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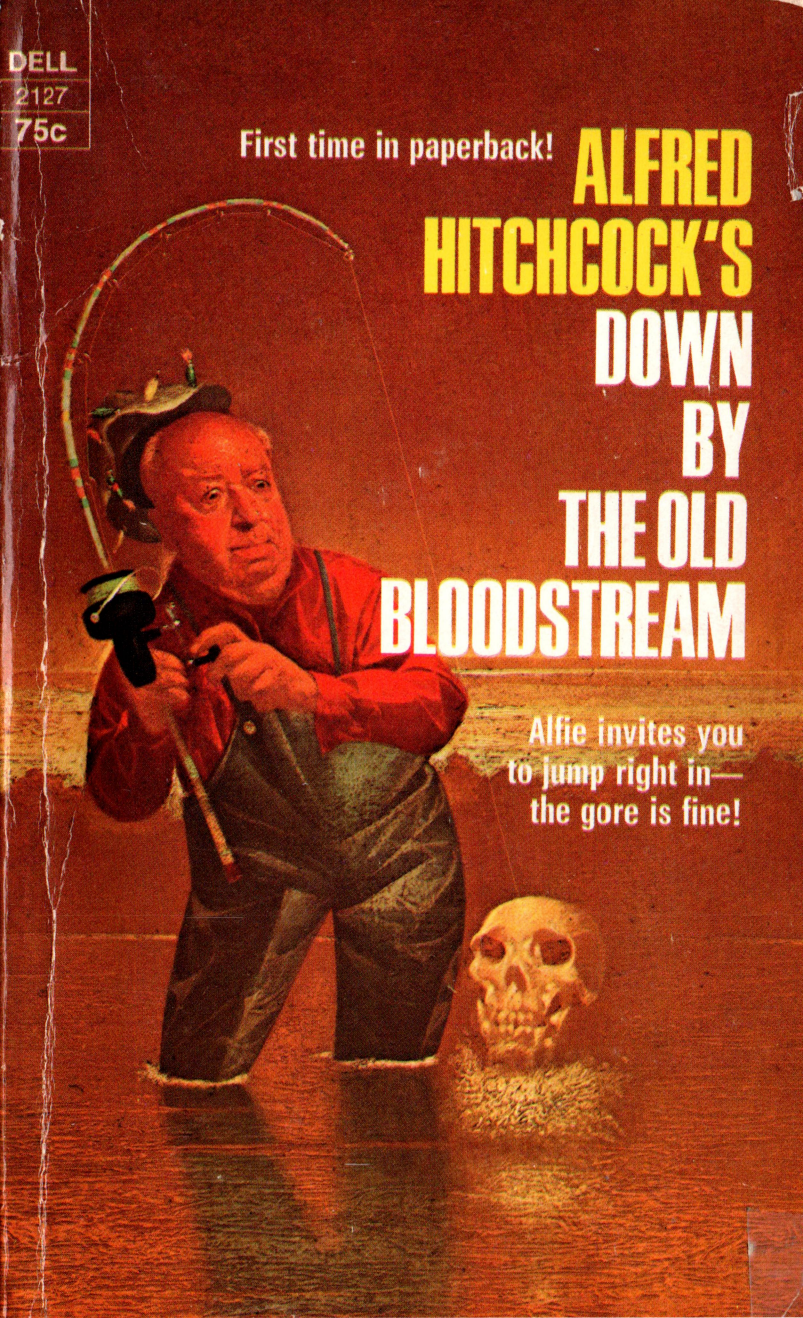

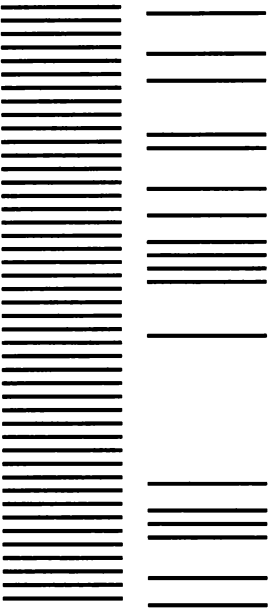

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Down by the Old Bloodstream

DOWN BY THE OLD BLOODSTREAM

Alfred Hitchcock,
Editor

A DELL BOOK

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INTRODUCTION

I think it's about time someone said a few words on behalf of premeditated murder. Unfortunately, it is being lumped in with violence these days. And violence is getting such a bad name that even the politicians feel safe in attacking it.

So many brickbats, for instance, are being hurled at violence on television. Rarely does anyone defend it. And those who do, such as window repairmen, always seem to have some special reason for wanting to see it flourish. As a consequence, it is very likely that violence will eventually disappear from the scene altogether. And what will we do then for a means of releasing our hostilities?

What to do with hostility, however, is a problem for the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. Let the Secretary worry about it. My concern is that in this witch-hunting atmosphere premeditated murder will get classified as a form of violence along with war, free speech on the campus, and professional football. And that if the nation ever panics and bars all violence, premeditated murder will get the axe right along with the others. That, some of us recall, is how goldfish swallowing was lost to society—by a cruel quirk of fate.

In what may prove to be a last-ditch stand in defense of premeditated mayhem, I think it should be made clear that it is, in fact, a fine art. A great deal of thought goes into it. Premeditation and violence are,

in a way, contradictory terms. To meditate is to think; while violence results from a sudden, thoughtless release of passion.

A man who wants to put an end to his wife, for example, and get away with it, doesn't suddenly lose his temper and assault her with a full sugar bowl. In the first place, that would be in terribly bad taste—and the records show that the murderer who premeditates invariably has, if nothing else, a superior sense of what is "right." In the second place, it would be foolhardy. For it is always difficult to get all the fingerprints off a sugar bowl, sticky as they are. As a result, the man who commits the premeditated murder utilizes the sugar bowl in a much more deliberate, humane, and reasoned manner. He sprinkles a pinch or two of arsenic into the sugar. What could possibly be less violent than that?

Those who would cast out premeditated murder along with actual violence ought to consider, too, what effect the action would have on the nation's economy. It is no secret in our police departments across the country that it is the hard-to-solve, well-thought-out murders that support the homicide squad. A crime of sudden passion is always quickly solved. It's simply a matter of snapping the cuffs on the perpetrator, who is always standing by in a dazed condition with the murder weapon still in his possession. But solving the premeditated murder takes time. The boys in homicide sometimes spend years on a single case. For he who premeditates usually covers his tracks well.

Assume then that we do away with artful killing. We'd have no need for all those detectives. The welfare roles, naturally, would swell. Taxes would rise. Taxpayers would revolt. And what would we have then? Crime in the streets very likely. It's a vicious

circle. A happy citizenry and a healthy economy demand a continuance of premeditated murder. It's as plain as the arsenic in your sugar.

We should remember, too, that a great many other people besides detectives make a living from the art. There are the newspaper reporters, for instance, who, given a good, juicy, well-planned murder, can sell papers with it for months on end. And there are the mystery writers—as represented here—who all get so rich from writing about it that if their incomes were suddenly cut off and they could no longer afford all the sports cars, cabanas on the Riviera and honeydew melons they wanted, the economy not only of the nation but of the entire world would probably be put in jeopardy.

Perhaps I am overreacting somewhat to the danger. Nevertheless, I think we would all be wise to keep the possible consequences of outlawing premeditated murder in mind. You might even want to alert your senator and congressman to those possibilities. These things have to be nipped in the bud. In the meantime, I invite you to entertain yourself with the stories in this collection. A great deal of premeditation has gone into making them highly enjoyable.

—ALFRED HITCHCOCK

THE GOOD THIEF

Hal Ellson

Sunlight glinted on the tall palm in the patio next door. Through half-closed eyes Victor Fiala watched the light, then gazed at the avocado tree directly above his head, its dark green leaves shadowed and cool like the rest of the patio, that godsend of privacy where a man could escape the turmoil of the world.

Fiala sighed and kept staring overhead. It was good to be home, good to rest. He sighed again and his eyes started to close. He was on the brink of sleep when he caught himself.

"Jose!" he shouted.

His voice echoed in the patio, but there was no answer to his call. A man has to do for himself, he sighed, and started to rise. The effort was too much. Back he fell and his eyes closed. Why had he called Jose? Why? Why? Why? The light faded and all sound, but now, at a great distance, he heard a faint tattoo of footsteps; someone approaching from half across the world. You're too late, he said to himself without knowing what he was saying, and the tattoo grew louder. His eyes slitted open, and across the shaded patio he saw his grandson coming toward him with that same look on his face, a perpetual frown of concern as if he carried all the world's burdens on his fragile shoulders. But this was a dream, not the real Jose. Fiala closed his eyes.

"Grandpa!"

He jumped in his chair and there stood Jose before him with a cold bottle of beer in his hand.

"So you finally came," Fiala said. "What did you do, fall asleep?"

"No, you did," Jose answered, handing him the bottle.

Fiala laughed and tipped it. He was still drinking when a loud knocking started up on the front door. Down came the bottle and he frowned at his grandson. "All right, see who it is," he said.

Jose ran to the door, opened it and returned to the patio, leading a neighbor.

"Telephone call, Victor," the man said.

"Really? I'm not taking any today. How about a cold beer, Arturo?"

"Thanks, but you'd better answer that call. It's from police headquarters."

"My day off," Fiala said. "I'm not talking to headquarters."

"Not even to Lopez?"

Fiala sat up frowning. "The Chief's on the wire?"

"That's right. He's hanging on."

Trouble. That means real trouble, Fiala told himself, rising from his chair. "Keep an eye on the boy," he said to Arturo. "Don't let him climb the tree."

A minute later he picked up the phone in Arturo's house. "Hello, Fiala speaking."

"It's about time," Lopez said over the wire. "What's wrong that you don't answer your own phone?"

"It's out of commission."

"Perhaps you didn't pay your bill."

"I always pay them, and on time," Fiala snapped.

"Very good. Now I have a favor to ask."

"What kind?" Fiala said suspiciously.

"I want you to work on a special assignment."

"Today?"

"I'm aware that you're off duty," Lopez said icily. "I mean today."

"No one else can take care of the matter?" He knew the answer.

"No one. I'm at my office. May I expect your presence?"

"Yes." The reply was hesitant, barely audible, but as soon as Lopez hung up, Fiala banged down the phone and bellowed, "May I expect your presence? Oh, you're a cute one, Lopez, with your fancy tongue."

"Bad news?" Arturo said as Fiala entered the patio and came toward him.

"A special assignment and on my day off."

"It must be a serious matter."

"Serious or not, there are others on the force, but Lopez wants me, and in this heat." Fiala shook his head and spied the bottle of beer his grandson had brought him. "*Put* it back in the refrigerator," he said to the boy. "I couldn't enjoy it now. Ah, Lopez put his spurs into me again."

"Relax," said Arturo. "Getting angry won't help."

"I know. It's too hot," Fiala answered and went into the house. He stepped from it again with his jacket on his arm and a bottle of beer in his hand. "On second thought, I'd better top this one off," he said, winking at Arturo.

Ten minutes later Fiala stepped from his car at the Municipal Building and entered its patio. On the balcony stairs a glum-faced policeman all but knocked him down, then apologized and said, "If you're going up to see the Chief, you'd better change your plans. The heat's got him; he's fit to be tied."

"When isn't he?" Fiala replied, and continued climbing. He frowned when he reached the Chief's door, knocked lightly and it flew open before him. Ordinarily Lopez' face was ghastly pale; now it was flushed and his eyes glinted with anger. He looked as if he were about to explode, and Fiala readied himself, but the explosion never came.

"Oh, it's you," Lopez said softly. "Come in."

Fiala stepped into the office, and Lopez went to a window that faced the street and stared out, obviously

at nothing, for he was muttering in conversation with himself. Finally he swung around and went to his desk. "Do you know what happened?" he said, smashing its gleaming surface with his fist.

Fiala shrugged. "I'm sorry, but I haven't the least idea."

"That's fine. Now why are you standing? Sit down."

Ai, the heat's got him, Fiala thought, finding a chair. He was in need of a smoke, but thought better of lighting up. Lopez struck the desk again. "Listen to this, Victor," he said, spitting out the words. "No, wait a moment. What position do I hold in the city of Montes?"

Fiala brushed his chin with the back of his hand and sent Lopez a curious side-glance. He's really in bad shape, he thought, and gave his answer, "You're the Chief of Police."

"An important position?"

"Yes."

"And people look up to me?"

"Certainly."

"They expect me to keep their city free of crime. No?"

Fiala nodded, wondering where all this was leading. "Now," Lopez went on, "what do you suppose the people would think if a thief got into my house and made off with all my silverware?"

For the moment, Fiala didn't believe his ears. Lopez robbed! He wanted to laugh and was barely able to restrain himself. "Someone took all your silverware?" he said.

"All of the finest pieces."

"Terrible," said Fiala, still wanting to laugh.

"You understand my predicament, I hope," said Lopez. "If word of this gets around, the whole city will be laughing."

Howling, thought Fiala.

Lopez continued, "That's why I called you. I want

the silverware back, and I want the thief. You're relieved of all other duties, Victor, till you clear the matter up. One more thing, you're to keep this to yourself."

Fiala nodded. "I understand. Now if I may ask a question. Do you suspect any of the servants?"

"Certainly not. They've been with me too long."

"Have you any theory concerning the theft?"

"None whatever, and that's what galls me. Oh, but if I knew who it was. . . ."

Frowning, Fiala rose from his chair. Already he saw difficulties of a peculiar nature. Silverware. Who would steal it from Lopez, and what would he do with it? "Nothing else was taken from the house?" he asked.

"That's just it. There was money and my wife's jewelry lying around, and none was touched."

Odd, Fiala thought. "I'll do my best," he said to Lopez, "but . . ."

"But what?"

"Never mind." Fiala turned and started for the door.

Even in the shadow of the arcade it was hot, and beyond it in the gutter and across the small plaza a fierce light burned. No one sat in the plaza. For once, it was absolutely deserted. Fiala gazed across it toward the Blue Diamond restaurant. Finally and reluctantly he stepped from the shadow of the arcade and made his way slowly across the plaza and into the restaurant. It was no cooler there.

"Hot?" said the counterman.

Fiala nodded and asked for coffee, then looked around at the empty tables. The counterman returned with his coffee. "Has Domingo been in?" Fiala asked him.

"You mean has anyone been in. No, I haven't seen him."

Fiala nodded and lifted his cup, thinking of the stolen silverware. None of the servants would have taken it, and any local thief knew better than to touch

it. An outsider? No, for the simple reason that the money and jewelry had been left behind. But why would anyone risk taking the silverware and leave the money and jewelry?

If I knew the answer to that one, he sighed, and finished his coffee. Rising, he went to the door. Beyond it the sun glittered in a mad dance, withering the green of the empty plaza. Utter silence out there, complete desolation. He thought of the coolness of his patio and shook his head. Oh, to be there now.

A movement of hot air brought him back to reality and he stepped out to the sidewalk. Four blocks away he entered another restaurant, asked for Domingo and was told he hadn't been in. Disappointed, he walked leisurely back to the plaza and sat on a bench in the deepest shade he could find.

Five minutes later Domingo sat down beside him. "You were looking for me, Senor?"

Fiala nodded and eyed him. Domingo appeared nervous, but then he always did. "I need information concerning some valuable silverware. What do you know?"

"Me?" Domingo tapped his thin chest. "I know nothing."

"In that case, you'd better find out something from your friends."

"About some silverware? They wouldn't touch anything like that. I know, Senor."

"You sound very sure."

"I am. Stuff like that is too hard to handle. My friends know better."

Domingo's protests were too fervid. Did he know something? "Then you haven't heard anything?" asked Fiala.

"Nothing at all." Domingo shrugged. "If I hear. . . ."

"Something tells me you have already heard."

"Oh, no, Senor."

"Oh, yes. You're too jumpy. What is it you're afraid of?"

Silence. Domingo stared at the empty plaza while a painful expression crossed his face. Finally he spoke. "Remember," he said with concern, "I had nothing to do with the matter. I only heard about it."

"That's much better," said Fiala. "Now just what did you hear?"

"The silverware was stolen from the Chief of Police."

"That's right."

"And that's why no one would touch it. A fellow would have to be out of his mind."

"True," said Fiala, "but it so happens that someone did steal it—and I want his name."

"I don't know that, Senor."

"You're a liar. You know, but you're frightened of something and trying to cover."

"No, Senor."

"I'm losing patience. You're protecting someone and you're apt to regret it."

"All right," Domingo said. "Perhaps you won't believe this, but it was. . . ." Here his voice dropped as he revealed the name of the thief.

Fiala was stunned. "Oh, no!" he said. "He couldn't have done it."

"He did, Senor, and now you know."

"But why would he steal the silverware? It doesn't make sense."

"He's been gambling and losing. He had to pay his debts."

"A pretty story."

"You don't believe me?"

"Let's say I doubt you."

Domingo shrugged. "That's the story and it's straight."

Fiala shook his head. "It's hard to believe, and what if it ever gets around?"

"Now you can see why none of us would touch the silverware."

"Lopez wants it, and the skin of the thief."

"Ai, wait till he discovers who he is."

"That can't happen," Fiala said, shaking his head. "Not in a million years."

"Why not?"

"Because Lopez would probably kill him."

"Which is no skin off my back."

"I can't give his name."

"Then keep your mouth shut and forget about the matter."

"Impossible. I've got to do something."

"In that case, do what you have to do."

"It's not that simple. If I reveal the truth, nothing will be settled, and all sorts of complications are apt to arise."

"Do or don't, either way you hang, so let me out of this," Domingo said and started to rise, but Fiala held him back.

"About the silverware. Where is it?"

"I don't know. You'll have to make your own arrangements about that."

"No, you will, as an interested buyer."

"Me, Senor? I wouldn't touch the stuff for a million pesos."

"You'll make the contact," Fiala said as if Domingo hadn't spoken. "As soon as you do, let me know."

"I don't like this at all," Domingo complained.

"Neither do I, but we're both stuck, so on your way."

Nodding, Domingo got up and walked off. A few minutes later Fiala arose from the bench and went slowly to his car.

Subdued music came from the Black Cat. Only two customers were in the place when Fiala entered it. He nodded to them and went to the bar where the owner was dozing.

"Pancho."

"Ah, Victor." Pancho shook his head. "A bad night last night. My head is ready to split."

"And a bad day for me," Fiala complained. "I've got to work, and in heat like this."

"What will it be? A small one?" Pancho produced bottle and glass and set them on the bar. "You look worried," he said.

"I am. Lopez put me on a tough one."

"Ah, Victor, sometimes I don't think he likes you."

"Nor himself," Fiala answered. He emptied the contents of the small bottle into his glass and started for a table in a dark corner. "If you will excuse me, Pancho. I have a few things to think about."

"As you wish, Victor."

The beer was cold, light, golden. Fiala tasted it and pushed back the glass. It might be hours before Domingo contacted him. In the meantime he could prepare himself for a difficult feat. If it worked, all to the good. If it didn't. . . . *I'll be done for,* he thought.

Two hours later he arose from the table. "I'm leaving," he said to Pancho. "If anyone is looking for me, send him to the house."

It was dark in the patio. Fiala sat under the avocado tree and shook his head. Late, and no word from Domingo. At nine, his grandson brought him a bite and a bottle of beer. At ten, his daughter asked if he were going to bed and he waved her off.

Quietly she went back into the house and he continued to wait. It was well past midnight when a knock sounded on the front door. He got to his feet and hurried to open it. A somber-faced boy handed him a note. Scanning it quickly, he said, "Let's go. Get in the car."

In an area off the dry bed of a river that skirted the city lay an area of darkness, ominous silence, and empty streets fronted by adobe houses. Many were untenanted and in complete ruin, others were close to

that state. The car moved slowly, the boy watching. Finally he pointed. "That one, Senor."

The car moved on, turned the next corner and stopped. "Thanks. Better go home to bed now," Fiala said, pressing a five-peso note into the boy's hand.

The boy ran off and vanished in the dark. Fiala stepped from the car and studied the house which the boy had pointed out. It appeared deserted, but ten minutes later the door opened. A man stepped out, then another. Their voices drifted through the street, loud in violent argument, and faded as they walked away.

Early the next morning Lopez swung around in his chair at the knock on his door. "Come in," he snapped. Yesterday's mood was still on him. Fiala noted this as he entered the office.

"Well, what happened?"

Lopez' voice grated, and Fiala flinched. Another hot day was in the making, which was enough to contend with, much less the Chief's temperament. Fiala raised his hand. "It's all taken care of," he said. "I've got back the silverware."

"And the thief?"

"I'm afraid he escaped."

Lopez' jaw moved, but not a word came from his mouth for some seconds. "I think you'd better explain," he finally said.

Fiala took a deep breath and began. "This is what happened. I made contact with a fence who knew about the silverware. He was reluctant to talk, but I finally persuaded him, and he sent me to another fence. This fellow was more cooperative. Through a third party, he arranged a meeting with the thief. They met in an abandoned house. My contact looked over the silverware, refused to buy it and left. As he went out the door, I moved in." Here Fiala shrugged. "Unfortunately, the back door was open. The thief went out it like a light."

"Very bad, Victor."

"Yes, I know, but you have your silverware."

Lopez nodded and lifted the box of cigars on his desk. "Have one of these," he said, "and take two days off."

Twenty minutes later Fiala was home and sitting under the avocado tree. It was hot again, the sun burning the city, but in the patio it was cool. Slowly he unwrapped the cigar Lopez had given him and lit it, then called to his grandson to bring him a cold bottle of beer. It was his daughter who brought it.

"What are you celebrating?" she asked when she saw the cigar.

"Nothing in particular," he answered and smiled, thinking of what he had done, stolen back the silverware which Lopez' son had taken to pay off his gambling losses.

THE HAPPENSTANCE SNATCH

a Novelette

Fletcher Flora

Banty was all brains and no luck. That was his trouble. You kept thinking he was a guy on his way to somewhere, with all those brains under black curly hair, but he never did have the luck when he needed it. It makes no difference how smart or good-looking you are, you aren't going to attain your objective if you don't have a little luck here and there along the way.

You take the triplets Banty held in a stud game in Kansas City. Anyone would consider it the best kind of luck in the world to hold a hand like that in a game of stud, one in the hole and two showing, and anyone with any brains at all would back it up with his grandmother's pension if necessary. But what seems like good luck one minute may turn out to be bad the next, and it's just about as bad as luck can be, when you consider the consequences, to hold triplets when the guy across the table is holding a straight. About the only way you could make it worse would be to bet your triplets with money you didn't have on the table, or anywhere else, and to have someone like Archie Flowers holding the straight. And Banty did. And Archie was.

I wasn't there, but Banty told me about it. I hadn't seen him around for a day or two, so I went up to his room to see if he was there, and there he was. He hadn't shaved, and he'd been drinking. He'd have been drinking still, except that the bottle was empty and he didn't have enough money to buy one that wasn't.

"What's the matter, Banty? You don't look good."

"Look, stupid," he said, "don't come up here telling me how I look."

He called me stupid lots of times, and some of the times I didn't like it, even though it was true, which I admit, but I never made a big thing of it because we had been pals for a long time, and I kept waiting around for him to start having the luck to go with his brains, and hoping that some of it, when he did, would rub off on me. Anyhow, I let it pass, not saying anything, and pretty soon he told me about the stud game and losing a bundle on the triplets.

"How much did you lose?" I asked.

"Three grand."

"Where did you get three grand?"

"I didn't have it," he said, "and that's what's got me worried."

"You mean you owe Archie Flowers three grand?"

"Minus about five hundred that was on the table."

"That leaves twenty-five hundred."

"You're a real genius, Carny. You can do arithmetic problems in your head."

"Well, I don't blame you for being worried. How long did Archie give you to raise it?"

"I've got until morning, and morning's coming too soon. You got any money?"

"Not that kind, Banty. You know that."

"I don't mean the kind it would take to pay off Archie. I mean enough to get me out of town."

"Not enough to get you far enough."

"How much is that?"

"Maybe a hundred. Maybe a little less."

"That's better than nothing. What I've got to do is get away and give this some thought, and you can't think very clearly in the hospital with a broken head, not to mention other bones, and you can't think at all, if bad comes to worse, on a slab in the morgue."

"Where you planning to go?"

"I was thinking about going down to Uncle Oakley's farm."

"Who's Uncle Oakley?"

"Not is. Was. He's dead. He had this farm down in the hills, about a couple hundred miles south, and he left it to my cousin Theodore when he died, but Theodore doesn't live on it and can't sell it, because it's nothing but a shack on forty acres of rock. So there it is with no one home, and it's a place to go until I can think of a better place."

"What I'd like to know is how you plan to raise twenty-five centuries on forty acres of rock."

"Never mind. I'll do the thinking, which is out of your line. Uncle Oakley's farm is safe, if not productive, and that's what's important at the moment. My mind is made up to go there, and now's the time for us to start."

"Us? Did you say us?"

"Certainly I said us. Do you expect me to go off to the hills without even someone to play two-handed stud with? Besides, there will be a certain amount of work to do, and you may be useful."

"Dammit, Banty, I don't want to go down to Uncle Oakley's farm."

"The hell you don't!"

"I don't, and I won't, and that's all there is to it."

"All right, Carny. We've been pals a long time, and I thought we'd be pals forever, but I guess I was wrong. If you won't go, you won't, and I won't either, and I hope I never see you again. You get out of here and don't come back, and don't even bother coming to my funeral if Archie Flowers kills me tomorrow for not paying off the twenty-five hundred I owe him."

