloozag, the star of his next film.

"Rhonda Aloozag? I never heard of her."

"Of course not, neither has anyone."

On the following day we drove to an unprepossessing, deserted windowless electronics factory where I met Rhonda.

Rhonda Aloozag turned out to be a prodigious electromechanical steel robot. Ulla pointed and proudly proclaimed Rhonda Aloozag the star of his next film, *Never Leave Me,* or *Leave Me and I'll Kill You.* He hadn't quite decided on the title.

"Madness," I said. "Sheer madness."

"Madness, is it?" Ulla thundered. "Think of a woman who loves you no matter what you do to her. I'll show you what I mean," he said, and grabbed a ball peen hammer and struck Rhonda on the shoulder resoundingly.

A blue turret light lit up Rhonda's head and she said, "I love you, I love you, I love you."

Ulla burst into laughter. "See, no matter what I do she loves me. Furthermore, she's been completely programmed to flatter the male ego. Separate circuits have been installed. She encourages, she flatters, she sympathizes, and I've even given her one providing a small measure of jealousy." He turned to the Robot and said, "Rhonda, I'm going to have a few beers down at the corner with the boys."

"You're lying," said Rhonda. "You're going to see Joan or Cathy, or Sylvia, or Mary, or Ruth. Leave me and I'll kill you."

"I was only kidding, I'll stay home," said Ulla.

"I love you, I love you, I love you," Rhonda mumbled.

"Remarkable," I said. "But what made you think of it?"

He explained that Rhonda was devised as the result of an inspiration that came to him after his divorce from Suzy. Since it was a known fact that the ideal marriage situation was one in which both partners made equal concessions to each other and since this rarely occurred, then why not dispense with the idea and create one partner who conceded to everything? He realized that a successful marriage could be insured by Rhonda. In addition, so as not to arouse the wrath of Women's Liberation, he had already planned the sequel to *Leave Me and I'll Kill You* to be called *Look at Another Man and You're Dead,* starring a male robot.

"Wonderful," I said, and left and went home. That was a few months ago. Now I am happy to report that Ulla Bergsen has just telephoned to inform me that he had not been kidnapped or murdered. Instead what had happened was that the circuit on Rhonda Aloozag controlling jealousy had gone haywire. She had held him captive under threat of death if he attempted to leave. Finally, her battery ran down, which enabled Ulla to make his escape. This should prove conclusively that the unexpected, meaning those things we cannot predict, does control our lives.

Predictably, you do not have to be married to a robot to enjoy the unexpected in the stories that follow.

ALFRED HITCHCOCK

BOYS AND GHOULS TOGETHER

HOMICIDE, MAYBE

Lawrence Treat

Around nine o'clock that morning, give or take a few minutes, Magruder came trudging up the steps of the precinct house and went inside. It was the new one, only built six or seven years ago and it had tan, marbled flooring and the plywood on the rear wall was tinted, and he still wasn't used to the place.

Charlie, in uniform and sitting at the desk, said, "Morning, Mac. Lieutenant wants to see you."

Magruder nodded and kept on walking. "Sure," he said. "Soon as I get set."

"Mac!" Charlie's voice, sharp and brittle, stopped Magruder cold. "He's got his long drawers on and something's up. Something big."

Magruder frowned, gave a kind of shrug with his big, heavy shoulders and swung left. The door of the lieutenant's office was partly open and Magruder went in.

The lieutenant, a tense, stringy guy, was sweating away at the phone and taking it on the chin from somebody he couldn't talk back to. When it was over, he slammed the phone down and gave the metal waste paper basket a solid kick. It slid across the room, hit the wall with a resounding bong and tilted over. The mess of cigarette butts, torn envelopes and crumpled police forms settled him down a little, but not enough.

"We got trouble," he said crisply. "Look." And he shoved a report at Magruder. It was headed "Medical Examiner's Office," and the subject was Marian Reed.

"I thought we had that one wrapped up," Magruder said. "What's the matter? Isn't a confession good enough?"

"No. He denied it this morning, claims he didn't know what he signed, that you tricked him and beat him up. And he has a black eye to prove it."

"We told you about that," Magruder said. "He resisted arrest, and I had to take a poke at him. Sid knows—"

"That's the least of it," the lieutenant said. "I can hold off the D. A., but what about the Medical Examiner? He says nobody hit her, nobody beat her up. She died of carbon monoxide poisoning. She fell and rolled under the bed and had convulsions. He thinks that's how she banged her head. Read it."

Magruder glanced at the M. E.'s report. "Multiple bruises over extended area—typical cherry-red tissue —carboxyhemoglobin, 40%—Van Slyke test—conclusion, asphyxiation due to carbon monoxide, probably generated by defective refrigerator."

"About those bruises," Magruder said slowly. "It says here that some of them may have occurred a good twelve hours before death."

"But they didn't kill her, so what's the point?"

"I don't know."

"I do," the lieutenant said. "We arrest her husband, an innocent man, and we charge him with murder and get a confession. Wait till the papers get hold of that. The commissioner's down my throat, says we can't tell an accident when we see one and he's going to get to the bottom of this."

"Yeah," Magruder said. "Sid come in yet?"

"He's upstairs. I figured I'd drop the boom on you, first. You can take it."

"Thanks," Magruder said drily. "Me and Sid, huh?"

"I back up my men," the lieutenant said, "but we got to do something about this. A defective gas refrigerator, and we book a man for murder."

Magruder rubbed the side of his face and felt a small patch of stubble that his razor had missed. "Reed was in the same room as his wife," he said. "Why didn't he kick off, too, and make things easy for us?"

"The M. E. says people react differently, and parts of the room can have different concentrations of gas, on account of the drafts. He thinks Reed was knocked out by it, that Reed shows the typical effects of carbon monoxide poisoning—general confusion and loss of memory. He's in the hospital now, for examination, and he may have permanent brain injury."

"Anybody fix the refrigerator yet?"

"No, nobody's been in. We've got a man at the apartment, outside."

"I'll get hold of Sid and take a run over there. Maybe—" Magruder searched his mind and found nothing.

"Maybe what?" the lieutenant asked.

"Nothing, except that maybe he did beat her up, and not by accident. So something's screwy." He yawned and added casually, "Too bad we can't hang it on somebody."

Something in the way the lieutenant grunted made Magruder spin around, and for a couple of seconds the two of them looked at each other. If they could get a fall guy, twist somebody's arm, dress this up as a homicide, they'd be off the hook. And they could do it.

They wouldn't, of course. They were honest cops, decent guys. They didn't railroad people or manufacture evidence, but the idea crossed both their minds at the

same time, and they knew it.

Neither of them smiled. The lieutenant said, "Let me know what's cooking," and Magruder said, "Yeah, sure," and he turned and went out, closing the door.

He winked at Charlie, sitting at the desk, and he crossed the big room and climbed the stairs to the squad room. There, he spotted Sid Kohacky.

"We got a little problem," Magruder said. "On the Reed case. I'll tell you on the way over."

Magruder drove, because he liked to, and Sid sat next to him and kept jerking his knee impatiently. He was all fired up, and Magruder wasn't.

Magruder was an old man, as cops go. In his fifties. Big, slow-moving, grizzled, maybe a little tired. And Sid was a tall, quick, rangy kid, a year out of college where he'd studied police work. He had plenty of ambition and a lot to learn, and he was supposed to learn it from Magruder.

"We went wrong somewhere," Sid said, "but so did everybody else. What do you figure we can find out now?"

"Probably nothing," Magruder said, "but we'll give it a try, anyhow. Think it over, Sid. Anything we missed?"

It had happened yesterday. In the morning, they'd finished going over the inventory of some stuff that had been taken in a jewel robbery. They'd left the jewelry store and were sitting in the car and looking over the forms they'd filled out, when they got the call. A woman had been found dead, Apartment 4E, 1829 North Whitman, and a uniformed cop was there, waiting. So the pair of them rolled.

The address was a five-story brick building, built just after the war and in fair condition. There was no elevator, and Magruder hauled himself up the stairs while Sid bounced behind him.

Patrolman Joe Chambers was outside the door of 4E, along with a young, bony, dark-haired guy and a middle-aged piece of pudge wearing a beret. Joe identified them.

"They found the body. George Elwin, the super," he said, pointing to the pudgy guy. "And Bellini, from the refrigerator people. He came to fix something, and Elwin let him in. They say they didn't touch anything except a blanket. They almost tripped over it, so they pulled it back. That's how they happened to see her, under the bed. Otherwise, they wouldn't have noticed."

Magruder glanced at them. They both looked a little sore, as if they'd been having some kind of an argument.

"Who is she?" Magruder said to the superintendent.

"Marian Reed," fat stuff answered in a rasping voice. "Her husband's a truck driver. He's probably at work."

"Where?"

"I got the address downstairs, somewhere. You want it?"

"Later on," Magruder said. He put his hand on the knob and pushed the door open. "Come on, Sid," he said, and walked in.

It was a big one-room apartment with a kind of recessed alcove for the kitchen. A Murphy bed, double-size, covered the far side of the room. The bedding was rumpled, a chair was knocked over, and an empty whisky bottle was lying next to it. The bare leg sticking out from under the bed showed where the body was, and the blue blanket that had concealed it had been shoved against the nighttable.

Magruder sniffed at the odor of stale blood. "Better open a window," he said, and he went over to examine the body. He had to get down on his hands and knees to see it under the bed.

Her pink, frilly nightgown was ripped down the

front, and you could see some of the body bruises. She was blond and she must have been quite a piece, a few hours ago and before she'd been hit on the head.

Magruder turned away. The closet was about three feet to the right of him and the doorknob had blood on it. He figured they'd find a few blond hairs, and that would be it.

While he crouched there with his joints stiffening up, he could hear the argument going on outside. The refrigerator man wanted to be paid for his service call, and the super refused because the guy hadn't done anything. They'd apparently been at it for quite a while, and neither one of them would give in.

Magruder made a mental note to find out all he could about that service call. He felt a little drowsy, and he kept hearing the voices outside. He rubbed his forehead, pulled back, then rose slowly to his feet.

"Tell Joe Chambers to put in signal four-eight," he said to Sid. That was the one that would bring in the experts and the lab men and the big brass, all the complicated machinery that goes to work on a homicide. "Then bring those guys in. The super first."

"Sure," Sid said. "You think—" He broke off. They'd probably told him in school that you don't jump to conclusions, you do your investigating no matter how obvious the setup looks. "Sure," he said again, and went out.

Magruder moved heavily around the room, studying it section by section. His head ached and he had to force himself to concentrate. On the table he found a crumpled-up delivery sheet headed Acme Express. The initials H. R. were scrawled on the bottom, so Acme Express was where Reed worked. Magruder copied the address on his pad. Then he walked over to the kitchenette.

The dishes hadn't been washed. A couple of glasses

were broken, and there was a highball glass that smell of watered whisky, as if somebody hadn't finished his drink and then the ice had melted down. The sink and the gas refrigerator looked new. More or less, everything added up in Magruder's mind. The case seemed to him pretty well cut and dried, nothing to it but leg work.

Sid came back with the super and Magruder let him stand there, pulling uncomfortably at his beret and not too sure of himself. His black eyes kept shifting to the bare leg of the dead woman, as if he couldn't tear them away from the sight.

"What was the trouble with the refrigerator?" Magruder asked.

"She said it smoked," the super answered. "But you better ask that guy outside. He's the expert; that's why I had him come and look it over."

"When did he do that?"

"Yesterday, while I was away."

"Where'd you go?"

"To my sister's. She lives in the country and I stayed there overnight."

"Go away often?" Magruder asked.

"I get lonely," the super said. "My wife left me a couple of months ago. I don't like being alone, so I visit my sister."

"If the guy fixed it yesterday, what is he doing here now?"

"Claims he wanted to check up, and he rang the bell but nobody answered, so he called me. I went up with him and opened the door with my pass key." His eyes bugged up. "I called the police right away."

"How did the Reeds get along?"

The super shrugged. "I wouldn't know. They were just tenants."

"When did you see them last?"

"Her?" the super said. "I don't remember. But funny thing—when I got back from my sister's this morning, it was around ten. I saw him leaving. On his way to the bus stop, just like nothing had happened."

"Yeah," Magruder said. He rubbed his forehead, but the fuzziness was still there. He said, "Anything else, Sid?"

Kohacky nodded and spoke to the super. "What's your sister's name?" He jotted it down along with the address, and looked pleased with himself.

They took Bellini, the service man, next. He had the roving eye of a Romeo and he was nervous, and Magruder threw it straight at him.

"What went on when you were here yesterday?"

Bellini stared at the carpet. "I fixed the refrigerator," he said sullenly.

"Fix her, too?" Magruder demanded.

Bellini didn't look up. Magruder said, "How long were you here?" Bellini shrugged, shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Magruder said, "I can find out easy, your work sheet will show it. How long?"

"Maybe an hour," Bellini mumbled, as if talking hurt him somewhere in the stomach.

"An hour," Magruder said, thinking about it. "And do you always go back the next day to check on your jobs—it's a rule or something?"

"I wanted to be sure," Bellini said.

"Of her?" Magruder snapped, hoping to catch the guy off balance.

Bellini finally looked up. "Lay off me," he said angrily. "Between you and that skinflint of a super that won't fork up, I'm losing a day's pay. Lay off."

"What about this morning?" Magruder asked. "Where'd you go before you got here?"

"I left home at seven thirty, same as always, and I

stopped in at the shop and I made two service calls before I came here."

Magruder turned to Kohacky. "Better get it all down," he said. "We can check it later on."

Sid was making notes on the alibi when the lieutenant arrived. The fingerprint men and the photographers showed up right after that, and then the medical examiner and a deputy commissioner.

Magruder fed them what he'd found out. The medical examiner lifted the bed and decided she'd probably been killed when the metal rail of the Murphy bed had dropped down on her, by accident or design. He put the time of death in the early morning, say between midnight and six A.M., although he couldn't be certain, yet. Later on, he decided it was around four A.M..

"Looks like Reed is our man," the lieutenant said. It didn't take any brains to guess that Reed had beaten up his wife and killed her, maybe because he'd found out she'd been monkeying around. "I'll get those alibis checked, the super's and what's-his-name—"

"Bellini," Magruder said.

"Yeah, Bellini. You and Kohacky better go down to that trucking place and pick up Reed. Slap him with it right off. You may get a fast confession. Chances are he doesn't even know the body was found."

"The way I see it," Magruder said, "he went to work as usual and figured he'd come back for the body. He has a truck. He could lug the body downstairs and then take it some place to dispose of it."

"Right," the lieutenant said. "He may show here, of course, and if he does, I'll handle him. Better get moving."

Magruder and Sid went out, and for once in his life it seemed to Magruder that there were more stairs going down than up.

"I got a headache," he said, rubbing his forehead. And up till then, that was about the only clue anybody had that carbon monoxide was involved.

Out in the fresh air, the headache went away, and by the time Magruder and Kohacky got down to the Acme Express, Magruder was feeling fine.

The place was mostly garage, with a section in the back where they kept crates and packing materials, and with a small office in front where the dispatcher spent most of the day doing nothing. He was a stubby little guy who hated being alive, but he got a lift out of the idea of Harry Reed being in some kind of trouble.

"Don't surprise me none," he said. "What did he do on that binge of his?"

"How do you know he was on a binge?" Magruder asked.

"You shoulda seen the hangover he had this morning. Showed up an hour late, and needed help backing out of the garage. He must have tied one on last night."

"Did he ever do that before?" Magruder asked.

"They all do," the dispatcher said. "They drive you crazy, they don't give a damn."

"I'm asking about Harry Reed," Magruder said. "Ever see him drunk?'

"Well," the dispatcher said. He couldn't quite come out with anything that might help a guy.

Magruder and Kohacky left and sat across the street in the squad car. It was a long wait. They talked about some of the boys in the precinct and then about food and then Magruder told about a cop named Putnam who had a phenomenal memory. In particular, he remembered numbers, he could rattle off the license plates of every car that was ever reported stolen. He could go back years, and still remember. They used to quiz him and check up, and he was never wrong. He

was in the department for ten years and he never came across a stolen car. Not once.

Around four in the afternoon an Acme truck with a dented fender came in. The driver was wearing a zipper jacket. He was a big, broad-shouldered guy with a thick neck and plenty of flesh, and the dispatcher signaled to the pair of cops, this was Reed.

They got out of the car and walked over, and Reed was trying to explain the fender. It was just one of those things, he was saying. Never happened before. There was something the matter with the wheel, maybe. How else could he swerve like that and clip a hydrant? There was something wrong with the steering.

Magruder interrupted. "You're Harry Reed? We want to talk to you." And Magruder flashed his shield.

The dispatcher was peeved because he wasn't in on this, but at least Reed was in hot water, and so things could have been worse.

Magruder and Kohacky brought Reed over to the squad car and stood him against the door. "You know why we're here," Magruder said. "Just tell us about it, and it'll be a lot easier for you."

Reed blinked. His eyes were dark and set deep, and there was scar tissue around them, as if he'd spent a few years in the ring. "Last night?" he said. "What did I do?"

"You killed your wife. What for? What reason did you have?"

"Me?" Reed said. "Why, you son of a—" His eyes went small and mean, and his left hook came around so fast that it caught Magruder in the ribs. He was jolted back, puffing heavily and aware of the slowness of his reactions.

Sid charged, grabbed Reed's arm and spun him around before he could get a haymaker in on Magruder.

Then the two cops waded in. Sid grabbed Reed's jacket and twisted it, and Reed lunged and ducked into Magruder's punch and caught it in the eye. Reed staggered back against the car, hit it with a bang and shook his head groggily.

"Well?" Magruder said. He had his hand on his gun, but he didn't pull it out.

"The slut," Reed said. "She walked out on me."

"What did you kill her for?" Magruder said.

"Me?" Reed said. "You're kidding, you don't mean it." The two cops glared, and Reed let out a kind of sob. "I don't know what's the matter with me," he said. He raised his left hand and looked at the fist. "I'm getting slow with those dukes of mine," he said. "A few years ago, and I'da knocked you cold."

"Like your wife?" Magruder said.

"Where is she?" Reed said. "Who'd she run off with?"

"Just tell us about last night," Magruder said.

"I don't know," Reed said. "I don't know. We had a drink when I got home, I guess we killed the bottle, and I woke up this morning with one hell of a hangover. But I couldn't have gotten that stoned on one bottle."

"Then you had more than one," Magruder said.

Reed didn't argue. "I must have," he said, "because when I woke up, I was still dressed and I'd been sleeping in the green chair, and it was almost ten o'clock. I didn't even have breakfast. I just washed up and went to work."

"What about your wife?"

"I didn't see her. I figured she'd taken a powder on me."

"You slammed her around, knocked her to the floor, then conked her real good with that bed rail."

"Did I? I don't know. I can't remember."

"Let's go down to headquarters," Magruder said. "You and me, we'll sit in back and talk."

Magruder didn't get very far. Reed cried a little, and then he perked up and laughed a little, not hysterical, but just saying it was funny, he was kind of mixed up on everything.

Down at the precinct, they brought him into the interrogation room and went to work. The lieutenant helped out, and he had the medical examiner's preliminary findings. Marian Reed had been killed early in the morning, around four. Apparent cause of death was violent contact with the metal rail of the bed, although the autopsy was not yet complete.

Reed kept insisting that he remembered nothing, and it was pretty clear that he'd killed her in a drunken frenzy.

"Ever hit her before?" Magruder asked.

"I got a temper, I get sore easy, and she'd been playing around with somebody. I know that much." Reed rocked as if he was in pain, and his eyes had a blank look. "Sure, I hit her every once in a while, but not hard. Never like that."

Magruder turned to Sid. "The guy can't even think straight. Better type out a statement. He'll sign."

Sid typed it out, the bare essentials of what must have happened, and he and Magruder read it aloud to Reed a couple of times and asked him to sign, and he did. Then they went home.

So that was the way it had gone yesterday, and the two cops hashed it over now on their way to the apartment, enumerating details.

"Let's ask around," Magruder said. "I'd like to find out if either of them left the house. It might help."

They made a door-to-door canvass, ringing bells and looking for somebody who had seen the Reeds recently.

Nobody had. Then they tried the neighborhood stores, and they drew blank until they hit the druggist.

"She was here," he said. "She was upset, she had a wild look in her eyes. She asked for some ointment to take care of a bruise."

"When was that?" Magruder asked.

"Day before yesterday. In the afternoon."

"What was she wearing?"

"She had a coat on. She kept it closed and held it up to her neck. And every once in a while she kind of moaned."

Magruder almost smiled as he said, "Thanks," and went out.

On the street, he rubbed his jaw and tried to remember on which side of his face that patch of stubble was. "I got a feeling we're onto something," he said.

Sid perked up. He'd heard about those hunches of Magruder's, and he kept studying Magruder and waiting for him to come out with something. But all Magruder did was rub the other side of his face and look up at the fourth floor. He sighed as he thought of all those stairs.

"May as well go up," he said finally.

The cop on duty told them the gas had been turned off, and Magruder and Kohacky went into the room. The windows were wide open. Sections of the table and refrigerator and all the doorjambs were splotched with fingerprint powder. The Murphy bed had been stripped, probably for a lab examination. There were chalk marks on the carpet under the bed, showing where the body had been. Otherwise, the apartment was pretty much the same as it had been yesterday.

"Nice rug," Magruder said. "Good, heavy pile. Feel it."

Sid rubbed his shoe into the nap. "So?" he said.

"So it's a nice rug," Magruder said. Then, in a kind of explosion, he erupted.

"Just think of it," he said bitterly. "From what the M. E. says, Reed came home, had a couple of drinks with his wife and ate dinner, and then killed the bottle and went to bed, and all the time they were inhaling that stuff. They got groggy and passed out, and she had convulsions and rolled under the bed and hit her head, and she finally died. He must have staggered over to the chair; it wasn't so bad there. Anyhow, he pulled out of it and managed to get up the next morning. Out in the fresh air he shook off the worst of it, but he can't remember anything and maybe he never will."

It was quite a speech for him, he wouldn't have come out with it to anybody else. Just Sid. Still, after all those words, Magruder wanted to be by himself. So he went into the bathroom and found the tube of ointment that Marian had bought from the neighborhood druggist. Then he opened her closet and examined her dresses, one at a time.

He pulled the green one out and held it up. "Look," he said. He pointed to the rips on the front and to the missing buttons. "She had a bad time with somebody," Magruder said. "After she fought him off, she went down to the drugstore. The way the druggist described her, she was still in a state of shock."

Sid said, "And whoever assaulted her was scared she'd talk, either to the police or else to her husband. Reed would just about kill anybody for fooling around with his wife."

"Easy enough to sneak back into the apartment while she was downstairs," Magruder said. "Romeo could slip the catch on his way out, the super could use his passkey."

"It could still be an accident," Sid said. "And if it

wasn't, how do we find out who monkeyed around with the refrigerator?"

"A little common sense ought to do it," Magruder said. "Let's go see the super, that's the first step."

The superintendent was fixing lunch in his basement apartment when they walked in, and he was in a bad mood.

"A thing like that," he said, "it gives the place a bad name. Who wants to rent an apartment where a man killed his wife?"

"He didn't kill her," Magruder said. "She was asphyxiated. By the refrigerator."

"That makes it worse," the super said glumly. "A defective refrigerator—nobody'll take a chance on that apartment. They'll be scared of another accident."

"It was no accident," Magruder said. "Somebody fiddled with the gas jet and changed the adjustment. Somebody who knew about refrigerators."

The super stared and pulled his beret down on his head. "Bellini?" he said. "The guy must have been off his rocker."

"Who said it was Bellini?" Magruder asked.

"Who else?" said the super.

"You."

The super gave a short, surprised grunt as if he'd been socked in that round belly of his. Then he twisted his lips. "I hardly knew her," he said. "Never even spoke to her."

"Sure you did," Magruder said. "Your wife had left you, and there was an attractive tenant upstairs and you figured she wasn't fussy, so you tried. Only it didn't work out, and you were in a hole and scared of a beating, so you fixed the refrigerator adjustment and went away overnight. It must have been quite a surprise when you saw Reed calmly walking down to the bus."

"You're crazy," the super said. "I wasn't even in that apartment."

Magruder didn't exactly smile, but he had a friendly expression as his hand whipped up and knocked the beret off the super's head. The wound on his temple was reddish, the scratch marks were vivid.

"So that's where she clawed you," Magruder said. "I figured a dame like her, she'd fight back."

"I fell in the shower," the super said. "Banged my head. And if anybody attacked her, it must have been Bellini, the young bully."

"A young, good-looking guy like him?" Magruder said. "She'd be a pushover for him. But you?" He snorted, needling the guy. "Who would fall for you?"

"Even if you were right," the super said in a low voice, "even if I made a pass at her, so what? She didn't die from it, did she? She died because Bellini did a lousy job on the refrigerator."

"And you refused to pay him. But that was yesterday morning, and you'd just come back from staying overnight with your sister, remember? How did you know the refrigerator was still defective?"

"Something Bellini said. I don't remember I—I—"

"Yeah, you, you," Magruder said. "You're our boy and we won't have much trouble proving it. So why don't you make it easy on yourself and tell us about it?"

It took Magruder and Sid a little over two hours to get the confession. Which was about average, Magruder figured. Just about average for a routine case like this one.

EBONY KILLER

Robert C. Ackworth

Jack Eustis always wanted to be a horseman—cowboy, circus rider, trainer, breeder, any kind of horseman. Instead, because of praticalities, he became a local lawman and finally County Sheriff. Ironically enough, one of his first contacts with Ralph Berton was the day Ralph's wife Anita was killed by a horse on their big stud farm. It was clearly an accident. Anita's bay mare shied at a snake and hurled her against a rock, and brain concussion killed her instantly. A whole riding party witnessed it, and when the sheriff dropped by, it wasn't to ask questions but to offer condolences.

It was an odd time for a friendship to start, but something happened right then between Ralph Berton, in his moment of pain, and the sheriff who had wanted to be a horseman; and during the next year—when a lot of changes took place on Berton's farm—Eustis was a frequent visitor at the breeder's stables and began to be somewhat of a horseman.

The big change at the Berton place was that it ceased to be a stock farm with a hundred horses roaming its fields and crowding its paddocks. Ralph Berton was told by Doc Wiley that he had to watch his heart. It was either slow down or die fast, and Ralph slowed down. He never even mentioned considering selling the place he'd built from scratch, the place that some said

had made him a half million. But he did sell his stock except for six old-timers he kept for riding and for talking to and being with. He closed the upper story of the big house to ease the lot of Mrs. Howell, his housekeeper, and he didn't rest until his whole staff had jobs at least as good as the ones they'd had with him. He kept on old Willis Thomas, who'd been with him at the start, as farm manager, although there was little managing to do. He had two young fellows—Barry O'Shea and Timothy Ulden, both horse lovers—come out from town days to keep the snarl out of the place. And that was all.

Some said it was a waste and thought Ralph Berton ought to sell out and live in an apartment. Sheriff Eustis understood why he didn't. A man wanted to live where he was happy. And the doctor said that if Ralph was careful he could live twenty or thirty more years.

Jack Eustis soon got into the habit of stopping at the farm whenever he could. He and Ralph Berton became real friends, the main reason being that they both loved horses. Ralph wanted to talk about them and teach—and the sheriff wanted to talk about them and learn.

At thirty-four years of age, Jack Eustis learned to ride. He mounted a gentle old sorrel and walked and cantered her around the walking ring.

"Sit erect and don't roll from side to side," Ralph kept saying. "Only your lower spine should give—in rhythm with the horse's movement. You get that, and you'll be a rider."

Eventually Eustis was a rider, and then he and Ralph took rides over the hills of the farm. When they stopped to rest, Ralph talked horses and Eustis listened. Ralph knew horse-history from the time of the half-pint aborigine of cavemen days right up to the time of the thoroughbred. But the period he talked most about was

the days of the wild mustangs, those descendants of the Spanish horse that had proliferated in the West until men had curbed them, then eliminated them.

Ralph imparted more than horse-history. He taught the sheriff everything there was to know about treating a horse right—and even a little about breeding and training.

Then one day Ralph's younger brother—twenty years younger—came home to stay. Lloyd Berton had spent most of his boyhood here under Ralph's wing, but his restlessness and unsteadiness had taken him away to the merchant marine a few years back (and who knew to what else?—for Eustis had once received a vague inquiry about Lloyd from a chief of police in California). Some said that Anita Berton had disliked Lloyd heartily and had been glad when he'd left home. Eustis could believe that.

Obviously, Ralph Berton's helpers didn't like having Lloyd here again.

"Always wanting to be waited on, no matter how busy you are," Mrs. Howell sniffed to the sheriff one day. "You'd think he was a prince!"

Old Thomas, usually closemouthed, made a comment to Eustis, too. "Won't do Mr. Ralph's heart no good having that scamp to worry over!"

Lloyd Berton was always pleasant enough to Eustis, but to the sheriff the young ex-mariner seemed a little too slick. His concern over Ralph—"I've come home to take care of you and see that you take it easy," he kept saying—seemed overdone. Eustis had a feeling Lloyd's real reason for coming home was to wait out inheriting Ralph's estate. With Anita gone, it stood to reason that Lloyd would now be the principal heir.

Lloyd rode with Ralph and the sheriff several times. Technically he was a good horseman in that the horse

did as he directed. And he knew horses, having grown up here. But it was clear to Eustis that Lloyd did not love horses. He only wanted to master them.

Eustis felt uncomfortable about Lloyd, and he tapered off stopping at the farm, hoping Ralph would understand the reason without their having to talk about something that familial loyalty wouldn't let Ralph talk about.

Then one day when he hadn't seen Ralph for almost a month, Eustis chanced to drive by the farm of Morgan Raines, who had once been Ralph's competitor. When Ralph had sold his stock, Raines had bought a lot of it. Raines was leaning against his post-and-rail fence, and Eustis stopped to talk horses. Raines took him on a tour of his stables.

"You should have seen the rogue horse I had," Raines said. "A black beauty, but an unmanageable terror, and no good on a business farm. I tried to talk Ralph Berton out of taking him, but he wouldn't listen."

It seemed that two weeks ago Ralph had stopped to see Raines. Ralph had been bereaved at the death of his old roan gelding. He had seen Ebony (a better name for him would be Devil, Raines said) and it had been love at first sight on Ralph's part. He'd taken the horse home with him.

It worried Eustis that Ralph had taken on a burden that might prove to be too taxing for him, and the next day he dropped by. Lloyd was not in view. Ralph shook the sheriff's hand heartily, and neither mentioned the long time it had been since Eustis' last visit. Ralph looked different, and it was a long moment before Eustis realized why. Ralph's twill trousers and khaki shirt were sweaty and soiled. Usually he was neat and clean. Today he was as sloppy and grimy as Lloyd was most of the time.

"I'm a little odoriferous," Ralph grinned, "but it's because I'm trying to get Ebony used to me. A horse knows by his nose. No old mustanger would change clothes and thereby change his odor—when he was breaking a horse. That would mean starting all over again."

Ralph took Eustis to the only stable still in use and proudly showed him Ebony. The horse was handsome. He was blue-black and about fifteen hands and a thousand pounds. He had a strong body set off by an elegant carriage, a proud-rising tail, and a noble head. And he was comparatively quiet, only rearing up a little and nickering when they entered instead of trying to kick the box stall apart as the sheriff expected.

Ralph went right up to the horse and stroked the tapering muzzle. The horse fidgeted, but stayed fast in his stall.

"Every horse is born with a wild strain in him," Ralph said, "and this one has a double dose. He's had several owners, and I think one or more of them played dirty with him. A horse hates someone who mistreats him, and he can smell his enemy as far as he can smell water, which is far. What I'm trying to do is gentle him and show him I'm his friend—"

Suddenly the horse jerked his head away from Ralph and his teeth bared. He whinnied as his ears went stiff and upright. When the door from outside opened and Lloyd walked in, the horse reared high and came clumping down on his hooves.

"You make him nervous, Lloyd," Ralph said. "Let's go outside."

Outside, Lloyd turned darkly on his brother, pointing his finger.

"That's a killer horse if I've ever seen one, Ralph. None of us except you can get near him without him storming up—and he'll turn on you yet! The wild ones

always turn, Ralph. Get rid of him!"

"Don't you worry, Lloyd. Ebony's going to turn out fine."

Lloyd shrugged and walked off, and Ralph frowned after him. Then he turned to Eustis.

"Ebony's no killer, Jack. He was just born out of his time, that's all. Ebony should have been born a hundred years ago. Can't you see him, wild and free, leading his pack over the prairie?"

"I don't know, Ralph. Maybe Lloyd's right. You be careful."

For the next ten days Eustis was too busy with law matters to get back to the Berton farm. On the day he did, the skies were glowering by the time he arrived, in late afternoon. Except for Ralph, the farm was deserted. Lloyd was in town, Ralph explained, and Mrs. Howell was away visiting her sister, and old Thomas was with his sick daughter. The chore boys—Barry O'Shea and Timothy Ulden—had just gone back to town.

"Got something to show you, Jack," Ralph said with a smile.

Ralph took Eustis to the stable where he watched Ebony calmly submit to saddle and bridle. A minute later Ralph was riding him around and around the walking ring. The horse had beautiful movement, and Ralph reached down and patted his flank when he reined up beside Eustis.

"You treat a horse right—any horse—and one day he's yours," Ralph said, smiling again. "Wait till Lloyd sees this. The story is that Ebony's never let anybody stay on his back more than a minute."

When they got back to the stable, Ebony nickered and hooved the ground.

"That powerful nose of his smells the storm coming, though it's probably still hours away," Ralph said. "Storm and fire scare all horses."

Eustis was scared about something, too. He did not like the idea of Ralph being alone here. Suppose he had a sudden attack?

"Come home to supper with Nancy and me," Eustis urged.

"Thanks, Jack—but I've got to stay here and rustle up some grub for Lloyd when he comes. That guy can't even boil an egg on his own."

The sheriff left reluctantly, and felt edgy all evening. His nervousness increased when the violent storm broke around nine. Eustis could not remember a storm that made more noise and loosed more wind-driven rain than this one did in the hour it raged.

It was just ending when Lloyd Berton phoned that Ralph was dead!

Ralph Berton's body was bloodied as badly as any sheriff Eustis had ever seen, as badly as the worst of those lifted out from the tangles of car accidents. The body was awful, and so was the silence as Doc Wiley leaned over it. Doc had been Ralph Berton's physician in life. He was also County Coroner.

Doc rose. "Killed by hoof blows," he said thickly. "He could have had a heart attack simultaneously. That's something we'll never know."

Eustis looked at the horse Ebony, whose hooves were covered with blood. The horse stood staring out of his stall; stood motionlessly, as if he had died standing up. It was as eerie as the scene Eustis had walked in on—the stallion whimpering over the man he had hooved to death, as if he were crying his regret. Ebony had submitted with peculiar docility when Eustis returned him to his stall.

The sheriff turned to Lloyd Berton. "Tell us, slow and clear."

"Ralph and I were having stew when the storm came

up. We heard the horses shrieking over the thunder, and Ralph wondered if they were all right. I think he was scared maybe this killer horse had broken out of his stall—which he had—and was going to do in the other horses. The lights went out just as we got to the stable." Lloyd stopped.

"Go on," Sheriff Eustis said.

"The noise from this dark stable was awful—worse than the storm noise. I knew this horse was kicking the place down, and I said it would be suicide to go in."

"And you didn't go in, did you?"

Lloyd's eyes narrowed. "Not then. Ralph sent me back to the house for a flashlight. When I got back down here, it was all over. I couldn't get near Ralph. I flashed the light in the horse's face, and he lunged for me. I got out just in time. I went in and called you."

The sheriff looked at the stolid, silent horse and said nothing.

"That murdering horse ought to be shot," Lloyd said. "And I'm just the man who can do it."

Eustis turned. "You're not shooting that horse. I'm ordering you not to. When and if that horse becomes your property, you can do what you want with him. But not until then. You understand?"

Lloyd hesitated, then glowered "When he's mine, he's dead."

Lloyd took a step—only one step—toward Ebony's stall, and the horse awoke from his sorrowing lethargy. His ears angered back, his eyes blazed, and his jaws opened as he reared up and came crashing down.

"You see?" Lloyd said, stepping back. "He wants to kill me, too."

There was something wrong about it.

The whole story, the way Lloyd had told it, made sense, and there was nobody to say it had happened

otherwise. There were no grounds for an inquest, and the only witness was Lloyd, anyway, unless you counted those that couldn't testify—the mute horses.

It was neat and tidy, but there was something wrong with it, the sheriff kept thinking. And he kept searching inside himself for what was wrong, but he couldn't find it.

Ralph Berton had a big funeral, well attended, for he had been well liked. Soon afterward the sheriff learned that after Anita's death Ralph had made a new will leaving the bulk of his estate to Lloyd, but with handsome bequests for Mrs. Howell and old Thomas. The will provided that in the event of Lloyd's death before the will was executed, the farm was to go to the state university for use by its veterinarian school.

The day after the funeral, the sheriff chanced to run into both Mrs. Howell and old Thomas, though on separate occasions. They had both left the farm, after many years of service there, when Lloyd took over.

"If it was work for him or starve, I still wouldn't work for him!" Mrs. Howell sniffed, and old Thomas said substantially the same thing, adding that it was too bad Ebony hadn't made a better choice of victim.

"Of course," old Thomas said, "when a horse is scared, he'll turn on someone who loves him—and someone he loves. I think Ebony came to love Ralph toward the end. But he sure hates Lloyd. Hates him to death."

A few days after that, the sheriff ran into Timothy Ulden and found that both he and Barry O'Shea had been dismissed by Lloyd.

"Said he'd take care of the place himself until the estate's settled," Timothy said. "Then he's going to sell if he can get the right price."

"What about Ebony?" Eustis asked, wondering if

Lloyd had ignored his order not to shoot the horse, ignored it on the basis that the order was not valid—which it wasn't.

"Never saw such a change come over a horse. Of course, I didn't see much of him, for Lloyd's tended the horses, but from what I did see, Ebony's lost all his spirit. I mean, he just stood in his stall, sadlike—like he was sorrowing himself to death."

What was wrong came to Eustis in the middle of the night, a week after Ralph Berton was buried. The remembrance, the connection, pounded up in him, bolting him awake. It was a slim thread, and he could be wrong, but he did not think he was.

He had to wait until a decent hour. As it was, he arrived at the funeral home while Charley Adamson was still at breakfast. Eustis sighed with relief when Charley said that Ralph's things were still there.

"Don't know why Lloyd hasn't picked them up," Charley said. "I've reminded him twice. There's a watch and a ring. And of course there's Ralph's bloody clothes, but I don't suppose Lloyd'll want those."

"I do," Eustis said, and walked out with them in a white box.

Eustis headed straight for Morgan Raines' farm where he found the breeder looking at some new stock. Raines listened with widening eyes as the sheriff told him his new views on Ralph Berton's death.

"It's farfetched," Raines said, "but it's possible. Yes, it is."

"Will you come with me to the Berton place? I may need a witness."

Ten minutes later they drove in at the farm. There was no sign of life, and Eustis had a feeling that Lloyd was still in bed. He and Raines went to the stable,

where they found Ebony lying in his stall. The horse did not stir when they stood over him.

"A horse will lie down to sleep or when he's sick," Raines said. He bent over the horse and frowned. "The horse looks gaunt—and his lips are caked. I think Lloyd's slow-killing the poor creature by starving him—and by withholding water. A horse needs twelve pounds of oats, fourteen pounds of hay a day—and watering twice—or he dies fast."

