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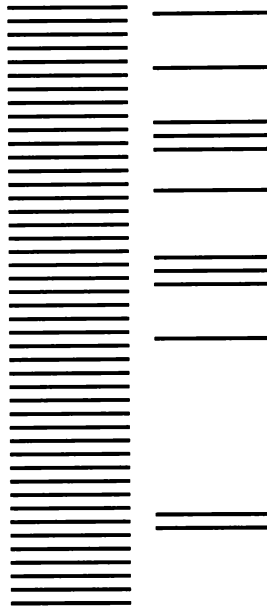
# ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S COFFIN CORNER



**A** is for the **arsenic** he's fond of.

**L** is for his **lethal taste** in tales.

**F** is for the **fiends** who are his best friends.

**I** is for the **icepicks** that they use.

**E** is for the **extra-special pleasure**
he takes in every slaying that's well done.

**Put them all together they spell**

**ALFIE,**

**The man who says that murder can be fun.**

**Here are Alfie's latest and best,**
**in a gathering guaranteed to**
**make a death's-head grin—**

# COFFIN CORNER

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## Alfred Hitchcock

A DELL BOOK

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# INTRODUCTION

Several weeks ago, Dr. Carson Fitch, the famous throat doctor—who has gained fame for his method of loosening the tightened throat muscles of frightened opera singers on opening nights—made a startling announcement. In the course of his thirty years as a medical practitioner he had found that his nonoperatic patients could often sing as well as, if not better than, those who sang for their livelihood. He had reached this conclusion after requesting vast numbers of nonsingers to sing out "Ah" as he examined their throats.

Occasionally the "Ah" would be of such remarkable clarity of tone and of such power and richness that he would request them to sing a simple scale. As a result, he himself had discovered innumerable "talents" who went on to become famous operatic personalities.

At the time his report was published, I was already a fair singer. In fact, I once sang the baritone lead in a high-school production of *La Bohème* and had been congratulated heartily by the chorus master for my outstanding performance. The more I thought of what Dr. Fitch had to say about undiscovered talent, the more I began to think I might possibly have the qualifications for a career in opera.

To think that I might have appeared at La Scala and the Metropolitan Opera, to the wild acclaim of cheering, whistling, bravo-shouting audiences!

I immediately began singing scales and arias while strolling through my apartment, much to Mrs. Hitchcock's amazement and puzzlement. Day by day I could hear the improvement in my voice.

There is only one rule that I follow. I never sing while I am under the shower, although I must admit that I can reach marvelous notes there, due no doubt to the shower stall enclosure, which acts as an echo chamber. This rule is a precaution against possible death or severe injury and I pass it on to you in the interest of your safety. This stems from the time my upstairs neighbor objected to my singing and banged on the floor with a blunt instrument, possibly a broom, to show his displeasure.

Taken aback at this rude interruption, I banged back on the ceiling. It didn't end there. There was a further exchange of banging. Finally he came to my door. He explained that he delivered milk and would I please stop singing since he had to sleep during the daylight hours.

I thought he was making a reasonable request and, since he appeared to be a friendly chap, I also told him about Dr. Carson Fitch's theories.

He laughed pleasantly and said, "You never know, he just might have something there." Then he thanked me profusely for my cooperation and returned to his apartment.

During the week that followed, I made daily trips to a nearby park and sang arias in secluded spots, which were met by the jeers and catcalls of nonmusic-lovers.

At my apartment I unexpectedly began to hear the smooth, resonant tones of another singer at odd hours. To my surprise, it was the milkman. He had a fine voice, a remarkable and powerful voice, in fact, and since I admire fine singing, I found it pleasant to listen to him.

Soon it became apparent that someone else objected to his vocal efforts. I could hear clattering on the steam pipes and occasionally I heard shouts of anger, which I guessed came from the apartment above the milkman's.

When I stopped him in the hall one day and asked him about it, he replied that his upstairs neighbor was the guilty culprit who objected to his singing.

Whereupon I advised him to ignore this harassment since his unappreciative neighbor was obviously jealous and, furthermore, talent had to be worked at so that it could develop.

"That's exactly what I've been thinking," he said, and went off happily.

Then for the next few weeks I heard him singing and also the growing vehemence of his neighbor's objection to it. Between songs I could hear the pounding on the ceiling and the milkman and his oppressor shouting insults at each other.

The milkman sang louder, sometimes with the windows open, and from time to time he sang under the shower. Obviously, he had discovered the beneficial, flattering effects of singing in the shower stall.

One day he sang a selection from *Figaro* while under the shower with great power and it so infuriated his neighbor that he struck the floor with a hammer and dislodged a large hunk of plaster which killed the milkman with a frightful racket.

A word to all aspiring opera singers. Learn from the mistakes of others and don't ever sing while under the shower.

And now that I have passed on this invaluable bit of wisdom, may I humbly request that you read the stories in this collection, which I heartily recommend as first-rate entertainment.

—ALFRED HITCHCOCK

# A WALK ON THE MOUNTAIN

## by Richard Hardwick

"Well, here we are!" he said to his family. "Here's where your old man used to come in the summer when he was a kid!"

But even as he said it, Charlie Walters felt foolish. The place didn't look the same, not the friendly, comfortable, nostalgic place he liked to remember. Sure, he'd expected a place to change in twenty years, but . . .

"I don't like it!" little Chuckie bawled. "I *hate* it! I wanna go to the *beach!*" He began to jump up and down on the floor of the car.

"Shut up, Chuckie!" his mother said sharply, her patience exhausted many miles earlier. But it was as if he hadn't heard her.

Charlie turned the car off the dirt and drove through the pool of red mud that marked the entrance to the weed-grown yard and pulled to a stop. It certainly was different! The cottage seemed smaller, and the old beech tree that he and Billy Nelms used to play in was gone. Not even a stump left. Beyond the thick tangle behind the cottage he could see the lake. And it was different. It didn't seem to have the sparkle it used to have and it wasn't as wide. Not nearly as wide.

"Mommy, I wanta go to the beach, too," Susan, the oldest of the Walters' three children, said, her voice a little tremulous. "I'm *scared* of this place!" She was almost seven

and remembered the air-conditioned motel where they stayed at Saint Simons the summer before, with the wide white beach out in front, and all the other children to play with. There was nothing here she could see but an old shack and a dirt road and thick woods all around. That did look like water there through the trees, but there wasn't any sand.

"Charlie," Nancy said, "you told me—you didn't say it was like *this*." Nancy was Charlie's wife, usually a very agreeable woman. "Do you mean we're paying forty dollars a week for *this?*" She put her arm protectively about little Janie, the youngest, who sat very still with her thumb in her mouth.

They didn't understand! "Nan, for the Lord's sake, let's not start a squabble now! We're all tired from the drive. Now let's unpack the car and get settled and then take a nice cool swim in the lake—"

"What do you expect me to do with these children for two weeks while you're off fishing, or visiting those old boyhood cronies I've heard so much about? Just turn them loose in this—this *forest?*"

Charlie gritted his teeth and got out of the car. "Come on, kids! Everybody take something in, and then we'll go down to the lake for a swim!" He spoke loudly, trying to overcome the gloom that had settled over all of them, trying to sound happy, like the fun was just about to begin. But two of the children were crying now, and Nancy was glaring at him. So maybe he'd made a mistake! Couldn't they give him one night's sleep before the inquisition started?

He went around back of the car and began taking the luggage out of the trunk. "Come on, Chuckie, give your old man a hand."

Little Chuckie was wading through the mudhole with his shoes on.

*"Chuckie!"* Nancy screamed, grabbing his arm and snatching him clear. All the children were crying now, and Nancy wouldn't look at Charlie.

The night was very nearly unbearable, with the last of

the children falling into exhausted sleep after midnight. It was the most uncomfortable bed Charlie had ever slept in. When he awoke just before daybreak, he sneaked out of the cottage and walked down to the lake. The water was too cold for swimming so he began to walk along by the lake. The old paths were still as he remembered them, probably kept open by animals coming down to the lake for water. How many happy hours he had spent here! Then he stopped and began to wonder. Happy? Maybe he just *wanted* to think of them as happy. Was that what had brought him back to this place after twenty years, to relive it through his own children? That surely wasn't giving them a vacation; that was *inflicting* it on them.

The path followed the irregular outline of the lake. It *was* a small lake. From a little promontory he could see the dam, and back up the other way, the boathouse where everybody went on Saturdays and Sundays. That view was strange, because the boathouse had seemed so huge, so—so *terrifying* when he was ten years old. Suddenly, he wondered why he thought of it as terrifying. He'd never done that before. It *was* depressing, and he certainly hadn't expected that. He was beginning to wonder just what he had expected, when out of nowhere, a strange feeling swept over him. A completely nonsensical feeling that he was *lost*, and unaccountably he turned and began to trot along the path back toward the cottage. The strange feeling had touched deep inside him, like a cold finger laid against his heart. He slowed to a walk, blaming his mood on the utter quietude of the lake and the mountain. It was *so* quiet, it seemed lake and mountain were *waiting* for something, long forgotten. He was walking faster, stiff branches slapping against his face and briars tearing at his trouser legs. Faster and faster he walked, until once more he was trotting, then running. He noticed the path was taking him up the mountain, not down along the lake where the cottage was, but *up*. He looked over his shoulder and a patch of water shone briefly through the tangle of branches, like a piece of tarnished silver under the leaves.

The other place was up there. He remembered now. Funny, he hadn't thought about it before he planned the

trip. That place was something about the mountain he should have remembered.

He stopped beside a tall, lean hickory to catch his breath. He used to run all the way from the lake to the top of the mountain, but that was twenty years ago. Used to run with Billy Nelms and—there was someone else. Someone else was there, when they were whooping through the woods, their clothes covered with beggar lice and their short-trousered legs crisscrossed with briar scratches.

Yes, sir! Those had been the days! *Don't go up the mountain, son,* Mama said, and *Stay down here near the cottage, son, near the lake,* Papa said. So he went up the mountain the first day to see *why* they didn't want him to go up there, and that was where he found Billy Nelms.

He turned now and started up the mountain again. It was strange, that with everything so green—the trees and the moss and all the growth covering the ground—he seemed to remember *red* more than any other color.

*Don't go up the mountain, son.* He could still hear her saying it, God rest her soul. It wasn't much farther. He went up the steep slope, pushing against trees to ease the burden on his legs. Then he saw it, only somewhere down the years the house had burned and there was only the skeleton of a stone chimney standing there, with trees grown up where the house had been. Billy Nelms had lived here.

Then, for the second time, the sudden coldness reached inside him, sending a shudder through him. *Lord!* it was quiet on the mountain! Not a bird and no wind in the trees. Only the drip of dew off the leaves and the wet, mouldy smell of the earth. The mountain, soundless as a tomb, smelled of death. Why in God's name had he come back to this forsaken place!

"Hey, Billy!" he shouted suddenly, unexpectedly. Anything to break this silence! "Billy Nelms!"

*My God, now, that was silly!* He looked about sheepishly, as though expecting to see someone watching. It was as quiet as ever. Nothing was there but the old chimney, standing as if it had grown up out of the weeds. It was as if the mountain were trying to tell him something.

He'd left his watch at the cottage, but, judging from the increasing light, the sun was almost over the mountain and Nancy and the children would be waking up. He'd promised to take Chuckie fishing this morning. Nancy would be burned up if she had to handle the kids alone. He couldn't blame her. It was a crackpot idea coming up here. Try to recapture the past and you make a mistake. That psychiatrist he'd gone to for awhile certainly hadn't been any help. Anyhow, they had all wanted to go to the beach where their friends were. Nobody went to the mountains any more. The only reason they ever did was to get away from the heat, and now everything was air-conditioned.

They'd leave as soon as he got down the mountain. The agent could keep the forty dollars. He didn't even want to talk about it. Any place that could make you feel like *this* wasn't fit to talk about! He'd admit to Nancy and the children that he'd always *hated* and despised this red mountain and Billy Nelms . . . and . . . there *was* something else! *Evan*— Oh, God, how he'd hated *Evan!*

He was crying. Sitting at the foot of a tree with the tears pouring down his cheeks. Business pressures on and on; he surely needed a rest. If Nancy knew he'd gone to a doctor—or the psychiatrist—maybe she wouldn't be so quick to shout. He took out his handkerchief and tried to laugh, but ended sobbing. *Now what made me call a big green mountain like this a red mountain?* he asked himself, trying to make a joke of it. *And why would I say I hated Billy Nelms when he was my best friend?* But he had hated Evan; there was no denying that. Evan, bigger and stronger than the rest, and a bully.

He got up and turned away from the ruins of the house, intent on going back down the mountain while he was still thinking straight. This mountain was doing something to him. There was nothing here, just memories of a place that never was as he remembered it. It was cold. Not just the morning air, but the way it seemed. Chill and quiet, deathly quiet.

He started down the path, but took a wrong turn and suddenly he was looking at the tree. It was the beech tree—

the one with the crooked limb, like a crippled arm—and he wanted to laugh because he remembered it being down at the cottage. It stood just alongside the path and when he walked over to it, he saw that the pieces of boards that had been nailed to its trunk for steps, were gone. There was no sign they had ever been there.

Had he come all the way up this mountain to see a tree? What was special about this tree? The urge to run was strong inside him, to hurl himself down the side of the mountain as fast as his legs would carry him. But he didn't move. He stood and looked at the tree and he thought of Evan. How he had hated and despised that boy. Dirty. He even smelled. He never went in the lake when the other kids took a swim, but waited on the bank and pushed them and threw them back in or stole their clothes. *Mean . . .*

It was strange that in all these years he had never thought about Evan. It should have been Evan that stood out above everything else. Stranger still, that he ever wanted to come back here.

*Then get up and get down the mountain . . .*

But he remained seated beneath the beech, leaning back and looking up at the bent limb, the muscles in his jaw knotting. He was cold, and yet the perspiration was streaming, making his clothes damp.

"How silly!" he said aloud. "How completely and utterly stupid! Sitting here looking at a—*a tree*—" He tried to laugh again, but he couldn't. The mountain was closing in on him. *Crazy . . .* to come to the top of a crazy green mountain and stare at a stupid tree with a bent limb. A bent limb . . . a rock in his hand . . .

His mind came suddenly alert. Suddenly suspicious of itself. Now what was that all about? His thinking of a *rock*. He remembered. The last day of the summer. The last day of a month of misery. The last day of being terrified by Evan, of being tormented by Evan, bullied, scared. But the hate had built up too tight simply to go away and leave. It had to express itself; so he took a big, jagged rock and he went up on the crooked limb that hung over the path. He could hear his father calling from down the

mountain, his voice echoing through the woods in the cool morning air. The Dodge touring car was packed and they were waiting for him. His father did not like to wait when he was ready to do something. The shouts grew more insistent, and now he could hear his mother's voice, high and clear, "Chaar—lie!"

But the voices were blotted out, because something bigger entered his mind, requiring all his attention. It was Evan, jogging along the path, his big head flopping about on his shoulders as he ran and the matted black hair falling over his forehead. The rock sped down toward him and everything suddenly was *red!*

"Mama, where's Daddy?" little Chuckie said, "I wanna go fishin'. Daddy promised that me and him would go fishin'."

"I wanna go to the beach, Mama," Susan said for the hundred and fiftieth time. "Mary Ann's family went to the beach. Why can't we—"

Nancy reached out and put her hand over the child's mouth.

"Didn't I hear your father?" she said, tilting her head, listening.

"I didn't hear any—"

*"Sssh!"*

Then from up the mountain they heard him calling, in a strange, childlike voice: *"Daddy! Mommy! Wait! Don't go and leave me!"*

It sounded as if he was running down the mountain, crashing through the underbrush as though something were pursuing him. And as he drew closer, it sounded, too, as if he were crying. . . .

# A TIME FOR RIFLES

## by H. A. De Rosso

The lights that we were to use later were in a tackle box; Caldwell placed the box in the trunk of the car beside the rifles, which were covered with a blanket. He could feel Bridgeman watching. And when Caldwell glanced at him, Bridgeman smiled—the tight, secretive smile that evinced as little emotion as the opaque look in his gray eyes.

"All set?" Bridgeman asked.

Caldwell nodded. Bridgeman's wife didn't even nod.

The three of them sat in the front seat. Behind them, on the floor, were the bait bucket and another tackle box and three fishing rods, things which they would not use. The car knifed without too much sound through the soft summer night.

Rae Bridgeman sat quietly between the two men. Caldwell was very much aware of her nearness. It started that strong something to running through him, the something that disturbed and upset him and made him think of the loaded rifles in the trunk of the car and of the dark purpose that had come to live with him since the night he had held her in his arms.

It was almost as though she were thinking of the same thing, for he felt her shudder. Her voice came soft and small, like a little girl's, and this was not at all like her.

"Is it worth it, dear?" she asked Bridgeman. "The risk,

I mean? They hand out stiff fines for shining deer, especially if you're from downstate."

Bridgeman laughed, light and easy. Caldwell glanced at him, but could not read the look on Bridgeman's face, not by the dim light of the dashboard.

"Relax, hon. Me and Joe are old hands at this, aren't we, Joe? Remember the old days, before I moved to the city? We were young punks then and we did our share of violating. Isn't that right?"

Caldwell glanced out the window, at the black, inscrutable face of the forest whipping by. The headlights picked up the goldenrod and thistles that grew tall on either side of the brown road.

"Yes, we knocked off a few deer," Caldwell said.

He felt Rae's glance switch to him, but he would not look at her.

"I've heard Lew talk about it," she said, "but that was just out of season. You never did any shining, did you, Joe?"

"No."

"Why are you doing it now, then?"

Caldwell said nothing.

Bridgeman laughed, soft and without emotion.

Doesn't he suspect? Caldwell's thought was angry. Doesn't he have any idea at all? Is it going to be as simple as hitting a target?

"I want to take some venison back, hon," Bridgeman said. "The deer are nice and fat now. And they taste much better out of season. Don't they, Joe?"

Caldwell grunted and went on staring out of the window. He felt Rae stir beside him.

"Oh, you two," she said and made a sound of disgust. "You seem to think it's just a game."

"It is," Bridgeman said. "A game between us and the wardens. We always were smarter than them."

"Why don't you just shoot deer when it's—it's daylight?" Rae asked, still exasperated. "Why shine them?"

"It's easier that way, that's why," Bridgeman said. The flat, toneless laugh followed the statement. It was starting

to get on Caldwell's nerves. "A deer'll freeze when you get him in the light, just stands there with his eyes reflecting the light. So you can shoot him right between the eyes. Now you know, hon. What's more, there are no wardens out after midnight, unless they've been tipped off."

"I hope you're right," Rae said.

"Nag, nag," Bridgeman said, teasing.

Rae said nothing. She settled deeper into the seat and stared straight ahead, lost in thought.

The car sped on. There was no traffic on this lonely road. The headlights picked up nothing but the curves and undulations of the brown road and the silent stand of the timber on either side.

Caldwell opened the trunk and took the lights out of the tackle box and handed one to Bridgeman. Then he took the loaded rifles out from under the blanket. He thought his hand would tremble, but it was steady as he handed a gun to Bridgeman. There was a third gun, a carbine, in the trunk.

"Do you want yours?" Caldwell asked Rae.

"Take it," Bridgeman said when Rae hesitated. "It might make you feel better."

"Are you taking her with you?" Caldwell asked. He felt his throat tighten as he spoke and his heart falter and skip a beat.

"Not unless she wants to come," Bridgeman said. "Do you, hon?"

Her eyes searched them both briefly. Has she seen something? Caldwell thought. Has she guessed? But her guessing was not so important as Bridgeman's. He was the one who must not guess.

"No," she said in that strange, small voice. "I'll stay here in the car."

"Take the gun," Bridgeman said again.

"Why?"

"A deer might come along."

"I wouldn't know what to do if one did."

"All you gotta do is turn the headlights on. That'll stop him and then you can shoot him. You won't miss, hon.

You're a good shot. I know because I taught you."

Still she hesitated.

Bridgeman shrugged. "All right then. I just thought the gun'd make you feel better, being left here alone."

"Okay," Rae said. "I'll take it."

Her hand brushed Caldwell's as he gave her the carbine. Her fingers were ice cold and seemed to linger a moment against his. Was she trying to tell him something? Reassure him? He had not told her anything, but she might have guessed. He had wanted to tell her, but had not known how to put it into words. But she must know and was comforting him with that touch. It should have made him experience relief. Instead, he tightened up still more and felt sweat bead his brow.

"What's the matter with you?"

Bridgeman's sudden question caused Caldwell to start. But he forced his voice to be calm and expressionless. "Nothing. Why?"

"You don't seem so enthusiastic about this trip any more. You've hardly said a word all night."

"I've just been thinking. It'll go rough on us if we're caught."

"Well, it was as much your idea as mine," Bridgeman said.

He peered harder, but Caldwell was sure Bridgeman could see nothing on his face in the dark even if something were there. Still, it made him uneasy with Bridgeman staring like that.

"You want to call it off?" Bridgeman asked.

"No." He said it quickly—almost too quickly, he thought. He had to get himself in hand. He had to stop letting his imagination run away with him. Bridgeman knew nothing and guessed nothing and in a short while now it would be over. He drew a deep breath, careful not to make it audible. "Well, let's get started."

"You said to carry the light at the waist?" Bridgeman asked.

They were mining lights that Caldwell had taken from the iron-ore mine where he worked. There they wore the lamps on their hats, but this was not mining. And it was

certainly more deadly than mining with what he had in mind.

"Yes," Caldwell said. "That way both your hands are free to use the rifle."

He watched Bridgeman clip the lamp in place. In the silence he could hear the sound of his own breathing and the soft sound of Rae stirring. She stood on tiptoe and kissed Bridgeman.

"Be careful, dear," she said in that small voice.

"Don't get scared if you hear several shots," Bridgeman said. "We'll be back."

"So long, Joe," Rae said.

"So long," Caldwell answered.

Then he and Bridgeman were moving off, up the road, the scuffing of their heavy shoes on the road the only break in the vast and solemn silence of the forest.

He remembered the spot, whereas Bridgeman didn't, because Bridgeman had been away for several years while he had hunted and fished in this country without interruption. Bridgeman would have passed the place up. It was Caldwell who stopped and Bridgeman, aware that he had, turned and came back a few steps.

Bridgeman glanced about, at the unfamiliar pattern of trees and brush standing stark and stolid in the bright moonlight. "Is this the deer run?" he asked.

"Don't you remember?"

"There's a lot more brush." Bridgeman peered at the second-growth timber that had taken over this cutover land. "But I remember now."

Caldwell was aware of the quickened beating of his heart. Why don't I just let him have it here and now? he thought with a touch of panic. Why not get it over with? He'll be just as dead.

Then Caldwell got himself in hand. It had to look like an accident and so it could not be done here, not on the open road.

"Well, take your pick," he said, noting that his voice had turned thick and gruff.

Bridgeman stared at him.

"Which side do you want?" Caldwell said, fighting a strong impatience. "You take the deer run on one side of the road and I'll take the other."

Bridgeman went on staring, not saying anything. There seemed to be something cold and calculating in his silent immobility, and Caldwell told himself to stop imagining things.

"How far in do you want me to go?" Bridgeman finally asked.

"Not too far. Just so it's a ways off the road. We don't want to kill anything too close to the road, but not too far, either." He could feel himself start to sweat again. "We won't have to carry anything too far that way."

Have I fooled you? he thought with the flutter of apprehension and panic in his stomach. Or do you know? Is that why you're looking at me like that? But how can you know?

Then Bridgeman smiled. Caldwell could see the flash of his teeth in the moonlight. "Well, luck, Joe," Bridgeman said.

"Luck, Lew."

He dropped to one knee and pretended to tie his shoelace while Bridgeman crossed to the far side of the road. He did not want to present his back to the other. As Bridgeman crossed the ditch with one long stride, Caldwell straightened and ducked into the brush. A branch lashed his cheek and scratched it. Then he was through the clumps and out of sight and there he stopped, listening to the drumming of his heart and the repetitions of self-reproach.

He had to wait. He could not follow too soon. He had to let some time elapse. Then he could say he had followed a deer across the road and had shot at the deer. This was the story he had decided on. So he had to wait, with patience, though patience was something that he now found most difficult. Still he waited, all on edge, dreading. But he wanted her. . . .

Rae.

She came before his eyes now, beautiful, desirable. He had sensed the thing begin in him the first time he had

seen her. He had fought against it then, because he and Lew Bridgeman had grown up together and had been friends. But she had never resented his attentions and she had told him the first time they'd been alone that she wasn't very happy and in that moment the purpose had been born and so here he was, holding a rifle in dampened hands, waiting, waiting.

He brushed a hand across his eyes and forehead and the fingers came away wet. He had to put her from his mind, he told himself. He had to concentrate all his thinking on what lay ahead, what must be done. He could not be at all sure that Bridgeman had not guessed and was there across the road, waiting, too.

He drew a deep breath and told himself he did not have to be foolishly direct and open about it. He would go farther up the road, under cover of the brush, until he was over the rise, and there he would cross and, even if Bridgeman were waiting, he would come up on him from behind.

This plan took some of the edginess from him. The sweating eased, the beating of his heart softened. In a little while he felt quite calm and objective about what he was going to do.

He parted the brush and looked across the road where Bridgeman had disappeared. The blank face of the forest stared back at him. He glanced up and down the road, visible in the moonlight, and he was just in time to catch sight of someone slim and slight enter the timber on his side of the fire lane.

For a moment he almost dropped the rifle. Something laughed at him, harshly, cruelly jeering, and then the horror came, from far and deep, from the vast, ancestral places, and then the disenchantment and finally the pain.

Rae. Rae . . .

It was several moments before he could begin to think. So she had a reason for not coming with them, for pretending reluctance in accepting the carbine. What was it?

There were several answers and this complexity all but drove him frantic. Maybe she and Bridgeman were in this together, maybe that was how she had schemed to escape

Bridgeman's wrath, by helping him kill her lover. Or maybe Bridgeman didn't know and she was out to kill Caldwell before he could tell about the two of them. Or maybe (wildly now) there was still someone else, and she saw in this situation an opportunity of getting rid of both him and Bridgeman. Or maybe she really loved him and was coming to tell him so and to warn him and to help him.

Rae. He almost sobbed the name. Rae. How can I be sure of you? How can I be sure of anything?

With the passing of the shock and of the hurt, he was able not only to think again, but to plot again. There was one way of finding out what he wanted to know, one way she could not deny, should she be enticed by it.

He turned and started along the deer run. The brush lessened as he drew away from the road and soon disappeared. Here the trees, maple and oak and wild cherry, grew tall and stately, like pillars of a vast temple, and the ground beneath was clear of underbrush. Moonlight filtered through intertwining branches and here and there laid fragile patterns on the floor of the forest.

The deer run was a definite trail through the timber and Caldwell went along it quite easily. After awhile, when his breath had quickened from the pace of his walking, he halted. He took the lamp, which he had left unlit, and hung it and the battery on a low limb. He switched the light on and then went on to one side, and away from the glow, and stood and waited with his back against the bole of an oak.

His straining ears picked up many sounds arising out of the stillness of the forest, many of which he credited to his imagination. The lamp, swinging a little on the branch, gave out a winking glow. Sweat lay hot and sticky on him.

Though he was waiting for it, the shot, when it came, made him jump. The bullet smashed into the orb of the lamp, snuffing out the light instantly, and then went shrieking down the avenues of the trees. The echoes rolled back and forth, fading into silence.

He got down on one knee and waited, his heart beating hard and heavy. Righteous anger came and then hate.

I'm in the driver's seat now, he thought. If you want to come and make sure that you've hit me, I'm here waiting. You'll want to do that, won't you, Rae? You'll want to make sure. Well, come on then. I'm here to welcome you.

He gripped the rifle so hard, he felt his fingertips sting as the circulation was cut off. So he drew a vast breath and forced some of the tenseness from him and went on waiting.

Finally, he spied a flicker there ahead of him, a faint winking of a light as someone moved in on him. A sudden burst of rage made him whip the rifle to his shoulder and aim at the approaching glow. Then his finger remained motionless on the trigger and his will rebelled and all at once his mind was full of the pain of Rae's having deceived him.

The thought came that this might be Bridgeman after all and, once again, he brought the rifle to his shoulder and, once again, he could not squeeze the trigger. He had to know first; he had to be sure. The killing could come afterward.

He moved in a small circle, going silently through the trees, the oncoming glow a beacon to guide him. Whoever it was was pretty sure the bullet had done its work, for the approach was direct and open. Twigs snapped underfoot and old, wet leaves made soft, mulching sounds. Caldwell moved in behind the walking figure and with a swift step got up close and shoved the barrel of the rifle harshly against its back.

A shrill, startled voice cried out and then was abruptly still. He saw the figure sag and crumple to its knees and in that moment of recognition he did not know which he preferred—being here alive, looking down at the frightened, sobbing woman, or lying dead among last year's spoor.

He picked up the flashlight from where it had fallen from her hand and switched the glow off. She was still down on her knees, making great, gasping sounds, either of vast exhaustion or of near-hysteria. He picked the carbine

up, too, and stood there, holding a gun in either hand.

After awhile she looked up at him. He could see the pale blob of her face. He imagined it would be beautiful if he could see it clearly and very concerned and very tragic. But it moved him even less than would a stranger's photograph on a wall.

"Joe?" Her voice came small and quavering and very uncertain. "Is that you, Joe?"

He said nothing. He stood and stared mutely down at her.

"Are you all right? I heard the shot. I feared so much for you. He's out to kill you, Joe. But you know that now. Are you sure you're all right?"

He stood and listened to the voice of disenchantment. To think I would have killed for you, he said to himself. All at once he envied the animals that burrow in the earth, for he would have liked to crawl deep into the earth, never to emerge.

She turned slightly so that she faced him squarely, her head uplifted and hands outstretched, like some supplicating madonna. "Joe? Aren't you going to say something, Joe?"

"What is there to say?" His voice sounded thick and harsh, a stranger's voice.

She reached a hand out to touch him and he drew back, sharply. The movement was a revelation to her of all he thought and she made a sound, half of disbelief, half of pain.

"Joe? You don't think I— You can't think it was me who—who shot at you?"

"I suppose it was *him,*" he said. "How dumb do you think I am?"

"Oh, Joe, Joe. How can you think a thing like that of me? I came to warn you. I never had a chance to before. He was always with us. That's why I pretended to stay in the car, but I followed, so I could come and tell you. He hates you, Joe. He hasn't said a word about it, but I know him and his ways and he hates you very much and means to kill you. Don't you believe me?"

Another time he might have, he thought, before he had glimpsed her rottenness, and his own. He wondered which was the more vile, hers or his.

"Joe." She was crying openly now. "Oh, Joe. I never thought you'd have so little faith in me. Go on. Why don't you look at my gun? That will tell you if I shot at you. . . ."

They huddled in the darkness. He put an arm about her and she rested her face on his shoulder. She wept silently now, giving voice to sorrow and hurt and bewilderment.

He wanted to tell her, after having examined the carbine and finding it fully loaded and unfired, I'm sorry, Rae. I'm really very sorry. It's just that I'm all mixed up. I want you so much I thought I could kill to try to get you. Please forgive me. The words were fully formed in his mind, but somehow he could not pronounce them.

Her sobs finally stilled; she looked up at him.

"Do you think he's still out there?" she whispered.

His answer was a whisper, too. "I don't know."

"What are we going to do?"

He had been asking himself the same thing without finding an answer. "Stay here, I guess."

He felt her shiver. "You mean—just wait for him?"

"The way I see it, he has to wait, too. He's not sure he hit me when he fired. He's not even sure he smashed my light. For all he knows, I just switched it off. That's why he won't come looking. He can't take the chance of stumbling into me. So he'll have to wait, too."

"Couldn't we leave? Couldn't we go back to the car?"

"And run into him on the way?"

"We could circle, couldn't we? And come out on the road. You know this country good."

"That's where he's probably waiting. On the road. Between us and the car. No, Rae. We've got to wait."

"For how long?"

To that he had no answer.

"Until morning?" she asked.

"In daylight I'll make a better target," he said grimly.

She put her face in her hands, so that the sound of

her sobbing would not carry far. "It's all my fault. If I wasn't such an awful person, this never would have happened."

He stroked her hair, the silken hair, and knew sadness and regret. "Don't cry, Rae. It's more my fault than yours. Don't cry."

"I'm promiscuous."

"No, no you're not."

"I am. And that's a nice word for it. There've been others besides you. Lew and I made a poor marriage, but he won't call it quits. He says I'm just upset because we can't have children. He won't do anything to give me cause to divorce him. He's been hurt before, but he did nothing about the others. You're the only one he's tried to kill. You, the one who means something to me. The others never meant anything."

"That's because he knows I meant to kill him," Caldwell said, for a moment knowing sympathy rather than hate. "In one way, I don't blame him."

"Maybe if I talked to him."

He stared at her. She had stopped crying. She was looking up at him rather solemnly, her face pale and sad in the shadows.

"I'll go to him," she said. "I'll talk him out of it. I'll promise to be good to him from now on. He'll listen to me because he loves me."

"No."

"Why not?"

"He's mad, real mad. Mad enough to kill."

"But not me. It's you he wants to kill."

He shook his head in bewilderment. Something told him that this was wrong, the irreparable error. But he did not know why it was. "He might not recognize you," he said.

"I'll be careful. I'll call to him first."

He shook his head again. He knew now it was the thought of losing her for good that hurt him.

She kissed him softly. Her lips felt cold and stiff. "I love you. Always remember that, Joe. You're the one I really love. Will you remember?"

"I don't want you to go." He thought the anguish would

show in his voice, but his tone was flat. "I'll figure something out."

"No, my darling. I don't want you dead and, strangely, I don't want him dead, either. I want you both to live. Mine is the only way. After all, I started this. It's only right that I finish it."

"I won't be able to see you again?" The pain that he felt was in his voice now.

"No, Joe. This is good-bye."

He held her tightly and kissed her fiercely and he supposed there were tears because his eyes stung and then she was going, walking away from him down the avenues of the trees, in sight for a few brief moments, and then gone.

He stood in loneliness and sorrow. All his mind could hold was the thought that she was gone. She had taken the carbine and the flashlight with her and all he had left to remember her by was an image in memory.

He wanted to cry out, to call her back, but it was too late. She should almost be there by now. It was then that the realization struck him with all its horror, and in that same instant the shot came. . . .

He walked with dull, unhurried steps, for what had happened was already done and he would not allow himself the loophole of hope. So there was no need to hurry. He made his slow way through the trees and even stopped to disengage a branch that caught in the cloth of his jacket and then he stepped through the brush and out into the clear moonlight that washed the road.

Bridgeman had picked her up and carried her out of the woods and laid her on her back on the road. He was down on his knees beside her. He looked up as Caldwell walked in, rifle cocked and ready at his hip.

She lay in that utter quietness that is the mark of death. She still clutched the shattered flashlight that she held against her heart to guide the bullet.

Bridgeman lifted pleading hands to Caldwell. "Kill me. Go ahead kill me. You think I want to live with this on my mind?"

Caldwell lifted the rifle and aimed it. He was cold and grim inside, and detached, as though another Joe Caldwell stood on the side and watched, like a dictator of a play.

"What are you waiting for?" Bridgeman cried, tears streaming down his face. "I killed her, didn't I? But I thought it was you I was killing. She didn't make a sound. She didn't even answer when I called out. All I saw was the light and I shot at it. Damn you, Joe, aren't you going to kill me?"

Caldwell heard other words, as he knew he would forever hear them. *I want you both to live. Mine is the only way. After all, I started this.* The rifle fell and he turned away and stared at the watching, brooding forest.

Why? he asked mutely. Why like this? Why?

The forest held its silence. . . .

# THE LAST GOURMAND

## by Donald Honig

They walked past the monument and crossed the avenue, appearing in the streetlight for a moment and then fading back into the dark. The candy store was the last place open in that end of the neighborhood. They passed it without looking in and then passed the empty lots. A breeze sighed through the weeds.

"I still say it's crazy," George said. "I don't care what you say."

"When you lay your hands on five thousand," Joe Geeb said, "you'll see how crazy it is."

"I don't know what makes you so sure it's there."

"Because it has to be. Carl Muldoon put it there."

"And then they killed him."

"That's right," Joe Geeb said. "They killed him because he wouldn't tell them where it was, or maybe because he tried to make some deal, or for some other reason."

"How do you know he didn't tell them?"

"Because they killed him, man," Joe Geeb said. "Why do you think they killed him? If he would have told, they wouldn't have killed him. They would have taken the money and bugged out. But he wouldn't talk, so they tried to beat it out of him, but they couldn't do that, either. He wasn't a very big guy but he was tough. My old man knew him. He says Carl Muldoon was real tough."

"How do you know they beat him to death?" George

asked. He was tall, walked slowly, his eyes watching the sidewalk with quiet gravity, disgruntled-seeming, as if he had been impressed into this scheme, his hands in his pockets.

"I saw him, remember?" Joe said. "I was the one who found the body, me and Inchy Hines. Ever since that time —God, it's almost ten years ago now—I've been thinking about it, figuring it out—the whole story, from that dead guy and the newspaper stories to Carl Muldoon dead in that house and all that money never turning up."

"Listen," George said, "do you know how many tramps and hoboes and kids and midnight lovers have been in and out of that house in ten years?"

"Not that many," Joe said. "You don't get that many hoboes in Capstone to begin with, and kids have been afraid to go near the place, and the midnight lovers don't tend to go exploring around."

They crossed to the next block. There were a few two-family houses here, dark now, quiet. The avenue was very still.

"If you're that sure then that it's there," George said, "why don't you go in yourself and look for it?"

"I wouldn't go into that house alone for—five thousand dollars," Joe said.

"But you'll go with me for twenty-five hundred?"