Well, how do you feel and what can you do when a pal talks like that? You feel like a heel, that's how, and you do whatever he asks to get him out of the trouble he's in, that's what, and that's how I felt and what I did. Banty packed some things in a bag, and we went

over to my place on Troost, a room over a second-hand furniture store, and I packed some things in a bag, and we started out together for Uncle Oakley's farm in Banty's '56 jalopy. While we were driving south out of town, I counted the money I had, and it came to $98.63. Banty took it and put it in his pocket and said he'd pay me back every cent of it, even though I'd be using my share of it for food and cigarettes and things like that, and even though he was furnishing the car for the trip besides. It shows how Banty was. He was a free-spender and knew how to treat a pal.

We got out of town on a highway going south, and after a while we came to a service station, and Banty drove in and stopped at the pumps, because the car needed gas. There was a little restaurant attached to the station, a short-order joint for truck drivers, really, and this reminded Banty that he'd been on a bourbon diet for quite a while, until the bourbon ran out, after which he'd been on a diet of nothing at all, nothing being all he could afford after the stud game. We went inside and had hamburgers and pie and coffee, which took maybe half an hour, and when we came out again, the jalopy was gone, but the attendant said he'd only parked it off to one side, out of the drive. He'd parked it in an open space between the station and a place next door, and this place was one of these highway nightclubs, and it wasn't any cheap dump, not by a long shot. It was built of gray stone and glass brick, and there was a formal hedge all around it, and a lot of green plants growing in stone urns along a curved drive coming up to the entrance from the highway. When someone opened the front door, going in or coming out, I could hear music for a few seconds, a classy jazz combo, and I wished Banty and I could go in there and have a few drinks and some fun, but we didn't have the time or the money, and so we got

in the jalopy and started south again for Uncle Oakley's farm.

We drove along pretty fast for about an hour, and then I went to sleep. I must have slept for almost another hour, and when I woke up we were at least a hundred miles down the highway with maybe another hundred to go. Banty was smoking a cigarette and humming a little tune off-key. I listened to the tune for a while, trying to place it, but I kept thinking all the time that I could hear something else, another sound besides the engine and the wind and Banty's humming, but I couldn't decide what it was exactly, or if it was really anything at all besides my imagination. I kept listening and listening and trying to decide what it was and where it came from, if anything from anywhere, and finally I decided it was the sound of snoring in the back seat, which didn't seem likely. I turned my head, though, to see if it possibly was, and damned if it wasn't. The sound was snoring, and it was a girl doing it.

"Banty," I said, "who's that girl in the back seat? You know her?"

"What's wrong with you?" Banty said. "You crazy or something?"

"Honest," I said. "There's a girl in the back seat, and if you'll only listen you can hear her snore."

Banty listened for a few seconds, his head cocked, and then he pulled over onto the shoulder of the highway and stopped the car and listened for a few seconds longer before twisting around slowly and looking over the back of the seat. I had a wild notion all of a sudden that I was seeing and hearing things that weren't there, he seemed so unconcerned, but then he cursed softly under his breath and pinched the end of his nose, which was a gesture he had when he was puzzled by something, and I knew she was there, all right, and Banty saw her.

"Wake her up and throw her out," he said.

That suited me fine, because I don't mind saying that I'm afraid of strange women who turn up all of a sudden in places where they aren't wanted or expected. I reached over the back of the front seat and shook her a little, but she only turned away on her side and made a little whimpering sound, and drew up her knees like a kid sleeping, clutching them in her arms.

I shook her again, harder, and said, "Come on, come on, you crazy dame, get out of there!" and pretty soon she came wide awake in an instant and sat up with a jerk. She yawned and rubbed her eyes and began to scratch in her short, tousled hair.

"Where am I?" she asked.

"You're in the back seat of my car, that's where you are," Banty said.

"Really? Is that really where I am? Actually in the back seat of your car?"

"That's what I said," Banty said, "and what I want to know is how the devil you got there."

She kept on scratching in her short hair, staring at us with wide eyes, but she didn't seem to be scared or confused or anything like that. In fact, there was a little smile on her face that gave me a notion she thought it was all pretty funny, a good joke on someone, but I couldn't see the joke. What I could see, now that she was sitting up looking at us, was that she was too pretty for her own good, and maybe mine and Banty's, and I wished she would pull down her dress, which was one of these sheaths that keep riding up.

"Well," she said, "I confess I'm a little vague about it, to tell the truth, but I must have simply come out of the Roman Gardens and crawled into your car and gone to sleep. I can't think of any other way it could have happened, so that must be the way."

"What's the Roman Gardens?" Banty asked. "Is that the place back up the highway with all the hedges and plants and things growing around?"

"That's it. It's a nightclub, and I went there with a

friend of mine named Tommy. I drank quite a few martinis, and so did Tommy, and he was getting some unacceptable ideas, and matters were complicated by all the martinis I had drunk, which made it impossible for me to be as clever defensively as I usually am. Finally, as I recall, I went to the powder room and then on outside with the intention of getting some air to clear my head. I was feeling dizzy from the martinis, and I thought I'd sit down for a while until I wasn't dizzy anymore, and the back seat of a car seemed like a good place to sit. I got into one which was handy, and which now turns out to be yours, and it would have been all right, of course, except that I apparently went to sleep, and here I am."

"Here you are, and there you go," Banty said. "Get out of here and go back to Tommy."

"How far have we come?"

"About a hundred miles."

"In that case, don't be absurd. A girl can hardly walk a hundred miles anytime at all, let alone on high heels at night by herself on a highway."

"That's your problem, sister. I didn't invite you go crawl in my car and go to sleep."

"Well, that's no reason why you can't be a gentleman about it. What was done is done, however unfortunate, and you will simply have to take me back where you found me."

"This is where we found you, sister, and this is as far as we take you."

She was looking at Banty with this queer little smile still on her face, as if she was still convinced that she was a good joke on someone, but I could have told her, knowing Banty, that the joke was on her, and it wasn't a very good one, either.

"I promise to make it worth your while if you take me back," she said.

"How much?"

"A thousand dollars."

"Come off. Where would a tramp like you get a grand?"

"You might be surprised. Take me back, I'll give it to you."

"Let me see it."

"You insist upon being absurd, don't you? You must not be very intelligent. I don't have it with me, of course."

"You don't have it anywhere. I may not be very intelligent, sister, but I'm intelligent enough to know when a common little tramp is telling a fat lie. Besides, I happen to need about three grand at the moment, and I couldn't take less for my trouble."

"All right. Three thousand. It makes no difference to me. It isn't my money."

"No? Whose is it?"

"My father's, of course."

"Oh, sure. You old man's a millionaire, that's what he is."

"That's right. He is."

"What's his name?"

"His name is Arnold Gotlot, and I'm Felicia Gotlot, and we live at Number One, Gotlot Place. It's a private street that belongs to my father, and so it's named after him, and we have the only house on it."

Well, if she was a liar, she was a good one. She said it casually, with the sound of truth, as if it were something she was used to saying, and she couldn't have picked a better old man if she had tried all night, for Arnold Gotlot was a millionaire, sure enough, and everyone knew that much about him, although not much more than that, for he was a seclusive old devil who didn't say much and wasn't seen much and, in fact, made a kind of principle or something out of his privacy.

Banty had begun to pinch the end of his nose now, which might be a good sign or a bad sign, depending on what caused it and what came of it, and he and

Felicia Gotlot, if that's who she was, were still staring at each other and seemed to be taking each other's measure. I was on Banty's side in whatever might develop, but I was beginning to have an uneasy feeling that I might not be backing the winner.

"In my opinion," Banty said, "you're a liar."

"In my opinion," she said, "you're a fool."

"Get out," he said.

"If I do, you'll be sorry."

"You're the one who will be sorry if you don't," he said.

"Kidnapping's a serious offense," she said. "Isn't it Federal? Don't they put you in the gas chamber for it?"

Well, now, just like that! Just like explaining something simple to a kid. I felt as if I'd been hit in the belly with a ball bat. It even shook old Banty up. His mouth popped open, and he stopped pinching the end of his nose, and I could tell that he was trying to keep a clear head in spite of being surprised and confused by what she'd suddenly said.

"What do you mean, kidnapping? Who's kidnapped anyone?"

"That depends on whether you take me back to Kansas City," she said. "If you don't, I've been kidnapped, and you'd better believe it."

"You think you can get away with something like that? You just told us you were loaded on gin and went to sleep in the back seat."

"That's what I told *you*. What I tell my father and the police could be something else entirely."

"Banty," I said, "I don't like it. Let's take her back and be done with it."

"Wait a minute. I'm thinking." Banty was pinching the end of his nose again, staring at Felicia Gotlot with odd intensity, and it was apparent that he was thinking hard and fast about something that just come into his head. "I'm beginning to believe this dame. She

is Felicia Gotlot, all right. Look at that dress. It doesn't look like much, and there isn't much to it, that's for sure, but I'll bet it cost three, four hundred at least, if it cost a penny. Look at that bracelet on her wrist. Those are real diamonds, if I ever saw one. Look at that fur piece. It could be mink, and I'll bet it is."

He started out talking quietly enough, but the more he said, taking inventory, the more his voice changed. It didn't get louder or faster, nothing like that, but a kind of excitement came into it, something you could feel more than hear. After the inventory, he was silent for quite a while, still staring at her, and that sense of excitement was as real then, when he was silent, as it was before, when he was talking. All of a sudden he reached inside his coat with his right hand, and I thought he was reaching for a cigarette, but he wasn't. He was reaching for a gun, a .38, and he pointed it over the back of the seat at Felicia Gotlot.

"Get up front," he said. "Never mind getting out. Just crawl over."

I said, "You lost your marbles, Banty?"

"Don't ask questions," Banty said. "She wants a kidnapping, she'll get one. A real one." The excitement was so big inside him now that his voice began to shake a little from it, but the gun in his hand was steady. "Don't you get it, Carny? This is the big break. This is what I've been waiting for. This is good luck coming after bad. And it just walked in. Just walked right in and went to sleep. A rich little tramp with a load of gin. It's like fate or something. A man can't turn his back on fate, Carny. A man who did that would never have any luck again, never as long as he lived."

It scared me, honest, hearing him talk like that, almost as if he were in a kind of spell, and he meant it all, every word of it. I knew it, and Felicia Gotlot knew it.

"I don't want any part of it," I said.

"It doesn't make any difference what you want," he said. "You've got part of it whether you want it or not. This is a snatch, as of right now, and you're in it just as much as I am. You take my advice and play along, Carny, because the stakes are big. Five hundred grand against the chamber. Think of that, Carny. A cool half million. Peanuts to old Gotlot for his precious daughter. Maybe we could make it a million. I'll think about it."

There was no use arguing with him, or trying to get him to be reasonable at all in that queer mood he was so suddenly in, and Felicia Gotlot understood this as well as I did, for she simply crawled over the back of the seat with a big display of nylon that I'd have appreciated more some other time. She settled down between me and Banty, and Banty handed me the .38 and said, "If she makes a sound or a move, belt her over the head with it," and we went on down the highway toward the forty acres of rock that Uncle Oakley had left to Cousin Theodore.

We had the devil of a time finding it in the dark, because it was a long way off the highway on a little gravel road leading into the hills, but we finally found it, after a lot of wrong turns and dead ends, and it was hardly worth finding at all, let alone with so much trouble, for it was nothing but a three-room shack made of rough native lumber that was as gray and weathered against the side of its hill as all the rocks around it. It turned out, though, that there was a good fishing stream on the place, and Cousin Theodore came down here often to fish. As a consequence, the place was stocked with sheets and blankets and cooking utensils and things like that, including a lot of canned goods.

There wasn't any gas or electricity, only kerosene lamps and a wood stove in the kitchen for cooking, and Banty, who had clearly been here before, found some kerosene and lit some lamps while I watched

Felicia Gotlot to keep her from getting away, although I don't know where she'd have gone in those dark hills so far from anywhere. The truth is, she didn't seem to have going anywhere in mind at the moment, and I don't blame her.

One of the three rooms was a bedroom, with nothing in it but a bed and a chest with a mirror over it, and we put Felicia Gotlot in there. There was no way of locking her in, which was a problem, and Banty said we'd have to tie her feet and hands.

"It isn't necessary to tie me," she said. "There's nowhere to go, and I wouldn't know which direction it was if there were."

"We'll tie you anyhow, just to be safe," Banty said. "It won't hurt you, and it won't be for long, because this job is hot, and I intend to work fast with it."

She kicked off her shoes and lay down on the bed, and we tore a sheet into strips to tie her with. We tied her hands together and her feet together and tied her at both ends to the head and the foot of the bed. We left enough slack so she could move some and be fairly comfortable, but not enough so she could sit up or reach her feet with her hands by bending. Then Banty went out to the kitchen to build a fire in the stove and make some coffee, but I hung back after he was gone. I don't know why I did, exactly, except that I was feeling kind of bad about tying her to the bed that way, like an animal or something. To tell the truth, I admired her and respected her and wished we weren't doing to her what we were. You had to admire and respect her, I mean. She had plenty of moxie, besides being kidnapped and all, without crying or making a big fuss, and she knew it was her fault for talking too much, letting Banty know who she was, after getting loaded on gin and crawling into the car and going to sleep. She took the blame, as I figured it, and was quiet and sensible.

"You want some coffee?" I asked.

"No."

"Well, good-night, then," I said.

"Go to hell," she said.

I went out to the kitchen instead, and Banty and I sat down at a table and had some coffee when it was ready.

"When you've had your coffee," Banty said, "you'd better get some sleep because after I leave in the morning you probably won't get much."

"Where you going?"

"To Kansas City to get the money. Half a million. I've decided not to press our luck."

It seemed to me he was already pressing it, but I didn't say so. "You'd better get some sleep yourself," I said.

"I'll catch a few hours after I get back to KC. Then I'll call old Gotlot and arrange for the payoff."

"What if he won't pay?"

"He'll pay. I'll tell him we'll kill his precious daughter if he doesn't."

"What if he won't?"

"Then we'll kill her."

"I hope he pays," I said. I took a drink of coffee and wished it was whiskey. "What then?"

"I'll drive back here with the money, and we go on south."

"What do we do with Felicia?"

"We leave her here, tied to the bed. We'll send a letter to the police after we leave, telling where she is. She'll get hungry and thirsty waiting, but she won't be hurt any."

"Just a minute. We'll have to wait until we're a long way south before sending the letter, and the postmark will tell which way we're heading."

"There's the difference between you and me, Carny. You're stupid, and I'm not. We'll send the letter from the nearest town. Only we'll send it to the police in New York or Los Angeles or someplace like that, and

they'll have to call back to KC. It'll give us plenty of time to get a long way away, and no one but us will know which way it is."

"I have to hand it to you," I said. "You've been doing a lot of thinking, all right."

"I've always been a thinker," he said. "I've just been waiting for my luck."

"I don't like leaving Felicia Gotlot tied to the bed for so long," I said, "and I admit it."

"You'll like the quarter million well enough," he said.

"When will you be back with it? That pretty green moola."

"Forty to fifty hours at the longest. I'll work fast."

"It's a lot of money. I never thought I'd have so much."

"Get some sleep," he said.

I tried, but I didn't do much good at it. I lay down on an old leather sofa in the living room and closed my eyes, but I kept seeing things behind my lids that I didn't want to see, and I kept thinking about how Banty had never had any luck, and wondering if he could possibly have any this time, when we needed it most, and altogether it must have been a couple of hours before I finally went to sleep, which was almost time for me to wake up again. Banty woke me, and I got up, and he was ready to leave. It wasn't light outside yet, but you had the feeling that it would be all of a sudden before long.

"I'm on my way," he said.

"Good luck!"

"Keep an eye on that dame. She's tricky."

"You can count on me," I said.

"I've got to," he said, "and I do."

He went out, and I could hear the jalopy start up and move off down the gravel road toward the highway, the sound of it growing fainter and fainter until it was gone completely, and then I went into the kitchen and lit a kerosene lamp and made a fire in the

wood-burning stove. There was a full pail of spring water that Banty had brought in last night, and I put coffee on to perk and checked the supplies to see what I could find for breakfast. There was no bread or eggs or milk or butter, of course, nothing fresh, but there was a package of ready-mixed pancake flour and some cans of condensed milk. I found a skillet, made some batter with the flour and condensed milk, and fried some pancakes in the skillet that looked as good as you could want, if I do say so myself. By this time the coffee was done, and I went through the living room into the bedroom where Felicia Gotlot was, and she was awake.

"You sleep all right?" I asked.

"Wonderful," she said. "It's so comfortable being tied in bed that I'm going to sleep that way all the time from now on."

"You want some breakfast?"

"If that's coffee I smell, I'll have some of that."

"It's coffee, all right. If you promise to behave yourself, I'll untie you and you can come out to the kitchen."

"My behavior, it seems to me, is pretty well determined. It's your behavior that concerns me."

"Don't worry. I won't bother you any."

I untied her, and she swung her legs over the side of the bed, smoothing down the narrow skirt that had slipped up her thighs in the night. After rubbing her wrists for a minute and bending over to rub her ankles afterward, she stood up and went out ahead of me into the kitchen. I poured two cups of coffee and divided the pancakes into two stacks on a pair of tin plates that I found in a cabinet.

"I'd like to wash my face and hands," she said.

"Go ahead. There's some water in the pail there."

"Where did it come from? Is there a well or something?"

"Not a well. A spring. There are springs all through these hills. Springs and caves."

"How do you know so much about it?"

"I was born down here. Not far from here."

"Truly? I had the impression you were probably hatched from a billiard ball someplace in KC."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Never mind."

She washed in the cold water, using a pan beside the pail, and dried herself on a towel hanging from a nail in the wall. Then she combed her short hair with her fingers, lacking anything else to do it with, and we sat down at the table and began to drink coffee and eat pancakes. She ate as if she were hungry, which she probably was, and didn't complain about not having any butter for her pancakes or sugar and real cream for her coffee, nothing like that. She was altogether a remarkable young dame, I've got to admit it, besides being the prettiest one I had ever seen close up in my life, or far away either, for that matter, in spite of being rumpled and tousled with last night still in her face.

She gave me an uneasy feeling, and I didn't like it. It was the kind of feeling you get over some girl when you're a kid, before you're old enough to know better, and it makes you think crazy and act crazy. It's bad in a kid and worse in a man. I wasn't acting crazy yet because I hadn't had time, but I found myself wishing all at once that she was someone besides who she was, Felicia Gotlot, and I was someone besides who I was, a guy called Carny, and that there was a chance of our being something to each other besides what we were and had to be but she wasn't, and I wasn't, and there wasn't. I hoped Banty would hurry back from KC, and meanwhile, I decided, I'd better think less about her and more about the quarter of a million dollars I was going to have all for my own to spend as I pleased.

It had got light outside, and by the time we'd finished our cakes and coffee it was light inside too, light enough to blow out the kerosene lamp, which I did. We washed up the tin plates and the skillet and went into the living room, and it looked like a long day, waiting and waiting for Banty and wondering all the time where he was and what he was doing and how long he would be, and it was made longer and worse by having started so early, and by the problem of what to do with Felicia Gotlot.

I decided not to tie her up again until night, unless she tried something tricky that made it necessary, and I told her this, and she said thanks, she appreciated it. Sarcasm.

"Remember I've got this .38 in my pocket," I said.

"I remember."

"Don't think I won't use it if you make me."

"Would you?"

She found some old magazines and began to leaf through them, and I smoked and watched her for a while. Then I thought I'd have another cup of coffee, and went after it, and she said she'd have another cup too, and so I brought it. I sat down and began to drink my coffee, and she drank hers, but she kept looking at me over her cup with this odd expression.

"What are you looking at?" I asked.

"You," she said.

"Well, cut it out."

"Why?"

"I don't like it."

"Do you know what I was thinking? I was thinking about what you might have been like as a kid in these hills."

"I was dirty and ragged and ignorant."

"You must have had a lot of fun."

"Sure I did! My old man was a drunken bum and my old lady was a drunken slob."

"Is that why you left home?"

"Partly."

"What's the other part?"

"Just to get away from these rocks and see if I could find a dollar to carry in my pocket."

"Did you find one?"

"I've been doing all right."

"Now you're going to do even better, aren't you? Now you're going to have a whole quarter of a million dollars to carry in your pocket."

"That's right."

"No, it isn't. That's wrong."

"You think so? Wait and see."

"Do you really imagine that fellow you called Banty can pull off something like this?"

"Sure. Why not? Banty's smart."

"I doubt it. Anyhow, he's weak. He doesn't have anything inside. He's just some curly hair on top of nothing."

"You don't know him, that's all."

"I don't have to know him. All I had to do was look at him and hear him talk. You'll find out. He'll botch the job and squeal on you, and both of you will end up in prison, and maybe in the gas chamber."

"Shut up. If you haven't got anything sensible to say, just keep your mouth shut."

"Take my advice. Get out while you can. You could get away if you left right now."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"It makes no difference to me, really. I just hate to see you get into any more trouble than you're already in. That Banty's bad luck."

"I should tie you in bed and leave you there."

"Have it your own way," she said.

She shrugged and began leafing through another old magazine, and I began to think again about Banty and try to figure when he'd probably be back. He hadn't told me any schedule, of course, because that was something he'd have to work out in KC after he

got there, but I figured he'd probably contact Arnold Gotlot tonight, or maybe even this afternoon, since the job was hot. Besides, he wouldn't want to prolong his chances of running accidentally into Archie Flowers or one of his boys. He'd tell Arnold Gotlot about having Felicia and wanting the half million to give her back alive, and then he'd probably hang up and let Gotlot think about it for a while. Later on, maybe tonight or early tomorrow, he'd call again from another phone and set the time and place exactly for the payoff. I didn't know where the place or when the time would be, naturally, but I knew, knowing Banty, that the place would be one he'd choose carefully and the time would be soon, and it was my bet that it would be tomorrow night. That meant Banty would be back early the next morning at the latest, probably between midnight and daylight.

As I expected, it was a long day and a bad one, and I thought it would never pass, but it did. We ate something from cans about noon, and something else from cans before dark, and between the two times, Felicia Gotlot went into the bedroom and lay down on the bed and had a nap. I was tired and sleepy myself, having started the day so early after a hard night, but I didn't dare go to sleep because of having to watch Felicia Gotlot, to see that she didn't run away, maybe hitting me over the head or shooting me with my own .38 before running. I made her leave the door to the bedroom open so I could see her lying in there from where I sat, and I played Old Sol ten times with a pack of cards I found, and he beat me every time.

A little while after dark, I was so tired and sleepy I couldn't stand it any longer, and I told her I was going to bed and she'd have to go too.

"Are you going to tie me in bed already?"

"That's right."

"Would you let me sit up by myself if I promise not to do anything you told me not to?"

"No."

"You aren't quite as dumb as I thought you were."

"I'm not dumb enough to think you wouldn't lie to me if it suited you."

"I'm quite an accomplished liar. I have a particular talent for it."

"And that's the truth," I said.

I tied her in bed the same way Banty and I had tied her before. She didn't fight it, or try to talk me out of it anymore, but just lay there quietly looking up at me with that odd little smile on her face.

"Enjoy yourself while you can," I said.

"You aren't as dumb as I thought," she said, "but you're still pretty dumb."

"You may change your mind," I said.

"What makes you so sure Banty's coming back?"

"He'll be back."

"Well," she said, "half a million is twice as much as a quarter million, and I don't see what's to keep him from going north or east or west instead of south."

Then she closed her eyes, still smiling, and I don't mind admitting that I couldn't put what she'd said out of my mind, and I couldn't sleep because of it, tired as I was and much as I needed to. I got up and began smoking cigarettes, but I had to quit after a while because I only had about half a pack left to last me until Banty came back, if he ever did, and I sat there in the dark for almost ten years trying to convince myself that he surely would. Finally I lay down on the sofa again and shut my eyes, but I kept seeing Banty heading any direction but south, and it was after midnight before I went to sleep and began dreaming about the same thing. It was a dirty trick of Felicia Gotlot's to put me deliberately in such a frame of mind, and I hoped she was having as much trouble sleeping as I was, but she said the next morning she hadn't.

I got back at her a little by leaving her tied in bed

until the middle of the morning, but then I let her up for coffee, and let her stay up afterward. Things were strained between us, though, and it wasn't until afternoon, after we'd had something to eat out of cans, that she finally said any more to me than was strictly demanded by necessity. Then she said she was sick of staying inside all the time and would like to take a walk.

"I don't think so," I said.

"Oh, come on. We could just walk up the hill to the crest and back. What harm could it do?"

"Well, none, I guess."

The truth was, I wanted to get out of the house myself, and I was glad to go. We walked on up the hill at an angle to the crest, and it was something to see how well she managed to walk among the rocks in her high heels and tight skirt, and she was, as I've said, pretty remarkable at more things than you'd think. There was a fallen tree near the crest, and we sat down to rest on the trunk of the tree. It was mighty nice up there, if you care for rocks and scrub timber, and I could see, glittering in the sunlight at the foot of the hill below the house, the good fishing stream that Cousin Theodore came here to fish in.

"I've made up my mind to tell you something," Felicia Gotlot said.

"Don't bother," I said.

"I've made up my mind to tell you the truth, and you'd better listen."

"I'll bet it's the truth!"

"You know why I've made up my mind to tell you? Because you're not a really bad fellow, only dumb. It's that bad Banty who makes you do things that get you into trouble, but Banty won't do it anymore, because Banty won't be back."

"There you go again, and you may as well quit."

"I don't mean because he'll run away. I just said that to bother you and make you realize how dumb it

is to trust someone like that Banty. I mean because the police will get him."

"Not Banty."

"Yes, they will, and I'll tell you why. Do you want me to tell you?"

"Suit yourself."