The sheriff's fists clenched. "Will you try to feed and water that horse, Morgan? I'm going up after Lloyd."

Lloyd Berton answered the door still pulling on his shirt. Eustis pushed past him, ignoring Lloyd's protest as he went straight into Ralph Berton's bedroom on the first floor and yanked open the closet door. He pulled jodhpurs and a shirt off hangers and turned to face Lloyd.

"You're coming to the stable with me, Lloyd," he commanded.

Lloyd paled and his eyes glazed with the fear of a trapped animal, but he walked to the stable—with the sheriff behind him, watching.

They found Raines kneeling beside Ebony. Raines looked up worriedly.

"He took a little water and some bran mash, but he's got to take a lot more before he starts to come out of this."

"We'll see what this makes him do," Eustis said, and placed the clothes from Ralph Berton's closet near the horse's nose. In a moment Ebony's head stirred and then he raised it slowly. He lowered his nose and nuzzled the shirt and jodhpurs and whinnied softly.

Eustis looked at Lloyd Berton. Every bit of blood seemed to have drained from the young man's face.

"And now," Eustis said, "we'll see how Ebony reacts

to the clothes Ralph was wearing when he died."

The sheriff removed the clothes from Ralph's closet and replaced them with the bloodied clothes he'd died in. The sick horse responded almost at once. His ears went back, his eyes blazed, his jaws opened, and his great body shuddered from his effort to rise and fight. The horse snorted his rage as his weakness forced him back down.

Eustis turned. Lloyd had stepped back, back, back, as if he were afraid the horse really would rise and attack him. He was at the door.

"When you saw Ralph's heart might not take him as soon as you wanted," Eustis said, "you took matters in your own hands. *You did it by dressing him in your clothes!*"

"I—don't know what you're talking about," the pale man said.

"The conditions were perfect. There were no witnesses. The storm had frightened the horses to frenzy. The lights were out, and they couldn't see. *And you knew a horse tells by his nose!* You knocked Ralph out and got him into your clothes. Then you carried him down here and shoved him inside, where Ebony was running loose. The clothes were permeated with *your* odor, and Ebony struck in the dark because he hated you—probably because you whipped him behind Ralph's back, or worse. It was murder as surely as if you'd struck the death blows yourself. You used your enemy—this horse that had finally found a friend, in Ralph—to kill your brother!"

There was a long silence before Lloyd said, falteringly, "You can't prove a crazy story like that. Who'd believe it?"

Morgan Raines spoke. "A jury will believe it when it sees this horse respond to these clothes the way he just

did. And Ebony is going to recover to do that. I'm going to see to it—"

Lloyd wheeled and bolted, and Sheriff Eustis ran after him, but not too anxiously. He figured that Lloyd Berton was a coward, and he proved it. It took only one warning shot to bring Berton to a shaking stop.

Morgan Raines—the same kind of horse lover that Ralph Berton had been—said he would stay and see Ebony through the crisis. The sheriff would have liked staying, too, but he had another job to do. He had to drive Lloyd Berton in to jail.

SEA OF TROUBLES

Henry Slesar

To attract attention on Rue de Montparnasse, to swivel the heads of lovers, apéritif-nursers, and bickering artists, requires something unique in performance or appearance. Owen Layton accomplished the feat with a rumpled English tweed suit, a gray-flecked beard in the style of U. S. Grant, and a pair of crutches that kept his monstrously bandaged foot off the Parisian sidewalks. But there was something else that distinguished him, a cheerfulness, a jaunty face and manner that belied the crutches and bandages and their implication of pain and suffering. He was "le brave Américain" that morning, and he seemed to be enjoying the role.

He maneuvered the crutches skillfully as he swung into a seat at one of Patrick's outdoor tables, and the waiter moved swiftly to his side. With a laughing apology for his bad French, Owen asked for a Pernod and inquired after "mon frère, Monsieur Gerald," but the waiter only shrugged. "Never mind," Owen smiled. "He should be here any minute."

Robin Gerald Layton took longer than that, and brought with him the reason for his tardiness. It was a black-haired, sloe-eyed young woman with a swishing pony tail and a pouting mouth. The pout became more pronounced when Robin saw his brother, for he slapped her playfully and sent her on her way. Then he joined Owen at the table.

"Owen!" he said gleefully, pumping his arm with both hands. "How are you? When did you get here? Were you waiting long?"

Owen laughed, and pried loose the thick, paint-stained fingers from his sleeve. "Easy," he chuckled. "You want to put my arm in bandages, too?"

Robin spotted the shrouded foot for the first time and clucked in quick sympathy, but Owen shrugged off explanations. "Let me look at you," he said. "It's over a year since I saw you last; you look more Frenchy than ever." He grasped Robin's shoulders and studied the young, bearded face, a face not unlike his own, especially around the clear, smiling eyes. Robin Gerald (he had dropped the Layton) was six years his brother's junior, and five years of pleasant expatriation had kept him even younger looking.

"You look different yourself," Robin beamed. "That beard! A real beaver! And you used to kid *me* about my shrubbery!"

"Yes, it's pretty grim. I'm thinking of trimming it, as a matter of fact, more in your style. Here," Owen said, pushing his glass across the table. "Finish this Pernod for me. I shouldn't be drinking it, with my foot."

"Your foot?"

"Gout," Owen said ruefully. "You remember, I wrote you about it a few months ago. I had an attack just before sailing, and I probably would have gotten over it if I hadn't succumbed to those damn French chefs. From now on, I stick to the British line."

"A rich man's disease," Robin chuckled. "You shouldn't mind that, Owen."

"Yes," Owen said thoughtfully. "And neither should you, old boy. Remember where your money comes from."

Robin looked embarrassed. His sole income was contained in the American Express checks that bore Owen's

name. Owen had sent him to Paris to "paint," and occasionally, when not preoccupied with wine and women, Robin did. As for Owen, he always had a legitimate excuse for his Paris trips. He came to do business with the wine-exporting company his wife owned.

"And how is Harriet?" Robin said. "Still the same?"

"Yes, still the same amazing Harriet. Some women would have been content to let their inheritance lie snugly in the arms of some trust officer. But not Harriet. No, indeed."

"But she must have changed some," Robin said. "That beard! If she let you grow that, she's not the same Harriet I remember!"

Owen smiled pensively, and lifted his glass.

"No," he said. "She's not the same. And that's exactly why I grew this beard, and why I came abroad."

"But why? I don't understand."

"You will," Owen said. "Because you're going to help me."

"Help you do what?"

"Help me kill Harriet," Owen said. Then he took the Pernod from his brother and finished it with a lip-smack and a sigh, and inhaled deeply of the invigorating air of Paris.

Robin had moved into the Hotel Raspail since Owen's last visit, and his enormous studio room overlooked the eight-sided corner where Boulevard du Montparnasse met Boulevard Raspail. Robin must have found it an inspiring view as the parade of Parisian lovelies continued all day long. As for Robin's work, the results were evident. The studio was filled with canvases, almost all of them unspoiled by paint.

When Owen preceded Robin into the room, he did something that made his brother gasp. He dropped his crutches on the floor and walked unassisted to the daybed.

"Your foot," Robin said. "What about the gout?"

Owen laughed, and stretched out on the bed.

"The gout," he said, "is the cornerstone of my plan, old boy. Oh, it was genuine enough at first. I suffered the agonies of hell with those early attacks, but it's simply a matter of controlling my diet. However, I have already established a medical history of the disease, if questions arise later."

Robin sank into a sling chair, his face bewildered.

"I've never seen you like this, Owen. You're not making any sense at all. Those crutches, the beard, all this crazy talk about killing people—"

"It's not crazy at all. It's a beautifully rational scheme, and one you will be eager to see succeed. That is, if you enjoy the life you lead."

"Enjoy it? Of course I do!"

"It would be a pity to lose it all, wouldn't it? All this devotion to—art? And all the pretty women of Paris?"

"Has something happened between you and Harriet?"

Owen lit a cigarette.

"Nothing sudden," he said. "No head-on collision, at any rate. It's been a gradual affair, perhaps the inevitable result of the advancing years. You know I was considerably younger than Harriet when we married, and I believe the age difference excited her. But after ten years, the difference is suddenly not so great. Harriet is discovering that there are younger men in the world."

Robin swore, and went to the window.

"Are you cutting me off? Is that what you came to tell me?"

"Nothing of the kind," Owen said. "As long as my income can support it, you can continue to develop your 'talent.' The question is, how long will my income continue?"

"And that's why you want to kill her."

"But killing her very carefully, old boy, with due regard to the dangers involved. I might never have considered it at all if I hadn't arrived at this plan. So you see, even an attack of gout can have its beneficial side. I lay prostrated with pain for a month, while Harriet indulged herself with nondomestic pleasures—her current hobby is dancing lessons. You haven't seen anything until you've seen that woman doing a gross exercise they call the Twist. But in that month's time, I was given time to think. And I thought about something quite marvelous."

"What?"

"A unique phenomenon of the modern age," Owen smiled. "The magnificent paradox of transatlantic travel."

"Travel?"

"Of course. Now you know me, Robin, I'm a great champion of sea travel. For me, an ocean voyage is a tranquilizer, a remedy for every ill. But a ship makes its journey in five days; a jetliner takes only a few hours."

"But you hate planes. You've never been on a plane in your life."

"Planes terrify me. I've never tried to conceal the fact. Yet for sheer speed, old boy, you must admit they have the edge."

"I still don't understand! What does it all have to do with killing Harriet?"

"Everything," Owen Layton said. "For you and I, dear brother, are going to put that transatlantic paradox to use. We're going to prove that the difference between a ship and a plane is a lovely way to commit murder."

The *S. S. Empire,* flagship of the British Line, wasn't the largest vessel anchored at Le Havre, but on Saturday morning it was the busiest. In the bustling excitement that preceded its departure for New York, the

progress of the two bearded men on A Deck seemed painfully slow. One of them, grunting with every swing of his crutches, held the other's arm as they threaded their way through the chattering, scurrying, celebrating crowd of passengers, visitors, and crewmen.

Finally, they made their way into Stateroom G, and Owen stripped off his green plaid topcoat and Homburg, and collapsed on the bunk with unsimulated fatigue. It took the sight of Robin's blanched face to make him smile again.

"Relax," he chuckled. "Everything will be fine. Let's take care of the passports first, and then we can call the steward."

Robin locked the stateroom door before taking the passport from his coat pocket. Owen produced his own, and set about the delicate task of removing the small photographs from both books. He squeezed glue from a tiny tube and replaced them, one bearded face substituted for the other one.

"All right," he said. "Now let's ring for the steward."

The man who answered the call delighted Owen at once. He was an aged cockney with a thin crest of white hair, the mouth of a pixie, and the squinty eyes of a myopic.

"Yes, sir, everything all right, Mr. Layton?"

"Everything's fine," Owen said. "You're Mr. Pawkins?"

"Yes, sir, that's me, sir," the steward said.

"Come here, Mr. Pawkins," Owen said, hoisting himself to sitting position with the aid of one crutch. "I'm afraid I'm going to be something of a burden to you on this voyage, and I'd better make things clear right now."

"Oh, *no,* sir," Pawkins said, shaking his head vigorously. "You couldn't burden *me,* sir, not the likes of me. Service is me middle name, sir, you can count on that."

"You see?" Owen grinned at his brother. "That's why I like the British Line, dreadful food but lovely people. Mr. Pawkins—"

"Yes, sir?"

"As you can see, I'm something of an invalid."

The steward clucked. "Oh, my, sir. Your poor foot, eh?"

"Yes, my poor foot. As a result, I'm going to be forced to take all my meals in here, so you'll have to arrange matters with the dining captain. I trust that can be done?"

"Oh, yes, sir, don't you worry none about that."

"Nor will I be spending any time on deck. Don't tell me about your magnificent stabilizers, I know all about them. The least bit of roll is extremely painful to me, so I'll be in the stateroom until we reach port."

"Tut!" Pawkins said. "What a pity, sir."

"It's all right," Owen smiled. "I've got a great deal of business to take care of between here and New York. I'll have enough paperwork to keep me busy. So if you'll just bring me my meals and keep me from being disturbed, you'll be doing your job handsomely. All right?"

Pawkins snapped two fingers against his cap.

"Right you are, sir!"

Owen grinned, and waved a parting salute as the steward went nimbly out of the stateroom.

"Whew!" Robin said. "We were lucky. He's a cooperative old geezer."

"Don't be so sure," Owen said warningly. "He's a mite too friendly. If he tries to make conversation, ignore him. Make him knock before he enters, so you'll have time to get to the bunk and bury yourself in papers."

"Right."

"You might even pretend to be asleep sometimes,

face to the wall, that sort of thing. Never let him get a solid look at you, Robin, that's essential."

"I know, I know," Robin said testily. "You've told me that a thousand times."

"I can't repeat it often enough. You've got to be a *prisoner* in this stateroom, understand?"

"It won't be any fun."

"No," Owen said. "Nor would it be any fun to fill gas tanks in Hoboken. Not as much fun as living on the Left Bank, with those pony-tailed women of yours—"

"I said I would do it, Owen! Stop nagging me!"

Owen smiled. "I'm doing all the hard work. Including that plane trip tonight." He shuddered. "For me, that's the worst part of all. How high do those bloody things fly?"

"Thirty thousand feet, I think."

"Preposterous." He reached down and began to undo the bandage on his right foot. "All right," he said. "Let's get started. They'll be putting visitors ashore in ten minutes."

Ten minutes later, his crutches left behind him, his bandages now neatly wrapped around Robin's right foot, with Robin's gray tweed topcoat belted around him, and Robin's flop-brimmed hat on his head, Owen Layton left Stateroom G. He strolled casually across A deck to the stairs and the visitors' gangplank, and left the *S.S. Empire* to its business.

He brought only one suitcase to the air terminal at Orly Field. The immigration man looked at his passport with only a cursory glance at the photograph, and handed it back with a brisk, "Thank you, Mr. Gerald." The customs officer was gracious, and the ticket agent couldn't have been more courteous. But when Owen

saw the Air France jetliner standing on the tarmac, saw the immensity of its wingspread and the relatively small size of its jet engines, his knees weakened and his face turned the color of the gray flecks of his beard.

A loudspeaker in the terminal informed the passengers of Flight Five that their liner was ready to be boarded. Owen knew it was the worst moment he had to face; not even his image of Harriet's murder was as terrible as this. But he forced himself into a leaden walk in the direction of the ramp.

His memory of the flight was imperfect. He recalled five minutes of sheer terror during the steep takeoff, eight hours of alternative fright, numbness, and drowsiness, and an agonizing half hour following the Captain's announcement of their approach into Idlewild.

Then he was down, and safe, and ready for the most important part of his plan.

It was midnight in New York when he claimed his baggage and climbed into a taxi. He gave his destination as Grand Central Station.

In the railroad terminal, he deposited his luggage in a public locker, and took still another taxi to the street where he and Harriet had spent the last four years of their marriage. The brownstone was an unimposing building from the exterior, but Harriet's money had scooped out the interior of it and transformed the structure into a duplex of cunningly modern design.

It was after two A.M. before Owen used the key that admitted him, when the streets were empty and the shades of the opposite buildings were drawn against the night.

He went quietly up the stairs to the bedroom, and found it empty.

Harriet wasn't home.

Owen registered no surprise. It was Saturday night.

Presumably, he was in Paris, and Harriet had already demonstrated her willingness to enjoy evenings on the town without his company. But while it was no surprise, there was chagrin. Harriet was making the moment easier for him; she was proving the justice of his actions with her behavior.

He stretched out on the bed, and waited in darkness.

An hour later, the front door opened, and he tiptoed to the bedroom doorway to watch for Harriet's entrance.

She wasn't alone. There was a shadow following her, tall, lean, and with exaggerated broad shoulders. He couldn't hear their voices until they were inside, and couldn't define Harriet's company until she flicked on the hallway light.

"Oh, my feet!" Harriet was laughing. "Douglas, you're a brute, you know that?"

Douglas was a mustachioed brute, with long sideburns. Owen, frowning into the shadows, guessed that he was one of Harriet's dancing instructors, on extracurricular duty.

The man encircled Harriet's waist with both arms.

"Don't," she said carelessly, primping in front of a mirror. The man dug his chin into her neck and she giggled. "Did I tell you that I heard from my husband?" she said.

He pulled her into an embrace.

"He cabled yesterday," she said. "He's coming back on the *Empire* on the twelfth."

"Maybe she'll sink," the man said, and Harriet laughed.

"That's just what I'm doing, sinking. I'm awfully tired, Douglas. Be a good boy and go home."

"I'd rather be a bad boy and stay here."

She moved away from him, and went to the door.

"Call me tomorrow," she said.

When he was gone, Harriet came up the stairs. Owen flattened himself against the bedroom wall and allowed her to enter the room. Then, with a melodramatic flair that pleased him, he flicked on the lights.

"Owen!" she screamed.

He killed her with a modern Gres vase purchased, appropriately enough, in Paris.

Now there was a distasteful part, distasteful for a man of fastidious bent. He would require five days of anonymity, and he had previously decided that it would best be found in that region of the city where the lower depths were at their lowest.

It was painful to discard his British suit in a trash can, but he did. And then, wearing only a pair of rumpled slacks and a heavy wool sports shirt, his hair and beard dirtied and disheveled, he made his way to the Bowery. His first act was to join a shambling, silent line of vagrants outside a Clothing Relief agency, and he emerged with a costume that was superior to any he might have invented—a motheaten sweater of mottled blue color, a double-breasted jacket with a shredded lining and a thousand unironable creases and a felt hat with a stained brim. He left the relief center, bought a bottle of sauterne for ninety-eight cents, and rented a bed in a hotel called Lamb's for fifty cents a night.

He hated it, but there was one satisfaction. There would be no surprise recognition here, no danger of running into old friends or acquaintances. Or, he thought with amusement of some of the people he had known, was there?

At noon on Monday, in a steam-filled diner where the coffee tasted like antiseptic, he picked up a damp, mud-stained newspaper from the dirty tiled floor. There was

an item on the second page that gave him an appetite, even for the diner's foul-tasting bill of fare.

WOMAN FOUND MURDERED
IN EAST SIDE
BROWNSTONE
Dancing teacher held as suspect

It was an aspect of the situation that hadn't occurred to him, either in the planning or the execution. But he found it very much to his liking.

The *S.S. Empire* docked the morning of the twelfth. An hour before it anchored, Owen made a short visit to Grand Central Station. He removed his luggage from the locker, and in the terminal washroom he shaved and changed into clean clothes. Then he rented an automobile in his brother's name, and drove it down to Pier 16.

The passengers began to trickle out of the customs shed. He knew Robin would be among the last to appear.

Finally, he did, wearing Owen's green-plaid topcoat with the collar pulled around his throat, with Owen's homburg hanging low over his eyes. He handled Owen's crutches awkwardly, but he was a convincing cripple nevertheless.

Owen went to help him, full of solicitude. But he made his greeting from between clenched teeth.

"The steward?" he said tightly. "Did you see him before you left the ship?"

"No," Robin grunted. "I managed to avoid him. And I didn't tip him either, just like you said."

"Good!"

Owen helped him into the waiting auto. "Make it

fast!" he snapped. "Get the bandages off, and let me have that coat and hat."

They made the switch as before. When Owen stepped out of the car, he was dressed in the homburg and green plaid topcoat, and the bandages were back where they had originated. The crutches seemed like old friends as he hobbled back to the entrance of the pier.

There was a ship's petty officer emerging from the passengers' exit. Owen grinned as he came toward him, simultaneously greeting him.

"Pardon me!" he said jovially. "Can you tell me when the rest of the crew members will be coming off?"

"Crew members? Well, some won't be getting off at all, of course. Whom did you want?"

Owen smiled. "It's rather embarrassing. There's a steward I meant to see before I left my stateroom. He was very kind to me."

"What's his name?"

"Pawkins. An old fellow, extremely nice."

The officer chuckled. "Ah, yes, I know him. Well, tell you what, seeing that it's Pawkins. You come back with me to the purser's office, I'll see if we can get Pawkins up there. And you can remember him properly."

"Thank you," Owen said. "Thank you very much."

Pawkins was more than pleased. He looked at the two fifty-dollar bills with moist eyes, and shook Owen's hands vigorously.

"I'm most grateful," he said. "Most grateful, sir. And I hope you'll be back with us soon again."

"I will be," Owen said. "You can be sure of that."

He gave Robin the car that had been rented in his name, and instructed him to take an apartment in the Village and lie low. Then he took a taxi to his home. He expected to find company there on his arrival, and he wasn't disappointed.

"Mr. Layton?" the police detective said. "I'm afraid we have some bad news for you . . ."

The shock of Harriet Layton's death kept Owen confined to his home for a week. Understandably, he discouraged visits from his friends, and accepted their written and telephoned condolences with a gravity befitting the situation. When the press interviewed him concerning the murder, and asked cruel questions about the handsome dance instructor who was facing indictment by the grand jury, he was restrained in his replies. He had no reason to suspect his wife of infidelity; he didn't know the man called Douglas Farr; he was sure there was no scandal, and if Farr had been responsible for his wife's death, he was equally certain that the man had acted impulsively. His performance earned him good notices. The newspapers portrayed him as the bereaved husband, returning in innocence from a business trip abroad to find his home and his happiness destroyed. If there was another implication, in their mention of the large fortune that would be his upon probation of Harriet's will, it was unimportant in the light of the simple, uncomplicated facts of the matter:

When Harriet Layton died, her husband was in mid-Atlantic. And a dance instructor, whose moral scruples were both a public and police record, had been the last man to see her alive. A lovers' quarrel? So the tabloids speculated. But Owen offered no theories. With admirable dignity, he awaited the outcome of both the criminal and probate courts in full confidence that human and fiscal justice would reign.

On a Friday evening, two weeks after his return from abroad, Owen sat alone in the downstairs living room, patiently depleting the best of Harriet's brandy stock.

The house was quiet, quiet in a way that was enjoy-

able and gratifying. When the stillness was shattered by the ringing of the telephone, Owen was annoyed. But he picked up the receiver, and heard the voice of a strange woman.

"Owen? It's Sheila."

"I beg your pardon?"

"It's *Sheila.* God, I feel terrible not calling you before this, but I just found out what happened, honestly. I read it in the papers, the whole awful thing. You must be in a *state.*"

"Are you sure you're calling the correct number? This is Owen Layton speaking." Who was Sheila?

"Well, of course it is!" The voice was exasperated. Then it adopted an oddly hostile tone. "Listen, what are you trying to do? Is there somebody there with you?"

"No."

"Then why the big act? Listen, I told you not to try any of that shipboard romance stuff on me. I won't stand for it."

"Shipboard romance?"

"Listen, Owen, I want to see you right away. We have to talk about things."

Owen covered the mouthpiece with his hand, and stared incredulously at the instrument. Then he had a sudden and terrible notion.

"Did you say Sheila? From—the *Empire?*"

"Of course from the *Empire!* Listen, don't tell me that you're *that* mired up! I know it must have been a shock and all that, but from the way you talked about your wife, she didn't mean a fig to you. So cut it out!"

Owen swore a mighty oath, silently. It included the name of Robin.

"I don't have much time," Sheila said. "I want to see you tonight."

"No," he said quickly. "No, that's impossible. I can't see you."

"Listen, if you think you can try a brush-off—"

"I didn't say that! I said I can't see you tonight. I—I'm having visitors, important people, business."

"Tomorrow then. Early."

"It's impossible!"

"Look, Owen, you don't get rid of me that easily. Not after that week on the ship. Do you understand me?"

"I tell you it can't be done! I'm going away, leaving town. I don't know when I'm coming back—"

"Now *listen!*"

He dropped the receiver as if it were burning his hand. It fell back into the cradle and rocked to a halt.

Owen swore again, aloud.

Then he dialed Robin's number.

"You idiot!" he screamed into the mouthpiece. "You damned fool idiot!"

"Owen?"

"Yes, Owen!" he roared. "Do you know who I just heard from? Sheila! Does the name mean anything to you?"

There was no reply, except for a vague sound that might have been Robin swallowing hard.

"Well? Who is Sheila?"

"Owen, listen to me—"

"You were supposed to be a *prisoner* in that stateroom, weren't you? You were never supposed to leave! How many other women did you take up with? I suppose you went to the lounge and played bridge with the passengers? Or maybe you sat at the Captain's table?"

"I swear it wasn't like that! I did everything you said, Owen, I swear I did. The steward never even saw my face, not even once—"

"And what about Sheila? What did she see?"

"She was the only one, Owen, honestly. I was going crazy alone in that damn room. I just went for a little stroll on deck, at night—"

"Just a little stroll! And that's how you picked up Sheila, was it, just strolling?"

"Owen, I swear to you—"

"You did plenty of swearing, all right. From the way that woman talked, you must have sworn to anything. She's demanding to see me. She's read about Harriet's death, and now she wants some of the gravy. Do you know what that means?"

"Gosh, Owen, I never thought—"

"Do you know what it means? If she comes up here, I'm cooked! Roasted! Fried! One look at me and she'll know I wasn't on that ship! You think it'll take her long to put two and two together?"

Robin made a bleating sound of misery.

"Couldn't you put her off? If you put her off long enough—"

"And just how do I do that? After you've been so charming?"

"Couldn't you go away for a while?"

Owen juggled the receiver like a club. Then he said:

"Maybe you're right. Maybe it's the only answer for now. If I went back to Paris, to finish up my 'business' . . ."

"I'm sorry, Owen."

"You're sorry!" he snarled, and slammed the receiver down again.

There was one more call he had to make, to the ticket office of the British Lines.

There had been no staterooms available on the *S.S. Empire.* For the first time in his shipboard travels,

Owen was forced to accept accommodations on B Deck. But it was an indignity he was forced to accept in order to make the sailing on Saturday.

This time, the steward who showed him to his cabin was a gruff, uncommunicative gentleman who made no promises of devoted service. Owen himself had fewer requests to make. The week before he had discarded both bandages and crutches, declaring his gout healed.

His cabin was small, with poor ventilation and crowded furnishings, and the weather forecasts for the crossing were generally unpleasant. There were ominous storm signals in the ship's barometer. It wasn't going to be a tranquilizing voyage, that was for sure. But it was escape.

The ship sailed at four that afternoon. At five, there was a knock on Owen's door.

"Come in!" he said.

The door opened, and the woman in the neat blue and white suit paused in the doorway and looked at him with parted lips. Her hair was severely styled, and her blandly attractive face was denied prettiness by too forceful a mouth and chin.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I thought this was Mr. Layton's cabin."

"Yes, I'm Mr. Layton. What can I do for you?"

Her eyebrows met. "You're not Owen Layton."

"Yes, that's right."

She laughed uncertainly. "But you couldn't be. I mean—Mr. Layton's a much younger man. I'm sure there's some mistake—"

"Would you mind telling me what you want?"

She stepped into the room, with cautious movements.

"I saw your name on the passenger list. But the Owen Layton I mean—well, he's about your height,

and he has a beard like yours, but—well, he's in the wine business. Are you in the wine business?"

The room's ventilation seemed worse than ever, and Owen, sitting at the cramped dressing table, found breathing difficult. He looked at the woman with wide, horrified eyes.

"Who are you?" he said hoarsely.

"My name is Sheila Ross," the woman said, her lips tightening. "I'm the ship's social director."

"The social director?" Owen said. "You work on the ship?"

"That's right. And what I want to know is—who the hell are *you?*"

Then she turned, and clicked her heels hard as she went back to the door.

"Never mind," she said grimly. "I'm going to find out who you are. You see if I don't!"

The door slammed after her. Above decks, the *Empire's* whistle hooted into the skies, warning the seas ahead that it was on its way, troubled waters or not.

DEVIL IN AMBUSH

C. B. Gilford

Professor Howard Hollis, as he presided over his Survey of Medieval Literature class, was a lonely man. At least one reason for his loneliness was the fact that at Western Poly, a college busily turning out scientists and technicians, Medieval Literature was hardly a popular subject. Half a dozen students sat before him, heads bent, scribbling in their notebooks as his monotonous voice droned on about Dante and his Inferno.

Howard Hollis spoke absently, distractedly, but since he had taught the subject for a dozen years, he knew his material by heart. He lived, and was living at this moment, in an Inferno of his own, and his thoughts were as dark and painful as Dante's. And his torment always reached its fever pitch at this hour, four o'clock on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays in Medieval Lit. Because Rowena Stanley attended this class.

He didn't stare at her. That would have been the obvious thing, noticed and scorned by the other students, and so far, at least, he had managed to avoid the obvious. But he had a perfect right to glance at her now and then, as he glanced at the others. Impersonally. Just in passing. He glanced at her now, then quickly and guiltily away.

He had not been able to analyze the nature and all the reasons for his passion. Rowena Stanley could not

be considered a beautiful girl. He had had other girls in his classes in the past, when the juices of youth had bubbled high inside him, girls who had really been beautiful, and he had felt no compelling attraction. As before a painting or a statue, he might have admired their beauty, but he had never gone beyond that. But Rowena was somehow, mysteriously, different.

He gave her another quick glance. She sat in the back tier of desks—her own choice lately—though there were plenty of empty closer seats. She had her legs crossed, her skirt carefully drawn over her knees. Her legs were good, feminine, but scarcely objects in themselves to send a man reeling. Her brown tweed suit was not new, not especially flattering. She did not dress to attract men, at least not in Professor Hollis' class. Her head was bent diligently over her notes. She was blond, naturally, he was sure. But it wasn't just that. He'd had dozens of blonds in classes before. Rowena? The name? Scott's heroine. But Howard Hollis, at age forty, was certainly beyond the stage of being infatuated by a romantic name.

The class dragged on, an exquisite torture. What a ridiculous situation to be in, to anticipate these thrice weekly sessions with ecstatic expectations, like a lover impatiently awaiting a rendezvous, and then when the moment arrived, to be so frustrated and disappointed that the mere presence of his beloved was an agony and he desperately wanted her to be gone. He felt a sweat emerging on his brow, though the room had a wintry chill, and he clenched his fists in order to get a better grip on himself.

The Inferno. He lectured on automatically, detailing the dreadful punishments of Dante's damned souls. How appropriate, he thought; he might have been describing his own anguish. He glanced frequently at his

watch. The seconds were ticking by with the slowness of an eternity in hell. He wondered in a threatening panic if his strain were apparent. Possibly not. The heads remained bowed over the notebooks, including that blond head whose errant tendrils formed a supernatural mist, a halo, over its owner. This madness could not go on!

It ended mercifully with the ringing of a faraway bell. His voice hummed mechanically to the end of his sentence, then finished abruptly with, "that'll be all for today." The students, except for Rowena, looked up at him in a kind of relief, and a chubby brown-haired girl gave him a vacant, perfunctory smile. No one stayed after time with a question. No one was that interested. They seldom were. They packed up books, donned coats that had lain over vacant chairs, and filed out, pretending not to be in a hurry, though they really were. Rowena went with the others, in the very middle of the group. Professor Hollis heard their chatter in the hallway. They weren't talking about Dante. Five o'clock Friday afternoon, they were discussing weekend dates and activities. Possibly one of the young men was making a date with Rowena. She was not outstandingly popular as she was not outstandingly pretty, but on a predominantly male campus she received her share of attention.

Friday. He wouldn't see her again till Monday. Seventy-two hours. The relief of not having to be in the same room with her for another seventy-two hours. And the simultaneous pain of seventy-two hours of separation from one whose company he ardently wished to share.

Acting on impulse and not quite knowing his own intention, Howard Hollis struggled hastily into his topcoat, grabbed his briefcase and hat, and stalked out of

the room. The hallway was empty. All that was left of his students was the dying echo of their retreating footsteps and their fading laughter. But he knew which way Rowena usually went and that was the direction he took now.

In the shadowy entrance of the old building he came to a sudden halt. Rowena was there at the bottom of the stone steps, chatting with not one, but two, young men. Stabbed by jealousy, Howard Hollis didn't know whether to change his mind and dash out the back way, or to linger here, hoping.

But while he still debated between beating a cautious, wise retreat and plunging ahead into foolishness, Rowena's two young friends made off to the left toward the men's dorms and she herself headed straight across the campus. The temptation was now quite irresistible, and Howard succumbed to it.

By the time he was outside and down the steps, Rowena was fifty feet ahead of him. He did not want to yell for her to wait for him, and it would have been just as unseemly for a professor to be seen running in pursuit of a student. He forced himself to be content with a brisk stride, although, since he was a short man, this gait did not devour distances too rapidly.

The girl was walking fast also. The winter wind, coming at her from her right side, ruffled her blond hair and molded her skirt and coat around her body. In her low-heeled shoes, her legs seemed more sturdy than willowy. Lithe, graceful, even athletic, she was certainly not the wispy, large-eyed, horn-rimmed-glasses intellectual type that Professor Hollis might have been expected to gravitate toward. But logic and reason did not impel him now.

Abruptly she turned off to the right. If she had bothered to look she might have noticed him, but she did

not look. She took the path between the Engineering and the Physics building, but Howard did not dare accost her there. But then she left the sidewalks and headed toward the well-known shortcut through the little patch of woods. High Street lay beyond, but almost a block distant. Many students who did not want to go all the way around to Fulton Avenue took the shortcut. Perhaps she wanted to do some quick shopping before returning to her boarding house for dinner.

Dinner! He could catch up with her and invite her to dinner. That should certainly be within the bounds of propriety. She ought to crave a change from her boardinghouse fare, and not many of the students could afford to take a co-ed to dinner.

In the early winter dusk she was lost from view the instant she entered the woods. But the path was well marked, and now that he was hidden from onlookers, Howard broke into a trot. This wasn't much of a woods really, and not very wild, merely a little tract that the college was saving for future development.

He almost stumbled into her in the dimness before he called out, "Rowena . . . Miss Stanley . . ."

The quick way she swung around and the pallor of her face told him that he'd startled her, and he hastened to apologize. "I'm sorry if I frightened you . . ."

"I'm not frightened." Her voice, ordinarily such a pleasant, throaty voice, had a quaver in it, and the words seemed more intended to reassure herself than him.

"I saw you take the short-cut. Or at least I thought it was you." The lie was transparent, and he was ashamed of his inability to make this encounter appear accidental. She was staring wide-eyed at him, obviously certain that he had followed her all the way

from the classroom, and just as obviously apprehensive over that fact.

There was a long silence, with neither of them knowing what to say next. They stood in the midst of a larger silence. High Street would be full of cars and people, but their noise did not penetrate this far. Behind them, though closer, the campus was in a lull, the day classes having ended, and the few Friday evening classes not yet begun. The wood itself, devoid of wild life at this time of year, did not even yield the chirping of a bird.

This sudden solitude, this solitude in Rowena's company, sent Howard's pulse pounding, confused his mind, made him forget the easy talk that was so hard for him to make in the best of circumstances, made him forget even that clever dinner invitation.

"I'm in a hurry," the girl said finally. But somehow she did not, or was not able to move. She had grown even paler in these moments, and all he could see of her was her dreadfully white face, like a disembodied mask, hanging there in the deepening darkness.

But her remark triggered in Howard a desire to dispense with the polite niceties and probe instead right to the fundamentals of things. "You're always in a hurry whenever I want to talk to you," he heard himself saying with a half-horror at his own boldness.

"I don't know what you mean." The girl at least still had the wit to parry.

He plunged on recklessly. "I've asked you to come to my office several times. We've made definite appointments, and I sat waiting, but you never came. You always said you'd forgotten, but then you forgot the new appointment too. Even in the corridors you avoid me. I've called to you, and you pretended not to hear. My dear girl, you must realize that a professor now and then must hold private conferences with stu-

dents. That's the only way to really make sure what the student is learning, how she is progressing. And you, Rowena, you are so wonderfully sensitive . . . I feel that little discussions could be so rewarding . . . I want to see my students grow in understanding and appreciation . . ."

He stopped. How asinine it all sounded, how hypocritical and untrue. This girl was intelligent. He could not convince her with patent lies.

"I have to go now," she said. But still she did not move, afraid possibly that if she tried to leave, he would stop her.

"Please!" He was begging her. "Why won't you talk to me? Why do you always have some excuse?" He was nakedly humble now, but he didn't care. At least he was speaking from the heart. "Why can't I be your friend?"

She was shaking her head. "You're a professor . . ."

"What difference does that make? Do those young fellows have more of a right to speak to you just because they're students? If I were a student, sitting next to you in class, would you speak to me then? Look, I'm a human being, a man, and you're an attractive girl. I'm respectable, I'm not married . . ."

"You're old!"

The way it sounded, coming from her lips, made age seem something horrible, ugly, repulsive, an epithet of scorn and contempt and loathing. It was the equivalent of a slap in the face, the same kind of undeserved insult.

"I'm thirty-nine," he said quietly. It was only a small lie, since he was forty, and he hated himself for telling it. "I am not rich or handsome, but then some of your young fellows aren't either. But I know a lot more than they do. I've read hundreds more books. Don't judge

me by my lectures. I know they're dull and stupid, but those are the things I'm expected to say. I wouldn't bore you if we were alone. I could be very interesting, and say so many clever things—I know I could—if I had you to listen to me. You could inspire me, Rowena, because I love you . . ."

When she tried to dart away from him, he seized her wrist and held her fast. She struggled in his grasp, but he found a masculine strength he hadn't known he possessed, and she was helpless against him.

"Let me go," she pleaded, her voice hoarse with fear. "If you let me go, I won't tell on you . . ."

"You won't tell whom? You won't tell what?" He'd drawn her close to him now, and he hissed these questions directly into her face. "What am I doing that's so terrible? When you go out on dates, those boys hold you tighter than this. Why do you allow them to do things I can't do? Why must you treat me differently?"

She started to scream. No sound came out, but she opened her mouth, and the desire and necessity to scream glittered in her eyes. The threat of a scream lit the fuse of terror in Professor Howard Hollis, and his hands leaped to her throat in order to silence that scream.

The weight and thrust of his violence bore her to the ground. He fell with her, never relaxing his hold. One thing, and that one thing alone, was in his mind. A scream that would bring people running to see him, a professor, rebuffed by his student—that scream must never be uttered. His hands squeezed harder, and the face that had been so pale and white in the dusk grew mottled and dark.

Then, a long time after, when Rowena Stanley had ceased to move and struggle, when no part of her body resisted him any longer, he rose slowly and heavily to

his feet. She did not follow him, but continued to lie there, silent and voiceless, a shapeless thing on the ground, somewhat darker than the surrounding shadows.

He stood motionless for a while, trying to recover the rhythm of normal breathing. The confusion was clearing rapidly from his brain, and he was beginning to see the new and stark reality confronting him.

He, Howard Hollis, professor in good standing, had committed murder. He did not have to wonder whether the girl was dead. She was. She was lying there at his feet on a cold bed of damp, rotting leaves. He could see her nyloned legs, gleaming dully in the dark. And her eyes, wide open and staring up at him. And a book she had dropped, that had fallen open to reveal white pages fluttering in the wind.

"I'm sorry, Rowena," he whispered softly. "I didn't mean to." But he didn't love her anymore. His love had fled when the last flicker of life had left the girl's body. Whatever Rowena had been, whatever it was he had loved her for, was gone now. One cannot love a dead, departed thing.

He was alive. He had made a terrible mistake that he now wished he could undo, but he was alive. Some instinct that was a part of his every nerve and cell kept reminding his brain of this paramount fact. Rowena was dead, beyond help, but he was alive. And he must go on living.

