

ALFRED HITCHCOCK

DEATH BAG

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These are just four of the fourteen frighteningly good tales waiting in the darkest regions of a world of evil, in—

**ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S
DEATH BAG**

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S DEATH BAG

A DELL BOOK

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	9
<i>by Alfred Hitchcock</i>	
DYING A THOUSAND DEATHS	13
<i>by Hal Ellson</i>	
YEAR-END CLEARANCE	24
<i>by Mary Linn Roby</i>	
RUBY MARTINSON, EX-CON	29
<i>by Henry Slesar</i>	
BEWARE: DANGEROUS MAN	44
<i>by C. B. Gilford</i>	
MURDER AND LONELY HEARTS	64
<i>by Helen Nielsen</i>	
TO AVOID A SCANDAL	78
<i>by Talmage Powell</i>	
REVENGE IS BITTER-SWEET	84
<i>by H. A. DeRosso</i>	
HOSPITALITY MOST SERENE	97
<i>by Jack Ritchie</i>	
THE TENTH PART OF A MILLION	103
<i>by Robert Colby</i>	
HORSE-COLLAR HOMICIDE	122
<i>by Arthur Porges</i>	
SCHEDULE FOR AN ASSASSINATION	133
<i>by Robert Edmond Alter</i>	
AMBITION	141
<i>by Michael Brett</i>	
SUCCESSOR	147
<i>by Richard H. Hardwick</i>	
STOP KILLING ME	155
<i>by Hal Dresner</i>	

INTRODUCTION

Recently, while hunting alligators in the Florida Everglades, I heard what was the unmistakable roar of a bull alligator, and exercising great care I poled along in my flat-bottomed hunting boat toward the sound.

I floated past strange trees and shrubs with strange and fascinating names and observed fish, reptiles, birds and mammals in an area of multitudinous life. Mosquitoes attacked me relentlessly, but I did not cry out.

Again and again I heard the bellowing call of the alligator and I positively identified it as the alligator Floridpurse, which was the specie I had set out to find. Furthermore, I determined that these were mating calls, since it was spring.

I can assure you that if Mrs. Hitchcock had not hinted that she wanted an alligator purse I would not have ventured forth into this vast, grassy, gloomy forest through which the sun could not shine. Mrs. Hitchcock has a theory that things are not what they always appear to be, and what better way can there be of making sure that an alligator purse is the genuine article, than shooting an alligator and having a bag made from its hide. You can see, of course, that this precludes any possibility of imitation.

Therefore, you gather from what I have just said that I was not on a mission I had undertaken lightly. As I glided through the watery vastness of the Glades I soon realized that I was hunting a very clever alligator. Repeatedly, when I arrived at the spot from which I had last heard the call, I would then unexpectedly hear it from another part

of the marshland. With grim determination I turned right and left and then backtracked in my hunt for the saurian.

Finally, I heard an angry bellow from a thicket no more than twenty-five feet away, and making the boat fast, I cautiously stepped onto a bit of marshland and then proceeded through dense underbrush to a small clearing.

Imagine my surprise and consternation when I found a well-dressed Seminole Indian sitting on a log blowing an artificial alligator call, which produced the roaring, bellowing sounds I had heard. To add insult to injury, he blew a blast as I watched him.

I must confess that after acquiring blisters poling through the ominous Glades, and having been bitten red by an army of beastly mosquitoes, I was not in my usual cheerful spirits when I said, "You! I thought you were an alligator! I've been hunting you for over two hours."

He stuck out his hand. "Glad to meet you," he said. "I'm Charles Hyde." He smiled and raised his shoulders. "Obviously I'm not an alligator, but if you can tell me why you are hunting alligators perhaps I can help you."

I told him about the purse for Mrs. Hitchcock that had to be made from the hide of a genuine alligator, and when I'd finished he nodded and said, "Yes, I understand." Then he rose from his log and walked to a nearby shack from which he soon returned carrying a dozen beautifully hand-crafted alligator bags.

"I can assure you," he said, "that these are the finest alligator bags available anywhere in the Everglades at any price." Then he gave me a knowing wink and said, "I can also sell you the unused portion of hide from which each bag was made, which will allay any doubts and suspicions in the mind of the lady who is to receive the gift."

Never had I heard such delicious phraseology to set everything into proper perspective.

Frankly, I must admit that the prospect of poling through the Everglades hunting alligators was not especially appealing. My arms ached. I was tired and thirsty, and I was convinced that the situation would grow rapidly worse. Under the circumstances I made a fast deal for an alligator purse and hide, plus the additional expenditure of twenty-five dollars, which he charged to me as a guide fee after he convinced me that I was irretrievably lost and would no doubt perish in the Glades to be eaten by the same specie of alligator I had been hunting.

I followed him as he poled his boat back to territory I recognized. He waved good-bye to me. I hadn't gone more than a few feet when I heard the roaring bellowing call of a bull alligator, produced by Charles Hyde. Instantly, I went back to him. It came to me that if I had a similar alligator call, I could bag all the alligators I wanted.

"No sense selling you one," he said. "Alligators just laugh when they hear it. In fact, there aren't enough alligators around here for any decent hunting. I'm not in that business. My business is selling alligator bags and hides. There's a fellow at the north end of Okefenokee who does the hunting for me."

He also told me that he made a modest good thing of it by returning lost alligator hunters to civilization. He had worked as a cigar maker, as a bricklayer, and in a barrel-stave factory; but in this, the alligator purse business, he had finally found his true calling.

There was no question: he had built a better alligator trap.

I have kept the true story from my wife, and I trust that you will not divulge this secret. She enjoys the purse enormously. I shall be extremely grateful for your cooperation.

Insofar as the stories that follow are concerned, allow me to assure you that you will not hear any false alligator calls, and that the knifings, deceitfulness, shootings, poisonings and general mayhem are bona fide and what they appear to be.

ALFRED HITCHCOCK

DYING A THOUSAND DEATHS

HAL ELLSON

IT WAS TWO-THIRTY, hot and silent. Rogers turned to the bureau, stared at the bottle of brandy and shook his head. Drinking alone didn't help. He glanced at his watch. Moreno, the man with the dope, hadn't called.

Nothing comes off on time in this country, he thought angrily, and the phone rang. He grabbed it up from the night-table.

"Rogers?" the voice asked.

"Yeah, I'm here, Butler."

"What's the word?"

"Nothing."

"No call?"

"Not yet. What do we do?"

"Wait it out. That's all we can do right now."

"I've been holed up in this damn room for two days now, Butler."

Butler laughed. "You can take your calls in the bar, you know."

"That's an idea."

"Sure, but don't over-do it. We can't afford a slip."

"I know what you mean."

"Another thing, Rogers."

"Yes?"

"Moreno will contact you, but you won't meet him."

"Then how will I swing the deal?"

"Don't worry. Somebody else will deliver the goods for him. Don't be surprised if it's a blind beggar."

"You're kidding."

"No. That's the way our man operates. He uses some-

body desperate for money and throws him a few pesos. It's a cheap method and smart."

"Maybe so," said Rogers. "But what's stopping Moreno from calling? Doesn't he know we're here?"

"He knows, but he's playing it careful. Maybe the wrong parties are around and the scene's too hot, so just hold tight."

"I see what you mean."

"Okay, take it easy," Butler said and hung up.

Rogers cradled the phone. Yeah, take it easy, he thought. But the whole thing's on me.

He was convinced of that now. Butler sat safe in a hotel four blocks away. There was no risk in this for him, but it was his operation, his money.

Rogers turned to the bottle, uncorked it and took a long shot. He took another and looked at the bottle. A quarter done already.

Take it easy, he thought, and he smiled at himself in the mirror, feeling a little bit less frayed.

He picked up the phone now, asked that his calls be relayed to the bar, hung up and strode to the door.

The hall was shadowed. His heels clicked on the tile. The brandy was really working now, and he felt the heaviness leaving his body.

"Viva, Mexico!" he said as he thumbed the button for the elevator.

An infinite lightness carried him out of the car as the door opened. The huge high-ceilinged lobby, shedding pale light from above, unaccountably began to tremble. A sound of Spanish voices, liquid and unintelligible, flowed around him. Pleasant now, and non-alien. He lurched into a white-jacketed bellboy who bowed and apologized.

"My fault," Rogers said quickly. "Where's the bar?"

The bellboy pointed to a door with frosted glass, and Rogers made his way toward it, lightbodied, nerveless now after the agony of waiting.

But this was the danger-signal. He caught himself at the bar. Take it easy, he thought. No more brandy.

"The barman nodded. "Senor?"

"A beer."

One—two—three bottles. He meant to drink them slowly, but the feeling of well-being expanded. It exploded with the fourth bottle.

Moreno won't call today, he told himself, and therefore left the bar.

The white glare bounced off the pavement. He squinted at the small plaza across the street, deserted and dozing in the heat. A church-bell struck once, heavy and leaden.

He felt himself sway and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, a dark face was close to his own. White teeth flashed as the man smiled.

"You would care to go for a ride, Senor?"

"Go where for a ride?" he said.

Quickly the man reeled off a list of tours which might have interested a tourist, and Rogers shook his head.

"No tours, Senor?"

"No."

"Something else, then?"

Rogers hesitated and a man approached them and stopped. "Senor, I am an official guide," he said quickly. "I offer my services at a fair rate, and so I suggest you do not hire this man."

"Ha, he has a button on his lapel, and that makes him official," said the first man. "He and his friends want all the gravy."

"Don't listen to him, Senor. You will hire him to your regret. He isn't registered."

"And why not?" the first man asked angrily. "Because you and your friends have all the buttons sewed up."

Rogers looked at the official guide. He was well-dressed, obviously well-fed and self-assured. "I've already hired this man," he said, nodding to the one who'd first approached him.

The official guide bowed his head and walked off without a word.

"Now," said Rogers, "what else is there besides the tours?"

"Many things, Senor."

"Such as a place to gamble?"

"Oh, yes. If you like, I can suggest a respectable place."

"Respectable?" Rogers laughed and, when the guide frowned, he slapped him on the back.

"All right, take me to this respectable place."

The white teeth flashed in the brown face. The guide bowed and pointed to a car thirty feet back from the corner.

The street trembled as Rogers started forward, the white glare suddenly turned hazy. He lurched and stumbled. A strong hand caught and held his arm firmly.

"You are all right, Senor?"

"Fine."

The guide smiled and ran ahead. He opened the door of the car and shut it after Rogers, ran around to the other side and climbed in.

A ten minute ride through the hot deserted streets brought them to their destination, an old house of adobe with pale blue walls, and barred and shuttered windows.

The white glare flooded the empty street. Rogers squinted and said, "This is the place?"

"Yes, Senor."

"It doesn't look like any one's in there."

"Someone always is. Just walk in and give them this."

The guide extended a card.

Rogers took it. "You'll wait?" he said.

"Yes, Senor."

"I may be in there for a time."

"I have much patience."

Rogers got out of the car. When he opened the door to the house, cool air touched his face. He blinked and the room established itself. It wasn't a dive. Soft music was playing. Eight dice-players stood around a long table. A fat man with a red face bowed from behind a small bar. Rogers handed him the guide's card, and the fat man gestured toward the long table where the dice were rolling.

Three hours later he stepped outside the house. The guide was still waiting. As soon as he saw Rogers, he got out of the car and opened the door for him. Rogers stepped in.

"You feel all right?" the guide asked when he settled behind the wheel.

"All right," said Rogers, but he wasn't all right. He was drunk. Worse, the dice had gone against him.

"You had some luck?" asked the guide.

"Very little."

"Ah, too bad."

Too bad is right, thought Rogers, and he sickened as he realized what had happened inside the house.

"Anywhere else?" said the guide. "Or do you wish to drive back to the hotel?"

"Not yet."

"As you wish." The guide stared straight ahead, waited, then said, "Perhaps you wish to go to a good restaurant?"

"No restaurant."

The guide shrugged. "Then you have a suggestion?"

"Let's go back to the hotel."

The guide didn't answer this time, but started the car. As it moved off, Rogers closed his eyes.

What did I do? he thought, and sickened again, remembering what had happened back in the gambling house. He'd lost. Lost not only his own money, but also the money Butler had given him to pay for the dope when he met Moreno.

My God, he thought. But all wasn't lost. Moreno hadn't contacted him. Maybe he wouldn't call. Maybe . . .

He was deluding himself and he knew it. Even if Moreno never contacted him, he had to answer to Butler. It was Butler's money.

Better to deal with Moreno. Contact him somehow and talk him out of the stuff.

Ah, yes, talk him out of it. Impossible. Nobody talks a dealer out of the stuff. Only money does it. Or a gun.

A gun! The words exploded in his brain, and the car stopped.

"Senor?"

He opened his eyes. They were in front of the hotel again, the white glare was gone from the street, but it still trembled.

"You feel all right?" asked the guide.

"Yes, but it's hot. Let's go in for a drink."

The guide frowned.

"What's wrong?"

"I have to drive the car, Senor."

"Don't worry about the car. But that's not what you mean. You think I'm drunk."

"Oh, no. But you look worried."

The remark disturbed Rogers, but he managed to laugh.

"I haven't a worry in the world. Now let's get that drink. My lips are cracking."

"As you wish."

The expression grated. The whole manner of the guide suddenly irritated Rogers. But he knew that what was really bothering him was that he had lost the money.

Rogers stepped from the car before the guide could run around and open the door. It pleased him to do this, and he almost laughed, but didn't.

The glass-paneled hotel door opened. A gray-haired man in an ill-fitting uniform with gold-braid bowed solemnly. The coolness of the lobby swam around Rogers. He moved toward the bar, welcoming the deep shadow after the violence of the afternoon's white glare and thinking of the desperate situation he was in, thinking again of the gun, but only as a separate entity, not as an instrument of salvation.

"Salvation," he murmured.

"Senor?" the barman said, perhaps thinking with his limited English, that this was a new kind of drink.

"Beer," said Rogers. He turned to the guide.

"Beer," said the guide.

A few minutes later the barman called out, "Senor Rogers?"

"Here."

"Telephone. Will you take it in one of the booths?"

A boy in a white jacket plugged the phone into an empty booth at the end of the room, as Rogers waited in agony. If this were Moreno calling, he was doomed.

"Hello?"

"Butler again. What's doing?"

"Nothing."

"Too bad."

"Yes."

"Maybe we better break clear."

"What do you mean?"

"We can't wait. I know somebody else. We'll buy from him."

Stunned, Rogers gripped the phone, and said, "And start the whole business over again?"

"It's better than waiting."

"Who's doing the waiting, you or me? I've sweated it out for two days. Give Moreno a chance."

"All right. I'll give him till tomorrow morning. Does that suit you?"

"It'll do," Rogers answered, knowing he couldn't ask for more time.

"Okay, take it easy."

The line went dead. Rogers dropped the phone and returned to the bar, reprieved but still desperate, thinking of Butler. Butler would have no mercy.

The guide was watching him. He saw the anxious look on his face, the wish to please.

You can't help me. Nobody can, he thought, and finished his beer.

"Another?"

"As you wish, Senor."

The barman brought two more bottles and filled the glasses. Watching him, Rogers suddenly realized he couldn't pay for the drinks.

He groaned inwardly, and caught the eye of the guide. His hand went to his pocket. A single peso came out.

"This is all I've got on me," he said. "Can you cover for me till . . . ?"

"Certainly." The guide smiled, paid for the drinks and left a tip.

"Thanks."

"A pleasure."

They finished their beer and left the bar. Now, thought Rogers. There was no going back. He had to try again.

"Let's settle things," he said.

"How much do I owe you?"

The guide considered for a moment. "A hundred pesos," he said almost timidly.

"I see. Could you wait for it? I'm not finished with you yet."

"Of course, Senor. There's no hurry."

Rogers smiled. A hundred pesos was nothing to him, but to the guide—what wouldn't he do for a thousand? What . . . ?

Rogers stopped himself. He didn't want to think. He couldn't think.

"I'll see you later and straighten everything out," he said to the guide.

"As you wish."

"Where will you be?"

"Out front. Or in the bar across the street."

"All right."

Rogers started toward the elevator. The lobby seemed extra dark now. The elevator door slid open. Its light guided him in.

"Four, please."

He didn't remember stepping from the elevator, or the walk through the long hall. He stood before his door, inserted the key in the lock and took so long with it that he

raised his eyes to the number on the panel, doubting the room was his own.

The door opened. He entered the room. The white glaring light pouring through the window all but blinded him. He wanted to shut it out, but fell like a log across the bed—and slept to be awakened later by the phone when the evening's shadows had settled in the room. He reached for the phone.

"Hello?"

It was Butler again, asking if Moreno had called.

"Not yet," Rogers answered.

That was all. The line went dead. He got up, switched on the light, looked in the mirror and didn't recognize the pale frightened image of himself.

Quickly he went to the bathroom and splashed cold water on his face. He was still doing this when the phone rang again. The sound startled him. He was afraid to move now. It might be Butler again, calling off the deal.

The phone rang once more, and he went to it, realizing it might be Moreno after all. He answered.

"Senor Rogers?"

"Yes."

"Moreno."

"God, you finally called."

"Sorry, but one doesn't rush things in this business."

"Yes, I know. Are you ready? Where . . . ?"

"The village of Guadalupe. My man will meet you."

"Where's Guadalupe?"

"A half hour's ride from where you are. Any of the guides will take you."

"And when I get there?"

"Directly across the plaza from the church you will see a street. The last house on that street. No one lives there," Moreno said and hung up.

Rogers put down the phone. Sleep had diluted the effects of his drinking; his mind was clear now and he knew what he had to do. He'd known it since he'd lost the money in the gambling house.

He examined his gun now, put it away, walked toward the door and stopped when a feeling of acute unease took hold of him.

Again he started toward the door, then turned back, picked up the phone and called Butler.

"Everything's set," he said when Butler answered. "I've made the contact."

"Good. I'll be waiting to hear from you. Take it easy."

"I will. But what about Guadalupe? Know anything about it?"

"It's a village about twenty miles out in the desert. That's the place?"

"Yes."

"So?"

"Is it okay?"

"Sure, it is. What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Except it seems kind of odd that we can't get the delivery here."

"The town's probably too hot and, like I told you, Moreno's a careful guy. He doesn't take chances. Does that answer the question?"

"Yes."

"Good. I'll be waiting to hear from you," Butler said and hung up.

The guide was standing on the sidewalk in front of the hotel. Rogers stepped through the door, saw him and raised his hand.

"Ah, good evening, Senor. Ready to go some place?"

"Yes. Do you know where Guadalupe is?"

"Certainly."

"I'd like you to take me there."

"Of course." The guide smiled and pointed to his car.

"At your service."

Fifteen minutes later they left the suburbs of the city and the dark of the countryside closed in on them. Both men were quiet. Rogers finally spoke.

"For today's services I owe you a hundred pesos, is that right?"

"Yes, Senor."

"And for the drinks?"

"Twelve pesos."

"All told, that's not too much."

"It was a good day for me."

"How good?"

"Very good. In this business, one doesn't catch a tourist every day in the week. Believe me, it's not an easy way to make a living."

Rogers cleared his throat and nodded. "How would you like to make a thousand pesos more?" he said.

The car slowed perceptibly, and the guide turned and smiled. "That's a lot of pesos, Senor. But what do I do?"

"Just drive me to Guadalupe and keep your mouth shut."

The car slowed even more, the guide was no longer smiling. "Just for that—a thousand pesos?"

Rogers knew the moment had come. He reached for his gun, drew it and said, "I'll probably be using this. Never mind why. Now do you want the job?"

The guide glanced at the gun, finally nodded and said, "For a thousand pesos I have no tongue, no ears, no eyes."

"Good." Rogers put the gun away with a feeling of relief, and the car swung into a darker, unpaved road. Neither one spoke again till they reached the plaza of Guadalupe. An old man sat on a bench. There was no one else to be seen.

"Pretty dead," Rogers remarked.

"Yes, they go to bed early here. There's nothing else to do," the guide answered, and Rogers pointed to the street on the other side of the plaza.

"Drive down there, stop at the last house and wait there in the car."

"Yes, Senor."

The car moved slowly round the plaza and turned in at the street Rogers had pointed out. It was unpaved and rutted, the houses dark and quiet. The guide drove slowly and finally stopped before the last house.

"Here?" he said dubiously and with reason, for the adobe walls were crumbling, the thatch was gone from the roof and there was no door.

Rogers stared. He didn't want to enter the house, but he had no choice and drew his gun. Stepping from the car, he stood still and listened.

The night was silent, but from the abandoned house came a deeper silence. Rogers shuddered and started forward.

When he reached the doorway, he paused, sucked in his breath, then entered the house.

It wasn't as dark as he expected. Light from the sky paled the walls of the single enormous room. The room was empty. In the rear was another doorway. He stared at

it, waiting, suddenly chilled, wondering if he had made some mistake. It seemed long ago that he'd spoken to Moreno over the phone. Their conversation seemed like a dream now and, being here, that did, too, and the agony of the whole day that lay behind him. None of it seemed real.

I'm ready to wake up, he thought, and a faint sound caused him to whirl around. The guide was facing him, a gun in his hand.

"What do you think you're doing?" Rogers said, and the guide smiled.

"Put your gun on the floor, Senor, and step back," he said and when the command was obeyed he stepped forward, picked up the gun and shoved it in his belt.

"What's the meaning of this?" asked Rogers.

"You don't know, Senor?"

"My God, you're Moreno."

The guide shook his head. "No, but I'm Moreno's man, the one you were supposed to meet here."

Rogers stiffened, he wanted to cry out, but no sound came from his lips and again he thought he was dreaming. And, as in a dream, he sprang at the figure before him, his hands going for its throat.

At that moment Moreno's man pulled the trigger.

YEAR-END CLEARANCE

MARY LINN ROBY

I'M SURE you'll have a hundred and one excuses, Walt," the sheriff said angrily, "but what I'm telling you is that this sale has got to come to an end—pronto. If it doesn't, half the people in this town are going to be dead." He pulled a newspaper out of his pocket and snapped it open. "Whoever heard of such a thing?" he roared. "Look at this. 'Giant January Clearance Sale. Once in a Lifetime Bargains!' I never heard of anything so disgusting."

"Everybody does it," Walt insisted. "Every other businessman in town gets rid of merchandise that way. Why should I be different?"

"Because you're an undertaker!" the sheriff shouted. "Undertakers don't have end of the year sales."

"I don't see why not." Walt pouted. He was a big man with a crest of black hair and shaggy eyebrows, and spoke as he did everything else, slowly and deliberately. "I've got all these caskets I want to unload," he said. "I need new stock. And it's not just caskets, but visitor's books, crematory jars. You ought to see some of those jars, Ned. For only one hundred and fifty, plus tax, I can sell you one of the most beautiful—"

"Now don't get carried away!" Sheriff Harlow mopped his face with his handkerchief. His face was crimson. "It isn't as simple as you make it seem," he said. "Not by a long shot."

Walt looked at his friend questioningly. "All right, Ned," he said. "You just go ahead and explain. It ain't like you to come between a man and his business. Not unless you've changed in the last five years."

Five years ago Ned Harlow had decided to marry, after many a comfortable year of bachelorhood. Walt had tried to warn him, but to no avail. The marriage with Miss Netta Parsons from Peaksville had been a disaster from the moment she had told Ned to speak up when he had fumbled his marriage vows.

Netta was a strong minded woman. She kept Ned's house spotless and cleaned up his language, and she got rid of all his undesirable old friends—including Walt.

That had been a painful time. Walt and Ned had spent every Thursday evening of their adulthood hunched over a checkerboard, a glass of cold beer in one hand and a pipe in the other. Ned hadn't known, until it was over, what the friendship had meant.

Oh, he had put up a fight at first. He had tried telling Netta she couldn't choose his friends, that she could make life as miserable as she wanted for him, but he intended to keep on playing checkers with Walt. Yet Netta was a clever woman. She began to spread rumors around town about Walt's work. She told some dreadful stories of jobs not properly done, and spoke with enthusiasm about the undertaker over in Peaksville. The words of a sheriff's wife counted for something in a small town like Taunton, so Ned finally had to give up or see Walt's business ruined.

As a consequence it had been five years since Ned had been in this room. It was a comfortable old study; a man's room. The checker table was still set up in the corner by the fireplace. Forgetting for a moment what he was there to say, he looked at it wistfully.

"I don't play much anymore," Walt told him. "Now and then Jake Barker drops in, but I'm always so tensed up waiting for him to cheat that I can't concentrate on my game." He looked at the sheriff, his eyes sparkling. "Say, couldn't this business of yours wait? We could sit down and have a beer and maybe play a game of checkers."

The sherriff shook his head regretfully. "The thing about this sale of yours is this, Walt," he said. "The death rate in Taunton has gone up sky high in the past week. Don't tell me you hadn't noticed."

Walt rubbed his chin reflectively. "Well, it's true that I haven't had a free minute since I put that ad in the paper last Monday, but what's wrong with that? It's just darn lucky for all these people being able to take advantage of my January clearance."

"I wish you'd stop calling it that!" Ned snapped. "Didn't it strike you as too much of a coincidence that everybody should start dying this week?"

Walt stared at him blankly. "What are you getting at, Ned?"

"I've got reason to think that these people who are lying in your half-price caskets didn't all die natural deaths. In fact, it's my bet that darn few of them did."

It took Walt a long time to digest this. He tapped out his pipe on the mantelpiece and sucked at it reflectively. "You're not trying to tell me," he said, "that some of those folks in the next room were murdered?"

"I'm trying to tell you just that!" Walt exploded. "And there's going to be ructions around here soon if these deaths don't stop."

"But they've been accidents mostly," Walt told him earnestly. "Sarah Hardesty fell off her back porch and broke her neck, and Wes Gammet, well, everyone's known for a long time that if he didn't stop messing around with that canned heat he was going to get himself in trouble. And Tom Franklin—"

"It's more than a coincidence," the sheriff insisted. "They're a bit too clever for me, I'll grant you. So far. There hasn't been a case of poisoning yet, or anything you could prove was out of the way, but the fact of the matter is that these people who are dying are people that other folk have wanted to see dead for a long time—relatives and such who have to pay the funeral costs."

"Well," Walt said slowly, "that might be true, but I still don't see why I should stop my sale."

"Take Sarah Hardesty," the sheriff said patiently. "Everyone knows she left twenty thousand to her nephew Jake."

Walt smiled. "Good old Jake. He was up for Christmas, wasn't he?"

"He certainly was!" Ned shouted. "Just in time to push her off the back porch and collect the money. Now, you take Wes Gammet. He went off that canned heat five years ago, after he wound up in the hospital. But lately he took up with Grayson Brackett's wife, and there's some who think they saw Grayson with him down by the railway tracks the night Wes died."

He took a deep breath. "And there was Frank Cram. He's been working in that box mill for near on twenty-five

years. Strikes me pretty odd that he chose this week to lose his balance by the saw. I don't suppose I can prove that the fact Wilber Parker was standing right behind him when he fell has anything to do with Frank ending up like a sliced sausage, but—"

"Frank was a hard one to fix up proper," Walt admitted. "Wouldn't want to work that way every day. But I see your point. Frank was telling all around town that Wilber doesn't pay his bills, wasn't he?"

"You've got it!" the sheriff said. "Now my point is, if you don't call off that sale—"

The phone rang and Walt went to answer it.

"Yes," he said. "Well now, that is shocking, isn't it? A real shame . . . Yes . . . Yes . . . Well, I'm sorry to hear it, ma'am. I'll be right over."

The two men looked into one another's eyes as Walt hung up the phone.

"Was that another one?" Ned demanded.

Walt nodded. "Lucy Crocket's gone. Seems she fell into the mill pond."

The sheriff shook his head. "Well, there's one that will be impossible to prove. Everyone in town hated Lucy. Guess she's slandered everyone at one time or another. Walt, this should prove it, if nothing else does. Even if there's just the chance of a tie-in, you can't go on with this sale."

"I suppose you're right," Walt said. "It's a pretty sad thing, Ned, that folks around here would be taking advantage of my sale this way. Pity. I've got some lovely oak caskets. Pink satin lining, big fancy pillows. Overbought them back in '58—forgot that folks around here want things simple if they have to pay for them. Now they're going to lose out on a real buy. It's not just the goods, it's the services, too. This week it was going to cost just one third what it usually does to have the grave dug."

The phone rang again. Walt answered it.

"It's your wife, Ned," he said, looking sadder than ever. "She wants to talk to you, sounds mad."

That woman has built in radar, Ned decided. He hadn't told her that he was going to see Walt today, and here she was on the phone when he hadn't been here ten minutes, wanting him to come home.

Her voice shrilled through the room. That was like Netta to say those things about Walt, knowing he could

hear. The two men stood close together, Ned holding the receiver out a little from his ear. Every time she stopped he said, "Yes, dear. Yes, dear."

When the sheriff hung up, he stood looking at his old friend for a long minute.

Walt was slow, but not as slow as all that. "You know," he said happily, "it wouldn't hurt all that much to let the sale go one more day, would it? Might even help."

Everyone in Taunton said that Netta Harlow had one of the fanciest funerals they'd ever seen. No expenses spared, and, what with the sale and all, that meant plenty of extras. Walt really outdid himself.

The automobile accident hadn't done any real damage anyhow when the brakes had given on Potter's Hill—just broke her neck, nice and clean.

Walt didn't have so much business with the sale over, and things sort of settled back. In fact, he and Ned decided that they might as well play checkers on Monday and Thursday nights both, now that the end-of-the-year clearance was over.

RUBY MARTINSON, EX-CON

HENRY SLESAR

I GUESS I WAS the only member of our family who wasn't surprised when my cousin Ruby Martinson landed in jail. Everybody else thought Ruby was such a nice boy, the kind who never gets into trouble or sasses his parents or ever does anything you could disapprove of. But I knew different. I knew that Ruby Martinson, the *secret* Ruby Martinson that wasn't revealed by his thin, almost scrawny body and his big eyeglasses and his seeming acceptance of dutiful employment as an accountant, was really a vicious enemy of Society, a Master Criminal, a gigantic Evil Brain that plotted infamies which would have turned his mother's hair white, except that it was white already.

I was the only one in the world who knew Ruby's true character, and that was because he elected to confide in me. The confidences were terribly gratifying to my ego, because Ruby, at twenty-three, was several years my senior, and his enormous Criminal Mind was several times my superior. When we met over coffee and crullers at Hector's Cafeteria, and Ruby would limn for me his intricate schemes for crime, I was open-mouthed with awe and respect and a delicious kind of terror at even knowing such a dangerous man. The only trouble with the relationship was that Ruby sometimes involved me in his capers, and I didn't have the kind of iron fortitude he possessed. What I mean is, I was a coward. I still am.

At the time Ruby was thrown in jail, I was just completing a brief term of employment at the Brett Hat Company in the garment district. It was my third job, all in the clothing center, since leaving high school, and my boss, Mr.

Komroff, had decided I didn't have my heart in my work, which was blocking ladies' hats. He had tears in his eyes on the Monday he told me the bad news, and I was feeling pretty rotten, too. I didn't feel any better when I came home and learned that Ruby had been arrested.