"You said it just right," Joe said.

"And how come you've waited all this time?"

"It took me that long to convince myself that it's in there. And besides, didn't you know they're tearing the old place down in a few weeks? This is my last chance."

They came to the house. It was a two-story faded clapboard. It had been abandoned a long time ago, perhaps twenty years. It stood alone in this quiet, lonely part of the neighborhood, gloomy and windowless. The wind came low and smooth across blocks and blocks of empty lots. The neglected hedges in front soared to an incredible height. They were black and shaggy and almost as tall as trees, running the length of the house's avenue frontage, about fifty feet, parting where the cracked concrete of the front walk began.

Ten years before, the hedges had not been as tall but they had been just as wide and intractable and the house had been just as bleak and vacant but only not serenely old as it was now, but with a kind of whining self-sorrowing and desperation as though it knew that there was still hope, time, for it then and that that hope and that time were waning. That end of Capstone had been even quieter in those years. The few houses that were there now had not been built yet. No one ever walked there. But it was different down at the other end. It was, not livelier really, but more exciting then, particularly down around the desolate Baker Avenue cemetery streets. It seemed that people in the city and in Brooklyn knew about Capstone's mild and quiet streets. Whenever something happened in those unpredictable sections in those gunwild days, whenever someone had to be taken for a ride, it was done in Capstone. Dead bodies were always being found along the roadsides, in the empty lots, around the cemeteries, marked with bullet holes, gentlemen given the short action by their peers for reasons seldom quite discovered. (The police were never really that interested; the deposed men were almost always public liabilities the police had been looking for.)

Carl Muldoon was walking down that way one morning when he saw protruding from the grass a pair of gleaming black shoes, the toes pointing obliquely at the sky. Muldoon stepped into the lot and looked down into the grass. There was a very disgruntled face there, glaring sightlessly at the blue sky. Because the bullet holes were in the back of the head, Carl was not sure that the man was dead, although he suspected it firmly because, as the boys in Paddy's said, once they headed in that general direction they had sung their last song. He got down and fumbled his hand over the man's heart. It was stone still. Having gotten that close to him, Carl decided to speculate further. He slipped his fingers in and out of every pocket, finding nothing. He was about to get up when he noticed a bulge on the inside of the man's jacket. There was no pocket there. Whatever was there had been sewn into the lining. Carl covered the man's face with a handkerchief and

then proceeded to tear open the lining. A roll of bills fell into his hand. The top one was a hundred. He riffled them with his thumb. They were all hundreds. He stuffed them into his pocket, uncovered the glaring face and got up and walked away, his legs weak, his head hot, giddy.

He walked up to Grant Avenue and then turned up the police block where he went into the station house and reported what he had found, saying nothing, of course, about the money. (It was five thousand dollars; he had counted it in the washroom in Paddy's.)

The story was in the papers the next day, with Carl Muldoon of Capstone being accorded the proper credit. The motive for the slaying, the paper said, had probably been robbery because something had been torn out of the lining of the victim's jacket.

Carl Muldoon didn't know it, but someone else had been walking in the cemetery that morning. Stephen had seen everything. Stephen was an itinerant odd-job man who lived in the neighborhood. He was a hapless blunderer, with a child's vague mind in his man's body. He had been in the cemetery, near the fence, walking around looking for his mother's grave. (He had forgotten where it was; had been going there for the past six months with flowers looking for it, leaving the flowers on some other grave each time and going home.) He had seen Carl Muldoon kneeling in the grass, staring covertly about. Stephen had frozen among the tombstones, his head thrust forward, peering intently. He watched Muldoon do something. Then Muldoon was walking away, stiff and unnatural, walking quickly. When Muldoon had gone a few blocks, Stephen dropped the flowers and climbed over the fence and ran into the grass. He came to the body and stopped short, tilting his head and staring down at it with wide, lachrymose eyes. *Dead,* he thought carefully, concentrating hard upon the word until he had made it positive, lucid. He looked up. Muldoon's hurrying figure was becoming smaller and smaller. Stephen began to follow. *Muldoon did something,* he thought.

He followed Muldoon up to the avenue. He sat on the curb while Muldoon was in Paddy's. He stared at the

cobblestones, holding his hands tight around his ankles, trying to think upon the mystery that he knew was in Muldoon's actions. His eyes dilated at the thought of the torn jacket. *Muldoon took something,* he thought, decided, after much intense concentration.

When Muldoon came out of the bar, Stephen got up and followed him around the corner, walking under the shady trees on the police block. He stopped, watched Muldoon turn in between the twin globes and go up the steps and pass through the doors. Stephen sat down on the curb again, under the trees, holding his ankles, brooding, staring across at the old wooden building, ex-schoolhouse, that was the police station now. Muldoon came out in a little while, a policeman following. They came down the stairs. They talked. Muldoon was pointing with one hand, rubbing his cheek with the other. Then the policeman said something and Muldoon shook his head. The policeman got into a squad car and drove away.

Stephen watched Muldoon. Muldoon was walking, slowly now, staring down at the sidewalk. *Muldoon is still doing what he's been doing,* Stephen thought. He got up, followed Muldoon around the corner, staying a block behind. Once Muldoon stopped and scratched behind his neck and then began walking again, quickly now, purposefully, his hands jammed in his pockets. Stephen had stopped too, held his breath, and then was following again, down to the avenue. He stopped on the corner, watched Muldoon hurry along the avenue.

When Muldoon turned into where the high wild hedges were, Stephen began running. He ran past the empty lots and cut around the hedges toward the side of the house. He stared at the house, his heart thumping. He waded through the weeds and stole up to a window. He peered into the empty house. He had never been inside. The sign warned against going inside. The sign was the law, grim and baneful and implacable. He heard Muldoon upstairs, could hear him walking on the crackling floor. He became very excited, his hands grabbing the windowsill. And then he heard Muldoon coming down the stairs, coming quietly. He sank into the weeds, lay there waiting to be discovered

and thrashed. He shut his eyes. And then the sounds stopped. He opened his eyes and through the weeds he saw Muldoon passing on the other side of the hedges, fragments of Muldoon walking and walking interminably, and then gone. He felt the weight lift from him and he picked up his head. He got up, looked into the house again and then climbed in through the window. He tiptoed through the empty room, the floors groaning. He came into a still, barren hallway. There was a staircase. He looked up, touching the bannister. *Muldoon was up there before he came down,* he thought, his foot lifting to the bottom step, his eyes staring wide as he climbed the stairs.

He stood at the head of the stairs, leaning forward, listening, his eyes roving from room to room. All the rooms were empty, the doors hanging back. He began going into the rooms, gazing mutely at each blank, paintless wall, his eyes dumbly struck and astonished, his mouth agape, as if this were a place of sacred and inviolable ceremonies. He stared at the drab radiator in the corner of one of the rooms. He stared at it for almost five minutes before he went toward it. He stood over it, hovering, looking down at the lumpy handkerchief that had been stuffed between the pipes. *Muldoon did it,* he thought gravely. He dropped his hand down between the pipes and touched the handkerchief and pulled it up. He opened it and the money unfolded.

The money lay in his flat, steady, dumbstruck hand, beneath his amazed, peering eyes. He closed his hand then, making a fist over the handkerchief and the money. He left the room and went down the stairs, carrying the clenched fist in his pocket. He stopped before the front door. *Muldoon will come back,* he thought. There was a back way out, he knew, that came up from the cellar. He went down the hall, found the cellar door and went carefully down the dark wooden steps.

His feet touched the concrete floor. The cellar was black, with a cool, dank, malodorous smell. He walked through walls and walls of swaying dark, feeling ahead of himself with his free hand. He touched a heavy wooden door, making it move inwards sending all of daylight and

freedom ahead. The door creaked evilly. He shuffled forward, cautiously, because it was dark. His foot struck the wall of a storage bin, and then his hand touched the wall, flattened against it. He turned, suddenly frightened, and walked into the partially opened door and was stunned for a moment by the impact. Then, like an afterthought, he heard the click of the lock on the other side of the door, and didn't realize until then that his bumping into the door had slammed it shut. He lunged forward, grinding his shoulder against the door, his feet kicking and scuffling. His fists rose high and began beating. And then his fingers scratched down over the door searching for a knob, a handle, a latch, scratching and clawing in tragic disbelief, and then stopped. There was no inside handle, no knob or latch, on the heavy door. He stood there, staring at the dark, smelling the small, damp empty bin in which he was trapped.

The sounds woke him up. He was sitting with his back against the wall, his knees drawn up to his chest. He opened his eyes, thought immediately of water. (He had often gone a day or two without food, tramping around the neighborhood waiting for an odd job to be offered, so the hunger hadn't begun to work upon him yet.) He leaped toward the sounds, gasping, laying his ear against the door, his body trembling and tensing. He wanted to shout to the sounds but did not, listened instead because he was afraid because they were harsh sounds, snarling and ugly, that became shouts, especially one voice that kept insisting over and over and then something striking the floor hard with a thud and then the sounds swarmed and jumbled unintelligibly in scuffling and pounding, fast and furious, and then stopped. He caught his breath, listening to the sudden quiet. He heard footsteps cluttering down the stairs, loud and pugnacious. He covered his mouth until they were gone. Then the house was quiet again. He waited a long time, until the utter stillness had settled again, before thinking covertly, *Something is upstairs.*

He sat in the bin, in the dark, sat cross-legged, staring

at the door, scratching vaguely at his beard. It was four days now. He had howled and wailed and whined for four days, and now there wasn't any more of that left. The thing that he suspected as upstairs and to which he had cried had not once answered, so he had forgotten about it. He had pried about at the edges of the door with his fingers until his fingers were swollen with pain. He had risen and pressed his back to the wall and taken one swift furious step and driven and rammed against the door, perhaps a thousand times and his shoulders and arms and hands were full of deep, sullen, brooding pain. He was staring at the door now, his fingers sliding along the lumps of pain in his arm, his eyes lifted high upon the black impervious door, appealing now, childlike, flickering with fear and pain and bewilderment. Occasionally a sound would fall from his dry, slack lips, a faint moan that he was unaware of.

His eyes fell in moody outrage and his hand swept around through the dark and touched the money, his fingers rummaging idly through it as though it were leaves. He crumpled the money and crushed it into balls, became fascinated by it not as money but as something that was there with him in the dark, trapped and doomed the same as he, and he began to caress it softly, gently, and then buried his face in it and felt hot tears running off into it, sobbing into it. He fell asleep with his head on the money.

And then a few days later the money changed. It was his torment, his Satan—because of it he was there. He began to snarl and rage, with a voice he did not know was left in him. The intense hunger made the sounds primitive, animal. He flung the money about in the dark, flailing at it with his arms, smashing his arms against the walls and door and squawking with his dry, grating lungs until he felt things stabbing and throbbing in his arms and fingers and felt the grotesque, terrifying pains of broken bones and felt his own hot blood seeping out of him. He stopped then, not so much from the terrific swelling pain as from the soft, hot blood. It made him docile. It made him collapse to the floor, weakly, whimpering. His dry, flaky lips licked at the blood.

He sat still until the blood stopped. And then he slept. He kept opening his eyes and shutting them, drifting from sleep to sleep, trying to stay the great yawning agony in his stomach. And then the hunger would not let him sleep. He began biting at the cuffs of his shirt, tearing loose threads with his teeth and taking them into his thick, dry mouth. And then he was on his hands and knees, growling and whining, crawling over the money.

"Don't turn on the flashlight until we get inside," Joe Geeb said.

They went through the hedges and up the dark walk. Tall grass grew through cracks in the concrete.

"You were saying," George said, "how you knew about the money."

"It was because of the story in the paper. I cut it out and saved it for years. The body they found down near the cemetery was that of some small-time hood. The paper said that whoever had done him in had torn five thousand dollars—which his family said he had been carrying when he left the house—from his jacket lining. Only it was Carl Muldoon that lifted the money, and these guys who had pulled the assassination read about it the same as me, realized they had been tricked and came back and got Carl and made him bring them here to give back the money or part of it or whatever the deal was. But something went wrong, the hoods didn't get the money, beat Carl to death in lieu of payment, or however you say it, and left him here—with the money. See? Now switch on the light, man."

George shined the light upstairs.

"Let's start there," Joe said.

They went slowly up the yielding, groaning steps, following the beam of light. They prowled from room to room, flashing the light over ceiling and walls and floor, prying into the closets.

"This is where he was lying," Joe said, standing in the middle of one of the rooms, staring at the bald white floorboards under the pool of light. "Me and Inchy came here that day and saw him lying here all beat up. You should

have seen him. They figured he'd been here a month. It gives me the creeps."

"Let's try downstairs," George said.

They went downstairs and explored the rooms there, edging forward behind the flashlight. Each room was empty. In one, they did find a few empty beer cans. Joe Geeb sent the cans sailing out the window, cursing.

"I told you," George said.

"There's still the cellar," Joe said.

They went around the hallway and found the cellar door, swung it creaking back and went down the stairs. They sent the light sweeping through the dark. Cobwebs were fanned out in all the corners. They began going through the bins, Joe Geeb getting down on all fours and scratching into every corner, digging with his fingers, looking for loose bricks and then standing up and knocking on the walls, tearing the drawers out of an old dust-covered bureau that was standing in one of the bins, George swinging the light to follow Joe's every movement.

One of the doors had a spring lock. It was a very heavy door. With a great effort, Joe finally pushed it open. George spotted the light on the wall and then waved it down to the floor.

"Oh my God!" George gasped.

There was a skull there, the light burning on its leering whiteness and then moving down the rest of the skeleton which lay stretched out, the naked bones jutting fierce and fragile.

"Look at this, would you," Joe whispered.

"Who do you think he is?" George whispered, holding the light fast on the ghastly, empty thing.

"Was, you mean," Joe said.

"Let's get out of here, Joe."

"Wait a—Hey, what's that?" Joe said, bending, picking up something. He held it under the light. It was a torn piece of a hundred-dollar bill, a ragged corner. They looked at each other. Joe grabbed the light and whirled into the bin.

"Don't touch the—" George gasped.

"It's here, it's got to be here," Joe said, stepping over

the thing on the floor, flashing the light up and down, pounding the wall with his fists. "It's got to be here!" he said feverishly. He searched every corner, beating on the walls while George kept imploring him to be careful not to touch the— (He couldn't say what it was, merely The—.)

But Joe found nothing really, only fragments of green paper. He stepped back, staring at the maddening piece of bill in his hand. "It was here," he insisted doggedly. "In here."

"Well the money's not here now," George said.

Joe splashed the cobwebbed skeleton with light. "He must have had it," he said, dejected.

"Well even if he did," George said, "how long can you live on five thousand dollars—in here?"

# SUDDEN, SUDDEN DEATH

## by Talmage Powell

The hotel room was lonely, and the report, arduous. At the paper-littered kneehole desk, I paused to light a cigarette. As I leaned back in my chair, I caught a glimpse of myself in the bureau mirror. Mr. Everyman. Five feet eleven. Weight one-seventy. A lock of black hair fallen over a ridged forehead. The eyes squinted, the stubbled face just a little gray with fatigue.

I signed the report: *Steve Griffin.*

I stood up, stretched, and discovered that it was dark outside and that I was hungry. I slid the papers into the briefcase resting against the end of the desk and decided to freshen up with a shower.

I didn't get to take the shower.

The phone rang.

"Mr. Griffin?"

"Yes."

"Long distance calling. Just a moment and I'll put your party on. . . . All right . . . go ahead, please."

The connection seemed bad. Her voice sounded distant, faint.

"Maureen!" I said. "This is a surprise! Wait a second. Let me tell the operator the connection is—"

Maureen cleared her throat, a hundred miles away. "The connection's all right," she said in a stronger voice.

I gripped the phone.

"Anything wrong? Penny. Is Penny all right?"

"She's watching some kid TV show. Oh, she's okay. But—but she doesn't know yet."

"Know what? What do you mean?"

"Steve, you've got to come home. Right away." Her voice moved up-scale. There was a moment of silence; then she said quietly, simply, "A man's trying to kill me, Steve. He made the second attempt today. The first time might have been an accident. But not twice. No, not twice!"

I sat down heavily. I heard the distant voice pleading for me to hurry home. The first time had been two days ago, she said. The same car. She'd been out at a suburban plant nursery to get some shrubs for Dudley to set. The car had swung into the intersection, tires screaming. She'd jumped aside, just barely missed being hit. Today, it had happened when she stepped from the curbing at the supermarket, carrying a bag of groceries.

The same car. Heavy. Green. Like ours.

"My God, Maureen! Why?"

"Why?" she said. And she began crying. It wasn't like her. Maureen never cried. She couldn't be crying because somebody had tried to kill her. "I'll tell you when you get home, Steve."

I frowned. "Stick close. I'm on my way. Call the police."

"Yes, Steve—when you get here."

A hundred miles of blackness, with rain beginning to come down. I was driving a coupe that belonged to the sales department. It was light and didn't hold the road too well.

I wasn't hungry any longer. The phone call kept rehearsing itself in my mind. Somebody was trying to kill her, but she wanted to have me there in the flesh when she told me why and when she reported it to the police.

It was unreal, as unreal as our very first meeting had been. That had happened in Germany, in the closing days of the war. Maureen was with a USO troupe and when the German plane came over—one of those lonely, mad-

with-frustration vultures that the Luftwafe had left—Maureen and I landed in the same ditch. It was a muddy ditch. But I slammed her down and threw myself across her. Guns burped and a siren snarled. She was far from relaxed, but she wasn't trembling, either.

It was over in seconds. The plane went away and activity returned to the ground.

"Blood," Maureen said, looking at my back, and went green. Then she bounced out of the ditch and came back with two guys who had a stretcher between them. They lifted me out of the ditch and she ran alongside as we jogged toward the ambulance. She looked small and breathless and the breeze feathered her short, curly blonde hair.

She stood bowed and penitent as they slid me in the ambulance.

"I'll come to the hospital to see you, soldier."

"Swell," I said, speaking through my teeth because the numbness was going away.

It wasn't a serious wound, but a back muscle had been laid open and it was slow to heal. She came to see me three times while she was in the area. I kept my promise to look her up when I got Stateside. We went around together for awhile. Neither of us had close relatives. We were lonely. The things we'd seen overseas had changed us. We needed something. We decided we needed each other. One night we went to a party, and when it was over, neither of us wanted to go home. We drove the rest of the night, in a state that could be described as just a little hilarious, and got married early that morning.

It was not the perfect marriage, but we had worked at making it work. We were not, in the usual sense, in love. But we had a lot in common; we had companionship, understanding; we were willing to accept each other's minor imperfections without hurt or irritation simply because neither was judging the other with the yardstick of a romantic ideal.

Our daughter, Penny—five years old, blonde curly hair, teeth white and even in her small face—cemented the marriage.

If it sounds dull, I have given the wrong impression. We visited and partied among a sizable group of friends. Maureen was intelligent, and quick to laugh. Her minor failing was her hatred of details, which was reflected in her housekeeping. Her one major failing, if one had a desire to judge her, was her need for constant appreciation. She was neither catty nor flirtatious, but when she entered a room, she had to know that others knew she was there. The actress in her? Perhaps. But I was inclined to think the trait stemmed from a deep-seated sense of insecurity.

The first lights of the city flashed by the couple. Traffic grew heavier. I threaded my way cross-town, cutting in and out of traffic with a cab driver's dexterity. I swung into the residential section where we lived—Meade Park—and my fingers were gripping the wheel so hard they ached.

It was midnight and the rain was even heavier than it had been. Houses here and there—new and white and snug behind their lawns—showed lights.

I turned the corner onto Tarrant Boulevard. Our house was halfway down the block. The living-room lights were on and our car was parked under the carport. I pulled up behind the green sedan and sank back in my seat, content for a moment to look at the car and the lights of the house.

I got out of the coupe, turned up the collar of my trench coat and ran across the lawn to our front door.

I opened and closed the door, expecting to see Maureen arise from a chair, but the living room was empty.

"Maureen?"

The silence of the house began to live. The house began to ache with emptiness, as I gave the downstairs a quick search.

I took the stairs two at a time, my heart beating hard. I reached the door to our bedroom and a glance showed me it was empty. Then I rushed to the door of Penny's room. I was too weak to open it. I had to stand a moment, hearing my own loud breathing, before I was able to turn the knob and switch on the lights.

Penny was in bed sleeping. She had one arm flung over

her giant panda doll. She stirred, and then sighed into deep sleep.

I went back downstairs, wiping my face and hands. By the time I reached the living room, the handkerchief was sodden.

The main thing was not to go to pieces, to think what to do. I lighted a cigarette and forced myself to be calm. As I dropped the paper match in the ashtray, I saw the butt. I picked it up. It was still moist, soft. It hadn't been snubbed out long. It wasn't Maureen's; there was no lipstick on it. It must be a man's.

I kept from doing it aloud, but my mind was screaming her name, and I found myself at the front door, wet darkness in my face, looking for some sign of her. She might have gone out. But not far on a night like this, without the car, with Penny alone upstairs. The neighboring houses were dark.

I closed the front door. I had the average man's reluctance to call the police. Then I remembered the dim, distant sound of her voice over the phone.

In the small alcove off the hallway, I picked up the phone, dialed, and a quiet, bored voice cut short the ringing at the far end. "Police station, precinct five."

"I want to report a missing person."

"I'll connect you with the bureau."

A pause. I wiped my lips with the back of my hand. Another click.

"Missing persons. DeCoster speaking."

"This is Steven Griffin, 642 Tarrant Boulevard. My wife has disappeared."

DeCoster sighed, as if this were an oft-repeated routine. "Her name?"

"Maureen. She . . ."

"What makes you think she's missing? Sure she hasn't stepped out or been called by a friend or is late coming in from a movie?"

"Listen," I said. "Two hours ago I was a hundred miles downstate. She phoned me. She said someone was trying to kill her and begged me to come home. When I arrived, the lights were on in the house, the car was

there—but there's no sign of her. If you've got questions—"

"I'll ask 'em there," DeCoster said.

Eight minutes later, a police cruiser splashed to a stop before the house. I was in the open front door watching for it. DeCoster and a young cop in uniform came through the rain, introduced themselves, and we stood in the living room.

DeCoster was a tall, thin, sallow man. His face was long. He had loose pouches beneath his eyes, but the eyes were gray with sharp lights in them.

"Give it to me," he said, pushing his hat from his forehead.

I gave it to him.

"Got a picture of her?"

I picked up a picture of Maureen from a corner table. DeCoster took it, and I watched him decide that she was, in a unique way, a very attractive woman.

"Pixie," he said, "mischievous. Slanted eyes. Nice teeth. She won't be hard to recognize." He handed the picture to the uniformed cop and told him to take it from the frame, after I'd said that it would be okay.

"Sit down," DeCoster said to me, "and we'll talk."

"Talk! Why don't you do something?" I'd told him of the cigarette stub in my first résumé. Now I mentioned it again. "Whoever was smoking the cigarette couldn't have taken her out of here long before I arrived. Every minute you waste . . ."

He touched my shoulder. "I understand your feelings. But you're jumping to conclusions. Even if you're right, he won't be in the open, a sitting duck waiting with her for us." He nodded at the young cop in uniform. "Get it on the air."

The cop went out with Maureen's picture. DeCoster gave me his undivided attention, as if I were the only customer he'd had in the past five years.

"Tell me about her."

"What do you want to know?"

"Anything you can think of. Her habits, friends, likes and dislikes, activities. Her enemies."

"She didn't have any—not that kind."

He smiled and waited; and I went cold all over. The message was in his eyes: Oh, yes, she did; she had at least one of that kind.

I found relief in talking of her. As long as she could be spoken of in the present tense there was something to cling to. DeCoster was a good listener, attention never wavering.

I tried to show him what she was like, her strange mixture of maturity and perpetual adolescence. Just when you were convinced that her outlook would be forever youthful and unsullied, she would reveal a bit of bitter knowledge about life that should only have belonged to an ancient and rather pessimistic philosopher. At the very moment it seemed she would shy from a puppy's bark, she would show a flash of grit and determination that would have put a mastiff to flight.

With a nod, a word, a facial expression, DeCoster kept me talking. He learned that she'd been an actress who'd achieved only minor success. Her eyes still became nostalgic if talk turned to things theatrical, but she'd spoken little about her acting days since the birth of Penny.

DeCoster learned that I was a minor partner in a plastics firm headed by Willis Burke, who had become my friend during the war. The company had done well. Of a proud old family, Will had used an inheritance to put up most of the money when we started. He was the executive, the organizer, the desk man. I ran things in the field.

"Then you're away from home a great deal?"

"Most of the time . . ." I stopped speaking. We sat looking at each other. Carefully, I put my hands on the arms of the chair. "Do all cops have dirty minds?"

"Now, you just remember this." DeCoster's face seemed longer, thinner. "There are only three possible explanations for someone being after her, Griffin. First, the man might be a nut. Second, he might have mistaken her for someone else."

"And third?"

"Third—in your absences she's been up to something

that made somebody want to kill her." He said it gently. But I hated him.

The door chimes sounded. I was out of my chair, reaching the door ahead of DeCoster. Willis Burke was outside. He was a tall man, but gave the appearance of stockiness. He carried himself with that unconscious assurance that comes from never having to worry about money. At thirty-five, his face was still that of the college senior who is president of the student body. A square face with a cleft chin. Heavy, but even brows. Brown hair that formed a widow's peak on the high, clear forehead.

He was bareheaded, with rain speckles on his hair and dark suit. He'd been drinking, just enough to give him a glow.

He waggled a finger under my nose. "Saw the company car in the driveway. Suppose you'll want a bonus for finishing . . ."

"Come in, Will. Something's happened."

He came in and I closed the door. Will looked from DeCoster to me, sensing that my words carried more than casual implication.

"You in trouble, Steve?" Will asked. "Need help? We'll give it the old college try, kid."

"Will, Maureen has disappeared."

He was sober now, staring at me. Then his face went slack. "When?"

"Tonight."

I went on, speaking as rapidly as possible, not wanting to hear the words I was saying. DeCoster listened and said nothing.

Will licked his lips. "Lemme get this. She called. Life threatened twice. Gone when you got here. Look—this is real, isn't it? I'm not passed out and dreaming?"

"You're sober enough," DeCoster said.

"I was afraid of that." Will had brief contact with the shakes. He sat down. Then he got up again. "No wonder she's been looking as if sleep and she had become strangers."

"When did you see her last, Mr. Burke?"

"Yesterday. In the evening. Carla, my wife, and I in-

vited her to dinner. We'd noticed how peaked Maureen was looking. Decided she needed an evening. But it didn't work out."

"No?"

"Carla and I had words. We often do. I forget what the ado last night started over—oh, yes, Carla had forgotten to make reservations at the Penguin Club. I should have called her during the day and reminded her, she said, I knew what busy days she had, how much she had to think of.

"Usually Maureen is amused at minor tiffs. But last night her temper snapped and she walked out on us. Today she called me to apologize. Wasn't herself, she said. Bad migraine headache."

"You didn't see her today?"

"Nope. I asked her over the phone if I could give her an assist. She said she just needed a quiet day or so of rest. She was going to lie down and do nothing more than her grocery shopping at the supermarket late in the afternoon. I let her ring off then. Frankly, my fur was a bit ruffled because of last evening. Carla put an LP record on after Maureen left. I was a thoughtless fool for hurting Maureen's feelings, said Carla, furthermore I was a thorough cad for washing dirty linen in public. I spent the night at the club. Worked awhile this morning; then went out to cure my hangover, a treatment I have not yet completed."

"Did Mrs. Burke see Mrs. Griffin today?"

"I don't know. You can ask her."

"I'll do that," DeCoster said. "I take it that the two families have a stronger link than merely the business relationship."

"We're friends," Will said. "Sometimes I come here when I want a quiet dinner." Will's glance moved about the living room. "Cozy. Relaxing. Not like my place."

"How often do you come when Mr. Griffin isn't home?" DeCoster said mildly.

The cleft deepened in Will's chin. "Public servant, would you like a punch in the nose?"

"You're not as sober as we thought," DeCoster said.

"Or you're very foolish. Now answer my question!"

Will measured the cop. Then he decided to talk instead of punch. "I don't court scandal in the first place," he said. He glanced at me. "Secondly, Steve happens to be my friend."

I was glad he'd said that and I was glad he'd said it in that way. DeCoster's poisonous insinuation about Maureen was gnawing at my mind, despite my efforts to ignore it.

The phone rang. I went into the hall to answer it. The call was for DeCoster.

He listened mostly, speaking only a few monosyllables, glancing at me from under his brows. From the dining room came the tinkle of a bottle neck on glass, as Will dosed his hangover.

DeCoster dropped the phone in its cradle. His face was gray. As if speaking to himself he said, "The quick slash of a scalpel is more merciful than the sawing of a dull knife."

I grabbed his arm. "What do you mean?"

"A woman answering your wife's description was just brought into the morgue."

A strange thing happened to the house. Its walls seemed to expand suddenly with terrific speed and I was alone in a dark place where a cold wind blew.

Then DeCoster's face swam back in focus. He was gripping my bicep. "It may be a mistake. It might not be her. You'll have to go down and say for sure."

It was Maureen, I told myself. They had her picture. She was easy to recognize. DeCoster had said so himself.

I stood at the foot of the stairs, one hand on the wall and one on the newel post. I looked up toward a hallway where a dim night light burned. Where silence held and a child lay sleeping.

I felt DeCoster's hand on my shoulder. "I'll have a policewoman come over. Sergeant Elda Darrity. She's young, and kind, and really goes for kids. If your little girl wakes, Sergeant Darrity'll know what to do."

Will was standing in the hallway. He'd overheard enough to understand. His face looked as if it had been oiled.

"Steve, I'll go with you. I'll have Carla come over to stay with Penny."

"I'd like for you to go with me," I said. "But don't upset Carla." I preferred to have the policewoman in the house, if Penny should wake up. Carla prattled. Carla might try to tell a little girl about this big thing.

The policewoman was a pleasant and capable-looking brunette. She was husky, but there was kindness in her face.

With Will and DeCoster flanking me, I went out into the night. The three of us got into the back seat of a squad car. A young cop in uniform was driving.

The cruiser was warm and dry. The rain was insistent, streaming across the windows, whispering on the roof. The windshield wipers had to work hard to keep the windshield clear.

I remembered how humbly and tenderly she had watched them put me into the ambulance. "I'll visit you in the hospital, soldier. . . ."

The morgue was a brownstone building. The steps leading up to the double glass doors were worn, scooped out.

The lighting inside was white and harsh after the ride in darkness. DeCoster spoke to a man in a low voice.

"This way, please, Mr. Griffin."

We went down a corridor, into a room where the temperature was kept at a low point. A white-smocked young man moved across the tile floor on rubber-soled shoes. He pulled back a sheet that was draped over a form on a slab, and I made the identification for the one-thousandth time. I had endured the making of it nine hundred and ninety-nine times during the ride over.

The man in the white smock drew the white cloth back over the face of death. I turned away. My flesh felt cold, but sweat was creeping down my cheeks. I tried to recall her laugh, but the dark corridors of my mind held only my final look at her, broken and bloody and stripped of all dignity. Clothing wet and torn. Hair wet about her small, triangular face.

Tomorrow Penny would awaken and ask for her mother.

I was moving and there were two or three people around me, moving with me. I fumbled a cigarette between my lips and someone held a lighter flame to its tip.

Rain in my face again. Then the swirl of blurred lights outside the moving squad car. Will and DeCoster were still with me.

We stopped in front of the house. The three of us got out and went inside. The policewoman said Penny was still asleep; everything was all right.

Everything was all wrong. Everything was out of kilter. Everything was warped, rotten, and unfair. She was needed here. Penny needed her; I did; the house did.

Somewhere in the city, a man was feeling his muscles and nerves relax. Perhaps he was smiling to himself, or having a drink, or grim with a new worry as his mind went over and over the whole thing, seeking flaws, the smallest mistake.

Nobody could possibly need such a man.

DeCoster asked me if I would be okay. I nodded, and Will told DeCoster that he would stick around.

DeCoster turned to me. "Words are meaningless at a time like this; so I won't try to use them. Relax if you can, Griffin, and rest. We'll need all the help we can get. You'll be talking to several people in the morning."

I nodded. DeCoster and the policewoman went out. I sat down on the living-room couch and put my face in my palms. I heard Will in the dining room getting whisky. He came back with the bottle in his hand. "A short one for medicinal purposes, Steve?"

I shook my head. I watched him pour a small drink. He looked tired, almost ill. He didn't toss off the drink. He sat with his elbows on his knees, the glass held in both hands. He was staring at the carpet.

Then he lifted his head. "Steve, I didn't exactly level with DeCoster."

"What do you mean?"

"I've been here when you were away. Now that this terrible thing has happened, I must tell you. I have to make you understand. Steve, she was like a sister to me."

His voice faded away.

I sat perfectly still. "Go on, Will."

He made a vague gesture with his hand. "I know this is risking one thing I've treasured a long time, Steve—our friendship. But I won't take that other risk—having you learn from someone else. It was all completely innocent, but it might look different if you hear about it in a roundabout way."

He stopped speaking again. He seemed to need help in finding words. I let him sweat; I didn't say anything.

"She wasn't the one-hundred-percent poised young matron you wanted her to be, Steve. God knows she tried! For your sake—and Penny's.

"She had qualities she felt she should get the better of. They weren't really bad. Impulsive generosity. A lonely need for applause, approbation. A too-youthful streak in her that needed constant urging to be adult.

"She admired your character, Steve, your strength and realistic outlook. She was a different person when you were near."

"You were going to tell me," I said, "about you and her. Instead you brand me as a fool who didn't know his own wife."

I didn't realize that I was almost shouting, until I stopped speaking and silence provided a contrast.

Will tossed off his drink quickly. "I've told you," he said, "and I've told you why. We were not alone often. Neither of us entertained any thought of an affair. We would talk and have dinner, maybe go for a ride and make jokes that only children would laugh at."

"Like you were still in college," I said.

He dropped his eyes; a line of white showed about his lips. "Maybe you're right, Steve. I guess we did try to turn the clock back and pretend there was no present reality."

"Then you would go back to Carla."

He stared at the carpet and said nothing.

"Does Carla know?"

"I haven't told her. I don't think she'd understand. Steve, do you want me to get out?"

"No," I said. "I think you've told me the truth. I think you lied to DeCoster because in your way of looking at things you felt you were protecting my honor." I stood up. "So I'm not asking you to leave, Will. But do you think you'd better get back to Carla?"

"She'll be all right. I'll stay here. There might be something I can do. And thanks, Steve."

I went up the silent, hateful stairway toward the master bedroom.

I took off my shoes and lay across the bed, conscious of the empty twin bed beside me. I didn't turn a light on.

The darkness was close and I heard the insistent beat of the rain against the window panes. I might have spent more time with her. I might have come to know her better. I knew now that I had hardly known her at all. I'd been too busy making money, because I'd thought that was the most important thing I could do for her. I hadn't meant to cheat her. . . .

The girl came to the house early the next morning. Will was asleep in the guest room and Penny hadn't awakened yet. I was in the kitchen making coffee and thinking about one of the toughest problems I'd ever faced—how to tell Penny—when the door chimes sounded.

She was a tall, attractive girl. Her face was well-defined, with high cheekbones and a warm, full-lipped mouth. She had large, dark brown eyes and glossy brown hair which almost touched her shoulders. The details added up to a total that bespoke quiet friendliness.

"You must be Steven," she said, the voice one more warm detail. "I'm Vicky Clayton."

She saw the blankness in my face. "Maureen never mentioned me?" Beneath her quietness, she was nervous. It showed in the way she gripped the newspaper in her left hand.

"She might have, Miss Clayton. My mind isn't working too well this morning."

"Of course." The touch of her hand on my wrist was an unconscious, impulsive gesture. "I'm sorry, Steven," she said simply. "Maureen and I were friends once."

We were still standing in the doorway. I stepped aside and she entered.

"Would you like some coffee?" I asked.

She didn't protest or explain that it was an awkward time for her to be here. She said, "Thank you."

She sat down at the dining table and I brought coffee in. Her newspaper was on the table, and I saw the item. I picked up the paper. A woman had been run over by an automobile. She was a wife and mother; she had once been an actress. Police were searching for the death-dealing car.

I dropped the paper on the table and forced myself to drink some coffee.

"Have you lived here long, Miss Clayton?"

"I don't. I came here only a few days ago to visit relatives. I phoned Maureen. We were planning a lunch and old-times talk."

"You knew her in show business?"

"I was a terrible actress," Vicky smiled.

There was a racket of racing footsteps; a child in rumpled pajamas came into the dining room. Penny stopped short, seeing the stranger. Then she ran forward and bounced into my lap. She flung an arm about my neck and pressed her face against my chest. "Daddy, Daddy! You're home!" She scrambled down and before I could stop her ran toward the kitchen. "Mommy, Daddy's home!"

Vicky Clayton paled and glanced away.

"Mommy . . ."

Penny saw that the kitchen was empty. She came back to me. I picked her up, swung her high. "Is Mommy still asleep?" she asked.

"Penny," I said. Then I couldn't say anything else.

Vicky rose. "Hi, Penny. I'm Vicky. Your mother had to go away on a trip. And you know I forgot to ask her what you like for breakfast. But you can tell me. And we'll have a nice breakfast."

Vicky proved a godsend; the way she handled Penny was remarkable. The phone began ringing and people began dropping by the house. The place became a slow-motion confusion of hushed tones. Will came downstairs, sober and rather severe. He was back on beam and started taking

charge with a pleasant but firm demeanor.

Carla arrived, a plump, healthy magpie who wasn't chattering today. She held my hands in hers and wept softly.

Will rescued me by putting her to work answering the phone.