The deep primitive urges sent frantic messages to his brain. Had anyone seen him entering the woods with the girl? No, he didn't think so. The campus was all but deserted at this hour. And even if someone had seen him, could that someone identify him? Probably not in the failing light.

But even if he could not definitely be placed at the

scene of the crime, would anyone connect him in a general way with Rowena Stanley? Yes, this much was possible. He was her professor in Medieval Lit, of course. But there was more than that. He'd pursued the girl in his professorial way, trying to corner her in hallways, insisting upon appointments in his office. Very possibly—not certainly but possibly—she had confided her problem to somebody. Therefore he was in danger.

Alibi? It was too late for that now. If he had intended to murder the girl, he might have arranged something. But his had been an unpremeditated crime, completely spontaneous, emotional, in an unguarded, almost insane moment.

Insane! No, he wasn't that, nor had he been. He had very logically assessed the damage to his pride—and to his job at the college—that would have resulted from a foolish girl's scream. But supposing he had been an insane killer, lusting after the girl, a savage predator denied his prey and raging over his disappointment? A madman sublimating his frustrated passion in an orgy of violence and revenge? What would such a man do? How would he kill? How could this crime be made to look, not like the work of a staid professor, but rather like the work of a demented monster?

Calmly Howard came to a conclusion. And calmly he came to a decision. Reaching into a pocket and fumbling there for a moment, he drew out finally a small and much soiled pen knife. It wasn't much of a knife, and certainly not a weapon. He carried it for one purpose only, to ream out the clogged bowl of his pipe. It would have to serve another purpose now, however.

He had no stomach for what he had to do, but he realized it was necessary. He knelt in the leaves and flipped out the blade of the knife. It was dull and not

made for this work any more than he was. Still it served. The cuts it made were not deep, but the blood flowed, and that was the important thing. He slashed Rowena's forehead, her cheeks, her neck. And then her legs, right through the nylons. That was enough, he decided. There was too much blood already.

He stood up, aware that his position was still perilous. He had to take the knife home with him, because if he threw it away somewhere, it might be found and identified. He wrapped it in his handkerchief, stuffed it into his briefcase. That could be bloody too, as his hands might be, or other parts of his clothing. Certain things would have to be cleaned or destroyed. But he would have time if he could escape from the woods without being seen.

He chose to retrace his footsteps so as to emerge onto the campus. He was wise in this choice. The campus was almost deserted. He crossed it all the way to the library before he saw anyone. From there he kept right on going, straight to Mrs. Finch's boardinghouse, where it would behoove him not to be late for dinner.

The body was discovered that same evening, and the newspaper ran a huge headline in the morning. Howard skipped Saturday breakfast, sleeping late, as was his custom. Of course this morning he didn't sleep. He heard them all downstairs, discussing the newspaper story. When he went down at last, they were all preparing to go to the campus, and he went with them, so as not to seem suspiciously uninterested, and thus conspicuous.

An enormous crowd was gathered there, students, faculty, townspeople, numbering perhaps in the thousands. They swarmed over the grassy areas and into the wood itself. If there had been such a thing as foot-

prints, the crowd had conveniently trampled them.

The body had been removed long before, so the morbid-minded had missed that. But there were ample descriptions being circulated. All of them emphasized the horrible slashing. Some maintained that the body had been nude and violated. Everyone seemed to agree that the crime was certainly the work of a maniac. Delicious shudders of fear ran through the crowd.

Howard returned home well satisfied. At least no one had immediately gone to the police with the suggestion that Rowena's Medieval Lit professor might have murdered her. In due course, the police would question him, he was sure of that. But they would question everyone who had known Rowena. Quite natural.

Meanwhile he felt he had covered his trail pretty well. No one had seen him enter the house last night, and he'd dashed straight to his room and locked his door. A thorough examination of his accouterments revealed a fortunate fact. There was very little blood.

Soap and water took care of most of it, on the briefcase, his shoes, and his hands. There seemed to be no stains anywhere on his clothes, but he would reexamine these articles again and again, just to make sure. The handkerchief in which he'd wrapped the knife was red. He burned it in an ash tray, then flushed the remains down the toilet. The pen knife caused him some concern. Hiding it or losing it somewhere would force him to replace it with a new knife, and this small circumstance might be noticed and commented upon. He ended by washing and scraping the knife as best he could, and this process left no obvious stains. When he finished, he considered himself reasonably safe from detection by the route of chemical analysis of blood stains.

Lunch—Mrs. Finch served Saturday lunches to her

clients, as she called them—again featured the topic of the murder. Since they had visited the campus, they could now speak with some authority.

Mrs. Finch presided over the discussion. She was in her fifties, an amiable woman, the widow of a professor, shrewd if not intelligent, portly and large-bosomed, but still physically able to do most of the work around the place. "The poor girl," Mrs. Finch said, "the poor, poor girl. It must have been just dreadful."

"And so young," said Miss Jensen, a gaunt, grayed spinster of indeterminable age who worshiped the principle of youth. She was an assistant librarian.

"Nice girl, too," said Professor Trimble. Trimble taught mathematics, and had almost reached retirement age. His eyes weakened from long years of studying equations, he wore very thick-lensed spectacles.

"Did you know her?" Mrs. Finch asked avidly.

"I think so," Trimble replied. "Red-haired girl . . ."

"Blond," Howard corrected him.

"Ah, yes!" Jules Manson's face lit up. Jules was young, dark, round-faced, bespectacled, small, not more than five five or six, and slight in the bargain. But he was a terribly intense person. He was an instructor in psychology. "The Stanley girl was in your class, wasn't she, Howard?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact she was."

"Well, why didn't you say so?" Mrs. Finch shrilled.

"I thought I had. Yes, she was in my Medieval Lit."

"Tell us about her. What kind of girl was she?"

"Just a girl. All coeds are rather alike, aren't they? Or are they?"

"No two human beings are alike," Jules Manson interrupted. "That's what makes psychology so fascinating."

"Really?"

"Absolutely. But I'm not concerned about the girl. As you say, all the coeds are *somewhat* alike. Twenty years old, fairly pretty, interested predominantly in men. Almost a category, you might say. The one who appeals to me, as a psychologist, is the killer. Now there's a rather special human being."

"What kind of fellow would he be?" Howard asked, really curious.

"A maniac!" Mrs. Finch put in.

"A fiend!" Miss Jensen added.

"After a fashion, yes," Jules agreed. "A murderer is unusual enough, you know. All of us feel like committing murder now and then, but most of us lack either the sheer courage or else the capacity for an emotion violent enough to trigger a murderous act. But this kind of courage and this kind of emotion, though unusual, are nevertheless normal. The slashing, however, indicates abnormality."

"What kind of abnormality?" Howard wanted to probe this matter. The police psychologist would probably theorize just like Jules.

"Well, I'd say this just offhand." Jules liked to display his specialized knowledge, and this was his great opportunity. "Take a normal man. Granted that he has sufficient motive for murder, has the cold courage or the violent emotions, the act of murder itself and the destruction of the victim is quite enough to satisfy the murderer. If I had a wife, for instance, and thought she was unfaithful, and I killed her, the very process of killing and the fact she was dead would surely satisfy my jealousy. I wouldn't cut her up. What does this cutting signify? A disturbed mind, surely. But disturbed in what particular way? In this way. Murder wasn't enough. The act of strangulation didn't purge this man's emo-

tions. The fact that Rowena Stanley was dead didn't satisfy his desire for revenge, didn't even the score. This killer wanted more. So he disfigured the corpse."

"How clever, Jules," Mrs. Finch said with genuine admiration.

"Routine," Jules answered airily. "But that isn't all."

"What's the rest?" Miss Jensen stared goggle-eyed.

"The question now remains," said Jules, "was the killer satisfied with the disfigurement of the corpse?"

After a long hush around the table, old Trimble put the question. "What do you mean there?"

Jules gazed over their heads at the abominable wallpaper. "I theorize now. Our man is a lonely fellow. Loneliness is almost always a factor in these cases. This is not a loneliness merely of the moment, of temporary circumstances. This chap is lonely by temperament, and possibly, also, as a result of an unfortunate childhood, a traumatic adolescence, and finally, a lack of any real achievement in the adult world, achievement which might have won him recognition and respect among his contemporaries. Add this up now, this long history of rejection. What is our man at present? He is a bachelor certainly. And a recluse. I don't mean he lives off in a cave somewhere. He sees people. He meets people. But he has no friends, no confidantes, of either sex. He suffers from a dreadful and complete loneliness. He had been rejected, rebuffed, shunted aside all his life. Now tell me, if you were such a man, would you have any affection for the human race?"

It was not an audience chosen well for such a question. Or perhaps it was an audience very well chosen. Mrs. Finch was the only person in the group who had ever married. Jensen was a spinster. Trimble and Howard were bachelors, and for that matter, so was Jules.

Jensen was staring down at her plate, rather embarrassed. Trimble blinked, his tired mind still fumbling with the question. Howard was vaguely disturbed in the midst of his elation over the success of his impersonation of a maniac.

"There are two possibilities in regard to the Stanley girl," Jules went on. "One is that the killer knew her, and she rejected him personally. The other is that she was a stranger to him, but he took his spite out on her as a representative of all humanity. One possibility is as likely as the other."

This reasoning suited Howard. The killer could have been someone who wasn't even acquainted with Rowena Stanley, who had never seen her before the time of the murder.

"But I ask you this," Jules pursued. "If our man bears such a deep grudge against humanity that he had to disfigure the corpse, has his resentment been satisfied with that act? Or . . ." He paused dramatically.

". . . Will he strike again?"

"Preposterous!" Howard blurted it out before he thought.

Jules turned him a cool stare. "What makes you so sure of that, Howard?"

Howard came near to losing his nerve then, much nearer than he had last night in the woods, when he'd realized he'd committed murder. "Well, I mean . . ." He looked around the table. They were all staring at him, waiting for his explanation. "I mean, no matter how large one's resentment might be, surely a murder should satisfy it."

"What about the slashing?"

"That should be rather satisfying too . . ."

"Or it could just possibly whet the killer's appetite for revenge."

Howard was trembling visibly, unable to control himself. "I still think you're wrong," he stammered.

"We'll see." Jules was enjoying himself immensely, feasting upon the sensation he'd created. And now for dessert he turned to Miss Jensen, dropping his voice to scarcely more than a whisper. "If I were a female in this town, I'd be mighty careful, at least till they catch this lad."

Jensen reacted perfectly. Turning very pale, she swooned.

Police Chief Abe Keegle took personal charge of the case. He was a balding, paunchy man, but he had piercing black eyes behind his rimless glasses that hinted of a shrewd intelligence. Also he was thorough.

Howard Hollis was questioned along with a dozen other professors who had had Rowena Stanley, at one time or another, in their classes. Howard thought the questions themselves rather harmless, but he was wary of Keegle. He wasn't asked to provide an alibi, or anything so direct, but merely to give what information he had about the dead girl. But he suspected that Keegle was observing his general manner more than he was listening to the answers. Howard waited for the thunderbolt to strike—somebody had reported that Professor Hollis had paid rather special attention to Rowena Stanley, how about it? But this question was never asked. Of course, Keegle might have known things he wasn't revealing, but Howard felt much better after the interview anyway.

Something else disturbed him, however. A pathologist had subjected the corpse to a microscopic examination, according to the newspaper. The cuts had been made with a rather blunt knife. Which was curious, of course—if the killer wanted to slash his victim, why

hadn't he brought along a good sharp knife for the purpose? Also, there was some strange material in the wounds. Chemical analysis determined that the substance was hardened tobacco tar, such as is found in the bowls of pipes. The killer was a pipe smoker, therefore, and had used the knife with which he cleaned his pipe.

But how many pipe smokers were there on the campus? Dozens among the faculty. And pipes were always a popular undergraduate affectation. Not to mention possibly hundreds of townspeople. Not a very helpful clue certainly, and Howard decided to forget about it.

Meanwhile, Professor Jules Manson was interviewed by an enterprising reporter, and Jules gave the whole town the same opinion that he had given Mrs. Finch's clients. The maniac who had waylaid Miss Stanley would very possibly kill again. It might or might not have been good psychology, but it was successful journalism. The town—especially the womenfolk—was convulsed in fear.

Howard saw evidences of it wherever he went. No more was a coed seen walking alone on the campus, not even in broad daylight. In the town, there seemed fewer women in evidence generally, as if they were keeping to their homes and going out only when necessary. How stupid and unnecessary it all was, Howard kept thinking. He would like to assure the community that the killer would not strike again.

Of course he realized that Jules had actually played into his hands. Jules had swallowed the maniac theory, enlarged upon it, popularized it. Let some detective worry about a dull knife soiled with tobacco tar as not being typical of a slashing maniac. Jules' theory, repeated often enough, would convince even that stubborn detective.

But if anybody was convinced, it was Jules himself. Having elaborated the theory, it was his brain child—the killer would kill again. Jules talked of nothing else—in his classes, according to report, and certainly at Mrs. Finch's table.

"There's one reason our maniac won't strike again," Howard proposed at dinner one evening.

"What's that?" Jules asked, pouncing.

"He won't have a chance."

"How do you mean?"

"There are simply no unescorted females wandering about."

Which was quite true, Jules had to admit. Miss Jensen was a case in point. Jules himself, Howard, even old Trimble, were being regularly dragooned into providing convoy across the campus for poor Jensen. And when her fellow boarders weren't available, the librarian bribed students by doing bits of research for them. Jensen was an hysterical, but typical example.

Jules, however, was loath to accept this as final. "It won't last," he predicted. "Naturally the man is lying low at the moment, because he doesn't have an opportunity. This state of siege can't last forever though. Women will begin to get careless, and finally they'll forget entirely. People have short memories."

"I won't get careless, and I won't forget," Jensen promised.

"Others will. The man will have another chance eventually."

"He might move on," Howard suggested, "to where the fields are greener. He might have been a transient in the first place."

"Perhaps," Jules conceded. Obviously he would be unhappy if his theory did not prove out with a second murder.

But Howard's prediction was fast coming true. Even

such a sensational item as a grisly murder can't retain the public interest indefinitely. There'd been a chapel memorial service for the dead girl—the real funeral took place in Rowena's home town—which had been well attended, and had provided a new stimulus to fear. But the great surge of terror had subsided. Coeds were only too happy to accept male escort on every possible occasion. But this was not always convenient. Now and then they could be seen making short dashes between buildings. None of them did this after dark, of course, and none ventured near the woods at any time.

Abe Keegle had organized a group of special auxiliary patrolmen for night duty, so he apparently shared Jules' opinion that danger still lurked. These fellows were armed, and went about on foot. There were more uniformed cops in evidence too, and undoubtedly there were plainclothes men in strategic places.

Howard took to strolling about the campus and surrounding neighborhoods, constantly amazed at what his hand had wrought, and rather enjoying his secret knowledge that all of these precautions were futile. No one questioned his movements, of course, since he was a man, and no one, not even Jules, had ever suggested that the male population was in any danger.

It was on one of these strolls—two and a half weeks after the crime and when people were beginning to think and talk about other subjects—that Howard was startled by a strange and unusual sight. The time was eight o'clock, hardly late by normal standards, but more than two hours after dark and considerably late by the standards of this fear-haunted college town. The night was cloudy, damp, unpleasant, with patches of ground fog eddying about and half obscuring the glow of the street lamps. And it was in this grim setting that he saw the girl.

For a ghastly moment he even imagined that it was

Rowena Stanley. As she passed under one of the lamps, her head, uncovered even in this chilly weather, shone bright and blond. And though she was muffled in a heavy coat, she seemed the same size as Rowena. But of course it wasn't Rowena. He had seen her coffin put aboard a train.

But what was this foolish girl doing abroad at this hour? Didn't she know there'd been a murder? She was a student, because she was carrying books under her arm. What made her braver than the others? Strangely he resented her bravery.

And with an ungovernable curiosity he followed her. Across the quadrangle, then toward the Engineering and the Physics buildings. Howard's heart began to pound faster. She was taking almost the same route that Rowena had taken on that fatal night. His curiosity mounting, he trailed after her. She was not walking too fast; he had to slow down to keep from closing the gap between them.

Then she did an utterly inconceivable thing. She abandoned the path and turned straight toward the short-cut to High Street. The madness of it appalled him. She was completely out of the light now, and only the dull glow of her blond head, floating before him like a beckoning will-o'-the-wisp, allowed him to keep sight of her. He broke into a trot, but too late. The blond head had disappeared. She was in the woods.

He wanted to shout to her, and he almost did, but at the last moment managed to control himself. He had almost committed a dangerous error. He couldn't have the girl mentioning to anyone that she'd been hailed by Professor Hollis in the woods where Rowena Stanley had been murdered. Not even if he made it plain to her that he was concerned for her safety. No point in calling attention to himself that way.

Perspiring from an emotion he could not identify, he

turned back. He stopped at the library, fiddled away some time, then at nine escorted Miss Jensen home. In the parlor nursing a cup of tea thoughtfully provided by Mrs. Finch, he waited for Jules. The psychologist arrived about ten thirty and Howard pounced upon him.

"I'm very disturbed, Jules," he began.

"How so?" The younger man was weary, but he submitted to the conversation.

"I saw a coed wandering about the campus after dark. She was quite alone." He decided not to mention that the girl had entered the woods, for that would mean revealing that he had followed her.

But Jules perked up even without that. "What did I tell you, Howard? I knew the girls would get careless eventually."

"But isn't it dangerous? One oughtn't to be careless about matters of life and death."

"I thought you pooh-poohed the possibility of another murder."

"Well, I still do."

Jules smiled. "Then you shouldn't worry." The little psychologist stood up and commenced pacing the room. "I'm quite worried myself, however. A girl walks the campus alone after dark. Soon there will be others doing the same thing. This is the time I've dreaded. Our murderer will have another opportunity."

"He won't accept it," Howard said with certainty. "He wouldn't dare. If he's still in town he must know that the police are on the lookout."

Jules shook his head. "That won't faze him. He's used to taking chances. He took rather a chance when he murdered the Stanley girl, didn't he? Why should he hesitate now? Besides, he really doesn't have a choice. A man is not exactly a free agent when he acts under a compulsion."

"Compulsion?"

"Of course. This man *has* to commit another murder."

Howard stood up too. "That's ridiculous!" he exploded.

"It's perfectly logical. This first murder was committed out of revenge, resentment against society for society's having rejected him. Have these conditions changed? In the past two weeks, do you imagine that this man has suddenly found new friends, a newer, happier existence? Of course not. He is more unhappy than ever. Society forced him to commit murder. Now he feels remorse. Also he knows that he can never again be a normal man. He has taken a human life. His hands are bloodstained. All these things are the fault of society too. Don't you see? This man now has more of a grievance against the human race than he ever had before. So his compulsion is stronger than before, irresistible. No, Howard, I'm very pessimistic about this whole business. I feel like a spectator at a tragedy, where there is always more than one death. I have seen one already, but as a sophisticated member of the audience, I know there are others in store. It is as inevitable as the rising of the sun tomorrow morning."

It was a moment before Howard could speak, and then he replied almost involuntarily. "You make it sound very convincing, Jules, *very.*"

The little psychologist nodded his acceptance of the compliment. "This is one of those times," he said, "when I wish I was in some other profession, when I wish I didn't know so much about human nature." He walked to the archway. "I'm very tired. Good night, Howard." And then he was gone, up the stairs.

In his own room, Howard lay rigid and sleepless on his bed, staring at the black ceiling. His thoughts were

chaotic, his emotions confused.

Of course Jules sounds logical, he told himself. But that's because he is starting from a mistaken premise. A maniac did not murder Rowena Stanley. I did. And I purposely arranged things to make it seem like the crime was the work of a maniac. This is what Jules doesn't know. Nobody knows. So one can't blame Jules for going off on the wrong track any more than one can blame the women of this town for being frightened.

Except that blond girl who took the shortcut. She was the crazy one.

Yes, Jules was logical if the original murderer had been insane, unbalanced, acting under that compulsion. And the compulsion for violence and revenge was also logical if the murderer had experienced a lonely, unhappy childhood, and especially painful adolescence, and then had grown to manhood still unappreciated, unaccepted by his fellows.

This thought plunged Howard into a sea of memories. He could admit this now, here in this solitary darkness, with no one to observe his tears. He'd been a mama's boy. Yes, he had. He had adored his mother. Why? He didn't know for sure. Perhaps because he'd never been very strong or athletic, and so never could do the things his father expected him to do. Or maybe it was simply because he had preferred his mother. She'd been so beautiful, with her long blond hair.

Blond! No, there was no connection whatsoever. Rowena Stanley had not resembled his mother. Rowena had been athletic, more like his father. The blond hair was only a coincidence.

Why had his mother left him when his father died? He could have comforted her, become the man in her life. But she needed more than him. Possibly because she'd still been beautiful, and hadn't wanted to waste

her beauty. So she'd needed other men, one at first, and then many of them. It had been something of a scandal, and finally he had gone to live with an aunt, his father's sister.

But in high school and college, it was the blondes he'd always fallen for. He couldn't even remember all their names now, there'd been such a long succession of them. He hadn't been a shy young fellow by any means. Why, he'd proposed to a dozen of those blondes . . .

There was a sudden tingling in his body, a sensation that ran down to each separate finger end. Yes, the memory was quite clear and certain. Proposed a dozen times. And had been a dozen times *refused.*

He lay there trembling in the darkness. Damn Jules Manson! A shot in the dark, that was all it had been. Howard's own life did not at all resemble the life of Jules' hypothetical maniac murderer. When he, Howard, had strangled Rowena Stanley, he had been murdering her and her alone, not also his mother, not also all those lovely young blond girls who had refused to marry him.

No, it did not follow. He was not lonely, he was not unhappy. Wasn't he doing the sort of work he liked best? Not many men were as satisfied in their professions as he. He loved literature. He wanted to communicate this love to other people, so he was a teacher. This was the career he had chosen deliberately, in the full knowledge that a professor's pay was small, not enough really to properly support a wife. So it was just as well those blond girls had declined.

Lonely? Perhaps, but wasn't it almost inevitable for a bachelor? Most of his fellow professors of ten or fifteen years ago had decided to risk poverty and had gotten married. Married men and bachelors have little in common. So the chasm had widened, the wall risen.

The life of Professor Howard Hollis had been centered entirely in his students. He had devoted himself to developing and refining their young, unformed minds. He had looked at those rows of fresh faces year after year, and he had said silently to them, "I love you. I want to help you. I want to open the wonderful world of literature to you. I have devoted my whole life to your betterment. I love you. Don't you understand that? Teachers and students aren't enemies, they're friends. I'm your friend. Please let me be your friend. Acknowledge me as your friend. Call me friend. I love you. Speak to me. Tell me that you realize that I'm alive, I'm a person, I'm entitled to something. Recognize me. I'm Howard Hollis. A man. A person. Tell me that you recognize this. It's all I expect. I love you. Speak to me . . ."

But Rowena Stanley had *refused.* Rowena Stanley had *rebuffed* him. Rowena Stanley had *rejected* him. That's why he killed her. She deserved it. Now he understood this, he understood why he had to kill her. And if he had the chance he'd do the same thing again!

But she wasn't any different from the others. Why had he chosen Rowena Stanley to try to approach? Merely because she was blond? That was hardly an adequate reason. He hadn't been in love with her, despite what he'd told her in the woods. He loved her, yes, but not in the way she'd thought. Not romantic love. He was too old for that, long past that stage. Nor lust. He'd never been lustful even in his youth, and now he was middle-aged. No, his affection for Rowena had been more the fatherly kind, the professorial kind, the same affection that he felt for his other students.

But they all ignored him! They always had. He hated them all, not just Rowena, but all of them . . . all . . . all . . .

He lay there drenched in sweat, quivering in every

muscle, clenching and unclenching his fists. Waves of a strange new passion washed over him, a passion he had never remotely experienced before, not even while he was strangling Rowena.

A passion? Or a compulsion? Compulsion . . . compulsion . . . compulsion . . .

The brave blond girl had a pattern of movement. He did not get close enough to see whether he knew or remembered her, because he did not want to. He preferred that she remain anonymous, just a member of the student body. But he watched her from afar.

She left the library every evening about eight—probably she was doing research there for a special paper or thesis. She took the same path, always alone, across the quadrangle, between Engineering and Science, and thence to the short-cut.

For three nights she kept to this schedule. And each night he stalked her, always a little closer, always a little farther. On the third night he went clear to the edge of the woods. Next time, he knew, he would enter the woods.

"There's another course of action this man could take," he suggested to Jules. It was late, and Jules had just returned to the house. They were having a cup of tea. "He could give himself up."

The little psychologist arched his black brows and stared through his spectacles. "Why on earth should he do that?" he asked.

"Well, let's say he feels this compulsion you described, this uncontrollable desire to kill again. But supposing there's another part of his personality, a better part, that doesn't want to kill. So there's this inner conflict. But the better part, to prevent the worst part

from committing another crime, might want to surrender."

Jules shook his dark head grimly and ponderously. "Why should he want to surrender to a society that he hates?" he demanded.

"To spare another life."

"This life he wants to spare, why is it so precious to him?"

"Well, I don't know . . ."

Jules smiled with sly triumph. "Of course you don't know, because there isn't any reason. This desire for the preservation of human life, this quality of mercy, is completely foreign to our murderer. He committed the first murder out of hate. Has the hate subsided? Does he love now? Does he want to atone? Preposterous, my friend. Consider this man's present position. In the death of Rowena Stanley he achieved a measure of revenge, but not total revenge. He has not been apprehended. The police are nowhere near a solution. Believe me, I know that, because I've talked with Chief Keegle. So our man knows he can take his revenge and get away with it. Why should he stop when he's winning, and when his job isn't finished? When it's far from being finished?"

"You're quite right, Jules. I see it now."

Jules drained the last of the tea from his cup, and rose to leave. "Stick to your own field, Howard," he advised. "Fiction and poetry, the artistic, the make-believe. Leave the real life problems to the experts."

"All right," Howard conceded, "I won't argue again."

"Fine. Good night then, Howard."

"Good night, Jules."

Friday night again, a shiveringly cold, blustery night that would make most people stay indoors even if there

were not a maniac-murderer loose in the town. The wind blew cruelly across the open stretches of the campus, whined around the corners of buildings, set the bare branches of trees to creaking and groaning.

Standing outside the library, sheltered in the blackest shadow, Howard waited. Unaware of the cold wind, he had not even raised his coat collar against it. His hat brim was turned down, however, to hide his face. But even aside from this precaution, it was doubtful whether anyone would recognize him. For he was without his briefcase, his constant companion, his trademark.

The briefcase, he had decided, would only be in his way, and be something else to get bloodied. In fact, he had determined upon a whole new approach to the problem of blood. He would use the same knife, but he could not afford this time to walk into Mrs. Finch's with stains on him or anything he carried. So he had a cloth, a cloth with no identifying marks, with which to wipe his hands and the knife. The cloth he would simply drop at the scene. It could not be traced.

The blond girl emerged from the library almost precisely on schedule, her arms loaded with books. She passed within thirty feet of Howard, her head bent low against the wind, the dim light from a street lamp shining dully on her yellow head. Howard caught a fleeting glimpse of her profile, enough to give him the vague notion that he didn't know her. That pleased him, the thought of killing a stranger. He received other quick impressions also. Her legs did not seem particularly attractive, nor was her walk graceful. That satisfied him too. His grudge was not against just the beautiful girls. And this was perhaps why she dared to go alone at night—she imagined her unattractiveness was a protection.

He let her get something of a start and stay well ahead of him as she crossed the quadrangle. But as she passed between Engineering and Physics, he lengthened his stride and began to catch up. By the time she'd reached the edge of the woods he'd almost overtaken her. But she did not seem to be aware of his approach because of the howling of the wind.

There was just enough starlight and reflected glow from High Street and the campus to give some illumination as the woods closed in around them. The blonde head bobbed ahead of him like a beacon. But he was not impatient. He waited until they were well within the concealment of the trees. Then he closed the gap, treading almost upon her heels, and measuring his distance, he sprang.

He landed with his hands already around her neck, not with as good a grip as he had hoped, but good enough to stop her scream. The impact of his weight bore her to the ground, with him on top. But she fought valiantly, and she was strong. Only then did he realize his mistake. An approach from the rear is not the best when trying to strangle someone. The thumbs, not the extended fingers, need to be placed on the windpipe. He let go for a second, and tried to roll around to a better position.

That was his second error. The girl seemed to be trying to reach inside her purse. What did she have there, a whistle? Desperate now, he sought his second hold, the fatal one, with thumbs at the throat. A fraction of a second late. A word issued from his victim's mouth, a single word, not really loud, not really dangerous even, but a word containing a whole revelation.

"Help!" Not a woman's voice. But a familiar voice. Belonging to Psychology Instructor Jules Manson.

A wig, a disguise, easy enough in the bundling-up

winter weather. Jules Manson, so sure that the killer would strike again that he offered himself as bait.

Howard bent low, snarling into Jules' face. "You made me do this . . . you talked me into it . . . you damned pedant . . . you expert . . . you deserve to die . . . I'm glad it's you . . ."

The explosion was muffled by the closeness of their two bodies. Howard felt a sharp stab of pain in the fleshy part of his left arm. Jules had a gun. Well, it didn't matter. Howard's thumbs pressed down hard, and the gun didn't fire again.

When he let go finally, when there was no longer any need to hold on, there were shouts coming from High Street. Somebody had heard the report. All right . . . all right . . . he could never have explained the gunshot wound anyway.

He rolled off Jules' inert body, and fumbled in his pocket for the little knife. It wasn't sharp, but it managed to open the veins in his wrists. Then he crawled away a little off the path, under some bushes where they wouldn't find him in time. He lay there, feeling his life drain out of him.

His life . . . Jules had been wrong . . . what did Jules know about anything? He had had a very happy life.

THE ADVENTURE OF THE RED LEECH

August Derleth

When I look over my notes on the riddles my friend Solar Pons explored in the course of the summer and autumn of 1931, I am struck by their diversity, ranging as they do from the curious affair of Ashness Bridge to the strange adventure of Symond's Yat, from sanguine murder to cunning theft. Yet perhaps the mystery surrounding the death of David Cosby takes precedence over them all.

We were introduced to it one August day at high noon. We had been walking that morning along the Edgware Road and Pons had been entertaining—and instructing—me with the exercise of his extraordinary faculty for observation and deduction. As we turned into Number 7, a somewhat troubled landlady appeared before us.

"Oh, Mr. Pons, there's a lady waiting to see you," she said apologetically. "I showed her into your rooms. Perhaps I shouldn't have done it, but she seemed so disturbed, and she did beg so to talk with you."

Pons' eyes brightened. "We shall just see what is troubling her, Mrs. Johnson," he said.

Our client sat, evidently, just where she had been put by Mrs. Johnson, her gloved hands folded on a reticule in her lap. She sprang to her feet at our entrance, her dark eyes moving from one face to the other,

and fixing unerringly upon my companion.

"Forgive me, Mr. Pons. I had to come!"

"Pray be seated, Miss . . ."

"Cosby, Mr. Pons. Agatha Cosby."

"You have had a long ride from the country to bring me something that has disturbed you," said Pons tranquilly.

She gave a satisfied little nod and sat down. She was a small, sprightly woman certainly around fifty years of age, though no hint of gray as yet showed in her ash-blond hair. Her fingers were ringless, which was no doubt the basis for Pons' conclusion that she was unmarried, and her trim black slippers, sturdy footwear rather than dainty, showed dust, suggesting that she had been riding in an open carriage and had neither home nor hotel to return to, in order to await Pons' return to our quarters. She was modestly dressed in almost Victorian fashion, in uniform black, from shoes to hat.

"You have recently suffered a bereavement, Miss Cosby."

"My brother."

"Suddenly?"

"Yes. It is about his death—and the events that preceded it—that I came to see you. I seem to have become involved, sir." So saying, she took from her reticule a little cardboard box and handed it to Pons.

Pons opened it. A slight cry of surprise escaped him at sight of its contents. I crowded closer. What lay there, only crudely pinned to the bottom of the box, was a repulsive worm—a red leech.

Pons flashed dancing eyes at me. "Have you ever seen its like before, Parker?"

"Never."

Pons looked toward our client, his eyes narrowed.

"Posted to you from Rye, I see."

"That is where I live, on the edge of the village. *We* lived, I should say, for I am the last of the family. I received this in the post early today, and in view of what happened to my brother, I thought it best to seek help. I know something of your work, Mr. Pons, and I hope you will be able to help me. I am frightened. You see, my brother died after receiving one of these worms."

"Also in the post?"

"Yes, Mr. Pons."

"From Rye?"

"No, indeed, Mr. Pons. Posted from Paris."

"Ah," said Pons. "Pray tell us about it." He lit his pipe and leaned upon the mantel, waiting.

Miss Cosby bit her lip and wrinkled her forehead. "I hardly know where to begin, Mr. Pons," she said apologetically, "but I suppose it is with the arrival of the post. It was ten days ago that the little box came for David. Because I was curious, I managed to be in the library when he opened it. Mr. Pons, I was hardly prepared for the effect of the worm on my brother. He gave a hoarse cry—dropped the box, and fell back in his chair, struck dumb!

"Of course, I didn't understand at once. I saw only that my brother was very ill, and telephoned for Dr. Lansdown. He said my brother had had an apoplectic seizure, a 'cerebral accident' he called it. I didn't, therefore, connect the box and the worm to my brother immediately, so I destroyed them. It wasn't until after I received this that I began to suspect there must have been some connection between the worm and my brother's seizure. He lay semi-conscious for three days, and died at the end of the third day. Just before he passed away, he was talking a little."

"Ah! What did he say?"

"I fear his mind was affected, Mr. Pons. He seemed so desperately anxious to tell me something, yet all he seemed able to say was something about our old kennels—we kept dogs at one time, Mr. Pons, and he muttered about our dog Scottie. But we had given up the kennels years ago, and Scottie has been dead four years."

"Nothing more?"

"Nothing, Mr. Pons. That was all he spoke about. It was maddening. His eyes looked so desperately toward the wall on the side of the grounds where the dogs were housed, as if he were trying to summon them from the past. I listened in vain for something of meaning. There was nothing."

She fell silent. For a few moments Pons, too, was silent, drawing thoughtfully at his pipe, and seemingly unaware of our client's raising her dainty handkerchief to protect her nostrils from the reek of the abominable shag he smoked.

"I take it your brother was a retired man."

"Yes, Mr. Pons. He was in the importing business and had an office in Hanoi, Indo-China. He came home seven years ago. He was then fifty-three, and was moderately wealthy. He spent his time reading and working his garden, was proud of his delphiniums. He went out but little—except to the flower shows. You don't suppose," she ventured, looking anxiously at Pons, "that the leech had anything to do with his flowers?"

"I should be inclined to doubt it," Pons replied dryly.

"Nor was there anything in his papers to give me any clue to the meaning of the leech, Mr. Pons. Anything that is, that I could understand." She smiled diffidently, reached into her reticule, and brought forth a

folded sheet of paper. "This was there. I concluded that my brother was at work on some kind of mathematical problem."

Pons glanced at the paper and handed it, without comment, to me.

It was certainly not a problem, I saw at a glance, but an arrangement of numbers that evidently held some meaning for our client's late brother.

"90.33.7-117.17.5-131.34.2-289.6.4-314.10.9-368.
12.1-371.6.8-416.7.5-439.6.5-446.28.2-451.3.5."

"I would have thought nothing of it," continued our client, "but it was in an envelope and carefully put away. Can you read it, Mr. Pons?"

"I will retain it, if I may, together with the cardboard box."

"I have the wrapping here, too," said Miss Cosby, almost as an afterthought. So saying, she took another neatly folded paper from her reticule and handed it to Pons.

"Your brother must surely have had something more with which to occupy his time than gardening," ventured Pons.

"Oh, he was a great reader, Mr. Pons. For a while he used to read the papers, but in the past two years it was all books. He was in the habit of making notes on what he read, but he discontinued that, finally. My brother had an extensive library. Of course, part of it was my father's—the nucleus, you might say—so he only added to it."

"You have always lived at Rye?"

"We were born in that house, Mr. Pons."

"Someone in your family was previously in the business of importing?"

"Well, we did have a great-uncle who lived in Hanoi until he died there ten years ago. I don't particularly

know what he did. My brother had been in the bank at Rye, but he disliked that work and he had some little trouble, so he left it and went into importing at Hanoi."

"Was your brother known to have had heart trouble of any kind?"

"He suffered from a rise in blood pressure, Mr. Pons, of some years' standing."

"Since his return from the east? Or before?"

"Since."

"And was this widely known?"

"I believe only the doctor, my brother, and myself were aware of it." Our client clasped her hands together and appealed to Pons. "Mr. Pons, do you think I am in danger? I am so frightened!"

"Pray do not be unduly alarmed, Miss Cosby. Dr. Parker and I will be at your home before sundown tonight. We will plan to spend the night. It would not surprise me if the sender of that curious message were to call."

Our client's eyes widened in alarm.

"Fear not, Miss Cosby. Dr. Parker and I will be on hand."

After our client had departed, Pons sat for a few minutes with the three items she had brought ranged before him on the table, regarding them thoughtfully. I watched him covertly, and observed that presently he took up a page of notepaper and began to jot down something. Looking over his shoulder, I saw that he had rearranged the numerals of the late David Cosby's mathematical jottings into three columns:

90	33	7
117	17	5
131	34	2
289	6	4

314	10	9
368	12	1
371	6	8
416	7	5
439	6	5
446	28	2
451	3	5

Pons leaned back, his eyes dancing. "What do you make of it, Parker?"

"It's a cipher of some kind."

"Elementary. Does the arrangement of the numerals suggest nothing to you?"

I looked at them long and hard. "I am no cryptologist."

"Tut, tut! One need not be." He pushed the paper aside and drew over the cardboard box. "The leech, then."

"I see that it is a red leech, no more," I said, a trifle impatiently.

"I submit there is one distinctly odd feature to be observed," said Pons with that irritating air of harboring some secret knowledge.

"I have seen dozens of leeches in my practice," I informed him stiffly.

"But not, I'll wager, one like this. There are various members of the Hirudinea, which belong to the Chaetopod worms. The majority of them are aquatic, but there are parasitical land leeches common to the tropics. This leech is one such. There are leeches of a brown color, green, black, yellow, olive. But there is no red leech."

"How can you say so? It lies before us!" I protested.

"Say rather a leech of an obviously red color lies here," said Pons.

"You are playing with words."

"On the contrary. This leech is not red by nature. It would appear to be brown in hue. The red has been added."

"Painted!"

"So it would appear."

"But how, then, could a red leech have any significance to anyone if there is no such leech?" I cried.

"Precisely. That is the problem. Particularly such significance as to bring on a fatal seizure. I submit, however, that it was not intended to bring on such a seizure. I fancy it was meant to convey a message which perhaps only David Cosby could understand—or someone presumably privy to the knowledge that gives it meaning."

"Like his sister."

Pons nodded. "It would then have been a message Cosby never expected to receive," he went on. "Only such a message would have so startled him."

"A death threat!"

"Gently, Parker. We are not yet justified in that assumption. Let us suppose for the nonce that it was intended to convey a certain intelligence Cosby had no reason to believe he would ever receive. It may have been meant to inaugurate or foretell a chain of events which might very well have followed had Cosby survived his seizure which, I assume from our client's description, was paralytic in nature, perhaps a cerebral thrombosis.