It took me awhile to get the facts out of my mother, a sort of excitable type. Finally, I pieced together the story. Ruby had borrowed his uncle's car, a 1939 Plymouth, in order to take his moll Dorothy for a Sunday ride in the country. I say moll because that's what Ruby calls her, but Dorothy's really a very nice girl. Anyway, he was driving somewhere in the Bronx and I guess he got lost, because he steered the Plymouth down a one-way street. Unfortunately, he ran into a police car, and the cops were pretty nasty, especially when it turned out that Ruby had forgotten his driver's license. I don't know exactly what happened, but I gather that Ruby (who hated cops anyway) gave the officers a hard time, because they sent Dorothy home and took Ruby to the precinct house, where he was forced to spend the night. Monday morning, Ruby's father, a nice old guy who gives piano lessons, went down to the precinct and got him out.

Well, the whole business didn't sound so bad to me after I heard the story, but the way my mother carried on you'd have thought they were shaving Ruby's head and cutting slits in his trousers already. She was on the phone with Ruby's mother all evening, wailing and crying like the world was coming to an end. She spent the whole night in the kitchen making chicken soup to bring to Ruby in the morning, as if he was sick in bed with pneumonia or something. I never could understand my mother.

Anyway, I went out the next day with the want ads from the *New York Times* in the pocket of my windbreaker, and made the rounds. I didn't have much luck, mostly because I spent half the day in a movie on Forty-Second Street, but at six o'clock, compelled by habit, I headed over to Hector's Cafeteria on Broadway to see if Ruby, despite his experience, would be ensconced at the same old table in the rear, brooding evilly over his coffee and crullers. He was.

From the moment I was close enough to see his face, I knew that Ruby had changed. For one thing, he was paler. I mean even his freckles were paler; Ruby is a redhead, with lots of freckles. And there was a kind of suffering look

on his face, like a man who'd been through the crucible. Behind the big glasses he wore, his eyes were narrow and old-looking, and he kept flicking a little muscle in his jaw. The hand that held the coffee cup wasn't steady, and as he chewed on the cruller, his mouth was a taut, thin line.

I said, "Hello, Ruby," and he nodded without looking at me. "Gee, I heard what happened," I said, "about the car business, I mean."

He turned to look at me, real slow. Then he said, sort of spitting out the words: "Dirty coppers."

"Were they rough on you, Ruby? Did they push you around or anything like that?"

"Nah. They wouldn't dare lay a finger on me; I told 'em I'd get a mouthpiece if they touched me. That's when they tossed me in stir." He rubbed his forehead.

"Gosh. Was it bad, Ruby?"

"They thought I'd crack. They thought I couldn't take it. But I fooled them, the dirty skunks. I could take that rap standing on my head; they didn't know who they were dealing with. And if I *really* wanted to, I could have busted out."

My eyes went big as jelly doughnuts, and I began to realize that the night in jail had wrought a transformation in Ruby. He always talked pretty tough, but never with such ferocity. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but I knew that he was *hardened*.

"I cased the joint pretty good," Ruby said, staring straight ahead. "I figured out a foolproof plan for crashing out, and I would have, if my old man hadn't anted up. They couldn't hold me for long, not if I didn't want to be. I would have hopped a freighter for South America or some place and they'd never catch up to me. There were a couple of guys that knew the right people."

"What guys, Ruby?"

"Guys in stir, pals of mine. Guys who knew the angles. Believe me, I learned plenty."

I didn't like hearing Ruby talk that way. I mean, I knew he was a real criminal, a genuine public enemy, but he was more the Brain guy, not the strongarm type. The way he was talking now, it wasn't *suave* or anything; it was just plain tough, like a gangster.

"Gee, Ruby," I said, "you shouldn't let it upset you like that. I mean it was only one night. It could have happened to anybody."

He laughed, a short, mocking laugh.

"You just don't know, kid. You got stars in your eyes. Maybe you think it's all gonna be candy and cake for me now?"

"Huh?"

"What kind of deal do you think I'll get? Everybody knows I been in stir. The whole damn neighborhood knows. I'm a *con*. You think they can forget that?"

"Gee, Ruby—"

"Wake up, buster. Stop kidding yourself. Nobody wants an ex-con. You wait and see."

I was glad when Ruby and I parted early that evening, and glad that he didn't have a single nefarious scheme to outline. I wanted him to get over this new mood of his in a hurry; I didn't like it at all.

A couple of weeks later, I began to think he was back to normal. Not that Ruby had forgotten his run-in with the law, but he didn't look and act quite as bitter as before. I was greatly relieved; so much so, that I hardly minded my failure in finding a new job.

Then it happened. Almost three weeks to the day after Ruby had been sprung, I walked into Hector's Cafeteria and saw Ruby at the same old stand, and from the way the muscles were jumping in his jaw, I knew that he was plunged back into the depths of bitterness and melancholy. I didn't have to say anything. Right off the bat, he let me know what was on his mind.

"This is it, kid," he said, ripping apart a cruller. "They finally caught up with me. I knew it was gonna happen; it was only a matter of time."

"What, Ruby?"

He gave me a twisted smile. "Remember what I said about ex-cons? Well, now you know I was right. Nobody gives a con a break. Nobody." He slammed his coffee cup to the table. "I got my walking papers today. From Conroy and Company."

I stared at him. Conroy and Company was the big firm of accountants that Ruby worked for, on Fifth Avenue. He'd been working there longer than I remembered, and the news that he was fired came as a surprise and shock. I mumbled something sympathetic to him.

Ruby said, "Don't make any mistakes, kid. I know why I got the axe. They gave me a lot of jazz about hard times,

but I know different. They dropped me because I'm a con, and nobody wants a con on their payroll."

"Gee, Ruby, do they even *know* about—"

"Of course they know. What do you think I am, blind or something?" As a matter of fact, Ruby is pretty blind, without his glasses. "I know the score, buster. That's the way all the honest johns are. One false step, one prison record, and whammo—out you go."

"But maybe it's true, Ruby. Maybe times are hard. I've been out of work almost a month—"

He looked at me pityingly. "You're real innocent. And what do you think'll happen when I go looking for a job? What do you think they'll say when they know about me?"

I couldn't answer him. I felt so bad that I could hardly finish my cruller. After all, I didn't know too much about the business world. Maybe it was true.

"I'm sorry, Ruby," I said miserably.

"Don't worry about it," Ruby said, steely-eyed. "I won't have any trouble. There's more than one way to make dough without slaving away over lousy ledgers."

"But I thought you liked accounting?"

"There's something I like better. I got plans, kid, big plans. I haven't got 'em all worked out yet, but they're on the fire. Any day now."

I knew what he meant, but I didn't want to say it. There was a caper cooking in Ruby Martinson's Evil Brain, a caper that he intended as more than a mental exercise. I could only hope and pray that I wouldn't have to take part in it.

But I was wrong. A week later, when we were both still looking for work, Ruby telephoned me to stress the urgency of keeping our date at the cafeteria; a needless reminder. But it was obvious that his appointment had a greater significance than usual. I was immediately thrown into a minor panic; so much so that I botched up an interview that afternoon. I was filling out a resume form at a big company looking for office boys, and where the little dotted line said *Sex*, I filled in *Office Boy*. The guy doing the interviewing looked at me kind of funny, and p.s., I didn't get the job.

Ruby was hiding behind a book when I entered Hector's, and when I sat down, I saw that the book concealed a meticulous drawing that looked like the kind of floor plan

you used to see in front of detective novels. He passed the book over to me, his eyeballs shifting from side to side, and I peered at the thing without knowing whether he wanted me to read the book or the diagram. I began to giggle, nervously, and Ruby punched my arm.

"What's so funny? Can't you see what it is?"

"I don't know," I gulped. To tell you the truth, I was afraid of Ruby when he was like this.

"It's a penthouse apartment," Ruby said. "The guy who owns it is loaded. I mean *loaded*."

"What guy?"

"His name's Jaffe, and he's one of my boss's clients. My ex-boss. I used to work on his books once in awhile, and sometimes I went up to his apartment to pick up things for the company. I never met Jaffe himself, but I know he's a rich guy. Quite a layout, huh?"

I looked at the diagram again, but it didn't make any sense to me. No diagram ever did. But I didn't want Ruby to know how dumb I was, so I nodded my head.

"Now this here's a private elevator," Ruby said, pointing with his finger. "It lets off at the foyer of the apartment. But there's also another elevator, a building elevator. The private elevator's self-operating, but the building elevator has a man running it. You got to have a key to work the private elevator, and it takes you right into the apartment. Get it?"

I shook my head.

"What's the matter with you? If you got a key to the private elevator, you don't need a key to the door of the penthouse. All you do is get in the elevator and you're inside the apartment. They can unlock the elevator door from the apartment, with a buzzer; otherwise, you gotta use a key. Now the building operator, he's a guy named Pete, and sometimes he leaves his elevator to take a little nip down in the basement. I've been timing him for the last three nights, and it runs about like this."

He pulled out a sheet of paper with a lot of neat numbers in a long column.

"Now do you get the pitch? All we gotta do is hang around until Pete takes off for his schnapps, slip the key into the private elevator, and we got it made. There must be a couple of grand lying around that apartment."

For the first time, I realized that Ruby was talking about burglary.

"Wow," I said. "You mean you're gonna rob the place?"

"What else am I talking about, you dope? We won't have any trouble. They don't have any kids or sleep-in maids or—"

"We?" I squeaked.

He punched my arm again, and quickly canvassed the people at the other tables. Nobody appeared to be listening, so he went on.

"Now listen carefully. I bought me a whole set of keys from the locksmith's and I'll find one that'll fit the elevator. We'll have to test them out one night when Pete goes down to the basement. Then we'll come back on a night when Jaffe and his wife go out—"

"But that's burglary," I sputtered. "Gosh, Ruby—"

"So what's wrong with burglary?" he said, in a kind of raspy voice. "You think I'm going to wait around until I starve to death, trying to go straight? Not me, buster! Not me."

"But Ruby—"

"But me no buts, pal. I've got the whole thing figured. This elevator's an old rattly job; the lock ought to be easy pickings. If you don't want to help me with the key business, okay. But I'll need you when the time comes to pull the job. Okay?"

I wanted to refuse, desperately. But it was always hard to refuse the old Ruby Martinson, the one without a police record. Refusing the new one, the ex-con, was virtually impossible.

"Okay," I said despairingly, hoping that he wouldn't solve the key problem. "Okay, Ruby. Whatever you say."

But whatever hopes I had that Ruby wouldn't find a key for the Jaffe lock swiftly vanished. I should have known that Ruby was too clever to fail a simple task like that. Within four days, he gleefully reported success. He had the little strip of curvy metal that would let us into the penthouse elevator, and all we had to do was wait for the Jaffes to leave the apartment long enough for us to clean it out.

It was midwinter then, and the vigil we set up outside the apartment building on Seventy-Eighth Street was a cold business. I was still wearing the overcoat I had owned since my fifteenth birthday, and fuzzy stuff had been peeling off the thing until it was about as thin as Kleenex. I shivered so much that my teeth ached. For ten nights we watched the apartment house, but the Jaffes never seemed to go any

place. After awhile, I began to have the disturbing notion that Ruby, with his lousy eyesight, wouldn't recognize them if they *did* come out of the building.

At the start of the third week of our stakeout, I was whining and complaining about the assignment, and the more I whined the tougher Ruby talked. One Friday night, I didn't show up until after eight-thirty (our vigil began promptly at seven) and Ruby was plenty sore. Especially since he had seen the Jaffes step out of the building and into a taxi.

"This is it," he told me, with the intent look in his eyes magnified by the thick eyeglass lenses. "The penthouse is empty. Now all we gotta do is wait for Pete to get thirsty."

It took another two hours before that happened, and it seemed like a week to me. The more I thought about the caper, the less I liked it. My shivers weren't entirely due to the climate.

"Okay," Ruby said joyfully. "He just went down to the basement. Let's get started!"

We hurried across the street, dodging traffic. We went into the lobby of the building, and Ruby strode directly around the corner to the door marked PRIVATE ELEVATOR. I watched him dig into his pocket and come out with the key. In another five seconds, he slid back the door, and we were entering a tiny box padded with green canvas. He closed the door again, grinned at me, and pressed the button marked UP.

The ride seemed endless, and there was nothing but darkness facing us when it was over. The darkness turned out to be a velvet curtain in the penthouse, draped across the front of the elevator cage. Ruby pushed it aside, and we stepped out on a carpet so thick I almost tripped and fell over the nap.

"We did it!" Ruby chortled. "Easy as pie!"

I tried to say something, but couldn't. I watched as Ruby yanked out a flashlight from his hip pocket and pointed the beam over the floor. I caught a spotlighted glimpse of some bulky dark furniture in the huge living room. Then Ruby turned the light on his wrist watch and frowned.

"It's almost eleven," he said. "We'll have to work fast."

"Gee, Ruby," I said, in a choked voice.

"What is it?"

"I don't know—"

I did know, but I hated to tell Ruby. Either it was

nervousness or the cold weather or just plain nature, but there was something I just *had* to do.

"What is it?" Ruby said again, grabbing my arm.

"The bathroom," I gasped. "I gotta go to the bathroom!"

"You what?"

"I'm sorry, Ruby. But I just *gotta*."

He looked at me contemptuously. Then he clucked his tongue and said, "Okay, okay. So you can go to the john as soon as we get outa here."

"No," I said meekly. "I think maybe I should go now, Ruby. They *must* have a bathroom."

He slapped his forehead in disgust, and went striding into the living room. He flashed the light around for a minute, and then came back. He shoved me in front of him.

"Okay, in there. But hurry up, for pete's sake."

"Thanks," I said humbly, and hurried to the door picked out by the flashlight's beam and hurried inside.

When I was ready to leave the bathroom, I turned the knob of the door, but the door wouldn't open. I fiddled with the lock to see if I hadn't snapped it by mistake or habit, but the lock wasn't the problem. The door must have been warped a little, so I pushed harder against it. It still didn't open, so I whispered, "Ruby! Hey, Ruby!" He didn't hear me, so I whispered louder, "Hey, Ruby! Help me with the door."

I could hear him on the other side, saying: "What?"

"The door," I answered. "It's stuck from this side. Open it up, will ya?"

The knob rattled, and Ruby said: "Open the lock, you dope."

"I didn't use the lock. I think maybe the door's warped. Give it a good shove."

He made some effort, but it didn't do any good. I said, "Look, I'll push from this side, and you pull from that. Okay?"

I heard him curse, and then we both began pulling and pushing, but it didn't make the door budge, not even a fraction. Ruby said, "What's the matter with you, anyhow? Give it a real shove!"

I threw myself against the door and almost broke my shoulder. It wasn't a very big bathroom, despite the obvious plushness of the apartment, and there wasn't much room for me to get a running start.

"I can't open it!" I yelled, getting panicky. "I'm locked in, Ruby!"

"Try. Try!"

I tried. I began to batter the door with all the strength in my body, which isn't exactly great. I forgot all about being cautious and began to kick the door, but I couldn't get the blasted thing to do anything but stand there. I could hear Ruby moaning and swearing, and the concern I was feeling was rapidly developing into first-class panic.

"Ruby!" I gasped. "This door's really stuck. I can't do *anything*."

"All right, all right!" he said hoarsely. "Don't get yourself in an uproar. I'll figure something out."

"Ruby, it's eleven o'clock! What if they come home?"

"I said don't worry about it!"

"Ruby, don't leave me here!"

"Stop yappin', will ya? Let me think!"

I looked wildly around the bathroom for some implement to use against the door, but there was nothing but a deep sunken tub, a medicine cabinet, a shelf full of fancy colored bottles and stuff, and the usual plumbing. I was helpless; all I could do was depend upon Ruby's ingenious Criminal Mind to work me out of my predicament. I had faith, all right, but not quite enough.

"Look," Ruby said, his mouth against the door. "The only thing to do is jimmy the door open. I gotta get some tools—"

"Maybe there's something in the apartment."

"We haven't got time to look. I got some tools at my place."

"*Your* place? It'll take you an hour to get there and back!"

"Don't worry. I'll hop a cab."

"No!" I shouted. "Ruby, don't leave me here—"

"It's the only thing!" he said angrily. "Let *me* worry about it!"

"But what if they come home? Look for something around here. Don't—"

"Nah. They won't be home until late. You know how people like that are."

I didn't, but I hoped Ruby did.

"Be back before you know it," he said. "You just take it easy, kid. I'll get you out of this spot—"

"Ruby!" I said once more, but there wasn't any re-

sponse, and I knew he had headed for the elevator.

After he was gone, I made a few more attempts to get the bathroom door open, but none of them succeeded. Then, feeling as miserable as I can remember ever feeling, I sat down on the toilet seat and put my head in my hands. I looked at my watch, and it said ten minutes past eleven. I wound it carefully to make sure it wouldn't stop on me.

The next time I looked it said eleven-thirty, and I was really getting scared. What if the Jaffes weren't really such night owls? What if they just went to dinner or something? Maybe they were already on their way home!

At eight minutes of twelve, I was sick of sitting in one position, so I got up to pace the ten square feet of tile floor. I opened the medicine cabinet and examined its contents, none of which were particularly interesting. I shut the cabinet's door and stared into its mirror. I didn't look well.

At twelve-thirty, I discovered what people meant when they said they were a bundle of nerves. *I* was a bundle of nerves. Just to do *something*, I went back to the mirror and made faces at myself. First I bared my teeth and enlarged my eyes like some mad monster. Then I simpered like a little girl. Then I gave myself the lean, romantic look of a movie hero, about to kiss the heroine. I smacked the glass of the mirror and left a round wet spot. I wiped it clean with a bath towel, and then opened the medicine cabinet door. I took out some after-shave lotion and slapped it on my cheeks. I think I probably would have powdered my face next, if I hadn't heard a sound outside that electrified me. The elevator was coming up.

I turned off the light and put my ear to the door. When I heard the woman's voice, my heart swelled to the size of a kettledrum and got just as noisy. I looked at my watch and saw it was ten minutes to one.

The woman said, "Turn a light on, for God's sake. What are you, a seeing-eye dog?"

"All right, so all right," a man answered, in a heavy voice that sounded a little thick to me. "Listen, you want to sit around that's okay by me. I'm going to bed."

"So who wants to sit around?" the woman said. "Believe me, if I had a snootful like you tonight that's all I *could* do, go to bed."

Her voice sounded closer now, and I began to tremble because I was afraid I was going to get caught. The man

said something else that I couldn't hear, and then I heard footsteps, sort of muffled on the carpet. The next thing I knew, the knob on the bathroom door was being rattled.

Luckily, he didn't have any more success with getting the door open than Ruby had had. He mumbled something, and then said, "Damn bathroom door's stuck again. Will you talk to that lousy super?"

"Ah, talk to him yourself. You're the man of the house."

"So who's got the time, you or me? What else you got to do all day? What do you think I do downtown, play marbles?"

"Listen, I wish I knew," the woman said, with a faint laugh. "Use the bedroom john. We got a million bathrooms, you have to use that one? You want milk or something?"

"All I want's a good night's sleep. What time's your mother coming?"

"Eleven o'clock. So what about it?"

"Nothing, nothing."

That was all I heard. There was a click, and I saw the light disappear from under the crack of the bathroom door, and I knew they had gone to bed. Maybe I didn't make it quite clear how I listened to all this stuff. I mean, maybe you think I was just nice and calm, like a sort of court stenographer or something. Well, I wasn't.

After the apartment got quiet, I tried to look at my watch in the darkness, but the lousy radium dial wasn't working. I put a big bath towel over the bottom of the door and flipped on the light again. It was one-thirty.

Where was Ruby? I moaned inwardly. Two and a half hours had gone by, and he hadn't returned!

I sat down again, and began to worry about what my folks were thinking. I was often home late, and they never made any fuss. But from the way things looked, I might not be home for *days*.

At a quarter of two, I thought I was going to crack. The bathroom seemed smaller than ever. If there had been a book or a magazine or *something* to occupy me, it might not have been so unbearable. Now I knew what Ruby must have felt, in that Bronx jail. I was going stir-crazy.

I went through the medicine cabinet once more, reading the labels on the Alka-Seltzer bottle and the Dr. Lyons Tooth Powder can and the bottle of St. Joseph's Aspirin.

Then I looked over the assortment of bubble bath powders and bath salts and colognes and the other froufrou stuff on the shelf. I got tired of that after awhile, and went wearily back to my seat. I was pretty miserable, let me tell you.

Then I got an idea. I knew it was a nutty idea the minute I thought of it, but I couldn't get it out of mind. Somehow, it seemed like the only thing that would prevent me from going berserk, and the fancy collection of bath articles sort of gave me added inspiration. I began to run water slowly into the tub until it was about three quarters full. Then I took off my clothes, draped them over the toilet seat, and went to the shelf. I took the bubble bath powder and read the instructions again, then put a handful of the blue stuff under the faucet until it frothed up into suds. I dropped a dash of bath salts in, and a jigger of something called Miracle Bath Liquid. Then, just for good measure, I added three shakes of Evening In Paris cologne, and slipped into the tub.

It felt pretty good, soaking in the warm water, surrounded by all the sweet-smelling stuff I had loaded it up with. There was a big oval-shaped cake of blue soap in the dish, and I lathered myself up good from neck to waist, sloshing around with such abandon that I almost forgot about the people sleeping in the bedroom. It's a good thing I didn't start to sing or anything; I think maybe that would have been going too far.

I was just floating in the water, the suds lapping around my chin, when I heard the ringing noise outside. It was a startling sound, and I paused to hear what results it would bring.

There were soon some thumping, barefooted footsteps on the carpet, and then the gruff man's voice was saying, obviously into the building telephone, "Who is it?"

I didn't hear the answer, but whatever it was made Mr. Jaffe sore. He cursed and told whoever it was to go away, but then he must have gotten an argument, because he said, "Okay, okay, come up!"

The next thing I heard was the whine of the elevator. I guess Jaffe had unlocked the downstairs door. And when I heard the voice of his visitor, I gasped aloud. It was Ruby!

"What the hell's the idea?" I heard Jaffe say. "You know what time it is?"

"Yes, sir," Ruby was saying, talking real fast. "But you

see, the super told me about the bathroom door being stuck, and I'm going away on vacation tomorrow, and if you didn't want to have it fixed for two weeks or so—"

"What do you mean? Where's Rudolph, the regular handy man?"

"Rudolph? Oh, Rudolph quit, Mr. Jaffe. But like I said, if you want I should leave it until I get back from vacation—"

Jaffe growled something, and then said, "All right, all right. But make it snappy, will ya? We're trying to get some sleep!"

"Take just two minutes, Mr. Jaffe, just two minutes."

I listened to this talk in stunned silence, and then I heard footsteps approaching the bathroom door. I realized the simple cleverness of Ruby's plan, but I, of course, wasn't prepared for it. I yanked out the plug of the bathtub and the water went *gwush!* as I tried to scramble out, slipping and sliding on the doggone bath salts or whatever it was remaining in the tub. By the time I reached the big bath towel that was on the floor, Ruby was already working on the door with some kind of tool, and I wasn't even dry yet when I realized his efforts were producing results.

Then the door opened, and Ruby, in workman's overalls, was blinking at me, a kind of forked implement in his hands.

"You dope!" he whispered hoarsely. "What the hell are you doing?"

I couldn't answer him; my teeth were chattering insanely, and I couldn't get a word out of my throat.

"You gotta get *outa* here!" he said, his eyes wild. "They're in the bedroom, but they could walk out any second! Grab your clothes and beat it!"

I stammered something at him, and starting to make a big ball out of the clothing strewn around the bathroom. Everything seemed greased, and kept slipping out of my hands, and the big bath towel around my shoulders wouldn't stay in place. Ruby made a disgusted noise and yanked the clothes from me; I didn't waste any time draping the towel around my body as securely as I could. Then he skittered across the room back towards the elevator, and I went running after him, leaving big wet footprints on the carpet. We got inside and he punched the button marked **DOWN**, and I did my best to get my shirt and pants on. By the time we were at ground level, I had half my clothes on

beneath the overcoat. Lucky for us, there was a taxi on the corner.

Well, that was all the loot we got out of our burglary: a big bath towel that, lengthwise down its middle, we later discovered said, STATLER HOTELS. I also got a terrible cold that kept me in bed for two weeks, but at least I didn't have to go out and look for work. As for Ruby, he got a job with another accounting firm, and with a ten-dollar increase over his old salary. He said he lived in mortal fear that his new boss would find out he was an ex-con, but if he had any intentions of giving up his criminal career, it wasn't evident from his conversation. I guess some people never change.

BEWARE: DANGEROUS MAN

C. B. GILFORD

ELAINE KARNES heard her husband drive the car into the garage, and became uneasy when he didn't come into the house. It was past six, almost dusk, and he should have been starving after his day at the office and then the long drive home, at the remotest edge of the suburbs. She didn't want the steak to get overdone, and besides she was puzzled. So she went outside to find him.

The first thing she noticed was that he had switched on the light in the garage. She hesitated a moment in the driveway, expecting him to emerge. But he didn't. And then she heard the sound of the running water and saw the hose leading into the garage. He was washing the car—before dinner, and doing it inside the garage.

She went only as far as the doors, and called to him. He must have been crouching down in front of the car, because she didn't see him at first, and then, finally, he straightened up. He turned off the water at the hose nozzle before he looked at her. She couldn't see his face too clearly, but she sensed trouble. So she went to him, squeezing between the side of the car and the garage wall.

"David, what on earth are you doing?"

She could see his face now. He had pushed his hat back off his forehead. His lean, tanned face was oddly pale, and his brown eyes had a strange bright look in them. Water had splashed liberally over his once-neat gray tweed suit but he was unaware of it.

"Elaine, maybe I've done a foolish thing." His voice was strained, a bit unnatural. "Maybe dishonest too, I don't know."

She went the rest of the way to him, and into his arms. But his embrace was stiff, formal, almost unfriendly.

"What's all this about, darling?" she said.

"You remember Pharoah, Vandrak's dog? That Great Dane next door?"

Remember Pharoah? What a question. She thought of the uneasy, half-frightened feeling she had every time she saw him. The huge thing went out on a leash mostly, but every once in awhile he escaped and roamed the woods separating their house from the Vandraks'. And sometimes he wandered into the yard, loping around like a scavenging beast of prey, sniffing, pawing into the ground if he found something worth investigation. At such times she stayed inside the house. She'd never had the nerve to approach the dog, or to try to run him away from their property.

"Well, I hit it with the car, Elaine. I killed it."

She couldn't help feeling relief that this was all that was troubling her husband. Why this was the end of a nuisance.

"It was just after I passed Vandrak's house," David went on hastily, as if he thought he had to justify himself to her. "You know how the trees shadow the road, and anyway it was beginning to get dark. The dog just suddenly dashed out of the woods in front of me. I didn't have time to stop. I tried to swerve, but hit it anyway. Hit it real hard. Must have knocked it about ten feet off the road. Well, I stopped and got out and looked at it. It was just lying there. Couldn't see any sign of life . . ."

He hesitated, and his hands clutched her shoulders hard. His eyes seemed to search her face, for approval, or sympathy, or something.

"Well, don't you see, Elaine?" he went on. "I had a sort of choice to make. The dog was already dead. There was no point in getting help for it, or anything like that. But even though it wouldn't help the dog, I knew it was Vandrak's dog, and that I ought to call Vandrak right away. It was the least I could do, you might say. But then there was the fact that the dog had annoyed us, and you were scared of it even. Plus the fact that Vandrak is such an unpleasant guy. I just knew what he'd say, that I'd killed the dog deliberately. He'd raise a real row, sue me or something. Lord, I wouldn't mind paying him the value of the dog, but I knew he wouldn't be satisfied with that. He's vindictive. You could never be sure just what Vandrak would do or how he . . ."

He stopped, out of breath, his eyes begging her to understand what he was saying.

"So you didn't tell Vandrak," she finished for him. "You got back in the car and drove home before he saw you."

"Well, it isn't quite the same," he argued, defensively, "as leaving a human being in the road."

"I'm not blaming you, David," she told him. But she was oddly, intangibly disturbed. "I'm sure I'd have done the same thing that you did."

"I'll send Vandrak some money anonymously. I just want to avoid the man, that's all."

"Yes, I do think you should pay him."

"I had to wash the car off. There was some blood and dog hair on the fender, but I think I took care of it . . ."

He pointed to show her. What he hadn't been able to eliminate was the considerable dent in the right front fender. Still, it wouldn't be too noticeable, if one weren't looking for it. The headlight was still intact.

"I'll take it to some garage in some other town," he said, "and get that straightened out as soon as I can."

She nodded her agreement. "Now let's go in the house," she said. "There's a steak on the fire, but we'll have a drink first."

"All right. But let me hose out the garage first; then I'll be in."

She left him there, heard the water as it was turned on again. Back in her kitchen she took a couple of highball glasses off the shelf and mixed drinks for both of them—a bit stronger than usual. By the time she had them ready, he came in.

"Got to change these wet clothes," he said.

She waited for him in the living room where she'd built a fire in the fireplace. The evening was just chilly enough to justify a fire, and it was positively wasteful not to have one with so much wood around the place. David came in finally and she handed him his glass. They sat together on the sofa, very close.

"Do you really think I did the right thing?" he asked after a long moment.

"Darling, I've already told you I approved."

"I was a coward."

"But you're going to pay him. That's the most you could do anyway. After all, it was an accident. You couldn't help it."

"Vandrak might suspect me anyway. There aren't many cars on our road."

"Darling, please don't figure out . . ."

"I won't be able to get the car fixed till Saturday. I just hope Vandrak doesn't get a chance to notice it before then."

"Darling, let's forget about Vandrak."

He had stopped talking and was sipping from his glass when the doorbell rang. She felt the sudden tensing of his body at the sound, and she jumped ahead of him to answer it.

When she opened the door, there were two men standing there, one a man in ordinary clothes and the other a policeman in uniform. The one not in uniform showed her his wallet, however, with a brightly gleaming badge inside it.

"Detective-Sergeant Riconda," he announced himself. "This the David Karnes residence?"

She nodded.

"Is Mr. Karnes at home now?" he asked.

She nodded again, trying to be nonchalant, trying to fight back that unnameable dread she had felt before. Why were police coming about this matter of a dog? What had Vandrak told them?

"Could we speak to Mr. Karnes?"

She stood aside, inviting them to come in. Both the officers took off their hats as they entered. David rose to meet them in the center of the living room. Sergeant Riconda got right to the point.

"Mr. Karnes," he said, "were you involved in an accident a few minutes ago?"

She saw that David was pale, but his voice was steady enough when he answered. "Yes . . . yes, I was."

"And you left the scene of the accident?"

"Yes . . ."

"After first getting out of your car, and discovering that the victim was dead, that is?"

"Yes, I got out and looked at the dog . . ."

"Dog?"

There was a momentary silence. David looked puzzled. "Yes," he said finally. "My neighbor's Great Dane. That's the accident you're talking about, isn't it?"