I snatched the chance to go into the kitchen. Vicky and Penny had finished breakfast.

I glanced through the window. They were in the back yard, constructing a village in Penny's sandbox.

The police arrived. A different pair of them this time, both in plainclothes. The one who did the talking showed credentials that identified him as Liam Reynolds, lieutenant, homicide. We needed privacy. I took him upstairs.

He was a young guy and handsome. He didn't look like a cop. He looked like a dancer.

In the bedroom, I motioned him to a chair. I sat on the vanity bench.

He apologized for bothering me at such an inopportune moment. "But," he added, "I know you want to see him got. And got good. I want him, Griffin, and I'm going to get him. I hope he tries to play his string to the end. He doesn't deserve to live to reach headquarters. A jury might let him off with ten years."

Reynolds stopped speaking: then he relaxed. "Sorry. I've got a wife myself. Same size, same coloring." He stood up, walked to the window. "I talk too much. But I don't like things that crawl out from under rocks and prey on women."

He turned from the view of the lawn below. "Let's start with her phone call to you last night. Was that the first indication she was in any trouble?"

I nodded. Reynolds was a surprising man. Looking at him, I somehow began to feel better. Maybe it was his directness, the way he faced reality. Suddenly, the daze I was in cleared. I saw the new day outside. I saw the bed that had supported Maureen's body in sleep. I could say it now: She was dead.

"The reason," Reynolds was saying, "that's what you're afraid of, isn't it, Griffin?"

"Yes," I said.

"We'll find the reason." Compassion came to his face. "Maybe the reason was none of her doing after all. Maybe it was only in the twisted mind of the man who killed her."

He returned to the subject of the phone call. I repeated the call word for word.

"She knew the reason," he said.

"But she didn't tell me—and the reason proved to be more urgent than she thought."

"Money?"

"I don't see how. We have enough for comfortable living. Not so much nor so little to be a danger."

"Bad habits?"

"No real vices. Nothing to cause anyone to . . . Nothing big enough to constitute the reason."

"Affair?" The word was clinical, impersonal.

"She possessed a basic honesty, a great deal of kindness. I realize for the first time how lonely she must have been at times, how vulnerable I left her marriage—but if she had responded to another personality with passion, she would have told me and divorced me. I'm sure of it.

"I think you'll have to look for the reason in some tangent to her ordinary daily living, Lieutenant."

"I'll keep what you say in mind," he said. "Now with your permission I'd like to take a look through her things. So far we haven't much to go on. A few routine facts. Cause of death, brain injury. It might have happened when the car knocked her down. She was found on Timmons Street, a dismal, dirty deserted stretch of waterfront warehouses. She certainly didn't go there alone, afoot. He came here, forced her to go with him, and when they passed down Timmons maybe she fought her way out of the car. She was crazy with panic. She tried to run. He used the car as a weapon."

My mouth was dry. "He wanted to use the car. He'd tried twice before with it. Like a fixation."

"Yeah," Reynolds said. He crossed the room. "Did she have a place where she kept letters, mementoes, bills to be paid?"

"She wasn't methodical. Try the dressing-table drawer. Upper left."

It was a catchall drawer. I stood beside Reynolds as he scanned a few old letters from her friends, the small scrapbook she'd started once with some old playbills and a tiny newspaper notice or two. He removed bills, receipts, notes on scraps of paper reminding her to do things. Then he handed me her checkbook. "In order?"

I flipped the stubs. Then I went through them again. A frown creased my forehead. "No," I said, "it isn't in order. There are too many small ones written out to cash lately. The total's out of all proportion to what she usually spends."

"We'll find out if she endorsed them." He thrust the checkbook in his pocket as a reminder to call the bank. His attention returned to the drawer. It was almost empty when he brought out a sheaf of typewritten, clipped-together paper.

"Looks like a play manuscript," he said.

"I didn't know she was writing a play."

"She wasn't. Here's the author's name and address in the upper left corner of the title page. Randy Price. Know him?"

"I don't recall the name."

"Let's go have a look at him."

We went downstairs. Will Burke was finishing a phone conversation. He came down the hallway toward us. He was collected, efficient, competent, a young chairman of the board. He would remain that way until the Joe College in him kicked up its heels and told the executive to go to the devil. Then Will would shed his gravity, dignity, and cares and have himself a party for two or three days.

I introduced him to Reynolds and left the two of them talking. I avoided the living room, where a few well-meaning people lingered. I went out the side door.

The sun was warm and the sky was a washed-clean blue. Everything smelled fresh and green after the rain. I had to work at it to keep myself from thinking how much she enjoyed this kind of day.

At the rear corner of the house I stopped and watched Vicky Clayton and Penny a moment. The Clayton girl sat on the edge of the sandbox, her print dress drawn over

her knees and tucked behind her legs. She was leaning forward, constructing something in the sand. Penny hunkered nearby, absorbed in what Vicky Clayton was doing.

I walked forward and my shadow fell over them. Vicky stood up, the morning breeze toying with her hair. I took her aside, telling Penny we would be right back.

"I'm grateful," I said. "You've brightened her morning immeasurably."

"And mine, too. She's wonderful, Steven. I certainly hope I didn't do wrong. I chatted with her about her mother. I think she's reconciled to her mother's being absent for several days. When she's stopped missing her mother so much, she can be told the truth gradually, without shock."

"I'm even deeper in your debt than I thought, Miss Clayton."

"Oh, I love children. I teach, you know."

"No, I didn't."

"Of course—Maureen never mentioned me."

"I just wanted to tell you," I said, "that I'm going out with the detective. I'll take Penny off your hands and leave her with the woman who baby-sits for us."

"Must you? I haven't a thing to do. But I forgot—I'm a stranger. You might not *want* me to stay with Penny."

I didn't hesitate. I looked past Vicky. "Penny, on your best behavior with Miss Clayton."

"Yes, Daddy," Penny said.

Randy Price's address was on Shady Oak Lane. This was not far from Meade Park, but it was like being in the country. Shady Oak's history began during the between-wars boom, when a development company went broke out there. Streets had been laid out, a number of lots sold, a few low-priced cottages built. Then the crash. After that the city grew in other directions. And in Shady Oak, there were stretches of broken sidewalks. And gaunt, tarnished streetlights, with their glass knocked out, stood like skeleton sentinels, guarding nothing.

Reynolds and I passed two or three of the small frame houses that looked as if they hadn't been repaired or

painted since the day of erection. Junky cars sat in the yards and behind one house a cow was grazing.

Price's address was different in two respects. No cow watched our approach and the car beside the weathered cottage was a fairly new model.

The sun was warm and humming insects added laziness to the day as Reynolds and I walked across the porch. He knocked on the front door.

There was no immediate answer. Reynolds knocked again. Then a voice said, as if coming through a yawn, "Okay, okay. Be with you in a second."

Price, finally, came to the door and looked at us through the screen. He was young, dark, and handsome. He would have looked like a teenage boy, had it not been for the Vandyke and neatly clipped mustache.

"Hi," he said with a grin that showed the flash of large, even teeth, "sorry—but I'm not buying anything today."

Reynolds gave me a glance.

"I'm Steven Griffin," I said. "You're Randy Price?"

His face lighted with pleasure. "Say now—Maureen's husband? Holy cow, why didn't you let me know you were coming out? I'd have cleaned up the joint!"

He held the screen door back for us and we entered. The small living room was furnished with a couple of chairs, desk, daybed, straw carpet. Stacks of old books and magazines were at precarious rest on everything except the desk chair and daybed. Randy Price cleared chairs by the simple expedient of picking up the books and magazines and stacking them in a corner. While he was busy with this task, I had a chance to look him over. He was slender, his elbows and shoulders bony. But his muscles were flat, rippling, strong.

Finished with his task, he dusted his hands on the thighs of his trousers and offered his right hand. "Say, Steve, this is a real pleasure. Maureen said she was going to have me meet you when you got back to town. Sorry she couldn't come out. Busy, huh?"

I watched his face and listened to his boyish monologue, trying to come to some conclusion about him.

"Look, you guys sit down. Make yourselves right at home. I might be able to rustle up a beer."

He rushed out of the front room. We heard him banging around in the kitchen.

I glanced at Reynolds.

"Play it dumb," he said. "He doesn't know about Mrs. Griffin."

Randy returned with three moisture-beaded cans of beer and an opener. He set the beer on the desk beside a portable typewriter. He opened the beers and handed them around. Reynolds and I sat down and took a sip out of the cans. Randy half sat on the edge of the desk, smiling at us.

"Do you share Maureen's interest in the theater, Steve?"

"I'm afraid I don't know much about things theatrical."

"You've missed the most exciting thing in life," he said. "Of course, I'm a long way from the theater yet. But I'm learning life and people, which are the sources of great theater. I'm reading, studying, and working." An inner light shifted and began to burn in his eyes. He paced a few steps back and forth, talking of the meaning of the theater.

I could easily understand how this boy might instantly seal a friendship with Maureen. He was intense, eager, enveloped in a dream that had once touched her briefly. He was Youth with a classic, chiseled face. A woman with Maureen's impulsive generosity and kindness would have wanted to help him the moment she glimpsed his dream.

He calmed down enough to retake his position against the desk and sip his beer. "I'll never be able to repay your wife, Steve. She has an uncanny natural sense of theater, of what will play and what will not. I'm writing plays, plays, plays. A trunkful of them. When I get several that please me, I'm going to New York. I know," he said with such frankness and simplicity that I almost believed him, "that I'll be famous. I have it—that extra ounce of awareness of life and people. The world will some day recognize what Maureen and a few others recognize today."

He stopped speaking, a shy smile appearing, and the

smile made what he'd said appear less, far less, egotistical than it might have sounded. I had never before seen such superb, simple self-confidence.

"Say," Randy said into the little silence his words had brought, "you guys need more beer?"

Reynolds and I both declined.

"Couple weeks ago when I met Maureen," Randy said, "I had no idea what a lucky break it was. She still knows a few people. She's going to get some of my better stuff in the hands of a good agent."

"We have one of your plays in the car," Reynolds said. "Perhaps Mrs. Griffin intended to show it to the agent."

"Well, she has three of them," Randy said. A frown came to his face. His glance moved between Reynolds and me. He began to feel that something was wrong. His feeling seeped into the air of the cottage. "Say, isn't this a purely social call?"

Reynolds stood up, slid his small leather case from his pocket, and opened it. Randy stared at the policeman's badge.

"What's wrong?" he cried. "Has anything happened to her?"

Reynolds didn't answer. Instead he asked a question of his own, "When did you see Mrs. Griffin last?"

"Look, you guys, if something's happened . . . Yesterday afternoon at her house . . . How about telling me . . ."

"What time?"

"Oh, two o'clock, three o'clock maybe. I'd been in town to pick up some typing paper. I was nearby, so I stopped. She said she had a headache and still had her shopping to do at the supermarket. I offered to go for her, but she said no. I left right away."

"She was worried, afraid?"

"Afraid? Hey, what is all this anyway! Will you please tell . . ."

"How did you happen to meet Mrs. Griffin?"

"You mean make her acquaintance?"

"That's what I mean," Reynolds said.

"First time I saw her was right here. She was using

Shady Oak as a cutoff between her place and Fairhill turnpike."

"What's on Fairhill?" Reynolds said.

"Dudley Loudermilk," I said. "A fellow who does yard work for us now and then."

"That's right," Randy said. "She did say something about seeing a yard man. Anyhow, she was in trouble. The fanbelt had snapped on her car. People never think of a fanbelt until it breaks, and that's usually a million miles from nowhere. Damn it, you've got to tell me . . ."

"Her car was on Shady Oak?" Reynolds broke in.

"Yes, about half a mile from the house. Steaming like a calliope. She was afraid to try driving it farther and had remembered passing a cottage, my cottage. She wanted to use a phone to get a tow car. I didn't have a phone, but I had a car and of course offered to help her.

"She was tired from the hike, especially since she'd made it in spike-heeled shoes, and I offered her something to drink. She accepted a glass of water and we chatted for a few minutes. She saw the typewriter and a play manuscript on my desk and the talk switched to the theater. In five minutes or so we were old friends.

"Now for the last time will you tell me what this is all about?"

"Mrs. Griffin is dead," Reynolds said.

"Dead?" Randy said in a thin whisper. "When? How?"

"Last night. She was run over by a car on Timmons Street."

The boy stood perfectly still; the day was suddenly so quiet the insects outside could be heard. Then Randy's face began to twist. It became the face of a tortured boy; and the mustache and Vandyke became incongruous, almost ridiculous.

Tears came to his eyes. Then he covered his face with his long, thin, sensitive hands and ran out of the room. A bedroom was off the front room. He went in there and flung himself across the bed. His hard, choking sobs convulsed his shoulders, his entire body.

He tried to control himself and succeeded after awhile.

He pulled himself around on the bed and sat up. Tear streaks ran down his cheeks to his mustache. He knuckled tears out of his eyes with both hands.

Then he dropped his hands in his lap and sat staring at us, intermittent sobs snubbing his breath.

"How could it have happened to her?" he said. "How could it?"

His eyes begged for an answer, but Reynolds had none and neither did I.

Then a new thought came to Randy, causing him to sit straighter. "Timmons Street . . . What was she doing there?"

"We think she was taken there," Reynolds said.

"Deliberately? *Forced* to go?"

Reynolds nodded.

"Who did it? Who *would* do it?"

"We don't know yet." Reynolds stood with his hands in his pockets. "Whoever he was, he made two previous attempts on her life. Did she mention that to you?"

"No, but I had the feeling something was bothering her. I asked, but she just said she hadn't been feeling well for some time. So I let it drop."

"Where were you last night, Price?"

Randy stood up. "You think that I . . ."

"I'm just asking."

"I was here."

"Alone?"

"Alone. If I'm supposed to have an alibi, I'm out of luck. I didn't know I'd need one." He turned to me. "When will the funeral be?"

"Day after tomorrow, I think."

"I'll be there. If you need me for anything, let me know."

"Thanks."

He followed us to the front door. When Reynolds and I drove away, he was sitting on the sagging front steps of his cottage, staring into the distance.

We rode in silence. Then Reynolds said, "I don't like him."

I glanced across the car seat at him. "Why not?"

"I don't know. I see a person now and then who makes me think, 'I wouldn't want you coming up behind my back.' Too long a cop, I guess. Too much watching for opposites in people." Reynolds shook his head somberly. "Even while that boy was crying, I kept picturing him in my mind with his lips curled in contempt of everything beneath his own fancied genius. His sobs filled my ears, Griffin, but the echo was faint, distant laughter, and I knew he would have a certain way of moving through the dark. Quickly, decisively, without the slightest hesitation."

The remainder of the morning fled, consumed at police headquarters where there were papers for me to sign okaying an autopsy. The autopsy was to be held that afternoon. Reynolds said Maureen's body would be released to me tomorrow or the next day.

Reynolds talked with the two men who'd spent the morning on Timmons Street. They'd learned nothing new. There had not been any witnesses to the killing.

Reynolds said he would send me home in a squad car. "Can you take some more legwork?" he asked.

"If it's necessary."

"I think it is. I want you as close to the investigation as possible. A chance word or action might crop up somewhere that would seem okay to us, but which you—knowing her—would spot as being out of line."

"I'll get some lunch. You can pick me up at the house."

A young, fresh-faced cop drew the assignment of taking me home. He was respectful, sympathetic, and silent. And he seemed to understand, when I said I wanted to detour by Timmons Street.

I recognized it as a morbid impulse. But there was also the wish to have been there at the very end, to have been able to do something to avert the end.

Timmons Street had about it an air of desertion and decay. The big warehouses loomed dirty and silent, backs to the street, faces to the turgid river.

There were a couple of poolrooms, with lean teenage boys lounging in the doorways, and a greasy restaurant or two.

The only sign of real activity was the mooring of a

scabrous barge at the end of an old dock built to service a warehouse which belonged, according to a weathered sign, to Kukolovitch & Sons. Seamen made the barge fast and the tug that had brought it moved downriver with a hoot of the horn.

"Right over there, Mr. Griffin," the young cop said.

He'd stopped the car for me. I got out and walked a few steps. The police had made some chalk marks on the cracked asphalt. Other than that, there was no sign of the terrible thing that had happened there. She might never have existed so far as the street was concerned. There were not even skid marks, because he hadn't been trying to stop; he'd been trying to hit her.

I turned away, got in the squad car, and went home to lunch.

Vicky Clayton and Penny were the only people in the house. Vicky explained that Will had left a half hour earlier after calling his office.

Vicky had the table spread with sandwiches, tossed salad, coffee and cake. Penny was finishing lunch, talking between bites about her delightful morning. Then Vicky took Penny upstairs for her afternoon nap.

Vicky returned as I finished my coffee. We cleared the table together and as Vicky stacked dishes in the sink she gave me a direct look. "I'm looking for work, Steven."

"Thought you teach."

"I do. But there's no school now; it's summer. I have loads of time and have been wondering what to do with myself. I've attended summer sessions at the university for the past three summers in a row. I'm tired of that." She ran hot water into the sink, added detergent. "You haven't had a chance to think about it yet, but finding the right person to keep house and take care of Penny is going to be a sizable problem. Please, let me help. For a few days. Until you have a chance to start setting your life in order again."

I nodded, granting her request. "In many ways you're like her."

"Maureen?"

"Yes," I said. "The same sort of kindness. The same impulsive generosity."

Reynolds arrived in a police car. When we were in the car, I said, "Where are we going?"

"Plant nursery. Then the supermarket."

The trip to the plant nursery consumed time without returning a dividend. No one there had seen a woman almost hit by a car two days ago.

Reynolds and I got back in the car and drove from the suburban nursery to the supermarket south of Meade Park. There, the manager polished his glasses. "Sure, I remember some of the employees talking about a woman almost getting hit."

"Who saw it?" Reynolds asked.

"Why, I don't know."

"Someone did, or they wouldn't have been talking about it. Let's find out."

The third employee we talked to was a plump, brunette girl. She was a checker and stood with her back to her cash register. Customers with food buggies in nearby lines watched curiously.

"Gee, yes, she was almost killed!"

"You saw it?" Reynolds asked.

"No, but I was the first one he told about it."

"Who?"

"Tommy. Tommy Haines. He saw it."

Reynolds glanced at the manager.

"Tommy is a stock clerk," the manager said. "When we have long lines out here, he bags purchases and carries them out to our customers' cars. He's in back now helping unload a shipment of tomatoes."

The stockroom was cool and dim, cluttered with crates and baskets. It smelled of earth and winey apples.

Tommy was a tall, thin boy with a shock of sandy hair. He walked over to one side of the stockroom, wiping his face on the tail of his large, white apron.

He looked at Reynolds' badge, then at Reynolds' face. "Yeah, I saw the lady almost get hit. She trying to locate the driver?"

"Something like that. Is this the lady?" From his inside pocket, Reynolds produced a picture. It was of Maureen, a smaller reproduction of the picture of her DeCoster had taken with him the night before. I wondered how many of those small pictures were scattered about town in the pockets of men who were out asking questions.

"That's her," Tommy said. "I'd know her anywhere, even if she was so scared she looked a little different yesterday."

"Tell us exactly what you saw," Reynolds said.

"Well, it was right at closing time and we had a last-minute rush. I'd taken a double armload of groceries out to a customer's car. I was headed back across the parking lot when I saw this lady come out. She was carrying her own, only a small package.

"I didn't pay too much attention, except to notice she was worth a second look. She stepped off the curb to cross the street—sometimes they park over there, because if you want to turn left it's hard to get out of the parking area when traffic is heavy.

"She must have been past the middle of the street when she screamed. Not loud. But loud enough. I wasn't watching, because I'd started back into the store. But I turned around when I heard her yell like that.

"She'd caught a good break in traffic, to make her crossing. But there was this car that must have whipped out of the intersection. Whoever was driving was driving too fast, and when she saw him and yelled, he must have lost his head."

"What do you mean, Tommy?"

"Well, she dropped the groceries, and she was getting out of the way. And fast. But instead of cutting away from her, the guy got rattled and cut toward her. Then right at the last second, he shifted the wheel away from her. Lucky thing she was young and quick. If she'd been an old lady, it would have been curtains. She never would've got out of the way in time. I ran out and helped her get up. She said she was okay. Didn't want a doctor. Going home, she said. When she saw her husband, she said, everything would be all right."

"She got in her car and drove away then?"

"Yeah. And the funny thing, she was driving a twin to the car that nearly hit her."

"How about the license number, Tommy?"

"Golly, I didn't even think about it until the guy had gone around the next corner and was out of sight."

"You're sure a man was driving?"

"Looked like a man."

"Could it have been a woman with, say, an Italian haircut?"

"Never thought of that. Could have been. Just figured it was a man."

"Did she say anything to you about the car or driver?"

"Nope. She was crying a little. That didn't surprise me. She was mumbling something that didn't make sense. Just words."

"Remember them?"

"Well, she was crying. And she said she wanted her husband. She said she had to reach somebody and let him know he was wrong, that she hadn't meant it. Just words. Kind of hysterical, you know."

"Thanks, Tommy."

"Sure," he grinned. "Glad to get away from them tomatoes for a few minutes. I guess the lady was okay once she got home to her husband."

Reynolds and I walked out of the store, got in the police car, and drove away. I thought of the way he'd tortured her and then of the way he'd succeeded at last on Timmons Street. I began to picture him dead. I didn't want Reynolds or the state to get him. I began wanting to pronounce sentence myself and see that that sentence was carried out.

Reynolds was a deft, swift driver. We threaded through traffic.

"How about that car he was driving," Reynolds said, as if speaking to himself. "Odd that it was a twin to yours, Griffin. She remarked on it. So did Tommy Haines."

"Coincidence?" I asked.

"Maybe. But a broad one. That shade of green isn't too common in that make of car."

"No, we bought it for that reason, among others," I said. "Maureen wanted something unique. Not flashy. Just a bit unusual."

"I think we're dealing with a nut," Reynolds said. "Everything points to it. He took a long chance on somebody seeing him well enough for future identification or getting his license number when he tried that stunt in front of a busy supermarket. That isn't a man thinking in normal patterns.

"Suppose for a minute that he *is* a nut with the fixation in his garbled mind that the job had to be done with a certain kind of car—a car like yours. Why? What would lead him to think like that?"

I stared at Reynolds.

His face was tight. "I suspect you're a jump ahead of my reasoning. The car, in his mind, must be tied in with his reason for wanting to do what he did. But why the car—unless your car had done something to him?"

"Maureen would have reported an accident."

"Maybe. Maybe not. If she hurt someone, she might have panicked. Anyway, I didn't say she was driving. Do you ever loan the car?"

"We never have. But we wouldn't turn down a friend if he made a request."

"Has the car been repaired recently? Bent fender, broken headlight, anything like that?"

"Not that I know of."

"We'll find out. It'll take time. He's built himself a tight house, Griffin. Nobody knows him. Nobody saw him. Nobody knows his reason. The car is the one loose brick."

There were hushed, taut people at the house again. Will was there. I endured the barrage of murmured sympathy. The people filtered away and Will said, "You look peaked. You need some coffee. Vicky Clayton left a fresh pot, anticipating the need. Smart girl, that Vicky."

"Where is she?"

"Took Penny downtown. Too many people in and out, she said. They would communicate their feelings to Penny, Vicky said."

We had coffee and I thought of a loose end or two of business. But Will wouldn't let me mention them.

"Forget the business for a month. Or as long as necessary. The business won't suffer. Wouldn't be what it is if it hadn't been for you in the field, anyway."

"I spent too much time in the field, Will."

"I know."

"A month or two out. Weekend at home. No good."

He put his hand on my shoulder. "You can't unwind the past. What's Reynolds found out?"

I told him of Reynolds' idea about the car.

"Reynolds is no genius," Will said, "but he's a tough, shrewd cop, and he has experience. He's accustomed to looking for patterns. Maybe he's found one. Something was bothering Maureen, as I mentioned last night. And it didn't start two days ago, when the first attempt was made, either."

"You'd noticed it before?"

He shifted his weight in the breakfast-nook chair. "I first noticed it one afternoon about three weeks ago. I ran into her downtown. She was coming out of a florist shop, looking like she'd lost her last friend."

He helped himself to a second coffee. "I thought she was ill. She said she was feeling okay and brightened somewhat. Then I guessed she was just tired, maybe lonely. I invited her to have something tall and cool and she said she had to get home. Then I made a bright crack. I thought maybe it would cheer her up, that she might smile. I said, 'Rich uncle kick off and you're getting some flowers for the funeral?' I knew of course that no one we knew had died. But she didn't laugh. She almost burst into tears."

I pushed my coffee cup aside. "You remember the florist?"

"Sure. The little place on the corner of Second and Park."

Will accepted my abrupt departure without ruffled feelings. I remembered a lesson I'd learned from Reynolds. I went upstairs and got a small picture of her before I started out.

The florist was a slender, smiling, soft-spoken woman of middle age; her gray hair was cut short.

"You want some flowers for a lady, sir? Roses? You appear to me to be the rose-buying type."

"I want a funeral wreath."

Her smile vanished. "Please forgive me!" She came from behind the long glass case that held baskets and sprays. "That was extremely untactful of me, but you are young and . . ." She spread her hands. Then gently, "Your mother perhaps?"

"My wife."

"Oh, I *am* sorry."

I accepted most of her suggestions about the wreath, paid her, told her where it was to be sent and that the services were tentatively set for day after tomorrow.

"I'll attend to everything, Mr. Griffin. Rest assured that everything regarding the flowers will be taken care of."

"She was in your shop about three weeks ago," I said. "You might recall her."

"There are so many people . . ."

She broke off to take the picture of Maureen I was holding out to her.

"So young and lovely," she said. "But I'm sorry, Mr. Griffin, I don't recall the name. The picture . . ." she tilted her head, holding it before her. "Yes, it strikes a memory. Someone very like her came in. I remember a face like hers. An interesting face, one you notice. But I do not remember her for that. I recall her nervousness. She upset a basket beside the door and insisted on paying for it. But the name . . . it means nothing."

"She might have given a different name."

The florist handed back the picture, shrugged.

"May I use your phone?"

She nodded toward a phone that sat on a desk in the far end of the shop.

I dialed police headquarters. "This is Steve Griffin. Is Lieutenant Liam Reynolds there?"

He was out. He was, I guessed, probably checking autobody repair shops.

"I want to see him right away," I said. "I think I have something important."

"We can radio him in."

"Radio him to the florist at the corner of Second and Park."

I hung up. The florist was standing close to me when I turned. Her face was rigid and pale. "Really, Mr. Griffin, I have no idea what this is all about. But for you to call the police on me . . ."

"Don't misunderstand," I said. "My wife has been killed. The name she used here, the flowers she bought might help the police find who did it."

"Oh." She exhaled a good, long breath. When she raised her face, her eyes were again clouded with sympathy. "Of course, I'll help in any way I can."

She opened a steel file beside the desk, pursed her lips and touched her chin with a fingertip. She spent several moments remembering. Then she began going through the file.

She was still at it when Reynolds arrived about five minutes later.

She acknowledged my brief introduction—"How do you do, Lieutenant?"—without turning from her file.

"This is it—I think." She drew a daily sales sheet from the file. "Jane Brown. I recall thinking that it was odd, such a common, lackluster name for a striking woman."

Reynolds said, "Do you always put down the customer's name?"

"Oh, no. But when we sell flowers for special occasions, weddings, big parties, funerals, we of course ask for the name of the sender and recipient."

"Where'd she have you send them?"

"She didn't have them sent any place. She bought a large funeral basket. When I asked for the name she gave it. Then when I asked where the flowers were to go, she hesitated and said she'd take them."

I felt as if all the air had suddenly been pressed out of my lungs. Maureen had bought flowers for an unknown person's funeral, but she'd been afraid she might be traced

through the florist who had seen and could identify her. Maureen had thwarted us. But not him, not the nut in the green sedan.

Reynolds asked the florist a few more questions. The answers added to nothing. Maureen had left the shop to get her car. She stopped and chatted with some man on the sidewalk—that would have been Will. Then she had gone on down the street. A few moments later she appeared in the car, tapped the horn, and double-parked long enough for the florist to hurry out with the basket and put it in the back seat of the car. Reynolds asked a final question and we learned that Maureen had been alone during all this, except for the few seconds she'd spoken to Will.

The florist followed us to the doorway. We thanked her, and I noticed the gilt lettering on the window of the shop for the first time. The Blossom Shoppe, Elda Dorrance, prop.

The gray squad car was in a loading zone in front of a store a short distance down the block. My own car was in a parking lot around the corner.

Reynolds and I stopped beside his car. "Don't let it get you down, Griffin. It happens like this all the time."

"I thought it was a good lead."

"It was. It gave us one thing. She bought flowers for somebody's funeral, and she didn't want anyone to know about it. We've got the date of purchase—twenty-three days ago today. The flowers would have been used within two or three days at the most. So we check funerals. Every funeral for three days beginning twenty-three days ago."

"Will you know which one it is?"

"The one with an automobile as a contributive cause."

"My automobile," I said. "Driven by Maureen."

"Take it easy, Griffin."

My shoulders dropped. "Okay. I think I'll go home now."

I wasn't fooling him. When I was three steps away, he spoke my name. I stopped and looked back.

He gave me a level smile. "You did the right thing. It

was a good lead, and it belonged to the police. Keep doing it that way, Griffin. You've got a good head. You might run onto something. Don't try any solo flights. You might find him—and they lock you up just as fast for killing nuts."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Fine," he said. "I'll keep in touch."

No one was at the house when I arrived there. I went in the living room and sat down on the couch. Then I swung my feet and lay prone. Fatigue came to me like an opiate, making my limbs heavy, my mind dull. I put my hands over my face and drifted into troubled sleep.

I sat up suddenly. The sound that had awakened me was the front door opening. It was Penny and Vicky.

Penny was eager to impart news of her shopping trip and show me the hankies she'd bought. Vicky's calm eyes didn't miss the way I was feeling. She reminded Penny to go upstairs and change clothes so she could help prepare dinner.

When Penny raced out of the room, Vicky sat on the edge of a chair opposite me. "Would it help to talk about it, Steven?"

"I hate even to think about it. Reynolds is on a bloody scent. He thinks Maureen killed someone and then someone else, close to the first someone, set out to kill Maureen in revenge."

"You knew her, Steven. Could she have killed?"

"Accidentally, yes. She might have and then run in panic. But then for this, whoever it is, to plot her death coldly and deliberately . . ."

"Perhaps his mind was unhinged by grief."

I stood up. "So I should forgive him, wish him well?"

Her fingers were gripping the arms of her chair. She said in a choked tone: "Right now you're wearing the same shoes he wore, feeling the same things he must have felt."

"And he didn't forgive Maureen!"

"But if there is never any forgiveness, where is there any hope?" She began crying. She made no display of it. Tears simply started running down her cheeks.

The next day I decided to send Penny away for a few days. The shadow over the house was communicating itself to her as hushed people came and went. Will Burke offered to loan his lake cottage. We'd been out there on weekends. Penny loved the lake, the tall, cool pines, the birds and the rabbits that hopped across the sage field. Vicky insisted on going along as governess. It would mean staying at the cottage night and day, but she was staying at a hotel now because her relatives were in a small apartment, she explained.

I rented a car, loaded it with groceries, and drove my car out ahead of them, guiding Vicky, who was driving the rented car.

The cottage was made of logs, overlooking a pier and boat dock. Inside was a beamed living room with fieldstone fireplace, kitchen, dining nook, two bedrooms and bath.

"Pardon my pioneering instincts," Vicky said when she saw the interior, "but how does one manage out here? Deep freeze, electric stove, telephone—and look at the couches and chairs in the living room. Even a bearskin rug."

"There's a small outboard cruiser in the boathouse. Want me to get it out for you?"

"Thanks, but my sea legs are none too steady. Anyway, Penny might fall overboard."

Vicky insisted I stay long enough for coffee. Then I drove back to town.

Reynolds was parked in front of the house in the gray police car.

I stopped the sedan in the driveway. Reynolds and I met in the yard and entered the house.

"No suspicious funerals," he said. "I checked them for five days, beginning twenty-three days ago. She may have taken the flowers out of town."

"How about repairs on the car?"

"She might have taken that to a neighboring town also." Reynolds pitched his hat on a chair, sat on the couch, and exhaled. "Busy morning. And we still have several garages to go. Some of the small ones in the suburbs." He stretched

his legs before him and looked at his shoes. A hard, icy sheen came to his eyes. "It's got to work. There has to be a garage."

"Otherwise?"

"We're up a stump. We'll have to back up and find a new tack."

"Or fail."

"We won't fail. His crime isn't perfect. No crime is."

"How about the unsolved ones?" I said.

"Not one that isn't studded with mistakes," he insisted. "A crime in itself is a foolish, illogical act, contrary to the good of the group of which the criminal is a part. An unsolved crime means only that a dull, disinterested cop slipped up."

"Perfect enough from where the crook sits," I said. "Nothing to stop him from growing old, dying in bed, and having grandchildren honor his grave with a bouquet of posies."

Reynolds jumped to his feet. "Griffin, you're remarkable!"

"What did I say?"

"The flowers. Why assume they were for a funeral? Why not a bouquet to honor a grave—a grave several days old? I looked in the wrong direction. Instead of starting twenty-three days back and working down the calendar, I should have worked up."

He strode into the hallway. I heard him telephoning.

While Reynolds was still on the phone, an express truck stopped before the house. The expressman got out of the truck with a flat, oblong package in his hand. It was for Maureen, collect.

I paid, took the package, and closed the door on the departing expressman's back. I opened the package. The contents were two Randy Price play manuscripts and a letter from Hull and Jordan, Author's Representatives.

Dear Mrs. Griffin,

Pursuant to our correspondence of a month ago, we have had both Mr. Hull and Mr. Jordan read the enclosed manuscripts. While the plays indicate the

author has promise, they also unfortunately reflect immaturity and inexperience. However, the return of these efforts does not mean that we are averse to seeing more of his work. On the contrary, we wish to assure Mr. Price that he definitely has talent, a feeling for people, a crude but promising way of expressing his unique ideas about life. Please be assured that anything else of his will receive a sympathetic reading here and that all our resources will be used to his advantage the moment he produces something that is a bit more professional than these two.

Yours sincerely,
Roger W. Hull

P. S. I certainly do remember you, Maureen, from my days as an actor's agent. So now you're married and have a little girl? Congrats, many times over. I was in service, briefly, and began handling authors instead of actors when I donned civvies again.

RWH

The postscript was jotted in pen and ink, an afterthought when Hull's secretary had laid the letter on Hull's desk for signature.

I slid the manuscripts and letter in a table drawer. Then Reynolds came into the room and I quit thinking of the hope and encouragement Randy Price would get from the letter. I knew Reynolds had something. It showed in his face.

"You want to go?" he said. "I'll tell you about it in the car."

We walked out of the house, got in the police car, and Reynolds pulled away from the curb with a short cry of rubber.

"Twenty-eight days ago," he said, "at eight-fifty-five in the evening, a young woman with a little boy in her arms stepped from the curbing on West End Avenue. A car swung an intersection wide. It was moving fast and skidded. Out of control, it bore down on the mother and child. The mother tried to throw her small son to one side, but she

wasn't in time and the car couldn't stop. Both were buried two days later."

A shiver passed over me. Reynolds' voice seemed to recede. Maureen behind the wheel of a car, a mother and child looming before her . . . Maureen frozen with sudden terror, unable to stop the hurtling mass . . . No, no! It couldn't be!

"Hit-run told me," Reynolds was saying, "that they're still looking for the car. It slowed, but it didn't stop. It fled in blind panic. The boys on the detail got the usual conflicting descriptions of the car. They could be certain only that it was a heavy sedan, dark gray, or one of the new shades of pastel blue—or green. Nobody got the license number."

"Who were the people?" I asked, and had a hard time saying the words.

"Martin's the name. He owns a hole-in-the-wall grocery over on West End. We'll learn more about him. Bill Ravenel is meeting us. He's been on the case."

At the turn of the century, West End had been an address of distinction. Genteel quiet had reigned over large, impressive houses. Fine carriages reposed in the carriage houses or were pulled along the street by matched teams. Proper good mornings were exchanged on a sidewalk dappled by sunlight and the shade of maple trees.

Today, the quiet was no more than a lingering memory. West End seethed with people, noisy people, at this hour of the afternoon, tailend of the work day. The houses were gabled, gingerbread monstrosities, needing paint, gloomy in outlook, chopped into crowded, dreary apartments. Only a few of the trees remained and these were bedraggled from the onslaughts of climbing children. Laundries, fixit shops, pawnbrokers and garages had wedged between the houses, desecrating every final inch of space.

Reynolds parked near a fire hydrant, and a few moments later a gray twin to Reynolds' car swung in ahead of us. A man got out and walked back to us.

"Bill Ravenel," Reynolds said.

I reached across Reynolds to shake hands through the

open window of the car. Ravenel was young and tall with a boyish face and crew cut. His blue eyes were cold. He made the handclasp short.

"A little family has been wiped out of existence, Griffin," he said. "I hope it wasn't your wife driving the car."

"Ravenel . . ." Reynolds said in a curt tone.

Ravenel looked at him, then at me. "Sorry," he said stiffly. "But I'm close to this case. I know what the Martins were like. Good people. Poor people. People in love—until a thoughtless, drunken couple came barrelling along."

A shiver crawled down my back. "A couple?"

"Man and woman."

"And drunk?"

"They must have been, way they were moving along."

We got out of the car to stand beside Ravenel. For a moment, I wondered if my legs were going to hold me.

Ravenel pointed to a spot near the center of the street. "There's where it happened. The Martin woman was killed instantly. Child lingered a few hours."

We crossed the street. As Ravenel and Reynolds talked to people who'd known the Martins and showed Maureen's picture around, my first instinctive hatred of Ravenel was tempered. I glimpsed the case as he saw it.