"The sender was obviously approaching England from some tropical country, the leeches being tropical in origin, though he might very well have obtained them in Paris. He mailed Cosby's from Paris, and took his time in getting to Rye. Once there, he learned of Cosby's death. He learned also that his sister sur-

vived him and concluded that the business he had so dramatically announced to Cosby might be taken up with her. He does not yet know that his conclusion is in error."

"Do we?"

"I think we may safely believe that Miss Cosby is as mystified as we are at this moment, perhaps more so," he added enigmatically.

I refused to play his little game.

Thereupon he took up the wrapping which had covered the cardboard box and handed it to me. "What do you make of that? You know my methods."

I studied it for a few moments with care. "It is written in a strong hand with a broad pen," I said. "The writer is certainly a man." Encouraged by Pons' smile, I went on. "He wrote this in some haste, but he would seem not to be ordinarily careless, for he went to more pains with his leech than he did with this address. The paper would appear to be ordinary market paper, obtainable in any shop; the absorption of the ink makes the letters seem broader than in fact they were at the writing of them."

"Capital, Parker, capital!" cried Pons. "It cheers me to be provided with such evidence of your progress in ratiocination."

I bowed to acknowledge his praise.

He got to his feet abruptly. "Now, if you will excuse me, I have one or two little inquiries to make, and then, if you can spare the time, we are off for Rye."

Our client's home stood near the foot of the knoll on which the picturesque village of Rye stands, not quite at the edge of the salt marshes, on the far side of Rye from the coast, and in the middle of grounds that covered at least four or five acres, devoted, as was ap-

parent in the late afternoon sunlight, to lawns, trees, and gardens. A low stone wall shut it off from the lowland, and shrubbery outlined the boundaries of the property. Here and there stood statuary—all, save for two pieces, Oriental; the two were a conventional Venus and a bust of Queen Victoria over against the stone wall, as if the Queen were the patroness of the gardens, for a bed of roses was arranged not far before the bust. The Oriental pieces were of just such nature as might be expected of someone who had been engaged in importing primitive art and artifacts from southeast Asia.

All this we took in as we made our leisurely approach up the cobblestone walk to the entrance.

Our client had seen us, and threw open the door as we came up to it. "Oh, Mr. Pons!" she cried. "I am so glad you are here. I dreaded the coming of night."

"The anticipation of what one fears is always worse than what one anticipates, Miss Cosby."

"May I show you to your rooms?"

"It is too early for that, thank you," Pons said. "I would like to see the room in which your brother received the mail on the day of his seizure."

Without a word, Miss Cosby turned and led the way down the hall to the library, the entire outer wall of which was lined with shelves from floor to ceiling, and the shelves crowded with books of all description, though I saw at a glance that our client's late brother had been much given to sets of authors.

Miss Cosby pointed to an easy chair drawn up beside a Queen Anne table and a reading lamp. "It was just there, Mr. Pons."

"The chair, I take it, was in that position?"

"Yes, Mr. Pons."

"And the kennels were off on that side of the

house?" Pons gestured toward the outer wall.

"Yes. They were disused, except for Scottie, when David returned from Indo-China. The very first thing he did was to move Scottie, tear down the kennels, and put in his rose garden. I don't know who will tend it now he's gone, but I suppose it will fall to me."

Pons nodded abstractedly. He looked from the chair to the bookshelves, and then wandered idly over to the shelves.

"Your brother seems to have been a devoted reader of our classical authors."

"Oh, he was, Mr. Pons. Some of those older sets, of course, belonged to our parents. My father, too, read books voraciously."

"Hardy," mused Pons. "A complete set. Commendable, indeed! And Conrad! What other writer in our time has so effectively portrayed the sea? Unless it were William Hodgson, who had an eye for its terrors. And here are Dickens, Scott, Thackeray, Dumas—one would expect to find them here."

He walked slowly along the shelves of books, scrutinizing their titles. Now and then he paused to take down a book and open it, and make a terse comment or two, while our client favored him with puzzled glances, looking to me for assurance that Pons was about his quest.

"Who is Dickens' peer at the creation of memorable characters?" he asked. "And who so loves the English countryside as Hardy? Though he has an eye for the dark side of his fellowmen. Sir Walter is currently in eclipse, but I fancy the wheel of taste will turn again."

At length he selected a book and turned to our client. "And now, if you please, Miss Cosby, to our quarters."

Our client showed us to an ample room on the floor

above. Assuring us that dinner would not be long delayed, she left us to ourselves to discuss our ruminations.

"I never knew you to fancy Scott," I could not help saying.

"Ah, Parker, Sir Walter is among the most instructive of writers. One could do worse than have recourse to him for instruction in our history. He is the most meticulous of writers. Consider this novel—there are a score of pages at the rear devoted to his notes on the text, all setting forth the historical basis for this story of Elizabeth and Leicester."

He settled down in an easy chair, putting the book temporarily aside for some further study of the two papers left with him by Miss Cosby.

"Did your further enquiries add anything to what we learned from our client?" I asked before he was too deeply immersed in either the papers or the novel.

"Ah, very little of significance," he replied without looking up. "That little 'trouble' at the bank where Cosby worked before the Indo-China venture seems to have been some trivial peculations on his part. Nothing was ever proved. He left the bank quietly and went to the Orient. There he organized the Indo-China Importing Company with some assistance from his late uncle, and apparently conducted a legitimate and profitable business, occasionally making trips into neighboring countries to discover and buy artifacts, works of art, primitives and the like. Then, after seventeen years, he sold his business and came back to England to lose himself here."

After but a cursory examination, he put the papers aside and took up the historical novel he had brought from the library. Thereafter he alternated between the papers and the novel until at last, after jotting down a

few notes, he sat back with the book until Miss Cosby knocked on the door to announce dinner.

Over a substantial evening meal, Pons pressed his inquiry. "You mentioned, Miss Cosby, that you believed your brother to be moderately wealthy. You have had ample opportunity since his death to ascertain the facts."

"Yes, Mr. Pons, I have. He has left me comfortably situated for the rest of my life. The transfer of funds from Indo-China, together with the sale of his business, amounted to a considerable sum. His accounts at the bank are in excess of ten thousand pounds, and there are other investments. In addition, my brother occasionally hinted at certain insurance against losses or something happening at the bank. This, however, has not come to light; if he had such a policy, we have not yet discovered it. My brother was secretive, and he was also extremely parsimonious, I am sorry to say. There were many times I would have found myself painfully short of funds if I had had to rely on him; fortunately, I never had to."

"I observed a handsome bed of roses as we came in," said Pons then.

"David was very proud of his roses, put them in himself. He was forever tending them. He has never had a gardener on the grounds. He did everything, Mr. Pons. Of course, it was in part to save money, but primarily it was because he was convinced no one could do it as well as he."

"While he was in Indo-China, did you find him freely communicative?"

"It is odd you should ask, Mr. Pons," replied our client, "but that is one thing David could not be said to have been. He wrote very brief, terse letters."

"Did he speak of his associates?"

"Only on occasion of our uncle. Uncle helped him to get started, but my brother was evidently in complete charge of his business. Now it is conducted by a man named Goddard—Henry Goddard."

"But your brother certainly employed others. He would have needed someone to take charge of his office whenever he took trips into the interior for the works of primitive art he sold."

"I believe he employed three people. He mentioned that number. One was a clerk, one a bookkeeper who was in charge when he was away, and one an assistant of some sort. He accompanied my brother on his buying trips."

The paucity of the food he ate betrayed the fact that Pons was hot upon some scent or other. I could not fathom, from the general nature of his questions, what it might be. He had learned nothing that he had not already discovered by inquiring about London earlier in the day. Yet his face had never seemed more feral, with his keen eyes fixed on our client, and a duo of faint lines across his high brow. However, I was not prepared for his businesslike manner at the end of the meal.

"Now, Miss Cosby," he said briskly, "it has turned dark. We shall need a lantern and a shovel."

Our client's jaw fell momentarily as she gazed at Pons in astonishment for an instant before she spoke. "You will find both in the potting shed, Mr. Pons. Come, I will show you."

"Pray, permit me. We will be able to find our way."

"Very well, Mr. Pons. The shed is directly behind the house, at the edge of the grounds," she directed.

Once outside in the deepening dusk, Pons caught me by the arm and pressed a pistol into my hand. "It is quite possible that the house may be under surveil-

lance, Parker. I need you to 'cover' me while I am at work. There is an ash tree on the west side of the house, not far from the rose garden. Beyond it is a clump of laurel bushes. Take up your stance there."

"You have deciphered Cosby's figures," I whispered. "Extraordinary!"

"Alas! Sadly prosaic," he retorted, and slipped away.

I found my way to the ash tree without difficulty, and thence around the rose garden toward the growth of laurel along the stone wall at the western line of the Cosby property. There I concealed myself; I had indulged Pons' flair for the dramatic before; I would indulge it again.

I saw the light of the lantern spring up, and presently Pons came along, bearing the lantern in one hand, a shovel in the other. He came up to the ash tree and paused to take his bearings. I saw him fix his position before he stepped off five paces in a northeasterly direction. Then he took four sharply to the left in the direction of the bust of Queen Victoria, and was thus brought to the very edge of the rose garden. There he put the lantern down and dropped to his knees to examine the earth, and there, presently, he began to dig.

He dug for a little while and paused to sound the hole he had made. Then he dug again, and once more sounded the pit. Presently he must have heard something he expected to hear, for he worked far more carefully, digging around some object. At last he brought up a tin dispatch box a trifle more than half a foot square. He put it on the ground next to the lantern and opened it. Whatever was in it shone and glittered—red.

But at that moment Pons was interrupted.

"I'll take that!" said a firm voice.

I saw standing in the lantern's glow a slender man of medium height. He had a revolver in his hand, pointed at Pons.

Leaving the box with its contents where it stood, Pons leisurely came to his feet, lifting his lantern high to reveal a man of middle age.

"Mr. Leach, I presume?" said Pons. "Known to his intimates as 'Red' Leach?"

I saw now that the fellow had a red beard and a shock of red hair.

"I don't know you," he said anxiously.

"My name is Solar Pons, though I doubt you have had occasion to hear it in southeast Asia. The gentleman covering you with his gun from the laurels is Dr. Lyndon Parker."

Leach wavered a little.

"Good evening, Mr. Leach," I called out.

A wild look came into the fellow's face.

"As far as I know, you have done nothing illegal, Mr. Leach," continued Pons imperturbably. "Pray do not act on impulse now. You have come to see Miss Cosby on a matter of business, obviously of importance to you. Let us all go into the house together."

Leach stood as if struck dumb.

"But first," said Pons, thrusting forth his hand, "your weapon."

For a few moments they stood, immobile.

"Come, man, what do you say?" demanded Pons.

Slowly, as if mesmerized by the turn of events, Leach handed his weapon to Pons.

"And now, Mr. Leach," said Pons briskly, "pick up that ruby—it is certainly the largest I have ever seen —and come along."

"You'll trust me with it?" asked Leach in an incredulous voice.

"I daresay you have a claim on it," replied Pons.

"It is the Eye of Buddha," Leach said.

"Miss Cosby will want to hear about it. Let us go around by the front door and announce ourselves properly. Parker, put up your pistol, that's a good fellow."

Leach walked with a bad limp. Perhaps because of it he made no effort to make a break but went along docilely enough between Pons and me to the front entrance, where Pons put down the shovel and the lantern and sounded the bell.

Miss Cosby came to the door and threw it open. Her eyes widened in surprise at sight of three men, where she had expected but two.

"Miss Cosby, may I present Mr. Leach, familiarly known as 'Red' Leach," said Pons.

"Oh!" she cried, one hand flying to her lips.

"Mr. Leach is carrying what your brother buried at the edge of his rose garden on his return from Indo-China—his 'insurance' of which you could find no trace," continued Pons, pressing past her. "I believe he has a claim on it. If you are not too upset to hear his story, we will all listen to it."

"Do come in," she cried, finding her voice again. "Indeed, I must hear it."

Seen in the well-lit room, Leach was revealed as a man of early middle age, whose grooming belied the gruffness of his voice. He had pleasant blue eyes that wrinkled at the corners, and his beard, I saw now, was affected to conceal a scar along one side of his jaw.

"I didn't mean anything but to put the wind up old Davey," he said apologetically, "to let him know I was still in the country of the living. No more than that—except to prepare him for my coming to claim what was mine."

"And what was that, Mr. Leach?" asked Miss Cosby.

"At least the half of this ruby—and some of my back pay. You don't know?"

"No, Mr. Leach."

"Well, Miss, then I owe you an apology."

Miss Cosby smiled tremulously. "Do go on, Mr. Leach. How did my brother come by this ruby?"

"I was his assistant, Miss Cosby, and went with him on his trips. I knew the places, you might say. I worked for his uncle—begging your pardon, your uncle too, Miss Cosby—and then I worked for him, after the old man died. We went all through that country buying primitive art pieces, like the kind he's got out there in the garden, and other work for which he could get a good price. That was the way he made his money, by getting ten times what he paid for a piece, sometimes a hundred times what he paid for it.

"We'd heard talk of the Eye of Buddha years before. Your uncle knew of the stone fixed in the forehead of a statue of Buddha lost in the jungles of Siam. There's little to tell of it except that once, during a storm, we lost the trail, and blundered for miles through the forest and came upon it. We pried and chipped it out. That was the long of it. The short of it was that on the way out we were attacked by a party of priests and I was wounded. Then Davey said, 'It's every man for himself!' and ran for it. He got away. I didn't. But they didn't kill me. They took me prisoner, and healed me somewhat, and made me work for them. Over six years! I got away at last, and set out to find Davey. I sent him the leech to let him know, to get him ready to pay me what I had coming to me."

"You poor man!" cried our client sympathetically. "You may certainly keep that ruby. Whatever would I do with it?"

"Thank you, Miss Cosby."

"And in the morning you had better come around and we will discuss whatever back pay is coming to you."

Mr. Leach, his eyes quickening, favored her with a lingering glance, which she returned.

Pons rose with alacrity. "You will excuse us, Miss Cosby. We will just walk Mr. Leach around to his lodgings, then catch the 9:55 train for London."

"I fancy," said Pons with a smile, once we were seated in our compartment on our way to London, "Mr. Leach may have found more than back pay to compensate him for whatever misery was his in Siam."

"Bother Leach!" I cried. "What sent you to dig up the rose garden?"

"I thought that obvious," answered Pons. "It is no credit to your powers of observation that you should have to ask. Sir Walter Scott, of course."

"Fantastic!"

"Not at all. Cosby tried to tell his sister but she, being less imaginative than he, grievously misunderstood him to be talking of the kennels and the dog, Scottie. True, he was looking in the direction of the kennels. He was also looking toward the book shelves. Assuming that his mind had been affected, she made none but the most cursory attempt to understand him. What he was trying to say was *'Kenilworth'* and 'Scott'—Sir Walter, not a similarly named dog.

"It was *Kenilworth* that contained the solution to Cosby's simple cipher. You will recall that I directed your attention to the arrangement of the numerals. Out of a certain innate stubbornness integral to your nature, you affected not to see. Yet it was painfully evident that the cipher was based upon a book. The first line of numerals ranged from 90 to 451, the second did

not exceed 34, the third did not go beyond 9. What more obvious than the pages of a book, the lines of a page, the words in a line? In all such cases, of course, however simple the cipher may be, it is essential that the book be known so that pages, lines, and words can be set down. Our client, however obtuse, nevertheless managed to supply the title of the book once I chanced upon it on the shelves. The message, thus disclosed, proved to be spare and direct. 'Look under ash five steps northeast over four left towards Queen.' The Queen, in this case, being the bust of Her late Majesty, Victoria.

"Miss Cosby, I fear, is only just beginning to understand that her late brother was one-tenth a scoundrel. I should have preferred one of a dimension closer to nine-tenths!"

HE WAS TOO MUCH

Robert Colby

A crowd had begun to gather at the edge of the highway on the northern outskirts of the small Florida town. Two police cruisers were there, and an unmarked car which had brought detectives.

An ambulance had also arrived and stood ready to remove the body which lay sprawled under a tan blanket between the gleaming white convertible and an aging green sedan.

It was just past noon on a day in July and the sun was a relentless torch in a smothering chamber of humidity. Traffic groped north and south through the aisle of hastily parked vehicles hugging the shoulders of the narrow highway. Approaching cars slowed, as people gaped from their windows, then wheeled past uncertainly or braked to add their startled faces to the scene of violence.

Ken Stover, a lean, dark-haired man of thirty with a young face and ancient dark eyes, sagged against a fender of his sedan. A few tears of blood had trickled down from a cut under his left eye to mingle with the sweat which shined his pale features.

"You better start makin' sense, mister," the detective sergeant told him. "I don't believe a word you say. This don't look like any traffic squabble where you beat a perfect stranger to death. This was a planned killing."

The sergeant, a chunky, balding man in a rumpled

brown suit, had thick lips and flat brown eyes. There was bloat in his face and at the belly; he seemed a man who had once been solid and muscular but was going to seed.

"If you don't make sense soon," he continued in his mildly accented, deceptively soft voice, "we're gonna build a nice fat case of murder one around you."

"You knew this guy," said the tall, blond detective with the pocked face and the pink-rimmed, liquid gray eyes. "You knew him and you hated his guts. So you followed him all the way from Miami, and when you caught up with him you went crazy. You beat his brains out. You clobbered him until he was dead because you were jealous and you—"

"It was the girl here, wasn't it?" interrupted the chunky sergeant, turning toward a slender redhead who drooped beside him, biting her lip, nervously toying with the clasp of her purse. She had green, amber-flecked eyes, provocatively slanted, a small flaring nose, a wide abundant mouth, all set neatly in the precise heart of her freckled face.

Her delicate skin, peeling at the top rise of her cheeks, bore the blush of a recent sunburn. She wore a bargain-basement sun dress and cheap tan-and-white shoes, badly scuffed. Nothing but her good looks belonged with the sleek white convertible, though she had been beside the dead man who drove it.

Ken Stover looked at the girl briefly. "I told you," he said wearily, "I don't know the lady. I don't know her and I didn't know her husband, friend, whoever he was."

"Boyfriend," said the blond detective with a sage look. "And you know *her*, that's for sure."

Stover sighed heavily, shaking his head. "Think what you like, then."

"I never saw him before in my life," the girl said, "but he could have been an old enemy of Mr. Belanger's."

"You're both liars," said the sergeant. "Any halfwit could see that you two go together like John and Mary, and the dead man, older, and rich as you two are poor, got in the way of Stover's jealous rage. Or maybe you two were a pair workin' some kind of con game that got out of control."

"What did you mean," the blond detective asked the girl, "when you said Stover here could have been an enemy of Belanger's?"

"Well—" She moistened her sun-parched lips. "Marvin—Mr. Belanger—ran a big trucking company, and he'd been having union troubles. He told me he had a lot of enemies in his business, some he didn't even know. This man could be one of them."

"How do you like that?" said the sergeant. "When the chips are down she throws him to the wolves."

"No," denied the girl, "he's a stranger. But it wasn't just an ordinary fist fight that got out of hand, like this man wants you to believe. I could tell from the beginning that he meant to kill Mr. Belanger, after he goaded him into a fight. He came at him like—like an animal, a savage! Nothing could have stopped him until poor Marvin was dead. Oh, he—he was a brute, a determined killer!"

"Answer that one," said the sergeant to Stover. "You must have been steaming up a long time or you would have bounced Belanger a couple of times and walked away, instead of pounding him again and again until he was dead. Now that makes sense."

"It wasn't like that at all," Stover replied stridently, a kind of desperate sobbing undertone to his speech. "I was in the middle of town at a red light. The light had

hardly switched to green when he leaned on that big horn, right in my ear. Three long blasts. Then he pulled ahead fast and cut me off, still blowing the horn. So when we came abreast at another light and he began to cuss me out—"

"Yeah, you told us all that," said the sergeant. "A man blows his horn, gives you some lip, and that's all you need to maul him to death. I don't believe it. Never! Why, if you got shook that easy, went maniac every time some joe chewed you out in traffic, you'd have been put away long ago. Nope, can't be that simple. I just don't buy it, Stover."

"Well," Stover said, "I don't know how else to explain it—except that this guy was too much, that's all. He was just too much."

That was when they put him in back of one of the patrol cars and the uniformed cop drove him away. The detectives followed, bringing the girl. Ken figured they wanted to question her alone, en route to the station.

The police car had a screen of rugged steel mesh separating the driver from the prisoner, and the rear doors could not be opened from the inside. The compartment was aptly referred to as "the cage."

The cop, appearing neat and official in his tan uniform despite the soggy steam bath of heat, did not once turn around during the ride, showing Ken nothing but the anonymous back of his head and the rigid column of his neck. That, compounded by the nearly soundless whisper of the tires and the flat, empty face of the limp tropic landscape, gave Stover a shuddering sense of his own isolation.

Finding it impossible to lean back as if he were being conveyed in a taxi, he sat uncomfortably on the edge of his seat and stared out a window as they en-

tered the first dreary streets of the town. Sweltering far inland from the ocean and the manicured ivory beaches, its squat, tired buildings had not been rejuvenated by the money-green blood of the tourists.

Looking out upon this town which less than an hour ago had been merely an irritation, a fly in his progress northward, Stover now saw it as his final destination, his Hades at the terminus of a tortured existence. As the police car turned into a side street and braked before a yellow-brick tomb of a building, he was overcome by an unspeakable despair.

The room to which they took him was small, its dusky interior faintly described by the light from a single barred window. Containing only a battered desk and a quartet of scarred wooden chairs, the place was a hot, airless coffin which smelled of decay and sweat.

Ken was motioned to a chair by the desk, the sergeant and his blond partner removed their coats, rolled shirtsleeves high over bulging biceps. They did this with deliberation, in ominous silence, ignoring his presence.

The blond cop sank into a chair, stretched his legs and crossed ankles before lighting a cigarette.

The sergeant widened the gap in the partially opened window and peered stonily from the window, hands on hips. Turning, he fingered the butt of his .38 as he crossed to the desk and leaned against it, facing Ken.

"Well now," he said, "maybe you can straight-talk us in here. Nice and quiet, nobody to disturb us. No dames to distract us—like that hot-eyed redhead." He watched Ken with narrowed eyes, twitching his nose, scratching the rim of a nostril with a thumbnail. "What's her name, that cookie?"

"I don't know her name," Ken said in a tired monotone.

"Sure you do. Lois Detman. She was old stuff to you long before she picked up Belanger in Miami Beach at that hotel bar. Man, that's a lotta woman, don't ya think, Harry?"

"Yeah, yeah," said Harry, sending a smoke ring out to circle his agreement.

The sergeant, lacing fingers behind his head, eyed Ken, winked. "Don't you think she's a lotta woman, Stover?"

"I didn't notice. Couldn't care less. You're wasting your time in that direction, Sergeant."

"She picked up Belanger in the hotel bar where he was staying," said the blond Harry, summarizing. "Belanger was on a business trip. He was married, kids and all. Lois didn't care, he had dough. The boyfriend, Stover here, was tapped out, broke.

"Lois and Belanger do the town, make a night of it. He's sold. So he says, 'Baby, you've got it for me. Drive up to New York with old Sugar Bags and I'll set up a nest for you across town from the Belanger penthouse. Just so mama don't get wise. You dance to my tune and you'll have all the sugar you can spread around, baby.'

"So they hit the road together fast. But Stover sniffs the scent in a hurry. He takes after them, hate burning his brain. He stirs up a fight and it's a goodbye Belanger."

"That's a lie," said Ken flatly. "Belanger stirred up the fight."

"Sure—after you held him at the light and needled him into it."

"His death was an accident," pleaded Ken in a choked voice. "I'm sorry I killed him, I admit killing him. What more do you want?"

"*Why* did you kill him?" pressed the sergeant.

"I don't know, I don't know! I was in a rage. He wasn't even a person. He was a thing—a force—and I killed it."

The sergeant glanced at his partner. "Maybe this guy needs a skull shrinker," he said.

"Yeah, or else he's faking."

"That won't work with us," the sergeant declared. "We'll turn him inside out until we get the truth.

"Listen, Stover, we might be able to give you a break. Tell the truth, plead guilty and we'll try to get you off with life. But if it goes to trial you're a dead duck. They'll burn you to a cinder. Well?"

Ken said nothing.

"Let's book him and toss him in a cage," Harry said. "Maybe he'll sing another song if we let him think it over in one of our deluxe private rooms."

The sergeant pursed his lips, nodded. "Now Stover, one more time. Why did you kill the man?"

Ken looked into their blank faces and knew it was hopeless. Even if he had a week for the telling, how could he explain what he didn't quite understand himself to men like these? So again he was silent.

"Maybe we're pushing too hard," said the blond detective in a falsely soothing voice. "The poor guy is simply mixed up. Start from the beginning, Ken. Nice 'n easy. Tell us where you first met Marvin Belanger and how you got involved with him."

Stover sighed. "I told you before, I never knew Belanger. He was a complete stranger."

Belanger had reminded Ken of his father, a man of bullish arrogance, calculated cruelty and sneering contempt.

When Ken was thirteen his mother, who was forty-three but looked sixty, died an alcoholic. She was a

sensitive, compassionate person and they were very close. From little things she said when she was tight, from fragments overheard, Ken learned that his father's many cruelties and his sly meetings with Rita Barnes, a widowed neighbor, had caused his mother's drinking.

Ken's father did not drink and would not trust his mother with more than a dollar because he said she would disgrace him at some local bar. But mysteriously, his mother produced a full bottle of whisky nearly every morning.

After the funeral Ken's father, in rare good spirits, had unlocked a steel cabinet to reveal row upon row of tall whisky bottles containing the amber liquid which day-by-day had erased the bright true image of his mother.

Cradling a bottle in his big paw, his father told Ken, "Just rot-gut, but it cost me plenty over a long period. Every morning I put a fresh bottle beside the sink. That way, she had a choice: Drink it, or pour it down the drain." He grinned evilly. "Well, my boy, she made her choice, wouldn't you say?"

Right then, if there had been a gun within reach, Ken would joyfully have killed his father.

That evening, Rita Barnes, the brunette with the clever face and the funny little smile that was like a smirk, had cooked their dinner and sat boldly at table. Three days later, Ken was shipped off to a military academy in Virginia.

The detective lighted a cigarette and studied it as if it might tell him something. "You're not helping your cause one bit, Stover," he said. "Silence is practically an admission of guilt, and lies can be checked. You'll hold us up for a few hours maybe, but we'll soon have

your whole history on paper, line-by-line. We'll know you better than your own mother. We'll know every time you were a bad boy from year one. Right, Harry?"

"I'd bet my life on it," said Harry, "and his too. "What's your name, Stover? Your *real* name?"

"Ken Stover. It's on my driver's license. Verify it for youself."

"You can fake all kinds of ID, friend, but your fingerprints don't lie. Chances are a guy like you has got a record somewhere. We don't need a name. Your prints will dig it up."

"You can't dig up what doesn't exist," Ken answered, but suddenly he was in doubt. How far back could they reach? There was that brief incredible period when he actually did time with a Carolina chain gang.

He had run away from the military academy when he was barely sixteen. At that time he was slim and frail and badly equipped for a life which emphasized brute force and competitive sports. Because he spent his free time alone, reading, or writing mawkish poems, he was goaded into many a punishing fight.

One night his poems were stolen and the next morning the most revealing of his purple passages screamed at him from the blackboard when he entered his classroom for the study of the *History of Modern Warfare.* By noon a dozen copies of the complete farce, the whole dreadful unveiling of his soul, were being circulated around the academy.

There was no place to hide, so that winter night he stole away and joined a couple of semi-bums riding a freight car south. Caught in North Carolina, they were sentenced to thirty days in the county chain gang.

Ken was the immediate target for the perverse at-

tentions of Bull Whitlock, leader of the hard-core nucleus of habitual criminals, and Ken naïvely informed the guard. In the morning, just after the road gang dismounted from their trucks, Whitlock broke Ken's nose with the big sledge of his fist, fractured his jaw and kicked in a couple of ribs. Half a dozen Whitlock followers swore that the fight started when Ken tried to brain Whitlock with an outsized rock.

After Ken returned from the prison hospital he was found guilty of assault with a deadly weapon, and the penalty for having been beaten half to death and railroaded was six additional months at hard labor.

"You tell us you've got no record," Harry said, "but I don't believe you. I believe your mouth but not your eyes. You've been busted, Stover, that's for certain. You're an ex-con. You've been in and out plenty of times."

"No," said Ken hesitantly, "that's not true. When I was just a kid I got caught riding a freight and they gave me some time in a chain gang. But that doesn't make me a criminal."

No use telling the rest of it, he thought. They would only use it to try to needle him into a confession. Anyway, he was weary of the whole business. He was tired; tired in the way that his mother had been tired. What could these cops know about that kind of tiredness?

"If you're not a criminal," said the sergeant, "then you've got a job. You're an ordinary, decent citizen with an honest job. What sort of work do you do?"

"I'm a salesman. An auto salesman."

"An auto salesman," the sergeant sneered. "They're all auto salesmen. It's an easy out."

"He's an auto salesman but he drives a limping old

heap," Harry snorted. "You ever see a car trader who didn't wheel the latest thing in chrome, even if he didn't own it?"

"If you have a job selling cars," the sergeant reasoned, "what're you doing in Florida with New York tags? You don't work around here." He grinned scornfully. "Are you on vacation?"

"He's on a permanent vacation," said Harry, chuckling.

"Give me facts," the sergeant said. "Give me names and places. What outfit do you work for? In what city? And for how long?"

"I used to work for Dawson Motors in Buffalo, New York."

"You *used* to work, huh? At—?"

"Dawson Motors, Buffalo."

"We'll check that. We'll check that out pronto, don't you worry."

After he had served his sentence, Ken hitched a ride north. The man and his wife were headed for Buffalo, and Ken went along. One place was as good as another.

He got a job as a bag-boy in a supermarket and began to put on weight. Encouraged, he went twice a week to a gym where he worked out vigorously. He lifted weights and took boxing lessons. His trainer said he had real talent for the ring but he wanted nothing more than to look at any man without fear, knowing he could defend himself.

Time passed, he became a checker, then left the market to sell cars for Dawson Motors. Gil Dawson, the sales manager, son of the owner, was not much older than Ken. With dark, wavy hair and a lazy, brilliant smile that came easily to his handsome face, he

was liked by everyone, including Ken, though it was more than a year before Ken was willing to admit it.

Gil had taken Ken under his wing, teaching him all the tricks, making him one of the top salesmen. When the exposure of time did not produce the expected cracks in Gil's character, Ken happily accepted him as his first real friend. Through Gil, Ken met a few girls, made his first dates, and began to free himself from the fears which had made him a loner.

The sergeant turned from the window. "The trouble started with Lois Detman," he said. "Didn't it, Stover? You loved her. You did everything for her. Maybe you even stole the money to keep her in style. But when you were broke, what did she do? She ran off with moneybags Belanger, a married man cheating on his wife.

"So he became your worst enemy. It was the most natural thing in the world for a guy like you to track him down and kill him. Isn't that the story? C'mon now, it'll do you good to talk it out. You got nothin' to lose, nothin' at all."

"Why don't you leave me alone?" Ken said weakly, his spirit drained. "You want me to make something up to satisfy you? The fight happened the way I told you. I didn't know Belanger, I didn't know the girl."

In his whole life, Ken had known but two or three girls well, and only one intimately. She was now Shirley Stover, nee McCullen.

Ken was twenty-three when he met Shirley at a New Year's Eve party. She was a quiet blonde of twenty-two with earnest, unblinking azure eyes, a little ski-dip nose, and a pensive-sweet delicate mouth.

For Ken it was love at first sight. The relationship got off to a slow start because he could not shake the

habit of keeping his back to the wall, but Shirley understood his sensitive areas and she was patient. Late in the spring they were married. They bought a small house in the suburbs; Gil Dawson and his wife became their best friends.

When Gil's father died, Gil brought Ken to his plush inherited office, fixed a drink and toasted Ken in as the new sales manager.

In his late twenties, with eight thousand in the bank and a devoted wife, Ken believed it was going to be good all the rest of the way, but when he was nudging thirty there was a shift in Shirley's attitude toward him. At first cool and remote, she began to argue over trifles, ballooning petty irritations into scathing fights, denouncing his faults, hurling senseless accusations.

Ken decided to give the marriage a boost by taking Shirley on a long second honeymoon, but on the day he rushed home excitedly to tell her of his plans, he found Shirley gone. With her went his new car and all of his eight thousand blood-sweat savings, withdrawn from their joint bank account.

Left behind was a curt note stating that the marriage had failed and Shirley was filing for a divorce in Florida. She did not want to see him again, they would communicate only through her lawyer in Fort Lauderdale.

Everything went bad after that. Ken could not sleep or eat, he performed his job as sales manager mechanically. The absence of Shirley made him an abject third wheel at the Dawsons' house, and though Gil and his wife could not have been more sympathetic, their togetherness only reminded Ken that he was alone. He stopped visiting them altogether.

A uniformed officer stepped into the room. "I got a call for you, Sergeant," he said. "It's from New York,"

he added, looking pointedly at Ken. "Also, there's a teletype from Miami."

The sergeant told his partner to take over and went out behind the officer.

"You see?" said the detective the minute the door had shut. "Already they're hot on your trail. Okay, so you don't want to talk about the dame. How about Belanger? You ready to change your story?"

"No."

"Why did you really kill him?"

"Same reasons I gave you."

"What about the job? You sold cars, Belanger ran a trucking outfit. That's pretty close. Was he moving hot cars? Did you work for him on the side?"

"Never."

"How long did you stay with—" he consulted a notebook, "this Dawson Motors in Buffalo?"

"A little over eight years."

"Dawson used his business to unload stolen cars and you helped him. Isn't that so?"

"That's absurd."

"Why did you leave him after eight years?"

"I had some personal problems that interfered with my work."

"Want to talk about it?"

"No. I don't want to talk at all—about anything."

On the day before Gil was to leave for Detroit, going to a dealers' convention and remaining for a visit, he'd sent a secretary to ask Ken to come to his office. It seemed a formal, stuffy kind of summons, out of character. Why didn't Gil, as usual, just pick up the phone, or step down the hall to see him?

Ken had a sudden painful hunch. And he was right.

"Can't say how sorry I am about this, Ken," said Gil,

toying with his pen, chewing his lip, "especially since I know it isn't your fault. But you *have* been pretty lax, old buddy." A quick slash of smile. "Some of the boys have complained, customers too.

"Despite my strong personal feelings and your . . . tragic problem, we have to run a tight ship. Since I'll be gone quite a while, we'll need to have someone in charge who . . . Of course if you would consider stepping down to straight sales . . . But I think that would be pretty awkward all around, don't you?"

Back in his office Ken felt as if something whirling madly inside him were going to tear loose and break him apart. He sat at his desk and wrote Shirley, telling her that unless she agreed to see him at once he would contest the divorce, fight the settlement, the whole rotten business.

He got a quick answer to that one! She said it was useless but he could come if he liked. There was a Lauderdale address and a phone number. He could call on arrival.

Since Shirley had about ninety percent of his cash he couldn't afford to fly. Anyway, he needed a car. Since he had turned in the company car he'd been using, he bought the secondhand sedan.

He left that afternoon and drove nonstop, arriving early the next evening. He checked into a cheap motel, took a quick shower and called Shirley. She came on strong over the line, would see him in the morning, but he told her he couldn't endure waiting another moment.

It was a small but quite splendid apartment overlooking the ocean. He sat down nervously, studying her as she made him a drink. He told her she looked beautiful, she told him he looked very tired, and neither had exaggerated.

"I don't know why you came," she opened coolly. "It's all been said, it's all been done. Anything else is an anticlimax."

"I want you to come back," he said. "I don't care on what basis, I want you back. I need you. Oh, how I need you, baby!"

"What about *my* needs?" she said sharply. "I don't *want* to come back to you."

"Shirley, what changed you?" he asked her, his voice splintering with fatigue and love hunger. "How could all the years of loving you go by without leaving any impression? Laughter and tears together, success and failure, touching in the night, holding each other, talking our special language in the darkness . . . How close we were!

"Shirley, that was you, wasn't it? Where did you go? Don't you know I love you? I never stopped for a minute!"

"Love is a delicate flower," she said. "You trample it too often and it dies. Every time we fought, every time we cut each other up with words, it died a little. Until it just—ended."

He nodded. "I'm—I'm sorry about the fights," he said, "but I never honestly felt that they were *my* fights. I simply answered wild accusations, sometimes with anger and cruelty, I'll admit."

She was silent.

"Will you come back to me?"

She shook her head. "No," she said. "Never."

She had put down her drink and was reaching for a cigarette when suddenly he pulled her close. He began to cry softly against her shoulder. She neither held him comfortingly nor pushed him away. She simply sat.

In a moment he said chokingly, "I—I was never quite alive, never quite whole, until I met you. I

couldn't feel, or love, or trust. Oh, baby, don't leave me, don't let me die again . . ."

"I'm sorry for you, Ken," she said, "but life to me is no self-sacrifice and I must live it the way I please. We were a nice, comfortable habit that went sour, that's all. And now I've kept my promise and I do wish you'd leave . . ."

The next morning, Ken drove north on route 27, gutted, tired to the soul of his being. The summer heat was at first irritating, then unbearable. It seemed to seep inside his skull, squeezing his brain, restoring his rage.

He swept through the Everglades, came to the broken, dirty little town and the first traffic light. He didn't notice the man and the girl behind him in the big air-conditioned convertible with the electric windows sealed—not until he heard the angry determined blare of the horn and looked in the rearview mirror.

He saw that the light had changed but he delayed a few seconds out of spite, taking off slowly.

The white convertible swung sharply in front of him, cutting him off, sassing him with more horn, burning ahead, only to jolt-stop at another light, where Ken pulled abreast.

The man pushed his little button and the window obeyed with a quick descent. The stranger looked cool and had the scrubbed-pink shine of money, the indignant, self-seeking jaw of power and aggression, the challenging, disdainful eyes of the bully, a man like his father.

"Keep outta my way, you dumb cracker," he snarled.

Seething in the revitalized juices of a hundred hates, Ken shouted, "How would you like to have your ugly face punched in, mister!" Then he shoved ahead, slowed

to a crawl, blocking the convertible behind him.

He felt his nerves dance in his fingers with the need to smash something or someone—anyone! He was just going to teach that creep a lesson, then give him back the road in another quarter mile. He wasn't surprised this time when he heard the horn, expecting it, but when the ape glued his paw to it, held it frozen until there wasn't another sound in the world, it was too much.

Ken braked sharply, causing the convertible to jab his bumper and slide to a halt. They both leaped out at the same instant, the man shedding his coat to the pavement as he strode toward Ken, flexing his muscles. The guy was big, a burly sort who looked as if he had been weaned on the blood of street fights, though he was older, somewhere in his forties.

Ken was not awed by his size, his muscular development, his hurtling confidence. He felt nothing but a red-blazing hunger for the feel of his fist smashing against flesh and bone.

They came together with the stranger rocking Ken solidly under the eye; which was like detonating the really big bomb inside him, the one charged with a whole lifetime of abuses unpunished.

How measureless, how terrifyingly destructive was the everlastingly contained anger which now exploded in the pounding of Ken's fists against the composite face of his enemy; his fury at last unbridled as he wildly, sobbingly clubbed and battered unspeakable treachery and cruelty too long endured. Belanger, pummeled back against the grille of his own convertible, hung suspended for one awful moment. Then, emptied of his mortality, slithered to earth.