Detective-Sergeant Riconda was an old-timer, in his forties, beginning to incline to both stoutness and baldness. He

didn't become at all excited. "I'm afraid not, Mr. Karnes," he said. "I don't know anything about a dead dog. I'm talking about an accident in which a woman was killed."

David opened his mouth to speak, didn't succeed on the first try.

Riconda elaborated. "Your neighbor, Mrs. Paula Vandrak." He consulted his watch. "I guess this happened about—about twenty minutes ago. Mr. Vandrak said he heard his wife's scream from the direction of the road. He couldn't see what was happening, because his house is completely cut off from the road by trees. But he ran in the direction of the scream. And he got there just in time to see the car drive away. He was pretty sure it was your car, but he got the license number anyway. It checked. And then Vandrak found his wife lying by the road, dead . . ."

"But I hit a dog!" David had found his voice now. "I ought to know. I saw what I hit, and I got out of the car afterwards. Sure, I ran away, and I shouldn't have done that. But I didn't hit a woman! I hit a dog!"

Riconda looked genuinely puzzled. He exchanged glances with the uniformed officer, who shrugged his shoulders.

"Look," David said suddenly, "maybe a woman was killed. But there's a dead dog down there on the road too, isn't there? A Great Dane?"

In the silence that followed, Detective-Sergeant Riconda shook his head slowly in answer to David's question.

But he didn't seem a rash man. David's sincerity apparently impressed him. His brow was furrowed.

"I have two stories," he said finally, "yours and Vandrak's, and they contradict each other. But the evidence is on Vandrak's side, because we've got the corpse of a woman and not of a dog. There's another piece of evidence, however—your car. If there's blood or hair or anything like that on the front of your car, Mr. Karnes, it would tell us what you hit. So, if it was a dog you have absolutely nothing to worry about."

That was when Elaine saw her husband wilt, and she ran across the room to him.

He took her into his arms and held onto her so tightly and savagely that she could scarcely breathe. "What have I done, Elaine? What have I done?"

"Are you talking about your car?" Riconda asked.

David nodded. "I washed it off," he said. The words came out choked, broken. "I scrubbed it clean. There's still

a dent in the fender, but that's all you'll find. The evidence was there, but it's all gone now."

Riconda didn't speak for awhile, when he did, his tone had changed. It was harder now, harsher.

"Mr. Karnes, we'll have the lab boys go over your car anyway. Even if you did wash it, you might have missed something. In the meantime, I think you'd better come with us."

David let go of his wife, quickly, without looking at her. And he continued to avoid her eyes while he got his hat and coat. But she caught him at the door as he preceded the officers out. She held onto his arm and stopped him.

"David!"

"What are you thinking, Elaine?" he asked still not looking at her. "Do you think I killed Mrs. Vandrak and ran away?"

She had no difficulty answering him. "You said you killed the dog, David. I believe you."

David put his hand on hers and squeezed it. Then he went out the door. The two officers followed him, and she was left alone.

As soon as they took David away, she contacted George Newell, the only lawyer they knew, and a friend, and George accepted the case. He called back later, reported he'd talked to David. But bail hadn't been set yet; so David couldn't come home. Things didn't look too bad though. There were lots of things still to be checked through.

She couldn't help worrying, even though Newell had told her not to. And it was difficult for her to sleep that night in a house that seemed suddenly empty. In the morning there were dark circles under her eyes.

The lab men arrived shortly after dawn. She watched them work, gave them as much information as she could. They left without telling her what, if anything, they had found.

George Newell came just before noon. Like David, George was a young man just getting started in a career. He was confident and energetic, and Elaine was sure that he was smart too.

"When will David come home?" was the first question she asked him.

"Not for awhile yet," Newell told her. His lean face looked serious. "Feeling runs quite high against hit-and-run drivers, you know."

"But he killed a dog."

"That's what we'll try to prove, but we haven't yet."

"What about the lab tests on the car?"

"Negative. Your husband did a good job of washing it. Later we might get them to tow the whole car in so that they can give it a more thorough going-over. But the car angle doesn't look promising, Elaine."

She tried not to despair. She hadn't put much hope in the car anyway. "Did you talk to Mr. Vandrak?" she asked.

"I met your Mr. Vandrak. I heard him re-telling his version of what happened." Newell offered her a cigarette, which she refused, then lit one himself. "Strange sort of a guy, isn't he? I don't think I like him very well."

"David and I never got along with him. That's why David ran away in the first place. He didn't want to stir up trouble with Vandrak."

"Yes, I know."

"I've been thinking, George. I couldn't sleep much last night, so I had plenty of time. Can I tell you what I've been thinking?"

He smiled. "Of course, Elaine. What is it?"

"Well, I've been thinking about Vandrak mainly. Supposing David is telling the absolute truth—and I'm sure he is—that makes Vandrak a deliberate liar, doesn't it?"

Newell shrugged, ground out his cigarette. "It would seem so," he said. "Unless a real strange coincidence of some kind happened, involving two cars. But I think we can rather safely assume that if David's story is true, Vandrak is very probably lying. But why should he lie, Elaine? Can you tell me that?"

"I've thought of one reason," she said, frowning and biting her lip in the customary way she had when something was puzzling her.

"What's that?"

"Maybe he murdered his wife."

Newell stood up suddenly. He paced the rug a few times, finally stopped in front of Elaine's chair, his face grim. "That's interesting," he said. "What gave you such an idea?"

"Two things."

"What things?"

"For one, I happen to know the Vandraks didn't get along. I don't know all the reasons, but one at least was the

dog. Paula hated Pharoah. She told me that a dozen times. And her husband loved the dog, worshipped it. He tried to keep it in the house or on a leash as much as he could for the dog's sake. He didn't want the dog running loose. He was afraid something might happen to it . . ."

"Wait a minute," Newell interrupted, pacing to the fireplace. "It's conceivable then, isn't it, that if Vandrak was so fond of the dog, and saw David hit the dog, he might want revenge, might frame David for a more serious crime—homicide."

Elaine followed the lawyer to the fireplace. "I think Vandrak would be just the kind," she said, "to do something as abominable as that."

"But do you think he'd go so far as to sacrifice his wife in order to . . . ?"

"Why not, if he hated her? Supposing, for instance, she'd been responsible for Pharoah's getting loose, so he could run into the road and get killed. Then Vandrak would have been furious with her at the same time he was mad at David."

Newell smiled. "Elaine, this all sounds vaguely plausible, but it is guess work."

"Vaguely plausible? You'd think it was more than that if you knew Vandrak." Suddenly somehow she felt certain. And no masculine logic or incredulity would ever change her mind. This was the way it had happened.

"You mentioned two things that made you think of murder," Newell said. "What was the other?"

"Arnold Vandrak couldn't have been too fond of his wife, because several times he tried to make love to me."

"What?"

"Oh, I don't mean he'd want to kill his wife because . . . because of me." Elaine walked away. She couldn't help feeling embarrassed. "It just proves that he wasn't terribly in love with his wife, that's all."

"Did David know about these . . . passes?"

"No, I never told him. I didn't think it was serious enough. And David's the kind who might take that sort of thing very seriously. You see, I was always quite sure I could handle Vandrak, but I wasn't so sure I could handle David if he knew about it."

"I see . . ." Newell said, but both his face and voice registered a certain amount of doubt.

"It was really so silly," she went on, "so kind of ama-

teur. It always started when the dog would get loose and Vandrak would come looking for him. Sometimes he'd find the beast lolling about our yard. He knew I was afraid of him; so he'd ring the doorbell and start apologizing. Rather than invite him in, I'd step out on the porch. That's when he'd try something. But he wasn't very insistent, so I wasn't really worried. Just the same, after awhile I began listening to his apologies through the screen door."

Newell lit another cigarette thoughtfully. "Okay," he said. "Let's suppose David's story is the correct one, and also that Vandrak murdered his wife. You seem to be the detective, Elaine. How did he manage it?"

"I've thought of an answer to that too."

"You've a fertile imagination, I must say."

"George, I'm trying to help David . . ."

"Of course. Of course you are."

She sat down again before she spoke, and she spoke calmly and slowly. It was all so terribly clear and certain in her mind. "All right," she said, "it starts when David's car hits the dog. Vandrak either sees it happen, or is close enough to hear the squeal of brakes and tires. At any rate he's there on the scene when David drives away, and he recognizes the car. He's angry at David, and very likely he's also angry at his wife. Let's say she was responsible for the dog's getting loose. But, at the moment, he's angrier at David. He runs down the road after the car. It's about three hundred yards to our house. By the time he arrives, David is in the garage, with the light on, washing the dog's blood off the fender. That gives Vandrak his idea—David won't be able to prove he hit a dog instead of a woman. So Vandrak goes back to where the accident occurred. There's the dead dog. And, let's say, Paula Vandrak is there too. So he kills her . . ."

"How, Elaine? Does he ask her to wait while he gets his car and runs her down?"

"George, you're ridiculing me."

"No, I'm not. But all this conjecture, Elaine, has to be able to stand up. The police doctor is quite sure Mrs. Vandrak's fatal injuries were the result of her having been hit by a car."

"Well, maybe Vandrak did it that way. But I don't think so. I think he killed her on the spot, right there in the road, by a blow of some kind, with something big—something

that would make it appear Paula *had* been hit by a car. That's a minor detail . . ."

"A minor detail? Elaine, it isn't!"

"Just let me finish, George. He killed Paula and he left her there, and he took the dog away. The dog hasn't been found since the accident, has it?"

"No, Vandrak claims the dog seems to have run away."

She stood up, the certainty burning in her now. "That's ridiculous," she said triumphantly. "That dog was as devoted to Vandrak as he was to it. It would never run away."

"We can't prove that, Elaine."

She walked to him. "George," she began very slowly, "if I could discover where Vandrak buried that dog, it would save David, wouldn't it?"

The lawyer nodded, but grudgingly. "I suggest we convince the police," he said, "that they look for the dog."

She smiled, because now she actually felt like smiling. "George, dear, most of this neighborhood is woods. The police aren't going to dig up all of it, are they? No, I'm the one for this. I've got to get Vandrak to lead me to the dog's grave."

Newell took her shoulders, and he really looked concerned. "Elaine, if Vandrak is a murderer, that could be dangerous."

"Don't you remember," she said, "Mr. Vandrak is very fond of me."

She stood in front of her full-length mirror, studying the reflection objectively. What she saw was good. Her blue eyes were bright, shining, showed no trace of sorrow or tears. Her black hair was tied back neatly with the blue scarf. Her skin had a healthful, outdoor glow. And her face was pretty besides. But it's that outdoor look about me that Vandrak must like, she decided. Paula had been definitely the hothouse variety, not the type to have any affection at all for Great Danes.

She buttoned the jacket of the corduroy suit. Her figure was right too. All the necessary curves, but at the same time lithe, athletic. Her legs looked just fine in the knee-length wool stockings, and even the walking shoes were feminine enough.

Forgive me, David, she told him silently, over the miles

of their separation. I'm dressing to please another man. A beast of a man at that. A murderer. But he's got to like me. It would even be convenient if he'd sort of fall in love with me.

She left the house, locking the front door behind her, and walked down the road. When she came to Vandrak's driveway, she turned in. The house itself, a small ranch type, appeared in a moment from behind the trees. A funeral wreath was hanging on the front door. She walked to the door and rang the bell.

No answer came. So she walked around the yard, making a full circuit of the house. She tried to make it appear casual, on the chance that Vandrak was lurking inside and was watching her. She didn't notice any sign of a fresh excavation. But she'd been almost certain there wouldn't be. He wouldn't have been foolish enough to bury the dog too close. When she finished her tour, she sat down on the front steps and waited.

It was half an hour later that Vandrak's car ascended the driveway. She stood up, smoothed out the wrinkles in her corduroy suit, watched him get out of the car and come toward the door, laden with what seemed to be a sack of groceries.

He stopped short of the door because she was blocking his entrance. He stood there for a moment, and then he said, "What do you want, Mrs. Karnes?"

He was a big man, but lean. His bigness was in his height, in the width of his shoulders, the length of his arms, the size of his hands. He was inclined toward hairiness, so that his jaws, even when freshly shaved, gave a dark look to his face. His heavy brows so overshadowed his pale, deep-set eyes that the eyes seldom gave any clue to what the man was thinking. She had never been afraid of him before, but now, in the certainty that he was a murderer, she was. It was her first job to keep from revealing her fear.

"I haven't seen you since the accident," she told him. "I wanted to talk to you. To tell you . . . how sorry I am . . ."

His eyes remained enigmatic. "That's very kind of you." Then he waited, staring fixedly at her till she had to look away. "Is that all, Mrs. Karnes?"

"Is there anything . . . anything at all . . . I can do?"

"I'm a very self-sufficient man, Mrs. Karnes."

She argued desperately. "But I want to help . . . somehow. I feel so guilty . . ."

"For what your husband did? Paula's dead, and there's nothing anybody can do about that."

There was sorrow in his face and in his voice, but she knew it was all hypocrisy. Like every good murderer, the man was a clever actor. Her acting would have to be better. And when it came to acting, a woman had a trick a man could never match. She could cry.

"Oh, Mr. Vandrak, I'm so sorry," she began, and she let the tears flow.

"Please, Mrs. Karnes . . ."

She sensed a sudden unsureness in him. Perhaps he felt something of the same attraction toward her that had prompted him to make advances on previous occasions. Or perhaps he was too business-like a murderer to let himself be distracted from his problem of self-preservation by a woman, and so was trying to get rid of her without knowing quite how to manage it.

But she mustn't let him manage it. If he was to lead her to the dog's grave, she had to stay close to him. She lifted her face so that he could see her tears. And she could actually see the unsureness in the man now.

"Please, Mrs. Karnes," he said again. "You'd better go home now."

"I can't bear to go home," she sobbed.

"I realize you must miss your husband . . ."

She acted on the inspiration the instant that it came. "I'm not concerned about him," she said savagely. "He's a beast, a murderer. I don't ever want to see him again . . . Never, never!"

The outburst took Vandrak by surprise. The tiniest of sparks lighted in his pale eyes. Vandrak wasn't a man who'd sacrifice or even risk much to possess any woman. Nor would he jeopardize his own scheme of murder for a woman's sake. But if a woman like Elaine practically threw herself at him . . .

"It's you I'm sorry for," she said, pressing her advantage. "I want to do something to make it up to you. Isn't there anything . . . ?"

He was interested, tempted, but he was still cautious. "Mrs. Karnes, I appreciate your sympathy. But you'd better stay away from me. I don't think people would understand . . ."

"I don't care about people!" she said obstinately.

The tears were flowing freely down her cheeks. She knew her own power of femininity, and she exerted it. She stood there, knowing she looked helpless, appealing, and wanted to look that way. The ripe plum ready to fall into his lap.

Why shouldn't he accept her? She saw the temptation working inside him. He was visibly torn by his uncertainty. The wild thought entered her mind that perhaps she'd been part of his motive for murdering his wife after all. The thought frightened her. She wanted to draw back.

But it was too late. One of his hands still held the sack of groceries, but the other one reached for her. She knew the man's tremendous strength from the instant of his first touch. With that one hand he drew her toward him. She fought the fear and loathing inside her, kept her face raised to him, steeling herself for what might have been his kiss.

But it never came to that. He must have tried to shift the sack of groceries so he could draw her close, and the sack slipped out of his grasp. It ripped, fell, and all of its contents scattered on the ground.

The occurrence startled both of them, and they drew apart instinctively. She looked down. The sack had contained groceries. A loaf of bread. Coffee. A few cans of vegetables. But the rest—most of it—was meat. Neatly wrapped white-paper packages of meat.

Vandrak's voice interrupted her before she could weigh the significance of what she saw. "You'd better go home, Mrs. Karnes," he said.

She looked up at him. His manner had changed completely. That temporary weakness in him that had made him try to embrace her had disappeared. His face was darker than ever, and his eyes were cold. Hatred emanated from him. Implacable, single-minded hatred.

"Let me help you with these . . ." She said it automatically, thoughtlessly.

"I don't need your help. I just want you to go."

She backed away from him. He followed her with his eyes, and the menace in his eyes was immediate, personal. She turned away, wanting to escape his gaze. But she felt it on her as she ran down the driveway, until the screen of trees separated them, finally, and she was back on the road again out of his sight.

She stopped there, out of breath. She wanted to cry real tears now, tears of frustration and defeat. She had tried to make friends with Vandrak and had failed. And all because when he'd tried to kiss her, he'd dropped a sack of groceries.

A sack of groceries which was mostly packages of meat . . .

That was when it came to her. A woman might shop that way, but a man never would. And certainly not a man who was so new at the job of taking care of such things himself. Vandrak hadn't shopped wisely, hadn't bought a big supply of meat at a sale or something, or to stock a freezer. That meat was needed for something . . . now.

The dog wasn't dead. There was no grave. The dog was alive. Hidden somewhere. And it had to be fed.

She hadn't gone home, as Vandrak had told her to do. She'd started walking down the road, but then she had detoured into the woods, and was headed slowly back to Vandrak's house.

It was fairly clear to her now. Pharoah was alive, and Vandrak loved the dog enough to try to keep it alive—even, perhaps, with some risk to himself. If he could keep the dog alive, heal its injuries, he could bring it home some time in the future and simply tell everyone that the prodigal had returned.

But meanwhile he had to keep it hidden. Not in his house. At least not yet. That would be too dangerous. What if the dog should make a noise when a policeman happened to be around? Nowhere on the immediate premises probably. Somewhere in the woods then. There were plenty of places in the woods.

So she'd had a choice to make. She could have notified either Detective Riconda or George Newell. That would have been the safest thing to do. But George couldn't search for the dog any better than she could. And Riconda, even if he were interested, could so easily bungle things with his direct policeman's approach. Then Vandrak would be alerted, would either move the dog farther away, or maybe even, in desperation, kill the dog himself and bury it.

So the best way and the quickest way was to watch Vandrak, and follow him to wherever the dog was hidden. Vandrak might be suspicious. All those packages of meat spilling on the ground had unnerved him. But Vandrak

was by no means certain that she knew what the meat signified. And he'd have to go to the dog. Because if he didn't, the dog would starve. So she had a chance of finding out where the dog was hidden. A fairly good chance.

And David's freedom depended on her.

She made her way through the wooded area carefully. Though it was still early spring, most of the trees and bushes were in leaf. Stealth and concealment were not too difficult. She worked her way slowly, finally came to within sight of Vandrak's house.

She only hoped he hadn't already gone after the dog. She could see that he'd picked up the groceries. And his car was still there. Possibly he was inside. So she found a spot where she could sit and watch the house and not be seen if Vandrak should suddenly come out. Then she waited.

Time passed. The thought occurred to her that Vandrak in all likelihood would wait till dark before starting out on his errand. She hoped not. She didn't want to try tracking him through the woods in darkness. She was afraid of him enough in daylight. But two hours went by without sight of him. The sun drooped low in the west. Within the woods dusk came early.

Then Vandrak appeared at the back door. He carried a small package, and he plunged swiftly into the woods toward the rear of the house. Fortunately, he'd worn a light tan jacket. It made him a bit easier to follow in the growing darkness.

She pursued him as fast as she dared. She made noise, but she was lighter and smaller than he was, and therefore made less than he did. She could only hope that the noise he was making would render him oblivious to all other sounds.

The tan jacket moved rapidly. Vandrak was an athlete, and these woods were familiar to him. Elaine had to run to keep up. Branches and thorns grabbed at her hair and her clothes, scratched, tore. She knew if she had to confront Vandrak again, she couldn't rely on attractiveness to assist her. Once she tripped and fell, and when she got up, she felt there must be blood on her face.

It seemed to go on forever, that chase. She had known these woods were extensive. She'd told George Newell they were big enough to discourage anyone from searching haphazardly for a grave. But she hadn't realized how big they were. It seemed she'd been running through them for

hours. She had no idea if there were any houses near, or where a road might be.

But just when she thought she'd reached the point of exhaustion, the tan object up ahead stopped moving. She halted her own headlong pace quickly, knowing that noise was dangerous now that Vandrak wasn't making any.

Vandrak was with his beloved Pharoah. And he'd be there for a little while, tending the dog's wounds, feeding him, comforting him probably. So she had time to move slowly, watching every step. The light in the woods was gray and misty now, though up in the tops of the trees there was the reddish glow of the setting sun.

It took her as much as five minutes to creep near enough to sight the tan jacket again. Vandrak was very close to her, actually, perhaps less than a hundred feet away. She hadn't seen him sooner because he was crouched down on the ground. She edged still closer, till she could see the dog too, just to make absolutely sure.

Her first thought was that she would never have found this place had she been searching alone. And a dozen policemen, for that matter, could have easily missed it. Vandrak had made the dog a shelter of branches and leaves that looked just like the rest of the underbrush. Pharoah lay under this crude roof motionless. She caught just the barest glimpse of his tawny coat. Most of him was swathed in bandages. But Vandrak had been clever enough not to use white cloth for bandages. They were of some dark color, dark green, she thought.

Vandrak was kneeling over the dog. She wasn't exactly sure what he was doing. But his voice came clearly enough. "Hurts, doesn't it, Pharoah? Poor old King of Egypt. Hurts real bad. I know it does. But it's going to be all right. I told you that, Pharoah. It's going to be all right."

And every once in awhile, punctuating the man's words, the dog answered with a soft whine, complaining, yet patient, affectionate. He was a hurt dog, a badly hurt dog.

What she had figured out for George Newell had been right or mighty close to right. Now they could prove that David's story had been the truth. He had hit a dog. And Vandrak would have to explain why he had lied and would have to account for what happened to his wife.

All she, Elaine, had to do now was wait there till Vandrak went home, try to identify this spot in the woods somehow, and then get to a telephone.

She was crouching there, comfortable in this thought, when Pharoah began to growl. She didn't understand at first what the growling meant. And neither apparently did Vandrak. He talked soothingly to the dog. Only after a minute or two did he stop trying to placate the dog and begin looking for the source of the disturbance.

Elaine also knew that the dog had growled because he had sensed an alien presence. She stayed where she was, holding herself perfectly still. She couldn't outrun Vandrak. She would have to outwait him. She was concealed behind a screen of underbrush, her clothes were dark, and the sun was almost gone. So perhaps he wouldn't see her.

But Vandrak also must have been aware of the near approach of darkness, and that if he were being spied upon, he'd have to find the spy quickly. Spurred by Pharoah's ever more insistent growls, he started to search. The direction in which the dog was looking was the direction he took, and it was leading him almost straight to Elaine.

Halfway to her, he hesitated. She held her breath, hoping that he was giving up. But Pharoah barked. It was a low, weak sound, not the full-throated roar of which the dog was capable. Vandrak was urged on by it. He halved the distance again that was between him and Elaine, and then he stopped a second time. He was looking right at her.

"Well, Mrs. Karnes, what do you think you've found?"

She was certain from his tone that he wasn't bluffing. If she stayed where she was, it might anger him. If she tried to run, he'd pursue her. She did the only thing that was left. She stood up and walked toward him.

"I've found the missing dog," she said, and her voice was surprisingly clear, confident. "My husband's car did hit a dog after all, didn't it, Mr. Vandrak?"

"That's right, Mrs. Karnes," Vandrak said. He was standing in shadow, and she couldn't see his eyes.

"Which means he didn't hit your wife, Mr. Vandrak." She was only a few steps from him now, and she stopped.

"That's right again, Mrs. Karnes. I killed Paula."

"You confess then?"

"Sure. Sure I do. Out here where nobody but you can hear me."

His body was tense, and she knew her danger. But she had to brazen it out. "When the police find the dog," she reminded him, "they'll know the truth too."

"If the police find him, Mrs. Karnes. But they're neither as clever nor as interested as you." He grinned, wide enough for her to see. And then he sprang.

She tried to avoid him, but he was too quick. He bore her to the ground under the weight of his body. She had no chance to kick, only to claw with her nails. She did this as his hands found her throat. Her breathing was cut off, and a blackness not of the night descended on her.

Then she heard Pharoah barking.

And it was as if the dog were speaking to his master. As if commanded to, Vandrak loosened his grip on her throat. But he stayed where he was, and she awoke again to the sight of his face inches above her own, and the hot wind of his labored breathing falling on her face.

"Thanks, Pharoah," she heard him say. "You're right, old king. This would have been a mistake."

Then he looked down at her. In the semi-darkness, his pale eyes gleamed like an animal's. "That's one smart dog," he said. "If I choked you to death, I'd have to bury you somewhere around here. And they'd search for a missing woman, though they wouldn't for a dog."

She didn't ask him what his alternate scheme was.

But he told her. "I guess you're going to have to be killed by a hit-and-run-driver like my wife was."

She felt the weight of his body leave her suddenly, and then she herself was rudely jerked to a standing position. Instinctively, she opened her mouth to scream. Vandrak struck her across the face with his open hand, jarring her scream into silence before it could be completely uttered. Pharoah barked enthusiastically, ecstatically, Elaine thought.

"Hush, Pharoah," the man said. He turned to her. "Don't try screaming any more, or I'll hurt you real bad. Now we're going to the road."

She was too weak to walk. He dragged her. He was strong, for he could manage her weight even though deliberately she gave him no help. With her body useless, her mind raced. How was he going to make it appear that she'd been killed by a car? Certainly she wouldn't stand conveniently in the road until a car came by. But he'd managed it with Paula, she thought suddenly.

Behind them, and receding, Pharoah was still barking. Vandrak stopped once and, looking back, called out, "Shut

up! You hear me? Shut up!" But the dog's barking continued to pursue them from a ever-increasing distance.

In the woods it was almost completely dark now. But up ahead Elaine saw dusky light where the woods ended. That was the road. She didn't recognize it. Vandrak must have chosen to come out at a place that was unfamiliar to her, perhaps a place farthest from any human habitation. Fifty feet or so short of the road he stopped and looked around.

She'd saved her breath, having let him drag her as dead weight. Now she would fight him, she decided, to the last. If she could break loose for just one second, she might elude him, now that the woods were dark.

Vandrak held her by both her arms, cruelly hard, his heavy, enormous hands crushing into her soft flesh. But he made no move. Instead, he seemed to be listening. While he listened a car went by, a dim blur on the road, a quick surge of sound fading quickly again into silence.

One of Vandrak's hands shifted, went to Elaine's throat. But he didn't try to choke her. He exerted only enough pressure to remind her that he could choke her. He laughed softly, and there was a hint of madness in his laugh.

"It worked with Paula," he whispered savagely. "The police doctors were fooled completely. I hit her, you see, right on the jaw. No marks of choking on the throat. Just a solid blow on the jaw, enough to stun her, you see. And then I took her legs and swung her around and smashed her against a tree trunk. One big blow, you see. Just one blow like a car hitting her . . ."

The horror of what he had revealed galvanized all her energy. She kicked and fought furiously until she was free, falling over backward onto the ground. He leaped for her, found the cloth of her jacket. But she rolled to one side, leaving him with cloth in his hand. She was halfway to her feet when he found her again. They wrestled together. An immense pain grabbed at her shoulder. She had only one thought now. If he kills me, I want them to know he did it with his own hands . . . I don't want him to go free . . . and then they'll know too that David isn't a killer . . .

She didn't hear the voices or see the beams of the flashlights—and probably Vandrak didn't either—until the men had almost converged upon them. Then she managed one scream before Vandrak struck her.

Lying in the hospital bed, she was told everything.

She was bruised, terribly so, but nothing more serious. George Newell had gotten worried after their talk together, phoned her in the afternoon, received no answer. Finally, he went to Vandrak's house, found the car there and the man gone. He phoned the police. But nobody knew where to look until the dog started barking. Even then, they'd been just in time.

It was David who told her all this. Very concerned about her. Very grateful. Very happy to be free.

MURDER AND LONELY HEARTS

HELEN NIELSEN

HERBERT GIBSON was the last man who would have been suspected of wanting to kill his wife. He was the prototype of the good citizen: he belonged to the local Chamber of Commerce, two service organizations, the Athletic Club—which he hadn't visited in ten years and thirty pounds—and attended church every Easter, Christmas, and Mother's Day. The latter was a concession to Irene (Mrs. Gibson) who, in their twenty-six years of marriage, had mothered three cocker spaniels and a French poodle.

On the surface, the Gibson marriage was a happy one. None of their neighbors on Acacia Lane, that suburban paradise for the middle income group, could say anything against them. They were a quiet, conservative couple in their mid-forties, who kept their house painted, their two Chevrolets polished, and their lawns clipped and green, which was a matter of great significance on Acacia Lane. Residents of long tenure might have noted, had their memories been equally green, that Herbert Gibson had worn a somewhat bitter expression when he began walking the earliest cocker spaniel; but with succeeding years and successive spaniels this expression had gradually altered to resignation, benign resignation and finally, by the time Irene switched to the poodle, a kind of absent-minded serenity which, in the latter months, approached nirvana.

There was, however, nothing absent-minded about the manner in which Herbert conducted his business. He was a C.P.A.—twenty-five years in the same location: Room 408 Handley Building. It was an old building. The offices were small, dingy, but inexpensive, and Herbert saw no object in

providing luxurious surroundings merely for the purpose of telling clients how much they owed the government. Irene, who wasn't interested in business, was vaguely aware that he went off somewhere or other everyday to do something or other, for which he received a fairly adequate income.

Herbert wasn't ambitious. If he occasionally felt a vague stirring or uneasiness within, he stopped off at the drug-store for a bicarbonate and forgot about it. But that was before Rodney Dumbarton, Business Management, moved into the adjoining office. Whatever business Dumbarton managed was none of Herbert's—they met only on occasions when the postman erred as to his choice of mail slots—until the day his neighbor departed mere minutes ahead of the police. It developed that Mr. Dumbarton had managed to collect substantial sums of money from clients for services never rendered, a practice considered anti-social in law enforcement circles.

The fact that he'd been in contact with an absconded criminal was one of the most exciting things that had ever happened to Herbert. He tried to share the experience with Irene at dinner, but anything pertaining to his business bored Irene. All he had to say was—

"An interesting thing happened at the office today,"

—and her face, never really attentive, took on an expression of complete remoteness. She stirred her asparagus with a fork and stared over the top of Herbert's slightly balding head.

"I'm getting awfully tired of that Currier and Ives over the mantel," she remarked.

Herbert tried again.

"Mr. Dumbarton, next door to me, left just ahead of the police. He was mixed up in the darndest—"

"I think it's the snow I dislike," Irene added. "It's so cold looking."

"—scheme," Herbert said. "He'd distributed a lot of phoney advertising for something called a 'Friendship Cruise.' Here, I brought one of his brochures home with me."

Irene paid no more heed to the brochure than she had to Herbert.

"The room needs more color."

"His idea was to get unmarried men and women corresponding with one another through his office and then sell

them passage on one of his cruises. It was a sort of floating lonely hearts club."

Herbert paused, smiling at his own feeble attempt at humor. Finally, Irene did look at him.

"Herbert," she said, "eat your lamb chop. Celeste is waiting for the bone. She's been very patient."

Herbert sighed and put the brochure down on the table. The conversation had gone the way of all their conversations; Irene hadn't heard a word he'd said.