Alec Martin had soldiered three years in the Pacific theater during World War II before succumbing to battle fatigue. He'd talked about his time in the hospital readily with friends, as if it were something he wished to get off his mind.

A product of West End, he'd married a school-days girl friend, Sally. They'd lived in a small second-floor apartment, sharing a bath at the end of the dark hallway with a second couple. Alec had bought a small grocery store half a block away, a year before the birth of their son.

"They used to go to the store to meet Alec every night he stayed open late," Sally's father told us. He was a gaunt, gray, grizzled man, sitting in a stuffy, ancient living room next to his wife, a bony woman whose eyes were set in hollow craters of grief.

"The mother and boy," the old man said. "They used

to walk over to the store and Sally would help Alec close up. He was staying open late almost every night. They wanted to buy a small place away from West End. On the edge of town where there was sunshine and air.

"He saw it happen. He was expecting them, watching for them. Sally saw him and was waving to him. Maybe that's why she didn't see the car in time."

The woman beside the old man closed her eyes; it took all life from her face.

"It almost killed Alec," the old man said. "Nearly drove him crazy. He didn't sleep and he couldn't eat—just sat in that apartment and stared at the walls, not even bothering to turn on a light when it got dark. I tried to talk him out of it, but nothing you could say helped. He just had to start living again on his own accord. A week ago he sold out the grocery. Said he couldn't stand to live on West End any longer. Promised he would write and let us know where he was, what he was doing, but we haven't heard from him."

Ravenel stood up, his gaze resting on the old man. "We'll try not to bother you again," Ravenel said. "If you hear from him, let us know."

The old man went with us to the door. "You find out who was driving the car yet?"

"We're working on it."

The old man glanced at the three of us, one by one. I wanted to turn away. I wondered what his eyes would hold if he knew what Ravenel and Reynolds suspected. The old man shook his head. "What terrible hell they must be living in, that man and woman. The woman especially. She was driving. You learned that, didn't you?"

"Yes," Ravenel said softly, "some kids playing told us that much."

"But nobody got the license number," the old man said. "Nobody thought fast enough. And then the car was gone."

We went back into the noise and grime of West End.

"Sally Martin and the kid," Ravenel said, "were buried in Memorial Park. Let's have a look."

We drove to the cemetery in one of the gray cars. The graves were side by side on a sloping hillside. The sod over them had not yet taken good hold.

A weathered, decaying floral basket stood at the head of Sally's grave. Ravenel walked around the grave carefully, kneeled, and examined the basket.

He looked up at me, and the silence of the cemetery oozed over me like a living, tangible thing. I walked to the head of the grave and saw what Ravenel had seen, a tiny sticker on the base of the basket. It had been almost obliterated by rain and weather, but Ravenel had knocked dirt aside and the faded letters were still visible: The Blossom Shoppe.

"This is where she brought the basket," Ravenel said. "Now we can picture most of it. Martin did see the license number of the car that killed his family. He was standing right there in the doorway of his store. He denied seeing it because he didn't want us to get to Maureen Griffin. He wanted to get to her himself."

"You don't have any proof she brought it!" I pointed at the basket. "Coincidence has hung innocent people in the past."

"True, but the occasions have been rare," Ravenel said. "The pattern here fits together too well. The pattern is so complete that I'll stick my neck out and fill in a few more of the details. Martin saw the license. He went to the registration bureau and found out who owned the car. He was an essentially decent human being, but he was thinking in a sick manner. Then he sold his store. But I'll bet he didn't leave town. I'll bet he bought himself a big, green car—a weapon."

Ravenel turned from the graves. Then he stopped and looked at me. "By the way, Griffin, where were you the evening Sally Martin and the boy were killed?"

I was stunned. It seemed like a lot of time was going by and I wasn't saying anything. "I was out of town," I said.

"Can you prove it?"

"I might be able to."

"You might have to. After all, there was a man in the car with Mrs. Griffin."

That night I stayed with Will and Carla Burke. I couldn't face the silence of my own house. The three of us sat and talked until late, Carla on her best behavior, not criticizing Will once.

Finally, I didn't have the ill grace to keep them up longer. I went to bed in the guest room. But sleep wouldn't come. Maureen had been good, gentle, kind. She might have panicked after the accident, any human being might have. But she wouldn't have run far. She'd have gone back, offered assistance—unless the man had forced her not to.

I slipped into the bathroom, found Will's sleeping pills. It took two of them to put me under.

Being in Will's and Carla's company helped me get through the funeral the next morning. After a gloomy lunch, I went home. I had to go back to the house sometime.

I called the lake cottage. Vicky said everything was okay. Penny was minnow fishing from the shore with a string and bent pin.

Next I called Reynolds. His news was anticlimactic. A clerk in the license bureau remembered that a man of Martin's description had asked about a plate number. And a used-car dealer remembered the sale of a big, green car a week ago. The buyer, again, answered Martin's description, his manner and insistence on a certain type of car causing the dealer to recall the sale. Martin had registered the car in his own name.

"We know the how and why," Reynolds said. "Now we've got to find Martin."

I came from the phone alcove into the living room. The front door was open. Randy Price was peering in the screen.

"Hi, Steve," he said glumly.

"Oh, hello, Randy. Come in."

He sat down in a club chair and clasped his hands and

cracked his knuckles. "I had to see somebody, talk to somebody," he said. "I was at the funeral."

"Yes, I saw you. How about some coffee?"

"Sure."

We went into the kitchen.

"That Reynolds," he said. "He doesn't like me. Had a man on my neck off and on since you two came out to my place. Thinks I was taking Maureen for a ride or something. You don't think that about me, do you, Steve?"

He stood before me, nervously pulling his Vandyke. I saw the same catlike quality Reynolds had seen, and a light lurking deep in his eyes made me wonder if his talk was just so much soft soap.

"I don't know what to think about you, Randy."

"Okay, if that's the way you feel about it."

"Don't be a spoiled brat."

Anger flashed hot in his eyes; then it died. "Sure, this is a lousy time for you, Steve. And I won't ask you."

"Ask me what?"

"For a small loan. You see, Maureen loaned me a bit and I thought that if you . . . Well, after all, it isn't as if the money was being thrown away. Believe me, Steve, you'll be helping genius along."

I thought of those checks written to cash in Maureen's checkbook. Now I knew where the money had gone. It didn't matter. It was rather a relief. I knew how Maureen would have felt toward this boy. His work, not the guy himself, would have been the important thing in her mind.

"Don't make it sound so much like a privilege, my lending you money," I said.

"Thanks, Steve." He grinned and accepted coffee. And twenty dollars.

Not until Randy was driving away did I remember his play manuscripts. I went out the front door, but he was already turning the corner.

The postman was coming down the sidewalk. He turned in, offered his sympathy, and handed me a letter.

I went inside. The envelope was plain, white, with a local postmark. There was no return and the address was printed

in ink. I ripped the end off the envelope and drew out a single sheet of white paper. It bore the same neat hand printing. No salutation, no signature, a single line of words marching across the otherwise blank page:

You owe me the kid too, Griffin.

The words blurred. I crushed the paper in my hand. The very air of the house was suddenly charged with the terror, the tension of a scream.

I forced myself to walk, not bolt, to the phone. My hands were shaking so badly I mis-dialed once and had to start over.

"Reynolds speaking."

"Steve Griffin. For God's sake, get out here right away."

"What's happened?"

"He's after Penny!"

"How do you know?"

"A note. He sent a note. Reynolds . . . you know Lake Apopka?"

"Yes."

"Will Burke owns the cottage at the northern end. Get a man out there, will you? She's there with Vicky Clayton."

"It's as good as done. Hold yourself together, Griffin. I'm on my way."

I hung up and stood perfectly still. I'd been afraid before. Overseas, I'd been afraid. I'd been more than afraid when Maureen's phone call had brought me through a hundred miles of night and rain. But this fear was different.

I went upstairs and opened the top drawer in the chest of drawers in the master bedroom. Up high, beyond Penny's reach, was the gun I'd brought home when I'd decided to go on the road.

Maureen had laughed. "I don't know which I'm afraid of most, the gun or a prowler."

I checked the gun. It was loaded. I slipped it in my inner coat pocket.

When Reynolds arrived, I had the outward, visible part of the shakes under control.

He examined the note. Common dimestore paper and envelope. Nothing there to help us. No lead toward Alec Martin anywhere. When he'd bought the big green car, the city had swallowed him, taken him like a diseased cell, a germ, into its teeming bloodstream.

During the drive to the lake, Reynolds said that Ravenel had gone out after my call. With the Griffin case and Martin case consolidated, the two detectives were working together.

Penny saw our arrival and came from the lakeshore at a run. She jumped into my arms and I held her so tightly she winced.

She wriggled to the ground, telling me what fun she was having, and I walked with her to see the tiny fish she'd caught. After baiting her pinhook, I left her at the water's edge and followed Reynolds up the clearing to the cottage.

Ravenel was sitting on the peeled log railing of the porch smoking a cigarette and looking at Vicky Clayton. She sat in a rawhide and rattan chair, huddled in it, tensed as against cold.

Ravenel threw away his cigarette and stood up as Reynolds and I mounted the porch. I glanced at Vicky. Her lips trembled and she looked away. Her demeanor was certainly puzzling. It struck me now that it was that of a guilty person.

"Nothing out of the ordinary out here," Ravenel said, "except her."

He glanced at Vicky and she flinched.

"I saw her coming out of Martin's apartment one evening when I went over to talk to him," Ravenel said. "I asked him who she was. She's his sister."

Vicky jumped to her feet. She crossed the porch, stopping a few feet from me.

"Don't judge me too quickly, Steven," she said in a strangled tone. "What he says is true. Alec is my brother. Our parents divorced years ago and I lived with my mother while Alec stayed with father, who later remarried. I didn't know Alec very well, but we corresponded from time to time. His final letter was a rather incoherent account of the tragedy that had befallen his family, written to me

about twelve days ago, several days after the burial had taken place.

"When I got to him, he was in a state of acute mental distress. He would sit in the apartment and stare at the walls for hours. Then he would go out without saying where he was going or when he would be back."

Her voice broke. It was a moment before she could go on.

"I might have suspected," I said. "You never said anything specific about Maureen or your friendship. And that one time you defended Martin and begged me to forgive him."

Her head moved from side to side, slowly, as if the movement took great effort. "Defended him—no, Steven. Pleaded for him, yes."

Vicky was looking directly at me. The plea in her eyes was humble and eloquent.

"Alec," she went on, "sold the store and said he was going away for awhile, to forget everything. I had hopes he was snapping out of it. I helped him pack a few things in his apartment that were to be stored. There were some notes he'd made . . . Maureen's name and address . . . brief bits of information about her . . . a license plate number."

"Shadowing her," Ravenel said, "in those times when he was out. Stalking her."

A visible shiver crossed Vicky's shoulders. "He seized the notes, said they meant nothing, and tore them up. Then he went away, and I decided to stay on in town for a few days with my father. Actually, he was a stranger to me, but he'd suffered a great loss and he needed me.

"I was making plans to go home when I saw that news item the other morning. The name leaped out at me. I tried to tell myself that it couldn't be the woman whose name I'd seen in Alec's notes, that her accident could have had nothing to do with the accident that had cost him so much.

"But rationalization wouldn't satisfy me. I went to her neighborhood—Meade Park. It was easy to pick up general information about her. I stopped in the corner drugstore and everyone was talking about it.

"I learned she had a child. Alec had had a child, too. I couldn't bear to think of the implication."

She closed her eyes and fastened her lower lip between her teeth, fighting for strength to continue talking.

"Right then you should have come to the police," Ravenel said.

She was silent a moment longer. Then she said, "He was my brother. Perhaps—I was a fool."

Reynolds glanced at Ravenel and said, "Miss Martin, if I'd had a brother in a terrible jam, I might have been the same kind of fool myself."

"I had no real proof that he had killed Maureen," she said. "I still can't quite believe it—unless he has gone completely mad. If you had known him, you'd understand. He was quiet, gentle, kind. He might have plotted such a thing, wished for it, but the actual killing would have been against his grain.

"If he were innocent and I caused his arrest, I was afraid it would finish what the tragedy he'd suffered had begun. But I realized, too, that I might be wrong. If he were guilty, he might try to get to Maureen's child. Then I would be guilty too, for not having done anything."

Reynolds shot a glance at Ravenel, who was about to speak. "So Miss Martin," Reynolds said, "you decided to do something on your own. Namely, to assume the responsibility for the protection of the child."

"You do understand!"

"I didn't say that. I'm merely asking if that's what was in your mind when you knocked at the door of the Griffin home and introduced yourself as a friend of Mrs. Griffin?"

"You've stated it exactly," Vicky said.

Her eyes were still on my face, dark and deep.

"If you had wanted to harm Penny," I said, "you've had ample opportunity."

"I agree," Reynolds said.

Vicky choked on a sob and turned away quickly.

"The important question is still a-begging," Ravenel said irritably. "How about Martin? He's still at large with his threat against the little girl."

Reynolds looked toward the lake where Penny was

trailing her fishline in the water. Then he glanced over the clearing around the cabin.

"This is our best natural defensive terrain," he said. "A hit-run killing couldn't be arranged and a stranger can't come within a quarter of a mile of the place without being seen. Wherever we might try to hide her in the city, there'd be risks. Any face in a crowd might be his. Any footfall on a fire escape or in a corridor.

"I'll keep three shifts of well-armed men out here until we run him to earth. I think I can guarantee the safety of the little girl that way, Griffin."

"How about her?" Ravenel said with a nod toward Vicky.

Reynolds waited for me to speak.

"She stays," I said, "if she will."

"Thank you, Steven, thank you!" Vicky said.

We remained at the cottage until the arrival of two, big, capable-looking plainclothesmen. Penny, we decided, would be told they were friends of Will's, and there for the fishing.

I planned to ride back to town with Reynolds, pack a few things in an overnight bag, and return to the cottage after dinner that night.

At home I finished packing the bag and securing the house. The day was almost gone, and I wondered how many days I would have to live through until Penny was out of danger.

I was ready to leave the house to have dinner when Reynolds called.

"It's over," he said.

For a moment, I stood holding the phone as though petrified. "What?"

"We've found Martin."

My knees wanted to fold. I sat down in the chair beside the telephone stand. "Where?"

"In the river. He's dead. He was in his big, green weapon, sitting there on the bottom of the river."

"Reynolds, wait a minute. . . . I've got to take this a word at a time."

He gave a short laugh of relief. "Okay. One word at a time. Here it is. There is a wharf on Timmons Street, near the spot where Maureen was killed, belonging to Kukolovitch & Sons. It's low and old, with a ramp to the driveway so trucks can load and unload. Martin drove himself right off the end of the dock, Griffin. The spot must have haunted him. Who knows what goes on in a diseased mind? He must have gone back to look at the place where he'd killed Mrs. Griffin. And then an impulse grabbed him and he turned into the alley and hurtled the car off the dock. Must have happened at night. At any rate, no one saw it. Some teenagers were spearfishing off the dock this afternoon. One of them took a very deep dive—and there in the depths below him was the shadowy outline of a car. Martin's green weapon—with Martin in it."

"How about the barge that was tied up there?"

The line crackled. Then Reynolds said, "What barge?"

"I was down there the morning after Maureen was killed," I said. "Seamen were docking a barge. I remember the name of the dock because it was peculiar and because of the lonely sound of the horn as the tugboat pulled away and went downriver. Reynolds, the barge was light. The seamen left it there—like it would be loaded eventually from the warehouse. Now if kids are in the habit of fishing or swimming from the dock and the car wasn't discovered until this afternoon . . ."

"You don't have to draw me a map," he said. "Sit still. I'll call you back."

I sat still. As still as Alec Martin must have sat after the death of his wife and child. I stared at the wall, and I saw the same things Alec Martin must have seen.

The phone roused me.

Reynolds said, "You're right! The barge was there from the morning after her death until this afternoon. Martin's car was under it the whole time."

"Then he went in the drink the same night Maureen was killed."

"He must have."

"He couldn't have written the note threatening Penny," I said. "Somebody was being real cute, writing that note. Somebody thought he was being real smart."

"A crackpot . . ."

"Crackpot, hell," I said. "The man who wrote the note had a good reason for doing so. The car hadn't been found, and the man who put the car there began to breathe again, began to believe that the water was deep enough, that the car would never be found. The note clinched the case against Martin. With the police running in circles, trying to find a man who was at the bottom of the river, the man who wrote the note was perfectly safe. Only he didn't know about the barge—and he didn't realize fully what it does to a man to have life smashed out of his wife."

"Listen, Griffin, if you know anything . . ."

"I'll see you around."

"Griffin!"

I hung up. Seconds later I was driving away from the house.

He sat perfectly still in a quiet room, and the last red rays of the sinking sun came through a window at my back and struck him in the face. But he didn't blink. He looked at the gun in my hand and he listened to me talk.

"This guy Martin," I said, "decent, gentle, kind. He sees his wife and child killed and he gets a license number and he knows the name of the woman who was driving. He plans to kill her. He wants to kill her, wants it more than anything. He does it a thousand times over in his mind—and yet after making two attempts, at a nursery and again at a supermarket, he fails. Why? Because he wasn't cut of the stuff of which killers are made. Because something deep in his character caused him to fail at the final instant each time.

"Does he wait and try a third time? No. After his failure at the supermarket, he must have realized he couldn't do it—not that way. Instead of stalking Maureen like the hunter, which he isn't, he goes to the house. He's there long enough to smoke a cigarette and leave the stub in an

ashtray. He had her dead to rights, and Maureen knew it. She must have told him everything, including the name of the man who was with her the night Martin's family was killed.

"Martin wants this man, too. He forces Maureen to leave the house with him. He confronts the man, but he isn't dealing with a woman now. He's facing a man, a selfish, desperate, heedless, merciless man.

"The man is a little too tough for Martin. He gets the best of Martin. He dumps Martin in Martin's own car. He tells Maureen that she has no choice but to play the string to its end.

"The man heads for Timmons Street, for one reason alone. He's going to use the river to get rid of Martin. But at the final moment, Maureen breaks. She has some measure of decency, too—though the man would never understand that. She gets out of the car, Martin's car, and the man hits her. He's lucky. Nobody sees it. Then he runs the car into the river with Martin in it.

"Duck soup. The man is safe now. Nobody will ever know that he was party to a hit-run and subsequent criminal conspiracy. Not one breath of this kind of scandal is going to touch the man's name, mar his future. Not one moment of his precious time is going to be spent in a courtroom and behind bars.

"How does it read, Randy? Like a play?"

He moved then. He stood up, and he smiled contemptuously.

"A very lousy play. But, of course, you're not insinuating that I'm this mysterious and criminally brilliant man?"

"I think you are. You were very lucky, but you made two mistakes. You wrote that note, without knowing a barge was at the dock over the car. That diverted the pointing finger from Martin. And you lied to me—and that swung the finger at you, Randy."

He stood loose-jointed, almost relaxed. A faint breeze fluttered the pages of some of the magazines piled around the living room of the cottage.

"I'm beginning to get a little sore, Steve," he said.

"After all, I've known you only a few days and you're assuming a lot to come here and . . ."

"You've known Maureen longer."

"A couple of weeks."

"You're repeating yourself," I said. "Maureen was a discreet woman, almost timid in some ways. She told you she wanted you to meet me. And I strongly suspect that, when she introduced you to our crowd, it would be in my company, as a mutual friend."

"That much I'll admit."

"So when you were together, it was the two of you alone. After she was dead, how could she contradict you?"

"She couldn't very well, could she?"

"But you're wrong; she could. Two weeks ago was after the accident, but you've known her longer than that. A month ago—before the accident—she wrote an agent about your work. She sent him a couple of plays."

Color began leaving his face.

"It would have been a nice surprise if she could have got some good news from the agent for you, wouldn't it, Randy?"

"Now look, Steve, let's not build mountains. Maybe I did meet her more than two weeks ago. Maybe I said a couple of weeks without thinking . . ."

"Because you didn't want to be connected with her at a time prior to the accident. Why else should you lie? You must have known about the accident, in which a woman and a child were killed. To have known, you must have been there.

"You were great in the execution of the grandiose lie, Randy, being the egotist that you are. It was the little one that you loused up."

His face was gray. Behind his eyes, his thoughts were scurrying, darting, searching for a way out.

"The Martin woman and child were killed at eight-fifty-five," I said. "That's right after dinnertime. You were coming from dinner, weren't you, when you headed for West End? There are certain kinds of restaurants Maureen favored. I know them, Randy. If I wanted to waste

the time, I could take you to them. They're not limitless in number. You and a picture of Maureen. Both of you would be easily remembered, especially you with the mustache and Vandyke on that boy face."

"What do you mean by wasting time, Steve?"

"I'm certain you're the man. I'm certain it happened just as I said. Her blood was all over the scum of Timmons Street, Randy. You shouldn't have done it. You should never have done it at all."

He backed away. His face glistened with sweat.

"You can have a little more time," I said, "if you want to tell me about it."

"Can I have a beer?"

"Go ahead."

I followed him into the kitchen. He opened a can of beer and drank half of it in one gulp.

"They'll get you, Steve," he said. "The way Martin caught up with her and the way you caught up with me."

"Try and scare me!" I shouted, daring him.

He dropped the beer can. It spewed foam on the floor. He leaned on the kitchen table, gripping its edge. "You can't do it! Remember what you said about decency, Steve! You're decent, too. Your decency won't let you do it!"

"My decency screams for me to do it."

He began crying, but it wasn't an act this time as he'd put on when Reynolds and I had come here the first time and told him about Maureen.

He cried in rage and desperate frustration. "She treated me like a kid," he cried. "Like a baby brother. That night —after dinner—she was lecturing me. I was young. Don't rush yourself. Get a part-time job. I laughed at her. It made her angry. She whipped into West End. She was turned to say something to me. Then all of a sudden, they were there in the middle of the street, the woman and kid.

"Maureen didn't have time to stop. The woman had blundered into the street, looking and waving at her husband, who was standing in the doorway of his grocery store. The woman lost her head when she saw the car. She jumped the wrong way, right in the direction that Maureen had whipped the car.

"There wasn't much sound. Just like somebody had pitched an overripe melon into the front of the car. Maureen took her foot off the gas, but I slammed down on the accelerator and told her to get out fast, and she obeyed automatically."

"Then she hadn't been drinking?"

"No. She was fighting the car to keep it under control. Once we were away, I told her we didn't dare go back. It was too late to help them, anyway. My talk scared her. We came to the cottage and she sat on the front steps and cried all the time I was cleaning the front of the car. I took her home and the next day I took the car to a grubby garage and had the fender and headlight repaired. To play it extra safe, I stole a set of license plates before I went to the garage. I took the plates off and threw them away after the car was fixed.

"Then she showed up here with Martin. I didn't mean any of it, Steve! I just wanted a loaf of bread and a chance to write my plays. It wasn't my fault. One thing after another was forced on me from the moment that fool woman and her kid wandered into the street."

He dried his eyes on the sleeve of his shirt. "I need another beer."

He opened the ice box, took out the beer, and came around the table.

His back was half-turned to me. He'd talked all he could. He figured his time was up and that he had nothing to lose. He struck hard and fast, spinning on his toes and hurling the can of beer with his tall, lean body like a willow whip behind it.

The edge of the can laid open my left cheek. It almost knocked me down. I heard the gun in my hand go off, but the bullet missed him.

The screen slammed, and he was outside. Out in the dying afternoon. Red was still streaking the sky, like blood.

He was moving down the driveway like a broken field runner when I got outside. But my car was parked behind his and I was behind him with the gun. He ducked and changed direction when he glanced back and saw me

He moved out across the wide, empty field that stretched east of the cottage. Beyond was timber, safety. He was a zigzagging, running target, and he knew that he had a chance, that it would be hard to put a pistol bullet in the right place in such a target.

Blood was washing down the side of my face from the cheek cut. He was fast, a lot faster than I.

But he wasn't faster than the car. The same kind of big, green car that had killed Maureen and carried Martin to the bottom of the river.

He'd reached the middle of the field when he heard the surge of the car's power. He looked over his shoulder. Through the windshield I could see his face, his mouth a round hole, laboring for breath.

He yelled hoarsely. He leaped to one side, and the car veered past.

I twisted the wheel. The car slewed around like an enraged bull and started for him again.

He ran in the opposite direction. Long, strong legs flashing, head pulled into his shoulders.

He timed the car by the sound of the motor, and again he leaped and the car missed by inches.

He had slipped. Then he was up again and running, but his legs were wobbling. He went to his knees and got up again.

The car skidded as I brought it around. He flung another glance over his shoulder. His face was drawn, his eyes jutting.

He tripped. And this time he didn't have reserve to get up. He quit. He quit cold, and covered his face with his hands and huddled on the ground, waiting for the car.

I stopped the car, got out, and walked toward him. I stood over him, watching the violent tremors cross his shoulders, seeing the gray blotch of his face as he finally looked up at me.

"You're . . . not going to . . ."

"No, Randy," I said wearily. "For a moment I thought I could, but I guess you were right. If I'd been trying the way I thought I was trying, I could have made it on that first pass."

The day, I noticed, had changed. The redness had gone out of the rays of the sinking sun. There was twilight—and silence. It made me think of my child, Penny. I wanted to go to her. I looked down at Randy, glad I hadn't done it.

# CIRCLE IN THE DUST

## by Arthur Porges

It isn't often that Lieutenant Ader brings me a simple murder involving the traditional blunt instrument. For that kind, even the political hack of a coroner is good enough. Ader keeps me in reserve for the tricky ones, since I'm the only qualified pathologist in these parts—Joel Hoffman, officially on the staff of the Pasteur Hospital, but more informally, and through friendship, the lieutenant's one-man crime lab.

In this latest case the cause of death was quite obvious—no hidden subtleties at all. Nothing like the Whitman affair with its locked door and phosgene gas, or the Lakewood murder with that crazy horse-collar gimmick.

This time we had a harmless old lady killed with one blow from a heavy object. There was no possibility of her having been hit by mistake; somebody had taken a single, powerful swing with intent to murder. One side of the victim's skull was badly crushed; death must have been instantaneous.

"It's the motive that makes things rough on this one," Ader told me when I'd finished the autopsy. "Here's an old woman who'd never harmed a soul. All right, that wouldn't matter; some characters will kill a saint for sixty-nine cents, but she didn't have any money. There's no possible doubt about that. She was living on a small annuity

which was to lapse at her death. Less than two hundred dollars in her bank account, and a mortgaged house full of trashy furniture and whatnots. I don't get it."

"Maybe whoever killed her thought she had money stashed away," I suggested. "Most old people living alone are always suspected of being secret misers."

"That doesn't seem to figure. If a stranger killed her hoping to find dough, he'd have ransacked the house. Well, nothing was touched. Probably she admitted the killer herself, which doesn't prove much, since they tell me the old woman was so trusting as to be almost simpleminded."

"Low I.Q.," I said. "Like that other innocent one, called Jesus."

"You know what I mean," he snapped. Ader hates irony.

"Apology accepted. It's just that I get tired of hearing people called idiots because they don't invariably expect the worst from their fellowmen."

"Don't go philosophical on me," Ader said sourly. "I don't remember Plato breaking any tough cases."

"Any fingerprints in the place?"

"Everybody's. At least those who were there in the last five years. The old gal wasn't much of a housekeeper."

"Tell me about her," I suggested. "So far you haven't given me anything to hang one of my fantastic theories on."

"There isn't much to tell. She was a widow—a Mrs. Valerie Antoine. Came to California from New England. Bought a little wooden house here in Norfolk. Picked it, I'd guess, because her nephew lives in town. Everybody liked her—a harmless, motherly old woman of sixty-five."

"Who profits by her death?"

"That's the hell of it; there simply isn't any profit. I've checked up on her possessions. The nephew, Ray Zittenfield, inherits, but all he'll get is the mortgaged house, full of junk, and whatever is left of her two hundred bucks in the bank after burial expenses. Nobody would kill a chicken without a better motive than that." He paused. "Unless she saw something that somebody couldn't risk having her report."

"Not very likely," I told him. "If you read the autopsy report, you'll remember she had cataracts on both eyes. She wouldn't have been able to tell Elsa Maxwell from a Singer midget at ten paces. Maybe we'd better look for a pathological killer with no connection—somebody who picked her because she was handy."

"Not on your life," Ader retorted. "That's all right for a last resort. Right now it's premature."

"Then what do you suggest, Maestro?"

"I expect you to do the suggesting," he said coolly. "But first how about going over to her house with me? Maybe you'll spot something we didn't."

"Anybody there? Besides the inevitable Sergeant Briggs, I mean?"

"The nephew. He's staying in the house until things are cleared up."

"Hope it's not a life sentence," I murmured, and Ader glared at me. He doesn't appreciate levity during a case.

We drove out to the scene of the crime, a small wooden building at least thirty years old. A decade ago you could buy such a place for five thousand dollars, and there were few enough customers. Now, what with every American determined to acquire his own mortgage, plus the inflation, a shack like this costs ten thousand dollars. That was a possible angle, I thought; maybe the nephew hoped to sell the place at a profit.

After seeing and talking to him, however, I had my doubts. There are no obvious traits that identify a murderer, but Zittenfield certainly didn't seem to have the nerve and ruthlessness to kill a fragile old lady in cold blood. He was a nervous, pale young man, who talked so fast he tended to stutter. His glasses were so powerful, they made his blue eyes look like some rare species of fish in thick glass bowls.

He led us on a tour of the house. The lower floor was sparsely furnished. After all, how much does one old lady need? But the upper floor, which was really nothing but an attic consisting of one large room, told another story. There was a junk heap, if I ever saw one. Every foot was piled high with trash: old furniture, crayon por-

traits of long-dead great aunts, hideous Victorian nymphs holding grapes of green glass, and several tons of similar rubbish.

"Any of this stuff valuable?" I asked the nephew. "Is it possible she has some off-beat treasures here that some sharpie wanted badly enough to kill her?"

He looked a bit unhappy, and Ader gave him a sharp glance.

"Nothing that I know of," he said, "except a scrimshaw work—that might bring a few hundred dollars. I urged her to sell it, but she wouldn't listen to me."

"What's scrimshaw work?" Ader demanded. "And where is it now?"

"Over here. I knew better than to touch anything until you police gave the word. That sergeant outside warned me, too." He led us to a small wooden chest perched on top of a moth-eaten red sofa. When he raised the lid, we saw a fantastic collection of intricately carved doodads. There were letter openers, pie crimpers, and even back scratchers, mostly white, but with a few black items.

"Made from whale teeth, shark jaws, and the like," the boy explained. "Aunt Val's great-grandfather was a New Bedford whaling captain. Jared Gray, related to Asa Gray, the famous botanist. Captain Gray left all this junk to his son, who left it to his, and so on down to my aunt. Except for the scrimshaw, it's awful trash, but she wouldn't consider selling or giving any of it away. She hero-worshipped the old boy, I guess. She was easygoing about everything else, but just try to separate her from anything of the captain's, and no mule could have been more stubborn."

"And you wanted her to peddle these whale-tooth carvings?"

"Naturally. It was the only valuable stuff he left her. It wasn't doing her any good up here. If she got three or four hundred dollars, she could do some of the things she'd always wanted to. Like fixing up the place a bit; the termites are eating three meals a day here. I know a dealer—" He broke off, as if afraid of having said too much.

"I suppose you had a little commission in mind," the lieutenant said pleasantly.

The boy flushed.

"Well, it was my idea," he said. "She didn't know it was worth anything. But if even one piece disappeared she'd know that in a hurry. I wouldn't have made more than fifty bucks on the whole deal."

It was easy to read between the lines. He'd tried removing one of the better pieces to see if she'd spot the theft. Obviously, she had noticed it.

"We'll have this stuff priced by an expert," Ader said.

I knew what he was thinking. Suppose those bone carvings were worth thousands. That would give Mr. Zittenfield a real motive.

"I'm telling the truth," the old lady's nephew insisted. "That stuff won't bring more than three hundred dollars. Of course, the dealer will get at least a thousand, but that's the antique business for you. Tremendous markup."

Meanwhile, I prowled the rest of the room, squinting in the glaring afternoon sun that beat on one wall from the big, dusty windows. Suddenly I gave a low whistle, and Ader was at my side in one tigerish bound. He saw what I did, and no words were necessary. In the middle of a dust-covered table near the wall was a round mark suspiciously clean. Undoubtedly some object with a circular base had recently stood there. Ader called the nephew over.

"What was on this table?" he demanded.

The boy looked blank.

"I can't remember," he said, frowning. "All I ever paid much attention to was the scrimshaw. The rest isn't worth anything. Believe me, I know, Lieutenant. I've been interested in antiques for several years. Take my word for it, the rest of this tripe wouldn't bring twenty-five dollars."

"Yeah?" Ader sounded skeptical. "Somebody carried off whatever stood on this table. There must be a reason. Try to remember what your aunt kept there."

"I'm trying," Zittenfield said. "But who could keep track of all this junk? I was only here two or three times, and my last visit was over a year ago. You tell me what was in

your aunt's house last time you were there."

Ader looked sheepish. He'd been too busy this year even to see his own mother.

Ader turned to me.

"Any ideas, Joel?"

"Good Lord," I protested. "The thing had a round base —that's all we know. It could be a figurine, a vase—just about anything. You can't tell much from a circle in the dust."

He gave me an impatient look. That's the trouble with pulling too many rabbits out of hats. The first time you bring out a fistful of nothing, you're not just a flop but a saboteur.

"Let's go back down," Ader grumbled. "I want to ask Mr. Zittenfield a few more questions, and we might as well be comfortable."

We trooped down the rickety stairs to the shabby living room.

"What I need from you now," Ader told Zittenfield, "is a rundown on the other people—relations and friends—who associated with your aunt."

"That won't take long," the boy said, seeming a bit more relaxed now that he was no longer personally on the grill. "Aunt Val didn't see many people. She has two nieces, Grace Weinberg and Eunice Mills, who came by once every few months. They live up north somewhere—one in Portland, the other in Eureka, I think. Except for me, they're her only living relatives. As for friends, there's old Mr. de Witt, and Francis Raymond."

"Good. Tell me all you know about these people. Particularly if they're interested in antiques."

"Look, Lieutenant, you're barking up the wrong tree. I know more about that subject than all three of them put together. The two nieces are just nice married girls, wrapped up in their husbands and kids." He spoke with that air of scorn expected of a bachelor. "Their homes are modern and tasteless, judging from the women's descriptions. Any idea of either of those girls killing Aunt Val is just nonsense. Some stranger—a tramp, maybe—must have done it."

"All right," Ader said patiently. "What about the friends?"

"Well, de Witt lives down the street. He's about seventy, but still full of vinegar. I wouldn't be surprised if he was a little sweet on Aunt Val. Anyhow, he was always helping her out with odd jobs—things she couldn't afford to hire somebody for. I gave her a hand, too, now and then, but de Witt is a craftsman, while I'm pretty much of a bumbler. They'd have tea together once a week. She told me he was a perfect gentleman."

"Could he have been angry at her for rejecting him, maybe?"

Zittenfield raised his brows.

"At their ages, Lieutenant? It was platonic; they saw each other, and enjoyed it. My aunt was the fragile, very feminine type a man liked to help. As for de Witt, he wouldn't hurt a mouse."

"That leaves"—Ader peered at his notes—"this Francis Raymond."

"Him!" The nephew was contemptuous. "He has a little real-estate office. The only trouble is that every time a red-rumped apparition flies by he's gone like the day before yesterday. One of those real fanatical bird watchers. The only reason he ever visited with my aunt, I'm sure, is because some rare swallows nest in that clay bank behind the house. He'd talk to her about them, and she'd listen politely, but even if Val could see, she couldn't have told a crow from a pelican."

"This is getting us nowhere in erratic bounds," Ader groaned finally. "I'll have to investigate all these people eventually, I suppose. Come, let's get out of here, Joel."

"By all means," I agreed, thinking unhappily of the work piling up at Pasteur Hospital, which was paying my salary.

We left, leaving Zittenfield sitting there looking pensive.

Once outside, Ader gave Sergeant Briggs, who was pacing stolidly up and back, a few directions, and then took my arm.

"Whoa, boy—not so fast," he said "I'm going to have a

chat with this Raymond character, and you ought to be there."

"Okay," I agreed ruefully. "Just let the appendices and ovaries pile up at Pasteur. I can always work all night."

"I'll let you off seeing de Witt," he said generously, ignoring my complaint. The lieutenant is very single-minded.

We didn't find our man at home, but his landlady, a waspish type, told us to try Fisherman's Cove, object a white-haired six-footer. Sure enough, we spotted him stretched out, binoculars in hand, behind some rocks. As we came up, crunching over the sand, he frantically motioned for silence, warning us in an urgent whisper: "Nuts! Nuts!"

At least, that's what we thought he was saying at first, because Ader replied indignantly: "Who's nuts?"

It turned out Raymond was referring to a flock of birds something like sandpipers, called "knots," which are rather rare around this part of the coast. When we introduced ourselves, and finally pried him away from talking about knots, there wasn't much of value he could tell us.

"I was terribly shocked to hear about Mrs. Antoine," he said dolefully, rumpling his snowy mane. "She hadn't an enemy in the world." He spoke in a slow, well-modulated voice. This would be all to his advantage if he had anything to hide. When a man pauses after every word, it's hard to spot a more significant hesitation that might precede a lie. It's your fast talker who traps himself most easily, I've noticed.

"Were you ever up in that second-floor storeroom?" Ader asked him.

He thought for a moment.

"Once—no, twice. All full of antiques." He paused. "I suppose they could be worth something. Did you consider that point?"

"We did," the lieutenant said drily. "And are they valuable?"