"The police will get him because when he goes for the payoff, whenever and wherever it is, Arnold Gotlot will have enough men there to fight a small war."

"No, he won't. Not after Banty tells him what will happen to his precious daughter if he tries any tricks."

"That's what I've been getting around to telling you. Nothing is going to happen to Arnold Gotlot's daughter, and Arnold Gotlot knows it, because his daughter *is* at home this minute with a broken leg, where she has been for nearly a week."

"What the hell you talking about?"

"I'm talking about Felicia Gotlot's leg, which is broken. She fell off a horse."

"Oh, sure. And I suppose you're Felicia Gotlot's grandmother or someone like that. Is that it?"

"No one like that at all. My name is Amanda Swanson, and I'm a maid in the Gotlot home. Felicia likes me and humors me, and when I go out at night she lets me wear her clothes and jewelry. When that Banty was so nasty last night, refusing to take me back to Kansas City and all, I lied about being Felicia because I thought it would impress him and make him take me. Then when he got the idea to kidnap me, it was too late to tell the truth, because he wouldn't have believed me. Besides, I didn't like him, and wanted to get him into trouble, which I have, and he deserves every bit of it."

"I don't believe you. You're always telling lies, you said so yourself, and you're lying now."

"I admit I'm a good liar, and I lie when it pleases me, but now it pleases me to tell the truth, and you'd better believe me. I know old Arnold Gotlot like the

palm of my hand, and I know how he hates con men and blackmailers and crooks of all sorts. The minute Banty contacts him, he'll start laying the trap to catch him. He won't let on or say a word about Felicia's being at home, because that would scare Banty off. What he'll do, he'll play along and agree to everything, setting the trap all the while, and then, probably tonight, it'll be the end of Banty, and if you don't get out of here right away, it'll be the end of you too."

I'll say that I was excited, and I almost lost my head. All I wanted to do, all at once, was to start running and keep on running, without ever looking back, until I couldn't run any farther, and I wished I'd never seen or heard of Felicia Gotlot, or Amanda Swanson, whichever she was, or of Banty either. I was sort of crazy for a minute, that's what I was, and I did actually jump up and take a couple of steps downhill, almost on my way, when I suddenly stopped and thought better of it.

"Hold on," I said. "How do I know you weren't telling the truth before, and telling lies now?"

"So far as that goes," she said, "you don't."

"You're Felicia Gotlot, all right. You're just trying to get me to run away so you can walk somewhere and call Kansas City and get Bandy caught."

"Your concern for Banty is touching. Too bad he wouldn't feel the same about you. However, you could prevent my going anywhere by tying me in bed again. It wouldn't matter much to me. The police will be here sometime tonight in my opinion."

"Banty will be here, that's who. He'll be here with half a million dollars, and I'll be right here to get my share of it. Nothing doing, sister. You'd just as well quit lying, because it won't do you any good."

"I was wrong," she said. "You're just as dumb as I thought you were at first. You're simply too dumb to take proper care of yourself."

"You'd better quit calling me names too. I'm getting

tired of it. Come on. Let's get back down to the house."

She walked down ahead of me, without saying another word. In the house, she went directly to the bedroom and stayed in there all the rest of the afternoon, until it was time to open some more cans, and afterward she went back and stayed in there alone all evening until I decided it was time to tie her in bed again in case I fell asleep, although I was getting more and more nervous as it got later and later, and didn't feel like sleeping in spite of being as tired as I can remember ever being.

"So you're really going to wait for Banty," she said.

"That's what I'm going to do."

"Pleasant waiting," she said. "Wake me up when the police come."

"That will be a couple days after Banty and I are gone," I said. "I hope you don't get too lonesome in the meanwhile."

"It will be an interesting speculation for you," she said. "Maybe it will help to pass the night faster. It ought to be quite exciting as time grows shorter and shorter. Will it be Banty or the police? The police or Banty? A simple thing like that can get into your head and drive you crazy if you don't get it out soon enough."

You can see that she'd done it again. Just like she'd done it last night about Banty running off with the money. She'd put it in my head, and I couldn't get it out. It stayed right there and kept repeating itself over and over again, first one way and then the other, Banty or the police, the police or Banty, and to make matters worse I ran out of cigarettes. I gathered up all the butts I'd left in saucers around the place, and I smoked these, a few drags off each one, but pretty soon they were all gone too, and it was only about ten o'clock with a long, long time still to wait.

I didn't know exactly how long, of course, and I

began trying to guess, and I guessed four hours. There wasn't any reason for guessing four instead of three or five, but it somehow made me feel better and surer to have a certain time to look forward to. I guessed that Banty would make the contact for the payoff at eleven sharp, which would leave him three hours to get back down here if he hurried, which he sure as hell would, and after eleven I began to try to follow him along the highway in the jalopy, placing him at certain places at certain times. As it turned out I wasn't far wrong, for he was only about fifty miles away in my head when someone suddenly kicked the front door open, and five cops jumped into the room with their guns out, and every cop was nine feet tall.

Well, that's the way it ended, and it's over, and I'm almost glad. As you can see, Banty was bright but had no luck, and I had no luck and was stupid besides.

Not that Felicia Gotlot, though. She was bright and lucky both, besides being the best liar I ever met. It was simply impossible to know when to believe her, because she told the truth like a lie and a lie like the truth. I don't hold anything against her, though. I liked her, and still do, and I remember that she tried her best to get me out of it before it was too late, which it now is. The prettiest and altogether the most remarkable woman I've ever known was Felicia Gotlot—Amanda Swanson, I mean.

LONE WITNESS

Talmage Powell

Marco tingled with excitement and pure delight when Timothy Watkins came to him in a moment of extreme trouble. Marco didn't reveal these feelings. Instead, he ushered a disheveled Timothy into his apartment on a drizzly midnight with a show of concern and sympathy that appeared genuine.

After all, he and Timothy were supposed to be friends. Timothy's money, purchasing a chunk of Marco's foundering business, had bailed Marco out of deep financial difficulty. And like a true friend and honest man, Timothy had come straight to Marco when it appeared Miss Sharon Randall, a lovely brunette, preferred him over Marco.

When he opened his door on the man whom he secretly hated, Marco took in Timothy's appearance at a glance. Timothy was wet and muddy. His face had lost all color. His eyes were glazed, stricken, not quite in complete touch with reality.

Timothy, Marco knew, had had a dinner invitation from Miss Randall. Marco had spent the evening seething at the thought of the two of them alone in the intimate seclusion of her lakeside cottage.

A big, expansive sham of a man, Marco helped Timothy to the couch.

Timothy began mumbling a garbled apology. "No one else I could think of—had to tell someone; better leave. . . ."

Timothy started to rise, but Marco pushed him back. "No nonsense, now," Marco said. He was so eager to know the nature of Timothy's trouble he

would have locked the door to keep him here. "You did exactly right. Just relax and tell me what it's all about."

Timothy was incapable of relaxing. Marco crossed the room to the buffet, poured a stiff drink, and brought it to Timothy, who gulped gratefully, shuddered the liquor down straight, and a bit of color came to his face.

"Marco," he said in a whisper of suffering, "I've killed a man."

"What!"

"A stranger. A man I never saw before. Never knew he was there, hardly, until the car hit him."

All the bitterness went out of the evening, as far as Marco was concerned. He put on a front of gravity and trouble. He dropped beside Timothy and put his hand on the wiry, sandy man's shoulder.

"Better tell me about it from the beginning, Timothy."

Timothy was miserably reluctant. "I don't want to involve. . . ."

"More nonsense," Marco said, giving him a slight shake. "What are friends for, anyway?"

Timothy's need was so great and Marco so kind and understanding that Timothy's slate-gray eyes misted. "Miss Randall and I . . . we had cocktails before dinner and a couple drinks afterward. I left there pleasantly mild. Not drunk, but not completely sober either. Not knowing that a man's life would be in my hands. . . ." He closed his eyes and shivered briefly.

"You were returning home from Miss Randall's, Timothy?"

"Yes, driving along, thinking of her, of our evening. I saw the truck stop at the intersection far ahead. It pulled away, and I know now that the driver had let a hitchhiker out. The truck was going no closer to town than the intersection. The hitchhiker was headed on this way.

"I—I didn't see him until I was through the intersection. He was just there, all of a sudden. On the edge of the road, flagging me for a ride.

"I slammed on the brakes and the car skidded slightly. Felt like it was going to flip over. I hadn't realized how fast I'd been driving.

"I jerked the steering wheel. The car slewed off the edge of the pavement, and I heard a bump, exactly like cold metal slapping meat and bone.

"When I managed to get the car stopped, I got out but I didn't see the hitchhiker. It was as if he'd been a mirage in the rainy night, an impression of a thin, slightly stooped guy in jeans and out-at-the-elbows jacket.

"Remembering the sound of that bump, I began to shake all over, I tell you! I grabbed the flashlight from the glove compartment, ran up the road. . . ."

"And found him?"

"Yes," Timothy mourned, his head in his hands. "In a thicket down the embankment beside the road, his head all bloody—I knew he must be dead."

"How did you know? Did you go down and examine him?"

Timothy lifted his head slowly. "No, I—come to think of it, the sight of so much blood—I panicked, I guess. Don't remember anything else clearly until I got here. But he couldn't have been alive with his head battered so badly."

"Did you leave any traces of yourself out there, anything that might link you to him?"

"I—I don't know," Timothy said.

"Then we'll have a look."

"Marco, I don't want to drag you in. . . ."

"Forget it," Marco said, keeping his face averted so Timothy wouldn't see the glint in his eyes. "We're business partners, aren't we?"

Timothy stood up slowly. "You know, I always had the feeling you really didn't like me. Deep down, I

mean. Well, after all, you might have felt I stole your girl."

"Come now, Timothy, give me credit for being a bigger person than that."

The highway was a dark, deserted ribbon of slippery black. Timothy slowly stopped his car. "Right over there, Marco," he whispered, although there was no reason for keeping his voice so low. "Across the road. I was heading in the other direction, you know, toward town."

Marco's raincoat rustled as he shifted his bulk out of the car. He had the flashlight in his hand. "Leave the parking lights on, and if you see another car coming, get out and open the hood like you have car trouble."

"Marco. . . ."

"I know. You can thank me later."

Marco went quickly across the highway and started down the slope. He moved below highway level, the flashlight probing a rough, sparsely-grown landscape. His excitement grew higher. Surely, this was the opportunity of a lifetime. He'd get his business and his girl back. Once he went through the motions of friendship, he'd have to go, finally, to the cops, wouldn't he, before Timothy had a chance to move the body? He had conscience, didn't he? He was a law-abiding citizen, wasn't he?

The topping on the cake was the knowledge that if Timothy had played it cool he might have got away with it. Now, he never would.

Irritation began to crowd the elation in Marco. The finger of light became more hurried in its movements. Where in blazes was the guy, the dead man who would return to Marco everything Timothy had taken? The light swung across the heaviest of the thickets. Stopped. Returned.

Marco moved forward, holding the light steady. He cursed under his breath. Clearly, this was the place

where the hitchhiker had landed, where Timothy had seen him. There were freshly broken twigs, an impression where a man's body had lain. The wet leaves had been disturbed where the hitchhiker had dragged himself away.

With a growing sense of having been cheated, Marco moved the light slowly. He could see exactly how the man had pulled himself around, groaned his way to his feet. A few feet beyond the thicket was a tattered, soiled handkerchief with a smear of blood on it. The guy had paused there to touch his wounds, steadying, feeling the return of strength.

Marco plunged forward, hoping the hitchhiker had collapsed. Marco's eyes and brain were hungry for the sight of the dead body.

But the hitchhiker had recovered and gone. Marco had to admit the fact. He finally stopped his search and stood overcome by the death of hope. Wouldn't you know it? Those stringy, bewhiskered bums and winos, you couldn't kill them with a meat-axe. A passing motorist had probably picked up the guy. Right now, the bum was no doubt dry and comfortable in a hospital charity bed. The cops would give cursory attention to his accident and invite him to get out of town.

"Marco?"

Marco raised his head. Timothy's shadow was visible up on the highway.

"Marco, what is it? Where are you?"

The sound of the hated voice at this moment put Marco's teeth on edge. He hadn't until tonight known how much he really wanted to remove Timothy, when for a little while it had seemed possible.

And then a thought came to Marco. Timothy had no way of knowing he was down here alone. Without turning on the flashlight, which he'd extinguished when he'd quit searching, Marco called softly, "Get back in the car, Timothy! Trying to attract the atten-

tion of anybody who happens to pass? You crazy or something? I'm coming right up."

Chastened, Timothy was under the wheel of the car when Marco returned.

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

"What took you so long?"

"For pete's sake, I wasn't so long. It only seemed that way to you. I had to find the guy. And then I tried to figure something to do. Thought about moving him. Looked around for a place maybe to hide him."

"Then he's. . . ."

"Deader'n a burned out match, Timothy."

A sob came from Timothy as he hunched over the wheel.

"Look," Marco said, "I'm sorry."

"I'm a murderer, Marco."

"I wouldn't feel. . . ."

"Murderer," Timothy said. He suddenly beat on the steering wheel with the heel of his palm. "I'm a murderer—and the fact can never be changed."

"Hey, now get hold of yourself. We've got to think."

"One second," Timothy sobbed wildly, "I was a decent, law-abiding guy with a business interest and a girl. The next tick of the clock and I'm a killer, and nothing will ever make things exactly the same again."

Marco gripped him by the shoulders. "That's right, Timothy. You have to get used to the idea."

"Marco, I'm scared to face the police."

"No need for you to. Crazy if you do, Pal. You were drinking when you hit that guy. They'll really throw the book at you!"

Timothy shuddered and dropped his forehead on the rim of the steering wheel.

"But cheer up, Pal," Marco slapped him on the shoulder. "There's a way out."

"There is?"

"Sure. I'm going to help you, Timothy."

"How?"

"We'll go back to my apartment. I'll give you all the ready cash I've got. You'll have a long head start before that guy is found. They'll never find you."

"You mean—run away?"

"Any better ideas, Timothy?"

"But I'd lose my share of the business, my girl."

"There are other businesses, other girls. But you just have the next twenty years one time, Timothy. Of course, if you want to throw them away, along with the business and girl. . . ." Marco shrugged. "I'm trying to help you salvage what you can, that's all. I see no other way but for you to get going quick, go far, and never look back. And try not to take it so hard, Timothy. You're not the first guy to have a thing like this happen."

Timothy became quieter. He pulled himself erect, reached to the ignition key, and started the car. Marco was glad he had the cover of darkness to hide his elation.

They rode the self-service elevator up five flights to Marco's apartment. Marco let them in and turned on a light in the living room.

He gripped Timothy's bicep briefly. "Cheer up, Timothy. You'll start a new life under another name a thousand miles away, and all this will seem a bad dream. Now, I'll see how much cash I can rustle."

Timothy moved dully to the window and opened it. He drew in a deep breath of air. The rain had stopped. The night outside was clean tasting and very silent.

Marco returned. "Here's about five hundred bucks, Timothy. Not much, maybe, but used sparingly, it'll take you a long way."

Timothy took the money, looked at it as if he didn't quite realize what it was, and slipped it into his pocket. The lower portion of his face parted in a gray smile. "Murderer. . . ." he mused. "You know, Marco,

once you get over the first shock of knowing you're a murderer, it changes your whole outlook."

"Just don't think about it, Timothy," Marco admonished him then.

"Why not? Once you've killed, then human life assumes a completely new value. Or should I say lack of value?"

Marco began to feel uneasy. "Timothy, you ought to use every possible minute to put as much distance. . . ."

"I hate to think of losing the business and my girl, Marco. Really I do, especially since there is only one thing that can definitely link me to the hitchhiker. The rain must have washed the tire tread marks from the shoulder of the road, and I can burn my shoes, in case I left footprints. That leaves just one thing, Marco. You, the lone witness."

Before Marco could speak, Timothy clipped him on the jaw. As he crumpled, Timothy took Marco's shoulders and directed his fall out the open window. Then he kicked back the throw rug from under the window, which made everything reasonably obvious. Timothy would agree with everyone that it had been most unfortunate for the rug to slip.

MONKEY KING

James Holding

I've always loved jade. Green jade refreshes me like the cool crisp taste of mint in my mouth. Pink jade reminds me of sunset cloud that's been carved from the sky with a soft knife. And white jade makes delicious icicles of pleasure parade down my back like tiger tracks in snow.

Indeed, I'm hardly normal when it comes to jade; unfortunately, I've never had the means to indulge my feeling for it. If I'd been a millionaire, I'd have assembled a private collection. If I'd had an adequate education, I might have become an expert on the subject, serving on the staff of a distinguished museum. But as it is, forced since childhood to scratch desperately for a living, I'm a thief.

Not a common thief, however; I specialize in jade. And by "jade" I mean not only jadeite, nephrite and chloromelanite, the true jade minerals, but all their beautiful blood brothers, too, from saussurite to quartz.

That's what I was doing in Bangkok.

Bangkok is the home of the Green Monkey, an image of Hanuman, the ancient Monkey King, lovingly carved five hundred years ago from a single block of flawless green Chanthaburi jasper. The head is thirty-five centimeters tall, the body gowned in rich vestments, seated on a golden pyramid-shaped throne twelve feet high, and proudly displayed in an exquisite temple-museum building of its own, just off the Royal Plaza. It's one of the loveliest jades in Asia.

I intended to steal it.

The round-the-world cruise ship, on which I'd been

a minimum-rate passenger since San Francisco, anchored at dawn off the mouth of the Chao Phraya River in the Gulf of Siam. A huge flat-bottom barge met it there to carry three hundred of us, American tourists all, across the sandbar blocking the river's mouth and upstream to Bangkok for two days of sightseeing, then back downstream to our cruise ship again the next evening.

Incredibly, there was no customs inspection for two-day cruise-tourists of our kind, either coming or going from Bangkok. That's why I chose to enter the city, and leave it, as such a tourist. For the excursion, I carried with me from the ship only my large holdall camera bag, toothbrush and razor, and my umbrella.

Arriving in Bangkok, I left my fellow tourists to their own devices and took a taxi to the Ratanokosin Hotel where I registered. It's only two blocks from the Royal Plaza and the Abode of the Green Monkey. When the boy showed me to my room, I took off my jacket and tie, switched on the air-conditioner to full, and ordered a gin sling sent up.

Sipping it in a positive glow of anticipation and pleasure, I went over my plans once more, carefully and professionally. They were simple in the extreme. I'd reconnoitered the job several months before, you understand. I knew what I was up against. No one would question my camera case, I was sure. In a city whose temples, canals and towers are so infinitely photogenic, photographers are as common as cockroaches in China. And certainly no one would suspect my umbrella, a common sight on the streets of Bangkok at the beginning of the rainy season.

This was Saturday afternoon. My real work didn't start until Sunday, since the Abode of the Green Monkey is open to the public only on Sundays.

On Sunday, I arose late to a muggy, overcast day threatening rain. I felt fresh, confident and strong. After a hearty breakfast at my hotel, I listened content-

edly for an hour or so to the Sunday concert of music played on the *ranad ek*, or bamboo xylophone, by three Thais in the hotel lobby. Then I went to my room, secured my camera bag and umbrella, and checking the time carefully, set off for the Abode of the Green Monkey.

Under the wide overhang of its gracefully curved roof, the Abode's double doors are high and broad, beautifully inlaid with mother-of-pearl. They are guarded by an imposing pair of glazed-tile demons, one on either side, and more effectively, perhaps, by half a dozen slightly-built Thai guards with ingratiating ways and fine-boned faces, who patrol the platform outside while the Abode is open to the public.

The sweet tinkling notes of temple bells filled Bangkok's air, but I had ears and eyes for nothing save my immediate goal. And there it was. Dimly through the open doors I could see the Monkey King squatting cross-legged, wrinkled and benign atop his golden throne.

Scores of Bangkok residents and foreign tourists were streaming in and out of the great doors, even though it was now only five minutes until noon, when the Abode of the Green Monkey would be closed for the siesta hours. Casually I joined a spate of in-going tourists, my camera draped around my neck in approved shutter-bug style, my camera case hanging by its stout strap over my shoulder, my furled umbrella in my right hand. Soon I formed a part of a knot of sight-seers who stood at the foot of the pyramidal throne and gazed upward, enthralled at the simian jade features of the Green Monkey which sat serenely above our heads on the pyramid's truncated top.

Unnoticed, I edged out of the cluster and around to the side of the throne, where I began to examine with spurious interest one of the life-size golden statues that flank it. Shielded by this statue, I unslung my camera case and put it down as though to rest a mo-

ment. When no one was looking, I shoved the case out of sight with my foot under the trailing skirt of gold brocade that hangs down to the floor on all sides of the throne to mask the lower beams of its inner framework. It was the place I had selected, after much observation on my previous visit.

Nobody took any notice of me. I wandered farther toward the rear of the throne, glancing at my watch. A moment later I heard the voices of the guards outside the doors calling out that it was closing time; the tourists and sightseers rapidly began to depart. When I felt safe from observation, one minute before the noon closing hour by my watch, I lay down on the floor behind the throne, lifted its brocade skirt and rolled under the platform with my umbrella, all in one smooth uninterrupted flow of silent motion. I dropped the brocade skirt back in place, and grinned with delight.

I was completely concealed. Seconds later, two guards made a circuit of the Abode's interior to check that all visitors had left before they locked the massive doors. I could hear their heels clicking on the floor. And although their inspection of the premises was superficial at best, I was glad I was well hidden. If I could get past this tense moment without discovery, if the guards who saw me come in had not remarked my absence in the flow of departing visitors, I was home free. The guards were changed for the afternoon shift, I knew. There would be new men outside when I left with the Green Monkey.

With my ear to the marble floor, I heard the jarring thuds that told me the massive doors had been swung shut. Darkness and silence descended on me as the dim lights were switched off from outside.

I waited several minutes. Then I rolled out from under the throne, groped in the blackness until I located my camera case, and drew it forth. From it, I took a flashlight which I lit and set upon the floor to

work by. I unscrewed the cap from the end of my umbrella's fat straight outsize handle, and shook out of it a heavy cylinder of short, hollow, paper-thin steel tubes, nested one inside the other for storage, but capable of being screwed together like the sections of a fishing rod to form a light, strong ladder. I was proud of that ladder when it stood assembled less than fifteen minutes later. I'd designed it myself, and the oversize umbrella shaft and handle, too.

I was prouder still of the next object I lifted from my camera holdall bag. It was the heart and soul of my plan for stealing the Green Monkey.

Have you ever been in a glass factory? And seen the solid, rough-hewn chunks of broken green glass called "cullet" that they take out of the bed of a glass furnace when they shut the furnace down to reline it with new fire brick? Maybe you haven't. But what I took from my case in the Abode of the Green Monkey that day was just such a chunk of cullet, roughly pyramidal in shape, and like no other chunk of cullet in one respect: its upper section had been crudely carved and ground into a recognizable monkey's head.

It was, indeed, my first attempt at sculpture and not too badly done, I told myself. I had stolen the chunk of cullet from the waste pile of a California factory; I had lovingly worked on it in my cabin for five long weeks of cruising, chipping, carving, rubbing it with fine sand to kill the gleam of glass.

I set it gently on the floor. I leaned my ladder against the high throne of the Monkey King and, flashlight in hand, climbed carefully upward. When I was high enough to reach the image, I took the flashlight between my teeth and used both hands to lift the Green Monkey from his pedestal. Then I carried him, still wearing his rich vestments, down the ladder to the floor, rung by precarious rung. There, I stripped his raiment from him, a royal headdress and a jewel-studded, stole-like cloak that entirely covered his

body. I placed the headdress on my glass monkey's head, the concealing cloak around the shapeless torso of my chunk of cullet.

Examining the result in my flashlight's beam, I smiled to myself, not unsatisfied. Swathed as it was in cloak and headdress, the cullet looked enough like the Green Monkey to be his cousin, certainly enough to escape detection almost indefinitely in the anemic light of the Abode, perched so high above its viewers' heads.

Now I mounted my ladder once again and placed the glass statue on the Green Monkey's throne. I dismantled and restowed the ladder in my umbrella shaft. Then, and only then, I turned the flashlight on the genuine jade image, now resting naked on the floor.

I caught my breath at its beauty. I devoured it with my eyes. I stroked it with tender fingertips. I rubbed my cheek against it. I did a slow blind dance with it in my arms, fondling it. The Green Monkey was mine.

At last, regretfully, I slid him out of sight into my camera bag where the chunk of cullet had nested until now. I zipped the case closed, then sat down to wait behind the throne in the darkness until the Abode of the Green Monkey should reopen for the afternoon.

I had much to think about. The time passed quickly. About ten minutes before the Abode reopened, a drumming, rushing sound began on the roof above me, and I correctly deduced it had begun to rain outside. Soon the lights inside my sanctum flashed on, and the doors were thrown wide to the afternoon visitors.

Despite the rain, they arrived and entered in impressive numbers, quieting the only small worry I had—that if the shrine were sparsely patronized, I might have trouble departing it inconspicuously. I drifted aimlessly from the back of the throne, and managed to melt unnoticed into a group of tourists. I accompanied them when they left, secretly smiling to hear

them enthuse over the piece of broken glass they thought was the Green Monkey.

Outside the doors under the roof's overhang, I saw it was raining very hard. All the better, I thought with delight. I raised my umbrella, like most of my companion tourists, and prepared to step out into the rain, the jade image of Hanuman, the Monkey King, safe in my camera bag which was now all but concealed from view by my opened umbrella.

The Thai museum guards, clad in oilskin rain gear, still patrolled before the entrance doors, keeping a sharp eye on the crowd. They were different men from the morning's guard. I was safe.