The sergeant came back into the room. "We don't

know *all* of it yet," he said to Ken. "Just a matter of time. But we got the first reports on you and we know one thing, buddy; you been lyin', that's for sure!"

"Maybe we should beat the truth outta his hide," the detective said.

Ken sat up, felt the first angry stab of rebellion. "Why don't you just try that?" he challenged.

"This is your last chance to play ball," said the sergeant. "Now, Stover, I'm gonna be fair with you and tell you we already found out that you knew Belanger. Maybe it had nothing to do with the girl, but you had a great big smoldering hate for *him.* Isn't that right? C'mon now, admit it. You knew Belanger, didn't you?"

Ken stared at the sergeant, nodded slowly. "Yeah," he said, "I knew him. You got a cigarette?"

"Sure, sure," said the sergeant eagerly, reaching into his pocket. "Here, I got half a pack I don't need. Take it."

Ken reached for the pack, removed a cigarette. The blond detective quickly gave him a light.

"So you really *did* know Belanger," the sergeant said with barely contained excitement.

"That's right," Ken replied. "I knew Belanger. I knew him well. The whole world is full of Belangers—and today I killed them all."

HORN OF JUSTICE

Ed Lacy

While it wasn't "murder one," it was manslaughter and there was no doubting that Herbert had killed Mr. Jones.

Herbert was a thin-faced and very intense man of twenty-nine, more nervous than usual the last few weeks because he was a junior accountant and his boss had given him a difficult audit to handle, one which involved much homework.

On the night he killed Mr. Jones, Herbert was working at his desk in the front room of the apartment, facing the open window. The night was warm and muggy, which added to his strained feeling; sweat kept rolling into his eyes, fogging his glasses. At 9:30 P.M. Elaine, his wife, went to bed to read. There was a TV show at 10:00 which she usually watched, but she knew the noise would distract poor Herbert.

Mr. Jones was an insurance salesman and nobody will ever know exactly what he was doing in the apartment house so late. But at 9:45 P.M. when he unlocked his car, Jones found another auto double-parked next to his, making it impossible for Jones to drive away from the curb. The other car was locked and couldn't be moved so Mr. Jones slid into the front seat of his car and began honking his horn, hoping to attract the attention of the driver of the double-parked auto, the

shrill blasts loud in the quiet night. After about ten minutes of this racket (as he so testified in court) Herbert's next-door neighbor, an elderly man named Thompson, called from his window, "Will you please, please, stop that infernal noise!"

"You know who belongs to this parked car?" Mr. Jones shouted up at him.

"No, I don't."

"What do you want me to do, spend the whole night here?" Jones asked, giving his horn three long blasts, making Herbert jumble a long column of petty cash expenses which he had been trying to add for the past fifteen minutes.

Thompson asked, "Are you going to awaken the entire street? I have to be up early, need my sleep."

"That's your problem, pops," Jones called back. "Mine is to get home before my wife starts heckling me." Jones' horn split the muggy night again and again.

At this point Herbert stuck his head out the window and screamed, "Stop that dreadful noise!"

Jones answered with more horn blowing.

The previous Christmas the office had given Herbert a ceramic paperweight in the shape of an 8 ball. Without thinking, Herbert hurled it down at the car. The police agreed it was a freak accident. The ball broke the half-rolled window next to the driver's seat and a jagged hunk of glass sliced Mr. Jones' jugular vein. The horn blowing stopped as did Mr. Jones' life.

Herbert's attorney assured Herbert and Elaine, "Nothing to worry about, this is a clear case of temporary insanity. Herbert was so blinded by pure rage, he had no idea what he was doing when he threw that ball."

But the D.A., in his cold summation to the jury, said, "The fact is that the defendant is a college graduate, a professional man, very much aware of the difference

between right and wrong at all times, who knew better than to give vent to his anger. A man is dead and whether the deceased was making a pest of himself at the time, doesn't concern us. Blowing a horn is not a capital offense. The fact remains that a man was killed and I ask you to bring in a verdict of manslaughter."

The judge then charged the jury and they retired late in the afternoon. Herbert was returned to his cell. At 7 P.M. the attorney told a frightened Elaine, "I can't understand why they're taking so long, our case is open and shut. Nothing to worry about, although I didn't like the smug looks of the jury."

At 9 P.M. the jury reported they were still deadlocked and retired to their suite of hotel rooms for the night. The now worried lawyer told Elaine, "Even a hung jury is a victory for us. I doubt if the State will try Herbert again. Go home and try to get some sleep. I'll see you here at 10 A.M. tomorrow."

At 10:13 A.M. the following morning, the bailiff told the court clerk that the jury had reached a verdict. Herbert was brought in. Looking around, he asked his lawyer, "Where's my wife?"

"I don't know, she didn't show."

"But Elaine wouldn't . . . ?"

"Be quiet, the jury is coming in."

The jury filed in, all looking haggard. Herbert's attorney frowned with worry as the jurors glared at each other. Minutes later the foreman stood and announced, "We, the jury, find the defendant not guilty by reason of temporary insanity."

Herbert's lawyer sighed with relief as he pumped his hand; Herbert's boss came forward and slapped Herbert's thin shoulders. Mr. Thompson said justice had been done and Mrs. Thompson hugged Herbert.

But Herbert stared about the courtroom in a daze,

troubled that Elaine wasn't there to share his happiness. He finally pushed his way out of court, expecting to find Elaine waiting outside. She wasn't and he took a cab to his apartment, full of a feeling of dread.

He found Elaine sleeping soundly. Baffled and angry, he shook her awake. "Are you ill? Why weren't you in court? They found me not guilty."

"I know, hon," Elaine mumbled, half-asleep, kissing him. "I'm sorry but I—I overslept."

"Overslept? I expected you to be there, at least to be waiting outside with the car, if the tension was too much for . . ."

"Dear, the car isn't working, the battery is dead. . . . I was up all night honking the horn outside the jury's hotel . . ."

THE "BACKWORD" SHERIFF

Richard Hardwick

Sheriff Dan Peavy pushed blunt fingers wearily through his wild thatch of white hair, hitched up his unpressed khaki trousers, and stared again at the dead man. Slumped forward on the table, his head resting with the right cheek against the left forearm, the dead man stared back. The reason for his condition was apparently the knife which protruded from between his shoulder blades.

Dan lifted his gaze balefully to the four persons who waited impatiently for him to get on with it. "Alright now," he drawled. "Who was it found him?"

Mr. Duvall Pratt, a blustery, fat individual who had been growing progressively irritable since Deputy Jerry Sealey and yours truly, Pete Miller, answered the call half an hour earlier, gave a tremulous sigh. "Sheriff, we have told all that to your deputies! Is it absolutely—"

Dan Peavy nodded vaguely. "But I wasn't here, so tell me."

Pratt's cheeks gave a little gelatinlike tremble. "We *all* found him! We came down here to Findlay's cabin for our regular ten A.M. conference and found him exactly as you see him now. Naturally, we left everything exactly as it was and had the manager at the inn call your office at once."

"Naturally," Dan murmured. He looked around at the table. "Everything," as referred to by the fat man,

consisted of the corpse, the table, and a portable typewriter a foot or so to the right of the body, with several keys jammed against the empty roller, where the departed seemed to have struck it when he pitched forward.

"This regular ten o'clock meetin'," Dan said. "What's that all about? This some kind of business trip you folks were on?"

"We are here in your lovely county purely by accident, let me assure you!" Pratt said. "Carlton Findlay—" he bowed respectfully toward the dead man "—and we four were en route to Miami in our company plane. Some sort of malfunction developed in one engine and we prudently put down at your local airport. Carlton has been a pilot for years and the decision was his. Repairs were necessary and certain parts had to be ordered, so we rented these five beach cabins at the Guale Inn. Unfortunately, there was some mix-up on the airplane parts and we have now been here for two days."

Dan said, "Hmmmm," and gave his bulbous nose a tentative pull. "Now then," he said to the fat man, "the victim here is Mr. Findlay, and you say your name is Pratt, and you're the vice president of this here . . ." He glanced over at Jerry's notepad and attempted to decipher the jottings thereon.

"Interstate Land Development Company," Jerry whispered.

The fat man rolled his eyes in complete exasperation. "That is correct, Sheriff! And this—" he indicated the lone female of the group "—is Miss Mitzi Block. She was Findlay's secretary."

And, I noted, taking mental inventory of a neatly curved figure, large blue eyes, and honey-blond hair, a very nice dish, indeed.

Pratt made a gesture toward the tall, saturnine fel-

low who had been standing near the front window gazing out at the ocean. "Col. Barrington, sales director of I.L.D.C." The colonel acknowledged with a silent click of the heels of his sneakers, and a virtually imperceptible bow.

Almost as though it were an afterthought, the fat man indicated the final member of the group, a rodential young man who sat glumly astraddle a straight chair, his arms folded across the back, and stared at the corpse. "This is Edwin McChesney, Findlay's nephew." I judged him to be somewhere in the neighborhood of thirty, which put him roughly in the same age bracket as Miss Mitzi Block, and perhaps some twenty years the junior of Pratt, Col. Barrington, and possibly the late Carlton Findlay.

McChesney looked around at the mention of his name. "I'm in the promotional end of the game, Sheriff," he said, to which Pratt immediately made a snorting sound and turned away.

McChesney bristled. "And just what was that supposed to convey?" he demanded. He darted a suspicious glance at the others, then nodded slowly as his eyebrows rose and his lips pursed into a neatly puckered little "o." "So . . . *that's* it! Pin the tail on Edwin, eh? Because he happened to be my uncle!"

Pratt favored Dan Peavy with a pained smile, then spoke to McChesney. "You can only do yourself harm, Edwin, by trying to keep certain—ah—facts from the sheriff. I'm sure you realize it was no secret that Carlton informed you quite recently he had bailed you out on your stupid gambling debts for the last time. Now, abruptly, you stand to come into a sizeable inheritance." He shrugged at the unavoidable implication.

"There's a term for it," McChesney hastened to say in his defense. "Good fortune."

The colonel spoke for the first time. "Or murder?"

McChesney's nose began to twitch violently. He spluttered ineffectually for several moments, then aimed a shaking finger at Pratt. "Alright—al*right!* I would have kept my mouth shut. Now then, let's get all the bloody cards on the table! You, Pratt, are you going to have the temerity to try denying that you and Uncle Carlton have been fighting tooth and nail over how to run this blasted company for the past two years? You hated his guts, and now, abruptly, as you yourself so aptly put it, you are right in line for the top job! You don't have the thorn in your side, you can run things as you damned well see fit!"

The fat man seemed to be puffing up. "See here, Edwin! See *here—"*

But McChesney was not finished in his battle to come out of the corner. He spun around and re-aimed the finger at Miss Mitzi Block. "And you, dear sweet Mitzi, you've been sitting back looking for revenge ever since you landed this job! Oh, Uncle Carlton knew all about you, even if you didn't think he did! In fact, all of us knew—me, Pratt, the colonel—how Uncle Carlton backed your father against the wall a couple of years ago in that Atlanta deal. When the pressure got too great your old man shot himself. That's business, but not to you it wasn't. What would be your word for it?"

"Murder!" she snapped, obviously without thinking. Her big blue eyes became saucers, then blinked at the realization of what was happening.

"Is this the truth, ma'am?" Dan Peavy inquired in his gentlest tone.

Her lips tightened, and if looks were lethal, McChesney would have been reunited with his uncle on the spot. "Alright, it is true! I worked hard to get this

job, and every day since I've had it I've worked even harder trying to find something that I could use against Carlton Findlay. But I wanted *legal* revenge. I wanted to see him in prison!" She glanced haltingly at the corpse. "I . . . I didn't do . . . *that!*"

"You'll have to grant there is a motive, Mitzi," the colonel reminded her.

"Very well, Col. Barrington, I'll grant there may be a motive!" she came back hotly. "And while we're on the subject of motives, I've learned quite a few things by keeping my eyes and ears open on this job. Let's take you, for instance. What about your abortive attempt at swindling? Did you think I wouldn't know all about how you took options on that tract outside Tampa under a fake name and then tried to turn a whopping profit by selling to Interstate Land Development? But your inside information backfired, didn't it? Regardless of what else Carlton Findlay may have been, no one would deny that he was a very smart man. He found out about your little plan, and he told you he was going to leave you holding the bag—"

"You've no proof of these absurd allegations!" the colonel snapped crisply. He smoothed one side of his mustache with a nervous motion. "No proof at all!"

It had all happened so quickly, there was an unexpected and decidedly uncomfortable moment of silence, as if the dead man was the only one remaining to have his say.

But, of course, it was not Carlton Findlay who spoke. It was Dan Peavy. "Now, gettin' back to the murder. You all say you came down here at ten o'clock. Did anybody see him before that this morning? I mean, anybody who wants to admit it? It's right plain that *somebody* saw him."

"The last I saw of Uncle Carlton was at dinner last

night," said McChesney. "All of us had dinner together at the Inn."

"I spoke to him this morning," Miss Mitzi Block said, and added hastily, "on the telephone, that is. I believe it must have been ten minutes or so before ten o'clock."

Jerry flipped the pages of his notepad. "That's right, Dan. Switchboard girl at the Inn says Findlay rang Miss Block's cabin at about ten minutes to ten, talked a half a minute or so, then rang Pratt's cabin." He closed his notes and gave the young woman a reassuring smile.

"There were certain papers he wanted me to bring to the meeting," she said, by way of explanation.

The fat man nodded. "The same reason he phoned me."

"Your cabin's the one next to this one?" asked Dan.

"No . . ." Pratt said hurriedly. "Mine's the *last* one of the five we rented!"

Jerry had his ubiquitous notepad out again, showing a sketch to the sheriff. "This one's at the south end, and going north there's Miss Block's, Col. Barrington's, Mr. McChesney's—"

"And *mine!*" Pratt said happily.

"But anybody could have come down here from any one of the other cabins and had a mighty good chance of not being seen," I injected. "There are thick stands of sea myrtle between all these cabins, as well as between them and the road."

"So," McChesney smirked, "Duvall Pratt could just as easily have come down here and stabbed Uncle Carlton as anyone else!"

He bent his head, still grinning. "Maybe easier, thinking you gentlemen would figure it was too unlikely."

The questioning went on a while longer, with no

visible results. Dan allowed all of them to go back to their respective cabins for the time being, with strict instructions to stay put.

"Well, Dan," Jerry said when the group had gone. "Whatd'ya make of it?"

We were standing in the backyard of Findlay's cabin, and Dan rubbed his chin and gave his head a slow shake. "You're right about this dang underbrush, Pete. An elephant coulda come down here an' likely done it without a soul seein' him."

"The killer had another thing running in his favor," I said. "Findlay was expecting all of 'em for the ten o'clock meeting, so whoever did it could have gone into the cabin and got right up to Findlay without arousing any suspicion." Jerry nodded his concurrence. "Then he sneaked back to his own place and strolled back here with the others a few minutes later."

Dan Peavy gave his nose a particularly thoughtful twist, a gesture which in some unknown manner seemed to aid the flow of his mental processes. "Kinda funny . . ."

Jerry frowned. "Funny?"

"Yeah. All of these folks have got some kind of motive and not one of 'em's got an alibi. It looks to me like that's just the thing the killer was bankin' on. He knew he couldn't hide his reason for wanting Findlay dead, at least not for long, but he knew the others wouldn't be able to hide theirs either." Dan scratched his head. "Which leaves us up the creek, like they say."

Just about then the ambulance from Faircloth's Funeral Parlor came in the winding sand drive. When it pulled to a stop our venerable coroner and medical examiner, Doc Stebbins, dismounted and ambled toward us.

I finished taking all the necessary pictures, Jerry marked the position of the body, and the ambulance

boys carted the mortal coil of the late Carlton Findlay away.

"That knife hit him in or dang close to the heart," Doc was saying in answer to Dan Peavy's query. "I can let you know exactly after the autopsy."

"How quick do you reckon that killed him?"

Doc's bushy eyebrows went up. "Pretty quick, I can tell you."

"What I mean is, how quick? A couple o' seconds? Half a minute?"

Doc Stebbins shrugged. "Well, a man with a heart wound could live for a few minutes. No way to tell about a particular case unless you're there with a watch. It ain't instan*tane*ous, if that's what you're tryin' to make me say." He shuffled toward the door and the waiting ambulance. "But with a knife planted like that in him, a man's a sure goner, so what's a half a minute one way or the other?"

We walked outside with him. "Could be a helluva lot," Dan Peavy mused, squinting against the sun. "Yes, sir, could be one helluva lot—to the guy that's been stabbed."

The ambulance backed out the narrow drive toward the road. Jerry turned to me. "I was just thinkin', Pete. Suppose they was all in on it! Ain't a one of 'em sorry Findlay's dead. Could be they got together and hatched up this whole thing."

I shook my head. "I can't buy that at all. That's no act they're putting on, throwing all those accusations around. How about it, Dan, what do you think?"

We both turned and saw that our boss had gone back into the cabin. A couple of seconds later he poked his head out the door. "Jerry! Run get all them folks back here! Got something I wanta show them!"

The four suspects were assembled in Findlay's

cabin while Dan Peavy briefly went over the things we had been discussing. "So it looks this way," he summed up. "Every one of you has got a motive, none of you has got an alibi for the time just before ten o'clock when Mr. Findlay was stabbed."

"And just where does that leave you, Sheriff?" Duvall Pratt asked with undisguised disdain. "Personally, I say call in the FBI or the state police, somebody competent! With all due respect, sir, this is not a case for some —some backwoods sheriff!"

Dan Peavy favored the fat man with a self-effacing grin. "You may be right, Mr. Pratt. But first, just hear me out. Shouldn't take but a minute or two."

"Hear what the man has to say," McChesney said. "What have we got to lose?"

"Now, like I said," Dan continued, "the killer was dependin' on this very thing, that we wouldn't be able to separate the wheat from the chaff. But from what's come out, Mr. Findlay himself knew each one o' you had some reason for wantin' him dead. And from what I gather, he was also a pretty smart man." They all nodded agreement to that and Dan forged on. "So when one o' you walked in here a little before ten o'clock and stabbed him, I think Mr. Findlay knew right away what the killer was plannin'; and sprawled there on the table with maybe just a few seconds left on this earth, he knew the killer would most likely get away with it for that very reason."

"Granted that he must have seen his killer, Sheriff. There would have been no need in sneaking in here to do the job, since he was expecting all of us shortly." McChesney turned and gave a broad wink to the others. "What do you propose we do now? Run down to the morgue and have a little tête à tête with Uncle Carlton?"

"It would be mighty handy if we could do that," Dan replied, unruffled. "But things bein' as they are, I don't think it would be necessary." He walked slowly across the room and stopped at the table, where he sat down and reached for the typewriter, "Jerry, get out that notebook of yours and take down what I say. The rest o' you come here so's you can witness what I'm doin'."

With that, he gently plucked back the outermost of the jammed typewriter keys, holding the others so they would not fall back. "That was the 'B,' " he said. He eased the next one loose. " 'L.' " The next, " 'O.' " Then he glanced around at the puzzled faces and let the final key flip back into position. " 'C.' "

Pratt, incredulous, stammered, "You—you think Findlay struck those keys *purp*osely?"

Edwin McChesney was already on his tiptoes, straining to peer over Jerry's shoulder at the notepad. "B—L—O—C—" He moistened his lips and swallowed. "Bloc . . . *Block!* It's . . . it's Mitzi!"

"The poor devil must not have had the strength to strike the K!" Col. Barrington said, hopping on the bandwagon as it gathered speed. "Too much to blame on chance, though! One in ten million!"

McChesney voiced agreement. "No jury on earth would deny a dying man's last statement! He's put the finger right on his murderer! Justice, if I ever saw it!"

The young woman stood as if struck dumb. "I . . . he *couldn't* have . . ."

"Plain as the nose on your face!" exclaimed Duvall Pratt. The girl cowered as they all seemed to close in about her.

"Hold on there," drawled Dan Peavy. "Hold everything."

"You're the one who figured it out!" snapped the fat

man. "Just because she's an attractive woman, don't try to make excuses for her."

"Can't deny she's a mighty pretty girl, but that ain't what I wanta point out. When I unstuck them keys, I took the outside one first and the inside one last. Just backwards from the way Findlay hit 'em. Now, dyin' like he was, how come he'd go to all the trouble of figurin' it out backwards?"

"Backwards—?" somebody murmured, and six heads craned around to peer at Jerry's notepad. I read aloud, from right to left, "C—O—L—B—Colb?"

"Colby?" Jerry suggested weakly. "Anybody know a *Col*by?"

"Nobody here by that name—" I started, and then it struck me like a little tap from a hammer. "C—O—L—*period* B!"

"Col. Barrington . . ." murmured Miss Mitzi Block as she sank weakly onto a chair. "Col. Barrington . . ."

The colonel was halfway through the back door at full gallop when Jerry and I brought him down with a pair of flying tackles.

Sheriff Dan Peavy, of course, was really no different than he had been a couple of hours earlier, baggy khaki uniform, snow-white hair that cried out for both cutting and combing, a face like the windward side of Stone Mountain. But there was precious little reference to "backwoods sheriffs," and there was a definite look of respect in the eyes of Pratt and McChesney. I might add that Miss Mitzi Block gazed on him in a manner that might have given some downright ungentlemanly ideas to a lesser man.

Like me, for instance.

STUNG

Arthur Porges

Every day, on his return from work—something he postponed as long as possible on the plea of extra chores—Fred Tanner had to undergo what he thought of bitterly as the Ordeal of the Driveway.

As he turned up the concrete ribbon, his wife, Claramae, was always either on or near it, anxious to begin the evening's stint of questions, and complaints. Her voice, husky and incurably harsh, could be heard even before the car rolled to a stop.

"Did you pay the gas bill? See the termite man? I can't depend on you for anything. Fred, you'll have to talk to Mr. Foley again; those kids of his were on the roof of our garage this morning, and if we've told him once—"

Such a welcome would have been bad enough in private, but old Mrs. Hackett had to get her earful. She was the neighborhood spy and gossip, always sitting on her patio, big ears flapping hopefully, and seldom disappointed.

"You'd better do something about the wasps, too," Claramae went on. "They're terrible this year. It's a wonder we haven't been stung to death."

Which was nonsense, Fred thought. In forty-six years of suburban living, he'd never been stabbed by anything worse than a mosquito. In fact, he had no idea

what a bee sting actually felt like.

Tonight his wife's tirade seemed particularly unbearable. The bad day at the office, the steamy weather, the ache in his arthritic knee, all intensified his resentment. Looking at her in the clear sunset light, he wondered again about the woman's miserliness. He could understand Claramae's reluctance to spend on others—even her own husband. But who could conceive of a woman, not the worst-looking in the world either, with a good figure for her age and worth upwards of two hundred thousand dollars, who wouldn't even buy decent clothes for herself? She could easily afford an original from Paris, and yet she wore horrible, shapeless housedresses at which a recent immigrant would shudder.

Fred watched her covertly after dinner, which was badly cooked and messily served. Her hair, still a rich brown, was tangled and greasy. She had good legs, but her nylons were full of runs. Damn it all, she must know she couldn't take it with her!

With her where? The blasted woman had the constitution of a horse, and was sure to outlive him. He couldn't even hope to inherit, although Claramae had eight years on him in age. She was fifty-four, and had been complaining in a loud, harsh voice, he suspected, for at least fifty years.

There was always divorce, assuming that grounds existed. Was miserliness to the point of obsession enough? He doubted it. Practically all of their assets had been brought to the marriage by Claramae. Even the fine house was hers, not to mention those lovely shares of blue-chip stocks. Without those dividends, he'd have to live on his salary. That didn't scare him—since he got little else now—but his firm's pension plan was not the sort to promise a happy and secure old age.

Tanner sucked hopefully at his pipeful of cheap tobacco, and almost strangled as bitter liquid seared the base of his tongue. He coughed, and his wife said, "Filthy habit. Serves you right. That stuff rivals a scared skunk."

"If I could afford better tobacco," Fred countered mildly. It was a familiar exchange.

"We've no money to waste on that," Claramae said in a firm voice.

In a way it served him right, Tanner reflected, tapping out the dottle. He had married her mainly for her money. He'd assured himself at the time that once she learned, through him, to buy the right clothes, and patronize the better beauty salons, Claramae might be a woman no man need be ashamed of—at least, not two hundred thousand dollars ashamed of. That much green stuff could paper over a good many defects.

Meanwhile, he was trapped and getting no younger. There was that widow at the office, Adele Gimbal, cute as a bug's ear, and she liked him. But she was an expensive dish, not likely to cuddle up to an underpaid clerk. If he had Claramae's money—but that was out. She'd live to bury him. Divorce was useless, even if he had grounds. So there was no escape from the Ordeal of the Driveway and the depressing nights that followed it.

He cringed, momentarily visualizing a future of such ordeals. Then, suddenly, the vision changed. He saw himself roaring up the concrete strip at thirty—fifty—miles an hour. Instead of rolling to a stop so obediently almost at her feet—those feet in their worn, shabby, bulging slippers—there was the image of the old, heavy car hurling Claramae squarely against the solid brick planter under the picture window.

And after that. . . . After that, cold caution told him,

they'll either hang you, or put you away until the money will be useful only to buy electric blankets and practical nursing service. And Adele Gimbal will be somebody else's wife.

Unless . . . a voice in his brain hinted, unless it's a clear-cut accident—with a witness. A good witness, like old Mrs. Hackett. After all, people did lose control of their cars. At worst, it was only manslaughter. It was when you killed a stranger with no motive; but with a rich wife, the cops are pretty suspicious. You'd have to prove that control was lost, and have a damned good reason for it.

What about tampering with the car? No. Much too obvious. It would have to be something much more natural.

At that moment, Claramae gave a little scream of annoyance and fear. "Quick, Fred, there's a wasp on the window! Kill it, before it stings me!"

He arose reluctantly. Confound her. No wasp had ever touched the old fool. And did she ever think that it might sting him? Hell, no! Get it before it bothers *her!*

He swatted the wasp with a folded newspaper. For all their reputation as aggressors, wasps buzzing against windows were pathetically helpless. He'd smashed hundreds of them over the years, and they'd never struck back. Just as well; people said a bad sting really hurt; make you jump, and . . .

Like a flashbulb in his brain, the idea came to Fred. Suppose a wasp stung him just as he rolled into the driveway? In that case, any man might step harder on the accelerator, sending the car forward in one mighty spurt. Then, if Claramae happened to be standing there. . . . That was it!

He recognized a note of irony in the plan. Claramae's nephew, next in line after her husband to in-

herit, taught about insects and such at some midwestern college. Now he would be done out of his legacy by—of all things—a wasp. Once Fred got that two hundred grand, he'd make sure there was nothing left at his death for any of her relatives to get. Not that he had anything personal against the guy; but he meant to spend and enjoy every penny.

The next day at the office, Tanner thought a great deal more about murder than about mortgages. The plan was basically sound; he never doubted that. To begin with, it had happened before. Fred remembered reading a number of times about people who had been stung by various insects and thereby lost control of cars. There was obviously no ground for a criminal charge, even if one plowed into a dozen persons.

Another important point was the Great American Guilt Complex about auto accidents. Nobody liked to be too hard on a driver, even when he was criminally negligent. Each person felt that he might be in a similar spot himself some day, and was, subconsciously or otherwise, acquitting himself in advance. So in this case, with no evidence of criminality, Fred Tanner would certainly be home free and two hundred thousand dollars to the good, plus a house worth fifty grand more, and other perquisites. Life insurance, for example; and some heirlooms worth money.

It was now only a matter of working out the details. There were plenty of wasps around this season; they were no problem. Big, ferocious-looking, and with a most threatening buzz, but strangely peaceable for all that. If you didn't make foolish passes at them, they let you alone.

Luck was with him. His own dusty office, with bleary, unwashed windows, attracted two wasps that afternoon. The stupid insects could hardly have chos-

en less promising quarters, Fred thought sourly. No flowers, no fresh air, just the reek of ink and musty paper. When he had a chance, he experimented with a screw of foolscap, trying to trap one. That's how he received his first sting, which made him give a yelp of pain. He looked at the red swelling with mixed feelings. At least, now he knew what to expect. And it occurred to him also that by announcing loudly to Claramae that he'd been stung, Mrs. Hackett could later testify that it had happened once before—before the soon-to-be fatal accident, that was.

That night, on the driveway, he complained bitterly of his swelled finger, noting from the corner of one eye that Mrs. Hackett was sitting, a shadowy figure, on her patio, no doubt all ears, if such a phrase applied to a woman of her immense wheelbase.

Claramae was not sympathetic. "I told you to clean 'em out," she snapped. "You don't care if I get stung at home, but you fuss like a baby when it happens to you at work. Humph!"

That evening she was especially obnoxious. Fred could hardly wait for the next day. The vision was clearer than ever: the slow roll up the driveway; the sharp cry of pain and surprise, indicating a sudden stinging; and simultaneously the push on the accelerator that would send the heavy car hurtling against his wife. If she was straight in front, fine. If not, he'd wrench at the wheel, and get her on the lawn. The wasp would take all the blame in either case.

Claramae, spotting his secret hint of a grin, snapped: "What're you smirking at now, Fred?"

"Nothing," he sighed, and she grunted her disbelief.

The next day at four, he heard another wasp in the office, tracked it down, and—wiser this time—man-

aged to clap a plastic vial, just emptied of its allergy pills, over the furious insect. When it was curling and writhing on the bottom, he pulled the mouth of the vial away from the window pane long enough to slip the cover on. He wondered briefly if the wasp could live until five-thirty with little air, and decided that it could. Besides, the beauty of this plan was that unless the preliminaries worked, he needn't go through with it—just postpone, and try again.

He left a little after five, as usual, and when a block from the house, took the vial and its prisoner from his pocket. The injury should be as fresh as possible; nothing could be overlooked. As to location, he hated the idea of getting stung on the face, but he knew that was the best spot. A jab under the eye would explain the most erratic reaction with the car. Nobody could be expected to take that quietly.

Still, it was an unpleasant moment as he held the uncapped vial against his cheek just below his right eye. The pain this time was very bad indeed.

Blinking away tears, he drove the last block, swung up on the driveway, and saw Claramae directly in front of him. There was time for one glance at Mrs. Hackett on her patio, watching them, and then Fred pressed the accelerator hard. With a roar the big car leaped forward. His wife screamed once, to be echoed shrilly by the Hackett woman, then her broken body was flung against the side of the garage.

"Claramae!" Fred cried. "Something stung me—I didn't mean—it was an accident!"

Neighbors poured from their houses. When they arrived, he was bending over his wife, alternately shaking her—an obviously useless gesture because she was thoroughly dead—and jabbing one finger at the nasty welt on his cheek.

Inside he felt triumphant, but the emotion was oddly strong, so that his head spun, and it was hard to breathe. Then he was gasping, his face flushed and heart pounding wildly. The last thing he heard was Mrs. Hackett's twittery voice: "A bee stung him; he said so. Poor man. It was an accident. I saw it." Later, the coroner explained. "His neighbor, that Hackett woman, mentioned he'd been stung the day before. Apparently it was his very first sting. In some people that first one acts as a kind of sensitizer, making the victim extremely sensitive to more poison. If it happens again, the victim is seriously affected—even to dying. It's called anaphyllactic shock, and that's what killed Fred Tanner."

Eighteen months after that, a fat book was published. It was called *The Physiology of the Wasp,* and the author's dedication read: "To my aunt, the late Claramae Tanner, who made this book possible."

He never knew that his real benefactor was Uncle Fred.

LOCK YOUR DOOR

Donald E. Westlake

Robert was a heavy sleeper. Bea was always first out of bed in the morning, skipping cheerfully about the house, zipping up the venetian blinds to let the morning sunlight in, starting their breakfasts, setting out Robert's clothing for the day, finding some chipper music on the radio, and at last waking her husband, with his first cup of coffee and his first cigarette waiting for him on the bedside table. In their four years of marriage, she had never tired of waiting on him.

And so this morning. Robert was deep in dreamless sleep, and one by one his senses were alerted to the world around him. The touch of her hand on his shoulder came first, drawing him up toward consciousness, and the sound of her voice, brightly calling, "Darling, it's morning! Wake up, wake up, sweetheart, it's morning!" These brought him around sufficiently to smell the fragrance of the coffee and the acridity of the cigarette, already lit for him by his wife. Mind and memory slowly returned to him, till he knew who and where he was, and then he opened his eyes and saw—though dimly, without his glasses—the cheerful brightness of the room. Squinting, he lunged upward and, propped on one elbow, reached out first to the coffee cup to drain half of it and then to the cigarette to inhale deeply, and now all five senses were in operation again.

"Good morning, sweetheart," said Bea. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she kissed him and hugged him and whispered, "It's a *wonderful* morning."

"Mmmf," he said.

She smiled fondly at him, saying, "And how's my lover this morning?"

"I shouldn't of watched the late show," he said.

She popped to her feet at once, crying, "I'll get you more coffee!"

"All right." He reached out and grabbed his glasses from the bedside table and put them on, blinking as he got used to normal vision. Then he said, "Hey!"

She was at the doorway. She turned back, saying, "What?"

"That." He pointed at the wall beyond the foot of the bed. "What the hell is that?"

Coming back into the room, Bea looked at the wall. Bafflement crossed her features and she shook her head, saying, "I never even noticed it."

"For God's sake," he said. "It was big enough. You must be blind."

He stared at the wall. Across it had been scrawled, in pink lipstick letters nearly a foot high:

LOCK YOUR DOOR

"Well, for God's sake," he said, in a different tone. "For God's sake."

She shook her head, a doubtful smile on her face, saying, "I don't know *how* I'll get that off there, Robbie."

"You didn't even *see* it," he said.

"I'm so busy in the morning, I rush right out of this room first thing. Besides, I just opened the blinds just now." She turned to face her husband, and shook her head disapprovingly. "I know I forget about the door,"

she said, "but you could have just left me a *note* or something."

"What? What?"

"Why, that looks like lipstick. I don't know *how* I'll get it off the wall."

"You—" He stared at her, shaking his head. "You think *I* did it?"

"Well, *I* didn't," she said. "Why should I?"

Nearly whispering, he said, "I didn't either, Bea. I didn't do it either."

She started to say something, then didn't, but her mouth stayed open. Her eyes widened, and she looked again at the scrawled letters on the wall, and suddenly hugged herself, shivering. "Oh, Robbie!" she cried. "Somebody was *in* here!"

He got out of bed, a tall lean man of thirty-one, wearing the pajamas she'd bought him for Christmas, with the Cupids on a white background. He came over close to the wall, stood with his knees against the chair beneath the words on the wall, and studied them letter by letter. Then he turned his head and looked at the dresser beside the chair. There were filter-tip cigarette butts in the ashtray atop the dresser. Three of them. Neither he nor Bea smoked filter-tip cigarettes. "Somebody was in here," he whispered.

"Oh, Robbie. I'm scared."

He picked up one of the cigarette butts and showed it to her. "He—she—whatever it was, he sat in here and smoked and watched us sleep."

With a sudden motion, she came into his arms, and clung there, breathing loudly and rapidly. "Hold me," she whispered. "Oh, Robbie, Robbie."

Over her head he studied the wall. "The moving finger writes," he said, "and having writ moves on."

"Oh, don't *joke!*"

"I'm not joking."

"The *door!*" She whirled away, and he could hear her running through the apartment to the front door. He shook his head. Locking the barn after the horse has been and gone.

Still carrying the cigarette butt, he left the bedroom and walked down the hall toward the living room. He met her coming back, and she said, "It's locked now."

"He locked it after he left."

"What are we going to *do,* Robbie?"

"Make sure that door is locked, from now on."

"I could have *sworn*—" She stopped, puzzled and frightened, and then said, "But I couldn't have, could I? Locked the door."

"I guess not," he said.

They talked at it some more, but there really wasn't anything more to say, so finally he went back to the bedroom and got dressed, because otherwise he'd be late for work. He picked at his breakfast, having hardly any appetite this morning, and when he left for the office he said, "You keep this door locked today. Promise me you will."

"Oh, I will, Robbie," she promised.

He had trouble concentrating on his work at the ad agency that day, and phoned home twice to be sure she was all right. When he came home in the evening, he was still nervous and upset, but she had practically forgotten the whole incident. She had a fantastic ability to ignore the past, to let yesterday take care of itself. Her recuperative powers never ceased to amaze him. She had managed to scrub the lipstick from the bedroom wall, and had done nearly as well in scrubbing the message from her mind.

That night, when they went to bed, he suddenly remembered and said, "Did you make sure the door was locked?"

"I had it locked all *day,* Robbie."

"Better make sure," he said.

Reluctantly, she got up again and left the bedroom, coming back to say, "It's all locked."

"Fine," he said.

But, in the morning, there was another message:

WHY DON'T YOU LOCK
YOUR DOOR?

Angrily, he turned on his wife: "I thought you said it was *locked!*"

"It *was,* Robbie, it *was!*"

They argued violently all through breakfast, and when he stormed out to go to work she was in tears. He called from the office, around ten o'clock, to apologize and to make up, but after that he still couldn't get any work done, and he had a presentation deadline coming up in less than a week. Bea was the senior partner's daughter, but he wasn't anxious to see how far he could push his luck.

That night, Bea was her normal cheerful self again, meeting him at the door with, "And how's my lover this evening?"

"Listen," he said. He was having trouble controlling himself. "Maybe *you* aren't worried about all this, but I am. We've got some sort of homicidal maniac prowling around our bedroom while we sleep—"

"Oh, now," she said, smiling at him the way Miss Burke, his second-grade teacher, used to do. "I don't think it's all that bad. And she isn't a homicidal maniac anyway. She just comes in and watches us sleep, poor dear, and then—"

"She? What do you mean, she?"

"Well," said Bea reasonably, "she uses *lipstick,* doesn't she?"

"On the wall," he told her, "but not on her lips. *His* lips."

"What makes you so sure?"

"Those cigarette butts," he said. "No lipstick stains. So it's somebody who carries a lipstick around with him but doesn't use it, and all I can think of is a sexual maniac of some kind, some sort of perverted nut or something, and God knows when he's going to commit a murder or something. Prowling around in somebody else's bedroom, watching two people sleep—"

"That's just the way Daddy talked," she said. "He wouldn't believe it was a woman either."

"Daddy? You called your father?"

"Well, of course. I told him all about it."

"Fine," he said. "Fine and dandy!"

"Well, what's *wrong?*"

"Now your father thinks I can't take care of you or protect you."

"Oh, don't be silly. Come into the living room and drink your nice martini."

That night, Robert went with Bea as she checked the door, and then double-checked it himself. And in the morning the message on the wall read:

YOU BETTER LOCK
YOUR DOOR

"All right," said Robert. "That does it. Bea, you call the super today, and tell him we want the lock changed on our door. I don't care if it's a prankster or a madman or what it is, I've had enough. It took me forever to get to sleep last night. Damn it, this is *frightening. It really is frightening.*"

"A new lock," said Bea, staring wide-eyed at the newest message. She, too, was frightened this morn-

ing, though last night she'd gone to sleep the second her head had hit the pillow. Fear didn't stay with Bea very long.

At the office, Bea's Daddy called Robert in around ten o'clock. "What's this Bea's been telling me about a prowler?"

"I'm having a new lock put on the door," Robert told him.