With no one to talk to, Herbert soon forgot about Rodney Dumbarton and his extravagant scheme until one morning a week later when he was going through the morning mail and came across the following letter:

Friendship Cruises, Inc.

Dear Sir:

I am writing in response to your interesting brochure only because you sound as if you are a highly respectable organization and would have a highly respectable clientele . . .

At this point Herbert realized the postman had erred again, and that he had compounded the postman's error with his letter opener; but two typewritten stationery sheets remained, and curiosity got the better of virtue. He continued:

. . . This is very important to me as I am a respectable lady, over thirty, who has never traveled abroad, and the idea of getting acquainted with someone on shipboard before sailing seems wonderful.

You suggest a brief autobiography and information on my likes and dislikes. There really isn't much to tell about me. I make my living from tax accounting; but I would prefer companionship with someone in some other kind of work, preferably a writer or an artist, but most of all someone who is an interesting conversationalist. I would love to have someone to talk to.

It is difficult to say what I like to do, because I've never had time to do it and find out. I can only tell you what I've always dreamed of doing if I ever went abroad. Most of all, I want to go to Paris. I want to visit the Louvre and see the famous paintings, and visit Notre Dame cathedral and see the Rose Window,

and sit at one of those little tables outside a sidewalk cafe and have whatever people have at sidewalk cafes. I even want to take the elevator to the top of the Eiffel Tower!

I suppose I sound just like the typical tourist, but I will be waiting to hear from any of your clients whom you think might be interested in knowing me.

Respectfully,

Sylvia Sagan

Box 1477, City

P.S. I am a blonde with hazel eyes and have what my friends tell me is a good figure.

What had started as curiosity blossomed into astonishment by the time Herbert finished reading the letter. Was there actually such a woman as Sylvia Sagan? *I would love to have someone to talk to.* The words had a poignant quality that aroused Herbert's sympathy. *It's difficult to say what I'd like to do, because I've never had time to do it and find out.* At this point the writer placed a mirror to Herbert's soul. He raised his eyes. The door to his office stood open. The gold lettering, chipped with the passing years, told him his identity: Herbert Gibson, Certified Public Accountant. Somewhere in the city was another office: Sylvia Sagan, Tax Accountant. It might even be very much like his own—one desk, two chairs, a water cooler in the corner, and a calendar on the wall with a picture of puppies at play.

Herbert's eyes followed the direction of his thoughts and suddenly came to an arresting halt. The calendar didn't have a picture of puppies at play, Irene's perennial selection; it had a picture of a sea coast—and a wild one at that! And then he remembered why he'd done the choosing this year. There were two lines underneath the picture that had struck his fancy:

"I must go down to the sea
again,

To the lonely sea and the
sky—"

They were from a poem he'd memorized in High School English. He'd been darned good at English, come to think of it. He'd written several A compositions and tried his hand

at a few short stories before he married Irene. *I would prefer companionship with someone in some other kind of work, preferably a writer . . .* Herbert reined in his imagination and replaced the letter in its envelope. He would return it to the sender, of course, with a note of explanation the first time he had a few minutes to spare.

And that is exactly what he would have done, if Irene's brother Lennie hadn't been parked in his favorite chair in front of the television when he got home that night.

Lennie was a problem. He had won a Purple Heart in World War II and was still bleeding. He was getting a bit old to be a member of the Lost Generation; and anyhow, Lennie wasn't lost. He just didn't know what had become of everybody else. He did, however, know the way to Herbert's house whenever he was in need, and his unheralded appearance precipitated another fruitless conversation.

"I suppose Lennie's lost his job again," Herbert said to Irene irritably.

"You didn't even notice the new picture I bought for over the mantel," Irene said to Herbert.

"Or is his wound bothering him again—that knicked finger he got on the target range in Georgia?"

"I think the coloring is much nicer, don't you?"

"Hang it all, Irene, you know how he monopolizes the television, and this is my night for Foreign Escapade!"

"It's a genuine reproduction of a genuine Matisse, Herbert. Just think, a genuine Matisse!"

Herbert took Celeste for a walk.

It was a foggy night, and he almost enjoyed walking Celeste on a foggy night. She was less conspicuous and so was Acacia Lane. The houses of the neighbors—the Meekers, the Swansons, Dr. Pettigrew—were just so many dim forms behind the mist; and with a little imagination the street could become the Limehouse District, or a coastal town in Normandy, or any other place where mystery stalked the shadows.

"Who is Silvia, who is she

That all her swains commend her . . . ?"

He hadn't thought of those lines since he was courting Irene and they sang them together at her mother's upright. It seemed impossible now that they had ever done anything together. To Irene he was just a man who walked the dog, while Lennie watched television. What kind of a man would

he be, if he'd ever had time to do what he wanted to do? A letter began to write itself in his mind.

Dear Miss Sagan,

Your letter has been forwarded to me by Friendship Cruises. I must say that it is a very interesting letter with certain passages that lead me to believe we have much in common. Oddly enough, we're in almost the same business—

No, the last sentence wouldn't do. Sylvia wanted to correspond with someone in a different field, preferably a writer or an artist. Herbert made a mental erasure.

Oddly enough, in view of your request, I am a writer of short stories. Not a very successful one, I'm afraid; but then, like yourself, I've never had anyone I could really talk to or have share my dreams. That's important, don't you think? To know someone who cares about what you are doing—who believes in you and wants to be a part of your life?

Your ideas on travel are charming, Miss Sagan; but not nearly as charming, I'm sure, as you must be. I hope you will honor me by acknowledging this letter and telling me more about yourself.

Respectfully Yours—

Herbert Gibson didn't sound proper at the end of the letter any more than the letter sounded like Herbert Gibson. It was more in the style of Rodney Dumbarton's romantic brochure. His name hadn't appeared anywhere on the piece—still, he wanted something crisper.

Respectfully Yours,
Rodney Barton

That was better. Celeste stopped and Herbert stopped. A shapely blonde emerged out of the fog and walked past them. Herbert stared, remembering a postscript and adding it to his own mental missile.

P.S. I am a little past 40. I have light brown hair, blue eyes, and work out regularly at the Athletic Club.

It was only a letter in his mind, but it was astonishing how much satisfaction it gave him. It wouldn't be fair to actually write it. Or would it? It wasn't as if there really were a cruise. What harm could one letter do? He might give the poor woman a bright day in her drab little office with the water cooler and the calendar on the wall. He wouldn't have to risk exposure by using his own address; he could take a Post Office box . . .

The fog gave Herbert daring, but it was Lennie who gave him decision. He returned to the house just in time for Foreign Escapade. Lennie was watching wrestling.

"My gosh, Herbie, what do you want with that kid stuff? Watch this now! Abdullah's got a sleeper hold on the Cowboy. Ride 'em Cowboy!"

Herbert unsnapped Celeste's leash and went upstairs. Irene was in her bedroom reading a novel. She didn't so much as look up when he came to the door.

"I just want to borrow your typewriter to write a letter," he said.

She didn't answer, naturally.

The correspondence between Rodney Barton and Sylvia Sagan began innocently enough. It was all very well to write one letter and then terminate the correspondence, but why just one letter? As long as nothing could come of it anyway, what harm could be done? Herbert needed some entertainment now that Lennie had settled down with the television.

And certain things demanded an answer.

" . . . I can tell by your letter, Mr. Barton, that you are a very interesting person. You must meet fascinating people in your work, and I'm flattered that you would even think of writing to me. You've no idea how dull my life is! How I, too, long for someone to share my dreams!

Have you decided definitely on the cruise? I still want to visit Paris, but there's also Rome . . ."

P.S. I'm enclosing a recent snapshot. It's not very good, but it will give you some idea of what I'm like."

The snapshot wasn't very good—Sylvia was too far from the camera to give any distinct features to her face. But it had been taken on a beach, and although the bathing suit might have been a little out of fashion—Herbert wasn't an expert on such matters—the contents were ar-

ranged in a quite satisfactory way. This troubled him. He'd written to her only out of the kindness of his heart to give the poor woman something to dream on a bit longer. Why was her life so dull? And then he read the letter again. ". . . you are a very interesting person . . ." Perhaps that was true. Perhaps all he needed was for someone to hold up the mirror and let him see himself for what he could be. That might be the case with Sylvia, too. There could be no harm in one more letter.

Dear Miss Sagan,

Do you really imagine that my life is exciting, or that I have met anyone more interesting than you? Your letters are like a breath of fresh air on a stifling day. What a marvelous thing to have found a woman who is interesting and interested in others.

It would be criminal to go abroad and not visit the Eternal City. I would love to be able to escort you through the galleries, the cathedrals and the old ruins.

Incidentally, have you ever been married? I ask only because your snapshot makes it seem incredible that you were not.

Cordially,
Rodney

P.S. May I call you Sylvia?

The postscript was accidental; it seemed to write itself. This wasn't turning out at all the way Herbert intended. He had the vague sensation of being sucked into a whirlpool, but he mailed the letter anyway.

Dear Rodney,

You're right, we must be honest with one another. Yes, I have been married—unhappily. I hope you won't be angry with me, for not having told you of this sooner; but I did want to make your acquaintance, and was afraid you would think me forward. After all, the past is the past, don't you agree? When two people have so much in common they should enjoy one another and no questions asked.

Have you thought of Spain?

Dearest Sylvia,

I think of nothing but Spain—and you! But now I,

too, must make a confession. It was only by accident that I opened your first letter. You see, I work in an office adjoining Friendship Cruises and received it by mistake when the company went out of business several weeks ago. I meant only to return your letter with an explanation of why it had been opened, but you sounded like someone I wanted to know. I realize that I shouldn't have continued this long without telling you the truth, but I hope we are close enough friends now that you can forgive.

There are no Friendship Cruises, Sylvia dear, but there are still friendships that sometimes become life voyages. We can escape the hum-drum world. Fortunately, I have a little property. . . .

It was madness. Even as he posted the letter, Herbert knew that Irene would never consent to a divorce, and even if she did they would have to divide the property. The house was clear and would realize a nice profit, but half of that profit, less court fees . . . and he might not even get half if Irene learned about Sylvia! No, it was stark madness. It was what happened to a man after having his wife's brother planted in front of the television for six weeks. But he couldn't put all the blame on Lennie. There was still that stormy sea-scape on the calendar—the omen. And now everything hinged on Sylvia's answer. Perhaps she wouldn't answer. The thought came with both pain and relief, for even then Herbert knew what he really had in mind.

Sylvia did answer.

Rod, my dearest,

How can I be so lucky? Or was it only luck? Do you believe in Fate? Now I can tell you how timid I was about writing to Friendship Cruises. Their brochure made everything sound so wonderful, and I was simply dying of loneliness; but I was afraid of the type of person who might answer their offer. Now I don't have to be afraid because you weren't even a client. I suppose it's cruel of me, but I'm really happy the company went out of business.

You write that you have a little property you could dispose of. So have I. It may take a few weeks to

liquidate my holdings, but I've waited a lifetime. A few weeks longer won't kill me . . .

The language of Sylvia's letter was almost brutal. What had started as an innocent prank, had reached an irrevocable conclusion: Irene had to go.

But how? Herbert had never contemplated murder—in spite of Lennie's visits. How many means were there? Irene looked at him suspiciously when she found him tampering with the kitchen window. And he decided a faked robbery and shooting wouldn't work anyway. Irene was annoyed when he managed to bump into her a few times at the head of the stairs. That sort of thing was much too risky, really. The fall might not kill her. He'd be in a worse position than ever then, with an invalid on his hands. The axe in the garage was out of the question. Herbert always felt nauseous at the sight of blood.

The solution, unexpectedly, came from Irene herself.

"The rose bushes are getting a blight," she remarked over the breakfast table.

Herbert was deep in his problem.

"You're putting on a little weight, Irene," he said. "Why don't you do something for exercise—horseback riding, for instance?"

"Horseback?" It was the first time she'd heard him in years. "You know I'm terrified of horses. I was thrown when I was a girl."

"I know, but I don't think you should go through life being afraid of anything. I'll go with you."

Irene stared at him strangely. She'd been staring at him strangely ever since the window episode.

"I am afraid of nothing," she said firmly, "except the blight on the roses. Are you listening to me, Herbert? I want you to stop off and buy some arsenic—"

Herbert was listening.

"—and while you're about it, pick up a bottle of wine for dinner. It's Lennie's birthday."

"Wine?" Herbert echoed.

Irene's voice softened.

"I know it's an extravagance, Herbert, but I want the dinner to be something special. I didn't tell you before, but Lennie's leaving soon. This may be the last time we're all together on his birthday."

Irene had become a prophetess.

Arsenic and wine—the classic means of murder. There was still a matter of mechanics to work out. But when the fates were with you, what could go wrong? Herbert sat in his office and listened to the surf pounding on the rocky shore in the calendar picture—the omen. Now he understood what had been happening to him when he chose that calendar—happening long before he'd heard of Friendship Cruises or gone walking Celeste in the fog. Sylvia had only roused the dormant senses; he really was Rodney Barton—always had been. He had only been slumbering all through the years and now he was awakening.

And Rodney Barton could do anything. Arsenic and wine . . . he needed a small container. He left his office and walked down a flight to the dentist in 304. He complained of a toothache he didn't have, and then returned to his own office with a small bottle of oil of cloves which he promptly dumped down the drain. The small bottle was what he needed.

At noon, Herbert went out for lunch and stopped at the gardening shop where he'd traded for years. They made up a special arsenic solution of their own that came bottled, boxed, wrapped in paper and sealed with a strip of gummed advertising tape. The tape was never very tight. As soon as he left the shop, Herbert peeled off the strip being careful not to tear it, and returned to his office. There he managed to unwrap the bottle without damaging the paper or the box and—careful not to get his fingerprints on the bottle—transferred a small portion of the contents into the empty oil of cloves bottle. That done, he re-wrapped the bottle, retaped the seal—with the aid of the office mucilage—and surveyed his work with smug satisfaction. He knew Irene. She opened every package the moment it was placed in her hands; only her fingerprints would be on the arsenic.

He envisioned himself, shocked and grief-stricken, telling the police how Irene had asked him to buy the arsenic and the wine, and he, in all innocence, had done so without realizing the dark significance of her parting words:

"This may be the last time we're all together . . ."

Suicide was much more tragic than an accident. The neighbors would see nothing strange in a quick sale of the property so he could get away from bitter memories—away to Spain, warm and exciting with dark-eyed beauties danc-

ing in the sunlight, and Sylvia, of course. Sylvia who really understood him—and if it turned out that she didn't, there were always the dark-eyed beauties. Herbert leaned back in his chair, and, for the first time in his life, put his feet up on his desk. He was going to enjoy being Rodney Barton.

On birthdays, holidays, and festive occasions, Irene used candles on the table. Herbert counted on that and wasn't disappointed. For contemplated slight of hand, the less light the better. He didn't open the wine bottle. Lennie was more proficient at that art, and the search for a corkscrew took him safely off to the kitchen. Irene—to whom Herbert had given the arsenic, and who ripped the covering from the bottle in order to make certain he hadn't made a stupid mistake and bought the wrong preparation, was busy with her dinner. There was plenty of time during one of her absences from the room to transfer a few drops of poison from the small bottle in his pocket to the wine glass in front of her plate. It was a colorless liquid—not noticeable in the candlelight.

It was done. Herbert replaced the bottle in his pocket and stepped back from the table. Strange how he could hear that surf on the rocks again—louder than it had been before. It was actually done. It wasn't something dreamed up on a foggy night's walk; it wasn't something lurking in the back of his mind as he typed out mad letters to Sylvia. And they were mad letters. He realized that now with a sudden, sharp clarity that came like a lifting of the fog. Who was Sylvia? Who was she to make Herbert Gibson a murderer? No, not Herbert. It was Rodney who had done it—Rodney Barton.

"Herbert—Herbert, do sit down. We're waiting for you."

Herbert looked up, startled. He hadn't even heard Irene and Lennie come into the room, and there they were seated at the table ready to begin dinner. Lennie was pouring the wine.

"Wait, Lennie—" Irene said. "I think there's something in this glass."

He saw her hand reach out—but to his glass, not to hers.

"Dust," she said. "I was sure that I washed out those glasses."

Irene left the table, glass in hand, and in a moment there

was the sound of the faucet running in the kitchen. And it was then Herbert became aware of a terrible loss: Rodney Barton was gone! He couldn't go through with it; he simply didn't have the nerve. But Lennie was still pouring wine. Irene's glass was full—blood red and full. He had to get that glass somehow; but she returned too soon. Lennie filled Herbert's glass. It was time for the toast. Herbert's hand was trembling as he reached forward. If there was nothing short of snatching the poisoned drink from Irene's hand, he'd have to do just that. And then he thought of a way.

"Celeste!" he said sharply. "Where's Celeste? We have to get the whole family in on this."

When Celeste bounded up to the table, there was a momentary distraction, one just long enough for Herbert to switch glasses with Irene. They could proceed with the festivities then—Herbert so shaken from his brush with homicide, he nearly forgot himself and drank along with the others. Just in time, he realized what he was doing and made a splendid job of spilling the contents of his glass all over the damask cloth.

"Herbert, what have you done?"

The voice of a shrew, but music to his ears. Irene's glass was empty and she could still berate him.

"You've spilled your wine, you clumsy fool! You've spilled it all!"

Sheer music. Herbert made his way to the kitchen, for a towel, and Irene's chosen phrases followed him all the way. He didn't care. She could scold for the rest of their days just as long as he could hear her voice. And then it stopped. He listened, but the voice didn't come again—only the thud.

When Dr. Pettigrew and the policeman came down the stairs, Herbert was sitting in his chair with his face buried in his hands. He pulled the hands away slowly and looked up at them with haggard eyes. Lennie was with them, too, standing a few steps behind. He held something in his hands.

"I don't know what happened," Herbert said vaguely. "I just don't know—"

"It was arsenic poisoning," the policeman said. "One sniff of the glass was enough to convince me, and the doctor agrees. Your wife died of arsenic poisoning."

"But she couldn't have! I spilled—"

Dr. Pettigrew stepped forward and placed a restraining hand on his shoulder.

"Take it easy, Mr. Gibson. I know how you feel. This is incredible to me, too. Why, I've known you and Irene for years. I was just telling the sergeant, here, that I couldn't imagine what could get into a woman to do what she did."

"What *she* did?"

Pettigrew's face was grave.

"You've got to brace yourself, Herbert. Irene put the arsenic in the wine. We know that because Lennie tells us she'd been after him for days to buy it, but he never got around to it. I suppose she thought she could count on her own brother to cover for her. And tonight at the table, she found an excuse to take your glass out to the kitchen, didn't she? And when you spilled your wine, she was terribly upset, wasn't she? Don't you see, Herbert? Somehow or another Irene made a mistake with the glasses, but the poisoned drink was meant for you."

"For me?" Herbert echoed. "But why—?"

Three faces looked at him with varying degrees of pity, and then Lennie handed him a package of letters.

"We found these in Irene's room," he said. "Read them and you'll know why."

But Herbert didn't have to read the letters. The address was sufficient: Sylvia Sagan, Box 4770, City.

"Mr. Gibson! Mr. Gibson, are you all right?"

Herbert looked up with the eyes of a small boy trying to comprehend. Celeste, the French poodle, the Matisse over the mantel, the brochure he'd left on the dining table. Slowly, he understood.

"She wanted someone to talk to," he said.

TO AVOID A SCANDAL

TALMAGE POWELL

MY DEAR FELLOW, it's all perfectly simple and clear. I detest discussing such a gory thing, but I must do so. Otherwise, I fear you'll receive your only knowledge of the episode from those lurid newspaper accounts, which are written for scandal-hungry human animals of the lowest order. I shudder even to reflect upon the workings of such minds. And I should rather die than endure scandal.

This attitude of mine is the result of generations of breeding, I assure you. It is as much a part of me as the cells of my blood. I trace my ancestry back two hundred years on this continent. From that time—until the present moment—scandal has never touched my family. I come from a line of college professors and doctors, on my father's side, and social workers and genteel poets on my mother's. I was taught the appreciation of the finer things quite young. My dear mother impressed upon me that the family name I bore, Croyden, was a cherished possession which I must never sully.

The accident, you say? You saw the picture in the paper of my little wife lying on the concrete completely destroyed? Really, I feel a trifle faint just thinking of that picture. I fail to see why the photographer put such great store by it. Some things, I maintain, are simply not meant for the public eye.

I shall tell you about the accident, and it was all an accident from start to finish. You have my word, sir, the word of a Croyden. But first you must see how simple and clear it all really was.

Now I've already told you something about my background. With a little exercise of the imagination you can see my home, where everything was in perfect taste, where my mother played Chopin and Schubert on the grand piano.

I didn't take to the piano, as she had hoped I would. I couldn't imagine myself a pianist, because I never could have exposed myself to public view.

Even had I forced myself, I could never have been a good pianist. It was my nature to be too precise. I was precise in everything. I, from earliest years, always tied my shoes so the laces were exactly even, hung my trousers with the creases just so. Our maid used to complain that my room didn't look like a child's room at all. In fact, said she, you'd never know anyone lived in it. She was, of course, a big, blousy woman who lost her temper every now and then. I supposed she was none too bright and felt rather sorry for her.

While I was attending college, my dear parents died within six months of each other. They did it gently, in their beds, in excellent taste, without ostentation.

When the estate was settled, I found I must seek employment rather than continue my education. There was a very fine, old banking family in our town whose roots went deeply in the history of our section. I was fortunate enough to secure employment with them as a bookkeeper.

I loved my job. I ached with delight over the rows of precise figures. The months and years rolled rapidly away. As I advanced I was very careful about those whom I eventually came to employ. Scandal of a personal nature would reflect against the bank. I was careful never to hire anyone without background and breeding. I tried to seek out those like myself, though it was not always easy.

I had never given much thought to women. I was content to dote over my rows of figures, to live in my orderly apartment where not even a stickpin was out of place, and to indulge my hobbies. I had two such diversions. I collected stamps and I worked ciphers.

The only woman who ever interested me was Althea. A gentle, quiet slip of a thing, I met her at my employer's home one evening when I had gone there for some overtime work. She served us tea when the task was finished, and she gave me a gentle smile. She was not beautiful in the

usual sense, but I found her most attractive. She had a small, quiet face, soft blue eyes, and dark brown hair. She was my employer's cousin.

Althea and I experienced a brief courtship. We dined together quietly. We sat in my employer's home of an evening and watched the better TV shows. We took in a concert. We strolled in the park on a Sunday afternoon.

My poor hobbies suffered from all this lack of attention. I had no less than five codes to which I had given no attention. In the drawing room of my employer's home, I asked Althea to marry me.

She threw her arms about my neck and squealed. She kissed me wetly. She wept. I was taken aback. It was so unlike her. Seeing the strange new animation in her eyes, I felt hesitant.

She accepted my proposal very quickly.

As I walked home, I was so taken up with the problem of whether or not I had acted wisely that I forgot to stop for my evening newspaper. I knew there were depths in people that different circumstances sometimes bring to light, and I had glimpsed a new Althea this evening. A bit animal, a bit too vivacious for good taste.

However, before I could gracefully withdraw my proposal, she had announced the engagement. What dreadful scandal had I called it off then! So we went through with the wedding, quietly, with only her immediate family and a very few friends present.

We set up housekeeping in my apartment. From the first moment I knew that it was not going to work. Her habits were despicable. She appeared for breakfast in a flimsy negligee over her pajamas. She shopped without a list of purchases to be made. She was often as much as thirty minutes late with dinner. She was definitely not the gentle, timid Althea that I thought I had married.

And she was entirely too foolish and ignorant to understand my hobbies. She took no interest in them. She was jealous of them.

I felt like a desperate man at bay, sir. No longer was the apartment a beckoning climax to each perfect day at my place of employment. I felt as if I had been expelled from a wonderful dream of life to a nightmare caricature of life. What could I do? To what haven could I flee? There was none, sir, and I became utterly miserable.

At the bank, naturally, I kept up a graceful front. No

other course ever occurred to me. So far as any of them knew, everything in my life was still perfect.

I considered the matter more and more gravely. And the afternoon she destroyed my codes, I knew I could endure it no longer.

I could hear her humming as I approached the apartment door. I closed my eyes and leaned against the wall for a moment of weariness. Then I opened the door, and stood speechless, riven to the spot with repugnance.

The apartment was up-ended, with new furniture all over the place. It smote my eyes. It lashed against my brain. Such furniture, in bright colors and garish modern design.

"Hello, darling," she lilted "How do you like—?"

"What ever are you doing, Althea?" I asked in a controlled voice.

"Why, I'm re-doing the apartment, darling," she said.

"I see," I said.

I stumbled toward the little room I'd so long ago—in that other beautiful lifetime—fixed into a den. I assure you that the blood vessels in my head almost burst when I reached the door of the den. Her horrible depredations had reached even there! Gone was my beloved desk, gone my walnut book shelves neatly stacked with ciphers.

"Althea, Althea," I demanded of her, "what have you done here?"

"Why, I'm lightening up the place a bit, darling. That old fashioned lamp you had wasn't good for the eyes and the furniture was positively depressing."

"And my codes?"

"Those old papers?" she said. "Oh, I threw them out, dear. Are you ill, Horace?"

Of course I was. In a way she would never know, could never understand. I staggered away from the door of the den, shook off her arm. Her touch was revolting. I wished I had never seen her. I wished she would just vanish—like a puff of vile smoke in an otherwise perfect day.

"Perhaps you'd better lie down, darling," I heard her say.

I looked up at her. Somehow I'd sat down in the living room on one of the horrid striped chairs.

"No," I said coolly, "I'm feeling quite well now."

"You're sure?"

"I wouldn't have said it unless I were!" I retorted.

She rattled on, until I thought her voice would drive me over the brink of madness.

There was a little balcony outside the apartment. I had never used it. Now, as she chirped on, she picked up four thin pillows with plastic coverings.

"Open the door for me, Horace?" she said, holding the pillows with both arms.

As I opened the double doors leading to the balcony, I saw that she had furnished it with a round wrought iron table and four matching chairs. The pillows were for the chairs, of course.

I remember that I glanced overhead. A jet plane, very high and leaving a vapor trail, was glinting like a silver speck in the rays of the late sun. From far below came the muted sounds of the city. To my right, I saw a few cars on the street and a newsboy on the sidewalk.

Everything outside was so normal. But my world was gone. And I knew it could be restored in only one way.

She had finished putting the pillows on the chairs. She stood back to appraise the balcony's altered appearance. She was quite close to the rail.

It was four stories down, to a concrete alley.

I strolled over beside her.

Then I grabbed her and threw her over.

Her thin, scream cut her away from life. From me. From the terrible ruin she had brought to my life.

Dear me, the joyous sense of relief I experienced! Of course, I couldn't let it be apparent. I had a part to play now, but I knew I could get through the trying days that were sure to come because the reward would be so great. I could hold on because afterwards the apartment would be as if she had never been in it. Once again it would be orderly and neat. My life would be beautiful.

I rushed into the hallway with a hoarse cry. Several doors opened, framing the staring faces of neighbors.

"My poor wife," I moaned. "She has fallen. From the balcony . . ."

Then I collapsed.

They carried me into the apartment. They patted my face with water. They yelled instructions at each other. Get a doctor. Get an ambulance. Call the police. How senselessly ineffectual they were! It was all I could do to keep from showing my contempt for them.

After a time, a rough, uncouth fellow in a policeman's uniform shoved his way through the ring of neighbors.

"You Croyden?" he said to me.

"Yes," I said, sitting on the edge of the divan. "I'm Horace Croyden."

"Then get on your feet!" he ordered.

"Officer," I said looking up at him, "I've suffered a most acute shock. You've no right . . ."

"I've got every right, bub," he said. "I guess you claim she fell."

"Of course she did."

"Why, you little liar," he looked at me as if he wanted to spit with disgust. "You threw her right off that balcony. There was a jet plane passing overhead. And a kid down on the street selling papers; tells me you happen to be one of his regular customers. Like most kids, them jet planes get to him. He was neglecting business for a minute, see? So he could look at that jet plane and think what it must be like up there and how maybe he'd pilot one of them babies one of these days. And he seen you. He seen every bit of it."

The apartment was suddenly hushed. I sat appalled. Positively appalled.

"Why'd you do it?" the cop demanded.

"She—she was ruining my life," I said.

"Then why didn't you just leave her?"

It was obvious to me that here was a lout who could never understand. And suddenly all the faces surrounding me were like the cop's, totally devoid of feeling or comprehension.

"Leave her?" I heard myself ask, aghast. "Leave her—and risk the horrid scandal of a divorce?"

REVENGE IS BITTER-SWEET

H. A. DeROSSO

THE ROAD was barricaded. A post had been driven into the ground on either side of the road and two two-by-sixes nailed to them. There was a sign that said—ROAD CAVING IN, DO NOT USE.

Will Owen slowed his car and turned off to the side, bouncing over the ruts made by countless hunters and fishermen to by-pass the barricade. Beyond the barrier, he pulled back on the road and speeded up.

The headlights sliced the darkness. They revealed the looming hulk of the old rock dump, now covered with weeds and wild grass, around which the road curved sharply, and then ahead the steel framework of the tippie, austere and long silent from disuse and abandonment.

He slowed again and turned the car around and then shut off the motor. In the silence he could hear the croaking of the frogs in a nearby pond and the slow, dull beating of his heart.

He reached for his cigarettes and then checked himself, thinking for a moment that it might be best not to show a light or even a cigarette glow. But then he told himself that at this hour, midnight, there would be no one coming here, only her. So he took out a cigarette and lit it.

Waiting depressed him. He supposed it was the atmosphere, the long-closed iron ore mine, the sense of desolation and forsakenness that dwelt among the empty buildings and weed-shrouded rock dump and silent, rusting machinery. But this had been the best place he could think of to meet her.

He turned on the panel light and checked his watch and

began to worry that she would not come. He had been quite firm with her over the phone. He had made it clear that he would not tolerate her failing to appear. She had pleaded that she was married and did not know how to get away at that time of night. He had told her sternly to find a way and had hung up.

Now he sat there, smoking, full of anxiety, wondering if he was going about this in the right way for it was something he had never done before and had never thought he would stoop to.

He was about to concede defeat when a flicker of light told him of the approach of a car. His heart quickened as he got out and stood in the darkness. He did not know what all the excitement in him was about, whether over the prospect of what would ensue or the thought of seeing her again and talking to her. It had been a long time since they had spoken, face to face.

The car made the sharp turn around the rock dump and its headlights blinded him. For a moment he cursed the foolishness that made him stand where he was being clearly outlined, when caution and even concealment were the prudent things. But he was new at this, he told himself, and had no pleasure or desire for it. Necessity and hate were his prompters, not conniving and stealth.

The car stopped. The lights winked out. The night shadows dwelt in unruffled peace again.

"Sibyl?" His throat felt dry and raw and ached when he spoke the name. He was being foolish again, he told himself, calling her like that. If it wasn't her—Something cold and clammy crawled along his shoulders.

The door of the car opened and in the brief life of the interior lights he saw that it was Sibyl stepping from the car. Then the shadows took over again, with a new shadow present, the shadow that was she, standing there.