Raymond shrugged.

"I wouldn't know. Takes an expert to tell." He froze suddenly, snapped the binoculars to his eyes, then put them down with a disappointed air. "Just cormorants."

"There's one item missing from that storeroom," Ader said, eyeing him closely. "I wonder if you happened to remember it."

"Where was it?"

"On a wooden table against the east wall. It had a circular base."

The big man reflected for a moment, then shook his head.

"There was too much stuff," he said. "I guess I'm not very observant." Then, as if to refute this, he called our attention to some dots far out on the surf. "Mergansers," he told us. "Pretty coloring, haven't they?"

"Yeah," Ader said, giving me a baffled look. "Well, if you should recall anything about Mrs. Antoine or her attic, get in touch with me right away."

I'm not sure Raymond heard him. He had those glasses up again, and was watching a big red-tail hawk. It was the only bird I recognized that session.

During the next week, Ader and his men did a lot of legwork. Most of what the nephew told us proved to be correct. An expert from Los Angeles explained that the scrimshaw work—carvings made by talented whalers on their long, often boring voyages—was excellent of its kind, but of interest only to a limited market. A dealer would pay perhaps three hundred dollars for the lot. And a well-known antiques appraiser had a good laugh at the contents of the storeroom. He did concede, however, that today's bad jokes often become tomorrow's treasures; and that by 1980, some of the old lady's horrors might be valuable. He devoutly hoped to be dead by then. Neither of these specialists had any ideas about the missing object, which both Ader and I were beginning to believe held the key to this apparently pointless murder.

Investigation of the victim's relatives and friends didn't help a bit. As Zittenfield had said, the nieces were simple housewives, with nothing to gain from their aunt's death. De Witt and Raymond seemed equally clean. It was more imperative than ever to identify the one object which the killer had bothered to steal. My inability to do this proved

most frustrating to Ader. He suggested, in turn, photography, microscopy, X rays, and chemistry, hoping that one might bring a responsive gleam to my eyes. But all I had to work with was a circle in the dust.

"Let's tackle it from a different direction," I said finally. "First, is there anything our suspects might specialize in that we haven't discovered? Some class of objects, say, which the murderer knows is valuable, but that others overlooked completely."

"If we assume that Zittenfield is competent when it comes to antiques," Ader said, "then the missing item is something else. A round base suggests a figurine; but, damn it, the nephew would know a good figurine when he saw it. At least, he'd remember it was there. This thing, whatever it was, didn't catch his eye. That means it was outside his field of antiques."

"Sounds like logic to me," I agreed. "Assuming, of course, he told the truth. If it was a valuable statue, and he took it, he'd be the last to admit any knowledge of the thing. What does your dossier say about de Witt. Any specialty there? A hobby maybe."

"He collects stamps. But they don't mount stamps on round-based doodads. They use albums."

"Stamps!" I exclaimed. "Maybe we've got something. A whaling captain active, say, in the 1840s, would have used some of the most valuable stamps in the world. Maybe the thing on the table was carried off for a blind, with a bundle of letters the real prize."

Ader jumped up, obviously excited.

"We'll certainly have to check that out. That's the best lead yet."

But we were wrong. There never had been any letters or stamps in the attic. The nieces knew that for a fact and were able to offer convincing evidence. For one thing, Captain Gray was almost illiterate. For another, Mrs. Antoine had burned all her written mementoes when her husband died.

"So that lead is out, too," Ader told me dourly at our next conference. "What other goodies did whalers pick up in 1840?"

"You've got me there," I admitted. "We're up the creek now." I paused. "Eleanor"—she's my wife—"reminded me last night that whenever we've been stuck before, I've always reexamined the evidence, searching for a fresh clue. It's worth a try."

"That's fine—but what evidence?"

"Well, give me all the dossiers, and I'll visit the attic again, just in case."

He rubbed his hands in satisfaction. I knew he saw me pulling the rabbit out of the hat again. And why had I stalled so long?

I went to the house alone. The nephew was out, but Sgt. Briggs let me in with the official key. The storeroom was brilliantly lit by the afternoon sun, and I noticed something we'd missed the other time. The unknown object had stood on a table against the east wall. For ten years the sun had streamed in, and the wall was badly discolored. But each item on that east side had cast its shadow there, so that vague silhouettes were to be seen—areas of unfaded paper, ghostly photographs, you might say.

The outline of the stolen object was fairly clear. Apparently the nephew had goofed or lied, for the shape was at least approximately that of a small statue. It was so grotesque, however, that I thought of a gargoyle. There was no way of telling how much of the distortion was caused by the kind of projection involved. The statue might have been three-quarters facing the wall, or profile.

I made a careful sketch in my notebook. It suggested something familiar, but tantalizingly nameless to me. Then I had it—the outline was that of a lumpish, birdlike figurine. Surely our mysterious object was nothing but a mounted specimen.

That started a whole series of conjectures. Anything might be hidden in a large stuffed bird—letters with rare stamps, jewels, gold coins. Who knows what a smart sea captain could pick up in those days of really free enterprise? Had the murderer sniffed out such a hidden treasure, one that even Mrs. Antoine knew nothing about, and then killed her for it? We knew how well she kept tabs on Captain Gray's stuff, and how unwilling she would have been

to sell even a moth-eaten bird. To get it, somebody would have to kill her.

But I was going too fast. In the first place, my identification of the silhouette as that of a bird was in itself a wild guess. I'd taken a survey course in ornithology as part of my pre-med background, but this called for an expert. I thought at once of Francis Raymond, but reconsidered as fast. After all, he was one of the suspects. If there was a hidden treasure in the bird, who would be more likely to find it than a fanatic? The mounted specimen which Zittenfield saw without remembering it, was just the thing to catch the eye of an ornithologist like Raymond. To him, the furniture would be invisible.

I took my sketch to the Los Angeles County Musuem and showed it to one of their experts. When he looked at my crude drawing, I saw his eyes widen. Without a word, he dragged a thick tome from his bookcase, riffled the pages, and gave a little grunt of excitement. I peered over his shoulder, and saw the sketch of a strange-looking, clumsy bird. The caption made me gulp. I expected to read "penguin," because that's what the bird resembled to my inexpert eye.

"Whaling captain," the ornithologist said with growing agitation. "Active between 1830 and 1850?"

"That's right."

"Good God man, I'm afraid to say it. The great auk became extinct about 1844. There's no reason why your captain couldn't have killed and stuffed one."

"Would it have any value?"

"That's the understatement of the century. I doubt if there are more than a few skins and fragments among all the museums of the world. Even a badly mounted one, damaged by insects, would be worth ten thousand dollars at least."

Well, that really cleared the air. Obviously there was nothing hidden in the bird; it was itself a treasure. And only one of our suspects was likely to have known that.

Ader got a search warrant, and we went through Raymond's house and office. We found the great auk carefully cleaned and wrapped, in his garage. Under the lieu-

tenant's relentless grilling, the whole story came out. Raymond had spotted the priceless specimen on his first visit to the attic. He had offered Mrs. Antoine a hundred dollars for it, only to have her refuse. After raising the ante to a thousand, he told her frankly what it was worth, and offered to split in almost any proportion. She wouldn't have any part of selling something the captain had handed down.

Raymond's business was on the rocks, thanks to years of neglect in favor of bird watching. The temptation was too great. With this foolish old woman out of the way, he could hide the specimen for a few months, "discover" it in some plausible manner, and make a fortune by peddling it to the highest bidder. His only mistake had been in failing to spread fresh dust over that clean circle. Except for that oversight, we never would have known anything was missing, and the murder, without a motive, would have remained unsolved.

As it was, the nephew got eighteen thousand dollars for the great auk. It was in remarkably good condition after a hundred years. I suspect that Captain Gray may have had a few pointers from the distinguished naturalist, Asa.

# JOSHUA

## by William Brittain

With a broad smile, Mitch Kellendorf slammed the battered black sedan into another tight curve, keeping one hand on the steering wheel while with the other he scratched his stubbled chin. Narrowly missing the huge pine trees through which the road was no more than a narrow slit, he yanked at the wheel. The car rocked violently, and Mitch fed it more gas on the short straightaway. The speedometer never dropped below sixty.

"Jeez, Mitch, take it easy! How am I supposed to get this stuff counted while you're playin' come-close with every tree in the woods?"

"What's the take, Eddie?"

Eddie Files, sitting in the rear seat, met Mitch's glance in the rearview mirror. Strong and dumb, thought Mitch. Just the type for a job like this. "Come on, stupid! How much did we get?"

"I figure about fifty grand, unless the bank cheated when they made up these bundles," said Eddie.

"Ah, don't be silly. We were in and out in five minutes. What do you think, the president is gonna sneak in the vault and give us cutup newspaper?"

"Come on, Mitch," pleaded Eddie, "and slow down. I wanna live to spend my share." Eddie glanced to the left side of the road. "Ain't that the fence you was telling me about?"

Mitch's foot hit the brake. "That's it, Eddie. And here's where we get off." He pointed to a section of the snow fence where the tops of several slats had been broken off. Stopping the car beside the fence, he turned to Eddie.

"Get out and lift the hood," he ordered. "Make like you've got motor trouble. If you see a car coming either way, tell me."

But no cars were traveling the narrow road through the forest. Mitch stepped to a joint in the snow fence, removing his pin-striped jacket to expose a .38 revolver under his left armpit. Unfastening two clips on the fence, he pulled back a short section, making an opening just large enough to admit the car. He dragged aside some brush which had been piled behind the fence, revealing a narrow roadway into the woods.

"Come on, Eddie," he called. Eddie slammed the hood, got behind the wheel, and drove the car slowly through the opening. Then he returned to help Mitch replace the brush and fence.

"Not even any tracks leading off the road, Eddie," Mitch chuckled. "In an hour, we'll be at the cabin. Then you can mix us a drink and we'll settle in for a while."

"How long, Mitch?"

"Who knows? Till the heat's off. Couple of months, maybe."

Eddie drove the car slowly between the trees. He turned to Mitch. "We'll stash the car out of sight of the road," Mitch said. "If anybody finds it, we're just a couple of guys on a fishing trip."

At the end of a quarter of a mile, as Mitch had expected, the road ended at the base of a huge spruce. What he had not expected was the man who stood next to the spruce, watching them calmly as the car glided to a halt.

"Jeez, Mitch," whispered Eddie, reaching inside his coat.

"Easy, boy," said Mitch slowly. "No cop I ever knew wore a red hunting shirt and a hat as beat-up as that one. Keep me covered. I'll go talk to him."

Upon closer inspection, Mitch became more assured

that the man was harmless. He was undoubtedly a full-blooded Indian with the high cheekbones, swarthy skin, and thin, prominent nose of all the brave red-skinned warriors Mitch had ever seen on television. The one jarring note was the huge cigar sticking out of one side of his mouth. At Mitch's wave, Eddie slowly got out of the car and walked toward Mitch and the Indian, his right hand still stuck under his coat. The Indian extended his hand in greeting.

"Top o' the morning to ye, gintlemen. Red Wing is the name, Joshua Red Wing. I was doin' a bit o' fishin' on the lake, and was just comin' home when I noticed yer vehicle. I was wonderin' if I could be of any service to ye."

"Jeez," gasped Eddie, "imagine Sitting Bull sounding like Pat O'Brien."

Mitch quickly jabbed him in the ribs with an elbow. The Indian, however, did not take offense.

"Ez to me manner o' speakin', sir, a great many people hev told me 'tis strange. Ye see, the way of it is this. In me youth, I worked at a church in the village in exchange for an eddication. But I spent most o' me time in the kitchen, developin' a taste for the English language and blueberry pie. The cook happened to be named Bridget O'Toole, and the good father's name was McGrath. They did their best by me, but I'm afraid me speakin' does sound a bit odd to some."

"You said you could help us," Mitch said, still suspicious. "What did you mean?"

"Oh, I often find I can be of help to fishermen in these parts. I can't guide ye, fer I've me own work to do in the daytime. But after hours I could bring in yer food, and perhaps a wee drap o' somethin' fer the inner man."

"And how much are you charging for this?" said Mitch.

"Would foive dollars the trip be askin' too much?"

Mitch breathed a sigh of relief. Anybody asking five bucks for the back-breaking work of bringing food for them to the cabin didn't know what was in that suitcase in the back seat of the car.

"It's a deal, Josh." They shook hands again.

"I'm assumin' that's your place across the lake ez it's the only one in walkin' distance," Josh went on. "I'll take yer things an' give ye a trip in me canoe. It'll save about a half a mile of walkin'."

With this, and before either Mitch or Eddie could protest, he walked to the side of the car, opened the door, and took out the suitcase from which Eddie had recently been counting fifty thousand dollars. Both men watched him with open mouths but, before they could voice a protest, he returned to them.

"I'll jist be puttin' this in the canoe, gintlemen. If ye'll git the rest o' yer gear together, I'll meet ye down at the lake. Jist follow the path." And he disappeared into the woods.

Eddie muttered and took one step toward where the Indian had disappeared. Mitch gripped his arm.

"Take it easy, boy," he said. "That guy's the best insurance we've got against anybody asking questions. But you go grabbin' that suitcase, and he's going to begin wondering why. He'll be there when we get there. He's too dumb to steal."

Still mumbling to himself, Eddie allowed himself to be led back to the car. Mitch carefully sprinkled pine needles over the top and fenders so that anyone seeing it would believe it had been there several days. Then he put up the hood.

"What are you doin' now?" asked Eddie.

"Distributor cap," said Mitch, holding it up. "Old Josh is too stupid to steal fifty grand, but he might like a car. He . . ."

"Saints alive!" Mitch was interrupted by a shouted oath which obviously had come from the Indian somewhere off in the woods. As the two men ran to the edge of the small clearing, they heard a bumping, a sound of wood scraping over stone, and then a splash. They saw the faint path which the Indian had followed and raced along it. Mitch reached the lake and quickly took stock of his new surroundings.

The weeds on either side of the path held trapped several notes of U.S. currency in twenty-dollar denominations. On

the small beach in front of him was a brown canvas sack, with the words "Haleyville National Bank" stenciled on it in black paint.

And on the waters of the lake, the Indian Josh was swiftly paddling his canvas canoe as far from shore as possible.

Eddie Files came pounding down the path a second behind Mitch, glanced at the money on the ground, saw the receding figure of Josh on the lake, and scooped his revolver from its shoulder holster. The echoes rolled from the high stone cliffs along one shore as he triggered off one forlorn shot at the figure pulling out of effective pistol range.

On the lake, Josh heard the shot, and at the same time the paddle jerked itself from his hands and floated slowly away from the canoe. He noted, almost with surprise, that one entire side of the flat blade had been split off by the bullet. Glancing toward shore, he saw the small figure of Mitch kneeling behind a large tree root at the water and holding his gun in both hands. Twice more the crack of the .38 echoed from the cliffs to Josh's right. Two small splashes started their circles of waves about twenty feet behind the canoe. Taking off his hat and holding the crown gripped in his hand, he dipped it into the water. Forward, push; forward, push. Foot by foot, Josh forced the canoe to where the broken paddle lay floating in the water.

On the shore, Mitch got up, replaced his gun inside his coat, and looked at Josh on the lake. He stared at the pathway on the far side of the lake, the pathway to his cabin. If the Indian made it that far, he'd be home free, and they'd never find him in these woods. He turned to Eddie.

"Eddie, listen, quick!" The same Mitch Kellendorf who had planned the Haleyville bank job without a hitch barked out his orders. "This trail goes along the left-hand side of the lake. I'll wait here. You go down the trail till you get in pistol range of the other end of the lake. Try not to let the Indian see you."

"What good'll that do, Mitch? We ain't got no boat."

"Listen boy! If he gets away, good-bye fifty grand. But he can't come back here to me, and if he tries to climb those cliffs, we'll have plenty of time to get over there and meet him when he gets to the top, even if he doesn't fall and break his neck. His only way out is at the other end of the lake. If you get there before he does, we'll have him pinned down. He'll be floatin' out on that lake like a sitting duck, and he'll have to come to shore sometime. Now get going."

Eddie got going.

On the lake, Josh hurriedly took in his situation. The lake was almost a perfect oval lying north and south. To the north was Mitch. Along the western shore, rock cliffs rose vertically from the water to a height of about forty feet. They were impossible to climb. Josh had tried it once. At the south end of the lake was his only exit. And he had seen Eddie start down the trail to close his one escape route.

Josh redoubled his efforts to get to the floating paddle. Finally he came to where it lay floating on the calm surface. As he picked it up, he saw that almost half the blade was missing. This not only cut down on the amount of power he could put into each stroke, but it also threw the balance off so that it twisted in his hands each time it was thrust into the water.

"Well, I guess I'll just have to make do," he muttered dryly.

Eddie Files had a body that was in excellent condition for a run of perhaps half a mile. Josh had a broken paddle which seemed to turn the canoe in every direction except the one he wanted. However, Josh almost won the race. He was within twenty yards of the sandy beach when Eddie, still running along the trail, sent a bullet chugging into the water.

Quickly Josh spun the canoe and sent it on a course away from shore, and toward the towering cliffs. He saw Eddie at one end of the lake and Mitch at the other. Eddie brought up his gun once more, decided that Josh was out of range and that he needed to conserve his remaining bullets, and he lowered his arm.

Josh knew that, as long as he remained fairly near the middle of the lake, the two men on shore would be very lucky indeed to get off another shot that could come anywhere near him. Not with a pistol, and he figured, rightly, that the men wouldn't have a rifle handy. They weren't the type. He had the only canoe available and was in command of the water. But it was impossible for him to come to shore.

Stalemate.

The sun got higher and reflected off the stone cliffs. Josh scooped water from the lake with his hands and drank deeply. Then he dipped his hat under water and put the cool, greasy blob of wet felt on his head. Over near the eastern shore a small pike broke the surface.

"Injun!" Even though Josh knew that Mitch was somewhere along the east side of the lake, the words, echoing from the stone cliffs, seemed to come at him from the west. He shouted his answer.

"I'm out here, as ye well know!"

"Look, Injun, can we make a deal?"

"I doubt that very much. And if ye'd be so kind, I'd prefer not to be referred to as 'Injun'. Me name's Joshua, but I'll answer to Josh."

"All right then, Josh, come off it. You're just as big a thief as we are. Otherwise, how did you come to open that suitcase?"

"That's what comes o' usin' cheap equipment in yer evil schemes. It so happens the handle on yer valise broke right off while I was comin' along the path to the lake. When she tumbled to the ground, she broke open, and of a sudden there was a pile of money starin' me right in the face. An' when I seen them canvas bags, I knew in a minute you two wasn't the Haleyville National Bank. Discretion bein' the better part of valor, here I am."

"There's a lot of money in that case. We could cut you in."

"I find yer proposal shockin'. If I was to do it, how could I hold up me head the next time I saw Father McGrath?"

"We'll outwait you, Injun."

"I doubt that, gintlemen. I've a surplus o' water as ye or any other fool can see. There's fish in the lake, and I've me rod in the canoe. In the next few days there'll be a game warden through these parts, tryin' to catch me poachin' fish out o' season. At the proper time I'll shout me difficulty to the wind, and he'll hear me. And I've no doubt he'll be away and gone without you two catchin' sight uv him."

"Maybe, Injun. Just keep that suitcase where it won't sink. It'd be a shame to have that go to the bottom when we put a few slugs in you and that canoe."

Josh waved his hand at the eastern shore expansively. "Have no fear, gintlemen. She's lashed securely beneath the front seat. Me and the canoe and the money will be around when you two are peerin' from behind the bars."

Josh's last remark was greeted with the roar of Eddie's gun, and another slug rippled the water far to Josh's left.

Mitch jogged along the east shore and met Eddie. He cursed soundly for several moments. Then he turned to his companion.

"Eddie, do you swim?"

"Sure, Mitch. I learned at Jones Beach in the surf. Why?"

For the first time, Mitch lost his temper. "Because I can't, and somebody's got to go out there and get that Injun, that's why!"

Eddie remained unruffled. "I don't know if a gun would be much good if I got it wet while I was swimmin' out there, Mitch."

Mitch threw up his arms and groaned. "You're not going to take a gun into the water, stupid. You big ox, if you can tip that canoe over, that Injun ought to be easy for you to handle in the water. He's nowhere near as big as you are."

"Gee, Mitch, I don't know if I can catch him while he's in the canoe."

"I thought of that. If you get to the canoe, tip him into the water. I'll give you my knife to take care of him, once he's in the drink. If he tries to move away from you, see if you can herd him toward shore so I can get a shot at

him. We gotta do something. He may have been lying about that game warden, but maybe not."

"What about the money?"

"Didn't you just hear him say he's got it tied to the canoe? Once we get rid of that Injun, we'll have all the time in the world to dry it out if it gets wet."

Eddie stripped to his shorts and gingerly walked over the sharp stones and twigs to the water's edge. Mitch reached into his pocket for his knife, clicked open the six-inch blade, and handed it to Eddie.

From the middle of the lake, Josh watched the preparations of the two men. "Well, me bucko," he whispered softly, "you may know how to swim, but ye don't know beans about canoes. I doubt ye'll be takin' Joshua Red Wing with those maneuvers."

He idly paddled a few strokes, and then let the canoe glide, with the split paddle trailing in the water. Suddenly he jerked the paddle inboard. He bent over from where he was kneeling, and his hands began groping in the bottom of the canoe.

Eddie Files began swimming with slow, powerful strokes that pulled him rapidly through the still water. Now, in the middle of summer, the lake was warm, and he felt good. He was almost enjoying himself, except for that Injun out there in the canoe. He held the knife gripped between his teeth, like a pirate he had once seen in a movie. The Indian made no movement in the canoe, but remained bent over so that Eddie could only see his back above the edge.

Josh allowed Eddie to get within fifteen feet of him before he flicked his paddle and shot the canoe a short distance away from the swimming man. Eddie was pleased. This movement put the Injun closer to the north end of the lake, where he knew Mitch was waiting.

He swam faster. Once more he got almost close enough to make a final lunge, and once more the canoe swept away from him. A third attempt to reach the canoe failed.

Eddie Files stopped swimming and began to tread water. He was getting tired, but the water was warm. All he needed was to rest a few seconds. As long as he didn't

let the Injun paddle around him and get back to the center of the lake, everything was going according to plan. Eddie realized that he had no chance to catch the canoe, but each attempt he made brought them closer to Mitch.

Just as Eddie was setting himself to begin swimming again, he saw the Indian straighten up, pull his arm back, and make a flicking movement of his arm and wrist. Was the fool trying to throw stones at him?

Eddie heard a metallic click, and at the same time something struck him just behind the ear. He saw the Indian whip his arm back rapidly.

On shore, Mitch heard the shrill scream of anguish ring out from the stone cliffs and over the lake, as the treble hooks of Josh's trolling spoon buried themselves in the soft flesh behind Eddie's left ear. Josh was upright in the canoe now, reeling rapidly, and keeping a tight line on the man in the water.

Eddie's first shout had lost him the knife from between his teeth. Fiery jabs of pain lanced red flashes of torture from the side of his head across his vision. He reached instinctively to his ear, and the free hooks rasped his palm. As he brought his hand back into the water, it crossed the eighteen-pound-test gut leader. He tried to grip it, but it only cut into his water-softened fingers.

In the canoe, Josh held the casting rod in his left hand while he kept his right arm wrapped around the paddle, ready to move in any direction. He paid little attention to where he was in relation to the shore. He had the biggest fish of his life on the end of his line now, and only one of them would come out of this combat alive.

"No ye don't, me boy," he cried, as the thrashing Eddie attempted to relieve aching muscles by treading water. He jerked the rod up, and edged the canoe away from the struggling figure in the water.

Eddie was weakening. Once he had succeeded in getting his fingers over the side of the canoe, but Josh had brought down the handle of his fishing rod viciously, breaking two of them. Eddie no longer cared about the money, or the Injun, or Mitch. He only knew he had to rid himself of that thing which was grinding the pain into his skull.

He had to rest, but the thing would not let him. Jab. Jab.

It took fifteen minutes for Josh to bring Eddie to the point of complete exhaustion. Finally, the beaten man in the water hung limply, just barely keeping his nose and mouth above the surface. Josh jerked the line several times, but without getting any reaction. He paddled closer. Eddie's eyes were closed, and blood was flowing from the spot where the hooks had entered.

Carefully, Josh brought the canoe behind Eddie. He reached out with his fishing rod and prodded the torn left ear. Eddie stiffened slightly but made no other movement. The mere act of remaining afloat took all his energy.

Josh reversed the paddle, bringing the butt-end downward. He raised it over his head and, with the full strength of his arm and shoulder, brought the knob end down on the back of Eddie's neck, just below the skull. He killed pike this way before bringing them into the boat, and Eddie's reaction was the same as that of the fish. There was a soggy, smacking sound, and Josh felt the jolt run along his arm. Eddie stiffened, quivered throughout his body, and began to sink slowly into the clear waters of the lake, dragging line from the fishing reel.

When the movement of line from the reel ceased, Josh waited several minutes, and then removed a small sheath knife from the fishing box by his knees. Laying the line on the wooden thwart in front of him, he dragged the blade across it once. The cut piece of line pulled itself over the side of the canoe and remained floating on the water, the only marker for the dead man beneath it.

On the shore, Mitch watched the entire battle out on the water. That Injun sure was a cold-blooded one. Mitch felt no sorrow over the loss of Eddie, but only a sense of worry that now he had the entire east side of the lake to guard by himself. While Josh dispatched the swimmer, Mitch made his way deeper into the woods. If the Injun found where he was, there might be a chance he could get away by paddling to the other end of the lake.

He cupped both hands around his mouth. "You there! Injun!" he called out over the lake. "Don't forget I'm still here waiting for you!"

"I'm sure of it!" the answer came back. "But if I'm not mistaken, there was two o' ye but a few moments ago. Tell me, sir, would ye care to try for a swim yerself?"

"I'm no swimmer, Injun. I don't have to be. All I've got to do is sit here, and pick you off when you come to shore."

"Ah, 'tis a pleasant thought, the two uv us both reachin' old age together here on this lake," Josh retorted. "That is, uv course, if the game warden don't come by to offer his greetin's in the meantime."

The sun moved across the sky, throwing long shadows on the stone cliffs. Mitch began to worry. If night fell and the Injun was still out there on the lake, there would be a chance he could slip ashore in the darkness. Mitch checked the two pistols. His own .38 held four bullets. Eddie's contained three more. He glanced at the lake, which was as calm as glass.

Running through the woods, Mitch finally reached a point near the shore of the lake which seemed to be nearest the canoe. He wasn't a bad shot with a pistol, but the Injun was too far away to aim properly. If he could start shooting and see where the bullets hit the water, he might have a chance to correct his aim and kill, or at least nick, the man in the canoe. Anyway, he'd save one shot, and that's all he'd need if he missed now, and the Injun tried to get to shore later.

Mitch looked out from between the trees. He was as close to the shore as he could get without Josh's seeing him. A few more feet wouldn't do any good anyway. He pulled out a pistol and steadied his hand against the trunk of a tree.

"Steady, boy," he whispered. "Just squeeze. Careful. Now . . ." Wham! The bullet kicked up water four feet to the left of the canoe and a little short of it. Mitch raised the muzzle and corrected his aim to the right. Wham! Wham! He squeezed off two more shots and, as he gazed out to see where they landed, he heard a cry from out on the lake. He watched as the figure in the canoe jerked once and tumbled into the water, turning the canoe over with him.

"Got him!" crowed Mitch happily.

The curved bottom of the canoe floated peacefully on the lake. But a new problem presented itself. Mitch could not swim. He would have to wait until the canoe drifted closer to shore where he could get to it.

The wait was not long. While Mitch could feel no breath of air on shore, he was certain that there must be a breeze on the lake, as the canoe was moving toward the shore two hundred yards from where he sat. He made his way to the point where it seemed the canoe would land, a nice sandy stretch. Ten minutes later, the craft was within fifteen feet of the shore, but there it stopped, its green bottom reflecting the afternoon sun.

Mitch looked around the lake. "That Injun must have gone to the bottom like a stone," he said aloud. "No sign of him, and he sure couldn't swim under water all the way to shore."

Seeing that the canoe was no longer moving toward shore, Mitch sat down on the beach and took off his suede shoes and silk socks. He removed his coat, and rolled up his pants cuffs as far as they would go. Gingerly he waded into the warm water. His feet sank slightly into the sand. After a few steps, he saw that his pants would be soaked, but his mind was only on that suitcase, which was now so near. Four feet away—three—two.

Mitch wondered if some current was dragging at the canoe. It seemed to be moving slightly out into the lake. It he lost it now, he might never get it back. Fifty grand! He set himself, and lunged at the canoe.

Mitch Kellendorf, who could not swim a stroke, found himself in twelve feet of water. The canoe, which now seemed to have a mind of its own, lurched away from him and floated rapidly out into the lake, where it again remained stationary, ten feet from his groping arms. Mitch's clothing clung to him. He shrieked once, and as he tried to gasp for breath, his face went under water. There were a few more disturbances on the lake, and then nothing but the canoe floating upside down on the placid water.

"So ye see, after I'd gotten rid of the big one, I still had

the problem o' gettin' off the lake. Then, when I heard the other one shootin', I threw myself into the water an' came up under the canoe. I knew there was enough air in there to last a bit."

Deputy Vern Lefner looked across the campfire he had made to the black-haired figure on the far side, wrapped in a blanket for warmth, and vainly trying to light a soggy cigar. "But how did you know about that drop-off out from shore?"

"It jist so happens, me boy, that there's a six-pound bass lurkin' along a rock ledge right at that spot. I've often fished for him there, and even hooked him once or twice. In season, o' course," Josh added, glancing at the star on his companion's shirt.

"Furthermore," he went on, "if the blackhearted villain scared that fish away, he deserves to stay right where he lies now. Mebbe his remains will lure the big fish back." Josh turned and threw half of the sandwich he had been eating to a chipmunk which had scampered into the firelight.

"Josh," said the deputy, "I don't understand you. You kill two men in cold blood without a qualm in the world. But you spend all day paddling a canoe, plus another hour flagging down a car on the road, in order to report to us, all without eating a thing. Yet you give half your sandwich to a little animal that'll rob your pack the next chance he gets."

Josh, sitting down and extending his feet to the fire, said quietly, "I've not a doubt in me mind the leprechauns would hev wanted it that way."

# THE AMATEUR PHILOLOGIST

## by August Derleth

My friend, Solar Pons, and I were discussing the trial of the French mass murderer, Landru, one May evening, when the outer door to our quarters opened, and a ponderous step fell upon the stairs.

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

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

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

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

"Come in, Inspector," called Pons.

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

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

Jamison removed his bowler and topcoat, put them down

on a chair, and came over to stand next to the mantel, near which Pons and I were sitting.

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

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

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

"That's the fellow. Has a place in Stepney—private house. Sells antiques and such. Dabbles in linguistics and philology. About fifty-five. One of our men reported that a thief he was watching went into his place of business. After reading his report, we decided to go around and pay Aubrey a visit. We got there just as he was having a heart attack. We took him to a hospital. He's bad. Couldn't answer questions. There is one curious thing. He'd evidently just opened his mail, and he still had a letter clutched in his hand. We can't make head or tail out of it."

"You've brought it?"

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

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

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

"Aha, but what?" cried Jamison.

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

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

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

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

"Of course."

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

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

"I daresay I'll have the answer to that in a few days," said Pons crisply, "if you want it. Parker, be a good fellow, and copy this message."

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

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

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

"Three days ago at Princetown, Devonshire."

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

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

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

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

"Ah, the cat burglaries. Let me see—that would be

seven years ago. You took in Archie Prior for that series of burglaries."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Then you have access to his premises?"

"We locked the house after him."

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

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

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

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

"Tut, tut! The message was plain as a pikestaff to anyone but those who looked for riddles in it," said Pons. "Its

author stirs my admiration and fires my interest. And so, too, does Mr. Abraham Aubrey. I trust he will recover, though his heart attack would seem to be fortuitous for our little inquiry."

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

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

"It came from someone in prison."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The soft lamplight illuminated another world—one of artifacts and curios, vintage furniture, glassware, carvings—all set about on shelves, tables, on the floor among the ordinary furniture of Aubrey's daily use, a fantastically

apportioned room which lay beyond a small vestibule, from which a narrow stairs led up to another storey, under the gables. Books, art treasures, handicraft, all wearing an aura of rarity, took on separate life in the dimly-lit room.

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

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

"Surely not here!" I cried.

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

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

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

"What about you?"

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

"Pons, you're expecting visitors?"

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

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

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

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

We made a conspicuous exit from the house by the way we had entered it. Pons seemed to be in no haste to leave the porch, and when at last he sauntered out into the

street, he stood for a few moments looking up and down, as if proud of his disguise, confirming my previous opinion that my companion took a singular, if somewhat juvenile, pleasure in disguising himself, which evidently fed upon a flair for the dramatic integral to his nature.

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

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

So saying, we set off down the street.

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

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

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

He was not disposed to tell me more.

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

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

we might make it in time for the four-forty. The last train leaves after six."

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

"I fancy the area we want is well beyond those buildings, which will screen us from view," he said presently. "Aubrey evidently has a tenant on his farm. Come, we'll make a little circuit."

He walked on past the farm buildings.

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

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

He turned from the lane as he spoke.

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

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

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

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

"Another of those fine old words, my dear fellow—'rodomel'. This means, if I recall correctly, a mixture of

honey and the juice of rose leaves, a poet's word. Or a philologist's. I have no doubt Aubrey apprehended instantly what it might mean." He bent to the sack. "Now let us just dabble and stolch about a little. That would be, I fear, in that muddy area between the water's edge and the grass."

He took from the bag, first, a pair of calf-height boots. Taking off his shoes, he put them on. Then he removed from the bag the joints of a rod, which he proceeded to fit together.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I saw no one."

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

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

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

finished with this task, and returned all the articles to the sack, did he carefully unfold the leather.

There lay revealed a sadly tarnished silver casket.

"Let me introduce you to Lady Canevin's jewel box, Parker," said Pons. "Somewhat the worse for circumstances, but with its contents, I am certain, untouched, just where Archie Prior hid it before he was taken."

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

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

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

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

Pons let us into the house.

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

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

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

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

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

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

An exclamation escaped Jamison.

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

Jamison nodded curtly.

"Good. We may expect that an attempt will be made to collect the jewel case tonight. The house has been under observation ever since we first reached it yesterday. ' 'Ware the horrid hent' means nothing less than that the jewel box, once recovered and brought here by someone not likely to be under police surveillance, will be lifted—'hent'—by dark or night—'horrid'."

"You broke the code!" cried Jamison.

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

Pons put out the lamp and we took our positions.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# THIEVES' HONOR

## by John Lutz

Ned Spangler, that anonymous wisp of thievery known to the police only as "The Monkey Burglar," gripped the rope with strong gloved hands as he lowered himself down the brick wall of the apartment building to the Vonderhursts' bedroom window. Eight stories below him the Ninth Avenue traffic continued to stream by, a myriad of moving lights, faint sounds muted by the night air. The office building across the street was dark, no danger of being seen. Cautiously, he moved his head to look into the Vonderhurst apartment.

The light was on in the bedroom, showing it to be unoccupied, but what Spangler was after lay carefully arranged on the oversized bed. He carefully tried the window and it raised with very little noise.

From beyond the closed bedroom door came laughter, a woman's squeal and the clink of glasses, the sounds of a party. Spangler smiled. The society page was a burglar's best friend. He swung lightly into the room and looked at the guests' expensive furs spread out on the bed. Swiftly he took from inside his shirt a large burlap sack and stepped toward them.

He was hurriedly stuffing the first coat, an expensive sable, into the sack when the door opened. Still bent over the luxurious array of fur, he stared at the girl, then quickly turned to leap for the window. He didn't though,

because the girl was now holding a small, deadly-looking automatic which she had produced from the evening bag she was carrying.

Keeping beautiful, unblinking gray eyes on him, she closed the half-opened door with her foot. Dressed in a white evening gown that flattered a perfect figure, her blonde hair was pulled back tight from a well-sculpted face that was unmarred by makeup. And now there was a strange gleam in her eyes, a gleam which Spangler didn't understand.

He stood frozen, awaiting the girl's next move. She had him cold.

"I believe 'red-handed' is the term," she said coolly. The gun didn't waver.

Spangler relaxed slightly. She wasn't going to shoot or scream, at least not right away. "It's the term," he said, measuring the distance to the window, knowing he couldn't make it even if she were a lousy shot.

"What's your name?" the girl asked, and the question was so unlikely it took Spangler by surprise for a moment.

"The police will fill you in later," he answered after a pause.

"Maybe that doesn't have to happen. Maybe we can make a deal."

Did he see the corners of her mouth lift slightly in a hidden smile? "I'm hardly in a position to make a deal."

"That's exactly why I suggested it," the girl said. There was amusement in her gray eyes. "A man like you, with your novel way of making a living, with that scar on your face, could easily be identified and traced by the police."

Spangler fingered the long scar running down his left cheek, a scar he'd gotten from his partner of ten years ago in a circus brawl. The lady was right. It wouldn't be hard for the police to trace an ex-tumbler who was so marked.

The girl continued, "Even if I were to let you leave this room I'd still have you in an uncompromising position, a position in which you could hardly afford *not* to deal." She leaned back against the closed doors and looked at him appraisingly.

Spangler searched her face, found nothing. "Out with it," he said.

"Yorktown 5-0305, my phone number," the girl said calmly. She repeated it. "You'll call it within three days, or . . ."

"You cry wolf," Spangler interrupted.

She nodded, and he had to admire her poise. Keeping the gleaming automatic aimed at him, she crossed to the bed and picked up a mink stole. "I always leave a party early," she said. Gracefully backing to the door still watching him, she slipped the gun back into her purse. "I estimate that no other guest will enter this room for at least ten minutes." Again, her lips hinted a smile. "What you do with that time is your business." Then she was gone.