"Seems to me you ought to call the police." Bea's Daddy was a strong, aggressive man with a distinguished face framed by distinguished gray hair. "Just what *I'd* do, in your position," he said. "That's what the police are for, by heaven."

"It seems so silly, though," said Robert. "Nothing's ever been stolen, nothing's been *done* to us; it's just this *nut* or whatever he is. And we're getting a new lock on the door."

"Don't trust apartment buildings in this city," said Bea's Daddy. "Surrounded by strangers. You never know what they're planning, what they've got up their sleeves."

"Yes, sir," said Robert.

"Ought to move to the country," he went on. "I know Bea'd like that."

"She's mentioned it," said Robert. "We're saving up for that."

"I'd take care of you, Son," he said. "You know that."

"Thank you, sir," said Robert.

When he got home that night, there was a graying fat man in work pants sitting on the floor in front of his apartment door, blocking the way. Robert said, "Do you mind?"

"Got to get this lock in," said the workman.

"I live here," Robert told him.

"Go right ahead," said the workman. "Don't mind me."

Robert stepped over him and went inside. Bea met him in the foyer, saying, "And how's my lover this evening?"

"Fine," he said.

"I remembered about the lock," she said. "Aren't you proud of me?"

"Maybe this is the end of it," he said. "I hope so."

Until that point, the whole thing had been rather garish and unreal. Frightening in the morning, of course, to see the message scrawled on the wall, but it wasn't a fright that could last. As Robert had told Bea's Daddy, nothing had been stolen, nothing had been done to either Robert or Bea, and the picture of some looney sitting in the dark bedroom, smoking filter-tip cigarettes, and fondling a tube of lipstick, was after all more funny than frightening.

But the morning after the new lock was put in, that all changed. The new cigarette stubs were there, and a new message. It read:

YOU LOCK YOUR DOOR OR
I'LL KILL YOU

And beside the message, also scrawled in lipstick, was a crude obscene drawing of a man and a woman, both impaled on the same knife.

Bea woke Robert the minute she saw it, and for a while the two huddled together in the bed, feeling suddenly vulnerable and alone. They were in a room, a smallish square box of a room, tucked away in a corner of a building, eight stories from the street. Windows in two walls gaped out at nothingness over the city. The door in another wall led out to silent empty rooms and

terror. Sometime in the night a *thing,* a *being,* a malevolence and a viciousness, prowling through the city, had slunk into this building, had been raised to the eighth floor in the box of the elevator, had sniffed and skittered along the hall, had somehow entered this apartment, had padded through the silent empty rooms to here, and here had crouched in silence, marking its presence only by the fitful glow of its cigarette, and then, in tight cold fury, had raged the letters across the wall and slashed out that crude filthy drawing, and then had gone, as silently as it had come.

They huddled together in the bed, cold with terror, and Bea was the first to speak: "We'd better call the police, Robbie."

He nodded reluctantly. Once the police were called, the seriousness of the matter could no longer be denied. The die was then cast, and there was no turning back. "All right," he said. "I'll call them."

"I'm afraid to get out of bed," she whispered.

"We'll get up together."

"What if he's still there? In the kitchen or the living room or somewhere? In a closet?" She pointed shakily at the closet door. "What if he's in there?"

"Cut it out," he said. "Don't make it worse than it is."

"Stay home from work today," she said. "I'll call Daddy, it'll be all right."

"For God's sake, it's Friday," he said. "I'm supposed to have that Chunko dog food presentation by Monday."

"I'll call Daddy," she said. "He'll understand. Please, Robbie, I couldn't stand to be here all alone today."

"I'll call the police," he said. "And then you call your father."

"Oh, *thank* you!" she cried, and hugged and kissed him.

By the time the police came, just before nine o'clock,

the terror had abated again, leaving in its wake an obscure feeling of foolishness. It seemed like such a silly matter in the cold light of day. The apartment was empty again, and the message on the wall seemed more pathetic than terrifying.

But the police didn't think so. Two uniformed patrolmen from a squad car came first, and when they saw the message on the wall and heard what had been happening here for the last four days one of them went away and phoned his precinct while the other wandered around checking the lock on the door and the double-lock on the window from the living room to the fire escape. Then fifteen minutes later a plainclothes detective came in.

He said his name was Brierson. "You people," he told them, "should have called us right away, the first morning. This is the work of a sick mind. You're lucky you weren't killed in your sleep."

"But what does he *want?*" asked Robert.

Brierson shrugged. "He wants you to keep him out. At least that's what he says. You run into that kind of maniac every once in a while. Kills somebody and leaves a message: 'Stop me before I kill again.' That kind of thing. This one wants to be stopped before he kills you two."

"Then I agree with him," said Robert. "I think he should definitely be stopped."

"But we've *locked* the door!" cried Bea. "We even got a *new* lock! If that's what he wants, we're *doing* it!"

"Sick minds," said Brierson, "very often speak in symbols. When he says lock your door, he means more than that. He means lock him out of your lives completely. He means he wants you to find out how he's getting into your place and stop him from getting in again."

"But we don't *know* how he's getting in!"

Brierson nodded. "We'll have to find out," he said. He got to his feet, a stocky balding man in a topcoat, his hat in his hand. "I want to talk to your super. I'll be back up here after a while. In the meantime, check through that peephole in your door before you let anybody in here."

"You bet we will," said Robert.

Brierson and the uniformed patrolman both went away. Robert and Bea, suddenly strangers in their own apartment, sat looking at each other and waited for whatever would happen next. But nothing at all happened, and after a while Bea, the first to recover, went out to the kitchen and started washing the breakfast dishes. Robert switched on the television set and watched game shows. He saw a commercial he'd had a hand in, and smiled at it.

When Brierson came back, he said, "The way we've got it figured, your man can be getting in here only through the door or the fire escape. Both are locked, but he can get around that some way. So we'll put a couple of men on surveillance tonight, and see if we can catch him in the act. We'll have one man in the hall, and one man outside where he can see the fire escape. Maybe we'll put him on the roof, I'm not sure. In any case, we'll have both entrances guarded. If he shows up, we'll grab him."

"I hope he doesn't even show up," said Robert.

And he didn't. The following morning, for the first time in five days, there was no lipstick message on the wall, there were no filter-tip cigarette butts in the ashtray. When Brierson came around, a little before noon, they told him jubilantly that the guards had worked, they'd scared the maniac away.

Brierson pursed his lips. "Not necessarily," he said.

"Remember the pattern of the messages. First the simple order to lock your door, and then the question, Why don't you lock your door? As though he couldn't understand why you hadn't obeyed the first time. And then the veiled threat. You *better* lock your door. You see? He didn't want to come right out and say what was in his mind. Maybe he thought he could keep himself from killing you if he never said it or wrote it. But after the veiled threat, he didn't have anywhere else to go, so he told you exactly what was going to happen."

"He was going to kill us," said Robert.

Brierson nodded. "He probably came very close to doing just that," he said. "But he gave you one last chance. He revealed himself completely, showed you what was in his mind. Then, if you still didn't obey him, it would be your fault if he killed you, not his."

"But now we've got the guards," said Robert.

"That may not be it. Having gone so far, having written the words 'I'll kill you' may have scared him. He may stay hidden for days now, afraid of what he's committed himself to. But whatever's been driving him will keep at him, and sooner or later he'll come out again."

"Don't talk that way," said Bea. She huddled close in Robert's arms, seeking comfort from him.

Brierson smiled. "I'm sorry," he said. "But those are the probable facts."

"There's no way for him to get in," said Robert. "That's what scares me. He's like a—a ghost or something."

"I don't believe in ghosts," said Brierson.

Bea said, "Are you going to have the men guarding tonight?"

"I'd like to station a man here in the apartment,"

said Brierson. "In the living room here. He can watch the door and the window both."

"Fine," said Robert.

Brierson nodded and got to his feet. "He'll be here by ten," he said.

After Brierson left, Bea said, "I don't care what he said, I think the maniac is scared off."

"I hope so," said Robert.

For the next five nights, a uniformed policeman stood guard in the living room while Bea and Robert slept, and there were never any messages on the wall in the morning. On Monday, Robert went back to work, told Bea's Daddy what the situation was, and received a till-Friday grace period to finish the dog food presentation. The work went better this week, and Robert was pretty sure he'd have the presentation ready before the deadline.

Bea, in a way, enjoyed having the policeman in the house. It gave her someone else to feed and to chat with. It didn't take her long to know the policeman's entire history, family, and prospects. The grim reason for the policeman's presence was no longer a reality for her.

On Thursday, Brierson came back. "We're dropping the guard," he said. "After all this time, it's doubtful he intends to come back at all. Sometimes it works that way. They steel themselves to kill somebody, and once they make the first definite move in that direction they scare themselves off and forget the whole thing."

"I hope you're right," said Robert.

"If he does come back," said Brierson, "which I doubt, it's a safe bet he'll just leave another message. He'll want to announce himself before doing anything.

But I don't think you'll be hearing from him at all."

That night, for the first time in nearly a week, Bea and Robert went to bed unguarded, and in the morning, there was a message again:

THE WOMAN FIRST

•

There was another drawing, too, a crude but graphically obscene sketch of a naked woman, screaming.

Brierson came almost immediately when they called, and brought with him two men in uniform. They proceeded at once to search the place. "He may have left a bomb," Brierson explained. "You can never tell with people like this."

But the search didn't turn up anything out of the ordinary. One of the patrolmen came in with three lipstick tubes from Bea's vanity table, but she told him they were hers, and the color used for the messages was a pink she would never use anyway. "We're not looking for lipstick," said Brierson to the patrolman. "We're looking for something left behind by the maniac."

The patrolman went away again, to return Bea's lipsticks and continue the search.

After it was all over, and the two patrolmen had been sent away, Brierson stood in the middle of the living room, his topcoat open and his hat in his hand, and scratched his head. "I just don't know," he said. 'I don't like this at all. But I've got the beginnings of an idea. You people stick close to the house today. I'll try and get back here this afternoon."

"I have a presentation due today," said Robert.

"I'll call Daddy," said Bea. "You can turn it in Monday."

"I think that would be best," said Brierson.

Robert sighed. "All right," he said. And he spent another morning watching game shows on television. Three of the commercials had sequences he had helped on.

Brierson returned at four that afternoon. "Well," he said, "I have good news for you two."

"You caught him!" cried Bea.

Brierson nodded. "We gave him a talking to, put a scare into him, let him know we were onto his game. He'll leave you alone from now on, I guarantee it."

Robert said, "But—doesn't he belong in an institution?"

"He's liable to wind up in one pretty soon," said Brierson. "Up till this point, though, his crimes have been minor. At least, in comparison to what he planned. To push for a jail term now would only be looking for trouble. It would be a short sentence—if he went to jail at all—and he'd come out filled with hate. He might come out ready to kill no matter what the consequences." Brierson twisted his hat in his hands. "In a case like this," he said, "a cop's got to think a little deeper than the rule book, to figure out what's best all the way around. As to the sexual angle of the case—" He paused, looking embarrassed, and glanced at Bea.

Bea immediately got to her feet. "I'll make you some coffee," she said. "You can talk to my husband." She winked. "He'll only tell me later."

Brierson returned her smile. When she'd left the room, he turned to Robert and said, "Stand up."

"What?"

"Stand up. Clasp your hands on top of your head."

"Now see here—"

"Shall I call your wife back in?"

Robert opened and closed his mouth, then looked toward the kitchen and licked his lips. He stood up and

clasped his hands on top of his head. Brierson came over and frisked him, quickly and efficiently, then pulled the tube of lipstick from Robert's hip pocket. "When it wasn't in the apartment this morning," he said, "I knew you had to be keeping it on you." He pocketed the lipstick. "We had the place watched last night. I figured it was you, but I wasn't sure."

Robert gnawed his cheek and studied the rug.

"Tonight," said Brierson, "you would have gone to wherever you've stashed the knife, brought it in, killed your wife, and left another message on the wall. Then you planned to get into bed next to the woman you'd just murdered, sleep like a baby, and make the horrible discovery in the morning. Right?"

"Go to hell," said Robert.

"The only thing I don't understand is why," said Brierson. "She's the boss's daughter. And she's a pleasant, charming, cheerful woman."

"Pleasant, charming, cheerful woman." Robert grimaced. "She's a calliope," he said. "She's a one-woman brass band. She's the most cheerful damn thing that ever happened. She drives me crazy."

"Then get a divorce."

"You already said it. Daddy's the boss."

Brierson sighed. "Well, now," he said. "You planned a felony, but you didn't get to commit it, so I can't arrest you for that. But you do have two or three misdemeanors to your credit, and I could pull you in for them."

Robert's eyes widened, and he glanced at the door through which Bea had gone. "For God's sake!" he whispered.

"I'm thinking it over," said Brierson. "Malicious mischief, false complaint—"

"You'll *ruin* me!"

"I suppose," said Brierson thoughtfully, "you planned to endear yourself to your father-in-law after your wife's death. Be a sort of son to replace the daughter who was killed."

Robert nodded dolefully.

Brierson tossed the lipstick into the air, and caught it. "I'll keep this," he said. "You can forget your little plans now. If you kill her, no matter how, we're onto you. And we'll get you. If you start any other little schemes, I can still get you for this one."

"You won't arrest me?" Robert asked hopefully.

"Not this time. But you can expect us to keep an eye on you for a while."

"I won't try it again."

"That's good."

Robert smiled sadly. "But it was a hell of a good campaign," he said. He glanced at the television set. "One of the best I've ever done. Great slogan, great pace, great build-up."

Brierson put his hat on and left the apartment. Hearing the door close, Bea came in and said, "Oh. Where'd he go?"

"Away," said Robert.

"Oh, well." Smiling, cheerful, happy, bright, chipper, she came bouncing across the room to clasp him in her arms, to hug him and kiss him and say, "And how's my lover man? Tell me all the sexy parts, hurry, hurry."

Robert closed his eyes and sighed.

TO STOP A FIRE

Elijah Ellis

In a section of the state as small and out-at-the-elbow as Pokochobee County, the elected officials at the courthouse, of necessity, work closely together, especially the county attorney and the sheriff.

So I wasn't too surprised, just irritated, when the phone rang late Friday night, waking me up. Many a time since I got the county attorney's job last year, Ed Carson, the sheriff, had rousted me out of bed in the middle of the night, usually to take a ride out into the backwoods to view the remains left after a knife fight or shooting scrape at one of the juke-joints.

Now, muttering curses, I fumbled in the dark for the phone. I told my sleeping wife, "I'm going to have this thing disconnected." But Martha snored on, uncaring.

Half-asleep myself, I growled into the phone, "Yar?"

"Is this Mr. Gates?" a voice asked. It was not a voice I recognized.

"Mmm," I agreed, and yawned. "Who's this?"

"My name is Gerald Waner. Sorry to disturb you so late, but it's necessary."

Waner! That woke me up in a hurry, and brought beads of sweat popping out on my face. "What can I do for you?" I responded.

"It's more what *I* can do for *you,* Mr. Gates." A chuckle. Then, "Be out to see you in half an hour."

"Wait a minute—"

But the line was dead. I jiggled the hook. When the operator answered, I said, "Daisy, where'd that call I just had come from?"

"From the lobby of the La Grande Hotel."

"Thanks." I hung up quickly.

I sat on the edge of the bed in the warm June night and lit a cigarette. I needed it. We—the sheriff, myself, and other interested people around the courthouse—had been expecting Mr. Gerald Waner.

But we hadn't expected him to arrive in the middle of the night. I didn't like any part of it. There was a good chance that Waner and his associates had committed a murder a couple of days before, over at Thomasville in the adjoining county.

Gathering up my clothes, I tiptoed out of the bedroom, pulled the door shut behind me. I went along the hall. I stopped long enough to look in on my two sleeping boys. Then I went on into the kitchen. I switched on the light and got dressed. It looked like a long night ahead, and I wasn't expecting to enjoy any of it.

After washing my face at the sink, I picked up the extension phone and called Ed Carson. When the sheriff came on I told him bluntly, "Waner's in town. Must have got in this evening."

Ed whistled softly. "So it's finally our turn, huh? What's the deal?"

"He's supposed to come out here to my place in the next half hour or so. Listen, have you heard any more about the killing over in Thomasville?"

"Nope. Nothing new. Just Frank Davis' body full of bullet holes. They found him lying beside the highway, like you already know. Hands tied behind his back. Real pro job."

I laughed without humor. "Yeah. Real professional.

Listen, I'll call you back soon as I hear Waner's pitch."

"I'll be waiting. Meanwhile, I'll get things lined up—just in case."

I agreed reluctantly. "But let's hope it doesn't become necessary."

"You know it's up to us," Ed told me. "The other counties are depending on us to show Waner and his boys a good time. . . ."

We hung up. I lit a fresh cigarette, went through the house to the living room. I switched lights on in there and on the front porch. I stood by the open front windows, looking through the rusty screens at the dark night.

There was nothing to do but wait for Waner to arrive.

As I said, we'd been expecting him. Reports had drifted in down at the courthouse, during the last couple of weeks, ugly and disturbing reports.

All concerning the doings of a Mr. Gerald Waner, who was making what he called a "business trip" through the State, accompanied by a collection of prize goons.

Waner had a mouthful of glowing promises, a pocket full of hard cash and, in the goons, the threat of force. What Waner wanted was simple: he wanted to buy the political structure of the entire State—county courthouse by county courthouse. Now, As Ed Carson had said on the phone, it was Pokochobee County's turn.

I thought about a letter that had arrived in my office that day, from the county attorney in the adjoining Thomas County. Old K. L. Johnson had written me: ". . . I can't remember when the people here have been as stirred up as they are about the murder of Officer Davis. Of course, the public knows nothing about Waner, which is just as well. I only wish Officer Davis hadn't found out what Waner is trying to do—at least

not before the situation could be explained to him. I am morally certain that Waner is responsible for the killing, but there is not one iota of proof. . . . So the final burden of disposing of the matter must rest on you people over there. From Waner's cocksure attitude, I feel sure he suspects nothing. . . ."

I watched insects fluttering around the porch light.

I remembered something my father used to say: *The best way to stop a fire, is to jump on it with both feet—while it's still a spark.*

A car stopped on the graveled street in front of the house. Two men got out, came along the path to the front porch. I unhooked the screen door and opened it. "Mr. Waner?"

"Right."

The pair came up on the porch, brushed past me into the livingroom. They didn't wait for invitations.

One was a short, tough-looking guy who asked me, "Who's here beside you?"

"My family. All asleep."

"I'll look around."

"No you won't," I said.

Quickly, the other man, Waner himself, stepped in front of his friend and said, "Don't be silly, Tom." To me he said, "You'll have to pardon our lack of manners, Mr. Gates. We've done a lot of traveling today and had car trouble to boot. That's why we're so late calling on you."

Waner was a tall, solidly-built man with an earnest, friendly face, and a shock of white hair like spun glass. He made me think of a big-time salesman, the kind who sells yachts and country estates.

It figured, of course.

The other character had "gorilla" written all over him.

I motioned them to chairs, and when we were seat-

ed Waner looked me over, chuckled, and said, "I'd expected to find an older man. It's amazing that a young fellow like you should already be such a power in state politics. Why, in the last few days my group has visited fourteen counties, and in all of them the officials have told us the same thing: 'See Lon Gates. What he says goes in this part of the state.' So . . . here I am."

I tried to look flattered.

Waner went on: "It seems that you are the key man in this section of the state. If we can persuade you to join the organization we represent, the whole southern tier of counties will fall in line. You're a big man, Mr. Gates."

I'm big alright. Six feet tall by two hundred pounds. But that's the only way I'm big. Now I glanced at my watch. Waner took the hint.

"We can have a full discussion tomorrow," he said. "Get into details. For tonight, I'll give you just a brief rundown. Alright?"

"Umm," I said.

"As you know, there is a regrouping going on in your State. Old, corrupt political machines are being booted out to make way for new men with new, progressive ideas—men like yourself. This is a poor state. One of the poorest in the nation. But it doesn't have to be that way. No indeed."

Waner looked at me expectantly. His white hair glistened in the lamplight. His companion, Tom, or whatever his name was, just sat in his chair looking at nothing.

"What is this—er—organization you mentioned?" I asked.

"Businessmen," Waner said in a reverent tone. "Big businessmen. From all over the country. All banded together for mutual progress."

I yawned, watching Waner closely through half-shut eyes. "Uh huh. In other words, the syndicate."

Waner's bushy eyebrows climbed. "Why, ah . . ."

"How much?" I said. "For me."

He obviously hadn't expected it to be quite so easy. His mouth curved in a pleased smile. He relaxed, leaned back and lit a cigar.

But the other one, Tom, got up and prowled the room. He paid special attention to the few pictures on the walls, the lamp bases, and so on.

I told him sardonically, "The place isn't bugged. I doubt if there's a tape recorder in this whole county."

Tom turned, scowled down at me. "Wise guy."

Waner waved him back to a chair.

"Okay, let's talk business," I said impatiently. "As I understand the situation from reports I've had, the national syndicate is ready to move on this state. Open it up. The works—gambling, dope, prostitution, everything. All under the protection of the syndicate's own privately owned politicians. And you, Mr. Waner, are here on, shall we say, a buying trip. So, how much is in it for me?"

Waner laughed outright. "No wonder the people in the other counties kept telling me to come to you. You're a businessman, Mr. Gates. Well, I'm not authorized to set exact figures, but I can promise you a basic minimum of a thousand dollars a month. As a starter. No ceiling on what you can take in, as time passes, and the wheels really start to turn."

I pulled at my lower lip, and pretended to give it thought. I said, "I'll think about it. But listen—why'd you knock off that deputy-sheriff over in Thomasville? Frank Davis."

I didn't get the strong reaction I expected. The goon tensed a bit, but Waner didn't turn a hair. He inhaled

from his cigar, blew a couple of neat smoke rings, and murmured, "I don't know what you're talking about. But let's pose a hypothetical question. Let's suppose that for the good of many, it was necessary to sacrifice one man, one who couldn't or wouldn't understand that the old days of political graft and corruption are over."

I shrugged. "You mean you killed Davis to let people know you weren't fooling."

Waner managed to look shocked. "Why, Mr. Gates! I didn't kill anyone. Perish the thought."

"Ah, let's quit horsing around," the man called Tom said. "I'm tired and sleepy."

"A thousand a month isn't enough," I said.

"Oh, that's your's, personally. And, as I said, it's just a starter."

I pretended to think some more. But there was no point in stalling. I knew what I wanted to know. That the syndicate was in fact trying to move in, as we'd thought. And that Waner and his boys had murdered Frank Davis.

I stood up. "You and your gang of thieves stay out of this state," I said. "I'll tell you just once. Get out. Go home and tell your bosses to look elsewhere for easy pickings. But stay out of this state."

This time I'd really surprised Waner. The phoney gloss peeled off, exposing the vicious punk underneath. His voice got shrill as he yammered at me, "Listen, we need you. You're the key to this whole section, and you're coming in. The easy way, or the hard way—"

I aimed a thumb at the door. "Out."

Waner jumped from his chair. He was shaking with rage. "Listen, you. I could snap my fingers and Tom would go kill your wife, your family, and never lose a minute's sleep over it. Don't fool around here. You're way out of your depth."

"So are you, punk," I told him.

He paid no attention. "Listen, the syndicate owns half the country. Now it's time for this two-bit state to fall in line. You think you can stop us? Country-boy, you better grow up. I tell you what. Me and my boys will be here till about noon tomorrow. At the hotel downtown. You come see me there before noon. And you better come with the right answers. Or your wife is going to have a serious accident before this time tomorrow night, and I can't promise—"

I started for him. He skipped back, yelling, "Tom!"

The goon came out of his chair in an easy rush. I got in one or two punches. That was all. He was a professional at brutality, and he did a workmanlike job on me. He chopped me down like a woodsman felling a tree.

I landed flat on my face, my nose and mouth streaming blood over the rug. A big foot clamped down on the back of my neck. Dimly I heard Waner say, "That's enough. I think he gets the idea. Don't you, country boy?"

I tried to curse, but blood choked me, and pain was moving in to flood the numb void of my body. I coughed weakly.

"Okay," Waner said. "I'll expect you by tomorrow noon."

He and his goon left. Painfully I turned my head, watching them go. They didn't say "Goodbye."

As soon as the screen door banged shut, I heaved myself up, and by holding on to chairbacks, walls, whatever I could find, managed to stagger through the house to the kitchen. I got Ed Carson on the phone. I said, "Go." And hung up.

The noise had finally awakened my wife, though the two boys slept on undisturbed. I heard Martha call-

ing from the bedroom. I didn't want her getting up, so I hurried to the closed bedroom door, opened it enough to say, "Go back to sleep, honey. I've got to go out for awhile. A case."

Martha grumbled, "Will you be long? Where're you going?"

"To put out a fire," I said, and eased the door shut.

Back in the kitchen, I washed up, then found a bottle of bourbon in the cabinet over the sink and had a long drink. The whisky burned like fury on my split lips but, once it hit my stomach, I felt better, well enough to go out on the back porch. There I keyed open the little storeroom, went inside and opened my old GI footlocker. From it I took a mothball-smelling bundle of black cloth and my old .45.

Then I went on out to the garage, got my car, and left.

To get my mind off my aches and pains as I drove along the bumpy streets, I thought about Pokochobee County. It's buried deep in the mountainous, sparsely-populated southern part of the state. A real backwater. We have radio, even television, and every Friday the weekly paper comes out, whether there's any news to put in it or not.

But the important thing about Pokochobee County, just now, was that we could seal it off from the rest of the world as effectively as if it were on the moon. Which is why, of course, Gerald Waner and his crowd had been passed along to us.

Now I turned my car onto one of the county seat's two paved streets, and drove through the tiny business district. It's a collection of crumbling brick buildings housing shabby stores and shops with fly-specked display windows. There are large gaps here and there where buildings have burned down, or simply

fallen in from old age, and never been replaced. It's an old town, an old county. But we like it.

I pulled into the driveway of Jim Kimmon's service station. It was closed. So was everything else in town. Jim himself would be with the others, over on the deep-shadowed courthouse lawn, under the oak trees around the ancient courthouse.

There were cars parked all along the block between where I sat and the courthouse. I could make out men headed that way on foot, one by one, and in small groups.

All were dressed as I would be in a minute—black robes topped by black, conical hoods. I got out of the car, put on robe and hood, and walked toward the courthouse.

There I found perhaps twenty-five men, standing around in silence. One of them beckoned to me. It was Ed Carson. I joined him. "Ready to go?" he muttered.

"Yeah. Let's get it over with."

We went along the deserted, dark street to the La Grande Hotel. The men fell in behind Ed and me. At the hotel Ed said, "Alright, six of you come with us. The rest wait here."

We entered the lobby. The nightclerk was fast asleep on a couch near the desk. I shook him awake. He opened his eyes, turned white, and his teeth started to chatter.

"Take it easy, Charley," I reassured him. "All we want to know is the room number of a Mr. Gerald Waner."

A little color came back into the nightman's face. "Oh. I see. Yeah. Well, Waner's in room 25 along with another guy. Three more men are with his party. They're in the adjoining room, number 26."

I nodded. "Okay. Go back to sleep."

I turned to Ed. "That's five men altogether. Let's get them."

We trooped up the old, creaking staircase to the second floor, found the two rooms we wanted. Ed had brought along the clerk's passkey. He used it first on room 25, then 26. He and I went into Waner's room, while two of the other men took care of the goons in 26.

We herded the five of them together in the dimly-lit corridor. They raised a brief row. But our costumes, and our guns aimed at their bellies quieted them in a hurry. Only Waner had anything to say after that.

His silky white hair was a tousled mess, and his eyes swollen with sleep. But he could still talk. "Listen, what the hell is this? What are you, a bunch of thieves? We haven't got enough cash among us to make it worth your while. Take off now. Go rob a bank or something. You don't know who you're fooling with, hear? Take off, while you're able."

I had been examining the faces of the five men. I found the one I wanted. A young kid, years younger than any of the others, and lacking their patina of coarse, sneering confidence. Likely enough this was the kid's first "job" with the syndicate.

From the way he was trembling, I had an idea it'd be his last, if he had anything to say about it. I decided to give him a chance. "You," I said, pointing at him. "Step out."

He did. He started a half-hearted protest. Carson backhanded him and he shut up. The other goons began to look worried. Even Waner.

"Get the rest of this trash out of here," I said. "I'll be down directly. Alright?"

Waner began to jabber, but the muzzle of Carson's pistol jammed between Waner's ribs put a sudden stop

to that. A couple of goons whimpered. They didn't know what was happening, but they didn't like it. Where they came from, they were the ones who scared people, instead of the other way around.

Carson and our men herded them off down the hall and on down the stairs. When they were gone, I turned to the kid. Now that we were alone he got back a little confidence.

"Man, you don't know what you're doing," he told me. "If you knew who we were—"

"I do know," I said. "All about you."

He hesitated. He looked pretty silly, standing there in his shorts and tee-shirt, shifting from one bare foot to the other. There was little of the big, bad hood about him.

"I want you to take a message back to your bosses," I said. "Get it straight, and tell them just what I tell you. Tell them not to send any more Gerald Waners down here. Tell them to keep out of this state."

The kid's mouth dropped open. He shook his head dazedly. "I don't understand."

"The syndicate will. Alright, get dressed. You have thirty minutes to be out of this town, and on your way out of the state. And don't come back."

"Bu—but what about Waner, and the others?"

"This is pretty wild country around here. It's easy for four strangers to get lost in the hills, and never be found again. That's all. Goodbye."

I left him standing there. I hurried downstairs, across the lobby, out of the hotel. There was a line of cars in the street, motors idling. I got into the first one and shut the door firmly behind me.

We moved out, slowly, through the dark deserted streets, like a midnight funeral procession. That's just what we were.

A LESSON IN RECIPROCITY

Fletcher Flora

In the yellow pages, Gaspar Vane was listed simply as a private investigator, leaving it up to any prospective client to discover for himself the precise nature of investigations undertaken. As a matter of fact, almost any kind that promised a fee was acceptable, but as things worked out, most of them were associated with the more sordid aspects of divorce. He was prepared to gather the evidence of grounds where grounds existed, and he was, for a premium, prepared to create it where it did not. He was not, in brief, a man to permit professional ethics to handicap his operations.

Gaspar suffered from baldness, which is a perfectly normal hazard of maturity, and he was fat. Altogether, considering a pocked face, loose lips, and ferrety little eyes, he was a physical composition of exceptional ugliness. What was not immediately apparent was the poetic range of his imagination. He spent much of his time in a private world in which miracles happened to Gaspar Vane, and it was this happy facility for fantasy that kept him in the practice of his rather unsavory trade.

In spite of the liberal policies that made it possible for him to take any kind of work that was offered, Gaspar's practice did not flourish. He frequently had difficulty in paying the rent and satisfying his creature

needs. He had no payroll to meet, having no employees. However, he did have an answering service that was essential to the little practice that he had, and he was forced at times into devious maneuvers to scratch up even the little that it cost. But he was stuck to his last, as the old saying goes, by a tenacious dream. He existed in the hope of a lode of luck. There would surely be one client who would turn out to be a jackpot.

He did not dream, however, when Hershell Fitch climbed the creaky stairs to his dingy office, that the jackpot was at hand. Hershell was a faded, depleted little man who had bleached to virtual anonymity in the shadow of a domineering wife, and it was under the orders of this wife, it developed, that he was seeking the services of Gaspar Vane. Anyhow, Hershell did not look like a jackpot, and he wasn't one. The jackpot was Rudolph La Roche, and it was merely Hershell's coincidental function to reveal him. Gaspar acknowledged Hershell's introduction with a flabby smile and a greasy handshake.

"Sit down, Mr. Fitch," Gaspar said. "How can I help you?"

Hershell sat in the one client's chair and balanced his felt hat carefully on his knees.

"It isn't exactly I," Hershell said. "It's actually my wife. I mean, it's my wife who sent me here to see you."

"In that case, how can I help your wife?"

"Well, we have these neighbors. La Roche is their name. Mr. and Mrs. Rudolph La Roche. It's Mr. La Roche's activities that she wants investigated."

"Ah! That's different. Quite different." Gaspar leaned back and dry-washed his fat hands. "You suspect Mr. La Roche of something illicit?"

"Perhaps I'd better tell you about it."

"I was about to suggest it."

"Well, it's this way." Hershell's fingers fiddled nervously with his hat, while he attempted to gather his harried thoughts. "The La Roches moved in next door nearly three years ago. Immediately they adopted this peculiar routine, and they've been in it ever since."

"Routine? What's peculiar about a routine? Most married people have a routine."

"It's not only the routine. It's mostly that they act so mysterious about it. In the beginning, when Mrs. Fitch and Mrs. La Roche were on amiable terms, my wife tried to find out where Mr. La Roche went and what he did, but Mrs. La Roche was evasive. Finally she was quite rude about it. That, I think, was the beginning of the bad feeling."

"Went? Did?" Gaspar's confusion was apparent in his voice. "Mr. Fitch, if you want my help, you must be more explicit."

"I'm trying to. The point is, you see, Mr. La Roche operates a small barber shop. As owner, he works the first chair. There is one other chair that is worked by a hired barber. I must say that the La Roches live in a much higher fashion than one would expect from the income from such a small shop, especially when Mr. La Roche is never there himself on Saturdays.

"Where," said Gaspar, "is Mr. La Roche on Saturdays?"

"That's the main point. That's what I'm coming to. We don't know, and we can't find out. Every Friday night, about six o'clock, Mr. La Roche leaves home in his automobile. He always carries a medium size bag, and he always leaves alone. Sunday night, between nine and ten, he returns. The schedule varies only slightly from week to week. The general routine never varies at all. Don't you agree that it's peculiar?"

"Not necessarily. Just because the La Roches decline to discuss their private affairs, it doesn't mean they're up to anything shady. Maybe Mr. La Roche has other business elsewhere on weekends that is more profitable than working the first chair in his barber shop."

"Exactly. What *kind* of business? After all, Saturday is the busiest day of the week in most barber shops."

"Mr. Fitch, let us come directly to the crux. Do you want to hire me to find out where Mr. La Roche goes and what he does?"

"It's my wife, really. She's the one who's got her mind set."

"No matter. It comes to the same thing. Are you prepared to pay my fee even though my report may be disappointing to you? I mean to say, even though Mr. La Roche's activities may be perfectly innocent?"

"Yes, of course. My wife and I have discussed the possibility, and we've decided that it's a risk we must take."

"Good. In the meanwhile, there will be certain expenses. Shall we estimate a hundred dollars?"

"A hundred dollars! My wife and I thought fifty would be ample."

"Well, let's not quibble. If my expenses are more than fifty, I'll simply add them to my fee. If you will give me the cash or your personal check. . . ."

Hershell had a personal check already made out in the proper amount. He extracted it from a worn wallet and handed it across the desk. It was signed, Gaspar noted, by Mrs. Fitch. Her Christian name was Gabriella.

Friday afternoon, Gaspar threw an extra shirt and a pair of socks into a worn bag, threw the bag into the rear seat of his worn car and drove to the address he

had extracted from Hershell in a final settlement of details. He had been there earlier in the week in a preliminary excursion designed to get the lay of the land, and now he drove past the La Roche house, a modest brick one across the hedge from the Fitches' modest frame one, and on down the block and around the corner. Turning his car around so that he would be in position to fall in behind La Roche when the latter passed the intersection, he settled himself behind the wheel to wait. It was then a quarter to six. He had ascertained from Hershell, of course, the direction in which La Roche took off. He had already observed La Roche's car, a black late model, and had unobtrusively taken down the license number. In the course of his careful preliminaries, he had even inspected La Roche himself in his two-chair barber shop.

On schedule, the black car passed the intersection shortly after six. Gaspar wheeled in behind and followed at a discreet distance. La Roche made his way across town, avoiding the congested trafficways, and turned onto the entrance to a turnpike and stopped obediently at the tollgate. He accepted his ticket, properly punched, and was immediately off again, while Gaspar was forced to wait for what seemed an interminable time until his own ticket was delivered. Meanwhile, he watched the other car uneasily and saw that it took the ramp which would send it onto the turnpike eastbound. He was soon nicely spaced behind La Roche's car, and it was apparent that the pace was going to be a judicious sixty-five.

At this speed, just below the level of terrifying rattles and threatening tremors, he was even able to consider comfortably the man he was pursuing. Rudolph La Roche was, indeed, a rather unusual personality. Even Gaspar, who was not especially sensitive to such

things, had felt it immediately. In the first place, his appearance was somehow arresting. Neither tall nor short, he was erect in bearing and decisive in his movements. His body was slender and supple. His hair was gray above the temples but otherwise dark. His eyes were lustrous, his nose was straight, his lips were full and firm. He was, in fact, a handsome man, and there was about him a disconcerting impression of agelessness. He might have been thirty or fifty or any age between, but he would be, one felt, the age forever that he was at the moment, whatever that age might be.

In the second place, with no more to go on than a queer prickling in the lard along his spine, Gaspar had the feeling that La Roche was a man who might be up to something extraordinary. He felt that here, at last, might be the miraculous jackpot.

After a couple hours of steady driving, Gaspar was paying his toll at the last exit and cursing bitterly at the delay as he strained to keep the receding red taillights of the black car in view. Under way again, he managed to close the intervening distance at the risk of violating the speed limit, now sharply reduced on the freeway running on for several miles into the city. The downtown traffic created serious problems with intruding cars that were unconcerned with Gaspar's mission, but the black car turned abruptly into a parking garage, and Gaspar, with one intruder preceding him, turned in after it. As he waited briefly for service, La Roche, having deposited his car and received his claim check, passed by so closely, carrying his bag, that Gaspar could have reached out and touched him. Gaspar cursed again, silently and bitterly, and implored dubious gods to prod the attendant.

A minute later he was on the street, peering with

wild despair in the direction La Roche had taken. At first the elusive barber was nowhere to be seen among the pedestrians. Then by the sheerest good luck, by the accidental course of his frantic gaze at the last instant, Gaspar saw him turning into the entrance of a fashionable hotel on the far corner. When he entered the large and ornate lobby of the hotel, however, he discovered that La Roche had again vanished.

Gaspar looked behind pillars and potted palms and even took a quick tour of a long arcade between expensive little shops, now closed. No La Roche. Forced by his failure to consider the improbability of incredibly fast service, Gaspar approached the desk and invoked the attention of the clerk, an indolent and elegant young man who did not look as if he could be forced to hurry by prince or bishop or even a congressman. Gaspar thought it best to present his problem directly and candidly.

"I'm looking," he said, "for a gentleman who just came into this hotel. Rudolph La Roche. Could you tell me if he registered?"

The clerk said coldly that Mr. La Roche had not, and his tone implied that even if Mr. La Roche had, the truth would be considered far too sacred to be divulged to a seedy transient with frayed cuffs and a shiny seat. Gaspar retreated behind a pillar, in the shadow of a potted palm, and sat down to brood and consider his position and tactical alternatives.

His attention was caught by the soft neon identification of a cocktail lounge. Of course! La Roche had simply developed a big thirst during his long drive, and he had stopped first thing to slake it. Gaspar had, now that he had time to recognize it, developed a considerable thirst himself. With the dual intention of nailing La Roche and having a cold beer, he crossed to the lounge and entered. But he was still out of luck. The

barber was not there, and Gaspar, afraid of missing him in the lobby, returned with his thirst to the potted palm.