Hurt and pride made him say it. "Come here."

The shadow did not stir.

"I said come here." The command was loud enough to bring an answering echo from somewhere out of the night.

She moved forward and stopped close enough for him to smell the scent she used. Of lilacs like the old days. Swiftly, angrily, he turned his back on the memory.

He did not know how to begin. It seemed crude and even profane to mention the matter bluntly and promptly. Still, he had to begin, had to say something.

"You're late."

"I couldn't get away any sooner than I did. And then I wasn't sure of this road. It is barricaded, and the sign says it's caving in. I—I was scared."

"That's just a precaution, to protect the company in case it does cave in. This road's used all the time, by hunters and fishermen. There's a creek not far off."

"But cave-ins do happen around these old mines."

"I told you not to pay any attention to the sign. What about the old road to Bessemer? Doesn't that have signs saying "Road Caving, Travel At Your Own Risk"? Yet they run buses over it. Cave-ins happen but the odds are against them."

He found that he was trying to picture how she looked in his mind. In the shadows he could not tell very well. She stood tall and slim and he could see that she wore a light, open sweater over her slacks. Her hair would be a golden blonde mass of tiny curls and her face—He shut his eyes and held them that way for a moment, remembering. But bitterness took over. He told himself that he had lectured to her on the subject of cave-ins to delay bringing up the subject that concerned them.

"Have you got it?" It came to him that his voice was strained.

"The money?"

"Yes, yes. What else? Have you got all of it?"

"The thousand that you asked for."

"Well, give it here."

She hesitated.

"What're you waiting for?"

There was a sound from her, as of a breath caught aching in the throat. "I can't believe it. Not of my father. Not of him."

"You saw the photostats I mailed you, didn't you? You recognized his handwriting."

"My father was a good man. He'd never accept bribes. He'd never have had anything to do with graft."

"That's not what his letter said."

That breath caught in her throat again. "Isn't there any decency in you? Can't you let the dead rest?"

"He's not the only one who's dead," he said and felt hate rush through him. My father's dead, too, he thought, all because of yours.

She was silent as though she, too, were thinking of this

thing that had killed all that had ever been sweet and beautiful between them.

"Are you going to hand it over?"

She thrust something at him with a quick, and angry gesture. His fingers made it out to be a thick-papered envelope. He did not look down at it. He stared at her instead, trying to read something in her face, but the shadows concealed whatever might have been there.

"Aren't you going to count it?" Scorn made her voice sharp. "Aren't you afraid I might cheat you?"

He was thankful for the darkness, hiding the flush that warmed his face. "I'll count it later."

"I don't suppose this will be all?"

"No."

"How much more?"

He started to stir uncomfortably, then checked himself. Right now he hated himself very much. "I don't know," he said.

"Will it ever be enough?" she asked. "After you've bled me and bled me, will you still make the letter public?"

To that he was silent. After a moment she averted her face and bowed her head.

"Are you crying?"

Her head rose swiftly. There was the smallest pause and then she said, "Why would I cry? My tears are finished. All I want to do now is go off and—and . . ."

She left him standing there, shaken and miserable and suddenly insufferably lonely, and got in her car. It started off and in a few moments the crimson tail lights winked out of sight around the dock dump. He stood there, the dead mine, dead thoughts, dead memories his company . . .

He sat with the fingers of one hand wrapped around his half-finished drink, impervious to the calculated movements of the stripper.

I didn't think it would be quite like this, he told himself. I thought I'd at least get some satisfaction out of the whole thing. But all I did was hurt Sibyl—it was him I wanted to hurt. But he's dead; so all I can hurt is his memory—and Sibyl again.

He was aware of someone sitting down on the stool next to him. Scent all but overwhelmed him.

"Buy me a drink, honey?"

He turned a tired, baleful glance on her. She was more

completely dressed now. The smile was practiced, artificial, like the long lashes, the red hair and the illusion of beauty under the oblique lighting.

"You have such a gracious way of asking."

Fingers played with his ear. "What's the matter, dear? Was somebody mean to you?" He felt the pressure of her thigh against his. "Buy mama a drink and tell me all about it."

Someone entered and passed behind him. Out of the corner of his eyes, Will Owen saw him. Resentment came and rancor.

"Try him," he said with bitterness. "He might even buy you a bottle of champagne. He's probably done it before."

"Thanks for everything, square."

She was gone and he was thinking, So he's what you wanted, Sibyl. You must have, for he's what you married. Evan Sterling. It took all his will to keep from angrily hurling his drink in Sterling's direction.

The dancer and Sterling left the bar and went to a table. She had her arms draped on his shoulders and he was quite drunk, his loud laughter attesting to that.

Distaste put the savor of ashes in Owen's mouth. He left his drink unfinished. Outside, the first pale light of dawn showed above the rooftops. A bird sang sharp and clear. Owen did not even hear the joyful sound.

The shack sat in a tiny clearing just off one of the sideroads. Mixed evergreens and poplars encircled it. The small clearing was untended. The grass grew tall and brown, full of goldenrod and thistles. An old car appeared to be permanently parked there.

Owen noted that one of the panes in a four-light window had been broken and repaired by the simple expedient of stuffing the hole with a gunny sack. He pounded on the door, rattling it.

"Corbett!" he shouted. "Open up, Corbett!"

There was no sound inside the shack. He glanced around, noting again the dust and grime-covered '41 Plymouth. He resumed his pounding.

"Corbett! Wake up! It's me! Owen!"

Someone inside stirred. The door opened slightly; bleary eyes blinked at the bright sunlight. A hand scratched several days' growth of beard.

"What you want?"

"To talk to you, Corbett."

There was a moment's hesitation. Then Corbett said reluctantly, "All right. Come on in."

There were dirty pans on the old wood stove and dirty dishes on the table. The bed was mussed and rumpled from recent occupancy, its white sheets gray. An almost empty gin bottle was on the floor beside the bed.

Corbett sank his hulk down in a chair and motioned Owen to another. Red-shot eyes regarded Owen truculently. "Well?" Corbett asked.

Owen looked about, trying to set everything in place in his mind. There were traps in one corner of the one-room shack along with fishing gear. A rifle hung on pegs above the bed. The smell of fish and drying pelts, wild essences, permeated the room.

"About Blackwell's letter that you sold me," Owen said slowly. "Will you tell me again where you got it?"

"Corbett's brow creased as he peered at Owen. "I already told you."

"Let me hear it again."

"Why?"

"Never mind why," Owen's tone grew hard. "Tell me."

Corbett's glance wandered about as though to see if someone else were listening. After a moment, he said, "Like I told you I broke into Blackwell's cottage." His eyes turned evasive, dwelling on everything but Owen. "What the hell? I've been having it tough. Made hardly nothing trapping over the winter. Ain't doing much better fishing and guiding. The Blackwells got it. So I thought I'd help myself to some of it, if they'd left any of it laying around."

"When did you break in?"

"Oh, last spring sometimes. April or May. I don't really remember."

"Where did you find the letter?"

"Huh?" Corbett said, seemingly startled. Then he got himself in hand. He threw a longing look at the gin bottle. "In—in a book. There was all kind of books laying around. It was in this book."

"What was the name of the book?"

"How the hell should I know? I wasn't looking for nothing to read."

"That's for sure," Owen said dryly. "How come you looked in that book at all? You're hardly the intellectual type."

"Don't go making cracks," Corbett said, bristling. "I ain't in the mood to listen to no cracks."

"How come you looked in that book?" Owen asked again.

"Well, people hide things in books, don't they?"

"Do they?"

"What you trying to do? What you asking me these things for? You got the letter, didn't you? You got a damned good bargain."

"Did I?" Owen asked quietly.

Corbett leaned across the table, eyes overtly hostile. "What you up to? What you noseying around for?"

"Blackwell lived in the southern part of the state," Owen said, "but he had a summer home here in the north. He died down south last January. Yet you found the letter in his summer cottage. How do you account for that?"

"Huh?" The chair creaked as Corbett shifted his weight. His glance went out the open door, to the tall grass waving gently in the breeze. From somewhere beyond the door a yellow hammer called, loud and ringing. "Old Blackwell was up here all last summer and fall, wasn't he?" Corbett's glance returned defiantly. "He probably wrote the letter then and hid it in that book. Anyway, he didn't want it found until after he was dead. That's what he said in it."

"Why did you sell it to me?"

The chair creaked again. "Well, I knew all about your old man. I'd worked for him one summer, a year or so back, on a road building job. You always said it was Blackwell who broke your old man because he wouldn't kick back on the contracts he got—and was the cause of him going off and shooting himself. You spread it all over town, Owen, so why wouldn't I know? Everybody knows you hate Blackwell. So . . . I figured you'd like to get back at him."

"Get back at him after he's dead?"

"He's got a daughter, ain't he? Besides, I didn't find the letter until after he was dead."

"Why didn't you sell it to me right away?"

"I didn't think of it. I didn't know what to do with it until his daughter came north."

Owen was aware of the quickened thumping of his heart. His eyes tried to lock with Corbett's, but Corbett's were never still long enough. "Why didn't you use it yourself, Corbett? I picked up a thousand bucks last night, just

like that. And I can get more, much more. Yet you sold the letter to me for a couple of hundred."

"Like I said, I was hard up. I needed some quick cash."

"The letter could have got you that cash just as quick."

"All right," Corbett blurted out defiantly, coloring. "I'm not smart enough. That's why. I ain't got no brains. I didn't know how to go about collecting no blackmail."

"Why didn't you offer to go partners?"

Corbett jumped to his feet, knocking his chair over with a crash. "What the hell you driving at? I'm sick of your questions. Get out of my house!"

Owen rose slowly to his feet, vigilant, tense inside. A pulse pounded hard in his temple. A strange excitement sang inside him.

"There's something fishy about this whole deal," he said in a low, hard voice, "and I'm finding out what it is, Corbett. I'm not leaving here until I do find out."

With animal swiftness, Corbett wheeled and lunged. Owen moved quickly, but he had the table between himself and Corbett. Owen sent the table and its dishes crashing and rushed forward, but by then Corbett had already reached his rifle. He snatched it off the wall. His face was gloating as he turned and leveled the weapon.

"You're leaving, Owen," Corbett said. "You're leaving quick, either under your own power or feet first . . ."

Owen drove slowly along the blacktop road, disturbed over some vague premonition that he could not quite make out. Something in him cried beware. But beware of what?

The sun shone brightly. The trees held the full green color of late summer. Only the uncut grass in fallow fields was brown and sere, a forerunner of the dying that starts with autumn.

A horn blared behind, startling him and causing him to pull over sharply. He instantly recognized the car that flashed by.

Evan Sterling's.

It was a Jaguar, the only one of its kind in those parts. Sibyl drove a Buick, but that was beneath Sterling, Owen thought acidly.

Why do I hate him so? he asked himself. Because he married Sibyl? We had quarreled and broken up. She was bound to marry someone. She's young and pretty and wealthy and was bound to marry. But why Sterling? He's

at least twenty years older than she and doesn't have a penny to his name and lives off her. But he is well-built and handsome. That gray at the temples gives him a distinguished look. Is that why she married him?

He did not consider his feeling to be jealousy. He had resigned himself to her marrying someone else. What existed in him was something stronger and more vicious than jealousy. It was something that almost frightened him.

He reached town and turned down the main street. At the lower end, where the road dipped and nothing but taverns filled an entire block, he saw the Jaguar parked. Sterling stood beside it, talking to the artificial redhead—who looked dry and musty in the harsh daylight.

Sterling's glance picked Owen up and held as he drove by. The look was a predatory look, sharp and piercing . . .

It was twilight and he had the lights on as he drove. In the windless air the leaves hung limp and still, as though wearied to the point of dying. The dust churned up by the car on the gravel road hung a definite while, moving lazily like yellow smoke.

He stopped the car short of his destination and proceeded on foot. His heart hammered. In the thickening shadows a bluejay called, lorn and loud.

At the turn-off to Corbett's shack, Owen paused for a moment. He remembered the rifle and the look on Corbett's face. But this time there wouldn't be a rifle to put him at a disadvantage. Owen promised himself. He would see to that and also see that Corbett told everything he knew.

There was no light in the shack. It huddled there, dark and inanimate, amid the encircling trees. The Plymouth, however, was parked in the same spot it had been earlier that day.

The door of the shack was open. Owen stopped hesitantly before it, a strange uneasiness crawling over him. He was going to call out, but his throat was dry and something told him not to.

He had no idea how long he stood there, tense and uncertain, straining his ears for sounds that could not be heard and his eyes for sights that could not be seen.

The instant he stepped across the threshold he sensed the presence of death. It crouched in every inch of darkness, it straddled the room and hung from the walls and ceiling.

He took out his cigarette lighter and flicked it on. The concealing shadows gave way reluctantly. He had to take two steps forward before he spied Corbett.

The man lay on his back, on the floor, parallel to his bed. The bullet had entered his temple through the small, neat, blue-red hole and emerged in a burgeoning, crimson mess on the other side of the skull. His mouth hung wide open, as though still trying to voice one last, agonized cry. The rifle lay beside his hand.

The lighter winked out. In the fetid darkness, full realization fell on Owen with the suddenness of inspiration.

In the phone booth he said, "Sibyl?"

"Yes?"

"I've got to see you. At the mine. Tonight."

There was a long pause that for a moment made him think she had hung up.

"It's—it's so late," she said, finally.

"It was late last night."

"I mean it's too late to get anything out of the bank."

"Who said anything about that?" Then he put a damper on the anxiety, the feeling of panic, and said calmly, "I'll take a check, anything. Just be there."

He could tell from the silence that she saw the lameness of what he had said, but it was too late to undo. "Couldn't we make it some other night?" she asked.

"No. It's got to be tonight."

"But—but I'm not alone tonight."

"So what?" he said belligerently. "Say something. A friend is sick. Say anything. But you've got to come."

He sensed the reluctance, the contempt, the grief in her tone. "All right. I'll be there . . ."

He braked the car suddenly, coming to a screeching halt. Then he quickly put it in reverse and backed away.

If I'd been going just a little bit faster, he thought, feeling both fear and relief, I wouldn't have been able to stop in time.

The headlights revealed the chasm in the road, where the earth had given way and fallen into some abandoned raise or drift far beneath the surface in the cavern workings of the mine. He waited until the excitement of his narrow escape settled and then he got out.

He walked ahead and stopped near the jagged lip of the

oval cave-in. He picked up a stone and tossed it into the pit. He heard the stone strike and carom a few times; then all was silence. Whether the stone had found a resting place or was still falling, he did not know.

He walked back to his car, thinking hard. After some more deliberation, he started the car forward, turning off the road, bouncing over a shallow ditch and passing through goldenrod and thistles that scraped loudly against the bottom of the car. Once around the cave-in, he drove back on the road and then pulled to a halt.

He returned to the cave-in on foot and came to a halt beyond it and began the waiting. He had a flashlight and checked his watch every now and then. It was ten after midnight when he spied the first glimmer of an approaching car.

He knew it was Sibyl because no one else would be using this road at this hour of the night. He signaled with the flashlight and the car stopped.

"The road's caved in," he said. "Just around the bend. You can't see it from here because of the rock pile."

"Where's your car?"

"I drove around it. Lucky I wasn't going too fast. Get over. I'll drive for you."

"Isn't it dangerous?"

"It's not going to cave in any more, not for now. Get over."

Her voice was tight with fright. "Couldn't we talk here?"

"Get over." Steel was in his tone and it made her obey.

He parked her car beside his. They sat there quietly, silently, she with her thoughts, he with his.

"I—I don't have any money with me," she said after awhile. "I didn't think you'd want any more so soon."

"Yeah. Yeah. You're right. Couldn't bring myself to spend it anyway. Not that kind of money. I know that now."

He was aware that she was watching him intently. "Will? What do you mean, Will?"

It came to him that it had been a long time since she's called him by his given name. The memories started to return and now, strangely, wonderfully, he didn't want to turn away from them.

"I can't go on hurting you," he said. "I thought I could because I couldn't hurt your father and I had to get at him

someway. But no matter what he was or what he did I could never hurt you again. You can have the letter, Sibyl. Do whatever you want with it."

She leaned toward him. "Will, I—"

"I don't want to hear any thanks," he interrupted bitterly. "We might not have much time and I want you to tell me something quickly and truthfully. How do you and Sterling get along?"

She withdrew from him. He sensed the coolness, the aloofness. She did not answer.

"Tell me," he said with quiet anger. "I'm not trying to pry; I'm only asking because your life depends on it."

"What are you talking about, Will?"

"Please, just answer what I asked you."

She stared at her hands, twining in her lap. "I—I knew what he was before I married him so I shouldn't complain."

"You're not happy then?"

The word came after a long pause. "No."

"Does he know that?"

"Yes."

"In other words, the marriage won't last."

She gazed at him pleadingly. "Please, Will. It hurts too much to talk about it. In fact, I haven't talked about it to any one. Please don't talk about it any more."

"I have to," he said, gentle now. "It's your life, Sibyl."

"Why do you keep saying that?"

He told her about Corbett.

Her eyes were wide. She was up against the far side of the car, as though backed there by fear. "But—but where does that concern me?"

"He killed Corbett."

"Evan?"

"I'm sure of it. No one else had cause to."

"But why would Evan kill Corbett?"

"Because he could have told me he'd got your father's letter from Sterling."

She shook her head. Her voice came small and bewildered. "No."

"Look, Sibyl," he said. "There were only two people who could have got that letter, you or him, and you didn't get it. He knows his marriage to you can't last. He could have used the letter to blackmail you, but then he thought of a better scheme, a scheme to get all you have."

She stared at him in fear and wonder. "I don't understand."

"If you were to die or be killed, he'd inherit all, wouldn't he? As the widower?"

"You can't mean that," she said, her voice hoarse.

"He turned the letter over to Corbett and paid him to sell it to me. Once I started blackmailing you I was trapped. All he has to do is kill you and I'll get blamed for it. It'll look like I killed you because you balked at paying up any more. Don't you see?"

She began to weep, softly, achingly.

He waited a few moments; then he said, "Does Sterling know you're here?"

"I think so. He saw me leave." She clutched his arm. "Do you think he followed me?"

"If what I figured out is true, he'll be here. He doesn't know I know Corbett is dead. He's got to make his play before I find out and get wise to him. It's got to be tonight. If he doesn't show up, then I've been wrong about him right from the start."

"But if he means to kill me?" Her voice was high now.

"I've got a gun with me."

Against the sky a flicker of light showed, like the winking of fireflies.

"Do you think that's him?" she asked.

"No one else would be using this road this time of night. It's him all right."

The light flashed again, approaching swiftly, and played faintly on the wall of the silent hoist house.

"The cave-in!" she cried, remembering it. "You know the way he drives. He'll never be able to stop in time."

"I know," Owen said.

HOSPITALITY MOST SERENE

JACK RITCHIE

THERE WASN'T much I could do about things, so I shuffled the cards for another hand of solitaire.

The tall one they called Hank stared moodily out of the cabin window and Fred, who was built heavy, kept busy trying to get local news on the portable radio.

The fellow with the thin mustache, who seemed to give the orders, sat near the table watching me play.

"What do you do to live in a place like this all year?" he asked.

I put down a couple of cards. "Some hunting and trapping in the winter. Fishing now and then." I looked up. "A little farming when I have to."

The boss man, in addition to the thin mustache, had dark brown eyes and a meagre smile that was always a part of his face. "You're taking this all pretty calm."

I shrugged. "I don't know enough yet to get excited."

He grinned. "That's the way to take it. Just behave and you got no worries for awhile."

The three of them had come in with their guns at noon and taken over. It wasn't me they were interested in. I was just something that happened to be in the place where they wanted to stay.

Fred turned down the volume of the radio. "I'm hungry."

"There's a side of venison in the storeroom," I said. "Cut off what you want. Better take a flashlight. There aren't any windows or lights in there."

Fred got a carving knife out of the drawer and came back with about three pounds of meat. He put it on the table. "You do the cooking, mister," he said.

I went to the sink and began cutting the venison into steak sizes. The boss turned up the radio volume for the six o'clock news.

When it was over, I took the big skillet off the wall hook. "They got pretty good descriptions of all of you. I guess you took your time."

"Don't let it worry you," Fred said.

I lit a cigarette. "My guess is you got rattled. You didn't have to kill the cashier. Jim Turner was a real meek man; he wouldn't have made any trouble."

Fred leaned back in his chair. "You got a cracker box

bank in that town of yours. According to the announcer it was robbed last year, too."

I nodded. "Folks around here figure Willie Stevens was in on it. Nobody's seen him since it happened."

Hank switched off the radio. "We'd be in Chicago now if it wasn't for that stinking car."

I tapped cigarette ash on the floor. "I'd say you were lucky it broke down. You'd probably have run into a road block if you kept going. You city boys think the picking is easy out here because there's a lot of space between houses. But we got county patrol cars with radios that work."

Fred grunted. "Your boy Willie made it."

I shrugged. "Willie is part of this country. He knew a lot of roads that aren't on the map."

I put some wood in the stove. "I suppose you left the car right where it broke down."

The boss grinned. "Us city boys, we got some brains too. Nobody's going to find it until we're long gone."

Hank unlocked the satchel they had brought with them and dumped the money on the table. His long face was satisfied. "Eighteen grand."

I opened a couple of cans of vegetables and started the coffee. "Comes to six thousand apiece. If you split fair and even all around."

The boss looked my way. "That's our business."

I grinned faintly. "I was just thinking. Six thousand isn't a bad pile of dough. Just about what a good plumber earns in a year. Maybe he'd have to put in some overtime though."

I turned over the steaks in the skillet. "Seems kind of funny for you to be in the same class with plumbers."

The boss frowned and pushed back his chair. "Let's get this stuff off the table and eat."

I set the table and brought over the food.

Hank talked with his mouth full. "When we get back to the city, it's nothing but the best for me. Thick steaks, expensive liquor, and the same kind of women."

I punched open a can of condensed milk and put it on the table. "This may seem like a foolish question, but what have you got in mind for my future?"

Fred showed white teeth. "Don't worry about your future. It's all planned."

When they finished the meal, Hank used a toothpick and looked at the other two. "How about a little quarter limit poker? We got to do something to kill time."

I went to the shelf for the cards. They were busy counting their change, so I slipped the ace of spades out of the deck and put it in my pocket.

Then I made myself a steak sandwich and sat down at the table to watch them play.

Hank had a run of luck and when he filled an inside straight to beat Fred's three aces, I sneaked the ace of spades out of my pocket and held it against the bottom of the table with my knee. "Sometimes you can judge a lot about a man just by the way he plays cards," I said. "Especially in an honest game like this."

The boss played with the two quarters he had left. "See anything interesting?"

I waited a couple of seconds and then cleared my throat. "No. I guess not."

Fred looked at me thoughtfully. Then he reached for the cards and began counting them.

I moved my knee and let the ace slip to the floor.

Fred tapped the deck with his fingers. "There's one missing."

I leaned over and looked under the table. "Here it is. On the floor. Looks like it fell accidentally." I smiled at Fred. "I guess you could have used that card the last hand. Too bad it wasn't in the deck."

Fred looked at Hank with a glint of speculation in his eyes and I knew there wasn't going to be any more poker that night.

I looked at my watch and yawned. "There's only one bunk here. I guess you won't let me have it, but that still means two of you will have to sleep on the floor."

I pointed to the deck. "Why don't you cut cards to see who gets it?"

The boss glanced at the other two and then got up. He went to the bunk and began taking off his shoes.

"Well," I said, letting Hank and Fred see my smile. "I guess that settles who gets the bunk."

The boss put one shoe on the floor and looked in my direction. "You sleep in the storeroom. We wouldn't want you cleaving our skulls with an axe while we're asleep."

I lit a spare lantern, grabbed a blanket and went into the storeroom. I could hear one of them fasten the hasp and slip something into the staple.

My storeroom is the only other room of my cabin. It's cut into the side of a hill and has a dirt floor. The only way to get in or out is through the door to the main part of the cabin.

I waited a couple of hours until I felt sure they were asleep and then got busy. I took a small trowel from a rack and began digging in the dirt near the door.

When I had a hole eight inches deep, I selected one of

my traps, the big one that held a black bear last winter.

I anchored it inside the hole and set it. Then I stretched a strip of burlap over the hole, pegging it taut with wood slivers. I sprinkled earth until the burlap was concealed.

I laid a board over my work and then went over to the potato barrel where I kept my money in an oilskin bag. I took out fifteen twenties and slipped them into my pocket.

I spent the rest of the night sitting on a box and thinking about what I was going to have to do in the morning.

It was about eight o'clock when Hank unfastened the door.

I stepped into the main room. "Good morning," I said, making it sound cheerful enough to irritate him.

The boss was still sleeping on the bunk, but Fred was sitting at the table. His night on the floor hadn't made him too happy. "Make some coffee," he snapped.

I grinned and began making breakfast. When I went to the cupboard for the eggs, I left the door open so that they would notice the gallon jug on one of the shelves.

The smell of the bacon frying woke up the boss. He yawned and fumbled for a cigarette.

I nodded to him. "This air and a good night's sleep makes you feel like a new man."

Fred scowled at me. "What's in the jug up there?"

I shook my head doubtfully. "Something that might be too powerful for you this early in the morning. Unless you got the stomach for it."

"Bring it here," he growled.

He pulled the stopper and smelled the liquor. Then he poured out a glass and downed a swallow. His voice was raw. "You make this stuff yourself?"

I shrugged. "There's no tax stamp on the jug."

After breakfast I sat down at the table and idly riffled the deck of cards. "I don't suppose any of you would be interested in poker?"

Fred poured himself more whiskey. He stared at Hank for a moment. "Why not? Nothing like a friendly game."

I put some change on the table. "Let's count the cards first," I said.

After a few hands, Hank began drinking too. "How long we got to stay in this place?"

"A couple more days," the boss said.

Hank looked sullen. "I say it's better if we take off right now. We're bound to pick up a car on that dirt road this time if we'd just wait long enough."

The boss glanced up from his cards. "We stay until I say we can go."

Their eyes held for ten seconds; then Hank looked away.

I rattled a few of my coins and said, "It's easy to see who's boss here."

Hank glared at me and refilled his glass. He took off his coat and tossed it on the bunk beside the boss's sport jacket.

We played a half an hour and then Hank began winning. After he took a big pot away from the boss, I shook my head, saying, "Maybe I ought to have a little of that whiskey. I guess it's giving Hank a lot of luck."

The boss stubbed out his cigarette. "Pour me a glass too."

On a hand of seven card stud, I dropped out after the fourth card and went to the water bucket.

The betting was heavy at the table and they weren't paying any attention to me. I took the twenties out of my pocket and slipped them under Hank's coat on the bunk.

They were still betting when I took my seat. There were about forty bucks in the pot when the boss folded his cards and dropped out.

Fred and Hank kept raising until Fred finally called.

Hank grinned and turned up four nines.

Fred's face was livid and he slammed down his cards. "I'm through with this sucker game!"

Hank stopped grinning and leaned over the table. "Just what'd you mean by that?"

Fred lurched to his feet, at the same time drawing an automatic from his shoulder holster. "Nobody wins all the time. Not unless he's got quick fingers."

The boss stood up, his face hard. "Put that gun away."

Fred lowered his gun slightly. "It was a mistake our taking that bum along with us. We never did know a hell of a lot about him."

I went over to the bunk and picked up Hank's coat and the money beneath it. "Here's your coat, Hank," I said. "I guess you're not wanted."

I shook the coat slightly and the money dropped to the floor. It landed with a slap that got everybody's attention.

Even with his heavy drinking, Fred reacted first. He glared at Hank. "You dirty double-crossing thief! I knew we should've got more'n eighteen grand out of that job."

Hank's jaw was slack as he stared at the money.

Fred's gun was up again. "You were carrying the bag all the time," he said to Hank, "and you got the key."

Hank realized what was coming and his voice rose to fight against it. "I never saw that—that money before!"

Fred's grim expression didn't change. And the gun in his hand blazed twice.

Hank shuddered with the impact of the bullets and he spun to the floor. He was dead before he finished falling.

Fred stared down at the body, shaking with anger now. The boss was looking at Hank's body, too, his face hard.

I sank down on the bunk, still holding the coat. After a second or two, I let go of it and my hand moved a few inches. When I stood up again, I had the boss's coat over my arm.

"Well," I said quietly, "I guess now you split the money only two ways."

They looked at me and Fred's eyes narrowed as he stared at the coat. "Let me see that," he all but shouted.

He yanked the coat out of my hands and turned to the boss. "This isn't Hank's coat," he said angrily. "It's yours."

I began edging toward the storeroom door.

The boss frowned, real puzzled, as he looked at the coat, and then at me.

His eyes widened with sudden understanding. "Don't be a fool, Fred. Can't you see what's been happening?"

But Fred wasn't listening to the words. That grim expression was back on his face.

"You stupid jerk . . ." the boss began hysterically.

Fred's gun roared.

I darted into the storeroom and slammed the door behind me. Groping in the dark, I pulled the board from the top of my trap. Then I crawled behind one of my potato barrels and waited.

It wasn't more than half a minute before Fred opened the door. He stood silhouetted against the light, one hand on the door frame and the other holding the gun.

I called him a name and heaved a potato at him. It got him in the chest and he snapped a shot into the darkness.

He muttered something then and started moving forward. On his second step, he screamed as the jaws of my bear trap snapped shut.

I felt along the wall until I touched the spade. He was clawing at the steel jaws when I swung the spade against the side of his head. That one swing was enough.

I picked his gun off the floor and went cautiously into the cabin. The boss was just as dead as Hank, just as dead as Fred.

Then I poured myself a drink.

It was going to be hard work dragging the three of them into the woods and burying them.

But at least there was no problem about where I'd do it. The little glen in back of the cabin was perfect. There was plenty room for three more.

That was where I buried Willie Stevens about a year ago, after we robbed the bank. We got only five thousand and I didn't think that was worth splitting.

I got the key off Hank's body and went to look at my money.

THE TENTH PART OF A MILLION

ROBERT COLBY

ON THE DAY Walter J. Ferris lost his striking blonde secretary to the marriage mill, he was seen peering through the glass partition of the typing pool. Beside him was Mr. Gates, the office manager.

Paula Reynolds, easily the most attractive typist of the group, watched Mr. Ferris covertly from the corner of her eye. Mr. Gates was nervously attentive to the president of this great New York textile company which bore his name, and followed the scanning gaze of Mr. Ferris alertly, writing something in a notebook every time Mr. Ferris spoke with a barely perceptible movement of his lips.

Then, as suddenly as he had come, Mr. Ferris vanished, presumably returning to that mysterious sanctum of the high brass three floors above.

His departure was followed immediately by an undeclared ceasefire in the typing lines, those machine gun bursts being replaced by tittering speculation. Every girl present was aware the job of private secretary to Mr. Ferris was a big prize with splendid advantages.

For openers, it offered a thirty-five dollar a week raise. There was no great volume of work; and you had your own little office where you were queen, looking down upon all the other secretaries and even certain minor executives who dared not cross you.