Spangler stood motionless for a moment, still in a kind of relieved shock. Then he went to work. He selected only the finest furs, packing them hastily but expertly into his sack so they'd take up the least possible space. He even checked the closet, where he found the best of the lot, Mrs. Vonderhurst's long, dark mink with her monogram in the lining.

Tying the drawstrings of the now bulging sack, Spangler stepped to the window and took a last look around. Then he tied the sack to his belt, reached for the waiting rope and climbed out of the window. Despite his encounter with the girl, he felt the familiar thrill and satisfaction. He had only to climb two stories to the roof, then use the rope to lower himself down the back of the building to the fire escape that led into the alley where his car was parked. In forty-five minutes he'd be home sipping his customary after-the-job drink, a good five thousand dollars richer.

On the third day he called her. He had to tell her his name and, surprisingly, she told him hers—Veronica Ackling. When Spangler heard the name, he realized why she would be at a cocktail party given by a wealthy art patron like Mrs. Vonderhurst. Veronica's husband, Herbert Ackling, was a well-known collector of rare books, and the

Ackling name appeared quite often on the society page.

Veronica wasn't coy. She told Spangler what his part of the deal would be. She simply wanted him to rob her of her jewelry, without her husband's knowledge, and Spangler would get ten percent of the insurance money plus ten percent of the price he could get for the jewels. Her husband, she said, was a miser who clung selfishly to every dollar, and she was on an allowance that was hardly suitable to her tastes. The robbery and insurance settlement, she assured Spangler, could be handled without her husband's knowledge, since he would be in Europe for the next month tracking down a rare first edition.

There was something about the deal that didn't smell right. Spangler, by nature a methodical and solitary operator, would rather have skipped it. A partner was something he didn't need or want, least of all an imponderable woman like Veronica Ackling. But, dammit, she had him trapped.

He felt much better about the deal when Veronica told him the jewelry was insured for ninety thousand dollars. That meant nine thousand guaranteed, and his other ten percent would add up to a worthwhile sum, even after the cut he'd have to take on the value of the jewels when he sold them. Spangler had stolen jewelry before, while traveling with the circus, so he knew ninety thousand dollars worth of jewelry sometimes amounted to less than thirty thousand when it reached the greedy but hesitant hands of a wary fence.

Veronica told him the incredibly simple plan for the robbery, and he left the phone booth from which he was calling and walked preoccupied out the door, already turning over the details of the theft in his mind.

At two A.M. Spangler climbed noiselessly on rubber-soled shoes up the five flights of stairs to the top floor of the Freemont Apartment Building. The Freemont was not quite so exclusive as the Barton Arms next door, where the Acklings lived, so there was no doorman. He walked quickly down the long corridor and found the service passage to the roof, just where Veronica said it would be. He picked the crude mechanism of the cheap padlock that

barred his way and in a few seconds opened the rooftop door to the sudden, cold blast of winter.

The gangway between the Barton Arms and the Freemont Apartments was ten feet wide, but Spangler leaped easily onto the roof of the Barton Arms. Wasting no time, he paced off the proper distance along the edge of the roof to be sure he was over the window of the Acklings' third-floor apartment, then moved about four feet to the side to be certain the rope wouldn't be visible from the windows on the upper floors. He tied one end of his rope to the sturdy base of a lightning rod, then let the other end, weighted so it would not be affected by the wind, down the side of the building.

The window to Herbert Ackling's den was locked, as Spangler and Veronica had agreed it would be and Spangler quickly solved that with the aid of an efficient glass cutter. Wearing gloves, he turned the lock, slowly raised the window, and entered Herbert Ackling's den.

There was no one home, of course. Ackling was in Europe, and Veronica was out establishing a firm alibi for herself to dispel any suspicions the insurance company might have. By the thin yellow beam of his flashlight Spangler rummaged through the den to make the robbery look genuine, even pocketing an expensive lighter from the desk top for effect. Then he made his way into the bedroom and pulled open all the dresser drawers. In the top drawer, behind an unruly tangle of scarves and nylon hose, he found the jewelry box.

Spangler set the box on the floor and easily sprung the flimsy lock. In the beam of the flashlight the jewelry sparkled dazzlingly. He could well believe there was ninety thousand dollars' worth here. Admiring each sparkling piece, he hurriedly filled the special pocket he had sewn into the lining of his jacket.

As he stood by the den window, feeling the comfortable weight of the jewelry against his side, Spangler flashed the beam of his light around with satisfaction. As far as the police and the insurance company were concerned, this world be just one more bit of work by "The Monkey Burglar." Then, silently, he left.

"Do turn out the light, darling." Veronica lay on Spangler's bed with the covers pulled up around her chin. Her eyes were closed to the light and, though there was a delicate frown line between her eyebrows, she was smiling faintly.

It was early morning, and Spangler sat on the edge of the bed contemplating his good fortune. He loved Veronica, he knew. When she had delivered the money, they'd had a few drinks, talked, and discovered they were very attracted to each other. Veronica's social position in no way awed Spangler. Though Spangler loved with a certain reserve, he was completely fascinated by this woman whose aristocratic coolness could turn like the flip of a card to deep passion.

Spangler, already dressed, turned off the bedside lamp and the half-light of dawn filtered through the slanted blinds. He propped a pillow behind his head and smiled at the fragrance of her expensive perfume.

"I have an idea," Veronica said, and rested her head against his shoulder. "I want you to rob me again."

"Did I hear you right?"

"It's not really a bad idea, darling." Her eyes caught the sunlight in the room. "You've robbed the same place twice on occasion. It's part of your *modus operandi.*"

"I'm not worried about getting away with it," Spangler said, "and I suppose the insurance company would come through again; there'd be no doubt it was the work of the same man. But why be greedy?"

Veronica said calmly, "Herbert's going to France again next week, and if there's one more robbery, if I can have just that much more money, I'll leave him. They're my jewels. Let him just try to get the insurance money back—if he can find me."

"And you'll be?"

"With you."

Spangler was silent for a few minutes. That part of him that looked at things objectively knew he didn't really have any more choice this time than he'd had before. There was no way he could involve Veronica if she chose to turn him in, no way he could prove their alliance. He wondered if

here were some detached and aloof part of Veronica's mind that thought the same thing.

"How much are your new jewels insured for?" Spangler asked.

"Eighty thousand. I used my share of the insurance money to replace the stolen ones. Herbert's unaware of the whole thing, of course. He never noticed what kind of jewelry I wore, or if I wore any, for that matter."

Spangler reached over to the nightstand and rooted through Veronica's purse for a pack of cigarettes. "I don't know," he said.

"This time you can have half of whatever you get for the jewels."

Another payday like the last appealed to Spangler. He wouldn't have to take a risk for a long time with that kind of money, and the thought of going away with Veronica appealed to him almost as much."

"Agreed," he said, and gently pulled her to him.

Veronica smiled. "We'll spend it together," she said before she kissed him.

A week later Spangler was at work again. He'd climbed the stairway of the Freemont and onto the roof. He'd leaped the gangway again and repeated his pacing off of distance and securing and lowering of the rope. Now he hung against the cold, unyielding wall, buffeted by a brisk winter wind that made his ears ache. He'd be glad to get inside.

He inched his way toward the window with his free hand and foot, surprised to see that this time a light burned in Herbert Ackling's den. Had Veronica forgotten to turn it off? Spangler cautiously looked into the room.

There was Herbert Ackling, his head resting on his desk top like that of a schoolboy taking an afternoon nap—only a brilliant scarlet pool of blood covered the top of the desk and the open book he'd been reading. On the thick carpet, just inside the window that Spangler now saw was flung wide open, lay the glinting automatic that Veronica always carried in her purse, the gun that Spangler had handled a dozen times. Then he knew.

Suddenly Veronica stood in the doorway, screaming loud and long. There was no expression of shock on her face as she looked at Spangler and the body; she would save that for an appreciative audience. She turned and ran.

With lightning speed Spangler pulled himself hand over hand up the rope. Why hadn't he thought of it? Now Veronica, the Veronica he loved, would have Ackling's insurance money. She also had something more important: a made-to-order murderer for the police.

Spangler reached the roof and ran over the tar and gravel surface toward the opposite edge. As he leaped the gangway with a yard to spare, he heard the wavering wail of a siren. Then he was in the Freemont building descending the stairs in long, desperate leaps. The wail of sirens grew steadily louder. It would be close, close. He didn't care if he made noise now.

As his feet hit the bottom floor, Spangler raced down the long corridor toward the rear door. There was a sudden whooshing of air and a burst of sound as the front door opened. Spangler faintly heard a voice call, "Halt!" He didn't hear a shot, but something ricocheted off the tile wall next to him, sending ceramic chips flying. He didn't hesitate, but hit the back door hard. It opened, and he was in the gangway that he'd just leaped, five stories above, a few seconds ago.

He stood still for a split second, gasping, then ran again. From a window high in one of the buildings a woman's voice screamed, "Murderer!" and a flashing red light suddenly appeared at the end of the gangway toward which Spangler was running. He spun on his heel, but this time as he heard the shots he experienced a searing pain.

Still conscious, Spangler lay on his back looking up at the narrow band of bright winter stars between the two buildings. The cement was hard and cold against his back, but his hands rested in something warm and sticky. He knew he was losing blood fast.

He heard a deep, authoritative voice say, "Out, out. Keep everyone out of the gangway until the ambulance arrives."

Spangler didn't care about the ambulance. He was thinking of Veronica, and strangely he felt no anger toward her. It was the game. She'd outwitted him, and for that he could only admire her. Damned if he didn't hope she'd enjoy the insurance money.

# THE FINAL CHAPTER

## by Richard O. Lewis

I suppose there is hardly a newspaperman alive—or dead—who hasn't at one time or another dreamed of writing The Great American Novel, the masterpiece that could free him from the rat race for all time and earn him the envy of his fellow scribes. I am no exception.

One reason why I hadn't already written TGAN was simply that, like most of the other hopefuls in the trade, I spent too many of my off hours in Tuffy's Tavern discussing national politics, foreign policy, the right to protest, blondes versus brunettes, and similar important things instead of grasping my typewriter firmly between my knees and slugging away hour after hour with unbounded determination.

But the main reason, I kept telling myself, was that I didn't have anything world-shaking to write about, and until I did, there was no point in wasting paper and typewriter ribbons. Yet my mind kept groping and seeking, waiting for the one big idea that would make my efforts worthwhile, the novel that would practically write itself.

When the final episode of the Mike Kelson affair broke suddenly into headlines in every major newspaper in the country, I began to wonder if this might be just the thing for which I had been waiting. The more I thought about it, the more convinced I became that at last I had the real thing. Briefly, the story was this:

Mike Kelson, a victim of the slums, had chosen—or had been forced into—a life of crime from the first days he had been able to walk the streets. By the time he was thirty, he had many arrests to his discredit, a few convictions for petty larceny, and a prison term of a few years.

Then had come the fateful night in the park when Officer McClasky, on routine patrol, heard what he described as "a shriek of pain" coming from a dense growth of small trees, and made haste in that direction, gun drawn. Approaching the area, he heard sounds of a struggle, and when he finally broke in upon the scene, he saw a man lying in the grass, his heart pumping out its last lifeblood from a hole in the chest. Standing over the man was one Mike Kelson, a knife in his hand, its thin blade still dripping blood.

No one had believed Mike's story, of course, that he just happened to be passing through the park that night when he heard whimperings coming from behind a clump of trees. Thinking that it might be some lost pet in trouble, he'd gone to investigate and found a young girl lying on the ground, most of her clothing off, and a man standing over her with a knife held to her throat. No one had believed that Mike launched a swift attack, that the man turned upon him with the knife, that the girl gathered her things about her and fled, and that the knife had, during the struggle, found its way into the man's heart.

Of course not. Mike had a police record; the dead man, one Bertram C. Mackless, had been a respected citizen. And so, the gas chamber for Mike.

Then, two days after the news of his execution had hit the papers, the hysterical girl was in police headquarters, sobbing out her story: Mary Hegthorne, fifteen years old; a sheltered life with a strict aunt; dragged into the bushes at knife point; raped. She was certain the man would have killed her to prevent identification if it hadn't been for the other man who had rushed in and leaped upon her tormentor. She had screamed, gathered her things together, and fled into the night. Shock; a trip to Europe and back with her aunt. Shame had sealed her lips; she had told no one of her experience. She had read nothing of Mike Kel-

son's trial, known nothing of his sentence until she read of his trip to the gas chamber and a recapitulation of the entire affair. Then, after two days of hysteria, she had run to the police.

That was the story—Mike Kelson, wrong guy, wrong side of the tracks, wrong side of the law, wrong side of everything until he had done the one heroic thing, the saving of a girl's life, which, ironically enough, had landed him in the gas chamber instead of earning him a hero's medal.

So I fell to work, gathering from the various morgues all the newspaper accounts I could find concerning the event and the characters involved; and in my room, making outlines and pounding the typewriter until Charley horses made a racetrack between my shoulders. I even went so far as to stay completely away from Tuffy's Tavern.

Word got around that I was writing a book, and immediately my fellow workers began regarding me as something distasteful that had recently been rejected from Mars. If you have ever written a book or tried to write one, you'll know what I mean—the little sidelong glances as you pass, the secret nudges in the ribs behind your back. Writing a *book? Him?* HAW!

You'll also know how I felt when, after a prolonged period of the hardest work I had ever done in my life, the book suddenly turned to ashes in my hands. Worthless junk, not even worth the cheap paper I had written it on. All I had been doing was a rehash of all the news stories, making a glorified news account of something everyone had already read! It was anticlimactic, no guts to it.

It was then that I began slipping down into the bottomless pit of black despair, but I couldn't give up. I had to finish it to prove something to those clowns at the office. Either that or put up with their jibes for the rest of my days among them.

I didn't go to Tuffy's to drown my sorrows. Instead, for the first time in my life, I faced the issue squarely and fought it through, night after night, until I finally found the trouble. Mike Kelson was but a puppet character. I

had not made of him a sympathetic character with whom the reader could identify. The whole thing lacked emotional impact. I had written a news story from my head rather than a drama from the heart. I needed to emphasize the miscarriage of justice, of course, but most of all I needed to let the reader feel as Mike must have felt during those final days in the death cell, waiting for help, waiting for someone to realize the truth, and knowing that each day of waiting was just one more day toward the gas chamber. I needed a final, climactic chapter, one with emotional punch.

Even though the thought left me cold and jittery, I knew exactly what I had to do to get the proper atmosphere for that final chapter. . . .

I arrived at the office early the next morning and walked directly into Editor J. T. Tallman's glass-enclosed cubicle. "Look, J. T.," I said, "I need a two-week vacation." He looked up at me, his thin brows arching high over his little pink eyes. "With pay," I added.

"You've been on vacation with pay ever since you've been here," he said.

I ignored the insult. "This is important. I'm writing a book."

Tallman nodded. "I know. The Great American Novel."

I didn't exactly like the way he said it. "It could be just that," I pointed out, "or it couldn't. It depends upon how much cooperation I get from you." Then I told him exactly what I wanted.

When I had finished, he looked at me as if my words had convinced him of a certain mental condition he had long suspected. "You're nuts!" he said. "Anyway, I couldn't do it."

"Then all the noise you have been making about all your influential friends on the outside, the big shots you've been clowning around with, has been just so much hot air," I pointed out.

He looked at me speculatively for a long time, one corner of his mouth—the corner with the cigarette in it—curved upward toward the left eye that was closed against the spiral of smoke.

"You don't carry enough weight," I said. "You just can't swing it!"

That did it. If there is one thing that J. T. can't pass up, it's a challenge. That's probably why he is one of the best editors in this part of the country.

Two days later, I found myself in a private cell in death row of the state prison. I had notebooks and pencils, and wore a gray uniform bearing the number 242403. In my cell was a toilet, a lavatory, paper drinking cups, a cot, and a chair.

Supposedly, only J. T. Tallman, Warden Simms, and the watchdogs of the cells knew I was here, and only Tallman and Simms knew *why*. I had been admitted under strict conditions of secrecy. Upon release, I was never to divulge that I had been in the place. I was here only to get the feel of things; nothing more. To get the emotional impact . . .

I began getting the emotional impact almost immediately. It was the deathlike silence of the place, the silence of a tomb. The low moaning sound, almost inaudible, that came from the cell directly ahead of mine seemed only to accentuate that silence rather than to dispel it. That would be Bostwell. The warden had given me a brief rundown on him. He was on his way out. Exactly five days from now, he would traverse that last long mile that led to oblivion.

There were only the two of us in the "row," and we were cut off from the rest of the prison—the rest of the entire world—by a great door of steel at the end of the corridor. We were isolated, in a strange limbo between the living and the dead.

I set to work, writing down the description of everything about me, everything I could see. I further tried to put myself into the position of a condemned man, and capture my own feelings.

After a time, I began to get jittery and realized I needed a smoke. I had half a pack of cigarettes with me, but no matches. No matches were allowed to the condemned, nothing with which he could set fire to his bedding or clothing. There was nothing else with which he could hurt

himself—no glass, no rough edges in the cell, nothing. Even the shoes were of soft felt. Ironic! A man condemned to die cannot do so at his own hands. He must wait, wait for the exact date, the precise hour. His life no longer belongs to him; it belongs to the state.

I tore open the end of one of the cigarettes, stuffed shredded tobacco into my mouth, and wrote in my notebook again. I was not to be granted any special privileges during my contracted stay, and I realized that going without a smoke for a full week might turn out to be an ordeal in itself.

A few minutes later, half sick, I spewed the sodden tobacco into the lavatory and rinsed my mouth.

I heard the steel door swing open, and went to the bars of my door. An officer was wheeling a small wagon with two trays of food along the corridor. I looked at my wrist. No watch. But since I had already had breakfast and lunch before being admitted, I guessed this to be the evening meal, but I wasn't very hungry.

A tray was pushed through the horizontal aperture of my door. I reached for it and found myself looking directly into the eyes of Officer McClasky, who had arrested Mike Kelson in the park that night, the officer I had panned unmercifully in some of the later articles I had written. If he recognized me, he didn't show it, and I carried the tray to my cot, sat down beside it, and began eating. The food was neither good nor bad; it was indifferent, just something to keep life going until the state ended it. A gob of mashed potatoes and colorless gravy fell from the tip of my fork of pressed paper. For some reason, my hand trembled.

Finally, I lay back on the cot, which was neither hard nor soft, but was just something for a body to rest upon until it went to its final rest. I lay there for a long time looking up at the yellow ceiling and wanting a smoke.

Yes, my articles concerning the behavior of Officer McClasky had been far from flattering. I had accused him of not being able to tell the difference between the cry of a frightened young girl and "a shriek of pain," as he had put it. I had accused him of not giving enough credence

to Mike's story to make the slightest on-the-spot investigation. Actually, I had just the same as blamed Officer McClasky for Mike Kelson's trip to the gas chamber, and now he was my keeper. I didn't know whether he had fled from the city force to take refuge here in the state prison because of my articles or not. Perhaps he had merely wanted to change jobs. But it didn't really matter. It was over and done with.

Yet, my thoughts kept troubling me. . . .

I suddenly found myself sitting bolt upright on the edge of my cot, the hair of my cropped head tingling. The scream that had brought me out of a fitful sleep had been inhuman, animal-like. Even before its reverberations had ended in the corridor, it came again, and again, each unearthly wail louder than the one before it.

Then came the words, high-pitched and shrieking: *"Help me! Please! Somebody help me! I am not supposed to die! I didn't do it! I am innocent!"*

Then the screams again, on and on until the steel door grated open and the night guard entered. He was followed by a slight man carrying a black bag—the medic, I guessed. They went into Bostwell's cell, and I could hear Bostwell pleading with them.

After the guard and the medic had left, the screaming slowly subsided into the monotonous moaning that had preceded it.

So this was the way it was! The last mile! Knowing that death was rapidly approaching and that no earthly power could forestall it, yet the hope, the pleading, the senseless shouting against deaf ears . . . And Bostwell had four more nights to go, four more nights filled with hideous nightmare.

The next night, the screams and the pleadings were even worse. Spine-chilling! Nerve-shattering! Again they continued until the medic and the guard had come and gone.

The screaming began earlier the next night, screams of a dumb animal being tortured beyond endurance, and accompanied by a constant thudding as if someone were beating the door and the bars and the walls with bare fists. The screams, shrill, stabbing, soul-piercing, continued even

after the medic arrived. Then there was a shuffling sound.

I got up from my cot and went to the door just as the guard and the medic were dragging Bostwell past, still screaming. I couldn't see his face. His head was hanging down between the two men who were dragging him along, his feet scraping the floor. I could see the number on the back of his sweat-stained shirt. He was just a number now, not a man; number 22220.

The corridor door clanged shut, cutting off the screams, and I sat trembling on my cot. Bostwell, with still two nights to go, had cracked up completely. I wondered what they would do with him now. Special medical attention?

I didn't sleep that night. I sat on the edge of my cot, cold with sweat and dying for a smoke. I put some shreds of tobacco in my mouth for a while, then spat them out on the floor. So this was what Mike Kelson had gone through—the utter despair of knowing that no one was likely to come to his aid!

Yes, I had what I had come for, the full emotional impact, the final chapter of Mike Kelson.

Suddenly I realized that I wanted to get out of the place. If they brought Bostwell back, I couldn't stand the screaming for two more nights. If they didn't bring him back, there was certainly no point in sitting and twiddling my thumbs for the four days I had left on my contracted stay.

"Tell Warden Simms I'd like to be released now," I told the guard who shoved my breakfast through to me.

His pointed face twisted itself into a questioning stare.

"I'm supposed to be here for a week," I said, "but I want to get out now. Tell the warden. He'll understand."

A half hour later he came back, a bundle of clothing under one arm, and unlocked the door. "This way," he said.

I picked up my notebooks and pencils and hurried after him, more than glad to quit the place. I had begun to develop a bad case of the creeps, and I didn't like it.

He unlocked the door to another cell. "In here," he said, tossing the bundle of clothes onto the bunk.

It wasn't until after the door banged shut behind me that I realized the cell was the one recently occupied by

Bostwell, and that the clothes on the bunk were merely a fresh uniform, meant for me.

"That won't be necessary," I said, wheeling about. "Just as soon as you see the warden—"

"Warden's not here. On vacation."

"Well, somebody must be in charge. Tell him I want to get out! Or call J. T. Tallman, editor of the *Gazette!*"

"Not allowed to carry messages for the prisoners," he said, turning away. "Against regulations."

"Hey!" I shouted after him. "Hey, listen—"

It was like shouting at the back side of a wooden Indian. The steel door clanged behind him, and then there was silence.

I sat on the edge of the cot for a long time, my brain alive with thoughts that were rapidly becoming distasteful.

After a while, for want of anything better to do, I changed clothes, taking a long, thoughtful time between each of the articles. Finally, I sat with the shirt across my knees, staring into space. It was the end of the week. Perhaps the warden had just gone somewhere for the weekend, would be back tonight or tomorrow. Anyway, J. T. would probably call before long to see how I was getting along. Nothing to worry about, really. I picked up the shirt. A tremor shot through me and the shirt flew from my trembling fingers to the floor. On the back of the garment, in bold, stark numerals, was the number 22220!

I leaped from my cot to the door. The corridor, the entire cell block, was empty and silent as a tomb. There was no one to call to. *And I had been handed the uniform of a man who was condemned to die within two days!*

Wobbly legs took me back to the cot again. What had happened to Bostwell? Where was he? Had he died from shock or something? In any event, why had I been given his number? Prisoners do not have their numbers changed! They are given a number when they come in, and they have the same number when they go out. Someone had made a mistake. That was it—just a mistake. Someone had gotten the shirts mixed up.

I don't know how long I sat there before I heard the door at the end of the corridor swing open and clang shut

again. I jumped up and saw McClasky coming along with the little wagon and my tray of food. McClasky! There was the answer! I hated to ask a favor of him after those articles I had written, but . . .

"Look, McClasky," I said, as he stopped in front of my bars, "you know me, don't you? I'm Bill Hendricks of the *Gazette*. I wrote some articles about you in connection with the Mike Kelson affair. I'll—I'll admit they didn't cast you in a very good light, but . . ." I hesitated. "You *do* know me, don't you?"

He pushed the tray of food through, and his eyes met mine. They were of an opaque gray that veiled whatever was behind them. "I never heard of you before in my life," he said evenly. "To me, you're just a number. Number 22220."

He wheeled away, leaving me stupefied, with the tray in my hands. "Hey!" I shouted finally. "Hey, McClasky! You've got to get word to the warden—"

The steel door swung swiftly shut behind him as if to prevent the silence of the place from escaping through it.

I didn't eat the food. I put the tray on the cot and sat beside it. McClasky was lying! Certainly he knew me! That number on my shirt was no mistake. McClasky knew about the number, knew I had been given the shirt . . .

I put my elbows on my knees, rested my head in my hands, and felt the hair wriggle around at the back of my skull as if it had a will of its own. Surely McClasky wouldn't . . . Not just because of some articles! No! Anyway, he couldn't get away with it! Yet . . .

Maybe those articles had really hurt him, had shattered his pride. The warden was away. After it was all over, it would go down in the records as a grievous error, and McClasky would receive a severe reprimand.

But that wouldn't do *me* any good!

I leaped to my feet and went to the door. I grasped the bars and tried to shake them. I screamed at the steel door at the end of the corridor—and my screams echoed back, mockingly.

I paced the floor. There was little else I could do until McClasky returned for the empty dishes. I would have it

out with him, tell him I knew what he was up to.

McClasky didn't return until he brought my evening meal, but he did not come alone. He brought a husky guard. They unlocked my door, and the guard came in and gathered up my discarded clothing and the tray.

"Look!" I began. "You've got to—" I realized instantly that he was paying no attention to me. I began screaming at him and beating his arms with my fists. "Listen to me! You've got to see the warden or whoever is in charge—"

He went out the door, and I knew he had no intention of listening to me. He had heard it all before. I was merely doing what Bostwell had done before me, what Kelson had done, what all the others had done. He was used to it. The condemned always screamed at him and struck out at him. *It was all in a day's work!*

I fell to the cot, sobbing, and heard the steel door at the end of the corridor close the silence in upon me again.

That steel door! Beyond it was the outside world, a world quite oblivious of what was happening to me. I had to get a message through that door somehow!

I sat for a long time, my mind in a turmoil, before I had an idea. It was a poor one, but it might gain the attention of someone, somewhere. I would simply write the whole story down on a page of my notebook, about the book I had been working on, about how Tallman and Warden Simms had arranged for me to come here for atmosphere, and how, for some reason, a mistake had been made. I would end it with a plea for help. I would make two copies; one I would place on my tray beneath the dishes so it would reach someone in the kitchen; the other I would give to the morning guard and depend upon his curiosity to force him to read it.

I picked up one of my notebooks, turned to a clean page, and looked for a pencil. The search became frantic. Then I flung the notebook from me and sank down to the cot again, for my pencils were gone. The guard had picked them up along with my discarded clothing. The condemned was not permitted anything with which he might injure himself! His life belonged to the state!

Sleep was fitful that night and filled with a procession

of nightmares I shall not attempt to describe. Through it all was the moaning, the pitiful moaning that was coming from somewhere deep within myself. But I couldn't stop it; in a way, it was the only comforting outlet I had for the emotions that seethed within me.

Now I could think of only one possible way of getting a message through that door: the morning guard. I would get something through that weasel head of his even if I had to drive it in by sheer force of lung power!

I was ready and waiting for him hours before he arrived, and when I heard the big door swing open, I was at the bars of my cell.

"Look!" I began shouting as he came down the corridor with his little wagon. "I am Bill Hendricks of the *Gazette!* I am not Bostwell! Go to someone who is in charge and tell him—"

"Take it easy," he said, his pointed nose twisting sideways as he lifted my tray from the wagon. "Your troubles will soon be over. You're having company this afternoon."

"Company?" I took the tray automatically, backed slowly to the cot, and sat down. *Company!*

Suddenly my troubles melted away. I set the tray aside, paced the length of the cell and back. I kicked the hated shirt—number 22220—across the floor and laughed at the ceiling. Warden Simms or J. T.—one or the other of them —coming to see how I was faring. Wouldn't they be surprised! And wouldn't McClasky have a lot of explaining to do!

I hadn't eaten for a long time, had no desire for breakfast, but I drank the small carton of muddy, tepid coffee.

When McClasky shoved my tray through the door at noon, I shoved it back at him with appropriate words as to what he could do with it. I could wait. I knew exactly what I was going to do as soon as I got back to town. I was going to Tuffy's and lap up a few beers, then I was going to search out the biggest steak I could find and top it off with a good cigar.

It seemed hours before I heard the big door swing open and clang shut again, followed by footsteps echoing down the corridor. I hurriedly gathered my notebooks and stood

up, ready to go, just as my cell door swung open.

I found myself face to face with a tall, slim man who was wearing a long gownlike robe and a white collar that was turned backward. I gaped.

"Come," he said, his voice deep and comforting. "Let us sit down."

We sat on the edge of the cot, facing each other. There was no chair in the cell. Too dangerous!

"And now, my good man," he said, "is there something you wish to tell me?"

*Was* there! I told him the whole story, from beginning to end. "And so," I finished, "you've got to tell the warden."

He nodded sympathetically. "The warden isn't here at present, but I am certain he will be back tonight." There was a moment of silence. "You have nothing else to tell me?" he asked, finally.

"No," I said. "Except that I'm damn glad the warden is going to get back tonight!"

He summoned the guard, and went out, then turned to face me through the bars. "I wish to inform you," he said, "that you may have anything you desire for your evening meal—anything within reason, of course. It is customary and fitting . . ."

My body turned to slush ice.

He must have noticed the pallor of my face. "Have courage, my good man," he soothed. "We will be with you in the morning to comfort you every step of the way."

My fists, clutching the bars, grew bloodless, and my head drooped forward to my arms. *He hadn't believed a word I had told him!*

I made another frantic try when McClasky brought my evening tray. He looked through me as if I had already ceased to exist. I hurled the tray away and watched its glutinous burden drip listlessly from the far wall.

I sat on the cot, trying to regain control of my trembling body. The warden would be back tonight. I sat there waiting through a black eternity that seemed to have no end before I suddenly realized that the arrival of the

warden would do me no good. He would have no way of knowing what was happening to me!

Leaping from my cot, I reached the door. I had to let him know! I began screaming then, screaming at the steel barrier, trying to pierce it—and my screams echoed hollowly through the corridor, unheeded. I looked for something with which to make noise. There was nothing. I tried to tear the bars from my door. I beat them with my fists. Someone, somewhere, had to hear me. . . .

After long ages, the door at the end of the corridor swung open. The night guard came, and with him was a slight man with a little black bag. They opened the door and came in, and I clutched the guard and screamed at him. "Go get the warden! Tell the warden they have the wrong man—"

I felt the needle go into my bare arm. It must have contained a terrific jolt, for the faces of the two men began to swim out of focus only seconds later. They eased me to the cot and left me there to drift through a cloying fog. I was only dimly aware of the clanging of the great door, the door that shut out all reality and all hope.

I did not quite go to sleep. As I floated along through the timeless hiatus, the irony of it all came to me, over and over again, torturing me beyond reason. I had come here to experience the last emotions of Mike Kelson, to experience how he had felt when, after doing the one heroic thing in his life, he had written his own final chapter. Now I was going through precisely the same experience, the experience that would be the final chapter of my own life—all because I had been trying to do the one worthwhile thing in life I had ever attempted. . . .

They came for me early in the morning, three guards and the man in the black robe. I screamed at them and fought them, but they pulled me bodily from the cell and dragged me down the corridor, feet trailing. I had heard of men who faced the firing squad without blindfold, of men who mounted the scaffold, unhooded, to fling defiance at their tormentors until the very last. I was made of less stern stuff. They dragged me the entire length of the cor-

ridor, away from the steel door, and into a dimly lighted room. In the gloom, I saw a row of hazy faces: spectators; witnesses to the fact that the state had satisfied the dictates of society at the promised time and with the greatest dispatch.

They forced me into a little room, a boxlike affair within the larger room, and shut the door behind me. My legs were of water, and I fell to my knees, groaning. I could smell the gas then. The gas? No! It was my imagination. The gas would be odorless. It would creep slowly upon me, within me . . . .

I tried not to breathe, and found that I had lost all control over the trembling of my body. I closed my eyes. I waited, trying to force my mind into blankness.

When I opened my eyes again, the door stood open. Bewildered, I got slowly to my feet and staggered toward it. I took hold of the edge of it and stepped through.

The outer room was brightly lighted now, and I saw the row of faces again. There was an officer with a discarded cloak of black on a chair beside him. There was McClasky, and Warden Simms, and J. T. Tallman. They were all grinning like apes. All except J. T.—and he was laughing his silly head off.

Had I got the emotional impact I had been seeking?

Certainly! Thanks to J. T. and his clownish—and very influential—friends.

And am I now going to finish The Great American Novel?

Certainly! Just as soon as I sober up and my hands quit shaking so much. . . .

# THE HELPFUL HORTICULTURIST

## by Mary Linn Roby

Walter Morton stood in his neat little walled garden and looked about with satisfaction. The *Nenistermun canadense* seemed to be thriving, its smooth green leaves and small white flowers beaming up at him as though proudly to draw his attention to the small cluster of black grapelike berries hanging beneath them.

Walter hummed a little song as he went to look at the *Iriglochin maritima.* Last week he had feared they were about to die. No matter how often he had drained sea water into the little bog he had built for them, the dears simply could not catch on. Walter was certain that, if he could simply get them to thrive, they would be one of his biggest sellers.

"Perking up, aren't you, my dears?" Walter said as he examined the spikelike petals.

The *Thlastiaivense* was doing well, too. Walter looked at it thoughtfully. Perhaps he could make up a few boxes of it today. Mr. Brand in Portland, Oregon, had been quite insistent in his letters. But Walter's was a business which could not be rushed, as he often told his clients.

Now, breathing deeply of the fresh, sunny air, he turned and went back into the cozy little house. Of all the furnished homes he had rented, Walter believed he liked this one best. The townspeople were friendly, but not persistent, and it was quite possible to keep relationships on a casual

basis. Sometimes, Walter thought it might have been nice to have had more friends. Still, his gardening was a full-time occupation for him; it was not as though it were simply a hobby. There was the paperwork to look after, and the mailing and sorting. Actually, too, Walter found his relationships with his customers completely satisfying. He was rendering services every day—services of inestimable value—that was enough for him. Besides, he was a man who liked routine.

Smiling to himself, Walter took the milk from the refrigerator and poured a little into a bowl for his cat. Every day he tried to keep things as nearly the same as possible: at six a shower, then breakfast, and out into the garden for a quick look around; back to tidy up the house, then out for some serious work before the sun became too hot; at eleven a tea break, and then, as now, it was time to package a few things so they could go out with the one-o'clock delivery.

Going out into his potting shed, Walter Morton took out his wrapping paper and a notebook. On the table was the box of *Saponaria vaccaria.* These were going all the way to Michigan, and Walter was afraid the pale red flowers would be a little wilted by the time they got there. But, he reminded himself, that didn't really matter as long as the cell at the base of each plant was full of round, black seeds.

Moving his fingers deftly, Walter packaged the plants, and then turned to his address book. Yes, there it was: Mr. Albert Andrews, and the address.

Walter paused for a moment to look at the newspaper clipping which he had pasted on the page opposite. He had found this one in his daily edition of a New York paper. Really, there was no end to the interesting stories one might find leading to new business. There had been quite a little article on how Mr. Andrews, after having lived with and cared for his wealthy uncle most of his adult life as a sort of glorified valet, had just received his inheritance in the form of a rowboat and two oars, while the remainder of the multimillion-dollar estate had gone, for her lifetime, to an elderly female cousin who was noted

for her excellent physical condition. On her death, the money was to revert to Mr. Andrews.

Something had told Walter, as he had read that article, that the elderly cousin would outlive Mr. Andrews with one hand tied behind her back. That sort always did. Walter had been so certain he was right that he had slipped one of his colorful brochures into an envelope that very minute and mailed it off to Mr. Andrews, after finding his address in one of the many huge city telephone directories which he found so indispensable.

Mr. Andrews' response had been more than gratifying, Walter recalled fondly as he printed the correct address in large black letters on the top of the box. Mr. Andrews' order and check had arrived within three days.

The sun, shining in through the single, spotlessly clean window of the shed, struck Walter warmly on the shoulders, making him feel completely relaxed. There was plenty of time before the mail went out. Perhaps he could break away from the routine just this once to smoke a pipe.

Humming a little song, Walter savored the smoke. Leaning against the wall, he flipped idly through the leaves of his notebook. When he thought of the real-life drama there was between these pages, sometimes it made him wonder if, when he retired, he shouldn't write a book.

There was Mrs. Soames, for example. Her picture had appeared directly over the headline, "CAFE SOCIETY LEADER TO DIVORCE." It had been her face that had attracted Walter's attention, the look in her eyes. She was with a man and a younger woman, and if Walter had ever seen hatred before, that was what was in the glance the camera had immortalized. The article, written by a leading gossip columnist, had just skirted libel.

> Rumor has it that Shirley Soames is not as eager to come to a parting of the ways as is Mr. Soames, who has been seen about town frequently with the gorgeous Evelyn Eire, presently taking some time off from spending Daddy's fortune to dabble in stage and screen work. Shirley Soames will be remembered as a former beauty of the cosmopolitan world.

There had been more, but it had not been necessary for Walter to read it. He was not obtuse. As soon as he had seen the picture he had been certain that here was a desperate woman.