Then, after another extended period of brooding, his dilemma was solved. He was staring at a bank of elevators, and one of the elevators, having just descended, opened with a pneumatic whisper, and there in the brightly lighted box like a magician's pawn in a magical cabinet, was Rudolph La Roche.

Rudolph La Roche transformed. Rudolph La Roche, elegant and polished as a brand new dime, in impeccable evening clothes.

And on his arm, staring up at him with a candid adoration that promised an exciting night, was the slickest, sexiest blonde bomb that Gaspar had seen in a long, long time. He stared, entranced.

Fifteen minutes later, Gaspar was installed in a room on the eleventh floor. It was a relatively cheap room assigned by the supercilious clerk as being appropriate to Gaspar's frayed cuffs and shiny seat. Gaspar had rejected the idea of attempting to follow La Roche and his gorgeous companion on their apparent excursion of nightspots for two sound reasons. The first was that he would almost certainly lose them along the way. The second was that the excursion would certainly make greater demands on the Vane expense account than the account could bear. Indeed, it was already obvious that the fifty dollars extracted from Hershell Fitch was going to be woefully inadequate.

Anyhow, since it was necessary to spend the night somewhere, it had seemed a good idea to spend it at the hotel which would clearly be his base of operations, whatever those operations amounted to. Fortunately, he was at the moment, in addition to Hershell's fifty, in possession of funds, so to speak, in another pocket.

Inventory disclosed that these funds came to approximately another fifty, and if necessary he could pay his hotel bill with a rubber check that he would have to cover by some device before it bounced. He considered this no reckless expenditure, but rather a sound, if somewhat speculative, investment in prospects that were beginning to glitter. Therefore, his inventory completed, he called room service and ordered ice and a bottle of bourbon.

While he waited for delivery, he thought about Rudolph La Roche, who was currently looking like the most remarkable barber since Figaro. Imagine the ingenious devil carrying on a sizzling affair within a hundred miles of home in a flagrantly open manner which practically invited detection! After all, other citizens of the old home town certainly stayed at times in this hotel and it was by no means a remote possibility that one or more of them would know La Roche there and recognize him here. The man must have monstrous assurance and vanity to think that he could get away with it indefinitely. The whole affair was all the more remarkable because it was clearly conducted on some kind of schedule with apparent stability. What kind of cock-and-bull story did he perpetuate about his weekly excursions to keep his wife chronically deceived? In addition to his other manifest talents, he must be, surely, a superb liar. Gaspar, indeed, was becoming almost violently ambivalent about the astounding barber. He was admiring on the one hand; on the other he was filled with envy and malice.

There was a knock at the door of his room, and he got up and opened the door to admit a bellhop, who was carrying a bottle and a thermos bucket full of ice cubes.

"Put them on the table," Gaspar said.

Following the bellhop back into the room he took a five-dollar bill out of his pocket and sat on the bed. He smoothed the bill on one knee and laid it carefully beside him. The bellhop was a very small man with a puckered and pallid face that made Gaspar think wildly of an improbable albino prune. As he turned, the bellhop's eyes passed over the fin on their way across the bed to a spot on the wall behind it.

"Will there be anything else, sir?" he asked.

"Nothing," said Gaspar, "unless you could give me a little information."

"That's possible, sir. What kind of information?"

"I'm wondering if you could tell me how long Mr. Rudolph La Roche has been coming to this hotel."

"Mr. Rudolph La Roche, sir? I'm afraid I don't know the gentleman."

"A slender man. Not very tall. Dark hair with a little gray over the ears. Military bearing. Appearance rather distinguished."

There was a flicker in the bellhop's ancient eyes as he raised them from the wall to the ceiling, closing them in transience.

"I know a gentleman who fits that general description, sir, but his name is not La Roche. A coincidental similarity, perhaps."

"Let's get down to cases. La Roche came into this hotel tonight and went directly upstairs without registering. Later he came down again, dressed fit to kill, with a beautiful blonde hanging on his arm. Since he changed his clothes upstairs, I assume that he has a room or has the use of the lady's."

"Ah." The bellhop's eyes descended slowly from the ceiling. As they crossed the fin on the bed, they opened briefly and closed again. "You must be referring to Mr. and Mrs. Roger Le Rambeau."

Gaspar was silent for a moment, scarcely breathing.

"Did you say Mr. and *Mrs.* Roger Le Rambeau?"

"Yes, sir. They have a suite on the fifteenth floor. Permanent residents. Mr. Le Rambeau is out of town during the week. He returns every Friday night."

"Oh? And where does Mr. Le Rambeau go during the week?"

"I'm sure I don't know, sir. I assume that he goes on business."

"How long have Mr. and Mrs. Le Rambeau been residents here?"

"Approximately three years. They moved in, I understand, immediately after their marriage."

"They must be well-heeled to afford this kind of setup."

"They appear to be quite affluent. It's my understanding, however, that Mrs. Le Rambeau has most of the money."

"I see. Do you happen to know if they were married here in the city or elsewhere?"

"I'm not sure. Wherever they were married, it should be a matter of record."

"Yes. So it should."

"I hope I have been helpful, sir."

"You have. You bet you have."

"In that case, sir, if there is nothing else, I had better get on with my duties."

"Sure, sure. You run along, son."

The bellhop, who was at least as old as Gaspar, flicked the fin off the bed with practiced fingers and went out of the room. Gaspar, left alone, continued to sit on the edge of the bed with his fat body folded forward over the bulge of his belly. A toad of a man, ugly and scarred and poor in the world's goods, he was nevertheless lifted by soaring dreams into the rarefied air of enlarged hopes.

Gaspar wasted no more time in spying personally on the astounding barber whom he still thought of, in order to avoid confusion, as Rudolph La Roche. After three stout highballs, he rolled into bed in his underwear and slept soundly for a few hours, rousing and rising early the next morning, which was Saturday. With the help of a clerk he spent the morning checking the file of photostated marriage licenses at the county courthouse, which turned out not to be such a tedious task as he had feared, inasmuch as he knew, thanks to the bellhop, the approximate time when La Roche had taken his bride. The only question was whether or not the marriage had been performed in the county and was there recorded. Happily, it had been and was.

Gaspar returned to the hotel, got his bag, paid his bill, claimed his car at the parking garage, and drove home. He was feeling so pleased with himself and the turn his affairs were taking that he had only the mildest pang of envy when he thought of Rudolph La Roche with his blonde bomb in their fifteenth-floor suite.

He spent Sunday with pleasant anticipations, and the following morning, with the resumption of workaday affairs, he investigated more records and satisfied himself on a critical point. Rudolph La Roche was married, all right. In fact, being married twice at once, he was excessively so. And if a philandering husband is a patsy, to make a riddle of it, what is a bigamist?

Gaspar drove by the two-chair barber shop, which was located in a small suburban shopping area, and there at the first chair, sure enough, spruce in a starched white tunic and plying his scissors to a head of hair, was the errant Mr. La Roche. Smiling wetly and humming softly, Gaspar drove slowly on. He parked in the alley behind the building in which his office was located, and heavily climbed back stairs, still smiling and humming between puffs. In his office, without delay, he

dialed the number of Hershell Fitch, who was at home and came to the telephone at the summons of Mrs. Fitch, who had answered.

"Gaspar Vane speaking," said Gaspar. "Can you talk?"

"Yes," said Hershell. "There's no one here but Gabriella. Don't you think, however, I had better come to your office for your report?"

"You are welcome to come," Gaspar said, "if you want to waste your time."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean there isn't any report. None, that is, worth mentioning."

"Where did he go?"

"He went to Kansas City."

"What for?"

"He went to see a woman."

"A woman! That sounds to me like something worth mentioning."

"I guess it is if you see something wrong with seeing an eighty-year-old woman who happens also to be his mother."

"He goes to Kansas City every weekend to see his *mother?*"

"That's right. She's in a nursing home there. Our friend is devoted to her, it seems. His visits are practically a ritual."

"Excuse me a minute."

There followed a brief period during which Hershell talked aside, apparently to the hovering Gabriella, and then his voice came through the receiver again, thin and a little petulant with disappointment.

"I guess you're right, then. I guess there's no use in my coming down."

"None at all."

"Since there wasn't really anything to report, I hope the fee won't be excessive."

"I'll send you a bill," Gaspar said.

He hung up and leaned back in his chair. On the other hand, he thought, maybe I won't. Truth is, he ought to send *me* a bill.

Mindful of the old adage that one should strike while the iron is hot, Gaspar consulted his directory and found the telephone number of the shop of Rudolph La Roche. He dialed the number and listened to distant rings. Then, the third ring being chopped off in the middle, he was listening to the voice of Rudolph himself. The voice, true to Gaspar's imagination, was modulated and suave and unmistakably urbane.

"Rudolph La Roche speaking," the voice said.

"I must have the wrong number," Gaspar said. "I thought I was calling Roger Le Rambeau."

There was a pause, almost imperceptible, and Rudolph's voice, when he spoke again, was as impeccably suave as before.

"Who is this, please?"

"Never mind. We'll get better acquainted in good time."

"I'm sure I shall be delighted. Would you care to make an appointment?"

"What's wrong with this evening?"

"Nothing whatever. Shall I name the place?"

"You name it. If I don't like it, I'll change it."

"There's a small tavern a few doors east of my shop. I sometimes stop in there for a beer or two before going home. If that's acceptable, I shall be pleased to see you there."

"That sounds all right. What time?"

"I close my shop at five-thirty."

"See you then," said Gaspar, and gently cradled the phone.

A cool customer, he thought. A real cool customer. But after all, any guy who could deliberately marry two women and practically keep them next door to each other was bound to be.

The tavern was a narrow building compressed between an appliance store on one side and a loan office on the other. It was clearly a place that exploited an atmosphere of decorum and respectability, making its appeal to the solid citizen whose thirst, while decently inhibited, could be counted on to recur with some regularity. Of the patrons present when Gaspar entered, the one who was the most respectable in appearance and the least so in fact was Rudolph La Roche.

He was sitting alone in a booth along the wall opposite the bar. A beaded glass of beer, untouched, was on the table before him. As Gaspar approached, he slid out of his seat, stood up and made an odd, old-fashioned bow from the hips.

"Rudolph La Roche," he said. "I'm sorry that I don't know your name."

"It's Vane," Gaspar said. "Gaspar Vane."

"How do you do, Mr. Vane. Will you join me in a beer? I'm afraid nothing stronger is sold here."

"Beer's fine."

They sat opposite each other with an air of cordiality and waited in silence while Gaspar was served by a waitress. After she was gone, Rudolph lifted his glass in a small salute, to which Gaspar responded uneasily. It was strange that Gaspar, who held all the cards, was far the more uneasy of the two.

"May I ask," said Rudolph, "how you became aware of Roger Le Rambeau?"

"You can ask," said Gaspar, "which is not to say I'll answer."

"It would do me no good, I suppose, to deny anything?"

"Not a bit."

"In that case, I'll save myself the trouble. Which brings us, of course, directly to the point. What do you intend to do about it?"

"That depends. I'm not what you might call a bluenose. If a man chooses to have two wives at the same time, I say, let him have them."

"Very wise of you, Mr. Vane. You are, I see, a liberal man. And why not? Bigamy is, per se, quite harmless. It has been respectable enough in the past in certain places and is still so today. It is a felony only where the laws of the land condemn it, and it is a sin only where the mores of society make it so. I pride myself, if I may say so, on being a kind of universal man. I select my ethical standards from all societies in all places at any given time."

"That sounds good enough, but it's liable to land you in a mess of trouble."

"True, true. One must have the courage of his convictions."

"If you ask me, two wives take more courage than sense. One is bad enough."

"Mr. Vane, you disappoint me. Marriage is, indeed, a blessed institution. It is made less than blessed only by the idiotic restrictions placed upon it. It is confused, I mean, with monogamy, which is quite another thing. It is extremely rare that a man can be fulfilled by one woman, or vice versa. Take me, for example. I rather imagine, Mr. Vane, that you think me, all things considered, a complex man. On the contrary, I am a very simple man. I have, on the one hand, very strong physical appetites that can be satisfied only by a rich and beautiful woman of a passionate nature. On the other, I have a deep and normal yearning for the stigmata of middle-class stability—a modest and comfortable home, a devoted and orderly wife who is primarily a house-

keeper, a respected and undistinguished trade to engage my attention. It is surely clear that one wife could hardly satisfy my needs. And I am not, whatever you may think superficially, a libertine. I choose not to engage in philandering. Therefore, I solve my problem simply and sensibly. I take two wives, and I am fulfilled. I am, Mr. Vane, a happy man."

"Well, as the saying goes," said Gaspar pointedly, "every good thing must come to an end."

"Must it?" Rudolph smiled and sipped his headless beer. "That sentiment seems to be in conflict with this interview. I understood that we were meeting to arrange conditions under which my particular good thing, as you put it, can continue."

"As I said, I'm no bluenose. I'm prepared to be reasonable."

"Mr. Vane, I've been completely candid with you. Surely you owe me the same consideration. If you wish to blackmail me, why don't you say so?"

"Call it what you like. Whatever you call it. I know a good thing when I see it."

"Precisely, Mr. Vane, how do you see it?"

"I see you in a trap, that's how."

"Quite so. A just observation. I can either pay or go to prison."

"Not only that. Your wives would be a little upset by your shenanigans, to say the least. You'd lose them both, and that's for sure."

"There you touch me in my most vulnerable spot. The loss of my wives would be the cruelest blow of all. I am, you see, a dedicated and loving husband."

"I'd give a pretty penny to know how you've been fooling them all this time."

"Secrets, Mr. Vane, secrets. As you said a while ago, you may ask, which is not to say I'll answer."

"It's not important. What's important is that you stand to lose them."

"A disaster, I admit, which I should prefer to avoid at any cost. Which brings us, I believe, to another crucial point. What, Mr. Vane, will be the cost?"

"Well, I don't want to be greedy, but at the same time I don't want to give anything away. Besides, that weekend wife of yours is rich. You said so yourself."

"A tactical error, perhaps. Having gone so far, however, I'll go even farther. Angela is not only rich; she is exceedingly generous and quite incurious as to how I spend her money."

"In that case, how does twenty-five grand sound?"

"To Rudolph La Roche, like far too much. To Roger Le Rambeau, fair enough."

"Roger Le Rambeau's who I'm talking to."

"As Roger Le Rambeau, I'll consider it."

"What's to consider? You pay or else."

"Of course. That's abundantly clear, I think. However, you must realize that I am dependent upon Angela for such an amount. In any event, I couldn't pay until I've had an opportunity next weekend to make proper arrangements."

"You think she may kick up rough about shelling out that much?" Gaspar's brow furrowed.

"No, no. I anticipate no difficulty with Angela."

"Just the same, you'd better think up a good reason."

"You can safely leave that in my hands. As a matter of fact, I've established a reputation with Angela for being lucky. She has profited more from certain wagers of mine, wins and losses taken together, than this will cost."

"I'll want cash. No check."

"I must say, Mr. Vane, that you're a strange mixture of professional acumen and amateur naïveté. Whoever

heard of paying a blackmailer by check?"

"I just wanted it understood, that's all."

"I believe I understand the conditions perfectly, Mr. Vane."

"In that case all that's left is to arrange the time and place of our next meeting."

"I see no reason to drag this affair out. I'm sure you're anxious to have it completed, and so am I. Shall we say next Monday evening?"

"Suits me. Where?"

"Well, the transfer of funds will, perhaps, require a bit more privacy than we have here. I suggest the back room of my shop. I close at five-thirty, as I've told you, and my assistant leaves promptly. A quarter to six should be about right. Drive into the alley and knock at the back door. I'll let you in."

"No tricks."

"Please Mr. Vane! What kind of trick could I possibly employ? I'm realist enough to concede that I've been found out, and gentleman enough, I hope, to accept the consequences gracefully."

Rudolph La Roche smiled faintly, slipped out of the booth, and repeated his odd little bow.

"Until Monday, then."

Turning briskly, his back erect and his head high, he walked to the door and out into the street. Gaspar signaled the waitress and ordered another beer. Somehow, he did not feel as elated as a man should feel when he has hit the jackpot. What color were Rudolph's eyes, he wondered suddenly. Blue? Green? Whatever the color, they were as cool and pale as a handful of sea water.

The alley was a littered brick lane between brick walls. Behind Rudolph's barber shop there was an in-

dentation which provided enough space in which to park a pair of cars. Rudolph's car was there when Gaspar pulled his old one up alongside, and the time at that moment was exactly a quarter to six. Gaspar crawled out and banged on the rear door of the shop. He was promptly admitted by Rudolph, who must have been waiting just on the other side. The barber was still wearing his starched white tunic, uniform of his trade, and it gave him an antiseptic look that was somehow disconcerting to Gaspar, who always felt slightly soiled even when he was still dripping from the shower.

"Ah, here you are," Rudolph said. "Right on time, I see. Come in, come in."

Gaspar, entering, found himself in a tiny room which had been devised by the simple expedient of erecting a plywood wall toward the rear of the original, single room. There was a small table with a bundle of laundry on it. On the same table there was a coffee pot on a hot plate, which was on a square of asbestos, and beside the table were two straight chairs. For an instant Gaspar felt trapped and vulnerable, and a wave of panic swept over him. But the panic receded quickly to leave him with no more than a vague feeling of uneasiness.

"Sit down, Mr. Vane," Rudolph said, indicating one of the straight chairs. "Shall I make coffee?"

"Not for me," said Gaspar.

"Very well, then." Seated sidewise to the table in the second chair, Rudolph leaned an elbow upon it and stared at Gaspar. "Shall we come down to business at once?"

"If you've got the money, let's do."

"Oh, I have the money, I assure you. Indeed, I have twice the amount we agreed on."

"Fifty grand?"

"Quite so."

"Where is it?"

"Never mind that. It's available."

"What's it for?"

"It's for you, Mr. Vane, all for you if you care to earn it."

Gaspar's feeling of uneasiness was suddenly acute. His fat body felt clammy.

"What do you mean?" he asked. "Earn it how?"

"By performing a certain service for me. I'm prepared, in brief, to make you a counter-proposition. Would you care to hear it?"

"It's no crime to listen."

"Let me say in the beginning, Mr. Vane, that you have made me sensitive to my position. I have realized all along, I suppose, that I could not indefinitely continue to live securely in my precarious circumstances, however desirable and delightful they might be. If you have found me out, it is certain that others will do so in good time, and although you are reasonable and willing to settle things amicably, it is certain that others will not be. Therefore, I have decided that it would be wise, so to speak, to settle for half a loaf. It is better, to put it brutally, to lose one wife than two. Do you understand me, Mr. Vane?"

Rudolph paused for an answer and examined his pared and polished fingernails, smiling at them with wry resignation, sadly and tenderly. As for Gaspar he felt as if an angry heavyweight had slugged him suddenly in the fat belly. In protest, it emitted a startled rumble.

"I'm not sure," he said.

"Perhaps I'd better be more explicit. I have decided with deep regret to sacrifice one of the two."

"Which one?"

"That has been my sad dilemma. Shall it be Angela

or Winifred? Believe me, Mr. Vane, I have struggled over the choice with a troubled soul. To begin with, I am approaching that time of life when the passions will cool and simple domestic comforts, such as quiet evenings and home-cooked meals and a tidy house, will assume dominant importance. A point, as you can see, for Winifred. On the other hand, that time, although approaching, has not arrived. Moreover, there is another commanding consideration which must be, I fear, definitive. I have reason to know that I am the principal heir in Angela's will. You can easily see the enormous complications that would arise if a will involving a large fortune were to be probated at this time. Not only would my bigamy almost certainly be exposed, but I should, inasmuch as Winifred was unfortunately my first and legal wife, lose everything that Angela left me. So, when you come right down to it, I really have no choice at all. Winifred must go."

"Go where? Go how?"

"Oh, come, Mr. Vane. Please don't be evasive. I've taken the liberty of investigating you discreetly, and you are, if I may say so, a ruthless man. I'm suggesting nothing beyond your capabilities."

"Let's put it into words. You want to hire me to kill your second wife?"

"Chronologically, my first wife. That's my counterproposition."

"You're asking me to commit murder."

"I'm presenting you with the opportunity if you wish to take it. I'm also giving you the chance to earn fifty thousand dollars instead of twenty-five."

This, of course, was Gaspar's great temptation, the overwhelming seduction of the affair as it was developing. Nevertheless, he dragged his heels. The disruption in the orderly sequence of routine blackmail was so

abrupt and monstrous that it created in his mind an effect of violence. He was confused. He struggled for clarity and coherence. Yet, for all his confusion, he thought he could see certain possibilities of treachery.

"Nothing doing," he said.

"Is that decisive? Don't you even feel inclined to discuss it."

"What's to discuss?"

"Certainly you can see the benefits to yourself."

"I can see one thing, all right. I can see that you're a bigamist, and I'm a blackmailer, to be honest about it. That makes us just about equal. Tit for tat. But if I accepted your proposition, I'd be a murderer. We wouldn't be equal any longer, and I'd have a lot more to lose than you."

"Nonsense. You're forgetting that I'd be guilty of conspiracy to commit murder, which is handled rather harshly under the law. No, Mr. Vane. We would be compelled to keep each other's secret, and that's all there is to it."

"That's not the point. The point is, you'd have me in a tighter bind than I'd have you, and you could refuse to pay me a dime for anything. If you were to do that, I wouldn't dare do a thing about it."

"I am an honorable man, Mr. Vane. My word is my bond."

"In that case, hand over the fifty grand in advance."

"I said, Mr. Vane, that *my* word is *my* bond. I didn't say that *yours* is *yours*. However, I'm prepared to pay you an advance of ten thousand dollars upon your acceptance of my proposition, just to show my good faith, and I assure you that the balance will be paid promptly upon the completion of your duties."

Gaspar, oddly enough, believed him. The cool little devil was just weird enough to have a kooky code of

honor that would bind him to his word in the terms of his devilment.

"Wait a minute," Gaspar said suddenly. "If you've got fifty grand to throw around, why can't I just raise the ante of the game as it is?"

"You could try, Mr. Vane, but you would fail. I am a reasonable man, and I'm willing to pay a reasonable price for silence or service, but I will not be victimized. I'll face my ruin first."

Again, Gaspar was convinced. The idea, he decided, was not worth pursuing. As to Rudolph's proposition, the suspicion of trickery was nearly allayed, but the fear of apprehension still remained.

"Well," he said heavily, "I'm not saying I'll do it, mind you, but I don't see anything against listening a little longer. What makes you think we could get away with it?"

"There's nothing in that to deter us. The exercise of reasonable caution should suffice. As you know, I leave home every Friday evening and don't return until Sunday evening. Winifred is alone all that time. She is, moreover, a creature of habit, and her actions can be accurately predicted. She has told me that she invariably attends a movie Saturday night. She returns home immediately afterward and consoles herself with several strong highballs. It is poor Winifred's one minor vice, but since it is rigidly controlled and is allowed to function only that one night of the week, it can perhaps be excused. In any event, she goes to bed somewhat under the influence and can be expected to sleep heavily. Anytime after midnight, I should say, would be safe for you to enter. I shall provide you with a backdoor key. A heavy blow on the head, deliberately planted evidence of burglary, and the thing is done. Poor Winifred has clearly surprised a burglar, who has

killed her in his alarm. You simply walk out of the house and away, and in the meanwhile I am in another city, which can easily be established. Upon my return, we complete the terms of our agreement."

"It sounds easy enough. Too easy by half, I'd say."

"It's a mistake to confuse simplicity with incompetence. Do you accept my proposition or not?"

"I'll have to think about it."

"As you wish." Rudolph stood up briskly, with an air of cheerfulness, and began to unbutton his tunic. "Meanwhile, I must ask you to excuse me. I'm late already, and Winifred is having chicken and dumplings for dinner. I'm very fond of chicken and dumplings."

Gaspar was dimly aware of being ushered deftly into the alley. He was slightly dazed, in a sluggish kind of way, by the turn of events. But he realized, at any rate, that the game was radically changed, and that all the money, in spite of his high hand, was still in the pot.

To express it in extravagant terms, Gaspar wrestled three days with the devil. Although he had been directly responsible for one suicide, a neurotic woman without the stability to weather a minor scandal, he had never killed anyone with his own hands, and now he was filled with dread at the thought of doing so. Not that he was afflicted with compassion or serious moral qualms. He was merely fearful of being caught, and of the consequences thereof. Still, the bait, fifty thousand lovely tax-free dollars, was a mighty temptation. Moreover, the project as Rudolph La Roche had presented it was so wonderfully simple. It was merely a matter of letting himself into a house, sapping a woman in an alcoholic sleep, faking a bit of evidence, and walking away. It seemed to him, in his more optimistic moments, that anyone could do it successfully.

There was another consideration. Gaspar looked up-

on himself as a rather exceptional fellow who had been haunted all his life by minor misfortunes, and in his gross body he nursed the pride of his delusion. He had always felt, when Shakespeare's famous tide rolled in, that he, Gaspar Vane, would take it at the flood and ride it to fortune. Well, here was the tide, and here was he. What was he going to do about it? On Thursday afternoon, he made his decision suddenly.

Sitting at the desk in his shabby little office, he looked at his watch and saw that it was twenty minutes to six. Rudolph's shop was closed, the second barber probably gone, but there was a good chance that Rudolph himself, engaged with the petty details of closing, was still there. Giving himself no time for further vacillation, Gaspar seized his phone and dialed. Two rings later, Rudolph's suave voice answered.

"Rudolph La Roche speaking."

"Gaspar Vane. Can you talk?"

"All alone here. Tomorrow is Friday, you know. I was wondering if you'd call."

"You got the ten grand?"

"Certainly."

"You got the other forty?"

"As I told you. In escrow, so to speak."

"When can you pay off?"

"Tomorrow. I'll have to go to the bank."

"Won't it look suspicious if you draw out all that money at once?"

"Hardly. Rudolph La Roche is not Roger Le Rambeau. His bank account never exceeds a few hundred dollars. The money, Mr. Vane, is in a safety deposit box."

"Shall I pick it up at your shop?"

"I think not. From now on it would be wiser, I think, if we took no chances of being seen together. I'll go to

the bank on my lunch hour tomorrow. Let's see, now. Do you know where Huton's Restaurant is? I'll go there for lunch at one precisely. Before eating, I'll go directly to the washroom to wash my hands. Be there at that time, and I'll manage to slip you the packet unobserved."

"Don't forget the key."

"Of course. Also the key."

"Huton's. One sharp. I'll be waiting for you."

And so, as good as his word, he was. He spent the few minutes before Rudolph's arrival in examining his pocked and ravished face in one of Huton's mirrors. Luckily, he was the only one in the washroom when Rudolph entered. Claiming the next lavatory, the dapper barber ran water into the bowl, squirted liquid soap into a palm, and began to wash his hands.

"The packet and the key are in my right jacket pocket," he said. "Help yourself."

Gaspar did, dropping them quickly into his own.

"Is it all here?" he asked.

"Certainly. When are you going to be convinced, Mr. Vane, that you are dealing with an honorable man? If the total is not correct, you are under no compulsion to render service."

"You'd better believe it."

"Listen carefully. Go in the back door and across the kitchen into the dining room. Turn right into a hall. Winifred's bedroom is first on the right. Got it?"

"Got it."

Rudolph pressed a button and held his hands in a rush of hot air, rubbing them briskly together. When they were dry, he adjusted his tie, settled his jacket more comfortably on his shoulders, and turned away. From entrance to exit, he had barely looked at Gaspar.

"Good-by, Mr. Vane," he said. "I'll be in touch."

Gaspar did not linger for lunch. Back in his office, he counted the money and found that Rudolph had indeed proved himself, at least so far, an honorable man. Gaspar put the ten grand in a metal lockbox, and locked the box in the bottom drawer of his battered file cabinet. He had never worried about thieves before, having had nothing worth stealing, but now he found himself wondering anxiously if he were exercising proper security measures. Oh, well, there was nothing to be gained by dissipating his mental powers in anxiety.

At a quarter to six, taking certain precautions that seemed fundamental, he was parked on the cross street at the end of the block on which Rudolph lived. Soon afterward, right on his weekly schedule, Rudolph passed the intersection in his car. Falling in behind, Gaspar followed as far as the turnpike entrance. Sure enough, Rudolph picked up his ticket at the toll gate and took the ramp that would point him east. Satisfied, or as nearly so as he could be, Gaspar drove back to town.

Approximately twenty-four hours thereafter, about one o'clock of the following morning, he was getting out of his car on a mean street some six blocks from the house of La Roche. He had chosen this place to leave the car because it was a block of rooming houses in front of which a variety of other cars were invariably parked at night. His own, he reasoned, would be less conspicuous in company. Moreover, it was remote enough from the scene of projected action to minimize the chance of disastrous association, just in case someone did happen to take notice of the car as a stranger.

Afoot, Gaspar navigated the dark streets, trying to exercise proper care without giving the impression of skulking. However, the houses he passed were dark. He saw not a single pedestrian, late abroad, on his way.

His caution, while commendable, seemed to be superfluous. The backdoor key was readily at hand in the right pocket of his coat. In the inside pocket, a dead weight that was at once comforting and threatening, was a short length of lead pipe.

A fat shadow, he slipped from the cross-street at the end of the La Roche block into the alley that ran behind the La Roche house. Minutes later, having paused briefly to reconnoiter, he was moving silently past garbage can and trash burner up a concrete walk to the back door. He paused there again, leaning forward with a large ear near the door. Silence within. Beyond the hedge where the Fitches dwelled, silence. Silence within and without and all around. Silence and thick, black darkness.

The key slipped smoothly into the lock. The lock responded smoothly to the key. Moving with swiftness and quietness that was surprising in one so bulky, Gaspar entered a kitchen and closed the door behind him. He stood by the door without moving until his eyes had adjusted to the deeper interior darkness, then moved across the floor toward the outline of a doorway. Suddenly, beside him, there was a terrifying whirr in the shadows, like an aroused rattlesnake, and his heart leaped and fluttered wildly before he realized that the refrigerator, with devilish malice, had chosen that moment to come alive. When he had his breath back, he moved on into a small dining room and turned right through another doorway into a hall. Following his directions, he stopped at a door on his right, behind which he detected a gentle snoring such as might be indulged in by a lady who had drunk mildly to excess. Without further delay, he opened the door and entered the room.

A tiny nightlight made a meager glow. The luminous

face of a clock leered at him through the darkness from a bedside table. On the bed, a prone and ample mass stirred and muttered. Another gentle snore followed.

Now! thought Gaspar. *Now!*

The length of lead pipe at the ready, he moved toward the bed.

Behind him, the silence was split by the merest whisper of sound. Then his head exploded with a clap of thunder and a blinding bolt of pain, and he was swallowed by the absolute night at the end of his particular world.

Rudolph came in the door from the attached garage and went directly to Winifred's room. He crossed to the bathroom and turned on the light above the lavatory. As he washed his hands, he spoke to Winifred, who was sitting up in bed against the headboard. She was gently stroking a cat that lay purring in her lap.

"Well," said Rudolph, "that's done."

"Did you have any difficulty, dear?" she asked.

"Oh, no. I was careful not to be seen, of course. It was simply a matter of leaving him at the mouth of a dark alley on a side street. It's a very rough neighborhood, the haunt of thugs and criminals and undesirable people of all sorts. He was, I'm sorry to say, exactly the kind of man who would be likely to frequent such a place. I emptied his pockets, and I'm sure, considering the blow on the head and all, that it will pass as an accidental killing in a routine mugging."

"My dear, you're so clever."

"Not at all. Very little cleverness was required to deal with Mr. Vane. He was quite a dull fellow."

"Did you find his car?"

"No, but it scarcely matters. Wherever it's found,

there will be reasonable explanations for his leaving it there. It's sufficient that he didn't leave it nearby."

"It's a shame that the ten thousand dollars can't be recovered."

"No matter. A paltry sum, surely, to invest in our continued security and happiness."

Rudolph emerged from the bathroom and began to pull on his coat, which he had removed.

"Must you return tonight?" she asked.

"I'm afraid I must. My weekend has been intolerably disrupted as it is. Besides, it is better to sustain the fiction that I didn't come back here."

"Yes. Of course, dear. Imagine that stupid man thinking that his dirty spying would make the slightest difference to us!"

"I'm tempted to remark that he simply underestimated my appeal to the distaff side, but it would be immodest. Let me just say that I've been incredibly fortunate in my marital life."

"Thank you, my dear. It's sweet of you to say it."

"And now I must rush. I really must." He went to the bed and leaned over to receive a chaste and tender kiss on his smooth cheek. "Good-night, Winifred. I'll see you tomorrow evening, as usual."

"Drive carefully, dear," she said. "Give my best wishes to Angela."

THE ETHICAL ASSASSINATION

Frank Sisk

The *Knights of Pythias invite you to relax.*

This cordial message in white script ran across the green backs of the several wrought-iron benches anchor-bolted to the concrete walk which skirted the small urban park. At the moment, time and clime were hardly propitious to acceptance of the fraternal offer. A bleak dawn, lowering with a sleety mist, had already turned yesterday's snow into a dingy slush. Yet one of the benches had a guest and he appeared to be relaxed utterly. Sitting in the slumped position of one who has dozed off, the man's hatless head of thick peppery hair sagged sidewise on his left shoulder. The drizzle, freezing as a crust on his coat collar, failed to disturb him. Nor was he bothered by the semi-circle of sound—shuffling feet and muttering voices—which grew steadily around him in number and volume. Even the icy voice of Captain Thomas McFate left him totally unmoved.

McFate said, "All right. Cover the poor devil up."

A police sergeant, who had already fetched a spare raincoat from the nearby cruiser, draped it like a stiff yellow shroud over the dead man's head and forefront.

McFate next said, "Get rid of these damned gawks."

Behind him a patrolman turned to face the crowd that had been gathering for the past fifteen minutes

and gradually inching closer. "Okay, folks. Move along now. That's it. Right on home or wherever you're going or you'll all catch cold and die."

"A high-powered rifle job if I ever saw one," McFate was saying to the sergeant. "At long range too." Half turning, he aimed his sallow hollow-cheeked face across the street. "From somewhere in that hotel. Sixth or seventh floor."

"Could be, sir. I'm no coroner but—"

"I'll take odds, Hanson. As soon as Bergeron gets back here with this Damroth, I want you and a couple of men to go through that trap with a fine-toothed comb."

Just then a second police cruiser ranged along the curb, sending a sheet of dirty water among the reluctantly dispersing onlookers, and parked behind the first. A lieutenant, surprisingly youthful, leaped out and opened the rear door to assist an elderly man who obviously didn't desire assistance. He waved the young lieutenant aside and emerged by himself. Erect, he was a few inches over six feet and looked much taller because of his nearly excruciating thinness. His face was thin too, and long to the point of fragility, but the wide mouth was strong and the dark eyes were alive with intelligence and a glint of humor.

McFate approached him, holding out his right hand. "Sorry to get you up so early, Doctor."

"Just call me mister," said the newcomer. "All my doctorates are honorary. Useful on the Foundation letterhead but preposterous in normal human intercourse. Now what's the crisis?"

"Bergeron told you nothing?"

"The lieutenant was most discreet."

McFate nodded grimly. "He was following orders, Dr. Damroth."

"To the letter. And may I remind you again that I prefer to be addressed as mister."

"Pardon me. I'm Tom McFate."

"I know. I've lived in this city for twenty of my seventy years, sir, and in the course of that time I have familiarized myself through the newspapers with your name, your face, and your exploits. Whenever a journalistic account of the day's news included the name of Captain Thomas McFate, there also was a crisis involving life or death. Generally death, and generally death due to homicide. That is the reason I have already asked you what crisis concerns you now. And more to the point, why does it concern me at this ungodly hour of such an inclement day?"

McFate's cheeks grew perceptibly more hollow, as if he were suppressing the cold cackle that sometimes served him for laughter. "Well, Mr. Damroth, you're right about homicide. We got a clean one."

"Clean is not, I suppose, an incongruency."

"A thirty-caliber slug is my guess. Through the heart. Death instantaneous."

"Clean indeed," said Mr. Damroth with a thin smile. From a silver case he took a honey-colored cigarillo. "Am I acquainted with the victim?"

"We don't know. But he seemed to be acquainted with you."

"Who is he? Or who *was* he?"

"We don't know that yet either." McFate held a match for Mr. Damroth's cigarillo. "Nothing on him but an empty wallet with one of those cards, 'Notify in case of accident.' "

Mr. Damroth bent toward the flame. "I can see my name on it."

"That's right, sir," said McFate. "Would you like to take a look at him for I.D.?"

"Naturally."

"This way then, Doc—Pardon me. Force of habit."

Smiling, the old man accompanied McFate to the bench and watched with clinical intentness as the upper part of the raincoat was drawn back from the face. The clinical intentness remained but now was joined by the light of recognition.

"You know him?" asked McFate.

"Very well, yes."

"Who is he?"

But Mr. Damroth was posing questions to himself and to the cigarillo. "To go like this. A month or so before his time. Incredible. Poor Ketch. I wonder why?"

"That his name? Ketch?"

The old man nodded. "Yes, that's his name. Harlan Ketch. *Dr.* Harlan Ketch. A superb mathematician." He turned to look sternly at McFate. "In his case, the doctorate was *not* honorary."

Hanson, the sergeant, said, "I knew he wasn't no hood. Tell by his hands."

McFate said to Hanson, "Tell me something I want to hear when you come back from that hotel across the street." Then to Mr. Damroth: "Was he associated with the Foundation?"

"For the past ten years."

"You said something about a month before his time. Or did I hear wrong?"

"You heard correctly," said the old man, still musing with his own thoughts. "The unfortunate man was dying of cancer. He would have been dead within a month. Two months at the most."

"When did you see him last, Mr. Damroth?"

"Just yesterday afternoon. At tea we had our usual discussion, jocular on my part but quite serious on his, about his mathematical approach to ethics."

"A little out of my line." McFate drew a crumpled handkerchief from the pocket of his yellow slicker. "Did he have a cold at the time?"

"A curious question, McFate." The old man looked outward now with a searching interest. "The answer is no. In fact, he had been immune to the common cold for the past six months."

"Some new drug at the Foundation?"

"One of the oldest drugs in the world, McFate. Morphine. It not only kills pain but in many cases it appears to kill the cold virus."

"Be damned," said McFate. "Well, that proves something, sir." He shook open the handkerchief and held it up. Near the center was a ragged hole the size of a dime. "We found this in his lap. Hanson thought Ketch had been shot while getting ready to blow his nose. I thought different. I guess I was right."

Mr. Damroth appreciatively regarded the captain. "What a bizarre implication! The handkerchief was an effective target."

"Held over his heart. White threads in the black fabric of his coat where the bullet entered. A man in a room in that hotel over there needed that kind of a target at dawn. With a scope on a rifle he could guarantee a clean job."

"Clean, again. I see the meaning now. But why should Dr. Ketch have himself assassinated when he was so near death anyway? Have you considered that?"

"I'm considering it, sir. Intolerable pain maybe."

"I think not. The morphine kept him tolerably comfortable. He assured me of this himself. He tired easily. He ate little. He was losing considerable weight. But those were the only symptoms evident to me or his other colleagues, and we saw him daily."

"Then it must have been something else. Insurance.

Double indemnity for accidental death."

Mr. Damroth slowly rotated the cigarillo between his lips and nodded. "Yes, that might be it. It sounds more in character."

"Then he had insurance of that sort?"

"His financial arrangements were never a topic of discussion between us. I don't know."

"Was he married?"