Finally, there was Mr. Walter J. Ferris, who was himself something of a prize. Still in his early forties, Mr. Ferris was tall and lean with an abundant thatch of dark brown hair. He was a dedicated believer in physical fitness and beneath his expensively tailored suits there was the

hint of solid muscle and coiled strength. His features were not pretty or regular, but handsome in the way of certain awesome rock formations which arrest the attention because of their rugged magnificence.

He was married—three times married, in fact—but he had never allowed his marital status to dim the gleam in his eye or distract him from his tireless interest in beautiful women. More, he was a millionaire—and generous to comely females who delighted him.

Thus, when three quite lovely girls from the typing pool were called separately to his office for an interview, the moment was somewhat as breathless as the judging of the Miss America finals. In the end, Paula Reynolds was chosen. This came as a surprise because, of the three, only Paula was married, and usually Mr. Ferris wasted no time on married females.

Yet, in the looks department Paula was irresistible. She was twenty-six, had shoulder length hair of burnished ebony, a flawless dainty heart of a face with darkly passionate eyes, and a slender willowy figure which blossomed in all the right places.

Paula was perhaps more surprised than anyone else, not only when she got the job, but by what Mr. Ferris said as he presented the crown.

Swiveling easily in his massive chair behind his massive desk, and smiling in a way that would have seemed a leer on the face of a man of lesser distinction, he said, "Well, Paula my dear, you have only one strike against you."

"And what's that, Mr. Ferris?"

"You're married!"

"I know," she replied quickwittedly, "and so are you! But I don't hold it against you, Mr. Ferris."

He laughed suddenly, gleefully. "At first I thought you were only beautiful," he said. "Now I find that you are also charming and—likeable, for lack of a better word."

He swung about and for a moment gazed down through a wall of glass at the toy streets and the bustling toy people of Manhattan, forty-two stories below. When he had circled back to her he said, "Do you love your husband, Paula?"

"Of course I love him," she answered breezily, though she smiled in a teasing manner which left the matter in just the right shade of doubt; for if Paula understood anything at all, she understood men.

"Report here in the morning, Paula," Mr. Ferris said briskly, snatching the receiver from one of the phones on his desk. "I'll call down and notify Mr. Gates of my decision."

That evening Paula took the good news home to Larry, her husband, who was a shipping clerk for a mail-order house. Taxes and the high cost of living swallowed his small salary in one great gulp and, even though Paula brought in her share, they were forced to live on a tight budget, saving for a house on Long Island while they rented a shabby apartment on the Westside.

Being young and in love, Larry's dreams of success and riches were only now becoming slightly tarnished by the corrosion of lasting failure. A medium sized, husky man of thirty-two with sandy hair and boyish features, his sharp blue eyes denied his look of innocence. They were quick, knowing eyes, sometimes merrily mischievous.

Although Larry was usually easy-going, amiable, he was occasionally taken by violent bursts of temper, especially when his jealousy over Paula was aroused. Not that she gave him cause, but she was the sort who turned more heads than a Davis Cup tennis match.

"Thirty-five more a week?" Larry repeated, sprinkling cheese on his heaping plate of spaghetti. "Hey now, that's more like it!" Pursing his lips, he calculated their total income in the light of Paula's raise. "At that rate," he mused, "we should have the down for the house by the first of next year."

"Mmmm," Paula nodded slowly, "but that would still be about six months off." She glanced around her disgustedly. "I don't know if I can bear this dismal place another six months."

"Ahh, don't be a killjoy, sweetheart. We'll do what we have to do." He studied her, his eyes narrowing. "How did you get the job, anyway? Thought you were only a so-so typist. They just pick your name out of a hat or something?"

Paula smiled her teasing smile.

"Oh," he said, "it was that way, huh? I should've known."

"It wasn't *that* way at all," she defended. "A few girls were sent up to Mr. Ferris for an interview. I got the job."

"It was still *that* way," Larry insisted. "After Ferris got

one good look at you he didn't care if he had to write his letters longhand. Just another potbellied old lecher," he sneered.

"Not that it matters, dear," said Paula with a dash of sarcasm, "but if Mr. Ferris has a pot belly he hides it beautifully. He's trim, tall and rugged, not much over forty, and quite good looking, if you like the type."

"And you like the type, I suppose?"

"Darling, please don't be childish. I was only having a little fun with you. You know I love you. And the only thing I see when I look at Mr. Walter J. Ferris is money. Money, money."

"How much is a guy like that worth?" Larry asked, his mood changing abruptly.

"Millions!"

"Millions," Larry repeated in an awed tone of voice. A man who thought of little else but money, his whole existence was dominated by fruitless schemes and hopeless dreams revolving around quick riches.

"How could Ferris have made it so fast, Paula? I mean, if he's only a little better than forty, how did he get control of a big textile company?"

"Simple," answered Paula. "His grandfather built the company and left it to his father. When his father died, it went to him."

Larry shook his head bitterly. "I never could understand this world. No justice. None at all." He took a sip of iced tea, lighted a cigarette. "A guy like that, gets his first look at life from a solid gold cradle in a room where the wallpaper is made of money. He's a born winner, he can't lose. It's already decided that he'll be president of the old man's company before he knows what the word means. You call that fair?"

"Oh, you haven't heard the half of it," said Paula. "Grace Comstock, the gal I'm replacing, told me that W. J. sheds wives like soiled clothes. He's on his third. They have a big place in Sands Point, a penthouse in town, and a waterfront home in Florida, complete with a yacht. They fly to Europe whenever the mood strikes them, and once a year they go on a luxury cruise to some fascinating part of the world. Imagine!"

"Sorry," said Larry with a sad little smile, "I can't quite imagine all that. It must be on another planet. Maybe it's called heaven. But I've got one thing Ferris hasn't, and

that's you! Just let him once get playful with *my* girl, and I'll kill'm with my bare hands. I'll break him up in sections you could feed a cat!"

Paula chuckled, but only to cover a stab of fear. Larry wasn't kidding! One time when they were down at the corner bar a man had tried to get cute with her. Larry would have strangled that man to death if they hadn't pulled him off in time, and Larry had warned that if she ever deserted him for another man, that man would live no longer than it took Larry to find him. This was a side of Larry which disturbed Paula, kept her always a little on edge.

Near the close of her third month in the new job, Mr. Ferris told Paula he was wildly in love with her, but Paula pretended not to take him seriously.

"If you *really* loved me," she said, closing her dictation book and offering up a sly wisp of smile, "you'd do something noble for me. Like, you might give Larry a job as vice-president in charge of—of the mail room, or something. Then we could live in the style you'd like us to become accustomed to."

Mr. Ferris was not amused. He came from behind the little office bar which vanished when you pushed a button. Solemnly, he offered Paula a martini, then sat on a corner of his desk and stirred his own drink with a toothpick impaled olive.

"I'm afraid," he said unsmilingly, "vast as my love for you is, dear Paula, it does not include Larry. As a matter of fact, there is no room at all for Larry in this very pleasant picture I am trying to visualize."

"Oh?" said Paula, snickering. "Poor Larry. Whatever shall we do with him?"

"We could," said Mr. Ferris, "dispose of him in the same way I am disposing of Nadine."

"That sounds pretty grim," Paula replied lightly, a smile on her lips.

"Not at all." Mr. Ferris reached across his desk for a gold lighter and flamed his cigarette. "I sent Nadine out to Lake Tahoe for a Nevada divorce. Very friendly. It's all agreed."

Paula could barely conceal her astonishment. "Well," she said numbly, "I certainly hope that this has nothing to do with—"

"No," said Mr. Ferris, "we've been drifting apart for

some time. All three of my marriages have been terrible mistakes. It's as if, unconsciously, I married the sort of dull social flowers my father would have chosen for me. He did actually arrange my first marriage, and I thought there was too much at stake to cross him.

"But until I met you, Paula, love was just a word, not a heart-twisting emotion that drives every other thought from my mind."

"I'm flattered," Paula said sincerely. What had begun as an exciting little game with no end result but the expansion of her ego, now seemed madly out of control. How could she retreat gracefully and keep her job? She decided to play it by ear.

"About Larry," said Mr. Ferris, "did you ever think of divorcing him?"

"No, it never occurred to me. Why should it? And even if I did want to divorce him, I couldn't."

"Why?"

"Because he wouldn't let me."

"Nonsense, Paula. How could he stop you?"

"Well, he would know there had to be another man involved. And he would hunt that man down and kill him."

"You're joking," Mr. Ferris said.

"If you think I'm joking, then that's only because you don't know Larry. He's perfectly normal and sane—except when it comes to me. He has this crazy, violent thing about me. Take my word, if it cost him his life, he'd kill any man who tried to steal me away." This startling truth might keep him at a safe distance, she hoped.

Mr. Ferris frowned. "I believe you," he said. "Though I'm not exactly the violent type, I can understand how he might feel that way about someone like you." He drained his glass in a gulp. "Well," he added mysteriously, "that does pose a problem."

"It does? What sort of problem?"

"Some other time, when you're in a more receptive mood, I'll tell you."

Paula was now intensely curious and wanted to hear more, but his manner closed the subject. He was withdrawn as he crossed the room and stared silently down into the shadows of late afternoon enveloping the city. She quietly left him.

Paula did not mention the incident to Larry. No use stirring up trouble needlessly. She would gaily, laughingly,

tell him the whole crazy story later, when Walter Ferris got around to showing all his cards.

Meanwhile, she was overcome with curiosity. If he came up with some sort of sly, nasty proposition, she would probably lose her temper, and her job. On the other hand, if a man like Walter J. Ferris, who could take his pick of almost any woman in the world, was truly serious about her . . .

How exciting that would be! With pride, with a wistful air of nobility and self-sacrifice, she would be able to say to her girl friends, ". . . Only a word, just *one* word, and I could have been Mrs. Walter J. Ferris, the wife of a millionaire, living in luxury for the rest of my life! But of course, I turned him down for the love of Larry. And I've never been sorry . . ."

When more than three weeks passed, and Mr. Ferris was merely kind and attentive without once returning to the subject of his undying love for her, Paula was disappointed. Perhaps he had only been playing a sneaky game to see if she were ripe for seduction. But no, he had never made a single pass at her. He was almost aloof.

It had to be Larry. He was afraid of Larry. Why, oh why, had she told him the truth about Larry? Now she would never know what he had really intended.

On a Monday morning several days later, Mr. Ferris did not appear at the office. He called in to tell Paula he had some personal matters to attend to and was taking the day off. There were, however, some business letters which had to go out and he was sending his chauffeur to bring Paula to his penthouse on Sutton Place.

Paula smelled something in the wind but she was more excited than alarmed. Riding across town in the long sparkling limousine, she tried to look casual and just a bit haughty, pretending that she was, indeed, Mrs. Walter J. Ferris, a person so accustomed to splendid living that she was just a little bored with it all. People turned to stare enviously at her and she felt very grand.

An elegant English butler bowed her into the study of the penthouse, his manner so obsequious she could have been royalty. Sitting by the window in that quietly regal sanctuary, glancing down at the bland surface of the East River, Paula felt as if she had entered the gates of paradise.

Larry had been right. A man like Walter Ferris was so

removed from pettiness and squalor, from the noisy shoving masses in their grubby surroundings, he might just as well exist on another planet.

Shortly, Mr. Ferris, impeccably attired in a suit of deep rich blue, entered the room. He was followed by a petite French maid carrying a tray. She set an enormous breakfast beside Paula, then quickly retired, closing the door behind her.

Paula was too nervous to eat. She drank coffee and nibbled on a Danish as Mr. Ferris chatted easily but impersonally. If romance was on his mind, or if he had anything momentous to tell her, he was certainly saving it.

Feeling that she should be relieved, Paula was irritated, but when Mr. Ferris graciously asked if she would mind taking some dictation, she smiled sweetly and went to work. An hour of this and Mr. Ferris glanced at his watch, said he had to leave for his home in Sands Point. It was late August and he would not be using the house again until next summer. There were certain instructions concerning the closing and maintenance of the place which he had to give the help.

Would Paula like to come along, continuing her dictation enroute? She would.

When they were about to leave, Mr. Ferris asked if she would care to look around the penthouse. As if walking on clouds they moved over whisper-soft carpets through a livingroom large enough to swallow two apartments like her own. They drifted down softly illumined hallways, glancing into spacious, silky-lush bedrooms, four of them, all in unique shapes, each with its own lovely decor. Four bedrooms—and five baths! A handsome dining room, the study, a large kitchen, servants' quarters, a garden terrace, with every piece of furniture exquisite, while throughout there was a pleasant, muted atmosphere, an air-conditioned silence which excluded the whole dreary world of toil below.

Marvelous, marvelous! thought Paula, but she said little because Mr. Ferris was so indifferent that she did not want to seem stupidly unsophisticated.

The summer day was sticky-hot, but in the air-conditioned limousine it was cool and serene. Like magic, a tiny bar appeared and Mr. Ferris produced chilled, ready-made cocktails. Sipping, he spoke carelessly of his winter home in Florida, showing Paula a snapshot, moving on to

other subjects, such as his cruise around the Pacific, stopping at such exotic places as Hawaii, Tahiti, Hong Kong and Tokyo.

Then he began to dictate but, to Paula's relief, he had hardly begun when they arrived at the house in Sands Point. They wound over a long, twisting drive past stables and a tennis court before they halted in front of a charming Cape Cod sort of house which rambled endlessly in all directions. Expecting an austere formal mansion, which she despised, Paula was delighted.

An hour later, as they sat together on a wrought-iron love seat in a cloistered garden near the swimming pool, Mr. Ferris said, "Well, Paula, what do you think of all this?" He made a sweeping gesture, big enough to include his whole empire.

"I'm positively in love with everything I've seen!"

"In that case," said Mr. Ferris, watching her intently, "I'll make you a present of it. This place, the penthouse, my home and yacht in Florida, my whole way of life. All yours, Paula—if you'll marry me. For my part, there would be no problem. My divorce papers came in this morning's mail."

Swiftly, as Paula sat gaping, he reached an arm around her and kissed her. She was much too overwhelmed to resist for more than a moment, after which she joined in the kiss, presenting it as a reward to this man who had just offered to make her queen of his rich kingdom.

When he told her again how much he loved her, she said, "But Mr. Ferris, I can't—"

"I do wish you'd call me Walter," he pleaded.

"But I can't possibly marry you—Walter. Have you forgotten Larry?"

"On the contrary, I've given Larry a great deal of thought. Could we buy him off?"

"Never! If the price were right, you could buy anything in the world from Larry—but me. Anyway, it's foolish to discuss Larry at this point. I haven't had a minute to consider my own feelings."

"Take all the time you want, Paula dear."

Paula was confused. It was obvious that Larry was never going to have anything or be anything. And perhaps, chained to a life of semi-poverty, the dull monotonous years would soon crush her feeling for him.

On the other side, Walter was most attractive and you

might easily grow to love a man who cultivated you in surroundings which were the stuff of the Hollywood dream makers. Only an idiot would dismiss a man like Walter Ferris with a few trite phrases about the comparative unimportance of money when you were in love.

Paula said, "I can't say how—how pleased and flattered I am that you would—but I'm happily married and I don't really know you, Walter. You seem kind, but you might turn out to be cruel. You seem generous, but you might be—"

"Darling," he interrupted, "didn't I just say that all of this is yours for the asking?"

"Yes, you did say that. But at the risk of sounding selfish, I want things of my own. Personal things, money to spend freely. Because, Walter, in my whole life I never had more than a few dollars that were mine alone."

Nodding, Walter smiled sympathetically. For a moment he sat in silent deliberation. "If you would help me erase Larry from the picture," he said, spacing his words dramatically, "then I would deposit the sum of one hundred thousand dollars to your personal account. Naturally, I would not do this until the day we were married, on the very day."

"A hundred thousand!" Paula exclaimed. "Oh my, oh my," she sighed, mentally rubbing her hands together, spending furiously. "But Larry would never give me up, even if I wanted him to. And he's dangerous. He might kill me, he would surely kill you."

"Then, as I said, we'll have to—erase him. It's the only way out."

"You can't mean—"

"Paula, if a man is going to act like an animal, then he should be treated like one. In self-defense, we can only destroy him before he destroys us."

Paula was shocked, revolted, but morbid curiosity and a hundred thousand dollars made her want to know the rest of it.

She said, "You've been thinking about this a long time, haven't you, Walter?"

"Yes."

"And what were you thinking?"

"I was thinking about a cruise to the Caribbean. I had

booked passage for two. Nadine won't be going now, of course, and we'll get another space for Larry. Since you'll both be my guests, how could he pass up such an offer?

"There are thirteen nights at sea, and very late on one of those nights, Larry will have an accident. It will appear that he had too much to drink and fell overboard, though we'll assist his demise with what is popularly known as a Mickey Finn. Probably he'll never be found."

"I see," said Paula carefully. For a moment she sat rooted, her head slightly inclined, as if she heard the distant ticking of a bomb. "Well, I—I must say, that certainly gives me a lot to make up my mind about, doesn't it, Walter?"

It took Paula threee dreadful days to come to a decision. Late in the afternoon of the fourth day, when everyone on the executive floor had departed, they sat behind the locked door to Walter's office and discussed the details of the plan.

The cruise ship, Walter told her, would leave New York on a Saturday morning, week after next. It would make stops at Port Everglades, Nassau, Jamaica, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. Somewhere along that route, at a time when the best opportunity presented itself, Walter would heave Larry from the stern of the ship. It would have to be in the hours after midnight when most people were in bed or partying, just as long as the decks were clear aft.

Larry would be plied with a good many drinks, enough so that he would be noticeably stoned at table and on the dance floor. Paula was to add a massive dose of chloral hydrate to his final drink, a triple-strength Mickey Finn. She would then guide him to the after deck, supposedly for fresh air.

Larry would be more than drunk when Walter sent him overboard; he would be totally unconscious. In such a state he would drown in the deep waters of the Atlantic. Walter would return to his cabin, Paula would wait a good half hour before screaming that her husband had toppled over the rail. At eighteen knots, Larry would be more than nine miles behind—and who could say how many fathoms down?

"There will be an inquest," Walter said, "and you'll have to testify. That won't be fun. I may even be called myself. But soon after the inquest we'll be free to marry."

"When we get married," asked Paula, "won't they suspect?"

"Let them suspect," he replied. "By that time it won't matter. Because if they had a witness, they would have produced him. And without a witness, they've got nothing."

"About the hundred thousand," said Paula, who was thinking mostly of money. "Later, you won't change your mind—will you, darling?"

Walter smiled indulgently and kissed her. "Of course not, my dear," he soothed. "A hundred thousand is only the tenth part of a million. And I have many millions. Besides, you'll know too much and I wouldn't dare cross you."

"That's true," she replied. "Yes, how true. But when it's over," she continued in a wheedling voice, "I'll have to stay all alone in—in that ugly apartment. For appearances' sake I won't be able to see you until after the inquest, at least. And I'll need a few little extras to cheer me—clothes, and spending money . . . You do understand, darling . . ."

Walter gave her a look which said she was an adorable, but spoiled child. He crossed to his desk and drew out his checkbook. He wrote swiftly and gave her the check. "There, start your bank account with that."

The check was for five thousand "You *are* an angel," she cooed. "But I'll have to hide this from Larry! I'll lock it in my desk and make the deposit tomorrow on my lunch hour."

In order to insure Larry's presence on the voyage, Walter said, Paula was to tell him that *she had* to go. It was to be a command performance because Mr. Ferris would be dictating letters, sending cables in connection with stock transactions, and so on, and Mr. Ferris did not think it proper to take Paula on such a cruise unless her husband came along.

What a laugh that was! thought Paula, but she did agree that it was a foolproof idea.

A small problem developed. Larry had no vacation time coming, Paula reported, and it would be necessary for him to take a leave of absence without pay. He was mighty upset about the loss of income. Walter said that was funny. If Larry but knew it, his money worries would soon be over, but Paula was to tell Larry that she had mentioned the problem to Mr. Ferris and her boss had said he would make it up to Larry out of his own pocket.

It was nearly two weeks before sailing time and Paula

waited in a state of wretched anxiety. Clever as the plan was, she knew that any number of unexpected turns could bring disaster. But on a Saturday morning in September there she was, as if caught in the web of a frightful dream, mounting the gangplank beside Larry, Walter striding firmly ahead of them, taking charge of murder just as confidently as he took charge of everything else.

The whole incredible scheme got off to a bad start. Between Nassau and Jamaica, on a night when Walter was prepared to make his first attempt to put the plan into action, Larry became seasick. They were at table on the main deck, drinking it up, dancing, Paula and Walter trying to hoist Larry atop their wave of false gaiety.

But Larry, coasting in the wrong direction, had become increasingly silent. Suddenly he made a face, clutched himself and hustled off. He remained in the cabin he shared with Paula for the next few days, missing Jamaica entirely, though he did come on deck just long enough to inspect the coastline.

Not until the ship docked at San Juan did he recover, going ashore in good spirits, making his apologies to Walter, promising to be a good sailor now that he had become better adjusted to the rolling of the ship.

Indeed, two hours after the ship had sailed at six on the following evening, he showed no signs of distress. He had eaten a hearty dinner and had declared himself fit, ready to attack the rest of the voyage with gusto.

On the pretext of dictating a long cable to his broker, Walter took Paula to the lounge. "This is it!" he said in a hushed voice. "We'll try again tonight. It's got to work because we haven't many chances left. You have the chloral in your purse?"

"I have it," she said nervously.

"Good. Now the orchestra plays until three a.m. and when they finish a few people will drift out on deck. So we'll stick to the plan and try to get our boy over the rail about two. That will give you plenty of leeway to wait a half hour, rush back into the saloon and sound your distraught alarm.

"Be sure to steer him past my porthole near half past one so there won't be any guesswork on the timing. Load his last drink heavily with chloral, but don't wait for it to take effect. Remember, you can't carry him. Get him seated on deck, then he can black out for keeps.

"Meanwhile, I'll scramble around the after decks above and below, to make sure they're empty. If not, we'll just have to risk waiting until they are. Got all that?"

"Yes, but I—I'm terribly nervous. I'm frightened!"

"Don't be. No matter what happens, keep calm and bluff your way through brazenly. Now go back to Larry, and we'll all meet on the main deck at nine sharp."

Paula could not remember a more agonizing span of time than those hours between nine and two a.m. She felt as if the desperate smile she had camped on her face had been set in cement and would never fade, even if she cried, even if she were struck on the lips with a hammer.

They were a ghastly threesome, so hectically gay, so frantically, falsely welded to fun and togetherness, the music throbbing, the drinks gurgling down as Walter ordered and re-ordered, Larry getting obediently drunk and boisterous, almost as if Walter had commanded him to do so.

Close to one o'clock, as the orchestra took a break, Walter sent Paula a look, then put his arm around Larry's shoulder and said, "This is a good fellow, Paula, a grand fellow. I like him. Yes, sir, I like this guy of yours! When we get back I'm gonna put him to work for *me*. Got a fine job in mind for your boy here, yes, sir! Would you like that, Larry?"

"Like it," said Larry. "Love it, love it! Betcha sweet life, Mr. Ferris," he cried, drumming the bottom of his glass on the table for emphasis.

"Call me Walter," said Walter J. Ferris.

"Walter then," said Larry. "Hell, make it Walt, even better. Hi ya doin', Walt, ole buddy?" He giggled.

Walter smiled thinly. "Drink up, drink up!" he said, lifting his glass. "To Paula, best secretary any man ever had. And beautiful too!"

They drank.

"And here's to the best everlovin' wife *I* ever had," announced Larry, giggling again, though his face went marble when he added, "and let no man, *no man*, cast his shadow between me and my everlovin' baby here, or I'll beat him deader than a junk-yard battery—you believe it!"

"Yes, well, I'm gonna turn in," said Walter, rising quickly. "Feeling groggy, you know. But this is my party, so you kids have a ball! I'll see you at breakfast, won't I . . . ?"

The next phase, right on schedule, went smoothly. Larry was docile, he staggered out willingly to get "fresh air." With satisfaction, Paula noticed that people gaped as she half-carried him from the room. That was important. ~~There should be witnesses to his drunken condition. It would strengthen her story.~~

Paula hiked Larry around the deck, right past Walter's porthole. She did not see Walter, but knew he was there, watching in the darkness of his cabin. When they came to the stern of the ship, Paula eased Larry into a deck chair. Singing loudly, tunelessly, he sprawled across it.

Paula peered anxiously into the shadowy gloom about her, letting her eyes adjust to it. At first she could see no one. But then, with a start, she spied a young couple, locked against each other in a far corner by the rail. They had turned to watch Larry, to stare at her, but apparently they weren't going to play to an audience, and they moved off sheepishly.

When Walter loomed up in the darkness, Larry sagged in the chair, sleeping like death, his face pale and flaccid.

"It's clear!" said Walter in a harsh whisper. "Did you give him the chloral?"

"Enough to knock out ten giants!"

"We'll see," said Walter, stepping toward Larry. "We'll make a little test."

He caught Larry by the hair and gave him a vicious swat across the face, then another. His head lolling, Larry slept on, oblivious.

"More dead than alive," mumbled Walter. He glanced about, then got a hold on Larry and, lifting him easily, moved toward the rail.

The ship rose and fell in a long, lazy seesaw. In its wake, a bubbling phosphorescent trail churned and glistened atop rolling hills of water. There was a mournful sighing of wind, a liquid hissing.

Trembling, Paula saw the vast, lonely ocean crouching under a cloud-draped sky, saw it as a pulsing evil monster waiting there.

She had changed her mind, wanted to cry out, but made only a feeble sound which was torn away by the wind as Walter completed the high, powerful swing. Letting go, he grinned insanely, muttered something about its being two hundred miles to the nearest land and a mile straight down—so here's to good luck.

Looking down, the distance from rail to water seemed immense, frightful. Sobbing now, sick in the deepest part of herself, Paula saw Larry's body entering the water obliquely and with only a small splash, the sound muted by wind and sea and the ~~pounding thrust of the propeller.~~

~~She saw Larry come to the surface far behind, then he quickly faded from sight. Gone.~~

"There, there," Walter murmured as he held her against him. "It's all over, darling. Now buck up and be a good actress, the hysterical wife, the sad little widow . . ."

How superbly simple it all was after that. Everyone believed her story that, drunk, Larry had playfully mounted the rail and toppled overboard. The captain swung the ship about and cruised in circles for nearly three hours. Searchlights blazed, fanning the water, a small power boat was lowered, darting about like a child helping its mother search impossibly for a coin in an ocean of sand. Throughout, the crew and passengers were grave and sad and sympathetic.

The inquest, not as formal and grim as Paula had expected, produced not a hint of foul play. She was questioned politely, almost tenderly. The captain, members of his crew and three passengers were also examined. All supported Paula's testimony eagerly; it was nearly as if they had seen it happen just as she had described it. Walter wasn't even called.

The verdict was accidental death. Man overboard, a drowning at sea.

Walter was so little-boy excited and pleased with the way it all turned out, he bought Paula a big blue convertible and in preparation for the wedding, a whole new wardrobe of expensive clothes.

He decided that under the circumstances it was needless to wait as long as planned. They would have a secret civil ceremony and, with luck, perhaps the news wouldn't leak out for some time to come.

They were married at nine o'clock on a Friday morning, and at ten, as promised, Walter took Paula to the bank and deposited a cashier's check for one hundred thousand dollars to her account. However, he did spoil his image somewhat by telling her that if by some chance she decided to run off with the money, he would spill the entire can of beans. Paula didn't believe for one minute that he would do

any such thing, but she pretended to be properly impressed.

They were catching a one o'clock plane for California, then on to Hawaii. Walter said it was a delightful romantic place to spend a honeymoon, and Paula agreed that it probably was the best choice. Walter was picking Paula up at her apartment, the shabby one which she had shared with Larry, the one she was seeing for the last time.

Dressed in a lovely new frock, Paula was ready at noon when Walter arrived outside. Her bags were packed and grouped neatly together in the hallway—but Paula only smiled a wicked little smile and made no move to answer the repeated, urgent summons of the bell.

It was *Larry* who finally went to the door and swung it wide.

At that moment, if Walter wasn't having a heart attack, he was certainly in fearful pain, making horrible faces.

"Hello, Walt," said Larry softly. "Are you well, old buddy? I think he's got the seasickness," he told Paula over his shoulder.

"Come in, Walter," Paula said with a cat smile. "Have a drink—darling. You'll need it. Oh, you will very definitely need a drink, Walter dear."

Walter made a graceless, stumbling sort of entrance, then collapsed into a chair like a punctured balloon.

"Larry?" he said in a hoarse whisper. "Is—is that you, Larry?"

Larry's smile mocked him. "It's Larry—Walt. Still a little damp and bruised, but very much alive. And I do thank you for your concern, buddy boy."

Walter groped for words. "How—how could you—"

"Tell him, Paula," said Larry. "We owe it to him. After all, Walt has been *extremely* generous."

"Oh, *hasn't* he though," agreed Paula. She poured herself a glass of champagne from a bottle which stood in an iced silver bucket beside her. "More champagne, Larry sweet?"

"Why, yes," Larry said expansively. "I believe I will. Walt? No . . . ? In that case, Paula baby, tell him that hundred thousand dollar story."

"Basically," Paula began, "it was a beautifully simple plan. Or would you call it a counter-plan?" She sipped her champagne happily. "Of course I had the advantage of

being a spy in the enemy camp, so to speak. You see, Walter, pet, I brought home to Larry every step of your naughty little scheme, and Larry took those steps apart and figured, oh so cleverly, cleverly, how to resist them, make them work for us.

"To get our show on the road, we had to have money for certain expenses. What would we ever accomplish without money in this world? Right, Walter? Imagine my surprise when, after only a little prodding, dear Walter himself paid our expenses handsomely with a check for five thousand.

"Gambling on success, Larry quit his ridiculous little job the same day I got the check. His thin, underfed wallet now fat with your money, he went right down and grabbed a plane for Miami. From there he caught another little old plane and went island hopping around the Caribbean.

"Naturally, he stopped at the very same islands where that lovely cruise ship was scheduled to make port. And can you guess what Larry was hunting? Well, I won't keep you in suspense. He was searching for one of those big hundred-dollar-a-day charter fishing boats.

"I see you're beginning to get the, uh—what was it you called it, Walter?—oh, yes, the picture! Anyway, this charter boat had to be just right. It had to be large, and fast. Also, the captain and his mate had to be willing to uh, aid and abet, shall we say, a hoax.

"But such types are not always easy to find, and Larry didn't have any luck until he got to San Juan. There he found the perfect combination. For a thousand dollars he hired the boat and the men. Their part was absurdly easy. All they had to do was follow that brilliantly lighted cruise ship out of San Juan and keep pace with it until the crucial moment. Meanwhile, they ran without lights, hidden well back in the darkness.

"You might be wondering, Walter, how we could arrange it so that you would dump Larry overboard on the route from San Juan, but we were always in control, could pick our own spot. Remember how Larry played seasick and didn't allow himself to become vulnerable until we left San Juan?