During the brief moment I paused under the Abode's eaves, while I was opening my umbrella and savoring my triumph, I found time to pity those guards. They saw the statue of the Green Monkey every Sunday of their lives, true. But had they ever seen the Green Monkey unclothed, as I had, the glory of the jade unhidden? Had they ever felt the cool, faintly oily tenderness of the stone? Had they ever seen the unbelievable beauty of a flashlight's beam shining through the green translucence of the loveliest carved wonder in Asia? No. Poor bodyguards to the Monkey King, they were bodyguards only, and nothing more.

At the moment, the eyes of one of them scanned me, poised to step out into the rain, and the weird conviction swept through me that he was reading my thoughts across twenty feet of space.

For he frowned suddenly, and began to walk toward me, his intent gaze never leaving me for an instant. At the same time, he made a sign to two other guards nearby who immediately began to converge upon me. Within the space of a single breath, all three stood confronting me, looking ridiculously petite in their little oilskins but somehow threatening, too, with the rain dripping from their hats, noses and chins.

"Kho apia," said the first one, politely. Then he switched to English. "Pardon, sir. Will you come with us, please?"

I gaped at him, utterly confounded. "Why?"

"Cannot talk in rain," he said. "Kindly accompany us in car, yes?" He was very apologetic, but also very stern, very sincere.

"Accompany you? In a car? Are you crazy?" I bleated. A spasm of genuine alarm squeezed my heart. I peered at him under the rim of my umbrella.

The other two guards stepped close and placed delicate hands gently on each of my arms. "Come," said my thought-reader, and led the way toward the car-park beside the street.

My heart dropped into my shoes. As I followed between my captors, the camera bag over my shoulder suddenly seemed intolerably heavy, as though the Monkey King weighed a million pounds.

They took me to police headquarters, where a doll-like magistrate listened to a rapid flood of Thai from my guards, punctuated by thumb-jerking in my direction. Then, at a crisp command from the magistrate, I was relieved of my passport, camera case and umbrella. They found the Monkey King within seconds.

I was locked into a cell, still dazed and uncomprehending. I had been promptly arrested after a single casual glance from the guard. Why? Everything had gone so smoothly, so swimmingly. Nothing, I told myself stubbornly, *nothing* could possibly have given me away, so it must have been thought-reading or some other occult art that had brought the gendarmes down on me. Orientals sometimes possess strange mental powers, they say.

Through the bars of my cell door, I said to the English-speaking guard who was locking me in, "Tell me, please, how did you know I had stolen the Monkey King?" I had been caught with the goods—there was no use pretending innocence.

He looked at me, smiling. "You inside Abode of Hanuman alone during siesta," he lisped. "This very suspicious, no?"

"Very suspicious, yes. But how did you *know* I'd been inside during siesta, just by looking at me?"

He shrugged daintily. "Rain," he said.

"Rain? What's that got to do with it?"

"Rain begin before opening of Abode for afternoon, yes?"

I nodded.

"That explain mystery, sir," he said. "Very sorry." He went away.

Belatedly, then, the light dawned on me.

My umbrella had been *dry* when I raised it to leave the Abode of the Monkey King.

LUCKY CATCH

Ed Lacy

When I stopped for my pass Doc Parker gave me a wide smile, then said, "This is the big day. Nervous, Jimmy?"

"A little, sir . . . Don. I mean, I'm under control." He didn't like me calling him "sir"—we were supposed to be buddy-buddies.

"Fine, fine. Keep things that way, remember your temper—that must always be held down."

I nodded. "Look . . . Don, do I have to go right 'home,' to *her* house?"

The practiced smile started to fade. "I don't understand, Jimmy."

"It's just that . . . this is my first weekend out, and we both know she *is* going to make a fuss over me, keep treating me as if I'm the living dead. Now wait . . . Don. I can take that—I expect it: I'm on leave from a mental hospital—people are bound to look at me oddly—as you said, a reflection of their own confused ideas on mental health. What I mean is this: I'll be in the city before noon—I'd like to take in a movie first, or stroll around—by myself, then report to . . . be with Mama for supper."

Doc Parker reached up to give me a pat on the shoulder. "Certainly, Jimmy, my boy, I want you to go out. Remember, if I didn't consider you ready to face the outside world, I wouldn't have suggested this weekend pass. Now—since we both know your mother's domineering emotional reactions, far better than she herself is aware of them, it will be up to *you* to see that the entire weekend is *not* spent with her. That

would be wrong, for both of you. That's your test, to make sure she doesn't start discussing—you."

"She'll try to, of course."

"Indeed, she'll try very hard from the first second she sees you. Without losing your temper, be patient: keep in mind you're dealing with an elderly woman who loves you too much, has mistakingly built her whole life around you. Steer the conversation to world events, books, movie gossip. . . . You have been reading the papers every day?"

"Oh, yes, Don," I said. I hadn't looked at the newspapers in my room, but it would upset the Doc to know that, perhaps cost me my pass.

"Fine. This afternoon go to a movie, then have supper—watch TV, with Mama. Saturday morning visit some of your old friends . . . take a girl for a walk, etc., etc. . . . Without Mama. But again, you'll have supper with her, might even take her to a show, a concert. Sunday, have a good breakfast, kiss your mother good-bye, then do whatever you feel like before returning here—by 6 P.M. Jimmy, you alone best know your situation, therefore *you* must always be on top of things."

"I understand, Don."

He slapped my shoulder again. "Fine, fine. Now have a ball." He winked. "Minus any liquor, of course."

I nodded. Liquor never did anything for me.

"Above all, never lose your control, your temper."

The two hour train ride was okay, but somehow the city frightened me badly. The crowds, the tension in the air—almost seemed like a restraining jacket. "Okay now, take it slow," I told myself. "Remember, you're like a hick: you've been completely out of touch . . . with the city, sight of people, even with reality, for almost 13 months now. Take it very, very slow."

Wandering around aimlessly, with everybody else rushing as if they didn't have a second to spare, left me restless. I didn't want to go "home" to Mama, or

call any of my friends, feel the doubt in their voices as they greeted me—wondering if I was "dangerous" or not. Passing a movie house, I went in. At first the darkness was a comforting protection, but the movie on the screen was so downright silly I began to feel alarmed—as if I was suffering delusions—again.

Leaving the theater, I realized I was hungry, had a sandwich and an orange drink at a stand. The counterman was telling some colored fellow, "What a day, warm—the way he likes 'em! Maybe he'll do it. Man, wish I could take the day off."

"Me too," the colored fellow said, eating a hot dog. "Going to be a hell of a baseball game, for sure."

"Excuse me," I said, ". . . eh . . . Is there a ball game on today?"

They both turned, stared hard at me. I felt hot anger boiling up in me. As I was about to ask what they were staring at, the counterman suddenly laughed, nice warm laughter—quite relaxing. "Hey man, where you been? *Is there a ball game?* Why, this is THE game of the century! Last chance for Rocky Burns to bust the homerun record! Yeah man, last game of the season, and it's going to be a flipper!"

"Oh. I've been out of the . . . country. Are they playing up at the Stadium?"

"Sure are, game starts in less than an hour," the Negro said, talking clearly despite his mouth full of hot dog.

I rode the local up to the Stadium, the express subway train was too crowded, but the local was a kick. At first the Stadium was terrible, this continuous and weird roar as thousands of fans talked and cheered . . . didn't make sense. Sitting in the bleachers, I moved over to a nearly empty section. I couldn't see home plate too well, but it was a sunny spot and I didn't have this feeling of being fenced in by so many people. I'd been to the Stadium many times before, and it felt good to watch the people, the girls, even if the

noise kept pounding my ears. Lord, whenever this Burns fellow came to bat, everybody roared like . . . well, like maniacs. Worse than some of the people they kept in Building 32—and they're way out.

I had a good look at Burns when he was playing the outfield. He didn't seem right, his face drawn and terribly nervous. Now, why should a ball player be so worried in the last game of the season? Along about the 4th inning he came to bat and even if I couldn't see him, I felt the quick tension in the air, heard the sharp crack of the bat . . . and the sheer, earsplitting, animal roar of 25,000 people. The baseball struck a part of the grandstand roof, ricochetted across the bleachers toward me, rolled to my feet. I picked it up. As a kid I once caught a homerun ball right here in the Stadium and . . .

I was aware of this sudden, smothering silence all around me, everybody was standing—looking my way. Then, thousands of people pointed their hands toward me, screaming, *"He has the ball! He's got it!"*

I became frightened. Sure, I had the ball, so what? My God, men and boys were climbing seats to come at me, all jabbering and yelling like mad things. Why, I actually saw Stadium cops running up toward me. I had this quick fear it couldn't be happening. "Are you all sick?" I wanted to scream. "I didn't do anything wrong . . . merely picked up a ball in the stands and . . . *What's the matter with all of you?*"

I shut my eyes. People were still rushing at me when I opened my eyes again. I lost control, panicked! Turning, I fled up an empty aisle, then through an exit tunnel. Coming out, I didn't know which way to run. Over the roar in the Stadium behind me, I heard the thud of footsteps. A husky fellow wearing a soiled hat and a loud sport shirt came running at me, his eyes over-bright, wide face flushed.

"Gimme the ball!" he rasped, reaching for my hand with his dirty fingers.

"Why? I picked it up, it's mine. Are you. . .?" Before I could finish the sentence he punched me. Ducking, I caught the blow on my shoulder. It seemed real enough, all right—a hard punch. But I was under control, not afraid. As part of my therapy I'd been doing a lot of work around the hospital grounds: I was hard and in shape. . . . Fighting him didn't worry me, physically, but I knew I might go off if I hit him, so I merely raised my hands to protect myself, asked, "What's the matter with you? With all of you?"

He kept swinging. I blocked a punch with my forearm, dropped the silly ball. It rolled under a closed refreshment stand. The man turned, crawled under the stand.

I lost sight of him. I suddenly wondered if there *ever* had been a husky guy, making such a fuss over a baseball. I crawled under the stand—but not to fight or get the baseball . . . I simply had to know if the man actually existed . . . or if I was off again.

He was there, sort of curled up with the baseball in his right hand. When he saw me, he yanked a snub-nosed pistol out of a pocket with his left hand, snarled, "Get out of my way!"

"Listen, please tell me why all this . . .?"

"Get out of my way or I'll kill you!"

He waved the gun—awkwardly—in his left hand. I was close enough to grab his left wrist, turn the gun hand toward his crummy shirt. "Please, tell me why you're throwing a gun on me? *Why?*"

He tried to kick, then wrestle his hand loose. I had a strong grip on him. Although bewildered, I was also kind of proud of myself: deep inside I was very calm and cool. "You're threatening to kill me over a baseball! Why? Are you sick or . . . ?"

There were two clean barks—lost in the general roar. The front of his gaudy shirt suddenly was burnt —two black and gently smoking holes in the cloth . . .

then bright blood gushing out. His right hand suddenly let go of the ball.

Knowing this *simply couldn't* be happening, I stared at his dead eyes, even touched the pasty-cold skin. Then I backed out from under the locked stand. Standing, aware my clothes were dirty, I looked around. I started to run. Three Stadium police came out of the exit tunnel, I practically ran into them. They grabbed me. One of them said, "Hey, there's the ball!"

"Please. Please! What in God's name is going on here?" I mumbled, maybe to myself, not even struggling with the cops.

The other two police officers slapped me on the back—almost a friendly gesture in this nightmare. The biggest one told me, "We're taking you to the office. You've done it!"

"Listen to me, I didn't do . . . it! Dammit, he . . . !"

"You're sure a lucky cat," the biggest cop said as we moved along. We passed through the edge of a cheering crowd, all of them with their backs to the game, but shouting and waving *at me*. "Is all this . . . really happening?" I started to ask, my mouth dry.

"What? Yeah, you're sure the lucky one," the large cop said again, grinning at me. "That's the ball which broke the homerun record, just give it in at the office and you get the ten grand, like it said in the papers! Ten thousand bucks for a second's work and . . ."

"Ten grand . . . Really?" I asked.

All the cops chuckled. One of them said, "Lucky here is dazed. I'd be the same way, holding ten big bills in my mitt. Young fellow, you've got it made! There'll be photographers and reporters, you'll be on TV and everything. So snap out of it, look happy!"

I gave him a sickly grin . . . wondering how long before they found the body under the hot dog stand. No matter how I explained it, I'd never be released from the hospital now . . . *never!*

Way off in the distance, mixed with the increasing roar of the crowd, I dimly heard somebody shout, "Catch him! What do you know, Lucky's fainted on us!"

JANIE ZEROES IN

Arthur Porges

In their fear and indecision, the Sanfords forgot all about Janie, huddled so quietly in the big chair by the fireplace. She should have been in bed hours ago, although they did permit some leeway at times, since the girl dealt in moths, bats, crickets, and other nocturnal creatures. At age eleven, thin, gawky, freckled, and redeemed from ugliness only by her huge, brown eyes, liquid-bright with animation and intelligence, Janie was definitely a "talent" in biology for any age.

As Mr. Sanford ran the tape for the third time, hoping, perhaps, that the sound of his son's voice might resolve the dilemma it had raised, Janie took notes and pondered. To her, it was like working on the initial stages of another "project" at the Kenilworth School.

"They're holding me, Dad," the boyish voice announced with a lightness obviously assumed. "I can't say where, of course. But unless you skip that Council meeting Monday, they'll 'take steps.' It's not a matter of killing; they want me to make that plain. They're talking about my—" here there was a faint hum in his voice—"fingers. I can't say any more; except that I'm okay so far."

"Bill's fingers!" Mrs. Sanford exclaimed, as she had on each playing. "What terrible men!"

"That's why I'm sure Ed Corey's behind it, all right," her husband gritted. "He operates that way. If I pass up the meeting and can't vote, the Council will sell his company Glen Devon, and there goes our last chance for a decent park."

"You'll have to do as they say," she sighed. "We simply can't risk Bill's hands."

His face was grim. Sometimes he wished the boy had a different flair. They'd been guarding those nimble fingers of his for years now, it seemed. Why couldn't Bill like law or mathematics or some other field where hands weren't so important? But just a week from tonight he would play Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto with the Symphony, unless Corey's hoods broke the kid's fingers. They wouldn't hesitate for a second, not with so juicy a land-grab at stake; and with a musician, an injury of that kind was terribly serious. The damage might be permanent, no matter how skillful the medical care later. Certainly it was not a risk to be taken lightly.

"Well," Mr. Sanford said heavily, "we've been all through it a dozen times, and I still don't know the answer. Do we call in the police, or obey instructions —fold up, and let Corey rake in the chips?"

"I haven't changed my mind," his wife said. "Bill's career means more to me than any park."

"That's just part of it. Everybody will think I sold out. I'll be through in politics here."

"I know, and it's terribly unfair. But what choice do we have? If you tell the police, what could they do? Where would they hunt for Bill? He might be next door, or fifty miles away. How could they find him before the meeting, only three days away, with no idea in the world where to look."

"Maybe I could help them," a young voice, full of confidence, said, and Mrs. Sanford started.

"Janie!" she cried. "Have you been there all this time? Why, it's almost midnight, child."

"I've been listening to Bill's tape—and figuring," the girl said.

"This isn't a game," her father said impatiently. "It's very serious."

"I know that. So am I, Daddy."

There was a note of reproof in her answer. She loved her parents dearly, but often wished they were less emotional and more logical in their attitude towards the world. But then people who decided automatically, without data, that bats and insects were unpleasant beasties needed a lot of education. It might take years, Janie told herself now, with a sigh.

"Go to bed," Mr. Sanford said brusquely. "Your mother and I have a problem to discuss. We need peace and quiet, child, not fantasy." He turned back to his wife. "You know," he said, "Corey has outsmarted himself. Even if I stay away, he loses. One of the votes he counted on, Hugh Morton's, won't materialize. Hughie got banged up in a traffic accident in Redwood Falls, and can't be here. I just got the word a few hours ago. That means a tie, and Mayor Leavitt has the deciding vote. He'll back the park: he's a good man, and committed to the hilt."

"He smells of stale rye bread," Janie's light voice cut in again.

"What on earth!" Mrs. Sanford exclaimed.

In spite of the situation, her husband grinned wryly. "Irv likes kummel," he said, "and *was* hitting it hard the day Janie met him. It not only smells that way, but tastes like liquid rye, too. I'll take whiskey," he added.

"Daddy," Janie said, "I really have an idea. It ought to work."

"All right," her mother said, looking at Mr. Sanford for approval. "It's no use trying to shoo her away once she has a notion. Let's have it, Baby, so we can get you to bed by dawn."

Janie winced at the "Baby," but knew this was no time to make an issue of the revolting word. "You listened to Bill," she said severely, "and missed all the important sounds on the tape."

"Like what?" her father demanded.

"Well, the crickets, for one thing."

"What about them, for Heaven's sake? They're all over the country."

"Yes, but there's a simple, definite relation between the number of chirps per minute and the temperature outside. Lutz gives it in his 'Fieldbook.' I did the arithmetic, and got seventy-four degrees."

The Sanfords looked at each other blankly.

"So we know how warm it was there. How does that help?" her mother asked.

"That's a pretty low reading for sunset during this hot spell, Mom. Not many places around here would have it."

"What makes you think the tape was made at sunset, may I ask?" Mr. Sanford said.

"Didn't you even hear the redwings, blackbirds? Crickets start chirping at dusk, usually; and birds are pretty quiet by dark, so I figured——"

"Never mind; I get it!" her father said hastily. "My head's not solid bone, only two-thirds."

"How does that tell us where Bill is?" his wife asked in a plaintive voice.

"Then there are the frogs," Janie went on inexorably, fixing her enormous brown eyes, warm and soft as melted caramel, on each of them in turn. "Redwings and frogs mean water."

"You have a good point," Mr. Sanford admitted. "But, honey, that's just not enough to go on. I'm afraid——"

"We've had no decent rain since March," his daughter reminded him. "You know how dry this whole area is. Really, Daddy, there are only a few places within miles of here that aren't dry as a bone by now. So with redwings (and that means tule reeds; they love 'em!) and kingfishers, I thought—"

"Kingfishers?" he gulped.

"They're birds. You can hear one rattling in the background. It just has to be on the old Larrabee Ranch. It has thousands of acres, a lot of old build-

ings, tules and ponds; and there's one little valley, where the sun is blocked off. I'll bet that's the place; cool air sorta settles down in the low spots. That's where Bill must be."

"Fred," Mrs. Sanford said, "she makes sense."

"We could phone old Mr. Renfrew on the Santa Clara Rancho," Janie suggested. "He keeps his own weather reports. He'll be able to tell us what the readings were at the edge of Larrabee, at least."

Mr. Sanford looked at her with a kind of wonder.

"I'll call Chief Thompson early in the morning; ask him to arrange for a search—kind of raid, rather—in that part of Larrabee. He'll think I'm nuts, but Janie could be right. What can we lose by trying? After all, if she's mistaken—and I wouldn't care to bet on it; she's been all over this county with your friend Edie Taylor's Audubon group—I could still duck that vote on Monday, and protect Bill against these hoods. And after that," he said savagely, "deal with Big Ed Corey!"

But Janie was right on target. The police, closing in stealthily under the guidance of a veteran sheriff, surprised Bill and two sheepish guards in a ruined cabin. It was in thick brush at the edge of a pond—with tules, naturally, and redwings that filled the air with liquid chirping.

"The two punks don't even know who hired them," the Chief told Mr. Sanford later that day. "He was disguised then, and while taking the kid down on tape. All they can give me," he added in disgust, "is that the guy stank of rye bread. They must think I'm simpleminded!"

Mr. Sanford's jaw sagged; he looked at his wife, whose eyes were saucers. Janie squeaked, then began to giggle louder than redwings.

"What do you know!" her father exclaimed. "The Mayor!"

"Wha-a-a-t?" Sheriff Thompson gulped.

It turned out later that Mayor Leavitt was in a bad

financial bind, and had sold out for a good price. With Sanford abstaining, his deciding vote could have killed the park.

Janie missed her brother's triumph at the concert hall, but that couldn't be helped. The moths began to emerge from their cocoons, and as she told her parents in tragic tones, "You wouldn't want those poor little things to be born with just *nobody* at all around!"

"No, I couldn't live with that on my conscience," Sanford said solemnly. He led his wife to the door; it would be a miracle if they made the overture now. "At least," he said in a stage whisper that made his daughter redden, "she's not the Compleat Cold-blooded Scientist at eleven." Then he added, aloud, "A Happy Mother's Day, Janie!"

A FAIR WARNING TO MYSTERY WRITERS

C. B. Gilford

Jones, the real estate agent, blinked at me. "Horatio Lamb," he repeated. "That your real name?"

"It is," I said. "I was trusting you'd recognize it. I'm somewhat in the public eye."

"You don't have a police record, do you?" he asked suddenly.

I was somewhat flattered by that guess. "You're warm," I said. "As a matter of fact, I write mystery stories."

But he was totally unimpressed. "Look," he began, "this apartment requires a lease . . ."

"I'm flush," I interrupted him haughtily. "I have the deposit and the first month's rent right here."

He accepted my money, but he studied it as if he thought it might be counterfeit. Finally satisfied, he pushed the document across the desk for me to sign.

Remember the way so many mystery stories started a generation ago? "Had I but known." "Had I but known, I'd have never gone to the old mansion," or something like that. Well, I just can't resist using that cliché here. Had I but known, I certainly would never have signed that terrible lease.

The beginning was auspicious, however. I had rented the center unit in a low, rambling, five-unit structure known by the romantic description, "a garden apartment." Actually there wasn't a garden in sight. No trees either, not much grass, mostly cement.

But it had privacy. In my little bedroom-bath-parlor-kitchen domain, I didn't even have to go out

for meals should the pangs of hunger strike simultaneously with inspiration. With four rooms, there were plenty of corners to throw dirty laundry into. I settled down to some serious fictioneering.

But I had underestimated my old friend, the real estate agent. Unimpressed as he seemed to have been at my profession, he nevertheless saw fit to mention it to quite a few other people in our "garden."

On the morning of about my third or fourth day in residence my doorbell rang. Up to that time my neighbors, typical city people, had displayed not the least hospitality or even curiosity. So I debated before I even answered that doorbell ring. Only when the ringing proved persistent did I lurch out of bed, find slippers and robe, and stagger to the door. I'd typed till two A.M. the night before, and I was done in.

But the sight I saw when I grudgingly opened that door did the rest of the job of waking me up. Not only wakened me, in fact, but also a few of my instincts—among them, strangely enough, the instinct for self-preservation.

She was good-looking, I'm sure you've gathered that by now. I don't like the word "sexy"—it's too general—but she was that too. And to top it all, she was a blonde. She stood there in that before-noon uniform of the suburban wife, the housecoat. But although she apparently, as yet, hadn't the time to get dressed, she was nevertheless wearing full makeup.

"Hi," she said. But the tone of voice she lavished on that one word added several paragraphs of meaning. I noted uneasily that my screen door wasn't locked. "Are you Horatio Lamb?"

"Yes."

"The famous mystery story writer?"

"Well . . ." I thought maybe she was a genuine admirer, and what writer can resist an admirer?

"I think mystery stories are just fascinating."

"Well . . ."

"And the people who write them must be fascinating too."

"Well . . ."

"Won't you tell me about yourself?"

I didn't invite her in. But she came in anyway.

"What a divine place," she said when she saw the interior. "This looks so like a writer. So bohemian."

She wanted a cigarette, and I gave her one. Probably she was a little disappointed that it wasn't of the marijuana variety. We exchanged a few vital statistics as she sashayed round. "I live in the next unit on the left . . . me and my husband . . . we don't have any kids . . . his name is Monty . . . Monty Green . . . he's a salesman and he's away a lot . . . my name's Lavender . . . Lavender Green . . . isn't that a scream? . . . but the funniest part is as Monty says, I'm not lavender or green either one . . . I'm all pink and white . . ."

I watched her with mounting apprehension. I mean, no woman walks *quite* that way naturally.

This is crazy, I thought. Let's face it, this is a dump, so she can't think that I'm a *rich* writer. And if it's something else, why not the milkman or somebody?

"I guess you have girls in your stories, don't you, Mr. Lamb?" Lavender asked suddenly as she sat down and edged close enough on my sofa to make our knees touch.

"Sure," I said.

"Sure," she repeated. "I know your kind, Mr. Lamb. I see the covers on all the books and magazines in the drugstore. There's always girls in mystery stories."

"Well," I said, "the covers can be misleading sometimes."

"Oh, I've read some of those books too."

"Well, there are all kinds really."

She started to giggle suddenly, and leaned against the back of the sofa in a way that almost put her head on my shoulder. "Horatio," she said, "don't I kind of remind you of the girls on those book covers?"

"Well, yes, you do," I had to admit.

"I'm wicked too, Horatio, just like those girls."

"Really?"

"Horatio, I'd make a wonderful character for one of *your* books."

She could neither have insulted me nor appalled me any more than she did with that suggestion. "Look here," I began, "you obviously haven't read my stuff. I'm not of that particular school, you see, and furthermore, I personally abhor . . ."

I won't record the rest of that interview. It took an awfully long time to get rid of Lavender Green.

The next thing that happened was the same, only different. This second one didn't even knock or ring the bell.

It was the evening after the morning I'd been visited by Lavender Green. I hadn't written a word all day. Just after dark—when it happened—I was lying on the sofa with a pillow over my face. Not sleeping. Trying to concentrate again, to regain my sense of privacy, to re-establish communication with my muse.