"Yes. He remarried a few years ago. His first wife died shortly after he joined the Foundation. I hardly knew her. I hardly know his present wife—his widow, rather—but I deduced overtly that the union was not a huge success."

Thirty minutes later, A. B. C. Damroth, president of the Tillary Foundation, and Thomas McFate, chief of the Homicide Division, debouched from a cruiser and made their way along a wet walk to the entrance of a modest apartment building. It required five well-spaced but prolonged pressings of a button under a mailbox bearing Ketch's name to gain a response. And not a very civil one at that, until Mr. Damroth identified himself. Then the tone of sleepy annoyance left Mrs. Ketch's somewhat hoarse voice to be replaced by gushing surprise and apology. The buzzer sounded to admit the oddly assorted pair and they moved without a word down a long echoing hallway to a brownish door marked B-22. At their knock it was opened by an opulently endowed woman in her early thirties who was still folding a fluffy negligee around herself while at the same time trying to do something with her orange-colored hair. As, moving backward, she ushered them into the foyer and thence into the living room, she again expressed surprise, apology, and even a feeling of honor in having the famous Dr. Damroth in her presence.

When the torrent of feminine exclamations and non sequiturs was over, Mr. Damroth said softly, "I'm afraid we have some bad news about Harlan."

Mrs. Ketch didn't quite get the gist. "I'm afraid he's not here."

McFate said, "We know that." Then stiffly, "He's dead."

Mrs. Ketch looked momentarily baffled, but she didn't sit down. "Dead," she said, an expression just short of delight flitting across her face. "Well, that's that's that's—" her eyes widened now in complete comprehension. "That was to be expected." She sat down in a chair.

McFate's jaundiced eyes studied her sternly. "You expected him to die today?"

"Not today necessarily." Then the woman reacted to McFate's icy stare. "Just who is this man, Dr. Damroth?"

The old gentleman performed the introduction and, while Mrs. Ketch was repeating the word "police" to herself, he added to McFate," "With your permission, may I ask her a few questions?"

"Take it. Sure."

"I assume you were aware that Harlan was mortally ill."

Mrs. Ketch, mollified by this approach, said, "Yeah, I knew. Cancer. I didn't believe it at first. But then he had me talk to his doctor. It was incurable, just a matter of time."

"When did he tell you about it, my dear?" said Mr. Damroth with a silkiness that caused McFate to suck in his cheeks.

"A couple of weeks ago."

"I see. And why didn't you believe him at first?"

"Because of all his rigamarole about the insurance

policies," said Mrs. Ketch. "Meek as a lamb, but sly as a fox when it suited him."

McFate cleared his throat; Damroth prevailed, however, by saying, "Exactly how did a discussion of insurance make you doubt that your husband was a dying man?"

"It was so out of character," replied Mrs. Ketch. "Or so *in* character. His *ethical self,* as he called it. Making me the sole beneficiary of his policy and cutting his darling daughter out."

"And he actually did that?" Even the old man's life-riven face betrayed another wrinkle: surprise.

"Yes, he did," said Mrs. Ketch a bit defiantly. "And why shouldn't he? After all, his daughter has a husband now, another poor bookworm like Harlan. But what do I have?"

"Do you recall the face amount of the policy?" asked Damroth.

"Twenty-five thousand."

"Then that's what you have, Mrs. Ketch."

Her face softened with satisfaction. "Why, that's right. So I do."

McFate interposed. "Maybe more, with a double indemnity clause."

"No, he didn't have that in his policy and they wouldn't let him add it. But they put it in mine because I was so much younger." She was proud of this.

"In yours?" Damroth took over again. "Then you now have an insurance policy, Mrs. Ketch?"

"Why, sure. For the same amount but *with* that indemnity thing. That was the deal. That's what made me suspicious when he first brought it up."

"And who, may I ask, is the beneficiary of your policy?"

"Who but his precious daughter? But I can always change that now. And don't bet I won't."

Damroth smiled oddly. "I see. You agreed to take out a policy on yourself, naming Harlan's daughter sole beneficiary, providing he made you sole beneficiary of his existing policy. Is that right?"

"Yes, but I'm no dummy. That ethics stuff he liked to spout—acting for the greatest good—I didn't swallow that one little bit. Before I signed on the dotted line, I made him take me to his doctor. He had cancer all right, no doubt of it."

Damroth remained thoughtfully silent, but McFate didn't. "It wasn't cancer that killed him," he said.

"No? Then what did?"

"A rifle bullet."

"You mean he was shot?"

"Yeah, that's it."

"Who by?" Mrs. Ketch was obviously intrigued.

"We don't know yet. Any ideas?"

"Who, me? No. But what a funny coincidence! Just last night he— Spooky, very spooky." Her frown was more perplexed than fearful.

Damroth interposed quietly, "What is the coincidence, my dear lady?"

"Well, he gave me this envelope that was written on the front of it not to be opened until after his death. Sealed with wax and all. And inside was this key and a note saying—" She stopped, lips pursed.

"May we see the note?" asked Damroth.

"Of course not," snapped Mrs. Ketch. "Things like that are private between a man and his wife."

"Indeed, yes," the old man said, again with that odd smile.

Back in the cruiser five minutes later, McFate said to Damroth, "This is the first time ethics ever came into a case with me. Could you educate me as we drive along?"

The old man chuckled. "On that subject, I'm not

too well educated myself, but perhaps I can communicate the gist of Ketch's theory. He was a mathematician, not a philosopher. But since mathematics is a logical science, the pure practitioner invariably begins to think that equations can be devised for the chief aspects of philosophy which are said to be logic, aesthetics and ethics. Descartes once wrote, *Omnia apud me mathematica fiunt*—with me everything turns into mathematics. It was the same with Harlan Ketch."

McFate said, "I hear you but that's all."

"You were probably exposed to algebra once. You remember the simple equation $a + b = 2ab$. Well, Ketch used equations like that, though much more complex, to determine a course of action when he was faced by a problem. In the simple algebraic example, a might represent two apples and b might represent three apples. Thus, when you saw the symbol ab you knew it meant five apples. If squared, it became twenty-five apples. Now in Ketch's immediate history, he may have used c, let's say, for cancer and perhaps d for death, t for the time remaining, m for money, h for his daughter's welfare—"

"Mr. Damroth, I'm lost. Why h for his daughter's welfare instead of d *or* w*?*"

"Well, not d because we assigned that to death. Possibly w though. I picked h since her name is Honora."

"She's married?"

"Yes, to a grammar school teacher named Speares whom I've met possibly twice. Amiable lad. They're both quite young."

"And not much liked by the widow."

"Evidently. In fact, I believe it was this antagonism, especially between the—ah—widow and Honora that precipitated the wedding. The young people planned

to wait until Bill—that's Speares' first name—took his master's degree. But the situation in the Ketch household grew intolerable. Finally, but reluctantly, Harlan gave his consent. His only child, you know, and she wasn't more than eighteen at the time. Still, unlike so many young-love matches, this one has turned out well. I gather that Harlan helped them out with a little money from time to time. Very little, however, for Mrs. Ketch apparently was voracious." The old man produced another cigarillo. "Enough of this gossip, McFate. Let's return to your education."

"Not now, sir, thank you." The cruiser was pulling to the curb in the city's financial district. "I've got to learn something here first."

"Where in the world are we?"

"At the headquarters of an insurance company. Want to come in?"

"I must if my own education is to be complete."

After passing through a receptionist and several white-collar personnel of progressively higher rank, Damroth and McFate finally gained access to a glass enclosure occupied by an assistant vice-president named Melrose. After listening to the police request, he spoke on an intercom. A few minutes later a pretty girl placed two perforated cards on his desk and, with a polite smile, withdrew. Melrose exchanged the glasses he was wearing for a pair from his pocket and examined each card quickly.

"Ketch, Mrs. Harlan B. parentheses Melanie," he said, "is insured for twenty-five thousand dollars. A clause doubles this sum in case of accidental death, except when such death occurs in a nonscheduled aircraft flight. The premium was paid in advance two weeks ago for a full year.

"Ketch, Mr. Harlan B., for Broadbent, was insured

by us in the same amount, but without the so-called double indemnity clause, until four days ago. At that time, he terminated the policy and was paid its accumulated cash value of seven thousand three hundred and forty dollars and twenty-six cents. By check. The check was honored the next day by the Pioneer Bank and Trust." Melrose dropped the cards and removed his glasses. "Does that answer your questions, gentlemen?"

"All but two," said McFate. "Who is the beneficiary on Mrs. Ketch's policy?"

Melrose picked up a card, replacing glasses. "Speares, Mrs. William S. parentheses Honora."

"And on the other policy?"

"Speares, Mrs.—No, that had been changed. At the time of termination, the sole beneficiary was Ketch, Mrs. Harlan B."

Again outside the building, Damroth said, "McFate, I begin to discern the shadow on an equation involving logic and ethics."

"Then stick close."

"I also believe I know where we'll go next. The Pioneer Bank and Trust."

"I'll say one thing, sir. If I learned algebra as fast as you pick up police procedure, I'd be a deputy commissioner tomorrow."

They arrived at the bank a few minutes before ten o'clock and approached a starchy blue-haired lady sitting nearest the door behind a mahogany railing. The nameplate on the desk identified her as second assistant treasurer. After a keen glance at Damroth's cigarillo and McFate's badge, she murmured something about a Mr. Kessler and left to go to another desk, a larger desk three rows back. When she returned, she pointed to it, saying Mr. Kessler would see them. This gentleman, brisk and prematurely bald, to judge from

his youngish unlined face, proved to be the assistant treasurer, and he got down to the business at hand immediately.

"Dr. Harlan Ketch cashed a check here in the amount mentioned just four days ago," said Kessler, consulting memoranda and several files that seemed to be miraculously at his fingertips. "He did not deposit any of the cash. In fact, he closed out his savings account of two hundred and three dollars and eighty-three cents."

"And walked out with all that cash?" asked McFate.

"Not all of it. Five thousand he took in twenty-dollar bills. We provided the heavy manila envelope. The approximate remainder was converted into a treasurer's check in the amount of twenty-five hundred dollars. I handled the transaction personally, and I particularly remember it because of his insistence on the date."

"Who was named on the check?" asked McFate.

"George Tinker. It seems Dr. Ketch hoped to consummate a business deal with Mr. Tinker and wanted the check to bind it."

Damroth spoke about the cigarillo. "You referred to the date. I presume that means the date of the check."

"Oh, yes." Kessler consulted another document. "He was quite insistent that the check be dated ahead to—yes—it did not become negotiable until today."

"I wonder," said Damroth, that odd smile on his old face, "if that check has already been cashed this morning, Mr. Kessler."

"The banks have only been open an hour, sir. But—well, let me see. With a treasurer's ticket for that sum we usually get prompt reports." He lifted a phone, spoke, waited, spoke again with a frown of faint surprise, and hung up. "Dr. Ketch and Mr. Tinker are early birds, gentlemen. Mr. Tinker cashed the check at nine-fifteen with the Merchant Savings. We must assume the

business deal was favorably concluded." He smiled with commercial pleasure.

"Irrevocably concluded at least," said Damroth, smiling oddly.

An hour later Captain Thomas McFate's cramped office was the scene of a report, a coffee break and an analytical conversation. The report came from the youthful lieutenant named Bergeron on the results of a preliminary investigation he had conducted in the hotel across the street from the Knights of Pythias bench. Room 727 had been rented the previous afternoon to one W. Collins who had checked out this morning shortly after daybreak.

Nobody could recall what W. Collins looked like because he checked in at the latter part of the afternoon when, as usual, a lot of people were checking in. And he checked out during the last few minutes of the night clerk's shift when the night clerk was half asleep and trying to keep his eyes open just long enough to finish the essential close-out paperwork.

"Mr. Collins is a pro," said McFate after Bergeron left.

"Mr. Collins is also Mr. Tinker," said Damroth.

"And a couple of other guys too."

A sergeant brought in two containers of coffee and four sugared crullers. The practical man and the academic man, looking out the grimy window at the leaden day, sipped and chewed for a few minutes in silence. Then the practical man said, "How would a gent like Dr. Ketch ever find a way to meet a hood like this Tinker?"

The academic man said, "That thought has occurred to me too. A year ago Harlan's interest in the inevitable logic of numbers as they appear in games of chance turned him toward the gambling tables. Purely experimental, I assure you. The sums wagered were small

and the profits small too. But he definitely had worked out some sort of system, and for a few months used the gambling dives as a laboratory. The system was not perfected, however, as I recall. He told me once that the house limit in most places prevented numbers from progressing to a real conclusion."

"This Ketch was quite a thinker."

"The treasurer's check was typical," said Damroth.

"Tell me about it," said McFate.

"As it appears to me, the key to the transaction between Ketch and Tinker was the payment. Each had to be sure that the other didn't default on his part of the deal. Obviously, nobody could pay Tinker for assassinating Ketch at his own request, except Ketch himself. And since this type of agreement isn't exactly adjudicable, Ketch could not afford to pay in advance. Men like Tinker, I imagine, might not honor the contract. Hence, Ketch devised a way to pay Tinker only after the service was satisfactorily rendered. That accounts for the time—before the banks opened today. And the predated treasurer's check."

"If Ketch was still alive when the banks opened, he would have stopped payment on the check. That it?"

"Correct. In the business world this is called incentive. Ketch gave Tinker a strong incentive to kill him this morning before the banks opened."

McFate swallowed more coffee and then suddenly sat erect. "Incentive, that's the word. He also must have given this Tinker a strong incentive to kill Mrs. Ketch."

"Correct again." The old man wiped crumbs from his chin. "You're getting a knack for these ethical equations, McFate."

"A good gamble. Seventy-five hundred bucks against fifty thousand."

"With his daughter as sole heir. A nice equation. A

slightly predated check, a slightly predated death plus an ethical assassination equals an estate for the deserving daughter minus any possible litigation from the undeserving wife."

"All right, sir," said McFate impatiently. "But now that the sitting duck is dead, how can he pay off Tinker for killing Mrs. Ketch?"

"Tinker will collect from Mrs. Ketch herself," Damroth replied.

"Five thousand bucks in a manila envelope. She doesn't look the type. He'd have to kill her for it."

"And he will. That's his business, isn't it?"

McFate was now on his feet. "I'm beginning to get it, yeah. The key he gave her last night. And that note."

"In an envelope not to be opened until after his death. He judged her well, didn't he? Timed it well too. When she broke the wax seal last night and read the note, it was probably too late to use the key. But she would have used it this morning whether Ketch was dead or not. Greed and curiosity. She's probably using it at this very minute."

"You think it's a key to a safety deposit box?"

"Definitely not. If I know my Dr. Harlan Ketch—and I'm growing to know him better today—he placed that manila envelope in a baggage locker at some out-of-the-way depot or bus station, a place that would be fairly deserted after the morning commuters left. A place, in short, where Mr. Tinker could work unmolested."

McFate reached for the phone and issued a command to the switchboard. To Damroth he said, "Maybe I can get her at home before she leaves."

Damroth smiled. "I'd wager it's too late."

It was. Nobody answered.

Therefore, McFate took the next practical police step. With a coded municipal map spread out on his

desk and the phone still in hand, he began assigning men to every location within the city limits that had public baggage lockers, adding a personal description of Mrs. Ketch.

"She's one of these orange-haired dames about thirty-five," he was saying for the sixth time when he stopped abruptly to listen, his face cold and expressionless. Then he hung up and swiveled his chair around to face Damroth. "He got her with a knife. They just found the body of an orange-haired dame in an alley near Brixon bus terminal. That's the end of the line."

Damroth said nothing for a moment. Taking another cigarillo from his case, he placed it thoughtfully between his yellowed teeth. "Well, sir," he finally said, "the ethical question that now comes to my mind is this: Does crime sometimes pay? Or shouldn't I ask?"

"Sometimes," answered McFate. "Why?"

"I'm trying to put myself in Ketch's frame of mind when he was working out his equation. He must have considered the fact that the insurance company would try to invalidate the policy on the basis of collusion."

"That's automatic, under these circumstances," said McFate. "But, of course, they've got to prove it."

"It takes at least two to collude, doesn't it?"

"That's what the lawyers say."

"Then all that has to be done is find Mr. Tinker."

"That's all."

"To humor an old man, would you tell me candidly what your chances are?"

"Off the record, yeah. About one in a hundred. Hell, one in a thousand."

Damroth nodded as if this confirmed a tentatively held opinion. Then, lighting the cigarillo, he said, "You know, McFate, I'm just learning to appreciate that mathematics is a terrifying science."

FAT JOW AND THE MANIFESTATIONS

Robert Alan Blair

A spasm of panicking terror chilled him out of the depths of sleep. For several suffocating heartbeats he dared not open his eyes lest this dank, buried sensation of encompassing moist earth prove reality instead of illusion. Again? This was not the first time in recent weeks.

To mind sprang thought of Ng Chak, of the other unmourned unknowns who supposedly slept beneath the cellar floor of the Baxter mansion which was now converted into apartments.

By effort of will Fat Jow forced open his eyes, to discover with an explosive release of breath that the night appeared normal. The mirrored walls of the former ballroom radiated a comforting glow from the street lamp outside. Sleep gone, he sat up on the edge of the couch.

From the dark bedroom at the rear came a soft whimper as the child Hsiang Yuen stirred in sleep. Fat Jow had initiated this sleeping arrangement since his grand-nephew's arrival; a boy needs a room of his own.

He tiptoed to the bedroom doorway, to be reassured by the child's regular breathing. A dream, perhaps; that it had coincided with his own waking interested him. Had he too dreamed? His sleep had been sound. He returned to sit upon the couch, smiled slightly.

Fears and uncertainties are magnified out of proportion in the silent midnight hours—yet the disquieting feeling was not entirely dispelled.

A tinkling drew his eyes toward the ceiling, where the crystal chandelier was quivering visibly, its teardrop pendants alive with reflected specks of light. This was no earth tremor, so common through the year in San Francisco, for only the chandelier moved—not the room.

The tinkling faded, the dancing lights gentled; then an abrupt crash in the room brought him tensely standing. His worn leather rocker had fallen, beside it a table and broken crockery lamp. His apartment door, which he had locked before retiring, burst inward as from a violent kick, but he saw no one in the dimness of the foyer beyond.

A corresponding bang across the foyer, a series of crashes and screams from his landlady's apartment, goaded Fat Jow from his trance. Hurriedly he put on robe and slippers, ventured out into the foyer. Down the shadowy lightwell echoed the voices of alarmed tenants from the balconied landings of the upper floors.

A man's voice rose over the rest: "Who screamed?"

From the darkness of Adah Baxter's apartment she rushed, spectral in white nightdress, her white hair unbound and flying. Her customary regal dignity abandoned, she clung wordlessly to Fat Jow, a head shorter than she. From her apartment sounded a final smashing of glass—and no more.

"A mild quake," offered Fat Jow, in explanation to the voices above. "I think it has passed."

Adah Baxter whispered fiercely to him, "You and I know that was no quake!"

A woman called down, "Is anything wrong, Miss Baxter?"

She looked fearfully back toward her apartment.

"No . . . really," she quavered. "I was . . . frightened, that's all." In a rapid undertone to Fat Jow, she added, "I can't go back in there. May I come in with you for a while?"

Wearily he gestured toward his door. "Sleep is quite far from these eyes," he said. He reached in past her and switched on the chandelier.

Adah Baxter paused at sight of his tipped furniture. "It—it was in here, too?"

"It appeared to begin in here," he said, righting table and rocker and kicking the pieces of the lamp aside, "then passed into your apartment . . . through two locked doors."

"Oh, dear!" She dropped limply into the rocker. "The child! Have you seen to the child? The poor thing must be terrified."

He listened at the bedroom doorway, softly pulled the door shut. "Nothing disturbs Hsiang Yuen," he said with indulgent pride, taxing imagination to define an area of excellence. He pulled the blanket from the couch and placed it about her shoulders.

"It wasn't what I'd thought," she said desolately.

"What had you thought?"

"That it was those real-estate people, trying to scare me into selling the house. I wish it were—I'd rather be mad than scared—but this wasn't that, was it?"

"It is questionable," said Fat Jow.

She hugged her shoulders and swayed. "I guess I've been waiting for something like this."

Fat Jow sat on the couch, frowned at the floor. "Do you pretend to know?"

"Well, don't you?"

"I try to believe this matter of your former tenants to be all a misunderstanding, but I find it difficult. If they *are* in the cellar . . ."

"But I told you . . ." Adah Baxter looked out through his open apartment door into the foyer. "I wonder which one of them it was?" she mused.

He asked uncomfortably. "How many?"

"Good gracious, who counts? They go back over a period of sixty-some years. My memory's not what it used to be."

"Were they all . . . oriental gentlemen?"

"Oh my, no. Only the last two . . . or was it three? I'd had such bad luck with occidentals that I thought orientals would be more dependable, if you know what I mean. But it didn't work."

"One does not choose dependable traits," observed Fat Jow, "by a person's accident of origin. Every nation has produced its poets—and its madmen. Besides the noises, Miss Baxter, did you happen to feel also a great fear?"

"Yes, after the noises started."

"Have there been other manifestations before now?"

"No!" It was a new thought. "Isn't it strange they've waited all this time?"

"Perhaps we grasp the obvious answer because it is easier," he said with faint hope.

"But how can we know?" she wailed. "When will it come again?"

"Whatever it is, it would not seem malevolent. It has not offered to harm us." He would not perturb her further by telling her of his other broken sleeps. "Let us assess the damage in your apartment."

Hesitantly she followed him across the foyer, gaining confidence when he turned on the lights.

The oil portrait of her father lay facedown on the hearth rug, the copper samovar in which she brewed her singular tea lying beside it among the scattered fire tools. By the door to her room a throw rug had been

curled back, a small chair upset. In her room they found the window shattered outward, fragments in the flower border below.

Giving the buried tenants a more suitable interment must only draw official attention and, despite her lethal leanings, Fat Jow entertained an affection for Adah Baxter and so would not see her come to harm. The Walking Woman, sweeping grandly through the city in picture hat and long black gown, was to be preserved as jealously as any cherished landmark.

"I should like your permission," said Fat Jow, "to consult an expert in these matters."

"If it will do any good," she said fervently, "go right ahead."

He moved toward the door. "Do you wish me to remain?"

"I'll be fine, thanks."

Fat Jow bowed himself out.

The Buddhist Temple on Pacific was built with contributions of money, material and labor, not only from Buddhists but also from persons of every faith and no faith throughout the Bay Area. It's austerely functional lines show the heady new flavor imparted to Buddhist tradition by transplantation from Asia to America.

Fat Jow sought through the peripheral chambers of the temple; found his young friend, the novitiate, at study in the library. Catching his eye from the doorway, he beckoned him into the passage.

"If you have not yet enjoyed the midday meal," said Fat Jow, "please join me."

Kwan Ho stretched his stiff muscles. "Knowing you, I'd say there was more than hospitality behind this."

"You are the only person I know who makes a serious study of parapsychology."

"At last!" laughed Kwan Ho. "My two semesters at

Duke University pay off, a free lunch."

Over dishes of Wandering Dragon in the relaxed atmosphere of a restaurant on Grand Avenue, Fat Jow related the midnight occurrences.

Kwan Ho interrupted: "That's the second time you've mentioned buried tenants. Your symbolism escapes me."

"No symbolism." Fat Jow looked about them, lowered his voice. "You will hold this in confidence?"

"If that's what you want."

"There are some buried tenants in the cellar . . . I think. I have never been certain, nor wish to be. One must, however, give Miss Baxter credit for selectivity. She chooses for this honor only those who reveal themselves to be after her hidden hoard of currency. And she is relatively humane; her potion has a gentle soporific effect."

Forgetting to eat, Kwan Ho stared at him. "You're dead serious."

"Yes. The Walking Woman is rather unusual."

"But the police . . ."

"She promptly reports each demise to the police, as it occurs, but such is her nostalgic reputation that they fondly disbelieve her. They think it is all in her mind, as indeed it may be, since the vanished opportunists who have attempted to victimize her are not of a sort to have family or friends eager to trace them."

"But *you* don't think it's all in her mind, do you?"

"No. She may be an habitual killer, but Adah Baxter is as rational as you or I."

Kwan Ho grunted. "Everyone to his hobby."

"If there be such a thing as infestation by spirits, will your skill enable you to banish them?"

Kwan Ho scratched his head. "These days, one is

less and less inclined to look for the occult behind phenomena like this. Often it turns out to be loose floorboards, rattling pipes, rubbing branches, or mice."

"I am sure we may eliminate these."

"So am I. When you'd had a chance to look at things in the light of day, did you get any ideas?"

Fat Jow nodded slowly. "Two possibilities, neither of which satisfies: the one, because no unscrupulous real-estate developer could have produced these effects from outside the house; and the other, because I am reluctant to accept a supernatural explanation."

Kwan Ho winced. "Supernatural has become a bad word. Today's abnormal or paranormal may be tomorrow's commonplace. If phenomena conform to standards or laws of their own, they ought to take their place *in* nature, not beyond it. Frankly, only one part of your whole picture, that cold feeling of terror, might be blamed indirectly on your friends in the cellar. But moving solid objects is something else, established experimentally in the laboratory; telekinesis, used by an agent who's very much alive. Before there was much formal study in the field, it was called a poltergeist. I'd want to go over the site before I offered any theory, though."

"This," said Fat Jow, beaming, "is exactly what I had hoped you would say."

Early the following Saturday, while Adah Baxter was absent on her daily circuit through North Beach and Chinatown, Kwan Ho came. Preferring to work without distraction of company or conversation, he prowled house and grounds alone, missing nothing.

After nearly an hour he rejoined Fat Jow in his apartment. Absently he stalked in, stood just inside the closed door. Manner and voice were awed: "I counted sixteen cement patches in that cellar floor. Do you suppose . . ." He made no attempt to finish the sentence.

Fat Jow leaned back in his rocker and studied the chandelier. "The less I know with certainty, the less I am troubled. What have you to report?"

"I'm not one of your true ESP-ers, understand, but I can detect a signal here and there, if I put my mind to it." Kwan Ho hesitated, rubbed the back of his neck. "I don't like to give you something more to worry about, but the strongest signals I get are right here in this room."

Surprised and uncomfortable, Fat Jow asked, "And not down cellar?"

"None there. As a layman, you're conditioned by a long heritage of superstition to attribute powers to the remains of the deceased. Instead, the effects are felt at the scene of the decease itself. The event leaves its mark on the surroundings, sort of soaks into the woodwork."

Fat Jow glanced about restlessly. "Then relocation of the remains would accomplish nothing?"

"Probably not. About the only way to get rid of the signals is to destroy the building."

Fat Jow disliked what he was hearing. "Must we then live with these signals?"

Kwan Ho walked slowly around the room, pausing now and again as if listening. "There are actually two types of phenomena here, like a double set of signals, one amplifying the other, combining forces in a pretty good show. The residual effects of a past event are limited; they can only create a mood, or a vague illusion, and there they stop; but something else is influencing them, bringing them out into the open." He stopped in the middle of the room, thrust hands into trouser pockets. "Our knowledge of the forces involved is sketchy, but telekinesis is usually connected with a disturbed child lashing out at the offending world through his subconscious, while he's asleep."

Fat Jow stiffened in the rocker, eyes piercing the younger man. "Did you know about the child?"

"You didn't say there was a child."

"My grand-nephew from China lives with me." Fat Jow moved to the window to look out toward the vacant lot at the corner, where the neighboring children were playing. "His parents are dead, and the Reds released him to me."

Kwan Ho threw out his arms. "There you are! Why didn't you say so? If anybody's got an excuse to be disturbed, he has."

Fat Jow turned. "Hsiang Yuen is an excellent child, obedient and well-mannered."

"That's the worst kind; he's hiding something. You've got a Chinese poltergeist on your hands. You'd better find out what's bugging the kid, before he brings the roof down around your ears. He could, you know."

"Can you not learn this?"

"You're closer to him. I came to diagnose some phenomena, not to psychoanalyze the kid who's causing them. If you think it's beyond you, take him to a doctor."

Fat Jow said coldly, "There is no fault in his mind."

"Didn't say there was. But before this is over you may need professional help."

"How may one so small," asked Fat Jow sadly, "harbor anything but small problems?"

"Small? Uprooted from the only homeland he knows, trying to adjust to a radically different society—it's been too much for him to swallow in one gulp."

"But he has adapted, swiftly and admirably. He plays with the others, he attends the nursery school—"

"Regimentation!" said Kwan Ho, snapping his fingers. "What would you expect? Naturally it reminds him of life in Red China, and doesn't fit in with the rest of his concept of America."

"Your logic aspires to the profundity of youth. The wounds of childhood may strike deep, but they heal rapidly and are soon forgotten. I would seek simpler and more immediate causes."

Kwan Ho shrugged and turned to leave. "Good luck! You may look a long time."

Alone again, Fat Jow retreated to the familiar embrace of his rocker and regarded himself in a mirrored panel.

Hsiang Yuen had settled readily and, Fat Jow thought, contentedly, into his new environment. Had not Fat Jow, concerned lest the child feel restricted by the conservative ways of an old man, followed the excellent advice of Mrs. Yick, the social worker from the neighborhood center, and sent him to her nursery school? She spoke knowingly of peer-group and parallel mental-emotional levels, of creative play and self-expression, of group therapy and healthy psychological development. This was a new world to Fat Jow as well as to Hsiang Yuen . . . and occasionally frightening.

How had he matured to manhood without any grasp of these values? Preparing a child for his place in modern society seemed an overwhelming responsibility.

When Hsiang Yuen returned from play, Fat Jow beckoned him to his side. The child came solemnly and silently. He seldom smiled, for his short years had been less than happy. His father, a Red Army captain, had been killed by anti-Maoists on the streets of Canton; his mother, a minor Party official, had died of illness within the year. Alone and apprehensive, he had flown the Pacific to the land of the Yankee imperialist enemy, to join this great-uncle whom he had never seen. Dutifully he stood before Fat Jow, hands clasped at his waist, eyes directed above, at the crystal chandelier.

"Come nearer," said Fat Jow, extending his hand.

Shyly Hsiang Yuen accepted his hand, climbed into his lap, leaned against the warmth of the old man. Fat Jow rested one arm lightly about the small shoulders. "Do you like living here with me?"

"Yes, Uncle." The child's eyes remained upon the chandelier. "Does it sparkle at night too, when the lights are out?"

Fat Jow sighed. Patience . . . a child's attention is elusive, often ethereal, but follows its own reasoning. "A little," he replied, "but at night there is only the streetlight for it to reflect. Perhaps there is something you do not like? Something you would want changed?"

After a thoughtful pause, Hsiang Yuen's eyes wandered from the chandelier to the bedroom door. "No, Uncle."

"I am sure there is something. Is it the nursery school?"

The child pondered, slowly formed an opinion. "I do not like Mrs. Yick," he said experimentally.

"Nonsense. Mrs. Yick is kind and wise, and she knows what is best for children who will soon be attending the elementary school." He could not confess that he too did not much like Mrs. Yick.

In a pleading note, the small round face tilted wistfully up at him. "Uncle, at first you took me with you to the herb shop. Why do you now send me away?"

"I do not send you away—" began Fat Jow, but his words died. Was Kwan Ho right? "You will be spending many years in school," he argued. "It is better that you know what it is like."

Hsiang Yuen eyed him reproachfully, pushed down off his lap. "I liked the herb shop better," he grumbled, shuffling toward the room.

Fat Jow let the child accompany him to the herb shop on Monday. He set him to small tasks, saw him respond with professional devotion. Hsiang Yuen lis-

tened to the talk, watched Fat Jow's skillful fingers at their diverse functions. Toward the end of the day, Fat Jow felt that this was right, that the young absorb interest and learn from the old. Was not this the child's own choice?

Not unexpectedly, Mrs. Yick appeared late Wednesday afternoon as they were about to close the shop. From within the doorway she surveyed the scene with disapproval. She was as tall and as heavy as Fat Jow, her level gaze fortified by authoritarian dark-rimmed spectacles. "This child is not ill," she charged. "You are keeping him away deliberately."

"It is his wish," said Fat Jow. "He is happier here. I cannot deny him."

"You deny him far more by indulging his whim, by depriving him of the school environment. His formal enrollment will then be the more difficult, that is certain."

Fat Jow shook his head, knowing the futility of explaining his true motive to someone like Mrs. Yick. He said sullenly, "I know what the child likes, and what he does not."

"He is better spending his days among those of his own generation," insisted Mrs. Yick; "not here, among the trappings of a primitive, outmoded craft."

He returned angrily, "The old is not to be discarded simply because it is old; it retains much of significance for the world of today." He waved about the shop. "Were this a restaurant or laundry, would your objection be as strong? Why do you focus upon my profession? Many Chinese-American children grow up in the business establishments of their parents."

"This is the Twentieth Century. Witchcraft and shamanism are being rooted out of civilized society, but they die hard."

Fat Jow drew himself up to his full five feet. "Traditional Chinese medicine is an ancient and honored art, requiring long years of study and operative techniques as delicate as those of any surgeon."

Mrs. Yick folded her plump arms in her immovable way. "The Health Department could put you out of business for dispensing drugs without a license."

He held up a finger. "Ah, since you mention this particular agency—" he started toward the wall-telephone, "—allow me to call the University of California Medical Center, where a distinguished faculty member—"

"Wait," she said with mingled uncertainty and curiosity. "What have you to do with them? I should expect you to stay away from there."

He turned back. "I have had the honor of working with them. When conventional courses of treatment have failed, as with advanced arthritis in the elderly, my friend has consulted me."

She whispered, "He . . . calls *you?*"

"Many medical men scoff, as do you; but others, like this man, who is a figure of national stature in the field of orthopedic surgery, look with scientific detachment upon traditional Chinese medicine. They cannot do less than the Chinese Reds. These most pragmatic of people permit it and actively support it."

"And you have been able to help?"

"Twice he approved acupuncture, and his patients responded favorably."

She shuddered. "Sticking needles in people! It sounds barbaric."

"There is relatively little pain. The needles are placed with meticulous care, to avoid sensory areas. It is an exact science, Mrs. Yick. A child might do worse in his choice of career."

"I hardly know what to say," said Mrs. Yick, slightly subdued. "I understand much now that I did not before." Her voice firmed. "But I still think Hsiang Yuen needs a school environment."

Fat Jow looked down at Hsiang Yuen, a rapt listener. "It is your life we juggle so blithely. Would you feel better about going to Mrs. Yick's if you spent part of the week here with me?"

Hsiang Yuen brightened, and the beginnings of a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "I think I would like that," he said.

"A compromise?" Fat Jow asked Mrs. Yick.

"A compromise," she said, smiling now.

Mrs. Yick then drove them home through the evening traffic, across Nob Hill. Wednesday was gone, and the child had his half-week at the herb shop; he would appear at the nursery school in the morning.

Fat Jow knew a relaxing sense of accomplishment —and the nights were serene. After two weeks had passed without incident he began to hope that he had divined Hsiang Yuen's unsettling problem—if, indeed, such had been the cause of the manifestations. Professional help had not been required.

They were partly into a third week when Fat Jow awoke shivering, cold through chest and shoulders. It was a simple physical cold, because he had become uncovered. This in itself was not unusual but as consciousness returned, he found that the blanket and sheet, with a gentle steady motion, were creeping down over the foot of the couch. He hauled back upon them without effect, for they moved with a force beyond his strength and weight. He released them and they landed in a heap on the floor.

He sat up, perplexed, unsure of his next move. This decision was taken from him when slowly the couch

tilted from back to front, and he scurried to a safe distance to avoid its toppling over upon him; but when he was away, it settled back into position as if content to have dislodged him.

Wavering now between fear and frustration, Fat Jow put on robe and slippers. Another wakeful night was indicated. He approached the couch, stopped when it moved again.

The apartment door banged open, and he awaited the corresponding bang from Adah Baxter's door . . . but nothing. Cautiously he emerged into the foyer, peered into the shadows, then upward, where a tiny creaking and scraping from the top of the lightwell recalled to him Kwan Ho's words: ". . . before he brings the roof down around your ears."

The stained-glass dome, three stories up, spanned most of the foyer. Discretion prompted Fat Jow to step back into the comparative shelter of his doorway. The century-old house was forever giving voice to its infirmities, but Fat Jow was not an adventurous person, especially not after midnight.

With an abrupt tiny tinkle that was immediately swallowed in the vastness of the foyer, a single triangular piece of stained glass fell and shattered upon the parquet floor. Had his door been closed, he would not have heard it. He waited motionless fully ten minutes, but nothing more happened, and no one came.

Why a single small piece? It would seem that the night's foray had been abandoned when hardly begun.

Grimly he turned and strode through his apartment to the bedroom; an understanding with Hsiang Yuen was overdue. Without hesitation he switched on the overhead bedroom light. Let the child wake.

Anger drained away. The bed was empty, and Fat Jow was the sole occupant of the room. Unbelieving, he

groped over the tumbled bedclothes, knelt to look under the bed, inspected the closet, the screened window, the bathroom. He dashed back to the open apartment door, ready to arouse the household, but he paused, hand on knob, looked toward the couch. The covers were again in place, drawn up to cover the small form of Hsiang Yuen, genuinely and soundly asleep.

Fat Jow looked down upon the child, then took himself quietly into the bedroom. He awoke to brilliant morning, refreshed and in good humor, for the bed was more comfortable than the couch.

Hsiang Yuen was standing by his side, tousled and bare-footed, smiling broadly. "I was in there when I woke," he announced with happy wonder. "The crystals make little rainbows when the sun strikes them."

Fat Jow drew him to sit beside him. "And you like that."

"Thank you, Uncle."

"But I did not—" Fat Jow decided to let it pass. "Why did you not tell me from the beginning that you wished to sleep upon the couch?"

Hsiang Yuen's smile lessened. "I was ashamed."

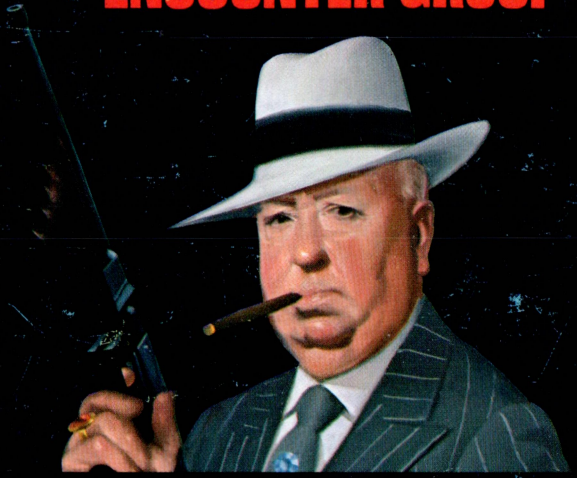
"Ashamed? Of expressing a little preference?"

"No, Uncle . . . of being afraid of the dark."

Fat Jow, suppressing a smile, nodded gravely. He understood more than he wished to imply. "It is nothing of which to be ashamed. At your age, I was the same."

Small problems require small solutions.

HITCH'S ENCOUNTER GROUP



Alfred Hitchcock has developed his own form of shock therapy for those in need of straightening out their twisted lives. It consists simply of bringing together cunning killers and unsuspecting victims in let-it-all-hang-out sessions set up either to kill or cure—preferably the former. Now Hitch has assembled a chilling casebook of diabolically successful experiments in this excruciatingly exciting area of research—fourteen tales guaranteed to turn your dreams into nightmares by such masters as:

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