"Don't be restless, Walter. I'm almost finished. The moment you left the deck, after throwing Larry overboard, I signaled the boat with a powerful, shielded flashlight which I had concealed earlier, and Larry had his own water-

proof signal light strapped to his body, so that he could be spotted quickly in the dark.

"There were certain risks, it was quite dangerous—and I was truly frightened the whole time. I nearly called it off, but now it all seems worthwhile. Oh, very! Because it's so nice to be rich. Not by your standards, Walter, but by our own.

"A hundred thousand is only the tenth part of a million, perhaps, but with our modest needs, we can live quite decently, thank you, on just the interest.

"Oh, the future is just positively unlimited, and how can we ever tell you of our *undying* gratitude, my dear, dear, Walter?"

"You're just a couple of con artists!" cried Walter. "It was a criminal trick, an obvious swindle! And I'll—I'll have you both arrested!"

"Will you?" said Larry. "How would you like to hear a tape recording of one of those murder-scheme chats you had with Paula in your office?"

"But I'm *married* to Paula," he whined.

"Not at all," said Larry, grinning. "I have returned. Tomorrow you'll be reading the story I told of how I *fell* overboard, had enough sense to remove some of my clothing so that I could better stay afloat until dawn when the captain of a certain fishing boat spied me and plucked me from the water. My well-paid liars will swear that since I was wearing only my underwear and could remember nothing, they took me to their own home and out of the goodness of their big hearts, cared for me until my memory returned, even lending me money for the flight home.

"Would you want to deny that story, Walt? No . . . ? Then except for the formalities, your marriage is annulled, and mine is beginning all over again. C'mon, baby, let's get moving! Maybe Walt would be willing to help us down to your new convertible with some of the luggage.

"And Walt, old buddy, since *I'll* be going with Paula on *your* honeymoon, you wouldn't make us a gift of those two tickets to Hawaii—would you . . . ?"

HORSE-COLLAR HOMICIDE

ARTHUR PORGES

I'VE BEEN on some rather unusual cases with Lieutenant Ader. As the only qualified pathologist in the area, I help out the Norfolk Police occasionally, since they don't trust their coroner, a political hack. You might say I'm an unofficial crime lab—that's me, Dr. Joel Hoffman.

Now of all the fantastic homicides we've tackled together, the weirdest in a long time is the one I think of as "the man who died grinning through a horse-collar." That description has a kind of insane rhythm to it that appeals to me.

The case began with the mysterious death of Leonard Bugg Lakewood, head of one of the older Norfolk families.

I was examining some tissue under the microscope, when Lt. Ader popped into Pasteur Hospital to ask my advice.

"This is a real tricky one, Joel," he said. "Looks like natural death—a stroke—but the family doctor is none too sure, and I don't like the over-all smell of the situation. Thought I'd kick it around with you before insisting on an autopsy."

I sighed. In ninety-nine per cent of such cases, it turns out to be by natural causes, but only after weary hours of lab work eliminating the abnormal. Still, the public should be grateful to people like Ader, who don't automatically take the easy way out. Besides, he does have a remarkably good nose for the scent of murder.

"Okay," I said. "Fill me in on the big picture, and we'll go on from there."

In such matters Ader is very concise, as if giving testi-

mony; you could write down a very neat outline by recording his words verbatim. It seems that Lakewood, a man of sixty-three, was a sort of benevolent—well, maybe not so benevolent, either—tyrant. He was strong for tradition, and proud of his English ancestry, which goes back to William the Conqueror. The way he told it—often and loud—Lakewoods fought for Charles I, smuggled aristocrats out of revolutionary France, and died with the Light Brigade. Not the same ancestor, of course.

At least once a year, either at Christmas or on some anniversary of a Lakewood historical triumph, he gave a family party in the old style—the kind of affair you find in "Pickwick" or Irving's "Bracebridge Hall." It tickled the man to revive ancient diversions and bully his long suffering relatives into participating for prizes.

"There's your motive," I said airily. "Anybody could get killed for such a foul scheme. Did he set up a Maypole in the patio?"

"Think you're exaggerating?" Ader grunted. "They've had some fine 18th Century May-day celebrations on the grounds. But this time it was just a run of the mill affair, with only the immediate family present. The latest gimmick in old games was the rural sport of grinning through a horse-collar."

"Did you say 'grinning'? And through a horse-collar?" I asked.

"That's right. They were celebrating some Lakewood who shot a Cromwell general in the rump. The way this game is played, you hang up a horse-collar. Then each person gets behind it and makes funny faces with his head framed in the thing. The one who gets the most yaks wins."

"On that basis, Red Skelton could have been King of England. What does he win—a horse to fit the collar?"

"In this case," Ader said sourly, "the prize seemed to be a fatal stroke. The old man performed last. He had just stuck his head inside, and was mugging like crazy, when kaboom—he has a kind of epileptic fit, and falls down deader than a salted mackerel. Now I ask you!"

"What's to ask? The man was over sixty, after all. Too much excitement. Any previous evidence of epilepsy?"

"That's the point—none. The old boy was healthy as a stud bull. The only time he'd ever been inside a hospital was during the first World War. He was wounded."

"Just for the record, then, who would want to kill him?"

"Anybody in the family, the way I see it."

"You have a rather jaundiced view. Do all parents seem likely murder victims to the Norfolk Police?"

"There's more of that tendency in the average family than most people realize," Ader said soberly. "Parents hang on too tightly in this country."

"Don't let's get Freudian," I begged. "Who's in this homicidal family of Lakewood's?"

"I'll tell you," Ader said. "His second wife, Ethel—she's about forty-five. Two sons: Walter, aged thirty-four, and James, thirty-one—both by his first wife. Then there's a daughter of his and Ethel's—Jeanette. She's twenty-three."

"What became of his first wife?"

"She couldn't take it. Divorced him soon after James was born. Probably she named Queen Victoria as correspondent!"

"Both boys married, I presume."

"Oh, no," Ader snapped. "Single, and not enjoying their freedom one bit."

I raised my brows at this, and he said: "There's a good motive, all right. Way I hear it, the old man kept the family under his thumb financially; and even when the sons managed to meet young women, they were never up to Papa's standards for the Lakewoods. When you add to that the distribution of close to a million bucks in stocks and bonds . . . It's a screwy situation all right. The boys were never allowed to work for a living. Mentally, their father was back in the 18th Century, when gentlemen didn't do anything commercial."

"Then how did he accumulate a million dollars?"

"Ah, it's all right to inherit money. *His* father was a tycoon—oil, I think."

"So the boys just sat around playing gentlemen."

"Not quite—that's the hell of it. There was too much Victorian Century. They couldn't work, but they had to study Greek and Latin. And the diversions of a gentlemen—wine, women and gambling—were taboo. They went to college, but only for classics, although both boys managed to sneak in a few science courses. James tried chemistry, and Walter physics; but Lakewood found out, so they didn't get very far. As for Jeanette, the old man didn't know it, but she was studying shorthand and typing on the sly,

and would have escaped at any moment. Still, there was no open rebellion by anybody."

"Brother," I said. "I see what you mean about motive. But still, on the surface, it sounds more like natural death. Why are you in doubt?"

He shrugged.

"Partly instinct; partly the family doctor. He says that the attack was almost a classic of the epileptic type, and yet there's no previous history of epilepsy. He feels that a fatal bout without any earlier warnings is very uncommon. Also there was some monkey business with the lights."

"Such as?"

"When Lakewood was making funny faces through the horse-collar, the lights flickered briefly just before he had that stroke."

"You're thinking of electrocution?"

"At first I did. But I don't need an expert to rule that out. The man had a normal heart. A slight jolt wouldn't do it; and there are no burns left by a strong current. It's mighty hard to electrocute a healthy man on a dry floor. You need very good contacts and high voltage for several seconds. He never even touched the horse-collar to any extent; and the whole family was in the room, far out of reach."

"What got you into the case officially?"

"The doctor. He's reluctant to sign a death certificate without a post mortem. A good man."

"Must be Dr. Lewis; he's the only first class diagnostician around."

"You guessed it."

"Well," I reminded him, "it's up to you. You have the legal right to demand an autopsy."

"I know," he said unhappily. "But if I'm wrong, the D.A. will crucify me, let alone the family."

"Nevertheless, you want one." I know Ader. He'd drag the devil out of Hell by the tail on Friday the 13th if there was an official subpoena for Old Nick.

"I've no choice, seeing that Lewis feels the way he does. The body will be brought here tonight. Give it the works, will you?"

"It just came to me," I grinned. "The obvious cause of death." I paused, and Ader brightened. "Horse-cholera!"

"Fun-neel" Ader growled. "Remember—I want your sup-

er-special P.M. on the corpse."

"Roger and out. Now let me get back to my cancer cells."

The next day I did the autopsy on Lakewood. Following the usual routine, I started with the skull. It wasn't much use to look further. My first find was a surprise indeed: the old man had a metal plate in his head, one of those platinum jobs they used in World War I. Apparently, he'd suffered a nasty skull injury, probably from a shell fragment, and needed the plate to protect the brain until there was a fresh growth of bone. Over the years, new bone had covered the metal quite nicely, so that the outside of his head was as good as ever. Now platinum is one of the noble elements, and doesn't corrode easily. After forty years or so, this thin patch, however, was somewhat darkened and discolored, which seemed a little strange. Still, I was more intrigued by the brain tissue around the platinum. It was a mess. I couldn't make much sense out of the situation. It was not a stroke caused by the usual broken blood vessel; the damage was too extensive and abnormal for that. The brain tissue looked more as if acid had been injected, or a hot poker mashed around. Yet there wasn't so much as a hair out of place on the outside. If a needle, or heat, or electricity had reached the brain, it didn't go through the scalp and bone. This was a real baffler.

I went through the rest of the P.M., but didn't expect to find anything else, and wasn't disappointed. Of course, the microscopic and chemical tests remained, and could take weeks, but they seemed uncalled for. Lakewood had undoubtedly died because of deep, wide-spread brain lesions, and those alone. Yet it looked as if Ader and Lewis were right to be suspicious, since nowhere in the literature could I find any natural cause that would explain the injuries.

I reported all this to the lieutenant, and it didn't make him happy.

"I appreciate your information, Joel, but unless we know the 'how and why' of this mysterious damage, we can't even begin to build a case. We still don't know it's even murder. There could be a natural cause—some crazy accident, or a new type of disease."

"That's possible, but highly unlikely. In any case, I'd

know a little more if I could get the complete details of the party. Are you planning to question the family again?"

"I'll have to. I got only the main facts last time. So if you'd like to come along . . ."

"You bet I would."

He arranged to pick me up the next morning, and left. I devoted some concentrated thought to the problem over night, but got nowhere slowly. They say you can't poison an egg without getting through the shell, which is sure to give it away. That seemed to be one phase of the problem here. If Lakewood was murdered, the killer got to his brain without piercing scalp or skull. Furthermore, he—or she—did it without being near the victim. On the surface that was so far-fetched a theory that I began to think maybe Ader was right, and we were up against a new disease. I was still brooding about it when I dozed off late that night.

The following morning Ader came by at nine, and we went out to the Lakewood house, a huge quasi-Greek mansion with extensive grounds. We got the family together and grilled them. They were resentful, but passive; the old man had apparently knocked all the fight out of them, which made our job easier. I studied them, while they were being examined by Ader, as if hoping to spot a possible murderer by inspection.

Ethel Lakewood was a faded, twittery woman who suggested a dancing mouse. As a killer, she hardly seemed to qualify, except that I know better. There are no obvious characteristics that typify a murderer.

Walter, the older son, was a thin, nervous type, with hot, intolerant eyes. He had thick, spiky hair that made him resemble one of those Bolshevik bombers so popular with cartoonists a generation ago. His voice was startlingly deep, as if belonging to a much larger frame.

The other son, James, was still trying to play Joe College. Perhaps he felt that the old man had wasted his children's youth, and he wanted to hang on to what was left of his. But a balding man of thirty-one, with plenty of jowl, can't look much like a sophomore.

The only refreshing sight among this bunch was Jeannette, a slim, dark girl, almost Italianate in appearance, with a yummy figure and eyes that danced with vivacity. Evidently Lakewood had not yet succeeded in crushing her

spirit, and I couldn't help rejoicing that now he never would.

Since James was the most articulate, Ader let him do practically all the talking. He brought out the horse-collar, and showed us how it had been suspended in the doorway of the huge parlor. The long hall behind it was kept dark, so that in the blaze of the brilliantly lit room each face framed by the collar was sharply etched, and every grimace visible to the audience.

I studied the heavy thing as James babbled. He was delighted to mingle with us commoners, having been starved for companionship, it would seem. The collar suggested a giant's toilet seat to my inexperienced eye but then I'm unfamiliar with draft horses, although I risk a buck or two on the racing kind occasionally.

"Now tell me," Ader was saying, "was this thing just hung up in the doorway, or was there more to it?"

"It was fastened right there," James said. "Naturally it was braced so as not to swing around, and it was decorated too. All sorts of colored paper around it. Walter fixed it up that way. Father wasn't sure that was right, but Walter read it in a book.

"He didn't know as much about old customs as he thought." Walter rumbled in that incongruous bass of his.

James tittered. "He was flabbergasted that you actually looked up anything," he said. "Usually you didn't care any more than we did. All of us wanted to get the fool party over, and didn't care one bit how accurate the games were. We always let Father win, anyhow. It made him easier to get along with."

"Now, boys," their mother twittered. "You know it was really very charming."

"You needn't pretend, Mother," Jeanette said firmly. "You hated it as much as we did. People have to live in the present. Daddy was mentally disturbed—why not admit it?"

"Why, Jeanette—I never—" The little woman suggested an agitated parakeet in her flutterings.

"What about the lights?" Ader cut in. "I understand they flickered in a peculiar way."

"That's right," James said eagerly, anxious to regain the floor. "You remember, Ma—Father was just making those funny faces, pulling out the corners of his mouth with his

fingers, when the lights dimmed and brightened again. He sort of reeled back, with a crazy, wild look, clapped his hands to his head, and then tumbled forward. He rolled right under the horse-collar into this room, and when we ran over, he was dead."

"How's the wiring here?" Ader demanded. "Any overload?"

"Oh, my, no," Mrs. Lakewood said. "What with electric ovens and air conditioners and washer-driers, we had special cables put in, didn't we, boys?"

"That's true," James said. "No reason for our lights to flicker. Must have been something at the power-house." He gave that thin giggle again. "Maybe a sparrow on the wire outside. Walter would know—he's the physics expert around here."

"Some expert," his brother boomed. "I had just two lousy semesters when the old man butted in."

"Daddy wanted him to study Greek and Latin," Jeanette added. "He said that's all a gentleman needed. Dead languages. And for me, music, embroidery—ugh!"

"Now, Jeanette!" her mother protested.

"Did anybody leave the room," Ader asked, "while Mr. Lakewood was performing?"

They looked at each other.

"Mother was here, and Jeanie," James said. "And Walter—he was in the arm-chair."

"That's right," Walter agreed. "We were all here. Nobody would have dared to leave while Father was doing his stuff."

That seemed to be all Ader could think of, so he broke up the conference. He took the horse-collar along, since it was the only evidence we were likely to have. Neither of us felt very hopeful about it. I think he brought it because there was nothing else available. Even then, he passed the buck to me.

"If the old guy was murdered," he growled, "this may have been involved—don't ask me how. I wish you'd take it to your lab and go over it."

"Right," I said. "I'll have another go at the skull, too. I'm far from satisfied with what we've got so far. Maybe I missed the boat."

"More like a submarine," he said.

No doubt about it, Ader was unhappy. If after taking the

body away from the family and messing it about, we came up with a fat nothing, the D.A. would singe his tail good.

That afternoon I put the horse-collar on a table, and scrutinized it with minute care. The staff had a good laugh at my expense. I won't repeat the comments about horse-doctor Hoffman, and did the patient die of the heavens.

The collar was made of wood covered with leather, and a faint odor of the stable still clung to it. There were a number of tiny studs, or nails, forming a pleasing pattern, and, on the whole, it had the good proportions that go with something that's functional. At a certain angle I could see striations, as if something had been wound about the collar in tight strands, but assumed they were marks of the decorative padding.

Getting exactly nowhere with the horse-collar, I decided to have another look at Lakewood's head. This time, as I twisted and pried, studying scalp and bone, something hit the table-top with a tiny click. I picked it up, and found to my surprise that it was a silver filling.

I had made a casual examination of the old man's dentition, noting that he was one of the lucky few who retain most of their teeth through the age of sixty. Now I went over his mouth again. The silver filling was the only metal one, although there were a few plastic jackets. I wondered why this plug was loose enough to drop out. Was it just a coincidence? I couldn't help thinking there was some simple tie-in eluding me in a tantalizing way.

My real break came just a few minutes later. I went back to the horse-collar to put it away. But when I picked it up, I noticed that a stray paper clip was sticking strangely to one place on the leather. I pulled it off, and there were nail-heads underneath. I touched the clip to the pattern at other points, and it clung. The clip itself wasn't magnetized, I found; therefore the nails were. How did they get that way?

Now, although I called myself jokingly a one man crime lab, I'm primarily a pathologist. I don't know beans about electricity and magnetism, and would rather dissect an elephant than tinker with my wife's vacuum cleaner. But like any scientifically trained man, I can locate information. In this case, I used the brain picking technique. In short, I paid a visit to Professor Harry Matison, who teaches physics at the Norfolk Institute of Technology.

What he told me tore the case wide open.

In order for those nails to become magnetized, they would have to be rubbed one by one with a magnet, which is hardly practicable—or the collar would have to be exposed to a strong magnetic field. This last meant either passing the collar through a charged coil, or, more likely, winding wires about the leather to make the whole thing itself into one huge coil.

"All right," I asked Harry, my excitement growing, "suppose this horse-collar was wire-wound, and had current passing through it—would that electrocute a man who put his head inside?"

"Electrocute! No, no, no—you could keep your noggin there all day. But just hold a piece of metal in your hand—a good conductor, like steel or aluminum—inside the coil, and it'll be white hot in seconds. That is," he added hastily, "if you've enough windings and the right amperage. But only metals are affected that way. They melt ores in a vacuum by such induced currents—no wires need touch the metal."

"Suppose the man had a platinum plate in his skull."

He whistled softly.

"You're the pathologist. Suppose the plate got even red-hot for half a second—and it could very easily. What would that do to the brain?"

"I know what it did," I said grimly. "And would it also affect metal fillings in the teeth—say expand and loosen them?"

"Why," he said, "you'd put your head through the ceiling. Imagine a white-hot filling against a nerve!"

Well, that put the lid on it. Ader's men found tiny bits of wire in Walter's room—he was the frustrated physicist, remember. It was easy enough to trace purchase of several hundred feet of wire to him. He had volunteered to prepare the horse-collar, and even invented an authority for covering the thing with tinsel, so as to hide the windings. He knew about the old man's war-wound; the younger children and second wife apparently had forgotten if they were ever told. It was a simple matter to bring a lead and switch under the rug to his favorite arm-chair. Then, when Lakewood's head was nicely framed in what was then a powerful electric coil, Walter just reached behind the seat to complete a momentary connection. The metal plate

must have been red-hot almost instantly, and the result very much like fatal epilepsy.

Confronted with all these facts, Walter broke down, and confessed. If he'd bluffed it out, we might have had our troubles in court, so fantastic was the truth. But his father had softened the boy's spine, and there would never be any fight in him. At the sentencing, he acted so peculiarly that they sent him to an institution instead of the chair. I'm not sure he wasn't better off there than at home under the old man's regime.

The house was sold; Mrs. Lakewood left town, and Jeannette soon got a good job as secretary to the President of Star Records.

I was most pleased with James, however. He married a red-headed show-girl, and promises to run through his third of a million in record time.

SCHEDULE FOR AN ASSASSINATION

ROBERT EDMOND ALTER

THE HIGHROAD snaked up to the very rim of the steep hill. From their car window the two assassins could look straight down to the blue floor of the cliff-girt harbor, where the little Mediterranean city—all whitewashed and slate-roofed—squatted like a broken angel food cake. They could see the tiny fishing boats moored in the pumice-white water, and the little ant-like people moving about the quays and squares.

Katov—the man who had actually fired the shot that had killed the visiting politician—drummed his fingertips nervously on the dashboard, and when he spoke his eyes and voice were edged with anger.

"All right, all right. They're not after us yet. Let's get on."

Vologin, who dated his term of service back to the Spanish Civil War, grunted and ground the gears. His physical appearance—short and swarthy—matched exactly with his temper and disposition.

"They better not come after us. I'll give them something—"

Katov looked at him, exasperated by his surly bravado. "Shut up, can't you?" he snapped. "Of course they'll come after us. They'll phone ahead, and the police will be out . . . probably the army too."

Vologin was a driver who fought the wheel instead of steering with it. He swerved away from a boy driving a sledge ox along the shoulder. The boy shouted after him, and Vologin shouted back and put on speed.

"Stop complaining," he said to Katov. "I've outwitted the

bourgeois for twenty-four years. We'll be down at the villa in an hour."

"If we miss the roadblocks."

"By the time they get their roadblocks up, we'll be playing *vingt-et-un* at the villa and I shall be winning your money."

Vologin skinned past an oncoming Mercedes-Benz, almost forcing it from the road. A horn hooted indignantly. "Fat swine!" Vologin muttered darkly.

"But we're two hours ahead of schedule," Katov fretted. "The yacht won't come for us until four."

Vologin looked ahead and then dodged a pothole in the road, making the tires whine. "That couldn't be helped," he said shortly. "Our orders were to shoot him when he landed. It was their fault, not ours, that the government yacht was two hours ahead of time."

"Yes, but *we'll* pay for it."

An old man walking the road missed death by an inch. Vologin didn't spare him a glance. "Why must you always be a worrier?" he wondered. "Why must you be one?"

Katov didn't know. He was, but he couldn't help it. For two days they had sat in the greasy little rented room overlooking the quay . . . and he'd worried. Then the government yacht had arrived and had tied up at the buoy, and then the politician had come ashore with a flock of minor visiting dignitaries.

Secret servicemen and uniformed policemen had been pushing everywhere and everyone on the quay, and Vologin, scowling out the window, had snarled, "Lackeys—all of them. I'd like to give them something in the neck to remember me by."

Damp with nervous sweat, agitated, Katov had pushed him aside and aimed the rifle out the window, picturing his victim in the scope. It had brought the politician in as clear and lifelike as an actor on a theater screen. Katov had set the fixed reticules on the man's chest . . . then he'd stalled.

"I don't think we should do it," he'd whispered. "We're too far ahead of schedule. We'll be stuck in that deserted villa for two hours while the police are searching for us."

"What do you mean *not do it*?" Vologin had gasped. "We're not private individuals who can call the turn. We have no choice. Our orders are to shoot him when he lands. Here, give me the gun if you've lost your nerve."

But Katov had no qualms about killing. He turned back to the window and put the politician in the scope again. The man was still standing down there, shaking hands, laughing; Katov could see his lips moving . . .

And then he'd squeezed the trigger, with one convulsive movement.

As they had fled the building, they'd bumped into a woman heavy with child, coming up the stairs. Vologin had slammed by her rudely, but Katov had been careful not to touch her, had murmured, "Pardon me," in passing.

When they'd piled into the waiting car, Vologin had said, "We should have shot her, too. She'll give them our description."

But Katov had said nothing. He'd thought how odd it was that he'd just killed a man, and then immediately had bumped into a woman who was bringing a new life into the world. *I suppose that's what makes the balance*, he'd thought. But Vologin had been right. They should have killed her. And then he really began to worry.

Forty-five minutes later the road was still on the rise. The mountains were sparse, pumice-streaked, and with blotches of shrubbery like a green leprosy. Katov was sick with suspense. Beyond each new curve he expected to see a roadblock confronting them, and he kept his right hand inside his jacket fingering the butt of the Mauser that was holstered under his armpit.

Vologin was gripping the wheel as though he were thinking of an enemy's throat, but he smiled when he glanced at the worried Katov.

"You see? Like I said—no trouble. We'll be down at the villa in fifteen minutes or so."

Right then the left rear went *PLAM!* and the car veered wildly toward the edge of the cliff, Vologin fighting the wheel savagely, and Katov shouting, "Keep your foot off the brake!"

The car lurched to a jarring halt and Katov put a trembling hand to his face to wipe at his mouth. Having to shoot the politician ahead of schedule had been the first mishap; then meeting the woman with child and not killing her; and now this. *What's coming next?* he wondered. *Something is . . . I can feel it.*

Vologin swore viciously, and poked his head out the window to look back at the defunct tire.

"Would you believe it?" he muttered. "That's the first blowout I've had since the war."

Katov looked around at the mountains with a cold glow of desperation. There was a green-choked cut leading off to his right. He eyed it reflectively, tasting his lips.

Vologin turned from the window. "Well," he said decisively, "it doesn't matter. We're way ahead of our schedule anyhow. Ten minutes to change the tire won't hurt us."

"A roadblock can be erected in ten minutes also. And *that'll* hurt."

"Worry about it when we get to it, will you? Give me a hand."

But Katov's creed was caution. He'd had enough. He opened the door and let himself out. "They're looking for two men in a car," he said. "Perhaps you can get through by yourself. I'm going to cut across country."

Vologin was stunned. "Are you mad? They'll pick you up on foot like a rabbit with a broken hindleg. Come back here!"

Katov shook his head and turned away.

"I'll meet you at the villa," he called. "Providing we both get through. Luck, good luck!"

"Katov—you're insane!"

Katov ignored the announcement. He dashed across the road and dodged into the shelter of the bushy ravine. He'd lasted ten years in the world's riskiest business; he wasn't going to throw himself away now by walking blindly into a trap. Caution, caution. Vologin was a fool who left too much to chance.

He created a dry wake of billowing dust as he worked his way down the ravine and into a shallow valley. The place was lifeless and fallow. Its agriculture had deteriorated years ago with the invasion of the Axis powers.

Katov hurried across a dead checkerboard that had once produced olives, grapes, and grain. The abandoned peasant huts were gaping ruins with tumbled-in roofs, overgrown with burdocks, splotchy with rust and decay. It suited him fine; being observed was the one thing he didn't want, right now.

He cleared the silent valley and started up the barren hills. Overhead the hazy sun smouldered like a branding iron, and everything was dry dust and slipping shale. He paused, fighting for breath, and looked at his wrist watch. 3:00. It was going to be a near thing. He simply had to

reach the deserted villa by four. From experience he knew that those in the yacht wouldn't wait. He cursed softly and started climbing again. At that moment he felt very underpaid and put upon, and wished that he'd gone into another profession. Something with security to it.

He stumbled onto a shaggy plain and was confronted by a great sprawling ruin—a palace once, long before the coming of Christianity. But history—other than that which concerned the organization for which he labored—meant nothing to Katov. He could see a road running below the ruins, and to save time he decided to cut through the old palace. He walked across a spoiled courtyard, up broad steps and under an archway.

He tramped heedlessly down stilled corridors, through a queen's suite and sunken baths, into chambers pockmarked and ringed with mammoth black pillars . . .

Suddenly he was lost.

He scowled, looking around at the tortuous arrangement of endless rooms and corridors. He was in a labyrinth. Silly, he said. Retrace yourself. Well . . . turn right? No, that wasn't familiar. All right, go left then. He looked at his watch. 3:20. Bad. Very bad indeed. He started walking fast. He walked for three minutes and came into a chamber with black pillars. Back to his starting point.

Katov looked at the lichenous walls desperately, tasting a sharp irony when he reminded himself that he was the man who never walked blindly into a trap.

Something incongruous to the dusty stillness of the four-thousand-year-old ruin sounded in the air. Katov started, turning his head, then recognized the sound. Car brakes squealing on the road. He heard the muted, distant slam of a car door, and he started to shout.

A voice—not too far off—answered. "Where are you?"

"Here! I can't find my way out."

"Continue to call!"

Katov went toward the voice, his right hand inside his jacket and resting on the Mauser-butt. The stranger had a car, and that was something Katov needed. He rounded a corner and almost ran full-front into a uniformed policeman.

For a dead moment they appeared to belong in the ruin as two forgotten statues. Then the policeman said, "Who are you? What are you doing in here?"

"I—I'm a tourist. I got lost."

"How did you get up here? I saw no car on the road."

Katov swallowed and managed to work out a smile. "I hiked up from the village . . . I'm staying there."

"What village? Do you mean Vikiros?"

Katov grabbed at it. "Yes."

The policeman put a hand to the top of his holster, casually.

"I'd better see your papers," he suggested. "Vikiros has been an abandoned ruin since '42."

Katov retained his smile, nodded slowly, saying, "I've got them right here, officer."

The Mauser's explosion let loose a thunder of running echoes.

The policeman went over backwards as though struck by the blast of a grenade. He was dead when he hit the aged flagstones. Only his hands continued to twitch, as if seeking something.

The man in the uniform who left the ruin and cut through the weeds down to the police car waiting on the dirt road, walked with a grim smile. The time was 3:45. That gave Katov fifteen minutes to drive to the deserted villa. Ample time. He opened the car door, slid in, and paused to adjust the officer's cap on his head. He checked his appearance in the rearview mirror. Very satisfactory. He really couldn't help chuckling as he started the engine.

The old villa was at the end of a promontory, clinging tenaciously in decay to the rocky shore. Katov drove down the wooded drive with complete confidence. He rounded a bend and saw the glimmer of limestone walls through the latticework of greenery. He was wondering if Vologin had also managed to get through when he heard a shot.

He jammed the brakes, grabbed his pistol, opened the door and crouched down in the road, looking around at the shrubbery. And then he saw another police car drawn up in the weeded drive before the old villa. A gun crashed again, somewhere.

He stalled, wondering. They couldn't be after him, not in this uniform. And they couldn't have found out about the dead policeman, because he'd hidden the body in the ruins only ten minutes ago.

Vologin must have reached the villa then, was here

somewhere waiting for him. But he hadn't come alone. Somewhere along the road Vologin had picked up the law.

I knew it, Katov raged. The careless fool! He can't keep out of trouble. And now I'll have to help him. He went at the shrubs in a running crouch and worked his way up closer to the walls of the old villa. Then he paused catching his breath, and looked around.

He saw an armed policeman standing behind a pine tree. The officer was waving at him to get down. "I've chased one of those assassins in here," he called to Katov. "He's in that patio somewhere. Now that you're here we can circle him."

Katov nodded numbly, wishing that the policeman wasn't so far off and that he might risk a shot at him. But he couldn't afford to tip his hand until he was certain of success. Then he had an inspiration; he would pretend to capture Vologin, and when the policeman lowered his guard . . .

Katov waved and started slipping through the shrubbery around to the north end of the crumbling patio wall. He heard Vologin trade a shot with the policeman, and grinned. What a surprise this was going to be for his friend.

He edged up to the wall and raised his head to look into the patio. It was a great, wildly unkempt place, like a secret garden in a fairy tale. He saw Vologin's hunched back sixty yards away. Vologin was crouching behind an old marble statue, peering out at the shrubbery in the tense posture of a man looking for a shot.