I heard the screen door open, and then the front door itself—not being opened merely, but being *kicked* open. I'd barely gotten the pillow off my face and looked up, and *he* was standing there in the middle of the room.

My first instinct was to call the police. Then when I remembered I didn't have a phone, I simply wanted to scream.

He wasn't very big, but maybe he was wiry. I guess it was his costume that scared me. The military boots, the tight jeans, and the black leather jacket with silver stars on the shoulders.

"You the creep who writes the stories?" he snarled at me.

How do you answer a question like that? Yes or no? Think about it a minute.

"I'm a writer," I said finally.

He glanced around disdainfully. "What a dump," he said.

It was my own opinion too, but I didn't like hearing it from a stranger. He started walking around a little. He didn't go far, just peeked through the doors into the other rooms. What's he going to do, I asked myself, when he finds there's nothing worth stealing?

He came back and stood over me. I was still lying on the sofa. "What kind of stories you write?" he demanded.

"Um . . . mystery . . . crime."

He grinned. He was an ugly kid, all pimply, and grinning only made him look worse. "You know somethin'?" he asked.

"What?"

"I'm a J.D."

"A what?"

"J.D. Juvenile delinquent, creep."

"Oh, sure. I should have known, I guess. But you see, the kind of stuff I write . . ."

"Look, creep, did I ask you a question?"

"Well, no . . ."

"Then how come you're answering?"

I shut up, and I guess it pleased him, because he grinned again. "My name's Duke Cornell," he said. "I live down at the end."

I wondered how legally binding that lease was.

"Got a cigarette, creep?"

I pointed to a windowsill where the pack lay. He took one and lighted it. Then after two puffs, he dropped the thing on a page of manuscript and ground it out under the sole of his boot. I had the distinct feeling that he hadn't wanted the cigarette itself, but simply an opportunity for that arrogant gesture.

"Look, creep," he said, "don't fool around with me, I'm tough."

I had no intention of fooling around with him.

"Lot's of books about J.D.'s, ain't they?" he asked suddenly.

"Yes," I had to admit.

"I could give you lots of stories about the things I've done."

"Really?" Polite interest, that was the thing. I'd learned that earlier.

"You want me to tell you some things?"

"Sure."

"And maybe you'll use 'em, huh?"

"Well . . ."

I was also a long time getting rid of Duke Cornell.

"Steve Mars, the name is." He had been pacing my living room, chomping on a black cigar, looking pretty important in his pinstripe suit even though he wasn't very big physically. But now he crossed over to where I sat and bore down on me with his little gimlet eyes.

"Oh," I said.

"So I was with the Tringo mob. I ain't saying I wasn't. But I'm retired now. Living like a solid citizen right next door to you here. Going straight too. So why do you come around here and stick your nose in?"

"But I'm not sticking my nose in," I protested.

"Hah!" When he jabbed his finger toward my face, the result was that he flicked cigar ashes all over me. But he didn't apologize. "Don't give me that trash, Mac. Why else does a writer like you come live next door to a guy like me? You want material, huh? You want my life story, huh? Well, you ain't going to get it, see?" More ashes.

"I don't want your material," I assured him. I groped for words to describe to him how relieved I was that he *didn't* want me to write about him. "I don't do violence. My stuff is . . ."

"Look, Mac," he interrupted, "you use one little thing about me, and somebody reads it that I don't

want to read it, and you'll be sorry. How'd you like a lighted cigar on the sole of your bare foot, huh?"

"I wouldn't like it."

"Okay, Mac, that's what you say now. But I'm going to check. Every once in awhile I want to come here and take a peek at what's in your typewriter, Mac."

Privacy . . . oh, dear departed privacy. It took awhile to get rid of Steve Mars, because he was full of anecdotes about other little persuaders besides lighted cigars.

"I live down on the end," she said primly, "and my name is Verna Gale."

"Pleased to meet you," I lied.

She perched like a nervous bird on the edge of my sofa. Not the Lavender Green type, but she might have been sort of attractive if it hadn't been for the mannish suit, the brown hair drawn back into a bun, and the horn-rimmed glasses that surrounded her gray eyes. She looked around my place and sighed.

"It's all so writerish," she said.

"Yes, isn't it?"

"I'm trying to write too," she confided. "Do you think it would help if I'd furnish my apartment this way?"

"It wouldn't be very feminine," I told her.

"Oh, who wants to be feminine?" she said. "I've been through my feminine phase, thank you. Crime's the thing. I just adore crime. Especially the kind with lots of violence and . . ."

"Well, that isn't exactly my field."

"The trouble is," she went on, "that I never seem to be able to find anything to write about. Where do you get all your ideas, Mr. Lamb?"

I toyed with the idea of mentioning our neighbors. However, instead of that I said, "Contrary to popular

belief, I don't get my ideas from real people. I get them out of my head, out of thin air."

She clapped her hands. "Oh, wonderful!" Then she kicked off her shoes, tucked her feet under her, and looked like she was getting comfortable. "I'll just sit here and I won't say a word," she promised. "This will be so educational, Mr. Lamb. I want to watch you get ideas."

Needless to say, it took awhile to get rid of Verna Gale.

I thought I'd seen them all. That was an illusion, however. The parade over my moat, through my castle, and back over my moat again, got longer and faster.

There was Monty Green, for instance, Lavender's husband, who was supposed to be "away a lot." Well, he spent some of his precious time in town with me.

"What's with my wife?" he wanted to know. Monty Green was six foot and a bit, wide shoulders, and hands like two hams hanging down beside him.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said politely. "Let me point out, Mr. Green, that your wife comes to see me, not vice versa."

"Does that make you innocent, pal? So you've got some kind of sex appeal that's never been invented before."

"Sex appeal?" I could have cried, really cried.

"Look, pal," he said. "You know what kind of a woman I used to be married to? A sweet, shy little thing, an introvert, with no confidence. She'd never been kissed. She'd blush at a lingerie commerical on television."

"Lavender?" I asked incredulously.

"I'm not talking about the Queen of Sheba."

Of course he wasn't.

"Then you come along, and Lavender flips. She puts on heavy makeup. She doesn't wear as many clothes.

She wiggles instead of walking. She's a different woman. And all I know she's been coming over here to your apartment, Mr. Horatio Lamb. Now do you tell me why all this, or do I start figuring my own answers?"

I tried to explain the curious mania some people have for trying to get themselves immortalized in literature. I confused him enough to prevent his getting violent, for the moment at least.

"But I'm giving you fair warning, pal. If you don't leave Lavender alone, I'll clean out this pigsty here, and I'll use you for a mop."

Elsie Cornell was fat and probably a jolly woman ordinarily. She sat on my sofa and cried. She'd brought a box of candy with her, and she munched chocolates while we talked. But even while she ate, she never stopped crying.

"Roger has changed," she told me.

"Roger?" I repeated. "Who's Roger?"

"Roger Cornell. Now known as Duke. But his name is Roger."

Maybe that name explained a lot of things about Pimple Face, but I didn't expound my theory to Elsie. She wasn't going to accept any blame for him if she could help it.

"What seems to be Roger's trouble?" I asked. Afraid that I already knew the answer.

"Well, he used to be such a sweet boy. Serious, polite, and so fond of his mother. Always did his homework. Never went out with girls. At night we used to sit and watch television together. He'd hold my yarn while I knitted."

"Sounds like an ideal son," I commented.

"He was an ideal son," she wailed. "Till just a few days ago. Till he started coming over here to see you. Now he's . . . well, he's a brat! He's seldom home, he steals money from my purse, he wears the most awful

clothes, he won't take a bath, he uses horrible language. He's just . . . detestable!"

I agreed with her.

"And it's all your fault, Mr. Lamb!"

I tried patiently to explain the peculiar psychology of adolescence. Elsie Cornell, however, was not a rational woman. She was just one quivering mountain of emotion.

"It's all your fault," she repeated, brushing aside my explanation, "and I'm warning you, Mr. Lamb. Isn't there some kind of crime called 'contributing to the delinquency of a juvenile'? I'll call the police on you, Mr. Lamb."

Then there was Joe Beagle. He came to my door one evening wearing a belted trench coat and a felt hat pulled down over his face. And it was such fine weather.

"Joe Beagle, licensed private eye," he announced, flashing me his card.

"What can I do for you?" I asked him uneasily.

"This is on the Q.T., Mr. Lamb," he began. "Okay?"

"Okay," I said warily.

"Well, Mr. Green hired me to keep an eye on his wife. That's pretty nice work, so I ain't complaining."

I knew the predatory type. The Peeping Tom who's paid to peep. Besides not trusting him, I don't like him.

"But then Mr. Green tells me the situation, how you're a crime and mystery writer, Mr. Lamb."

I waited for the blow to fall.

"I read all the stuff you guys write. And I've always said to myself how wrong you writers are. No realism, you know what I mean? Now here I am, a real private eye, with lots of real dramatic experiences. Sit down, Mr. Lamb, and I'll tell you all about myself. You could use a character like me in one of your books. In fact, I could be the hero of a couple dozen books."

Well, I wasn't going to hang around that bedlam.

Duke coming around once a day, grinding out cigarettes on my manuscripts. And then poor Elsie wailing and threatening. That screwball Verna watching me through the windows, trying to see how I got ideas. Joe Beagle talking both my ears off, telling me the most incredible, fictitious bunch of trash I'd ever heard. Monty Green with his big fists and Steve Mars with his lighted stogies. And poor Lavender, wiggling, writhing, lurching, batting her eyelashes at me, drowning herself in cheap perfume, playing it just short of Lady Godiva, with some Gypsy Rose Lee, Mata Hari, and Marlene Dietrich thrown in for good measure.

So I wasn't getting a thing done. Wasn't getting a syllable down on paper. Cobwebs all over the typewriter keys. What's going to become of me, I started to ask myself. If a writer doesn't make with the words, he doesn't eat.

And not one of these nuts who kept pestering me was contributing any material either. I couldn't write about gangsters, sexy blondes, jealous husbands, phony private eyes, or vicious adolescent punks. I kept telling them my specialty was puzzle stories, locked rooms, ratiocination, gentleman detectives, etc. But nobody—but nobody—listened.

Therefore I had to go. Lease or no lease. I got packed, waited for a time when no one—not even Verna—would be watching.

But I didn't go. Something happened which made it impossible for me to leave. Physically and morally impossible. Lavender Green got murdered.

There was a certain poignancy, almost a mystical symbolism, in Lavender's getting murdered that way. She'd always wanted to be in a book, she'd said. She'd always envied those beautiful girls on the covers of so many mystery-murder-crime publications. She'd wanted to be like them, to be one of them. I don't know

whether she'd ever realized fully what it was she'd wished for. A good percentage of those cover girls—maybe even the majority of them—are corpses.

But that's exactly what kind of corpse Lavender was. You could have guaranteed the sale of a hundred thousand copies with her on the book jacket just as she was. Lying on her bed with a silk scarf wound around her throat and her head just at the edge so that her blonde hair floated down toward the floor like a golden Niagara Falls.

Her husband found her there like that when he came home one morning from being away. He called the police, and when the sirens arrived, all of the neighbors got into the act. Elsie Cornell screamed and wept. Her pimply son smoked cigarettes and spit frequently and tried to look bored, but I think he was on the verge of getting sick. Steve Mars kept insisting, though nobody asked him, that he had an alibi, but wanted to see a lawyer anyway. Verna Gale flitted around like an excited little bird, chirping ecstatically that she was finally seeing "life in the raw." Monty Green was reacting mostly with anger against Joe Beagle, who was supposed to have been watching Lavender, wasn't he? And Joe Beagle kept saying that nobody could stay on the job twenty-four hours a day, could he?

We all gathered around the front door, peeking in and watching the policemen go about their chores. When they finished taking pictures finally and covered up the body and took it away, the spectacle lost its greatest attraction. But we all stayed anyway.

I could have rushed to the fore, of course, announcing my profession and volunteering my services. But I was biding my time. It was an opportunity, you must admit.

A couple of the detectives finally deployed among us, asking routine questions, but not accusing anybody. A certain amount of suspicion fell naturally on

the husband; you could see that attitude in the way all the cops looked at Monty. As to the rest of us, though—well, we were just the neighbors. None of us had provided any useful information, so we were just in the way.

"You folks can go home now," the boss detective suggested. "If you remember anything else about last night, you can let us know."

It was time, I concluded, for me—as Horatio Lamb in my professional capacity—to act. "You mean," I asked the detective, "that you're going to let all these people go?"

He looked at me in a very unfriendly manner. "What am I supposed to do with 'em?" he challenged me.

"Well, it seems to me," I said, "that you're being very careless about all this. You are apparently dismissing all of these people as possible suspects without bothering to determine whether any of them might have had a reason to dispatch Mrs. Green."

"To *dispatch* Mrs. Green?"

"To do away with her, that is. Don't you think some of these people here may have had a motive sufficient for murder?"

"I hadn't really thought about it," the detective admitted. "But it looks like maybe you have. So you tell me. Did any of these people have a motive?"

"They all did," I assured him.

He chewed his under lip, pulled at his nose, and stared at me morosely. "Are you trying to give me a hard time, bud?" he asked finally.

"I'm trying to help," I said simply.

"Okay, I'm listening," he said after awhile. "But make it fast. I'm a busy man."

"I would prefer to discuss this privately."

"Okay," he said wearily. "Come on in."

We went inside the Green apartment together. The place still swarmed with fingerprint men and the like,

but they didn't pay attention to us. There was an unoccupied corner. We occupied it and held our conversation standing.

First of all, I filled him in briefly on who I was. Then I explained to him the interest the various neighbors had shown in me, the morbid desire some of them had to be the model for some sleazy character in a book. And I also made the point that I did not write such sleazy books.

"Okay, okay," he said, trying to seem blasé. As if he met a mystery writer every day. "What about the motives?"

"Well, don't they appear obvious to you now?" I prodded him. "You're onto the husband already, but you don't quite realize the reason for his jealousy. It was because his wife had a crush on me."

The cop's eyebrows went up. Ordinarily I am not the sort to inspire crushes, but I do have my peculiar attractions, as I had learned. And this cop didn't understand in the least.

"Second, Joe Beagle. Indirectly my fault too. Lavender used to be a shy, sweet type. Under my influence she became a real vixen. As such, she appealed to Joe Beagle, though he'd never have looked at her twice when she had her old personality. So Joe, as I see it, maybe pressed his ungentlemanly attentions on Lavender, and well, you know what that can lead to."

He looked at me sourly. "I don't know nothing," he said. "You tell me."

"Then there's Steve Mars, a kind of similar case. He lives next door to Lavender Green for months, and doesn't give her a second look. Then suddenly she changes. And what does she become? The ideal gangster's moll. So maybe she got hooked up with Steve Mars in some nefarious scheme. Somebody has to get bumped off."

"Rubbed out," the cop suggested.

"The terms are synonymous," I told him. "Although I don't use either one of them in my own work."

"You prefer 'dispatched.' "

"Yes. But we're not here to discuss my literary style, are we?"

"No, we're not."

"All right then. There's the case of this Roger Cornell, who started to call himself Duke when I came on the scene. What lengths would he go to in order to impress me? To become a character in one of my books? Murder? Very possibly, officer. The boy has a real appetite for glory."

"In one of your books?"

"Absolutely. I think he realizes that newspaper notoriety is only temporary. But one can become immortal in a book."

"Uh huh."

"But before murdering Lavender, it is quite possible that Duke became involved with her. As an admirer, that is. Which could have disturbed his doting mother. Elsie Cornell, I'm quite certain, would commit murder to preserve her offspring."

The detective nodded thoughtfully. "You left out somebody," he said. "The screwy little woman. Gale."

"Ah yes, Verna Gale. In her case I feel most grimly responsible. She's an aspiring writer. She wanted ideas. And I failed to instruct her how to get them—which quite possibly could have driven her to the commission of murder, for the sole purpose of getting material to write about."

"I see."

"And there you have it, officer. It's a classic situation really. Where every one of the people in the story—in the situation, that is—has a motive for the crime. Therefore they are all suspects. You have your work cut out for you."

"You wouldn't care to tell me your personal choice,

would you, Mr. Lamb?" I swear he asked the question with humility.

"I'd rather not say," I told him. "I despise the sort of writer who's always making out the cops to be dumb and letting their amateur detectives show them up. So I'd rather leave the problem in your lap, sir. But if you have any trouble, feel free to call on me at any time."

And we parted, I think, as friends.

But he came to see me sooner than I expected. The very next morning, in fact. He knocked politely at my door, and I let him in. He seemed a little surprised at the condition of my apartment, but I assured him it was merely typical. He just didn't understand writers.

"No, I guess not," he agreed. "But what I came about was the murder."

"Yes. How's it coming?"

"Well, I've been using an approach you'd probably disagree with, Mr. Lamb. Fingerprints, lab tests, leg work. But I found the killer."

I was genuinely surprised. "Was I of any help to you?" I asked hopefully.

"Well . . ." He smiled. "I'll let you be the judge of that, Mr. Lamb. First of all, the killer is a man."

"Ah."

"And he'd been playing around with Lavender Green long before you arrived here, Mr. Lamb."

"Oh!" I was surprised again, and a bit confused.

"As you said, and her husband said, Lavender used to be the sweet, shy type. But still water runs deep. I know that's not original . . ."

"No, it isn't," I snapped.

"But a woman just doesn't become a completely new personality overnight, Mr. Lamb. Not even when nudged by such a momentous event as your arrival. It's just illogical. You didn't see it though, and neither did Mr. Green."

"Well, I . . ."

"But like I said, she was playing around. And finally the guy wanted to get rid of her. He had a chance to marry into some money, and Lavender was in the way. She wanted a little sugar to keep still. And this guy realized that she might develop a permanent taste for sugar. So he killed her."

I was in a panic of curiosity. "Who?" I asked. "Who killed her?"

"Name is Jones."

"Jones?" I searched my memory. "What Jones?"

"He's the real estate agent for these apartments."

I sat there. I didn't say anything. But wouldn't you know? There's always that kind of character. He's there, but you don't realize he's there. Everybody else looks so suspicious, has such good motives, that you forget about this one character. And then he's always the guilty one. I'd written all my stories that way.

The cop was making for the door, but he turned back with a little smile. "My problem is solved, Mr. Lamb," he told me. "But yours is just beginning. I'm afraid your friends haven't appreciated your butting in and trying to finger them on this deal. Look out there."

I followed his glance out the window. Yes, they were all there, Duke and Elsie and Monty and Joe and Steve and Verna. Steve with a cigar, of course. Monty with his big hamlike hands. Duke, as I met his eyes, turned and spit on the ground. Joe kind of snarled. And even Elsie and Verna didn't look exactly harmless.

But then the inspiration came. Jones, I exulted triumphantly. Jones has that damnable lease, and right now Jonesy has other things to occupy his mind. It was my only chance.

So I'm at this new place.

"What do you write?" they ask me.

"Systemical philology," I say. Nobody knows what that is and it sounds dull, so they leave me alone. You learn as you grow older . . .

THE STILL SMALL VOICE

Richard Hardwick

It couldn't have been a car he heard, not way out here on Hooker's Ridge, a mile or more from the road. Billy Joe shrugged and uncorked the pint bottle again, tilting it up and letting an ounce or two of the cool fire slide down his throat. He rammed the cork back into the bottle and cocked his head. It was difficult to pick out the sound from the constant thrashing of the trees and underbrush in the wind, but it had sounded like a car.

There it was again—and now there was no doubt about it. It was a car he heard, and it sounded as though it were laboring along the old logging trail at the foot of the hill. The engine grew louder, growling and groaning like a sick animal as the driver worked the gears. Billy Joe stared down the slope toward a crusty salient of rock off to the left. The logging trail showed as a faint discoloration against the brown covering growth.

He took another nip of the bottle of 'shine, shifted the squirrel gun on his lap, and leaned back against the tree. In a few moments the car appeared, a long black car, inching its way, jolting and bumping along the overgrown ruts. It came on for another ten yards and halted beside a thicket of jack pine. The door flung open and a tall, stoop-shouldered man in a dark suit stepped out. He took off his hat, tossed it in on the front seat, then plucked a handkerchief from his pocket and began to dust himself, letting his eyes rove over the surrounding terrain as he did so.

Now, I've seen that skeeter somewhere before, Billy Joe said to himself.

The man's eyes roamed all around, and it was awhile before Billy Joe realized his own hunting clothes blended with the dun coloring of the tree and the hillside behind him, rendering him invisible to the man below.

The man walked around to the rear of the automobile, apparently satisfied he was unobserved. He selected a key from amongst those on his keyring and inserted it into the trunk lock.

Maybe he's come out here hunting, same as me, thought Billy Joe. But that would not explain the clothes, nor why he would drive a fancy car so far off the highway.

The man turned the key and the trunk lid flew up on its spring. The man took another long look around, then reached inside and took out a shovel and a pick. He carefully leaned the tools against the fender, turned, reached farther into the open trunk, and dragged out a good-sized chest. He swung it with some effort onto his shoulder, took up the tools in his free hand, and strode off purposefully through the copse of pines.

Shortly, to Billy Joe's attentive ears, there came the sound of metal striking rocky soil in regular cadence. With a thoughtful frown creasing his face, Billy Joe drained off another ounce of corn whiskey. He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and looked at the car parked below. A car like that could belong to a gangster. It had a fast, powerful look to it. Maybe that was where he had seen the man before, in a newspaper in connection with some big crime. He could be here burying his fortune so the tax man couldn't get his hands on it.

A slow feeling of excitement crept over Billy Joe. This could just possibly be the big break he had been waiting for all his life, the turning point in his luck. A

change for the better was bound to happen sometime. A man surely couldn't be plagued with bad luck all his life.

After a long while, the sounds beyond the thicket ceased and the man emerged, his shirt sleeves rolled up and his dark coat slung over his shoulder even though the afternoon was cold—and growing colder. The pick and the shovel hung from one hand, but as Billy Joe had expected, the chest was nowhere in evidence.

As Billy Joe watched impatiently, the man replaced the tools in the car and after considerable effort in the narrow confines, got the car turned about and headed out the way he had come. The laboring engine and the sound of shifted gears gradually faded, blending slowly into the increasing rush of the wind in the trees.

Billy Joe looked up at the darkening sky. The clouds looked as though there might be snow in them. He pulled himself erect, shouldered the squirrel gun, and made his way quickly down the slope, across the logging trail, and through the pine thicket.

The man had hidden his labors well, brushing and smoothing over the scar in the earth, scattering leaves and pinestraw about. But find the spot Billy Joe did, and spurred on by the intuitive feeling that he was onto something big, he hastily cleared the ground, found a strong stick with which to loosen the freshly turned earth, and began to dig down with his gloved hands.

He was nearly four feet down, and growing weary, when he struck the chest. He paused, breathing hard from the sustained and unaccustomed effort, and looked down at the dark, squared corner showing in the red soil. He took a pull at his bottle and bent again to his task.

Suddenly, he stopped and poked his head up quickly from the hole. Suppose the man were to come back

for some reason or other? Suppose he found someone digging. . . ?

Billy Joe looked about apprehensively, surprised at how dark the afternoon had grown. Ragged clouds scudded low over the tops of the trees and the wind keened shrilly through the branches. Billy Joe rubbed his hands against his trouser legs, leaned quickly to his work. He cleared away the moist earth from about the lid of the trunk and soon made his way down to the hasps that held it shut. There was a lock on the middle one, but Billy Joe pressed the release and it popped up. With shaking hands he pulled back the hasps on either side, took a deep breath, and threw the lid open.

The blonde folded inside may have been pretty at one time. She wasn't now.

Darkness had long since fallen over the cold forest and hills by the time Billy Joe finished covering the chest, even though he had worked with all haste. When he had completed the job he hurried quickly along the logging trail, wishing he were home, wondering under what dark star he had been born. If someone else had dug up a chest buried by a prosperous-looking stranger, it would have been crammed full of money. But Billy Joe Odum—let him dig it up, and what's inside? A dead body!

Eula Mae was clearing away coffee cups and wiping cake crumbs off the table when Billy Joe got home. It was Saturday, and it had been Eula Mae's turn for the Sewing Circle.

"Must of had a lot o' gossip today," he said. "Them old biddies just leave?"

She gave him a sharp look. "Looks as if I got to do all the chores around here. I'm just gettin' around to cleanin' up in here. And my friends ain't old biddies!" She stepped close to him and smelled his breath.

"Great Lord! It's enough to wither a person's nostrils! And no squirrels to show for it, I'll bet! What the

devil you been doing all day, Billy Joe, look like you been crawling around on the ground!"

He looked down and saw the smears and streaks of red clay over his hunting clothes. He mumbled something about falling down, and went off to wash.

All through supper Billy Joe sat in deep silence, listening to Eula Mae's vituperation. He had thought about telling her what really happened to him, but he guessed the mood she was in wasn't right for interesting conversation. At last, he finished eating and got up from the table.

"You ain't said two words since you come home, Billy Joe," Eula Mae said. "You sick?"

"A body don't have much of a chance with you around, Eula Mae," he said. "Besides, I'm thinking."

"Oh, Lord! He's thinking!" she shrilled. She heaved herself up and began piling the dishes in the kitchen sink. "Last time you took to thinking the milk cow got out and a truck run her down on the highway."

"Wasn't my fault." Billy Joe muttered.

"Time before you got to scheming so hard you forgot to brake the pickup and it rolled down the hill to the hollow and turned bottom up."

"Brakes were just wore out."

"I'd quit thinking if I was you, Billy Joe!" Eula Mae hooted. "Give it up complete! Don't mess with it!"

"Weren't none of that a damn thing but poor luck, same as I had the day I asked you to marry me!"

"No worse than my luck when I said I'd do it!" Eula Mae countered hotly.