Mrs. Soames had been a bit slow about reacting to his brochure but, in the end, she had ordered a box of *Kalmia latifolia,* sometimes called mountain laurel. There was another small clipping on this page; Walter still remembered how heart-warming the news had been to him. Miss Eire had drowned, not two weeks afterward, while attending a beach party with Mr. Soames. Apparently, not twenty feet from shore, she had succumbed to a disabling cramp. The article noted that Mrs. Soames had been among the many guests.

Walter flipped through the pages of the notebook. Then there had been Malcolm Doak, the man who couldn't get married until his mother died. Walter had heard about him through a magazine article in one of those slick women's magazines. Walter was an avid reader of anything that might provide information which might be useful to business.

Mr. Doak had been interviewed by the magazine along with a lot of other men, all bachelors, concerning his reasons for staying in an unmarried state. It had been a tape-recorded interview, and had been most informal and revealing; more revealing, at least to Walter, than many of the gentlemen had probably realized.

Doak, for example, had laughed and joked, but there had been sheer tragedy behind the pseudo frankness. "I suppose I just couldn't leave Mother," he had said. "I'm sure she wouldn't put up with competition from another woman in my life." Then Mr. Doak had laughed, and the interviewer had laughed. It was one of those articles in which even the physical reactions of those involved are noted.

"If you will only stop joking, Mr. Doak," the interviewer had protested, whereupon Mr. Doak had gone on to give very logical reasons for remaining a bachelor, with no mention of Mother. But Walter believed that his first answer had been the correct one, and sent a brochure.

Mr. Doak had expressed an interest in *Solanum tuberosum,* a common Irish potato. Common except that the tubers—Walter always sent several—had been grown in direct exposure to sunlight. Into the package Walter had, of course, inserted the caution that this particular type of potato was unfit as food. Unfortunately, someone must have ignored his warning, for shortly afterward he had noted mention of Mr. Doak's mother's funeral. It had been a really grand affair. Walter could just imagine Mr. Doak telling his friends that nothing was too good for his mother.

Walter knocked out his pipe and closed the notebook. He frowned as the doorbell rang. He did not encourage visitors. They interrupted his routine. Besides, direct contact with other people had always made him feel uncomfortable. That was why this mail-order business was so right for him; no need to meet anyone face to face. Still, there was a certain gratifying personal contact.

Walter opened the front door. It was the police. *Two* policemen.

Walter smiled and invited them in. It was not his first encounter with the law. Still smiling, he ushered them into his immaculate living room hospitably, quietly.

"Now then, Mr. Morton," the heavier of the two said as he lowered himself into Walter's favorite armchair. "You operate a horticultural mail-order service, I understand." He peered myopically at his notes as though not able to believe what he was reading.

"That's right," Walter said calmly. He took the applewood box from the coffee table and offered cigarettes.

"I see that you've been operating in this town for the past two years," the officer continued. "And you're renting your home."

"That's right," Walter said carefully.

The policeman who was questioning him looked up. He was hunched forward uncomfortably in the tiny chair. "Just where did you live before you came here?" he asked.

"Yes, where did you live before?"

The other policeman was tall and thin and wore a worried expression.

Walter tapped his cigarette carefully against the side of the silver ashtray. "Why don't you tell me just why you're here, gentlemen," he said. "Then I could be more helpful."

It seemed for a moment that the larger of the two officers was going to protest, but after he had exchanged a glance with his companion, he said, "Tell me, Mr. Morton, have you ever sent any flowers to a man—let's see here—yes, a man in Pittsburgh, John Proutie?"

There was a long silence.

"You're not under any obligation to answer these questions," the thin officer said, "but it would certainly make things simpler."

"I'm just trying to think," Walter told him. "Proutie. Proutie. The name certainly sounds familiar."

"Don't you keep any records?" the bigger of the two men demanded impatiently.

Walter laughed boyishly. "You'll think it absurd," he said, "but no, I don't. Oh, I have papers lying around, but I'm afraid I'm terribly careless." He peered at them through his thick glasses. "You don't," he added, "have a search warrant, do you?"

"We don't *now*," the thin officer snapped, "but we could get one in a hurry."

Walter stared at the ceiling. "Proutie," he said thoughtfully. "No, I don't think I know anyone by that name."

The big man stared at him as though he were an insect under a microscope. That was one of the things that Walter found objectionable about the police. Whether you were in California or New England, they all had that particular look in their eyes.

"We had a notification," the big man said slowly, "that Mr. Proutie last week received a planter box full of *Solanum nigrum*. It's a small white flower with a black berry."

"I'm familiar with the plant," Walter said stiffly.

"Sometimes called black nightshade," the thin officer added ominously.

Walter cleared his throat. "I still would like to know why you're asking me these questions," he said.

"All right, sir. This Mr. Proutie worked for a big advertising agency. He was due for a promotion—at least that's our information—and then he didn't get it. This is a man of about forty-five, and it came as quite a shock to him. He did some investigating and discovered that the man who got the position had spread some pretty dirty information about his private life. That's it."

"Well," Walter said stiffly, "this gentleman's private life may be interesting to you, but I find it a bit boring. I don't know Mr. Proutie, and I can't be particularly interested in his reputation."

"One of your brochures was found in his apartment," the thin officer said, "among his effects."

"His effects? But I thought that he . . ." Walter's voice tapered off.

"Yes, Mr. Morton—that he what?"

"So the man's dead, is he?"

"Yes, Mr. Morton. He simply ate a few of the berries on that black nightshade you sent him. Someone got him to a hospital and tried to save him, but it was too late. Mr. Proutie had just time to confess that he had thought of murdering the man who got his job, but then he thought better of it and committed suicide."

Walter stared at them. "Well," he said, "this is simply shocking!"

"We found it very interesting," the officer in the armchair said.

"Tell me, Mr. Morton, do you deal purely in poisonous plants?"

"What makes you think that?"

The officer pulled a brochure out of his pocket and read off a list of Latin names. "All poisonous," he said triumphantly.

"I grow a good many things," Walter said carefully. "If a plant is poisonous, I add a warning."

"And these prices!" the burly officer blurted. "Five hundred dollars for this, three hundred for that. These are expensive plants, Mr. Morton."

"I don't like the inferences you're making," Walter said coldly. He rose. "I'm a good citizen, trying to make

my living the best way I know how. I grow plants and I sell them. I grow what the people want, and I ask a price that the market can stand. Is there any law against that?"

The officers glanced at one another. "There are laws about shipping plants through the mails," one of them stated.

"I have never knowingly violated a law," Walter told him. "If I were you, I would think this matter over carefully before pursuing it."

The tall, thin officer stared at him. "You're helping people kill other people!" he protested. "How do you have the nerve to—"

"I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to leave now," Walter said, moving toward the door. "I have work to do."

But he knew as they left that they would soon be back. This was always the moment that Walter hated. Not that there was much to do, for the house had been rented furnished. There was only his clothing to pack and his records to destroy.

Walter stood in the warm summer sunlight and stared at the glistening garden. He did hate to leave it. Still, there was always the sunny side. It was interesting to see new places. And he had been reading just the other night that there was no place better for growing *Jatropha manihot* than Florida.

# DEAD OAK IN A DARK WOODS

## by Hal Ellson

A real man wouldn't make those anonymous calls. It had to be a crank, some idiot neighbor trying to stir up trouble. John Roche stared at the phone. No, this time he wouldn't answer it.

Lighting a cigarette, he went to a window. The blind was half-open and he could see the houses on the far side of the block, windows alight beyond the lawns; his neighbors.

Which one? he thought, and caught himself. He wasn't going to be taken in by the anonymous caller.

He turned, his eyes drawn to the clock. It was one minute of eleven. Sixty seconds and the instrument would ring. The tension in John projected itself into the room, light and air became immobilized. He no longer recognized his surroundings.

The phone rang and he forgot his promise. He picked up the instrument. "Hello."

There was an interval of silence, but that was usual. Then came the voice, familiar now, yet disguised, one of his neighbors and still anonymous. "Your wife, John," the caller said. "She saw *him* again the other night when you worked late. But don't blame her. He has a way with the ladies. He's very clever."

"Wait a minute," John said. "Who are you?"

"A neighbor."

"That's not telling me anything."

"Perhaps not, but I'd rather not give my name. By the way, the fellow who calls on your wife, he also is a neighbor."

"Who is he?"

"You consider him a friend. He pretends the same, and . . ."

"How do you know all this?"

"I have eyes and I happen to know the nights you work late. So does your so-called friend. That's when he comes. I've watched him from my window. He's as regular as a clock and he always leaves a half hour before you arrive."

John was gripping the phone. Lies. All lies. He couldn't believe a word of this, he wanted to slam down the phone, but there would be more calls. "Look, why are you telling me this?" he asked.

"Because I'm your friend."

"If you really are, why don't you give me your name?"

There was a pause, then the caller said, "It would serve no real purpose. Besides, I don't wish to become involved. I think it sufficient that I've warned you. Perhaps you don't want to face the truth. I can't say I blame you for that, because it's painful. But can you continue to turn your back?"

John didn't reply. He cradled the phone, stared at the wall and it began to disintegrate, leaving a gaping hole through which he saw the street where he lived, his neighbors' homes. In one was the anonymous caller, in another a man who . . .

Thursday and Saturday nights John worked late in the city and arrived home at ten. On those occasions when he expected to arrive earlier, he would phone Grace and let her know.

It was on Friday night that he received the warning from the anonymous caller. The next evening he started for home early, without phoning Grace. At nine-fifteen he stopped at a neighborhood tavern and had two drinks. Ten minutes later he drove into his own block and parked across the street from his own house. He waited. No one came from the house.

At ten-thirty he stepped from his car, ashamed of himself for having distrusted Grace and angry for having been taken in by a practical joker. Grace was watching television when he entered the house.

"You're late," she said and, seeing the look on his face which she mistook for weariness, "Oh, you must have worked so hard." Getting up, she kissed him. "Here, sit down while I fix your supper."

At eleven the phone rang. Grace answered it, and the caller hung up. Exasperated, she turned to John and said, "Another one of those calls. They make me nervous. Can't we do something about it?"

"Not very much," John answered. "Anyway, it's probably nothing to worry about. Kids like to do things like that."

His words calmed her. A few minutes later she went up to bed. Although he'd put in a hard day, John wasn't tired. He remained in the living room, reading the evening paper.

A half hour later the phone rang again, and he picked it up. The anonymous one was on the wire. The anger in John stifled him for a moment; he couldn't find his tongue. The caller was speaking now, "Too bad nothing happened tonight. Your wife's boyfriend had an appointment elsewhere, but he'll drop in again. I hope you'll be waiting for him, like tonight."

"You saw me?"

"From my window. Well, it's late. Good night."

John put down the phone. Was this a continuation of the "joke"? He didn't know what to think, but his anger had gone. Who was Grace's lover? Which neighbor? He went to a window and looked out. A silent street, silent, secretive houses. There was no telling who came while he was out.

Thursday, at last, it came. John parked the car across the street from his house. He waited, so tense that he couldn't smoke. Five minutes passed—an eternity. Beads of sweat were forming on his forehead and yet he felt a strange coldness. Slowly it was taking possession of his body, his mind. Slowly he was preparing himself for what

was to come. Tonight it would happen, tonight he was going to kill a man.

But which man? That was what disturbed him. If he knew, the task would be easier. More minutes passed. He was in agony. Time was slipping away with nothing happening. Would this be a repetition of Saturday night?

The sound of a door opening brought him alert. He turned, looked across the street. A man had appeared on the porch of his house. Now he was coming down the steps, hurrying, a dim figure emerging from the shadows. John recognized him when he reached the sidewalk.

"George!"

The man stopped, looked around. John called again and this time George looked directly at him, hesitated, then started across the street. When he reached the car, he looked in and said, "Oh, it's you. Why are you sitting here?"

For a moment John didn't answer. He stared at George. So you're the one, he thought. It no longer mattered that George and he were the best of friends. That was over. There was no feeling inside him, only a terrible gaping hollowness.

"Get in the car," he said.

"What's wrong, John?"

"Nothing. Get in the car." To emphasize the point and forestall argument, he lifted his hand. Light glinted on a black gun barrel. "Get behind the wheel."

George opened the door, slid behind the wheel and sat numbed.

"Now drive."

The command was puzzling, involving no destination. "Where to?" That rasping sound, was it his own voice?

"I don't know. Just keep driving."

"I'm . . ." George felt the pistol against his temple and went dumb. He didn't want to die. He didn't . . .

How dark and empty were the streets, thought John. Where was everyone? A falling star sliced the black heavens and vanished, the road sloped downward, trees were closing in. Ahead lay White Oaks, a patch of woodland that had somehow survived the march of the bulldozers.

"Where are we going?" George asked, and the pistol spoke, cold and hard against his temple. Black as the black sky, the woods loomed ahead. Not a light, not a sound, no sign of humans, not even a parked car with lovers who might respond to a cry for help.

"Here," said John. "Stop here."

George braked the car. John climbed out, stalked to the other side and said, "Get out."

"Why?"

"Don't ask questions. Just do as you're told."

George hesitated and at last stepped from the car. A field lay before them, crossed by an irregular path which vanished in the yawning dark of the woods.

"Let's go," said John.

They crossed the field, following the contortions of the path, and finally the woods stood before them, a black wall of shadow; the trees were ancient, massive and doomed. The path, darker and thinner, led on into the woods and silence. Like a fallen giant, the tree came into view, dead, stripped of its bark, gleaming in its nakedness beside the path; an oak robbed of its last branch, twig and leaf, and still magnificent in death.

"Here," said John, and they stopped. Through the trees at a distance, random lights gleamed in the windows of houses. George thought of the falling star slicing the black sky, and fear enveloped him totally. He wanted to explain. He could explain, but John had warned him to keep his tongue. A madman with a gun. Don't antagonize him. The less said the better. But if he said nothing . . . He waited.

George walked away from him, returned, his face emerged from the dark, a pale mask set with two black holes. "Turn around," said John.

An odd chilling request. "What for?"

"Because I said so."

The wrong thing to do, but how could he oppose the command? George turned, presented his back and began to tremble violently. Now he had to explain, do it quickly; words, an unfinished explanation enveloped by the crack of a pistol. He fell forward awkwardly across the dead oak.

The lights of the house looked different, brighter, the way they used to look. There was a spring in his steps as John mounted the porch; he had no feeling about the occurrence in the woods. In the dark, a dark form toppling and vanishing, his memory of the event was as vague as if it had happened long, long ago. The star had fallen from the black sky to the black woods, equating all things, no feeling for his dead friend. Friend? He slipped his key into the lock.

"Oh, here he is. George, what took you so long?"

John stepped into the living room. Grace's face sagged. Roberta, George's wife, stared at him blankly. The lights in the room were already shedding their luster; the warm night air was suddenly chill. Grace and Roberta, like mannikins in a shop window, stared at him as if at a stranger. Sometimes one intrudes on friends, kin. This was an intrusion, but he could not excuse himself and retreat from the cold terror enveloping him.

"We thought you were George," Grace said. "He went down to the corner for ice cream and didn't return."

How could he when he was in the woods, lying behind a dead tree? Dead. A horrible mistake; he had never been Grace's lover.

"Could you go to the corner?" Roberta asked. "I know George likes to talk, but he's been gone so long."

John nodded, unable to speak. He went out the door and returned five minutes later to report that George had not been in the ice-cream parlor.

"Then something must have happened to him," Roberta cried in alarm.

Murderer. He had murdered the wrong man. Now what? John wondered. Go to the police? He wasn't that brave. Let them point the finger and accuse him. No, he wouldn't tell. As long as he didn't, he knew he was safe. No one suspected him.

Safe? What of the anonymous caller who watched from his window along the block? Tomorrow someone walking through the woods would discover the body; everyone would know of the murder and the caller would pick up

the phone to inform the police. But now, tonight, he had no knowledge of the crime and he would probably call as he always did. So there was still a chance. If he hadn't seen George enter the car, he couldn't bear witness. If he had? If he had, perhaps he would listen to reason, understand the terrible mistake, that his was an equal share of the guilt for what had happened. Perhaps that would silence him.

At eleven John was waiting, the phone within reach. Muted, the black instrument kept its silence. John sat rigid. An hour passed in an agony of slow minutes. Still no call and still he waited, not knowing it would never come, that the anonymous one was silenced, that his body, already chilled and rigid, lay sprawled beside the dead oak in the dark woods.

# A RECIPE FOR EGGS

## by Frank Sisk

The recipe was quite simple and the ingredients were readily available. This did not surprise Lily Quince, for it was what she had come to expect of her father—a display of magic with the things at hand.

"All you require, my child," he had said briskly over the phone, "are a few dozen leaves from that *Prunus virginiana* which is now flourishing to the rear of your garage and in some abundance."

*"Prunus virginiana?* Oh yes, Dad. The chokecherry tree."

"Silly name. But as you wish, Lily. However, select only leaves that have begun to wilt."

"Why is that, Dad?"

"The juice concentrate is highest then."

"I see. A few dozen leaves, wilting. Will that be enough, Dad?"

"Quite enough. You aren't writing this down, I trust."

"Of course not. You don't think I'm that stupid, do you?"

"My faith in your native intelligence was slightly shaken when you married Joaquin Quince, my child. Now there's a silly name by anyone's standards."

"And he manages to live up to it."

"So you've led me to understand, Lily. Well, then, you'll need a small pressure cooker next."

"Is a two-quart one small enough?"

"It will do. But barely cover the bottom with water. A few ounces should be sufficient. Then toss in your leaves, seal the cooker and allow contents to stew for five minutes. Do you have a hypodermic syringe and needle?"

"Yes, you left one here, remember, when you were up a few months ago? The one you used for nutrient injections when Flummsy had the mange."

"Fortuitous, my dear. By the way, how is the dog doing?"

"She died a few days after you left, Dad."

"Trial and error, that's the heartbeat of science, Lily. Many trials and many errors precede ultimate success, errors that tax patience."

"Oh, I understand that, Dad. I'm not blaming you. Besides, Flummsy was Joaquin's dog, not mine. And he made as great an ass of himself over her as he does over so-called literary bitches that seem to dote on his every poetic word and gesture. It's too bad he's not as talented as he thinks he is."

"I cannot abide a semi-egghead," said Lily's Dad sternly.

"Ditto, Dad. And speaking of eggs, what is the next step?"

"When the liquid residue in the pressure cooker has cooled to room temperature, simply draw up one cubic centimeter into the hypodermic syringe. Then take a fresh egg, also at room temperature, and gently insert the needle into the less rounded end. The trick is to penetrate the shell without noticeably rupturing the membrane. And slowly give the egg an injection. The larger the egg, the better."

"He insists on the jumbo size."

"Perfect, my dear."

"By the way, Dad, exactly what is this liquid? Technically, I mean."

"The pharmacopoeia would describe it as hydrocyanic acid."

"You're sure it will work?"

"My child," said Dad with a touch of asperity, "you may take my word for it."

Several hours later Lily had successfully prepared one of a dozen jumbo-sized eggs. Opening the refrigerator door, she placed the treated egg in the front row of the porcelain tray.

Closing the door, she walked to the sink and continued to follow Dad's precise instructions. Earlier, she had removed the limp chokecherry leaves from the pressure cooker and set them to drain in the sink. Now she filled the pressure cooker with water and, without covering it, set it on the stove to boil.

Next, she wrapped the leaves in a paper towel and carried them to the backyard. The incinerator was already stoked with twigs, and the rakings of dry grass. A single match was enough to set the fire.

Back in the kitchen, Lily dropped the separated hypodermic syringe and needle into the water that was beginning to simmer in the pressure cooker. Then she started to scour the sink with a sponge soaked in isopropyl alcohol. Later she would do her hands and arms.

Dad was meticulously thorough. Whenever she talked with him, she always learned something interesting. It had been that way as far back as she could remember.

Today, for instance, she had learned that it is the foliage, not the fruit, of the chokecherry bush which is poisonous. Moreover, she had learned that the purple berry is known botanically as a pome. Dad had exercised his dry wit on that. "If there were truth in your misconception, Lily, we could invoke poetic justice and serve Quince a pome for breakfast instead of the prosaic egg."

Lily was laughing to herself when the phone rang. She glanced at the clock on the stove. One-thirty. This would be Joaquin late for lunch and with another implausible excuse.

She went to the hallway and picked up the receiver. "Yes?"

"How dulcet and divine," said Joaquin in his three-martini voice. A blur of voices and music composed the background. "I felt I must advise you to re-jug the caviar and re-cork the champagne."

"How sweet of you," said Lily blandly.

"The bard then is forgiven?" asked Joaquin.

"The bard sounds more like a bombed bird," said Lily. "Are you flying around the Green Mint Patio? Or is your location a secret?"

"Bull's-eye, sweet princess. Green Mint it is. Do I detect a critical note, a note accusatory?"

"Not at all. A note of relief, if anything. You'll be staying there for lunch, I hope."

"Already had it, my dear helpmeet."

"It seems to have quenched your thirst, at least temporarily."

"Sarcasm, Lily, sarcasm. It hurts me in my ailment."

"What ailment is that?"

"My pump, my ticker, my hectic heart. You know I've been consulting a physician."

Lily laughed. "So you told me. And a female physician at that."

"You still don't believe me, Lily love?" His voice grew plaintively maudlin. "You doubt the bard's sworn word?"

"Of course not, Joaquin. After all, I saw you in consultation with my own eyes—over cocktails in the Embassy Lounge. But the tableau presented a point that has been troubling me ever since. Why were you feeling the doctor's pulse instead of the other way round?"

"I'll explain it again, wife of my heart—when I come home to dinner. Until then, maintain a stoic facade."

"You may wish to assume a stoic facade yourself at the time, because I won't be here."

"Alas! And why not, *ma petite?*"

"Dad phoned this morning. He's not feeling well. I'm going to fly down there."

"The ties of consanguinity are strong ties. What seems to be troubling the mad scientist? Some of his own potions perhaps?"

"You're truly amusing, Joaquin."

"So I am told. But not often by you. How long will you be absent from our little nest?"

"A few days is all. You won't starve. There's food for at least three days in the refrigerator. Including a dozen jumbo eggs, fresh from the country."

"My salivary glands runneth over. One other thing, though, dear wife. Will you leave me a bit of green money? Certain little bills are coming due."

"Doctor's bills?"

"Among others, yes. Fifty dollars should do nicely, lover. Hide it in the coffee pot. And bon voyage."

The plane arrived in Raleigh on the last slant of afternoon sunlight. Lily hurried through the terminal gate in a mood for quiet anticipation, which was as close as she had come to joy in many a month. A meeting with Dad always had this effect on her—and there he was, a neat grizzled man of medium build, trying to conceal his happiness behind a sardonic smile.

"Oh, Daddy," she cried, rushing toward him.

"Welcome home, my baby," said Dad, enfolding her in his arms. "Pardon the aroma of insecticide clinging to my coat. I was spraying the azaleas just before my departure from home."

"It smells so natural, Dad," said Lily.

Another thing that delighted her, a few minutes later, was the fact that Dad still owned the Italian sports car. Somehow the car fit him perfectly.

On the trip from Raleigh to Southern Pines they chatted about a dozen trivial things. The name of Joaquin Quince didn't arise until the last afterglow of sunset receded within the deep blues of the horizon, and that was just as they pulled into the driveway which ran beside Dad's pink stucco cottage.

As he turned the key in the ignition, he said crisply in the sudden silence, "Apropos your unfortunate marriage, Lily, did you ever consider the conventional alternative for bringing it to an end?"

"Divorce? I considered only for a moment, Dad, and then dismissed it for good."

"Tell me why, my child."

"Frankly I could not imagine myself admitting to the world that I had made a mistake."

Dad nodded appreciatively. "Exactly. We have many traits in common, Lily."

"I know it," she said fondly.

"We're realists. When we make a mistake we recognize it, but we prefer to correct it privately."

"You do understand."

"The undeluded mind with undiluted pride; that's our mixture, my child."

Lily smiled. "I knew I could count on you, Dad."

"You've been counting on me for years, haven't you?" said Dad with that teasing wickedness in his voice.

That night in the drowsiness that beckons sleep, Lily felt like a child wrapped safely against the world's unpleasantness in her father's insulating wisdom. It was the recurrence of a familiar feeling that ran back to the mists of childhood. She could faintly hear herself calling from a crib across the years, and then she could see her father's silhouette in the doorway of the room. His voice was always soft with reassurances. He sometimes mentioned the nightingale outside the window as he tucked the blanket under her chin. And when he went finally from the room like a benign shadow, closing the door quietly, she felt safe enough to slip into sleep.

This night, just before sleep overtook her, the thought ran through her mind that Dad had been both a father and mother to her. She had no other, no brother or sister. And no mother. Her mother, a picture of blonde beauty with a cigarette in an ebony holder, was framed in leather and folded away in a trunk these many years. She had died when Lily was four, leaving money but no memory to her daughter. . . .

Over orange juice at breakfast, Dad went directly to the subject of Joaquin. "It's important, my dear, that you now realize exactly why you married Quince. Do you know why?"

"In general, yes. I thought he had the makings of a poet. At the time, I'd been reading biographies of Byron and Shelley. That was my mood, I guess."

Dad chuckled. "There's salvation in cool analysis. Do you know also what caused your disenchantment?"

"Many things, Dad. First, I gradually learned that he was a dilettante, more beat than beatific. Then I began to

realize he was a compulsive philanderer, even in our own home. A woman simply had to purr a word of flattery at him and he was blind to all else but her—until the next flirtatious wench materialized."

"In short," said Dad, "you discovered, in this order of importance, that he didn't love you and that, incidentally, he was not much of a poet. Right?"

Lily chuckled now. "I'll accept that, and about time, I'll admit."

"Good. Next, it is doubly important that you understand why Quince married you. Do you think you have that sifted out?"

"Completely."

"Let me hear you say it."

"Oh, there's not been any doubt in my mind for the past year, Dad, that he married me for money. He certainly didn't have any himself, and he never made any. As it was, he was rather disappointed upon learning I was not quite as rich an heiress as he was led to believe."

"Then you exaggerated the size of your income?"

"Not specifically. By indirection probably." She shrugged her shoulders. "Any price for a poet."

Dad nodded sagely. "It's obvious, then, that you always understood the bait for Quince was partly money."

"Looking back in today's cold light, I must admit it. Yes, Dad."

"You're smarter than your mother ever was," said Dad as if to himself.

Lily raised an inquiring look over her coffee cup. "In just what way, Dad?"

"She never believed that I married her just for her money." He winked a wicked blue eye.

A week—and presumably seven jumbo-sized eggs—went into the maw of the past without a word from or about Joaquin Quince. The strain of waiting began to tell on Lily.

Late one afternoon she put the question squarely to her father as he was coming from his little greenhouse. "What makes you so certain, Dad, that our special egg will work?"

"Take my word for it, child." He pulled off his work gloves. "If you followed my instructions, time will bear fruit. But just to put your mind at ease, let's review the salient steps." He counted off a finger on his left hand. "Point one: Quince is practically a fanatic on the subject of four-minute eggs. He must have one for breakfast every morning. Am I right?"

"Yes, that's so."

"Point two: he eats the egg with a spoon from an egg cup, less rounded side up?"

"Yes."

"When he removes a section of shell, he applies a liberal sprinkling of salt and pepper?"

"Yes, and Worcestershire sauce."

"Gad," said Dad, shaking his head disconsolately. "He deserves it. Point three: you have eleven untreated eggs and one treated egg in the refrigerator. No more or less."

Lily nodded, then said, "But what if he dropped one? Broke it?"

"It's a possibility, my dear, but the chances are eleven to one in favor of his dropping an untreated egg."

"I suppose so. But seven days have gone by."

"You depend too much on the disposition of the eggs in the refrigerator. You expect Quince to consume them from front to back. His mind isn't of that order. Moreover, he may have had a breakfast or two away from home as the result of, shall we say, a night of poesy?"

Lily laughed in relief. "Yes, there's always that."

Dad smiled. "Let me assure you, my child, that when J. Q. consumes the egg in question, he will be only a few breaths away from death. He'll die right at the kitchen table. Point four: the milkman, nosey by nature, will observe the defunct versifier when he delivers at noon."

"True. He always peers through the glass in the door to see if I'm there."

"Point five: when the police arrive, they will have no trouble getting in touch with you immediately because you have left a note to your husband, containing my phone number, conspicuously clipped to the directory."

"In case of emergency."

"The emergency will soon occur," said Dad.

Dad was right as usual. Four days later an official phone call terminated their lunch. A toneless voice, self-identified as that of Captain Thomas McFate, tersely announced the facts: the body of Joaquin Quince had just been discovered in the kitchen of his home; cause of death as yet undetermined; no signs of violence; an immediate autopsy would be scheduled with or without consent of spouse; but said spouse should make plans to return home at once.

Within the hour Lily and Dad were en route to the Raleigh Airport. They exchanged little conversation. Intuitively, they used the silence to help each other over the abyss that somehow had opened beneath them, at least for Lily. They caught a 3:15 flight to New York.

As she unbuckled her seat belt and settled back with a sigh, Lily said, "I'm beginning to feel free as a bird."

Dad said, "I know." He said it with conviction.

Lily turned to look at his fine old head. "I believe you really do, Dad."

"Never doubt it," he said with a strange softness.

"But I'm beginning to feel a bit afraid, too. That police captain sounded so unsentimental."

Still speaking in a soft, reminiscential way, Dad said, "You have nothing to fear, baby, nothing. Even if the medical examiner discovers traces of hydrocyanic acid, the police will never learn how or by whom it was administered. The egg as a receptacle is never suspected because its shell guarantees the purity of the interior. And Quince has eaten the interior. Alibi? You haven't been within seven hundred miles of the place in the last eleven days. Motive? You have none. Quince had no money or insurance, and you never exhibited the slightest jealousy over his flings with other women." He moistened his lips and seemed to look far away. "Now in my case I had an excellent motive, several of them really. Still they weren't able to prove a thing because I was in Hot Springs, Arkansas, at the time, taking the series of baths with several other botanists, while Myra was basking in the adulation of her gigolos a thousand miles away."

Barely comprehending, Lily said, "Myra? You mean my mother, Dad?"

He kept looking out among the cottonballs of cloud. "Yes, my child. She had a few things in common with your recently departed husband. She was ungovernably promiscuous, and she believed firmly in the food value of soft-boiled eggs."

Despite the fact that her mother was not even a memory to her, Lily felt a sense of shock astir somewhere within, then apparent in her face.

"Don't be shocked," said Dad as if reading her mind. "There wasn't a maternal bone in her body. If anything, she hated you for temporarily spoiling her figure."

"Why are you telling me this now, Dad?"

He turned and gazed at her affectionately. "I thought it might help you over this crisis to know how much we have to share with nobody else in the world."

She returned his gaze, suddenly knowing what he meant. "It helps," she said.

Lily opened the refrigerator door. "I'm famished."

"I'm rather hungry myself," said Dad. He looked at the gold wafer of a watch that was strung on a fine chain from lapel to coat pocket. "After all, my dear, it's eight hours since we had lunch in Southern Pines."

The police had finally left a half hour earlier.

Lily was examining the contents of the refrigerator. "I'm afraid there's not much here, Dad. Do you like Canadian bacon?"

"Love it."

"And some—" she could hardly say the word, "eggs."

"Yes, so long as they're not boiled. How many are left, Lily?"

"Two."

"Number Ten did the trick," said Dad with satisfaction. "Interesting."

"I'll scramble them," said Lily quickly. "Is that all right?"

"Fine, baby."

"Tea or coffee?"

"Tea would suit me."

Within a few minutes of wordless work, Lily had the small supper prepared and served. Just as she was spreading a napkin on her lap, the phone rang. "Go ahead without me, Dad," she said, rising. "And help yourself to these muffins while they're hot."

"Don't worry," said Dad.

A switchboard operator was on the line saying that Captain McFate wished to speak with Mrs. Quince. Just a minute, please. And the minute ran on interminably, it seemed, before the unsentimental voice came across to her.

"Mrs. Joaquin Quince?"

"Yes, Captain. What is it?"

"I thought you would like to know the results of the autopsy."

"Are they ready so soon?"

"Yes. The medical examiner finds that your husband died of a heart attack."

"A heart attack?"

"Something about a ruptured mitral valve in the left atrium. You sound surprised, ma'am."

"Well, I am."

"The medical examiner's finding agrees with a report just filed by your husband's physician. You knew he was under treatment, didn't you?"

"Not really."

"Well, Doctor L. G. Smith read about your husband's death in the afternoon paper and presented herself at headquarters. Yes, Doctor Smith is a woman, the 'L' standing for Lorna. Says she's been treating Mr. Quince for the past three months for heart leakage."

There was one more question Lily had to ask. "Does the autopsy indicate the time of my husband's death?"

"Yes, ma'am. The M. E. places it between nine and twelve last night."

"Then he didn't—"

Lily dropped the receiver on the cradle and walked in wonder to the kitchen. Dad's fine old head lay on the table.

# NOT THE KILLER TYPE

## by John Arre

I, Craig Robertson, presumably sound of body and wit, mean these notes to be read in the event, and only in the event, that there should be anything violent, unusual, or even slightly suspicious about my death.

I have reason to believe there will be.

Last week I attended, for the first time, a class reunion at my old university and, melodramatic as it sounds, my past caught up with me. On the final evening of the reunion a few dozen of us crowded into the cocktail lounge of the hotel where we were staying, and I sat on my bar stool, hoisted my Scotch and soda, and lost myself in the general gaiety. I hardly noticed the man who slid onto the stool next to mine—until he spoke.

"Craig! Craig Robertson!"

The voice shocked me, the voice and the eyes of the man who had joined me. His face had matured and was now unfamiliar, but he had the same sandy hair, the same voice, the same challenging blue eyes that I remembered.

Those eyes were really what I recognized. They were not only challenging, but flat, implacable, merciless.

He misunderstood the blank look on my face as we shook hands. "Nick," he identified himself cheerfully. "Nick Murdock. Now, don't tell me you've forgotten?"

"Of course I haven't forgotten, Nick," I said as heartily as I could manage. "How could I ever forget!"

I was being quite truthful. How *could* I ever forget? After all, twenty years ago I had murdered this man.

For two decades I'd tried to tell myself that I'd failed to kill him, knowing all along that that wasn't true. Nick Murdock was dead. Yet here he was beside me, his handsome face unscarred, radiating the same ruthlessness, the same savage energy he'd had as a boy.

I had never bought a school yearbook, and had scarcely glanced at the reunion registration list. Even if I had spotted his name, it would never have occurred to me that a dead man might be one of my classmates.

If Nick were actually still alive, he would be a couple of years older than I, but in the days before and after the Korean War it was quite common for classmates to be several years apart in age. I might have seen him at a distance on campus any number of times; but with a university population of twenty-odd thousand attending half a dozen widely separated schools, it wouldn't have been unusual if our paths had never crossed.

"So what have you been doing with yourself, Craig?"

My throat seemed paralyzed, and I had to force myself to make the usual small talk and to answer Nick's questions. I gave him a fast rundown. I'd been with the army in Korea . . . got married and had three kids . . . picked up a Ph.D. and now taught art history over in Indiana.

He, it seemed, had been too much on the go ever to marry. He'd become interested in photography and done quite well in the field of photo journalism, had traveled all over the world and, in fact, had just returned from Vietnam.

The conversation was so normal that I could almost have been persuaded that that night twenty years before had been a dream.

He asked how my parents were, and I said they were fine, and I asked, "And yours? How's your brother?"

He looked surprised. "Jerry? Didn't you know? Jerry was killed years ago."

All my apprehension returned. Somehow I knew what was coming.

"Killed?" My voice wavered. "You mean killed in the war?"

Nick shook his head. "He never made it to the war. He was killed in an accident. Burned to death. That damn tent I had out back of the house caught fire."

So that terrible autumn night had not been a dream.

I had killed all right, but I had not killed Nick Murdock. I had killed his younger brother, Jerry. Years after the fact, I was discovering that I had killed the wrong boy. Not only had I committed a murder, but I had murdered a complete innocent.

"Hey, are you okay?" Nick asked.

"Hot in here," I said. "Don't worry. It'll pass."

"Maybe you need some fresh air."

"No, no, I'm all right. Sorry to hear about Jerry. That must have happened after we left town."

He nodded thoughtfully. "About the same time, I believe. Yes, just about the same time."

Unwillingly, I forced myself to ask the expected question. "Did you ever find out what caused the fire?"

"Not exactly. But do you remember all the gasoline-powered equipment I had in that tent, Craig?"

"Several lamps. A stove. The heater."

"That's right, close to two gallons of gasoline. Any gas-powered device can be treacherous, you know—just don't monkey around with them if you don't know what you're doing. And the kid didn't know much about them. Apparently he tried to adjust the heater or something . . . knocked it over . . . dropped it . . ."

My forehead was damp and my palms were clammy, and I barely heard what Nick went on to say. I was remembering what he had done to my sister, Ellen—and what I had done to his brother.

I must make one important point. What I did, I did under extreme provocation. Obviously there was a time in my life when I could kill, but I am not a killer by nature. When I was in Korea, I had all I could do to hold the sights steady and squeeze off the shot, and today any act of violence sickens me. If ever a man were purged of the killer instinct, I am that man.

The same could never be said for Nick Murdock.

Nick was the most unbridled kid I have ever known, a born fighter and a born winner, the kind of boy who would rather die than lose. From an insult to a beating, nobody ever licked him permanently. Every challenger paid later, and paid badly, no exceptions.

I remember once when, by some freak, another kid managed to pin him and hammered his head against a rock, trying to make him admit defeat. When the kid was at last in tears, frightened by what he was doing and by his inability to make Nick yield, Nick finally threw him off, and what followed was the next thing to a massacre. To this day I believe it was sheer luck that Nick didn't kill the boy.