Katov, still watching him, started to scramble over the wall. He saw Vologin straighten up suddenly and start to raise his pistol . . . but the policeman was quicker. A shot whacked out of the shrubbery, and Vologin's head snapped back. He spun around grotesquely, got twisted in his own legs and sprawled headlong onto the flagstones.

Katov couldn't believe it. Just when everything was going his way. That impetuous trigger-crazy Vologin! Still—the game wasn't over yet. Perhaps Vologin wasn't dead. But no matter, the important thing was to get close to the policeman when his guard was down and let him have it.

He started picking his way through the tangled growth hurriedly.

Vologin, blood dribbling from his mouth, raised his

head and looked at Katov coming for him. He was going out in the same manner he'd lived—hating.

Katov didn't even get a chance to call before Vologin's bullet hit him high in the chest.

He slammed into the ground, tried to raise himself, tried to shout at his distant friend, but his arms turned to liquid, and the only thing that came from his mouth was a warm, briny liquid. As from far away he heard Vologin shout:

"There's something to remember me by . . . you capitalist lackey!"

AMBITION

MICHAEL BRETT

I FLICKED the ashes off my dollar cigar, leaned back in my chair and shook my head sadly. "Pete, I think you ought to visit a good doctor and have him look you over. There's something wrong with the machinery inside your head. Maybe you've been working too hard, maybe you ought to take a trip to Florida, get out in the sun and relax. Take a dame with you, live it up a little."

Pete Granite was a tall, dark-haired, handsome guy. He was a good man with a knife and a gun, and he'd used both weapons for me in the past without leaving a trace. Pete goes for classy dames and they go for him. He likes the good life and he lives it up real good. Pete's ambitious, and that's all right with me, because I like to see guys in my organization who want to make something out of themselves. Lately though, he's been knocking around town with a beautiful dolly and he's got her set up in a fancy apartment overlooking Central Park. He spreads the word around that the dame is paying the tab, but he's broke all the time, so his story doesn't add up. It's time I learned the score.

"Sit down," I said. "Take it easy. Have a drink."

He sat, swallowed a shot of bourbon, and said, "Boss, I tell you that old man knocked off Harry Apples. Hogan pulled me in and had me sitting in the squad room when this guy came in asking to speak to him. He told Hogan that he killed Harry."

I sighed patiently. "Hogan didn't believe him."

Pete stood up. "Boss, I tell you the old man really

sounded like he did it. He said he killed Harry and then buried him in the basement."

"He sounds like some kind of nut. Who is he anyway?"

"His name's Jonathan Sunbeam."

"You know something, Pete, you kind of surprise me. You think that cops are stupid or something? Right off you tell me that this Sunbeam guy is about seventy-five years old. Seventy-five year old guys don't go around knocking off top syndicate men like Harry. If anybody chilled Harry it figures to be some out of town guns, maybe some boys from Detroit or Chicago specially brought in to do the job."

Pete nodded. "Yeah, it figures that way, boss, but that old man knew a lot of things about Harry."

"Anybody who reads newspapers knows lots of things about Harry Apples. Pick up any newspaper and you can read how he was a big man in the organization, big in narcotics, protection, loan sharking. So what does that mean?" I had to laugh in spite of myself. "Pete, you're supposed to be a hip guy, a guy who's been around. Do you know what a crank is?"

"I know, boss."

"Let me straighten you out, Pete. The cops are always bothered by cranks right after a sensational murder, or when somebody disappears. There's a mad dash by these quacks to get over to the police so they can confess to the crime. Loonies, crackpots, weirdos, they're all over the place, but the cops know who they are. It's their business. All they have to do is listen to them and they recognize them."

"This old guy wasn't any crank, boss. He even knew that you and Harry were partners."

"He got that out of the newspapers."

There was a long silence. Pete poured himself another drink and downed it. He pursed his lips. "He told Hogan what kind of suit Harry was wearing. He even described his diamond stickpin."

I leaned forward. "Did he show Hogan the stickpin?"

"No, but . . ."

"But what? If the old man really knocked Harry off and wanted to pay for it, he'd have the stickpin to show, or something." I shook my head. "I don't think you understand these things, Pete. These crackpots are always looking for publicity. The cops claim they come out when

there's a full moon. There are people who complain that their neighbors are throwing cockroaches into their apartments. They say they're being followed by spies, or little green people from outer space, or they know a guy who's making an atomic bomb in his basement and plans to blow up Manhattan at noon."

"Yeah, I know you're right, boss. I know about those creeps, but this Sunbeam guy even told Hogan how he knocked Harry off."

I took a long, hard look. "Maybe you better tell me all about this. Start at the beginning. Get back to Hogan. Why did he take you in?"

Pete shrugged. "I was over at the Chez Briand having a few drinks when Hogan came in and said he wanted to talk to me. He brought me downtown and started asking questions about where I was when Armondo got knocked off in Jersey."

"You walked away clean there."

"That's right, boss. Two shots through the head and I just left him in the car. Nobody seen or heard anything. I didn't leave any prints, nothing. But Hogan acted as though he knew something."

"Forget it. Don't let that bother you. You had an alibi."

"That's right, but when a hard-nose bull like Hogan wants to bring you in, you go. It ain't the first time he's brought me in for questioning, and it won't be the last."

"A little discomfort is one of the occupational hazards of your job, Pete. But you get paid for it."

"No complaints there, boss. Anyway, I'm talking to Hogan about five minutes and all of a sudden a cop walks over to Hogan's desk and says there's a Jonathan Sunbeam who wants to talk to Hogan on a very important matter. So Hogan tells me to take a chair against the wall, and Sunbeam walks in, sits down at Hogan's desk and starts telling about how he knocked off Harry Apples. I take a good look at this bird and wonder what's with him, because he don't look like a gun."

"Did you hear all the conversation?"

"Yeah, he tells Hogan he's got Harry buried in the cellar. Hogan just nods and smiles, humoring Sunbeam along. Then Hogan asks him why he knocked Harry off, and Sunbeam says, 'Because I'm the Avenging Angel of Death.'"

I tapped my temple with my forefinger. "What did I tell

you? Sunbeam has got bats, loose bolts, and bugs. He's whacky. He's read that Harry disappeared and is assumed dead. Sunbeam probably thinks he really killed him."

"That's what I think too, boss. He's nuts. But Hogan humors him along. He asks him how he put the chill on Harry. Sunbeam has an odd look on his face, like there's all kinds of thinking going on inside his head. Then he puts a big diamond on Hogan's desk, and that shakes Hogan. Right away he wants to know where the old man got the rock. It's a real big blue and white sparkler. I'm sitting close enough to see that. Sunbeam says he has many rocks like that in his house. In fact, he says this diamond is the one that killed Harry Apples."

I sighed. "How, Pete? But make it fast. I've got some things to take care of. I don't want to spend the entire night with this thing."

Pete took a quick breath. "Sunbeam says he showed the rock to Harry and wanted to sell him a batch of stones just like it. It was all a trick to get Harry alone. He says Harry went to see him and he killed him, used a .38 with a silencer."

I said, "Straighten me out, Pete. You mean to just sit there and tell me that Hogan didn't do anything after he heard the story and saw the rock?"

"Hogan said, 'Thank you very much, Mr. Sunbeam. I'll look into it.' Sunbeam said, 'I'll be waiting at my house to show you where I buried Mr. Apples and the rest of the diamonds,' and he said some more garbage about him being the Avenging Angel of Death."

I gave it a little thought, because the bit with the diamond was just the kind of thing that would appeal to Harry Apples. I knew Harry. Harry liked lots of dough. If he felt there was a chance to pull a little deal on his own and get away with it, he'd do it. Harry always had ambition to be a big man. He was always making private deals on his own for hot ice.

"Let's have the rest," I said.

"After Sunbeam left I sat down at Hogan's desk again. Hogan was grinning. He says kooks would drive him crazy. He asked me if I saw that piece of glass the old man put down on his desk, said paste was all it was."

I nodded. "That sounds more like it. Hogan isn't any fool."

"That's just it, boss. I wasn't sitting more than ten feet away, and that wasn't any chunk of paste."

I gave it some thought. "Hogan's been around a long time. If he says it was paste, it's paste."

"Boss, I'm telling you, it was a real diamond, big. I know that Harry liked to deal in hot ice. He could have been tricked by Sunbeam."

"Pete, I appreciate what you're trying to tell me. It shows you're up on your toes. You keep your eyes open and you've got ambition. You'll go places in this outfit, but I think you're wrong on this one. I'm sure of it."

"Boss, I know you're right all the time. But this time is different."

I got up and walked over to the window and looked out at the East River. The view costs me five hundred dollars a month and I can afford it. I was here because I had ambition and the necessary drive. In a way Pete was like me when I was his age. There were the gorgeous dames and the fine cars and the power I wanted. Pete had a little of that ambition, too. I couldn't fault him for that. He was trying to get ahead.

"All right, Pete. It wouldn't hurt to check."

Pete grinned. "Thanks, boss. I'll get right on it. I already got Sunbeam's address. I even drove up to his place and looked it over. He lives in an old house out of town, a real spook place overgrown with weeds, and the porch is all broken and the steps are gone."

"The more you say about it, the more it sounds like the kind of a place where a weirdo would live."

Pete grinned. "Yeah, it must sound like that. Suppose I find Harry in the cellar?" he said softly.

"You're not going to, but if you do, then you just make sure that Sunbeam joins him."

Pete grinned. "Boss, I was wondering about chances of working on the inside of the organization."

"If this hunch of yours is right, Pete, it'll open the door for you. You've got ambition and initiative. There's a place for a man like you."

"Thanks, boss."

After he left I went across the room, pushed my original Van Gogh aside, opened the safe and removed two thousand dollars. It was the agreed-upon amount.

I picked up the phone and dialed a number. "Hogan," I

said, "call the old man and tell him that Pete's on his way. You can pick up the money in the usual place."

I hung up and walked over to the window. There was a magnificent view of the river. Ambition had brought me here. Hogan had some of it. Ambition could kill him, too—but all in good time.

SUCCESSOR

RICHARD H. HARDWICK

JOHN FLEASON sat on the terrace of Cora's big, inherited house, the Scotch whiskey giving him an accustomed inner glow.

Fleason hadn't expected to have everything but now from his chair he could see a great many of the things that Cora had brought into his life. The beautiful home set beneath the oaks and palms; the white hulled cruiser that was tied up at the long dock that ran parallel to the bank of the Intracoastal Waterway fifty yards from his seat. The garage full of cars and the platoon of servants that swarmed about the house and grounds. And the grounds themselves—lush tropical gardens laid out by a master and cared for like a baby by highly-paid gardeners.

It was everything he wanted.

His eyes narrowed as he glanced at Cora as she sat humming some vague tune, dabbing away at the canvas before her.

"John! Joohnn!" she sang out in her high shrill voice that sent a chill down John's spine every time he heard it.

"Yes, Cora. I'm right here, dear. What do you want?"

"John, will you bring me a glass of tea?"

"Cora, we have exactly eleven servants here. Do you think we could possibly prevail upon *one* of them to bring your tea?"

"There's no point in using that tone of voice, John. I think it's nice to have you bring me my tea. It's thoughtful." She smiled up at him. She had huge jowls and though she was in her early forties, she seemed much older.

"Do you think it's thoughtful even though you thought of it?" John said.

"Will you get my tea, John?" She turned back to her canvas and began dabbing again, knowing that John would get her tea and that there was no need to discuss it further.

John got up, thinking of the time she sold the yacht, gave the new Ferrari to the chauffeur. What she had done in the past, for less than not getting her tea, she might do again.

Again, Fleason bitterly admitted it to himself—Cora *owned* him. She had never given him more than a hundred dollars a week and though she paid any debts of his that arose from gambling she never allowed him to purchase or own anything of consequence. After five years John still had to ask Cora when he needed a new pair of shoes. And Cora was conservatively said to be worth four million. John Fleason knew, by Cora's own written statement, that if he survived her it would all be his; and he was ten years her junior and in excellent health.

He returned to the terrace with the tea and strode leisurely across the wide lawn to where Cora sat beneath the trees.

"Thank you, dear," she said sweetly. "Now that wasn't too bad, was it?" She smiled and John wanted to sink his fist into her fat face. Instead he managed to smile back at her.

"It was very thoughtful, Cora dear. May I go?"

Her face became stern. "I wouldn't recommend that attitude, John. You know, you're not my first husband. And it's entirely possible you may not be my last." Her fat face broke into little pieces as it smiled. Not even a mother could love that, John thought, much less a hired husband.

She had threatened him with divorce before. Hardly a month had gone by in their five years of connubial bliss that Cora hadn't threatened him with divorce. He was just another possession, like her cars, her houses, her servants, and he would have to continually toe the mark.

The divorce threats were just that—threats. But she did take his toys away from time to time. Just to keep him in line. So he brought her tea and her candy and her oils and anything else she wanted. He hung on, telling himself that the stake was worth the game. He would wait her out no matter what he had to do. One of these days all of it would be his.

Her heart was growing tired of irrigating the great mountain of meat. Her doctor had been discharged for suggesting that she diet and Cora had found a quack whose ethics were balanced by how much could be deposited in the bank. John, of course, thought highly of the new doctor and made a mental note to reward the gentleman properly immediately after the funeral services—which he sincerely hoped would be very soon.

Then Cora brought Oscar Wooten to Sunday buffet.

For John it was like a movie going round for the second time, only he had no intention of getting up and leaving. He remembered well the day Cora—she was then Cora Barton—brought *him* to Sunday dinner. He had watched Henry Barton's face that day. Henry had looked at him the way a little kid looks at the neighborhood bully who arrives to gather up the marbles. Henry had watched Cora giggle and cavort like a three-hundred-pound high school girl with her first date and, in the period of two weeks that elapsed between the time John showed up and the lawyer with the divorce papers arrived, Barton had watched his slippery hold on millions loosen and fall away.

And now, apparently John's turn had come. Since there wasn't a man living who could stand the sight of Cora, it was a case of each man taking his turn; the last one would pick up the chips.

Five years! Each day five years in itself and now when the cardiograph had begun to sound like a Geiger counter, Cora showed up with—this! Fleason knew Cora never gave anything more than a mere pittance to an outgoing husband. If they didn't take that her lawyers took over, and likely as not the once happy bridegroom would get nothing. Cora once told him about her second husband and those photographs and documents and so on that cut him off dead in court. They could do the same to him, Fleason knew.

A successor was stalking the house. John's toys and all that went with them, in the end—the right end—were in jeopardy.

John Fleason estimated his time at approximately one week from the time Oscar Wooten came smiling in the front door. He had to do something in less than a week. And then it came, very suddenly, as he picked up the paper Monday morning. On the front page was the story of the

convicts. Eight men had broken out of a camp in the northern part of the country. Six were lifers—murderers—and all of them were extremely dangerous.

"Miles," he called the butler. "Miles, have you heard anything about this on the radio?" He tapped the headlines.

"Yes sir. Mr. Fleason. Less than an hour ago there was more about it. They think the men are in these parts and they may be desperate for food and money." Miles looked out at the dense woods that surrounded the house on all but the river side. "They'd be right out there."

The idea took shape. "Thank you, Miles." Thank you very much indeed, he added silently as Miles left the room.

Escaped convicts! Desperate men. Here in the area. He smiled as he thought about it.

That afternoon Cora came in from the pool, her high soprano laugh piercing the walls and cutting through the doors. She burst into the room and following her, like a wavy-haired, handsome, two-legged dog, was Oscar Wooten. His rugged features were shaped into a smile.

John Fleason remembered when he could smile at Cora. He remembered how, when he was called upon to flash his smile, he would put Cora out of his mind and conjure up an image of luxury—everything he wanted—and then smile . . . Gradually the smile had worn thin as she doled out a pittance of an allowance, jerked him around like a monkey on a string.

And the nights. Crawling into bed with Cora was like climbing into a Dutch oven. The huge organism exuded heat—and more heat. He dreaded her embrace but it came nevertheless, and with alarming regularity. Some nights, as they lay there bathed in perspiration, John Fleason came very close to wishing he had never met Cora . . .

Oscar Wooten walked over to him. "Care for a drink, Fleason?" he asked.

He's offering me a drink! Fleason marveled. Of all the gall! Showing me that he's taken over already. "Thanks, Wooten. Decent of you. Make mine Scotch and water."

He watched the smile on his successor's face as he poured from the crystal-clear decanter. "You know, Wooten, in the five years Cora and I have been married I have developed the most acute taste for Scotch. Hardly able to get to sleep without six or seven of these."

"I don't think that will worry you for long, Fleason," Wooten said with a smile.

John Fleason's temper flared to the point of retort, but Miles came to the door.

"Mr. Fleason, sir," the butler said in a low voice. "I didn't want to disturb you, Mr. Fleason, but it's about the escaped prisoners. They shot a man down in Winslow Junction. Trying to get food or money, the radio said. Their pictures are here in the evening paper. A bad looking lot." He handed Fleason the newspaper. The pictures were on the front page and a description of each man along with the offense for which he was imprisoned. He followed with particular interest the description of the men. He noted that they wore the grey prison clothing. "They could be in our very back yard, so to speak, sir," the butler said. "And I thought you should know."

"Take every precaution, Miles. And thank you."

When Miles left the room John Fleason looked at his watch. It was eight-thirty. Winslow Junction was seven miles from the plantation. Through the woods, fleeing, a man could make it in two or three hours. Midnight would be a good time to put his plan into effect. Wooten would be gone and the servants asleep.

Dinner was served on the screened patio and Cora made a point of leaving John out of the conversation as much as possible. Remembering the identical scene five years before with Henry Barton playing his part, Fleason looked at the fat-jowled mess sitting at the end of the table and unconsciously broke out into loud laughter. The others looked at him strangely.

"It wasn't that funny, John," Cora chided him.

What the hell is she talking about, John thought. He shrugged. Perhaps Wooten had told a joke.

Dinner ended with Cora finishing her third piece of pie. Miles placed a brandy before each of the three.

The smiles that flitted back and forth across the table between Oscar and Cora told Fleason that there wasn't much time. Once Cora made up her mind, about anything, she acted quickly. He would act quicker. With his brandy he made a silent toast: Here's to me, he told himself, and tossed it off with a quick gulp.

They retired to the living room after supper for coffee. At eleven, Oscar rose. "Goodnight, Cora. The day was

wonderful. Goodnight, Fleason." He walked toward the door.

"Goodnight, Wooten," John said; moving across the room he slapped Oscar on the back. "Feel free to come see us at any time—any time!"

Wooten and Cora looked at him strangely but said nothing. Soon Wooten's car roared out the long driveway.

"You're acting peculiarly, John," Cora said icily. "What's come over you? I think you had better sleep in the study tonight."

"Why?"

"Isn't it obvious, John?"

"You mean that we're *phitti*? Through? I'm being booted out?"

"Yes." At the door Cora turned. "I'll talk to you tomorrow more seriously." The door closed behind her.

John poured himself another brandy. While he drank it, Miles came to the door. "Will there be anything else, Mr. Fleason?"

Just a little murder, Miles, he thought; then he smiled and said, "No, that'll be all. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Mr. Fleason." Miles left and John knew he'd be in his room in the servants' house in fifteen minutes. That would leave Cora and himself in the big house alone.

He had another brandy and at eleven-thirty walked into the den and took his big game rifle down from the wall. He slipped a cartridge into the chamber and placed a full clip in the rifle. Probably find her in the kitchen, he thought, looking in the refrigerator for something to "tide me through the night."

John Fleason took a clean rag from the gun cabinet and placed it in his pocket. Then he walked to the French doors and threw them back. The moon shone brilliantly down through the beards of Spanish moss and the river was as bright as day. The woods were dark, though, the dense foliage of the trees cutting off the pale light from above. It was time to call her, but first he leaned over and picked up a piece of rusty barbed wire that had been outside the window for some time. He had intended to see how long the stupid gardener would let it lie there before someone told him to remove it. John picked it up holding the rag. His hand did not touch the piece of rusted wire.

"Cora!" He waited. She heard, he knew, but he repeated, with a note of urgency in his voice:

"Cora, come quick!"

He heard the sound of her moving, the floors reverberating under her bulk. "Where, John?" She was in the den now.

"Right out here. Look here a moment, quickly!"

She came out through the doors. Her mouth was moving. John thought that he had never seen her when she wasn't chewing something.

She peered into the darkness. "Where, John? What's the trouble out there? What's—"

He had the wire ends in both his hands. He flipped the noose over her head, pulled back hard, feeling the wire sink into the folds of her neck. Her hands flew up, clawing, her breath could not pass the obstruction as John pulled, then twisted the wire. He put several more twists in it. For a few moments Cora moved with amazing agility, and John Fleason could not help but think of Moby Dick. In the moonlight, her eyes seemed huge as they stared at John Fleason. Blood pumped from the places where the barbs had punctured her flesh. No sound came from her lips and the food she had been eating dribbled down her chin. She fell heavily, thrashed about for several more seconds and then lay still.

John raised the rifle and fired it into the woods until there were no more shells in the magazine. Then he turned and ran into the den. He picked up the phone, dialed.

"Hello? Sheriff's office? This is John Fleason. Yes, that's right. Something terrible has happened out here. My wife—she—she's been killed. Those escaped prisoners. I shot at them, but it was dark and—what's that? Yes, of course I'm positive! I shot at them—don't know if I hit any of them or not. You'll be right out? Very well. Goodbye." He placed the instrument down gently on its cradle and smiled. His plan was going well, very well, indeed.

Miles appeared in the hall doorway, his eyes wide, almost complete circles with a dot at the center.

"Mr. Fleason, the radio. Mr. Wooten—I—"

"For God's sake, Miles, make sense!" Fleason shouted at the butler. "What's wrong?"

"The radio—I—" a semblance of coherence returned to his words. "They *killed* him—Mr. Wooten. The convicts.

Shortly after eleven, the man on the radio said." Miles swallowed hard. "Just fifteen minutes after he left here, Mr. Fleason. Ten miles down the road to the junction. They caught them not long afterward. Isn't it terrible, Mr. Fleason? Isn't it terrible?" And Miles stood there wringing his hands.

"Yes," Fleason said mechanically, "it sure is." He turned toward the French doors. Cora's huge face lay partially on the doorsill, her lips pressed against the wood forcing a grotesque smile, the dead eyes staring directly at Fleason.

He could almost hear her laughing.

STOP KILLING ME

HAL DRESNER

THE PUDGY WOMAN straightened the small black hat which sat like a sparrow on the nest of her freshly blued hair and approached Desk Sergeant Bevelow. She waited, anxiously turning her purse in her pale fingers, until the sergeant looked up from his report, and then she said: "My name is Mrs. Frances Turchin. I live at 6310 East Howard Street, Staten Island. My husband is killing me."

"My wife is killing me," Sergeant Bevelow responded pleasantly. "Are you lodging a complaint, Mrs. . . . ah . . ."

"Turchin. Mrs. Frances Turchin. My husband's name is Bernard W., 6310 East Howard Street, Staten Island. . . . Aren't you writing any of this down?"

"Not until you lodge a formal complaint, no, ma'am. The city doesn't like us to waste paper. Now you say your husband has tried to kill you?"

"No. I said he *is* killing me. Right this minute while I'm talking to you he's killing me. Don't you understand?"

"No, ma'am," said Sergeant Bevelow. "I don't believe I do. Your husband has made an attempt on your life, is that right?"

"No, no, no," said Mrs. Turchin, kneading her purse. "He hasn't done anything but keep on saying that he's going to kill me, he's going to kill me, he's going to kill me. A hundred times a day for the last three weeks. In person, over the telephone, at home, in the car. Every chance he gets. Friday night we were at the movies and right in the best part he turns to me and says 'I'm going to kill you, Frances'. It ruined the whole picture for me."

"Has he ever made these threats in the company of other persons?" asked Sergeant Bevelow.

"Of course. I told you he says it every chance he gets. It doesn't matter if somebody is around or not. Two weeks ago, my sister was over for dinner and right in the middle when she's talking about her neighbor's cancer, he says 'Excuse me a minute, Velma,' and turns to me and says, 'I'm going to kill you, Frances' and then he laughs and tells my sister to go on with her story." Mrs. Turchin rubbed her fingers together nervously. "You don't believe me," she said, "you can call him up right now. He'll tell you himself. Ulster-9-2704. He'll tell you. He's very proud of it. He says it's the easiest way to kill a person anyone ever thought of. Call him, he'll tell you and then he'll laugh. Oh, that laugh! It's like a private joke that only he knows. If I hear that laugh again, I think I'll go out of my mind."

"You're certain that your husband is serious about this and he's not just making a joke?" said Sergeant Bevelow.

"If he says he's serious, he's serious. And with this he says he's serious. Go call him, you'll find out for yourself. Ulster-9-2704."

"Has he said how he plans to kill you, ma'am?"

"Of course. Certainly. He says probably I'll get run over by a car. If not, he says, I'll fall down some stairs and break my neck; we live on the third floor. Or if not that, then maybe I'll take too many sleeping pills. I take sleeping pills," she explained. "I don't know how many I've taken since he started with this crazy thing. Maybe too many already. And still I can't sleep. A couple of times, I doze off and he pokes me and wakes me up and says 'I'm going to kill you, Frances'. Then *he* goes back to sleep and I lie there all night worrying. *That's* how he's killing me."

"You mean you think he's worrying you to death?" Sergeant Bevelow said.

"That's it *exactly*," said Mrs. Turchin. "He's killing me with worry. So one of these days I'm going to be worrying so much I'm going to step in front of a car or fall down three flights of stairs or . . . oh, what's the use? It's just like he planned. The other night he said to me that he gives me a week more at the most. A week and by then, I'll be dead. And you know something?"

"What, ma'am?"

"I believe him. I *believe* him." Her fingers squeezed at her purse. "Even today on the way over here, I was worrying about it so much, I didn't see the bus I was waiting for. I was standing right out in the street. If some

nice girl hadn't pulled me back, he would have killed me right then."

"Your husband," said Sergeant Bevelow.

"Of course, my husband," said Mrs. Turchin. "Who are we talking about?" She touched her hat which had been on straight, thus making it crooked. "Thank God I haven't got a heart condition or he would have finished me a long time ago. Even so, I'm jumping every time I hear a sound. And he says he gives me a week at the most. I'll be *lucky* if I live a week. So, what are you going to do about it?"

"I don't know what we can do about it, ma'am. If you'd like to swear out a complaint against your husband, we can—"

"What kind of complaint? I told you he's killing me. Isn't that enough of a complaint? By the time I start with complaints and papers and subpoenas, I'll be dead already. I don't want to swear out any complaints. I want you to speak to him and tell him to stop killing me."

"I suppose I could do that if you'd like, ma'am. But first would you mind explaining *why* you think your husband is trying to kill you?"

"Because I won't divorce him," said Mrs. Turchin firmly. "That's all. Just because I won't divorce him. Is that a reason to kill a person?"

"I've known some who thought it was," said the sergeant.

"But he doesn't want to divorce *me*," said Mrs. Turchin. "Oh no. For that, he's too chivalrous. That, he says, would make him look bad in front of his family and his friends. *I've* got to do the divorcing myself or else he'll kill me. Well, he can kill first," she said decisively. "Because I'll never divorce him. Imagine. At my age, where would I find another husband?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Sergeant Bevelow.

"So," said Mrs. Turchin. "Ulster-9-2704."

"Did your husband say why he wants you to divorce him, ma'am? I mean, perhaps this is something that should be settled by a marriage counsellor instead of the police."

"He says there are a thousand and one reasons. And all of them are crazy. You want me to give you some of his crazy reasons?"

"If you don't mind, ma'am."

"I don't mind. They're all crazy reasons, you'll see for yourself. Crazy reason number one: Because I don't cook well enough. We've been married twenty-three years and

suddenly he decides I don't cook well enough, so either I divorce him or he's killing me. You're married, aren't you?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Sergeant Bevelow.

"Is this your wife?" Mrs. Turchin asked of the framed picture on the sergeant's desk.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Very sweet looking woman. Does she cook well?"

"About average I guess, ma'am."

"You see? Nobody's perfect. Crazy reason number two: Because I'm not as beautiful as I was when he married me. Is that a crazy reason or not? How long have you been married, if I may ask?"

"Fourteen years next May, ma'am."

"And is your wife as beautiful as when you married her? Be honest, not polite now."

"No. I don't guess you could say she is."

"So!" said Mrs. Turchin with a curt nod. "Crazy reason number three: Because he says he's got nothing else to talk to me about. We've been married twenty-three years and he says he's all talked out as far as I'm concerned and he doesn't care to listen to anything else I have to say either. How is *that* for a crazy reason? Don't you have times when you don't have anything to say to your wife?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And that's a reason for divorce or killing? Does he think I've got so much to say to *him*? I've been married as long as he has, you know. Then, crazy reason number four: Because I clutter up the bathroom with my things. So what woman doesn't clutter up the bathroom with her things? I've got cosmetics, cleansers, shampoo. I keep as much as I can on my dresser. What can I do with the rest? Put it in the closet? I need it every day. Where does your wife keep her cosmetics?"

"In the bathroom, ma'am."

"There you are," said Mrs. Turchin triumphantly. "Crazy reason number five—"

"Excuse me," said Sergeant Bevelow. "But I think I understand the situation now. If you'd like, I'll call your husband and have a talk with him."

"Oh, I'm so glad. Maybe you can talk some sense into him. Ulster-9-2704. Bernard W. Turchin. You want me to wait while you talk to him?"

"No, ma'am. I don't think that will be necessary. I'll just

ask him to come down here at his first opportunity and we'll have a little chat then."

"Thank you," said Mrs. Turchin. "Thank you. I really don't know what I would have done . . . just today when I was coming over here I was standing in the street thinking about it and . . . oh, but I told you about that, didn't I?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You see? You see the way he's made me? A week at the most he says he gives me. I'll be lucky if I get home all right."

"Would you like me to have an officer drive you, ma'am?"

"No, no, don't bother. I'll be all right. Just talking to you has made me feel much better. If only he'll stop that killing me, killing me, killing me, every minute. . . . Well, thank you again. You've got the number now? It's Ulster-9-2704."

"Ulster-9-2704," said Sergeant Bevelow.

"That's right," said Mrs. Turchin. "Well, thank you again."

"Quite all right, ma'am."

Sergeant Bevelow watched until the woman had walked through the door. Twice in that time he saw her straighten the small black hat which sat like a sparrow on the nest of her freshly blued hair. He seriously doubted if she felt much better for having spoken to him. She still looked as if she might distractedly step in front of a car or fall down a flight of stairs. Not today perhaps, but probably soon. Very possibly within the week.

Sergeant Bevelow looked at the report on his desk, tapping it thoughtfully with the eraser end of his pencil. Then he picked up the telephone receiver and dialed Ulster-9-2704.

"Mr. Bernard Turchin?" he said when a voice answered. . . . "This is Desk Sergeant Stanley Bevelow of the Fourth Precinct. I wonder if it would be possible for you to stop down here sometime today? . . . No it's nothing official," Sergeant Bevelow said and glancing over at the picture of his wife, "it's purely a *personal* matter. In fact I'd appreciate it if you could make it after I get off duty. . . . Oh, about six would be fine, fine. . . ."

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