Billy Joe snorted in disgust and went into the front room and lit his pipe, muttered deprecations on women who always had to have the last word. He sat down and stared out the window at the cold night, wondering if the woman buried out there on Hooker's Ridge had been the tall man's wife, and if he had put up with the sort of thing Billy Joe had to take off Eula Mae.

Probably he had, and had got a belly full of it and decided to do something about it.

Billy Joe smiled inwardly, thinking how nice it would be if that were Eula Mae up there in that chest, four feet under the clay. But how did a man explain it when his wife turned up missing?

People were bound to come around and start asking questions. Weren't they? He puffed on his pipe, and occasionally he looked around at Eula Mae standing in there at the kitchen sink.

What was that fellow in the big black car going to say when they started asking about the blonde woman —assuming, of course, she was his wife? Well, Billy Joe said to himself, he's buried her, and more power to him. Billy Joe had no idea of sticking his nose into it any further than he already had. Still, it was a shame that there wasn't something valuable in that trunk. It wasn't every day a man found somebody burying a trunk in the woods, and when he did, it seemed to Billy Joe that a man surely ought to be able to profit from it.

The following afternoon, Billy Joe had cause to reevaluate. There was a picture in the newspaper, a picture of a tall, stoop-shouldered man, and Billy Joe's feelings about having seen him before were borne out. Or rather, he had seen someone who looked a great deal like the fellow. The name beneath the picture was Leonard Cramer, and he was the son of Thompson Cramer, the Big Man of the state's political party, the man who spoke quietly in the hotel rooms and said who would be governor and who would get this state contract or that one. The son—Leonard—resembled his father in all ways except one. Character.

The newspaper headline proclaimed the fact that the younger Cramer's wife had mysteriously disappeared, and there were overtones that political vengeance was behind the disappearance. There was an

eloquent plea by the elder Cramer, addressed to the unknown persons responsible for the disappearance, begging for the return of his beloved daughter-in-law. There was also a picture of a blonde, smiling in happier days. It would all have touched Billy Joe deeply had he not witnessed the scene at Hooker's Ridge the day before.

The newspaper story went on to say that the FBI was being called in to investigate and that various suspects were being questioned.

When he finished reading, Billy Joe let the paper drop to his lap. So that was how it was done. Of course, they'd never in a million years find the body, and probably the whole thing would eventually die down with everybody feeling sorry for Leonard Cramer. Simple.

Billy Joe found his thoughts flicking to Eula Mae. The trouble there was that there wasn't a reason on earth for anyone to want to kidnap Eula Mae. He picked up the paper again and looked at Cramer's grief-stricken likeness. He could almost see the big black car jouncing along the old logging trail, the dark, expensive suit the man wore, the pick and shovel leaning against the fender as the man dragged the chest from the back of the car . . .

Things started to turn in Billy Joe's mind. Strange things. Slowly, he began to realize that maybe he had found something out there on the ridge as good as any treasure. He lifted his eyes, a smile on his face. Through the kitchen doorway, he could see Eula Mae's broad back as she stood before the sink, and an idea came to Billy Joe.

Two ideas, in fact.

The first idea went well from the start, though Billy Joe hadn't yet planned it to its ultimate conclusion. The next morning, after Eula Mae had gone to her job at the cotton mill, Billy Joe took up his pick and shov-

el and went back to Hooker's Ridge. He took along a pint of corn whiskey as fortification against the cold and got immediately to the business of digging Mrs. Cramer a new grave some hundred yards from the old one. When the grave was dug, Billy Joe disinterred the lady, transferring her in her cramped coffin to the new site. He covered her carefully, taking note of the exact location by lining it up with various trees and landmarks, filled the empty grave, and went home.

When he had cleaned himself up, Billy Joe drove the battered pickup into town, parked at the barber shop, and entered the telephone booth that stood outside. For a moment, as he took the telephone off the hook and dialed for the operator, his resolution wavered. He was very near junking his idea when the operator's voice sounded in his ear.

"I want to call Mr. Leonard Cramer, down in Capitol City, operator." After a nervous interval, during which the operator called information, got the number, dialed it, and told Billy Joe how much money to pay, there was a deep voice on the other end of the wire.

"You Mr. Cramer?" Billy Joe asked with considerable difficulty. "No, never mind who this is just now, you just hear me out. And if I was you, I wouldn't want nobody else listening in on account of it might make a little trouble for you."

A wave of satisfaction swept warmly over Billy Joe, because he was able to talk to the son of an important man in this way.

He went on. "Lemme put it this way, Mr. Cramer. I chanced to be doin' a bit of huntin' out near Hooker's Ridge a couple days back, when along comes this big black car a-driving through the woods. Well sir, you can imagine how I felt seein' a great big car out there in the middle o' nowhere! But that ain't the beatin'est part. Guess what I seen when that car finally stopped alongside a stand of pine——"

"Who—who is this!" Cramer demanded, his voice cracking.

"Lemme put it this way, Mr. Cramer, this might be your conscience callin'!"

Now, Billy Joe thought, that had a nice ring to it! "Yes sir, this here could be your conscience letting you know that somebody besides yourself knows that pretty piece in the paper weren't nothing but a lot o' hogwash. Anyway, I'll be callin' you again, real soon. Maybe we can do some business."

"Wait——"

Billy Joe gently let the phone down on the hook and stood there in the booth a few seconds, chuckling to himself. He went into the barber shop, hung his mackinaw on a wall hook and sprawled in the barber chair.

"Gimme a shave, Luke, and take your time. Make it a good one!"

The barber grinned, winked at two fellows who were sitting reading the newspapers. "Don't recollect you ever payin' for a shave before, Billy Joe. What happened? Eula Mae get a better job?"

The three men laughed.

Billy Joe leaned back in the chair. "Laugh all you want. When a man's luck turns, laughing ain't goin' to hinder it! Yes sir, just keep on laughing."

He lay there with his eyes closed, the thick warmth of the barber's towel on his face. He drifted into a happy languor, thinking of the possibilities that lay before him. He would wait until the furor had died down, keep Cramer guessing, worrying, and when the time seemed right, Billy Joe would demand . . . How much would he say he wanted? A man whose father was such a big politician must have access to a great deal of money. Maybe, Billy Joe thought, he could get as much as ten thousand dollars or even more.

But there was one thing that had to be done first. The one thing that would enable Billy Joe to really

enjoy his fabulous new luck. He would have to get rid of Eula Mae.

Now, that would take some figuring. Maybe some kind of an accident would do it. Of course, that was risky. Something could go wrong. If there was just a way to explain Eula Mae disappearing, the same as Cramer had done with his wife. But why would Eula Mae disappear? She had a steady job, and a good man, no matter what some folks might say.

It had to be the accident, then. Now, what kind of accident could she have that nobody would start nosing around?

"What the devil are you mumbling about, Billy Joe?"

Billy Joe's eyes popped open. The barber was standing over him, wiping the razor on a cloth and grinning. He cut a glance at the men in the shop. "He's took to talking to himself! You know what that means, boys!"

They all had a real big laugh over that.

Billy Joe smiled again and closed his eyes. They couldn't bother him with their jokes. Let them laugh. One day he'd ride up out front in a car like Leonard Cramer had, and then he'd see who did the laughing.

The next afternoon, Billy Joe took his squirrel gun and went out to Hooker's Ridge again. Very carefully, he made his way to the spot where Cramer had buried the chest. When he saw the spot, Billy Joe grinned broadly. The ground had been hastily dug into, the fresh earth scattered recklessly about. He wondered how Cramer had felt when he discovered the body had been moved. The quarry had been flushed!

During the ensuing days, Billy Joe watched the papers carefully. The kidnap story stuck, and the trail grew cold. There were dark insinuations that Mrs. Cramer had come to no good at the hands of her kidnappers. The story faded gradually from the news, retreating toward the back pages for lack of new devel-

opments, and at last nothing at all was to be found concerning it.

Billy Joe continued his cryptic calls to Leonard Cramer. He would drive considerable distances in order to spread the calls so that he could not be traced and each time he got Cramer on the line he would say; "This is your little old conscience checkin' in. You best start gettin' some money together and I'll be talkin' to you." And he'd hang up, cutting off the panicky voice on the other end of the wire.

Cramer was set up now. The other business was all that remained. Getting rid of Eula Mae. Billy Joe stayed awake nights pondering it. How to do it without anyone getting wise? How to make it look like an accident? It had to be something that could happen to anybody. The simpler the better, because there wouldn't be as many things that could go wrong. He thought of his squirrel gun. Lots of people were accidentally shot while someone cleaned a gun. There wasn't any great hurry. He'd give it some more thought.

It rained on Saturday afternoon. Billy Joe drove the pickup carefully along the rainswept road from town and turned down the muddy ruts toward the house. The idea hit him then. A simple accident. Why not run over Eula Mae with the pickup? The brakes never had been much good and with the ground around the house so muddy . . . Who'd question that? And even if anyone did, what could be proved?

He was chortling to himself when he stopped in front of the house. He blew the horn and rolled the window on the right down a bit. He blew the horn again and the front door opened and Eula Mae poked her face out, scowling.

"Come here!" Billy Joe shouted. "Come out here, I need some help! Hurry up!"

"What the devil you need help with?" Eula Mae shouted back.

"You come here and I'll show you!"

She disappeared, and for a moment Billy Joe thought she was going to ignore him. But she came back with a shawl over her head and plodded out into the downpour. Billy Joe put the truck in gear, slipped the clutch out, and headed straight for her, gathering speed over the slick ground. Eula Mae was too far from any sanctuary, when she realized what was happening. She tried to jump aside, but she was too slow and the ground was muddy. She slipped and the truck's bumper smashed into her. Billy Joe felt her thump once against the underside of the truck as he roared over her.

He slid to a stop, sighed, and flexed his hands on the wheel. Then he saw the car behind the house, pulled close to the back door on account of the rain. He looked up into the rear view mirror, saw Eula Mae lying back there in the mud, and beyond, standing in the open front door, the three ladies who rounded out the Saturday Sewing Circle.

There was an opening in the docket of the circuit court and Billy Joe went on trial immediately. The verdict was quick and extremely popular. Billy Joe hadn't realized Eula Mae was so highly thought of around the county until he heard the judge pass down sentence. The words came down from the bench, hot and heavy: ". . . hanged by the neck until dead!"

With his good luck just starting, the old bad luck hadn't quite let go after all. In his cell in the death house, Billy Joe was a picture of dejection. At long last things had been going his way, running so smoothly, the future full of promise, and then this. Cramer had gotten away with it, why couldn't Billy Joe? *Cramer . . .*

Billy Joe came slowly to his feet. Why hadn't he thought of that sooner? He must've been in too much of a daze. Even though the original plan had col-

lapsed, there was still a very good use for Cramer. Cramer's father was a big man, the biggest man in the state, the man who pulled the strings that made the governor move. And the governor, by simply putting his name on a piece of legal paper, could pardon Billy Joe. It would be a fair swap, his life for Cramer's son's life.

Billy Joe sent for his lawyer and paced anxiously around his cell while waiting for him. At last the lawyer showed up, and Billy Joe pulled him quickly to the farthest corner of the tiny cell, then peeked cautiously through the bars to see that the guard was beyond earshot.

"Now, what's this all about, Billy Joe?" the lawyer said. "I'm doin' my best working on your appeal, you know that. No need gettin' me out here——" He looked around the cell and gave a little shudder. "This place gives me the creeps!"

"Never mind all that!" Billy Joe said gleefully. "Forget the appeal. I'm as good as outta here right this minute!"

The lawyer gave him a look of alarm. "Now you be careful, Billy Joe! They don't cotton to folks tryin' to break out of here!"

"You just listen," said Billy Joe. "And you do just what I tell you. You get yourself to a telephone and you call Leonard Cramer in Captiol City. He's old man Thompson Cramer's boy——"

"Cramer——"

"You call him," Billy Joe interrupted, "tell him who you are, and tell him you got a client in bad trouble." He waved off the lawyer's attempt to speak. "Tell him"—Billy Joe grinned slyly—"tell him it's about a little piece o' property out on Hooker's Ridge. He'll understand, and he'll come a-runnin'!"

He stopped, watching the lawyer's slowly shaking head. "I don't know what this is all about, Billy Joe,"

the lawyer said, "but whatever it is, you might as well forget about it——"

"Forget about it! His old man'll get me outta here! He'll get me a pardon!"

"I don't know what you got in mind, but if it's got to do with Leonard Cramer, just forget it. He blew his brains out this morning. I heard about it on the radio less than an hour ago. Left a note saying he killed his wife. Turned out that kidnapping business was something he cooked up himself."

Billy Joe's mouth fell open. "He—confessed? *Why? Why!* Didn't nobody but me and him——"

The lawyer moved toward the bars, sighed and picked up his briefcase. "The note he left said his conscience had been bothering him something terrible, not that you'd think a man like that would have a conscience." He shot a quick look at Billy Joe. "No offense to present company, o' course."

He slowly put on his hat. "I'll keep after that appeal, Billy Joe, but I wouldn't advise you to get your hopes up. I sure wouldn't."

He turned and put his hand on the bars. "Guard? Guard . . .?"

HAUNTED HILL

Robert Edmond Alter

Ames was down at the creek crossing when he heard the clop of hoofs coming up the dirt road. It was Flem Trubb, riding along spry-like on his old plug. Flem was wearing a dusty grin, and that got Ames some excited.

I sholy hope Flem sold to them lumber mill folk, he thought.

Flem's plug trotted up to the crossing and Flem reined up as he reached the plank bridge.

"Hidy, young Ames!"

"Hidy, Flem. Y'all coming up that road like a man fit to busting with good news."

Flem laughed. "That's just what hit be, boy. Good news! I finally went and solt my timber acreage to that mill man. You tell your grampa I'll likely be by tomorry to settle what I owe him."

Well, hit's shore about time, Ames thought. But he smiled.

Flem was a shiftless sort who had never been acquainted with a lick of work in his life. He had sponged off his hill friends for years, borrowing money far and wide. None of them had ever worried much about loaning him what they could spare, because they figured Flem's timberland was their security on what he borrowed. And all of them knew that the local lumber mill had had its hard-cash eye on that forested tract of his for some time.

Thing was, times had grown almighty mean in the little hill community over the last year, and some of Flem's more hard-pressed creditors had been urging

him to make a dicker with the mill on his land and settle up his debts. He was in to Ames' grampa for some $300, and now the old man was on his back with a gouty leg, and their rye crop had failed, and Ames figured it would be stiff hoeing to squeeze them through the winter without the money Flem owed them.

"Grampa's to home right now, Flem." Ames hoped Flem would take the hint and ride over to the place and pay up.

But Flem didn't. He said, "Reckon he orta be, and him down with a game laig. Well, I'm a-goan home now and add up what I owe folks. See you tomorry, boy—on payday!"

Ames watched Flem ride up the road and disappear among the blue-green hills. Then he looked down at the cloddy earth and kicked at a stone. It was a mean road for a young fella, trying to scratch an existence out of the rockbound hill land, with a crotchety old grampa and a self-righteous aunt on his shoulders. Times was he'd get so sick of it, he thought he'd just up and run off. But he knew that wouldn't solve anything. A poor man couldn't actually starve in the hills where he'd been raised, but he darn well could in a big friendless city.

Ames shouldered his hoe and headed for home. He felt vaguely troubled about Flem Trubb for some reason.

His Cousin Tope was there, telling the old man about Flem's sale, when Ames walked in.

"Flem Trubb always was a fool, and this proves he still is," the old man said from his perennial sickbed. "Tope, here, says Flem struck the deal with the mill man right in the general store, with half the village looking on."

"I don't wonder they was looking on," Ames said, smiling. "Flem owes half the village."

"Yes, but he didn't have to settle for cash, did he?

Tope says 'twas $8,000 in true bills! The dagnacious fool orta tooken a check and kept his money safe in the bank. Then he coulda writ all of us checks on hit."

"Well," Cousin Tope said, "we ain't never yet had any thieves in these parts, and I don't reckon one will come along between now and tomorry when Flem pays up."

Ames said nothing but he was inclined to agree with his grampa. It had been a stupid thing for Flem to let everybody know that he had $8,000 on his person. Too many men had been killed and robbed for far less.

It got to worrying him so, he couldn't find any pleasure in his grits and sowbelly that night. Finally, he told his aunt he wasn't hungry, and got up from the table to fetch his hat and shotgun.

"Whar you goan at?" his aunt wanted to know.

"Just goan check my foxtrap in the east wood," he said, and ducked out the door to dodge any further questions. His aunt's irritating cackle voice followed him. "Fixing to go see him some sassy-cheap gal, I expect."

But Ames didn't have girls on his mind. Nor did he go near the east wood. He went over the hill through the gorse and smilax and into the wooded upper valley where Flem Trubb lived. It was mighty dark under the crowding umbrella-like live oaks and Ames, stumbling over roots and grubby shrubs, was some relieved to see the distant light from Flem's shanty glowing through the tree-ribbed darkness.

KA-POW! The night exploded with a smash and he came to a startled halt. *A shotgun,* he thought. And it had come from Flem's shanty. He started running through the woods, heedless now of the unseen roots and grabbing smilax branches.

Flem's shanty sat squat and square in the moonlight, the kitchen window ablaze with lantern light. The kitchen door stood open, but there was no sound, no motion in the house or in the dark dooryard.

Ames ran over to the door, calling, "Flem? Flem!"

The kitchen was empty and looked like a war had gone through it. Table and chairs were overturned, dishes in the hutch shattered, the floor littered with glass shards from the inblown windowpane, and the pine planks showed glittering streaks of fresh blood, as if some heavy bleeding object had been dragged out the door.

Ames stared, scowling. Then he took off up the road, yelling like he was being paid for it.

"Mr. Brikus! Hi, Mr. Brikus!"

Old man Brikus and his three sons lived above Flem. They came pouring out of their house with a great raft of hounds barking up a storm, and Ames had to fight the mutts off with a barrage of rocks.

"One of you run for help!" he yelled at the four men on the porch. "I think Flem Trubb's been kilt!"

The startling news spread like a summer fire in cornstalk, and within the hour twenty or more iron-eyed, grumbling hillmen were milling around Flem's dooryard and inside his house.

The facts, old man Brikus stated, spoke for themselves. They had found a piece of paper in the kitchen with the names and sums of the men Flem had owed. Obviously, poor old Flem had been sitting at the table figuring out his list of debts when some bushwhacker, who knew about the $8,000 in cash, had sneaked up to the window and blasted him in the back with buckshot.

Seemed plain enough, too, that the murderer had then dragged Flem's bloody body into the woods and hid it.

"Least thing we kin do is scatter and try to find pore Flem, what's left of him," Miles Tompkin, the local constable, said. The others agreed and went barging into the woods with their guns and hounds. Ames, carrying one of Flem's lanterns, went along.

Around midnight he came upon some deep potholes

in Tangle Valley, about a mile from Flem's place. They were deeply bored, striated cavities, formed in the glacial period when the world was very young. If Flem's body had been dumped in there, then that was the end of it. The potholes were reputed to be bottomless.

Some three hours later all the searchers came straggling back to the shanty with nothing to show for their night's work except a multitude of thicket scratches and some torn clothing.

"Bushwhacker musta hid him in them old potholes in Tangle Valley," Ames said. "Reckon we'll never know for sure."

They all felt mean bad about it. Flem had owed every man of them money. And the worrisome thing was, the crime must have been committed by somebody they knew. Maybe even by one of them. They started giving each other guarded looks.

Finally Nub Rucker, who was out over $200 to Flem, cleared his throat and said, "Peculiar now, ain't it, that young Ames shoulda been way up here with his shotgun when hit happened?"

Nobody spoke. Everybody looked at Ames, who was standing in the dooryard with his mouth open. Then he let his temper rip.

"Listen at me, Nub Rucker. I ain't never yet bushwhacked nobody. And I'll climb the man says I have! Hit's true I was worried about the money Flem owed us, and I come up here to see could I collect hit. But I never got to see Flem. I was way in the woods when I hearn the shot, and that's gospel!"

"Well, *some*body in these hills done hit," Nub muttered. "And you got to admit you was the closest."

Old man Brikus frowned at Ames, half-angry, half-embarrassed.

"Maybe you best let us have a look at your shotgun, boy," he said. "A sniff down the barrel will tell a-plenty."

"That's the same as calling me a liar," Ames said. "I just done tolt you I didn't shoot him. Any man wants to poke his nose down my gun has got to come take hit first."

"Now boys, boys," Miles Tompkin said soothingly. "This ain't no way to act—gitting all het up and jumping on young Ames who we known all his twenty-two years. By mighty, let's not go turning on each othern like suspicious dawgs. We lost out and we got to take our licking like men."

An irate grumble of assent went through the crowd, and old man Brikus spoke to Ames in a sheepish voice.

"No hard feelings, boy. We're just some outa sorts tonight. I reckon nobody here really believes you done her."

"Well, nobody better!" Ames snapped, and he shouldered his shotgun and tramped off into the woods.

An uneasy pall of suspicion and fear crept over the little community. By day, the iron-eyed men combed the hills and woods, looking for a body that had disappeared from the face of the earth. By night, all doors were barred against the sinister dark, and the angry hillmen oiled their guns and told their frightened wives and children to stay away from the windows.

Flem Trubb's silent shanty took on its own aura of dread. Away off in the wooded hills, it sat in lonely isolation, brooding inwardly over the strange tragedy that had happened within its mute walls; a place to be shunned and avoided, not even to be talked about . . . until Cousin Tope came racing down the hill one night.

Wide-eyed and gray-faced, he burst into Ames' house like a shell, scaring Ames' aunt half-witless.

"I seen hit!" he cried. "I seen a hant in Trubb's house!"

Ames grabbed him and got him in a chair, and then when Cousin Tope shut up and got his breath back, he told them about it . . .

"Pa sent me down to the store and I had to pass Trubb's to git thar. So I seen a ghosty light a-flickering in the shanty and I slips up to the door, thinking the murderer has returned to the scene a his crime, like folks always say they do. And they's this dim hazy light filling the kitchen like witchfire. Only I cain't see whar at it's a-coming from! And then——" Cousin Tope trembled and threw a fearful glance over his shoulder.

"And then this black sillyette steps right outn the wall and into this devil light and starts coming at me! Hit's all hunched over and has its hands up with the fingers crookit like claws, and I lets out an almighty yell and takes off into the woods and down the hill—and what I wanta know is how air I to git home agin tonight and me with no gun?"

Ames' grampa snorted and said, "Well, you kin borry our shotgun, Tope."

"No," Ames said. "I'm a-walking him home with the shotgun. If Flem's bushwhacker or hant is prowling around that shanty, I want a look at him. C'mon, cousin."

His aunt started to kick up a fuss about it, but Ames told her to put a sock in her mouth for once in her life; and then the old man began to rag at him.

"You just purely asking to have your fool haid blown off!"

"Well, it's my life, ain't hit?" Ames snapped. "So why don't you just sit back and worry about your gout, which you brang on by guzzling moonshine all your life." And he stalked angrily out the door.

The two young men went over the hill and slipped through the brooding woods. Neither of them spoke, both of them feeling that they were creeping into an atmosphere of evil. Up ahead, the forlorn little shanty waited for them in the moony gloom.

They stole across the deserted dooryard and up to the shattered window. Everything was dark. There

was no sound. But there was an odor that stung their nostrils. It came from the black kitchen—the stench of sulphur.

Cousin Tope gripped Ames' arm.

"Smell it? Oh golly, hit's the devil's brimstone a-burning!"

Ames was a product of his narrow environment. He was just as superstitious as the next hillman. His pounding heart took a fast turn and, if it hadn't been for the shotgun he was clutching, he likely would have cut and run.

"Let's take a squint in the kitchen," he whispered.

Cousin Tope didn't want to, but he didn't want to be left alone in the spooky yard either. He followed his cousin.

Ames stepped very carefully into the dark doorway. Nothing moved. The infernal reek of sulphur was stronger. The eeriness of the silent, empty house sent little nervous fingers up his spine. He held his breath, straining his ears. He swore he could actually hear the very silence which pervaded the demoniac-scented air.

Something happened to the silence. A low, dismal, almost painful sound seemed to come up through the floor—*"Uuuaagh!"*

It was just too much for Cousin Tope's keyed-up nerves.

"Wha—!" he cried, and collided with Ames in the narrow doorway, and shot away in a panic of haste. His scream in Ames's ear triggered him into a wild, blind leap. He landed a yard from where he had stood and took off on the spot like an arrow.

It wasn't until he was some hundred yards away that Ames slowed down enough to regret his rush into the woods. However, he wasn't about to return to the creepy house that night, not when he didn't have a lantern or even a match on him to make a light. He trudged on home, wondering what had become of his fool cousin.

It was a fine crisp morning, with the dogwoods all red and vivid like the splattering on a colossal paintboard, when Ames crossed the yard and entered the haunted house. He was resolved to go through Trubb's shanty from top to bottom.

There were three rooms on the main floor, and even a weak-eyed man could see at a glance that they contained nothing but a few old sticks of furniture. No bushwhacker, no hant. The shotgun ready in his hands, he tiptoed up the breakneck stairs to the small cobwebby attic. He found nothing but mice.

That left the cellar. Truth was, he didn't have much stomach for going down into that damp little hole—but he did it. Again the faint odor of sulphur touched his nostrils. But the cold earth floor and the limestone walls appeared to be as solid as granite. There was no place in the cellar for a hant or a man to hide.

Puzzled, Ames walked out of the shanty and entered the woods, only to halt within a few yards. He stood stockstill, brooding over the facts that were known to him. Suddenly he looked up.