He had followers, especially his brother Jerry, who idolized him, but he wasn't a leader. He was too much a loner. He made his own rules, and laughed at all others, self-confident and self-sufficient. It was no wonder the rest of us kids looked up to him with a kind of awe.

One of Nick's great passions was his tent. It was a magnificent tent, a good twelve by twelve feet, and God only knows where it had been obtained during those war years. It was presented to him the spring he was sixteen, and he at once pitched it in the woods behind the Murdock house and proceeded to live in it, even sleeping in it every night. During the daytime younger kids like Jerry and myself were allowed to inspect and admire it in Nick's presence, but otherwise we were commanded to stay far away.

When autumn came, Nick was forced to go back indoors, but the next summer he was seventeen, and he swore he was going to spend the entire fall and winter out in that tent. After all, he said, he was already old enough for the Marines, and when he graduated from high school next spring, he was going to join up. None of us kids doubted that he would be the deadliest Marine the Corps ever had.

That was the summer my sister Ellen started going with Nick.

Ellen was the object of considerable envy. You see, the Murdocks were rich. In a way, they were the town's "first

family." They ran the town's two major industries, a canning company and a sewing-machine factory, and they lived in a huge Queen Anne house which sat well back on ten acres of lawn and woods.

My family, on the other hand, lived in a small seven-room white-shingled house, and my father was a maintenance engineer for Mr. Murdock.

So you can understand why all eyes were on Ellen and Nick that summer. She was his girl, the only "steady girl" he'd ever had, and everybody knew it. She was the girl he'd leave behind when he joined the Marines next spring and, if her luck held, she would be the girl he'd marry and settle down with when he got back.

My parents, I remember, were both proud of their daughter and worried about her. They were quite puritanical in the upbringing of their children, and Ellen had a rebellious spark. Inevitably there were certain rumors about Nick and her, rumors which resulted in more than one small-boy scrap for me.

Day after day the two were seen together, evening after evening, my sister and Nick Murdock. They sat together in the confectionary, they strolled together hand in hand through the small park, they disappeared together at parties—and one night in early September Ellen didn't return home from her date with Nick.

My father's angry voice awakened me in the middle of the night. He telephoned the Murdocks and talked with Nick. Nick said that he and Ellen had quarreled over something inconsequential and that she had walked out on him; he had no idea of where she was.

My father called the police, and the next morning he talked to Nick again. My sister didn't come home that day or the following night.

The next day her body was found in the river.

When the story got out that she had been pregnant, everybody in town knew what had happened.

Nick wouldn't have married her, not adventurous, untamable Nick. He wouldn't have been tied down at seventeen with a wife and a child, and Ellen would never have dared to tell her parents what had happened. Before she

would have faced them with the truth, she would have died—and she did.

I held Nick Murdock responsible for that.

I had never before realized how much my older sister meant to me, and now I found out. I also found out what it's like to hear your father cry, and to watch your mother age and shrink and look through eyes blinded by pain.

I dreamed of revenge. What fifteen-year-old boy wouldn't have? I envisioned myself torturing Nick Murdock. I saw myself shooting him, cutting him, garroting him. Every day and every night was filled with dreams of making him suffer, making him die slowly and painfully, for what he had done.

In November I learned that we were leaving town. The pain and the disgrace of Ellen's death were too much for my parents, and my father would no longer work for Mr. Murdock. We were moving downstate, where my father had accepted another job.

I was glad, except for one thing. The move would put space between Nick and me and delay any possible revenge to an unforeseeable future.

I remember the day of the move quite well. It was crisply cold, the autumn closing in fast. Thanksgiving Day was at hand, and already the dying leaves lay thick and browning on the ground. For some reason the moving company was delayed and didn't arrive until late in the afternoon. By the time the men had finished, it was dark, and my father decided we should stay overnight at a motel on the edge of town and start the trip downstate early the next morning.

After a late supper in the motel dining room, I decided to take a walk and see the old town, perhaps for the last time. By then it was quite late, the streets were deserted, and the night was cold. I didn't want to see anyone. I had already said good-bye to my friends, and my mind was filled with the memory of Ellen.

The route I took back to the motel led by the Murdock house. Perhaps I had half-consciously planned it that way. If only there were something I could do before I left, something to avenge my sister. . . .

Quietly I crossed the big Murdock lawn, trying to avoid

the dead leaves in order not to make a sound. A few lights were on in the house, but I saw no one. I circled around the house, and there in back stood the tent.

The tent was barely visible in the darkness; but moving closer, still as silent as I could be, I saw the faintest glimmer of light from the canvas flap of the door.

I moved closer yet. What if Nick were in there? What would I do? What *could* I do to the boy who had caused my sister's death?

At the door of the tent I peered in through a slit at the edge of the flap. I could see very little: vague dark shapes and, near the ground, a soft glow.

The flap wasn't completely tied. Just one pair of strings near the bottom held it closed. Stooping down, I unfastened the strings without the slightest difficulty.

Without making a sound I entered the tent. I could see better now, and gradually I made out a couple of cots, a table with a camp stove on it, and several unlit lamps. Nick's sleeping bag was on one of the cots, someone huddled deep within it, unmoving. Apparently Nick was asleep and quite unaware of my presence.

The light came from a gasoline heater which stood on the ground near the center of the tent. It stood about twelve inches high, and emitted the faintest hissing sound. It must have held almost a gallon of fuel.

I don't know how long I stood there, staring down at the sleeping bag, hating Nick; thinking of what he had done to my sister, to my parents, to me; thinking of how I wanted him to pay and how one day I would make him pay.

Suddenly my dreams of revenge seemed childish and futile. Never would I actually have the guts to do what I wanted to do. I was just a fifteen-year-old kid, bitter and helpless, and the time had come to leave the tent, go back to the motel, and forget all about Nick Murdock. I turned to go.

Then, without thinking at all, I picked up the heater and dashed it to the ground at the very side of Nick's cot.

The effect was explosive and blinding. At the very instant that the flames leaped over the cot, I twisted and

ran from the tent. I hadn't gone a dozen steps when I heard screams, and I felt the hot red glow behind me. The trees turned a dusky pulsating pink ahead of me, and I strained to throw myself into the darkness beyond. The red light and the screams seemed to thrust me toward the darkness. . . .

I found myself walking along the road, and the lights of the motel shone coldly ahead. *It didn't happen,* I told myself, *nothing has happened. . . .*

In all the years since that night, I had tried to persuade myself that I hadn't really carried out my revenge, that nobody had really been hurt, that that night had been nothing but a bad dream—but forgetfulness was impossible. Only a few days after we'd arrived in our new town, my mother received a letter from a friend. "The Murdocks," I heard her say to my father, "have had an awful tragedy . . ." I didn't listen to any more. I hurried to my room, threw myself onto my bed, and lay there in a cold sweat.

*It didn't happen! Nothing has happened!*

Yet it had happened. I had commited a murder, the wrong murder; and now, after all these years, I found myself sitting in a festive cocktail lounge with my intended victim, sipping whiskey, and talking about old times and old friends. No matter how I tried to turn the subject from Jerry's death, Nick insisted upon reverting to it, as if he were as haunted by that long-ago autumn night as I was.

"You know how Jerry was," he said, as we sat there, our heads close together. "Typical kid brother, I suppose, always wanting to do whatever I did. Remember?"

"Yes, I remember."

"And I, big brother, was always inclined to cut the kid short. He always wanted to sleep out in that damn tent with me, and I always said no. When my folks showed signs of weakening, I reminded them of the gasoline lamps and so forth, and told them it was no place for a kid like Jerry. That was just an excuse not to have the kid around, of course. But as things turned out, how right I was."

"Yes," I said numbly, "you were right."

"It was pretty cold that night," he went on, as if I hadn't spoken, "and my mother insisted that I get a heater for the tent if I were determined to stay out there, so just before the stores closed—it was a Friday night, and they were open late—I went downtown and bought one. Came home, loaded it, and put it out in the tent to warm the place up, then went back into the house.

"Well, we thought Jerry had gone upstairs to bed, and maybe he had. But I guess he thought he saw his chance, and he sneaked out of the house and into the tent. He was going to sleep out there with his big brother. Maybe for once his big brother wouldn't kick him out. Maybe for once . . ."

Nick turned those cold blue eyes on me. His face was quite expressionless.

"When I first heard him scream, I just sat there in the living room. Then I ran out the back door, and I saw him come flaming out of that blazing tent. . . .

"Craig, I've seen men burn to death since then. I've seen them burn in the Pacific and in Korea and in Vietnam. I've even taken pictures of them burning. But my own kid brother . . ."

Fortunately, at that moment some acquaintance of Nick's passed by, and Nick turned from me to chat with him. I felt as hot and stifled as if I were having a heart attack. I ordered another round of drinks and asked for a large glass of water. When Nick turned back to the bar again, he picked up his drink without speaking, and I thought with relief that the subject of Jerry's death was at last closed—but I was wrong.

Nick looked into his glass as if searching for a revelation in the crystal cubes, and he chuckled softly. "You must have hated my guts," he said.

Startled, I looked at him. "What are you talking about?"

"You know. You haven't forgotten, any more than I have. You remember very well the story that went around, the story that I was responsible for your sister's pregnancy—and that I'd refused to marry her."

There was a new kind of tension between us now. "That's water over the dam," I said. "That was almost half a lifetime ago."

"But you *must* have hated me," he insisted. "I would have hated *you*. If I'd been you, I'd have tried to get even for what happened to Ellen. Craig, do you know what I would have done?"

"Nick, honestly, I couldn't care less—"

"One thing I might have done would be to set that tent on fire. I might have tried to burn Nick Murdock up in it. Of course, I might have burned Jerry Murdock by mistake—or I might have figured that a brother's life for a sister's was a fair exchange."

"You're crazy," I said. "You're talking sick. It was all a long time ago."

"Seems like yesterday, doesn't it?"

His manner was as casual and friendly as ever, and he was even smiling a little. He took out his cigarettes and offered me one, and I shook my head. He took one for himself and lit it.

"Tell me something," he said. "As you say, the water is long over the dam, so just for the hell of it, tell me. Did you try to kill me that night, thinking to even the score?"

I forced a laugh. "After all these years you're asking me—"

"After all these years I'm asking you, and if you won't answer directly, tell me this: How did you know I had a gasoline heater in the tent?"

"Why, you yourself just said—"

I broke off as I remember that *I* was the one who had first mentioned the heater. He'd later mentioned that he'd bought it only the night that the tent had burned. Except by some highly improbable accident, I couldn't possibly have known about it.

"Well," I began fumblingly, "I just assumed—"

"You didn't assume anything."

"Nick, you can't be serious. After all this time, how could I possibly be expected to remember just what equipment—"

"I'm perfectly serious, Craig," he said, shaking his ice

cubes and still smiling. "A thousand times I've gone over everything even remotely connected with that night, and I think you did just what I would have done. I think you sneaked into the tent that night and that you—"

"I don't care what you think," I interrupted harshly. "I didn't kill your brother, I didn't try to kill you. And if that's what you think, well . . ."

Carried on by my own impetus, I then said the stupidest thing I have ever said in my entire life. I said the one thing I should never have said.

I said: "You can't prove a thing."

Nick looked at me sharply, and his smile disappeared. I noticed for the first time that he was sweating as much as I was. His face gleamed.

"That's right," he said after a moment. "I can't prove a thing. Any more than you can prove that I was the one who got your sister in trouble. But, then, you and I don't have to prove anything, do we, Craig?"

I stared at him without finding a thing to say. His cruel blue eyes were hypnotic.

Suddenly he turned away, laughing. "Buddy, you should see the look on your face!"

"You've practically accused me of—"

"Don't you know a put-on when you hear one? Don't you know when you're being kidded?"

"Kidded!" If I hadn't been so shocked I'd have hit him. "This is your idea of a joke?"

"You never did have much sense of humor," he chuckled. "But as you said, how could I expect you to remember just what equipment I had in the tent? And if I did believe you killed Jerry, I wouldn't be such a fool as to warn you of my suspicions, would I? Not me, Craig—I'd do something about them!"

He finished his drink and slipped off his bar stool.

"Well, I'll see you around, Craig. I'll be seeing you, and you won't have to wait another twenty years." He grinned at me. "You can believe that, buddy."

He wandered off through the crowd.

I haven't seen Nick since then. Maybe he really was, as

he said, just "putting me on," but I don't believe that for a minute.

No, I've changed over the years, and it's now utterly beyond me to kill a man; but Nick Murdock hasn't changed.

Nick can.

# BLOOD KIN

## by Richard Deming

At sixty-two, Professor Rufus Crawford was a thin, gentle-looking man who gave the impression of having only benign thoughts. Yet, at the moment, he was contemplating with ghoulish satisfaction the prospect of his only nephew being strapped to a stool in the gas chamber.

The professor had never seen an execution of any sort, but as a chemist he knew what the chemical reaction was in a gas-chamber execution. To amuse himself he did the problem in his head: HCL + KCN → KCL + HCN. It was pleasant to think of Myron Fiske breathing in the HCN.

It would be a suitable end for Myron, the professor thought, for he had been a murderer even before this present charge. True, he hadn't used a shotgun on the professor's sister, but his uninhibited squandering of his widowed mother's inheritance had driven her to her grave as surely as though Myron had pulled the trigger.

This time he had pulled one.

To Professor Rufus Crawford the evidence against his nephew seemed overwhelming. The state had established, at least to the professor's satisfaction, the following points:

(1) The late Daniel Crawford's will had divided his substantial estate into two parts: one-half to his nephew, Myron Fiske, now on trial for his murder; one half in trust, the income from the trust to go to his brother Rufus

during his lifetime, the principal to revert to Myron upon Rufus' death. (2) Myron Fiske was aware of the terms of the will. (3) Myron Fiske had been given an ultimatum by one John (the Collector) Lombard to get up twenty-five thousand dollars owed to various bookies, or else. (4) Myron Fiske, unemployed and living on a meager allowance granted him by his Uncle Daniel, with whom he lived, had no way to raise such money except through inheritance. (5) On the night of October second last, a Dr. Joseph Pollack had been summoned to Daniel Crawford's home by Myron. The doctor found Daniel Crawford dead of a shotgun blast and called police. Myron readily admitted to police that he had fired the blast, but claimed it had been an accident. His story was that he was cleaning the shotgun in the kitchen, and it accidentally went off just as his uncle walked into the room.

The state didn't believe Myron. Neither did his surviving uncle, Professor Rufus Crawford, who had known him to be a chronic cheat and liar for most of Myron's twenty-eight years. Rufus had never quite understood why his soft-hearted brother had taken him into his house after the death of Myron's mother, or at least why Daniel hadn't subsequently kicked him out. Daniel had always felt a blind and surely unreturned fondness for the boy, which, in Rufus' estimation, had reached almost idiotic heights when Daniel included Myron in his will and then informed him of the inclusion.

From his seat in the courtroom, the professor eyed the defendant with distaste. Myron Fiske was handsome in an effete, indolent sort of way, but Rufus had never been able to abide his looks. With his sleek hair and pencil-line mustache, he always reminded Rufus of a clothes mannequin standing in a store window.

The courtroom was nearly deserted, because the jury had been out for three hours. All the spectators except Rufus had tired of waiting after the first hour. The judge was in his chambers, the defense and prosecuting attorneys had disappeared somewhere, probably for coffee, and even the reporters had drifted out to wait in the hall where they could smoke. Aside from the defendant, a

bailiff and the dozing clerk, Rufus was the only person in the room. He stayed because he wanted to be sure of his seat. Rufus had been as fond of his brother Daniel as he had been of his sister Nora, and he had no intention of missing the pleasure of hearing his nephew found guilty.

The door of the jury room opened and the foreman stuck out his head. The bailiff went over to him. After saying something in a low voice, the foreman withdrew his head and shut the door.

The bailiff called to the clerk, "They've reached a verdict," and hurried to the main courtroom door to spread the news.

Within minutes the courtroom was again jammed. The judge resumed his seat on the bench and the jurors were led from the jury room.

"Has the jury reached a verdict?" the judge asked.

"Yes, your honor," the foreman said.

The judge said, "The defendant will please stand."

Myron Fiske slowly came to his feet. His expression was calm, but Rufus noted that he was quite pale.

"What is your verdict?" the judge asked the foreman.

There was a moment of total silence, then, "We find the defendant not guilty." He sat down quietly.

In accounts that Professor Crawford had read of sensational trials, it was always reported that "pandemonium broke loose when the verdict was announced." Aside from the simultaneous expelling of many long-held breaths and a low murmur of conversation, there was no discernible reaction from the crowd. Reporters immediately began moving toward the door, but they didn't "rush from the room" as they always did in the printed accounts of other trials. Nor did spectators surge forward to congratulate the acquitted man. They quietly began to file out.

The professor moved forward to where Myron stood waiting for his lawyer to finish stowing papers in his briefcase.

Myron gave him a cocky grin. "Hi, Uncle Rufus."

The chemistry professor merely looked him up and down.

In a mocking tone Myron said to his lawyer, "My

uncle is disappointed. He hoped for a conviction, so that everything would go to him."

The financial effect of the verdict hadn't once occurred to Rufus during the trial. Money meant very little to him. As a bachelor, his expenses had never been very high. Years back, he had bought a mountain retreat near Big Bear Lake to which he planned to retire in three years and devote the balance of his life to research. Over the years he had gradually furnished it with all modern conveniences, including a well-equipped chemical laboratory, and it was all paid for. When he finally retired, his pension would more than cover living expenses. He had no need for the income from the trust fund his brother had left him nor for the hundred thousand dollars which had been left to Myron.

The professor said dryly, "That's not the reason for my disappointment, Myron. I merely hoped to see justice done." Turning his back, he walked out.

It was another three years before Rufus Crawford again saw his nephew. He had reached the retirement age of sixty-five and had moved to his mountain retreat, a solidly built eight-room house on a mountainside, four miles from the nearest town.

Engrossed in his research, he had little time to brood over old scores. Though he disliked his nephew intensely, he was hardly a vengeful man. When he thought of Myron at all, which was seldom, it was with increasing mellowness. He never became completely convinced of his innocence, but eventually he lost his previous conviction of guilt. After all, Myron had been acquitted by a jury, which made him legally innocent.

One winter evening, Myron unexpectedly appeared on his doorstep. When Rufus opened the door, his nephew smiled at him blandly. "Hello, Uncle Rufus."

The professor looked him up and down. At thirty-one, Myron was as sleek-looking as ever. His appearance incited the same dislike in Rufus that it always had. Three years earlier Rufus would have slammed the door in his neph-

ew's face. As it was, he merely inquired somewhat dourly, "What do you want?"

"Is that any kind of greeting for your sole living relative?" Myron inquired. "Aren't you going to invite me in? It's cold out here."

It was quite cold, and sharp flurries of snow warned of a coming blizzard. A trifle ungraciously Rufus stepped aside. The younger man reached down to pick up a traveling bag Rufus hadn't seen, because it had been to one side of the door. When Myron carried it inside and set it down in the front hall, Rufus closed the door and gazed at the bag.

"If you're planning an extended visit, Myron, I'll tell you quite bluntly you're not welcome."

Myron took off his hat and used it to beat the snow from his overcoat. "You can put me up for one night, can't you, Uncle Rufus?"

"I could, but I won't."

"Would you turn your own nephew out in a blizzard? It's a four-mile walk to town."

"How'd you get out here?"

"By taxi. But I dismissed it."

In an exasperated tone Rufus said, "Then you may phone for another to take you away."

"I couldn't pay for it. I'm dead broke."

The professor stared at him. "You mean you've managed to squander a hundred thousand dollars in three years?"

"I made some bad investments," Myron said apologetically.

"At race tracks?"

"Some," Myron admitted. "But if you'll recall from the testimony at the trial, I owed twenty-five thousand dollars before I got Uncle Dan's money. Then my defense cost another ten thousand. So it's really only sixty-five thousand in three years."

Rufus was scarcely impressed.

"I've finally learned my lesson, though," Myron said. "I'm a reformed man. I've even been job hunting."

Rufus gave him an unbelieving scowl.

"No fooling," Myron said earnestly. "I realize what a fool I've been. I spent my last cent coming out here to ask your help. I have nowhere else to turn."

"If you want money, you won't get a cent from me."

"I'm not asking for money. It won't hurt you to listen to me. After all, I'm your only blood kin. May I take my coat off, so we can sit down and talk?"

Rufus continued to scowl. Glancing through the door pane at the outside weather, he gave an impatient shrug. "I suppose I can't kick you out in a snowstorm. I'll listen for five minutes while you warm yourself at the fireplace. Then I intend to phone for a taxi, even if I have to pay the fare."

With a grateful look on his face, Myron hung his hat and coat on the hall clothes tree. Rufus led the way into the front room and gestured toward the fireplace, where a log was burning cozily. Placing his back to it, Myron stretched his hands behind him to the heat.

Rufus said a bit grumpily, "Would you like a drink?"

"A coffee royal would hit the spot. I'm chilled through."

"You'll have to take instant. The percolator requires twenty minutes, and I don't intend that you should be here that long."

"That will be fine," Myron said agreeably. "Just a shot of whisky and a half teaspoon of sugar in it."

Rufus left his nephew to warm himself before the fireplace and moved through the dining room to the kitchen. The kitchen had a swinging door which automatically swiveled closed behind him.

He turned the electric burner beneath the teakettle to high, got down a cup and saucer and took a bottle of whisky from a lower cabinet. While waiting for the kettle to sing, he took a wine decanter from the refrigerator and poured a wineglass full of nearly colorless liquid which had only a slight golden cast to it.

When he pushed through the swinging door with the cup in one hand and the wine glass in the other, Myron was trying the door at the rear of the dining room.

Glancing at Rufus, he said, "I'm looking for the bathroom."

"That's my laboratory," the professor said. "I keep it locked. The bath's upstairs, first door to the right. There's a night light in the upper hall, so you'll be able to see your way."

He moved into the front room and set the steaming coffee cup on the mantel. Myron continued into the front hall and could be heard mounting the stairs. Rufus seated himself in his favorite chair and took a sip of his wine.

When Myron returned, Rufus silently pointed to the coffee cup. Sampling it, Myron replaced the cup in the saucer, turned his back to the fire again and looked inquiringly at the glass in his uncle's hand.

"Sauterne," Rufus said. "It's all I'm allowed any more. I have a touch of kidney trouble."

"Anything serious?"

"Not so long as I behave myself. Now what do you want to talk about?"

Myron put an earnest expression on his face. "I'm really down and out, Uncle Rufus. I don't own a thing in the world but the clothes I'm wearing and what's in my suitcase. I haven't anywhere to go. I think the shock of my position has given me an entirely new perspective. I really mean to settle down and get a job. If you would let me stay here just long enough to get one, it would about save my life."

"Where do you expect to get a job in the middle of a mountain resort area?" Rufus asked. "You might get a ski-instructor post if you knew how to ski, but I don't recall you ever going in for sports. There's no industry in town. It's little more than a trading post."

"I have several applications in for jobs in the Los Angeles area. I'm to hear this week on at least two of them. I took the liberty of giving your address as the place I can be reached."

Rufus raised his brows. "You have as much effrontery as ever."

"Don't be like that, Uncle Rufus. After all, in a sense

you're living on my money. That trust fund was really left to me, you know."

Rufus glared at him. "Only after I'm dead. And I'm not living on it anyway. The income is accumulating in a bank account, which, incidentally, will never go to you. My entire estate goes to the university."

"The principal was left to me."

"I repeat, only after I'm dead. Is that the real purpose of your visit? To collect another inheritance?"

Myron looked hurt. "I was acquitted in Uncle Dan's death. You know that was an accident. I was as sorry about it as you were."

The professor growled, "The only sorrow I could detect was that half the money was left in trust."

"That isn't true. I was fond of Uncle Dan. Are you going to let me stay here until one of these jobs comes through? I'm willing to earn my keep. I'll do the housework and cooking."

"I have a housekeeper and cook who comes in from the village," Rufus said coldly.

"Then I can chop wood for the fireplace and keep your drive clear of snow."

After contemplating him moodily for a moment, Rufus said, "I don't suppose you would risk disposing of me by another accident. I doubt that the next jury would accept the coincidence. I'll let you stay tonight, and we'll discuss it further tomorrow."

"Thanks a lot, Uncle Rufus," Myron said gratefully. "I knew you wouldn't kick me out in the snow." Turning to lift the cup again, he took a sip. "You sure make a good coffee royal."

Later, as he prepared for bed, Rufus had some doubts about his hospitality. He had always disapproved of Daniel's allowing Myron to move in with him, yet here he had allowed the same thing. It had been almost impossible to resist Myron's plea. Even though he disliked him, it would take a harder heart than Rufus possessed to thrust his only nephew out into a blizzard.

Although he still gave Myron the benefit of the doubt in Daniel's death, he decided to take no chances. He

locked his bedroom door and placed a chair under the knob.

The threatened blizzard failed to develop during the night. The next day was clear, and only a couple of inches of snow lay in the driveway when Mrs. Nell McGuire drove up in her snow-tired jeep at eight A.M.

Rufus, who automatically awakened at eight each morning without an alarm clock, heard the jeep drive in and the front door open and close. Climbing from bed, he slipped into a robe, removed the chair from under the doorknob, unlocked the door and crossed the hall to awaken Myron.

"Breakfast in a half hour," he told his nephew. "How do you like your eggs?"

"Any way," Myron said sleepily. "However you're having them."

Going to the head of the stairs, Rufus called, "Nell!"

A buxom woman of about fifty appeared at the foot of the stairs and looked upward.

"My nephew is visiting me," Rufus said. "He'll have his eggs up, too."

"Okay, Professor," Nell said cheerfully.

Five days a week Nell McGuire came in from eight until five, Rufus having to shift for himself only on Saturdays and Sundays. The professor saw little of her except at mealtimes, because he spent most of his time in his laboratory as she bustled about the house. She kept the house spotless, except for the laboratory, which she refused to enter and wouldn't even go near except to call him to meals.

During the night, Rufus had decided to ask her to have dinner with them today and run Myron into the village when she left. He had also decided to stake his nephew to a bus ticket to Los Angeles and enough money to last him a few days. Discussion of these plans could wait until after lunch, however, so he made no mention of them at breakfast.

After breakfast, Myron trailed after his uncle when the latter headed for his lab. When Rufus unlocked the door,

Myron followed him into the room and gazed about with interest.

The laboratory was a converted sunporch, with windows all along the south wall allowing plenty of natural light. Against the east wall was a double sink and a long worktable containing several Bunsen burners, tripods and crucibles. There was a hood over the work table to carry off fumes. The west wall was shelved from floor to ceiling and the shelves contained bottles of every size and shape in neat-labeled rows. In the middle of the room a zinc-covered counter ran around all four sides of a raised section in its center on which stood racks of test tubes, retorts, beakers, mortars and pestles and various other laboratory paraphernalia. On the near counter was a pharmaceutical scale, a glass-enclosed balance for more delicate weighings, and a hand balance.

"You have quite a setup here," Myron said. "What are you working on now? A new experiment?"

"I'm trying to develop a cheaper method of extracting metals from ores, to be used commercially."

Myron wandered over to the shelved wall and examined some of the labels. "How do you ever find what you want among these hundreds of bottles?"

"Oh, they're all alphabetized," Rufus said, moving over next to his nephew. "That is, they're alphabetized within their specific categories. I have to remember which shelf contains each category. For instance, this section is all metallic salts." He indicated the shelf at which Myron was gazing. "The row you're looking at happens to be potassium salts. As you can see, they're arranged alphabetically. First is potassium acetate, then potassium arsenite, potassium bromide, chlorate, cyanide, hydroxide, iodide and so on. I can place my hands on anything I want instantly."

Myron reached out to take down one bottle. "Potassium cyanide. Isn't this a pretty deadly poison?"

"About as deadly as they come," Rufus said dryly.

"What do you use it for?"

"For the extraction of silver from ores. Sodium cyanide is generally used commercially, but potassium cyanide

works well in the laboratory. The cyanide combines with both the free silver and the silver salts in the ore to form silver cyanide. You must then liberate the silver from the cyanide complex by getting the complex to combine with some active metal such as aluminum or zinc. I'm attempting to find some cheaper substance than these metals to dispose of the cyanide ion."

Replacing the bottle on the shelf, Myron said, "I'm afraid you're over my head, Uncle Rufus. But isn't it a little dangerous to work with this stuff?"

"Not when you know what you're doing. Now if you'll excuse me, Myron, I'd like to get to work."

Myron took the hint and retreated from the laboratory. But before he left, he gave the cyanide bottle a final, thoughtful look.

When the door had closed behind his nephew, Rufus mused over that look. He wondered if he were imagining things, or if the look had denoted Myron's realization that, since his uncle used cyanide in his experiments, his death by cyanide poisoning could easily pass as a laboratory accident. It didn't really matter what Myron had been thinking, Rufus told himself. By that evening he would be gone, and until then he wasn't going to have a chance to get at anything in the lab.

However, wondering whether or not his nephew actually was capable of poisoning him if given the opportunity continued to tantalize his thoughts. If he really knew, it would establish once and for all whether Daniel's death had been murder or accident. He wished there were some way to find out without learning the hard way, by ending up a corpse.

He decided that there was a way to find out which involved no appreciable risk. Taking the bottle of potassium cyanide from the shelf, Rufus placed it on the pharmaceutical scale. Bottle and all, it weighed a few grains less than eight and a half ounces. He put it back on the shelf. Emerging from the lab and leaving the door open, he found Myron reading a magazine in the front room. In the kitchen he could hear Nell running water.

"I'm going up to take a shower," Rufus announced.

Myron glanced up. "Okay," he said indifferently.

Rufus remained upstairs for twenty minutes. When he came back down, Myron still sat in the same chair and Nell was dusting the dining-room furniture. The lab door was still open.

Shutting himself into the lab, Rufus again weighed the bottle of potassium cyanide. This time the scale registered only a few grains over seven and a half ounces.

He felt his face redden with anger. At the same time he couldn't avoid feeling a kind of macabre amusement. Apparently his nephew had little knowledge of chemistry, for an ounce of potassium cyanide was enough to wipe out half the population of the village.

He was on the verge of stalking into the front room, informing Myron that he knew of his murderous plans, and ordering him to start for the village on foot forthwith. But he paused with his hand on the doorknob, deciding that it might be worthwhile to attempt to reason out his nephew's exact murder plan, so that he could outline it in detail when he did confront him.

It didn't take much conjecture to decide that Myron would choose the sauterne in the refrigerator as the vehicle for the poison, since no one but Rufus drank it.

Emerging from the laboratory, he found his nephew nowhere in evidence. Nell was now dusting the front-room furniture.

"Where's Myron?" Rufus asked.

"He went upstairs, Professor. I ran him out of here until I finish cleaning."

Rufus went into the kitchen, took the wine decanter from the refrigerator, removed the stopper from its wide mouth and sniffed it. He could detect no odor of bitter almonds, which he was certain would accompany a full ounce of potassium cyanide. Just to make sure, he poured a little into a glass, replaced the decanter in the refrigerator and carried the glass to his lab.

He left the lab door open while he ran his test, so that he would be able to hear his nephew if he decided to come back downstairs. Myron didn't come down, and the test was negative. As yet, the wine hadn't been poisoned.

When he came from the lab, locking the door behind him, Nell had finished the front room and was mounting the stairs. Rufus seated himself in his favorite chair and waited, phrasing in his mind exactly what he intended to say to his nephew when the latter appeared.

As he thought matters over, it occurred to him that sending Myron away might only postpone the danger. If his nephew was capable of poisoning him, he was equally capable of hiring a professional killer to pay a visit to the secluded mountain home. Perhaps he should call the sheriff's office and have Myron arrested for attempted murder.

But what could he actually prove? Only that Myron had stolen an ounce of deadly poison from the lab. This didn't necessarily show intent to kill, and if Myron managed to dispose of the cyanide before he was searched, there would hardly be legal grounds for suspicion.

An alternate plan suddenly occurred to Rufus. A slow smile formed on his face.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs and Myron came into the room. "That woman keeps rousting me from one room after another," he complained.

"She's used to having the house pretty well to herself," Rufus said. "I've decided to let you stay for one week, Myron."

Myron looked a trifle surprised. "Gee, that's swell of you, Uncle Rufus."

"After all, you're my only blood kin," Rufus quoted with a peculiar smile. "Do you play cribbage?"

"Sure, but I thought you spent all your time in your lab."

"I've decided to take today off. We'll play on the dining-room table."

Rising, he led the way into the dining room and took cards and a cribbage board from a buffet drawer.

The rest of the day, up until bedtime, Rufus kept his nephew constantly in sight. They played cribbage until noon, and twice Myron went to the kitchen for drinks of water. Rufus decided on both occasions that he was thirsty, too, and went right along with the younger man.

After lunch Myron declared that he had enough of

cribbage and went back to his magazine. Rufus picked up a book and they spent the afternoon reading. Every time Myron headed for the kitchen, Rufus was right behind him.

At five P.M. Nell came into the front room, bundled up to go home.

"Your dinner's on the table," she announced. "Tomorrow's Saturday, Professor, so I won't be here."

"I know," Rufus said. "See you Monday, Nell."

After dinner Myron and Rufus together carried the dishes to the kitchen, where the professor washed while Myron wiped.

As he put away the last dish, Rufus asked, "Like a drink?"

"I don't mind," Myron said. "Whisky and soda, if you have any soda."

Rufus mixed the drink, set it on the kitchen table, then took down a wine glass and lifted the wine decanter from the refrigerator. He assumed that Myron would know enough to look in the refrigerator for the bottle, but he was too dubious about his nephew's intelligence to be sure. He was glad of the opportunity to let him see where the wine was kept.

At nine P.M., after an evening of desultory conversation in the front room, Myron decided to go up to bed. He had made no further attempts to get into the kitchen alone, and Rufus decided he might have misinterpreted his previous forays there. Probably Myron had only been thirsty, for it would have been stupid of him to risk being caught in the act of poisoning the wine. It would be much safer to wait until the middle of the night and then quietly sneak downstairs. This would postpone Rufus' death twenty-four hours, since he drank wine only in the evening, but there was no reason for Myron to be in a hurry. Believing he had a full week to act, he could take his time.

The professor waited until he heard Myron reach the top of the stairs, then went into the kitchen and carried the wine decanter into his laboratory. A few minutes later he carried it back into the kitchen and replaced it in the refrigerator.

Again Rufus locked his bedroom door, but tonight he didn't bother to place a chair under the knob. When he climbed in bed, he didn't go to sleep. For hours he lay awake, listening. By two A.M. he was beginning to wonder if he had figured Myron's strategy incorrectly when he heard a floorboard in the hall creak. Straining his ears, he heard the loose board at the top of the stairs protest, then another creak halfway down the stairs.

Rolling over on his side, he went to sleep.

At eight A.M. the professor woke up automatically as usual. Pulling on his robe, he unlocked his door, crossed the hall and peeked into Myron's room. The bedclothes were disarranged, but no one was in the bed.

He washed and dressed without hurry. At the bottom of the stairs he opened the hall closet, pulled on overshoes, a topcoat and a hat. Going out the front door, he waded through the two inches of snow around to the back door which led to the kitchen. It was another nice day, he noted.

Holding his breath, he pushed open the back door, then quickly walked away, leaving it wide open. Rounding the house again, he replaced his coat, hat and overshoes in the hall closet, went into the front room and waited.

After fifteen minutes Rufus decided the kitchen had been sufficiently aired. Going through the dining room, he pushed open the swinging door into the kitchen, let it close behind him and crossed to shut the back door.

Then he contemplated the prone figure of Myron Fiske. The man wore pajamas, a robe and slippers. A tablespoon was clutched in his hand, his complexion was cyanotic and he was quite dead. The wine decanter stood on the kitchen table, its stopper lying alongside it.

Rufus returned to the front room and called the sheriff's office.

After the sheriff's deputy and the doctor he had brought with him had viewed the body, they both looked inquiringly at Rufus.

"Just what happened, Professor?" the deputy asked.

"Apparently he was attempting to poison me," Rufus said. "He stood to gain a hundred thousand dollars on my

death. I suspected what had happened the moment I found him like this, so I checked my chemical supplies. There is an ounce of potassium cyanide missing."

The doctor emitted a small whistle. "He accidentally got some in his own mouth?"

"Oh, no. I suppose you know how people are executed in a gas chamber, doctor."

"They use hydrocyanic gas."

"Yes. But do you know the exact procedure used in the chamber?"

The doctor shook his head. "I've never witnessed a real execution."

"Well, the condemned person is strapped onto a stool. Beneath the stool is a pot of hydrochloric acid. When the lever is pushed, a pellet of potassium cyanide rolls down a trough into the acid. The chemical reaction is instantaneous, forming potassium chloride, and releasing hydrogen cyanide into the air. One whiff of the latter, as you know, brings instant death. It is that potent."

"What's that got to do with this situation?" the deputy asked puzzledly.

"My nephew apparently thought there was wine in that decanter," Rufus said. "But I've been conducting some experiments which require hydrochloric acid at a reduced temperature. The simplest way to keep it cold was to place it in the refrigerator. Instead of dropping the cyanide into wine, as he thought he was doing, he dropped it into hydrochloric acid. In this practically airtight room, the gas must have hit him as quickly as if he were in a gas chamber."

# DOWN BY THE OLD BLOOD STREAM

That's where Alfred Hitchcock, that chillingly cheerful master of ghoulish gambols, likes to stroll when he's in the mood for a little gory refreshment. Entertainment is supposed to turn people on, but Alfie likes the kind that turns them off—permanently. You'll agree, when you sample his newest offerings of macabre murder and thumbscrew suspense, that he's out to give you a screaming good time.

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