"By gory, hit just might be," he murmured.

He swung left into the trees, found a witch-hobble thicket and crawled inside to wait the night. The long apprehensive day dragged by like a weary snail, passing finally into sunset. Then it was dark and the frosty stars began to push their way through the deep purple sky. Ames wormed out of the thicket and slipped through the silent shadows to the hem of the woods.

An hour passed, and another. The deserted shanty remained dark and oppressively still. A hooty owl spoke in a branch over Ames's head, asking its favorite question: *Hoo? Hoo?*

Who is right, Ames thought. He shot an impatient look at the haunted house—and his eyes bulged.

A spectral light was glowing in the low cellar window.

He came to his feet, staring. The cellar window was

screened by the sawblade grass growing wild in the dooryard and the light was barely visible. Yet there was no mistaking it; it gleamed like a spark on the edge of Hades' black pit.

Ames slipped across the yard and up to the kitchen door. It was closed. He was certain he'd left it open when he had departed from the house that noon. Well, everybody knew that a hant could move inanimate objects. It was a special trick of theirs.

He eased the door open and stepped into the dark clammy room.

Very gradually his sight accustomed itself to the dark and he was able to pick out the overturned table and chair and the black rectangle of the closed cellar door. He listened for all he was worth. No movement, no stealthy footsteps or ghostly groans . . .

Yet some sixth sense deep inside warned him that *something*, some definite and hostile presence, was lurking behind the closed cellar door—crouching and waiting.

He was afraid to breathe. His flesh started to crawl into chilly goosebumps and he felt the hair on the back of his neck rise like stiff spikes. His finger trembled on the trigger of the shotgun.

Then—very, very slowly—the cellar door started to creak open.

Glowing witchfire leaped through the crack in the door and bathed the far wall of the kitchen a ruddy color. The stinging reek of sulphur floated into the shadowy room. The slow scrape of a slithering foot sounded on the cellar steps, then another. The door swung farther open . . .

Uuuaagh! A low, sepulchral moan droned dismally across the kitchen, and Ames nearly cut loose with both barrels.

A black silhouette inched around the edge of the open door, sharply defined in the glowing light, and took on the shape of a hunched figure. It raised its

hands with clawed fingers and started to shuffle toward the gawkish-faced youth.

"J-just one more s-step, mister," Ames chattered, "and I'm a-goan blast you b-back down them steps!"

The hant petrified in its tracks. Then it wagged its clawed hands frantically.

"Ay gory, boy, don't shoot! Hit's only me. Just pore old Flem Trubb!"

Ames let his breath go and lowered his cannonlike shotgun.

"I figgered as much," he said with a weak smile. "But I sholy wasn't certain!"

They uprighted the table, and Flem fetched his lighted candle up from the cellar. Then they sat down to have a man to man, or man to hant, talk.

"You rigged the whole shebang so as to escape paying off your just debts," Ames accused the sheepish-looking man.

"Hit's true," Flem admitted. "When I got to figgering what I owed folks, I seen I would have to part with more than half my money. So then I got the idee to kill myself, er make hit *look* like I was kilt. So I upset my kitchen and butchered one a my hens and smeared her blood around. And then I went outside and blowed a hole through my winder with my shotgun."

Ames said nothing, and Flem looked doleful.

"I figgered to take right off for the big city with my money and live like a dude," he said. "But I didn't git no chancet."

Ames stared at him, still mute, and Flem grew peevish.

"What I didn't know is that a somebody like you was close by when I blowed apart my winder! You come a-racing along and never give me time to git back in the house to fetch my money. And next thing I knowed, you had two dozen fellers beating the woods

for my body. I had to spend the night sitting in a crick so the hounds wouldn't sniff me out!"

Ames started to grin, and Flem got more excited.

"And, by mighty, them fellers went right on looking for me the hull next two days! And by the time they let off and I got back to my house, hit was Friday night. Then when I sneaks up my money and some eatmeats, that fool cousin a yorn comes along." Flem gave a throaty chuckle.

"That's when I got the idee to hant him. Worked mighty fine too! So when he brung you back, I hanted you both. I lit a hull box a matches in the cellar to give the place a brimstone smell. How you boys did run! But I was afeared you'd fetch all them men here and start beating the bresh agin, so I hid up a tree and had to stay thar all day, 'counta you snooping around!"

Ames watched him, saying nothing, and Flem's candle-bright eyes turned sly.

"You don't aim to tell on me, do ye, boy? Tell you what. I'll pay *you* the money I owe your grampa, and you keep your mouth shut. Then I'll skedaddle for the big city, and won't nobody never know. How about hit?"

"You got that eight thousand on you?" Ames asked.

"Shore do! Right here in my shirt."

"Fetch hit out."

"Bet a purty I will! I knowed you was a smart 'un." Flem drew out a fat packet of greenbacks. "Now, let's see here . . ."

"No need to count any of it, Flem. I'm a-taking the hull bundle. Hand hit over."

Flem's mouth dropped. He watched the barrels of the shotgun center on his chest. Ames reached for the money and stood up.

"That first night I come up here, I aimed to do to you what you pretended to do to yourself," he said, "only you beat me to hit. But I reckon your way works out even better. Thing is, though, you ain't going to

any big city. I am. You *cain't* go—because you're daid, remember? Git on your feet now. You got somewheres else to go."

Flem wet his lips and his eyes grew bigger and bigger in his moist face.

"Whar?" he whispered. "Whar at you taking me?"

"Oh, it ain't far. Just over to them potholes in Tangle Valley."

THE MONSTER BRAIN

Richard Deming

Modern society has become so automated, it's amazing how many of the things one does are later scrutinized by an electronic computer. For example, for some time now our state headquarters of the National Association of Underwriters has been routinely feeding punch cards into a computer for every insurance policy issued, and for every claim filed in the state. The data which comes out is mainly useful for statistical purposes, but once in a while something will spill out which suggests a possible insurance fraud. When that happens, the information is relayed to the association's investigative division, which is where I work.

One Monday morning in mid-October I came to work in a bad mood. Anita and I had gone round and round again the night before about getting married. As usual, the argument had centered about the lack of future in working for a salary and ended with the ultimatum that she would never marry a man who couldn't support her in luxury.

Sally, our blonde receptionist said, "If that's a hangover you're suffering, Mr. Quinn, you'd better get over it in a hurry."

"It's not a hangover," I said, glowering at her. "It's just the normal distasteful expression I can't keep from my face every time I look at a member of the female sex. And why should I get over it, even if it were a hangover?"

"You had another fight with your girl," she said. "The chief wants to see you."

I smoothed my expression before I entered the

chief's office. He doesn't like to see anything but happy faces.

Ed Morgan is chief of the investigative division. He's a grizzled, barrel-chested man of sixty who has headed the division for twenty years and has the reputation of being able to smell an insurance fraud clear across the state. I had been working under him for seven years, since I got out of college, and had become his most trusted investigator.

"Sit down, Tod," he said. "I've got a routine investigation for you. I doubt that anything will come of it, because I can't work up much of a hunch about it, but the computer people sent some data over, and we have to check it out."

If Ed Morgan didn't sense a possible fraud from whatever it was the computer had divulged, there probably wasn't any. But a lot of our investigations are based less on outright suspicion than on mere thoroughness. We turn up the number of fraud cases we do because we investigate everything which seems even a little off key in insurance claims.

"What did the monster brain turn up this time?" I asked.

"Well, as you know, one of the items keyed on every punch card involving claims is cause of death. Some statistician was tabulating causes of death throughout the state for the past twelve months, and seems to think he found something interesting when he came to typhoid fever. Typhoid is rare these days; there were only seven deaths from it last year in the whole state. Five of them were in the same community. Each was insured by a different carrier, but through the same insurance broker. Each policy happened to be for the same amount too: ten thousand dollars. Headquarters thought the coincidence of cause of death, the insured amount and the broker being identical in all five cases might interest us."

He handed me a couple of sheets of paper on which

a resume of the data from the punch cards had been typed.

The five decedents who had been insured were an eighty-year-old man whose beneficiary had been his son, three women whose beneficiaries had been their husbands, and one eighteen-year-old boy whose beneficiary had been his father. All five policies had been written on different companies by a broker named Paul Manners. The deaths had all taken place during a period of about a month from the middle of July to the middle of August. The addresses of both the deceased and the beneficiaries in all cases were either R.D. 1 or R.D. 2, Heather Ridge.

"Obviously a rural community," I said. "Where's Heather Ridge?"

"I didn't know either until I looked it up," the chief said. "It has a population of seven hundred and is the seat of Heather County."

"I don't know where Heather County is either," I said.

Morgan grinned. "I'm not surprised. It's back up in the hills with the moonshiners. The population of the whole county is only about twenty-five hundred. There isn't even a paved road in the county, although the map shows a couple of presumably good gravel roads. There's no railroad line to Heather Ridge, and a bus only twice a week, so if you find you have to go there, you'd better drive."

I glanced at the resume again. "Whoever sent this over has a hole in his head. So the place had a typhoid epidemic this last summer. That's the logical time to have one. This Paul Manners wrote all the policies because a place that size wouldn't have more than one insurance broker. And the amounts being the same don't mean anything. Ten thousand dollars is the most common amount of life coverage."

"Exactly my reasoning, but we've turned up frauds with less to start on. It shouldn't take you more than a

few days to check it out. You may decide after examining the claim correspondence that you don't even have to visit the place."

"Okay," I said, rising. "I'll get on it right away."

In the outer office the blonde Sally said, "You look a little more cheerful now, Mr. Quinn. Is your opinion of the female sex improving?"

"It's just that I have a happy assignment," I told her. "If things work out the way I hope, I'll be able to send a lovely young widow to the gas chamber."

She made a leering face at me.

The insurance carriers all had branch offices in Blair City, fifty miles away. I drove over and by mid-afternoon had examined the files on all five cases.

Everything seemed in order. There was a certified copy of the death certificate in each case, all stamped with the notary seal of an Emma Pruett of the Heather County Clerk's Office. Each had been signed by the same doctor, Emmet Parks. Checking the policies, I discovered all had been taken out during the previous January and February, and all physical exams had been made by Dr. Emmet Parks. Again this wasn't too coincidental. It was hardly likely a town of seven hundred would have more than one doctor.

The relatively short time the policies had been in force made me decide to check a little more deeply, though. I revisited each insurance office and asked to look at the canceled claim-payment checks. I was startled to discover that in each case the checks had been endorsed to Dr. Emmet Parks and then cashed by him at the same bank in Holoyke.

I checked my road map and discovered Heather Ridge was about sixty miles from Holoyke. Now why were the checks all endorsed to the doctor, I wondered, and why did he go sixty miles to cash them instead of cashing them in Heather Ridge?

By the time I got back to the state capital, it was too late to do any more that day. I phoned Anita to see if

she were interested in going out to dinner, but she was just as icy as the night before. She hung up on me.

I spent a miserable evening brooding over what kind of business I could go into which might make the kind of money Anita demanded. I couldn't think of any. My education was in liberal arts, and my total experience was in insurance investigation. I finally gave up and went to bed.

The next morning I was at the office of the State Medical Society when it opened.

Dr. Emmet Parks proved to be a member in good standing, and had been for twenty years. He was fifty years old, and had never practiced anywhere but Heather Ridge. He was the only physician in all of Heather County.

If there was fraud connected with the five insurance claims, the only way I could see it had been worked was by mass murder. It seemed highly unlikely that a reputable physician would be a party to that, and equally unlikely that even a rural physician would misdiagnose five murders in a row as typhoid fever. Besides, since each beneficiary was different, it would involve the collusion of all five in murder.

Still, Parks's signature on all the claim-payment checks bothered me. I decided to keep checking.

When I left the State Medical Society Office, I visited the licensing bureau at the Capital Building. Insurance broker Paul Manners had passed his state examination and had been licensed only the previous November, which made the relative newness of the five policies considerably less suspicious. Since he couldn't have started selling insurance earlier than November, all it seemed to indicate was that he was a pretty hot salesman.

Checking his file, I discovered he was married but had no children, had a high school education and had been a part-time farmer for the past twenty-five years. During the same period he had worked half-time as a

farm appliance salesman in a store in Heather Ridge. According to his application, he planned to continue his part-time farming, but drop his extra job when he became an insurance broker.

A certified true copy of his birth certificate, again bearing the notary stamp of Emma Pruett, showed he had been born in Heather Ridge.

His three references rated his character high. One was from a Reverend Donald Hartwell, one from County Judge Albert Baker, the third from Dr. Emmet Parks.

While it was standard procedure for people to give their family physician's name when references were required, the frequency with which I was running into Dr. Emmet Parks's name began to intrigue me.

I took rather detailed notes of the information about Paul Manners contained in his file.

From the Capital Building I went back to association headquarters and gave a computer operator a question to ask the monster brain. Its answer lessened my suspicion. In addition to the five typhoid cases, Paul Manners had placed twenty other policies with various carriers since he had been in business, and all of these insured were still alive. It looked more and more as though the insurance broker had merely had the misfortune to start business in a territory where previously no one had ever been approached by an insurance salesman, had done remarkably well with his virgin territory, but had immediately run into an epidemic.

If it hadn't been for Dr. Emmet Parks's signature on all the claim-payment checks, I would have dropped the matter right there. But I had to check that out. I decided to visit Heather Ridge.

I drove up on Wednesday, arriving in the middle of the morning. The town was a good forty miles from the nearest main highway, back up in the hills in rugged, sparsely settled country. The last thirty miles

I traveled on washboard gravel road, and I didn't see a single other car. As a matter of fact, except for power and telephone lines strung on poles alongside the road, I saw few signs of civilization. Occasionally I spotted a farmhouse or a barn, but most of the time the view from the winding mountain road was of steep hills densely covered with pine.

I didn't see any heather, and Heather Ridge itself turned out to be in a valley instead of on a ridge, although there was a sharp, jagged ridge just north of it.

Later I learned the town and the county had been named after Amos Heather, a trapper who back in the mid-1800s had stood off an Indian attack from it for seven days before he finally lost his scalp.

The town was like something from the last century. There was a town square with a squat, one-story, red-brick courthouse in its center. A half dozen overalled old men chewing tobacco lolled on the low wall edging the courthouse lawn. There were a few tired-looking business establishments ringing the square, but there were no shoppers on the street. Only two vehicles were in sight, both parked in front of the courthouse. One was a 1932 pickup truck, the other a Model T.

The tobacco-chewing old men regarded me with silent speculation when I parked and entered the courthouse.

There was a long corridor running the length of the building, with offices off it on either side, labeled with the familiar titles you see in any courthouse. Most of the doors stood open so that I had to pause and look in to read the lettering on the doors. The sheriff's office was to the left just inside the main entrance, and directly across from it was the district attorney's office. Both were empty. I passed other empty offices labeled TAX ASSESSOR, REGISTRAR OF MOTOR VEHICLES, COUNTY RECORDER, COUNTY CLERK and CORONER. Opposite the coroner's office was an

empty office labeled COUNTY JUDGE, and a small, equally empty courtroom.

By then I was halfway down the corridor, and I finally found some sign of life. In a small alcove, behind a counter flush with the left wall of the corridor, a young woman sat before a telephone switchboard. She was a rather plain-featured brunette of about twenty-one or two. A sign hanging above the counter said INFORMATION.

"Morning, miss," I said. "Is the courthouse closed today?"

"Oh, no," she said with a smile. "What can I do for you?"

"Where is everybody?"

"Oh, they're all available." She indicated the switchboard. "I can have any official you want over here in ten minutes. They don't hang around here because we have so little business."

She laughed at my quizzical expression. "Kind of throws you at first, doesn't it? It took me some getting used to when I first came here. I've been in this job only a year. I'm from Holoyke. When I answered the ad for a secretarial position, I didn't realize I'd be practically running a whole county, but I'm clerk of the court, secretary to the D.A., the county clerk, the county recorder and the coroner, registrar of motor vehicles, switchboard operator and information clerk. My name's Emma Pruett."

The woman whose notary seal had been stamped to all the death certificates, I remembered. I said, "Doesn't anybody but you work around here? You're the staff?"

"When it's necessary. The population of the whole county is only about twenty-five hundred, and all the county jobs except mine and the sheriff's are part-time. The D.A. has his private law practice, for instance, and so does the county judge. The recorder of deeds runs a general store. The coroner's a practicing phy-

sician, and so on. The salaries of none of them are more than a few dollars a month. They hired me to coordinate things. I always know where to reach everybody when something comes up. The sheriff's usually around, but he happens to be over at the coffee shop at the moment."

It seemed a rather loose way to run a county government, but with such a small tax roll, it was a lot more practical than paying the salaries of a lot of full-time employees who had nothing to do.

I said, "If you're secretary to the county clerk, I guess you won't have to phone anyone. I just want to look up some death records to establish some insurance claims."

I handed her one of my cards and she studied it with interest. Then she got up from her chair, raised a gate in the counter and stepped out into the corridor. "Just follow me, Mr. Quinn."

She led me to the door labeled COUNTY CLERK and into the room. Moving behind a counter there, she asked, "What year?"

"This one. July and August." I took out my list and looked at it. "The first one is Herman Potter, died July ninth."

"I remember that name," she said, lifting a large ledger from beneath the counter. "He was the first typhoid death. Only eighteen years old, too." She located the proper page and reversed the book so I could examine it.

After studying the entry, which matched my notes in every detail, I said, "Next is Mrs. Henrietta Skinner, July fifteenth."

She found that entry for me and it also checked out. Mrs. Martha Colvin, Mrs. Helen Jordan and Abel Hicks, who had died respectively on July twenty-first, August third and ninth, also checked out.

"Thanks," I said. "Do you happen to know an insurance broker named Paul Manners?"

She furrowed her brow, then shook her head. In an apologetic tone she said, "No. I know all of the townspeople by sight, but I still don't know all their names. Does he live in town?"

"His address is R.D. 1."

"That would be Ridge Road," she said. "He probably lives on a farm out that way. I don't know many of the farmers around here."

"Where do I find Doctor Emmet Parks? Is his office nearby?"

"Doc? Just go east on Main Street one block. It's a big frame house on the left. You can't miss it, because it's being remodeled into a new clinic and there'll be workmen around. It's also right next door to the post office."

I thanked her again, left the courthouse and drove one block east on Main. It wasn't hard to spot the doctor's house. The framework of a long, one-story addition was attached to one side of it and a couple of workmen were lathing the inside walls. Just west of the house, on the side opposite the new addition, was a small, one-room frame building with a sign above the door reading U.S. POST OFFICE.

Parking across the street, I went over and climbed the porch steps. The two workmen stopped pounding and one of them called, "If you're looking for Doc, he's next door at the post office."

At that moment a thin, elderly man carrying a cloth bag emerged from the post office. He was followed by a stocky, gray-haired man with a thick chest. The latter was in shirtsleeves and was smoking a pipe.

As the elderly man tossed his cloth bag into the back of a jeep parked in front of the post office and climbed under the wheel, the pipe smoker said, "See you this afternoon, Joe." Then he glanced over at the porch and spotted me. As the jeep drove off, he came over and mounted the porch steps.

I asked, "Are you Dr. Emmet Parks?"

He took his pipe out of his mouth to examine me, then gave me a pleasant smile. He radiated such good nature, I instinctively liked him on sight.

"That's right, young fellow. What can I do for you?"

I handed him a card. "I would like to discuss some death certificates you recently signed in connection with some insurance claims."

After studying the card, he dropped it into his shirt pocket. "We can't talk over all this pounding," he said, indicating the two workmen, who had resumed nailing lath to the inside walls. "Come inside."

He led me into the house. The front room was set up as a waiting room, but no one was in it.

As we passed through this room to an office, he said with a touch of ruefulness, "I'm not snowed under by patients, despite being the only physician in this county. The people around here are too infernally healthy."

Inside the office he rounded a battered old desk to seat himself behind it and waved me to a chair. Beyond the office wall we could still hear the pounding of nails, but it was muffled enough so that we didn't have to raise our voices.

After relighting his pipe, he said, "I'd guess you're about twenty-seven, Mr. Quinn. That close?"

"Twenty-eight."

"Married?"

"No, sir," I said.

"Don't wait too long," he advised. "Eventually you reach a point where you suddenly realize your chance to marry is gone. I've reached it. It gets rather lonely rattling around all alone in this big house. And it'll be even bigger when the clinic's finished. It's too late for me to start hunting for a wife now, so all I have to look forward to is a lonely old age. Don't make my mistake."

I thought of Anita, and wondered if I would still be trying to talk her into marrying me when I reached the doctor's age. "I'm agreeable to marriage," I said,

"but my girl doesn't think I make enough money. She wants me to go into some kind of business for myself before she'll say yes."

"Beware of women with expensive tastes, Mr. Quinn. The more money you make, the more expensive their tastes become."

"This one is worth it," I assured him.

"The romantic faith of youth," he said with a rueful smile. "I won't burden you with more advice, because you wouldn't take it anyway. Now what death certificates do you want to ask me about?"

"Five deaths from typhoid this last July and August. Herman Potter, Henrietta Skinner, Martha Colvin, Helen Jordan and Abel Hicks. They were all insured for ten thousand dollars, each by different carriers, but through the same insurance broker, Paul Manners."

He took a puff of his pipe. "Uh-huh. What about them?"

"You were the medical examiner for each application, and also signed all five death certificates."

"Naturally. I'm the only physician in the county. You'll also find my signature on the coroner's reports if you want to check. I'm county coroner."

"It wasn't that which brought me here," I said. "All five claim-payment checks were endorsed to you and later cashed by you at a Holoyke bank. Can you explain that?"

Instead of seeming offended, the doctor looked amused. "You came all the way from the state capital just to ask about that, young fellow? They were cashed in Holoyke because that's where I have my account. Heather Ridge doesn't have a bank, and Holoyke is the nearest one. As to why they were endorsed to me, you don't know much about this country, do you?"

"Not much," I admitted. "It strikes me as a little backward."

"It's a century behind the times, Mr. Quinn. Back

here in the hills people like lots of room, and don't trust the outside world. The farms in this area are huge, and largely uncultivatable. Three-fourths of the land is either heavily wooded or straight up and down. Geographically we're the seventh largest county in the state; in population we're the smallest. Farmers around here sometimes go months without seeing anyone but their own families. They've largely been forgotten by the outside world. Social workers never come prying into the hill country to make sure kids are attending school. Our illiteracy rate is probably fifty percent, although I don't believe anyone has ever bothered to make a survey. Begin to understand?"

"I'm afraid not," I confessed.

"Hill people don't put their money in banks. They hide it under the flooring. That's why there's no bank here. It wouldn't have enough customers to support it. Most hill people wouldn't have the faintest idea of how to go about cashing a check. They endorsed them over to me so I could cash them in Holoyke and bring back the cash in hundred-dollar bills."

"Oh," I said. The explanation was that simple.

After a moment of thought, I said, "I guess that clears it up. I may as well see Paul Manners while I'm here, though. How do I find him?"

"You don't. He and his wife are in Florida for the winter."

I raised my eyebrows. "Do people from around here ordinarily vacation in Florida?"

He grinned. "Only Paul. He hit a windfall by becoming an insurance broker, because this is virgin territory. A lot of the townspeople have carried insurance for years, of course, but I doubt that any of the people back in the hills have ever before been approached by an insurance salesman. They wouldn't have bought from a stranger anyway. Paul was born and grew up in this area, and knows everybody in the

county, so they trust him. I guess his commissions financed his Florida vacation."

"Well, I suppose it isn't really necessary to see him," I said. "Everything seems to be on the up-and-up."

"You may as well complete your investigation while you're here," Dr. Parks said. "It would be too bad if your superiors weren't satisfied, and sent you all the way back to dig some more. I have to make a call near the Potter place. Suppose you ride along and talk to the father of the Potter boy?"

Ed Morgan liked investigations to be thorough, and I thought I should interview at least one of the five beneficiaries to make sure the doctor was telling me the truth as to why all the checks had been endorsed to him.

"All right," I agreed.

Dr. Parks had to make a call at a farm a few miles out Ridge Road, where a child was in bed with measles. I waited in the car while he was inside. Afterward we drove about four miles farther on, to a well-kept farmhouse.

A tall, knobby-jointed man of about forty-five came from the barn when the doctor drove into the yard. I could also see a woman peeking through the curtains of a kitchen window, but she must have been too shy to come outside, because she stood there without moving all the time we were in the yard.

Dr. Parks introduced the man as Sidney Potter. He shook hands with me diffidently, obviously ill at ease in the presence of a city man.

"Mr. Quinn is an insurance investigator, Sid," the doctor explained. "He wants to ask some questions about young Herman."

Sidney Potter's expression became sad. "The boy was only eighteen, Mr. Quinn. I only took out the insurance on him to save money for him to buy his own farm some day. I got another boy twenty, and I couldn't leave them both this farm. Doc advised me

as how insurance was a way to save, not just get death benefits. I bought it for that, not to make a profit on my own boy's death."

"I understand," I said.

"We all tooken sick, but the Lord chose to save me and Minnie and our older boy, and just took Herman. Doc says the fever was from the well. He had me put some stuff in it, and we ain't had no trouble since."

"All the others were traceable to well water too," Dr. Parks said to me. "I've had them all treated and have been regularly testing the water, as well as the water from other wells all over the county. I'm county health officer, among my other duties."

I wanted to nail things down completely, since I had gone this far. I said, "You got your ten-thousand-dollar insurance payment all right, didn't you, Mr. Potter?"

The man gave me a suspicious look.

"Mr. Quinn works for the insurance company which sent you the money," Dr. Parks explained, not quite accurately. "He merely wants to make sure you got the check." He turned to me. "We don't have much theft around here, but naturally no one advertises keeping a lot of money around the place. No one aside from me knows Sid was paid an insurance claim. He's naturally a little hesitant about admitting it to strangers."

"I see. I won't tell anyone but my office, Mr. Potter. You did receive the check then?"

"Yeah," he said reluctantly. "Ten thousand dollars, for which I thank you kindly. I had Doc cash it for me over to Holoyke. It's hid real good, so you don't have to worry about nobody but me and Minnie ever finding it."

"That's all I wanted to know," I told him. "I guess that winds up my investigation, Doctor."

As we drove away, the woman was still peering through the kitchen curtains. Glancing back, I saw a boy of about twenty emerge from the barn, from

where he apparently had been watching us all the time we were in the yard. When I called him to the doctor's attention, he glanced over his shoulder.

"That's Sid, Junior," he said. "The older boy. He's as shy of outsiders as his mother. You noticed her standing in the kitchen window, I suppose."

"Uh-huh," I said. "I can understand how an insurance salesman from outside wouldn't stand a chance in these parts.

It was time for lunch when we got back to town. The doctor invited me to lunch with him and took me to a coffee shop on the square, presumably the same one where the sheriff had been when I visited the courthouse.

Dr. Parks knew every customer there, and introduced me to all of them. I met the sheriff, a fat, elderly man named Tom Gaines, District Attorney Charles Hayes, who was a middle-aged balding man, and an assortment of farmers and merchants. We sat at a table with the sheriff and the D.A.

Emma Pruett came in as we were ordering. "Hi, boss," she said to Dr. Parks, then smiled at the district attorney. "Hi, boss."

We all rose and the sheriff pulled up a chair for her to join us.

"Sheriff Gaines is about the only person at the courthouse who isn't my boss," she said to me. "I'm everybody's secretary or assistant."

"That's right, you do work for Dr. Parks, don't you?" I said. "You told me you were secretary to the coroner, among your other duties."

"Plus secretary to the county health officer and the county clerk," she said. "He's all three."

"You're county clerk?" I asked the doctor in surprise.

"We all wear multiple hats around here," he said with a grin. "County clerk is quite an important job. It pays a hundred and twenty dollars a year."

"Doc is also postmaster," District Attorney Hayes said. "He practically runs the county."

I gave the doctor another surprised look.

"That's a tough job too," he said. "The mail truck from Holoyke arrives at ten each morning. Sometimes there are as many as a dozen letters and packages. I sort the mail from about ten to ten-fifteen, and an old fellow named Joe Husbands delivers it. Joe's on duty at the post office, except when he's delivering the mail, to weigh packages and sell stamps. He gets maybe six customers a day."

"This is a real active place," Sheriff Gaines said sardonically. "I made eight arrests last year, all either for public drunkenness or disturbing the peace."

After lunch Dr. Parks drove me back to his house, where I picked up my car. I was entering the square, with the intention of driving around it and continuing on out of town, when I suddenly remembered a remark Sidney Potter had made, and also a comment the doctor had made while we were at the farm. A fantastic thought occurred to me. Changing my mind, I parked in front of the courthouse.

This time Sheriff Gaines was in his office. He gave me a smile of welcome.

"Sheriff, do you know Paul Manners?" I asked.

He looked blank. "Manners? No, I don't believe so."

"He's an insurance broker. Lives out on R.D. 1, or so I was told."

He gave his head a puzzled shake. "Only one I know around here who sells insurance is Doc Parks. He even sold me my policy."

My thought hadn't been so fantastic after all. In fact, it had been the logical answer.

"Thanks," I said, and left the office.

Emma Pruett was again behind the information counter.

"May I bother you to look at some more records?" I asked.

"Of course," she said. "It's a relief to have something to do for a change."

We returned to the county clerk's office. Consulting the notes I had taken on Paul Manners, I first looked up his birth registration. He was recorded as having been born on April 2, 1918. On his application for an insurance broker's license, he had listed his wife's maiden name as Gertrude Booker and her birth date as June 4, 1920. Sure enough, that record was on file too.

Just to see how thorough the doctor had been, I had Emma check for their marriage record. I didn't know the supposed date of marriage, but I guessed it would be no earlier than 1936, as Gertrude would have been sixteen then. Starting with that year, Emma checked forward. The record showed they were married in 1940.

I had Emma check for the birth records of all five persons whose death claims had been paid, and found them all in order too. I had no doubt that in the cases of the eighty-year-old grandfather and the three married women, I would find birth records of their spouses and marriage records, but I didn't bother to look for them.

"Is there more than one undertaker in town?" I asked Emma.

"No, just Gerard Boggs. He's out past Doc Parks on East Main about a block and a half."

"Thanks," I said. "You've been very helpful."

I had a brief visit with the undertaker, then returned to the doctor's house. He seemed a little surprised to see me, but he courteously invited me into his office.

When we were both seated and he had his pipe going, I said, "I was on my way out of town when something Sidney Potter said, and something you said a few moments later, recurred to me. Potter said you had advised him that insurance was a way to save,

and not just get death benefits. He didn't say Paul Manners advised him. He said *you*. I might have passed that, merely assuming Potter had come to you for advice after being contacted by the insurance salesman, if you hadn't mentioned a few moments later that no one but you and Potter knew he had received an insurance check. Now why wouldn't Paul Manners, who sold the policy and no doubt helped Potter prepare his claim, know that he'd received payment?"

The doctor puffed at his pipe and gazed at me through the smoke. "I forgot about Paul. Of course he'd know."

I grinned at him. "You're going to fight until you're counted out, are you, Doctor? I've been back to the courthouse since I last saw you. You did a remarkable job on the records. It's a matter of legal record that Paul Manners and his wife were both born, grew up and married. All five of those typhoid cases have their lives carefully recorded too. On paper they were all born, grew up, married and died. Except for young Herman Potter, of course. He was just born, grew to eighteen and died."

The doctor hiked his eyebrows. "What are you talking about?"

"I just came from Boggs's Funeral Home. He remembers conducting a funeral for Herman Potter, but he never heard of the other four typhoid victims."

Dr. Parks pursed his lips.

"Furthermore, neither Emma Pruett, Sheriff Gaines nor Gerard Boggs ever heard of Paul Manners, which is a little odd considering he's the only insurance broker in the county, was born here and lived here all his life. Sheriff says you've been selling insurance."

"Hmm," the doctor said.

"It was quite clever of you to take me to see Mr. Potter. Herman Potter actually did die from typhoid, didn't he? I suppose that's what gave you the idea for the others. You created your own little typhoid epi-

demic by insuring, and later killing off, people who never existed except on paper."

Dr. Parks's pipe had gone out. He relit it and puffed it slowly.

"Why did you risk taking me to see Potter, Doctor? I was ready to leave town. You must have sweated all the time we were there, hoping I wouldn't mention Paul Manners. And later, at the coffee shop, you must have sweated even harder."

He took his pipe from his mouth and regarded me with rueful sadness. "Impulse, Mr. Quinn. I hadn't thought it through. It seemed wise at the time to lull your suspicions completely, in case future claim payments in this area later came to your attention. The danger of your mentioning Paul Manners to Potter simply didn't occur to me until after I had extended the invitation. Inviting you to lunch was another mistake. I really didn't want to, but unfortunately I'm innately courteous, and I didn't know how to get out of it."

I studied him with a mixture of amusement and admiration. "This is the most brilliant insurance fraud I've ever run into, Doctor. You rightly guessed that insurance companies wouldn't be suspicious of claims where the doctor who originally examined the applicant also signed the death certificate, particularly from a community this small. But you knew they would never stomach the doctor also being the man who sold the policy. You created a Paul Manners on paper, boned up to pass the state insurance exam and took it in his name. As postmaster you catch every bit of mail coming into Heather Ridge. When letters addressed to the people the fake Manners had given as references came from the state licensing bureau, they were never delivered. You simply forged answers and sent back glowing recommendations. In two cases, that is. You had also given yourself as a reference, so you didn't have to forge that answer. In the same way, you caught the claim payment checks mailed to the mythi-

cal beneficiaries of the four mythical decedents. How many of the other policies you've written are on mythical people?"

"About half," he said in a low voice. "I've actually sold only eleven. Up until now the others are rather a financial burden. I've been planning to record a few more deaths."

"Why did you do it?" I asked. "A doctor shouldn't be that hard up for money."

He snorted. "In this area the doctor gets paid in eggs and chickens and other produce. Up until now I've really needed my salary as postmaster and the fees from my various county jobs. Besides, I wanted to build my clinic."

After a pause, he added candidly, "A little greed entered into it too. I've set aside only half the money, so far, for the clinic. I've earmarked the rest for the traveling I've always wanted to do. I don't suppose you're open for bribery?"

I examined him for some time, and silence built between us. Finally I said softly, "Try me."

"Hmm," he said. "How much?"

"Let's consider the service I can render, in addition to merely keeping my mouth shut, before we arrive at a figure," I said. "If I go back and give Paul Manners a clean bill of health, it's extremely unlikely you would ever be caught again. Even if something roused the association's suspicion again, almost certainly I would be the investigator sent, since I'm already in on the ground floor."

He gave me his most charming smile. "Your readiness to be bribed leads me to suspect you're thinking of your expensive young lady. It won't solve your problem, of course, because no matter how much you earn, she'll always want more. That's your affair, however. How much?"

"Fifty-fifty, including the forty thousand you've already taken."

He pursed his lips. "I've earmarked twenty-five thousand of that for the clinic. Also the premiums on my fictional policy holders are quite a drain, and I don't feel expenses should come all from my share. There's only about ten thousand left to divide."

"All right," I agreed. "I'll settle for five thousand now and fifty percent of all future take, less premium costs. That suit you?"

"It's considerably better than going to jail," he said with a smile.

I rose and held out my hand, palm up. "Now if I may have my first five-thousand-dollar fee, I'll be on my way. I'll be in correspondence with you."

Parks got the cash from the bedroom, and we parted cordially a few minutes later, me with five thousand dollars in my pocket and considerably richer future prospects.

THE WRONGO

Michael Brett

Oakes, the hotel detective, saw the girl as soon as she sat down at the bar near Willis Hartley the third. An attractive, slender redhead, she was wearing a short white dress that contrasted sharply with the deep tan on her shoulders and arms.

Oakes nodded appreciatively. The girl was beautiful. She'd fool the average man into thinking she was an "innocent."

With the experience gained by working five years with the city vice squad and four years at the hotel, Oakes knew she was an operator. Her game was to con the rich and the unwary and to pluck them bone dry.

Oakes watched her from a booth. The bar wasn't crowded. There was a honeymoon couple, heads close together, whispering at the far end, three middle-aged conventioneers about midway, then Willis Hartley, the millionaire, and then the girl. Hartley was obviously her target.

Oakes sat back in his booth to watch the proceedings unfold. The girl ordered a drink. As Jimmy the bartender set a paper coaster down before her, Oakes caught his eye and made a small gesture toward the girl.

Jimmy stared at her, smiled awkwardly, then leaned over the bar and said something to her.

She said nothing for a moment, and then her voice carried across the room. "I will not show you my driver's license. I'm old enough to drink in this state and you know it."

Jimmy appeared uncomfortable. "Please, miss. We're not allowed to serve minors. It isn't anything personal. I'm just doing my job."

"Now you know I'm not a minor. I'm not going to show you proof of age." The girl was furious.

The argument had attracted the attention of the three conventioneers. One of them said loudly, "Go on, let the lady have a drink. Sure she's old enough. Why don't you be a nice guy?"

Jimmy laughed weakly. "I'm just a working man. Jobs like this are hard to come by, mister." He turned to the girl. "Please, miss, I'll have to see a driver's license, or some other proof of age."

Willis Hartley the third turned and stared at her intensely.

She reached into a bag for a wallet, fumbled for her license and handed it to Jimmy. He glanced and promptly returned it. "The house rules, Miss Bates," Jimmy said apologetically.

Miss Bates nodded stiffly. Jimmy fixed her drink, brought it to her, then went off and busied himself polishing glassware.

Miss Bates gulped her drink down, looked straight ahead at the mirror over the back bar and burst into tears, then quickly dug tissues out of her purse.

Oakes almost broke into laughter. This one was a fine actress. She could have made a successful career of the Broadway stage. She had the talent for it.

Hartley got up, walked down to where the girl was and sat down next to her.

Oakes sighed—another sucker about to hit the dust. He rose and walked over to the bar. Sooner or later he'd have to tell Willis Hartley that the girl was a con artist and was lining him up for some kind of fast swindle. Oakes knew he'd have to pick the right time to tell him. Important people, feeling perhaps that their wealth and power made them somehow invul-

nerable, sometimes resented being told that they were pigeons.

Willis Hartley was about fifty. He wore an excellent suit, and shoes that must have cost at least forty-five dollars, proclaiming him fair game for all kinds of hustle. You had to watch out for guys like him as the hotel didn't like it when any of the guests were hurt.

Hartley and the girl were talking quietly now. The local police had never arrested Miss Bates for anything, or Oakes would have known about it, but she was definitely working Hartley.

Oakes caught her words, interspersed with her sniffling. "I was supposed to meet my fiancé. I don't know what happened to him. He hasn't called and I haven't been able to reach him. I don't know what I'm going to do. I'm so miserable. I'm going to leave tomorrow morning."

"That's a shame," said Hartley. "This is such a nice place. If there's something I can do?"

His words brought on more tears for Miss Bates. She blew her nose and fled to the powder room.

Oakes rose. This was probably as good a time as any to tell Hartley the facts of life. He went over and introduced himself, then said, "Can we speak privately, Mr. Hartley?"

"Certainly," Willis Hartley said briskly. "We can speak right here."

"Mr. Hartley, I hope you don't misunderstand what I'm going to say."

"Yes, yes," Hartley said coldly. "What is it?"

"The girl you were just talking to, she's been here three days, alone—well, what I mean to say, Mr. Hartley, is that it has been the hotel's experience that a young woman alone can sometimes cause trouble for the other guests."

"She's been no trouble to me," Hartley said with a chill in his voice. "Why are you so concerned?"

Oakes manufactured a small smile. You had to be

careful about offending a V.I.P. like Hartley. It was his first time here and the hotel had given him the red carpet treatment, finest suite in the hotel and the best table in the dining room. He could throw a lot of business to the hotel. They valued him as a guest. They'd really extended themselves for him.

Oakes shook his head sadly. "I know you don't want to believe anything bad about the girl. I can see that, but believe me, sir, in my job I get to see them all, and I recognize them. The young lady is playing some kind of game, and the hotel wouldn't want anyone to get hurt."

"Really, I find that interesting," Hartley said. "You mean you take a look at a young lady and know, just like that, she's up to no good?"

"Yes, sir," said Oakes.

Hartley stared at his drink thoughtfully for a moment, then looked at Oakes. "The girl didn't approach me. I was the one who went over to her when I saw that she was crying."

"That's true," said Oakes. "I saw it. Maybe tears could be part of her act."

"You were watching me," Hartley said angrily.

"No, sir. Not you especially," Oakes said quickly. "Just doing my job, which is to keep an eye on everything that goes on, Mr. Hartley. You look at the operation of a hotel long enough, and watch the people, and after a while you're able to spot the wrongos."

"And the girl, as you choose to describe her, is a wrongo?"

"Yes, absolutely, Mr. Hartley."

"I'm curious about that, Mr. Oakes. How do you go about determining that she is what you say?"

"After a while you develop sort of a sixth sense."

Hartley gave a mirthless laugh. "All that with just a glance? What do you really know about the girl? What do you think she has in mind for me?"

"A girl like that. . . . There have been cases when

some just like her have worked a little extortion. You saw how reluctant she was to give her right age. She looks very young. It's a simple thing, the way they work it. The girl claims that she didn't know what was going on, maybe she says the man got her drunk. You saw the way she was crying at the bar just a little while ago. She could turn on those tears without any trouble at all, for your benefit, Mr. Hartley. Oh, they know all the tricks, sir. She could produce her dress, ripped in the right places and say that you did it. She could say that she was a minor."

Hartley nodded thoughtfully. "Just one thing, Mr. Oakes. She produced proof of age and that takes your filthy theory and drops it right out the window, now doesn't it?"

"I guess it does, Mr. Hartley, but she might have some other kind of surprise in store for you."

"I don't like your attitude toward the girl and your attitude toward me. I'm not a fool and I'm annoyed at the bartender's stupidity in questioning and embarrassing Miss Bates. I'm inclined to believe that the hotel has some fears about the girl not paying her bill."

Oakes remained silent.

"That's what I thought," said Hartley knowingly. "Well, you can tell the management that they have nothing to worry about. I'll take care of that."

"Yes, of course, Mr. Hartley. I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't say anything to the management." Oakes spread his hands in an imploring gesture. "I must have made a mistake."

Hartley waved him off. "All right, forget it. I came down here to get away from unpleasantness and business pressures. Let it drop."

Oakes thanked him repeatedly and went off. The girl had hooked him, and now all she had to do was yank at the line and set the hook. No matter what anybody told Hartley about the girl he wasn't going to be-

lieve it. Miss Bates appeared innocent, particularly lovely, beautifully formed, and she cried on cue.

Facing a combination like that, Willis Hartley didn't have a chance. Ironically, it was the worldly guys who usually fell into the trap.

There was a call for Oakes when he got back to his cubbyhole office, and he left to investigate the complaint of a distraught young school teacher who said that her wristwatch had been stolen while she'd been out of her room. A quick search revealed that the watch had fallen behind her night table. She thanked Oakes sincerely.

"Not at all, miss," said Oakes. "It's all in a day's work. Please feel free to call on me. It's our aim to make your stay as pleasant as possible."

He took the elevator down to his small room where he showered, shaved, then stretched out on the bed. All right, Oakes, the girl is going to take Hartley. A guy like Hartley pulls a lot of weight and he isn't going to like it when it happens. He's already told you to mind your own business, Oakes, but if you do, then there surely is going to be a raft of trouble for everybody and nobody needs trouble. So what do you do, Oakes? You keep your eye on them, that's what you do. You've warned him about the girl, and if Willis Hartley isn't smart enough to pay heed to a good solid warning, then it's his headache.

Oakes dressed and went down to the dining room and saw Hartley and Miss Bates together. Later they were in the cocktail lounge, which made watching them easier for Oakes. They sat in a darkened corner, holding hands and whispering to each other.

Oakes ordered a beer from Jimmy. "They never learn," said Jimmy, looking at them. "She's going to take him, but good. Look at how they're mooning at each other."

Oakes finished his beer. "Yeah, I've got to keep an

eye on those two, but he's told me to butt out. I'm going up to my room. Do me a favor, Jimmy?"

Jimmy grinned. "Sure. I'll give you a call the minute they leave."

Oakes returned to his room and watched wrestling and the beginning of a late movie. At midnight the phone rang. It was Jimmy.

"They left, staggering out of here a moment ago, heading toward the elevators. It figures they went upstairs."

"It figures," said Oakes. "Thanks." He hung up and watched the movie for half an hour, then went to Hartley's room.

Outside, in the corridor, he glanced in both directions and saw no one on the floor. He listened with his ear against the door, heard no sound, unlocked the room with a master key and walked inside.

Hartley was stretched out on the bed, sleeping. His mouth had fallen open. He snored. Oakes wondered when the chloral hydrate had been slipped into his drink. Obviously it was timed perfectly, so that he'd passed out as soon as he was inside the room.

The bathroom door was ajar and Oakes could see the bottoms of the girl's feet. He went closer. She lay on her back, fully clothed, her face twisted and the color of cobalt blue, eyes shut.

Oakes stepped over her, filled a glass with cold water from the sink, went back to Hartley and poured it on his face.

Hartley gasped and awoke. He sat up in bed, totally disoriented. He peered at Oakes. "What the devil do you think you're doing? What are you doing here?" He jumped out of bed. "What's happened?" he said, and glanced wild-eyed at the broken lamp and overturned chair.

"Somebody called hotel security and complained about noise in your room. I found you and the girl."

Oakes pointed toward the bathroom. "She's dead. I think she's been poisoned."

Hartley stood frozen, uncomprehending, staring at the bathroom. He went over, looked at the girl and returned, trembling, his face gray.

Oakes lifted the phone. "We'll have to call the police. You'd better sit down, Mr. Hartley. You look ill."

"Wait a minute," Hartley said quickly. "Put the phone down. It can wait a minute."

Oakes returned the phone to its cradle.

Hartley said, "I didn't touch her. I don't know what happened. I remember a blinding headache. I lay down for a moment, and that's all I remember."

"You can tell it to the police, Mr. Hartley, and I don't think they'll blame you for her death. Like I said before, I kind of spotted her for trouble. She wasn't anything. A nobody like her, it's for sure they're not going to blame you for her death. There might be a little publicity, but sometimes these things can't be avoided. It'll blow over eventually."

Hartley stared at Oakes. "You've got a thousand dollars if you get her out of here and away from the hotel. Get rid of her!"

Oakes waited a long time before he answered. "Let's be realistic. I'll have to get her out without being seen, and I'll have to put her in a place where she'll never be found. You're asking me to violate the law. That's a lot of risk to take."

"I didn't touch her," Hartley said.

"Maybe you just don't remember," Oakes said. "Ten thousand and you walk out of here as though nothing happened. You can forget all about it and no one will know."

Hartley nodded. "I've got the money in the hotel safe. I'll get it."

"Sure," said Oakes. "I'll keep you company."

They both went for the money and on the way back Hartley paid him. Hartley waited in the room while

Oakes wheeled a laundry cart in, dumped the girl into it, covered her with some sheets and wheeled her out. Twenty minutes later Hartley checked out.

That was approximately the same time that Oakes, the bartender and Miss Bates were in another room in another part of the hotel, dividing the money.

Jimmy grinned, folded a thick wad of bills and put it into his pocket. "It works every time. When you can get the 'mark' to make the approach, he hasn't got a chance."

Miss Bates rubbed the blue dye off her face with a tissue and cold cream. She glanced at herself in the mirror. "I hope this doesn't do any harm to my complexion."

"I don't think it will," said Oakes. "It never bothered any of the other girls."

A MIRACLE IS ARRANGED

Jack Webb

You might say that Paul Melcor and I had an argument over money. Unless you're either filthy rich or you simply can't count, you'd say it was quite a little bit of money. A quarter of a million.

Paul Melcor wanted to collect that tidy sum from the insurance company that I represent. And I wanted to stop him. Because—even though I couldn't prove it and nobody fully agreed with me—I thought Paul Melcor was a crook.

First of all . . . well, not first of all either because I had an inkling even earlier. But I got really uncomfortably suspicious when the blonde entered the picture.

I'm a cynic. You get that way in my business. You get so you don't trust anybody. You get firmly convinced that everybody—I mean everybody—is out to take you for every penny they can. But what idealist even, I ask you, would believe that a beautiful blonde would get herself tied up with a guy who was going to be a complete cripple for life?

Now such a thing might be conceivable if Paul Melcor was getting ready to die and the blonde could expect to inherit that quarter of a million in the not too distant future. But that wasn't the case. Paul Melcor was supposed to be a helpless cripple, but he had the same life expectancy I had. Which, in fact, was the basis for the big settlement. You can collect more for serious injury than you can for death.

The blonde's name was Gay France. Or that's what she said her name was anyway. She'd been a show

girl. She was tall, long-legged, and had a sort of baby-doll face, innocent-looking until you saw her eyes—blue but not soft—like the sky, yes, but the sky in winter, not summer. Gay France wasn't my type at all, even if I could have afforded her.

She wasn't present at the trial. Paul Melcor was too clever for that. He had sort of an option on her at the time, but he very intelligently kept her out of sight. She would have been too distracting. The jury would have kept forgetting what kind of verdict they were debating.

Of course Melcor himself wasn't present during the entire trial. Mostly it was just a dry discussion by witnesses, doctors, and such. Melcor saved himself for just one dramatic appearance—when they carried him in on a stretcher, so the jury could see for themselves what a wreck of a man he was.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury," Melcor's lawyer said with the stretcher there beside him, "here is the terrible result of that tragic accident. Paul Melcor was once a man who could walk about on two legs as you and I can do. He enjoyed life as only a healthy man can do. But no more. Never again will he rise from the position he lies in now. Never again will he take a single step. He is condemned to lie there for the rest of his life, for all the years that it may be his misfortune to stay alive . . ."

It went on like that for five or ten minutes. Emotional oratory on the part of the lawyer. And Melcor lying there, the supreme actor, laughing secretly to himself all the time, sneering at the obvious sympathy of those jurors, and gleefully planning what he was going to do with the money.

Oh, there'd been an accident all right. My company's client was a trucking outfit which operated mammoth-sized rigs. A big truck is a pretty frightening piece of machinery. That was a factor with the jury too. A metal monster versus a man.

Paul Melcor had been a two-bit salesman, not the kind who conducts his business in fancy cocktail lounges, but the kind who pounds a beat. So he was on the sidewalk. He wasn't even crossing a street. So there was no failure or carelessness on his part—another item in his favor. But the truck's brakes failed. It climbed the curb and invaded the sidewalk. And it pinned Melcor against a brick wall.

Now nobody would deny that being smashed against a brick wall by a huge loaded truck weighing thirty tons would constitute a terrifying experience. But my insurance company isn't supposed to pay off every time one of our clients scares somebody. Oh, maybe a couple of thousand for mental suffering. But for the really big dough to change hands, there's got to be an injury.

There was the crux of the argument. How badly—if at all—was Paul Melcor injured? Okay, a few exterior scratches—a couple of thousand more. We would have winced, but we would have paid. But Paul Melcor claimed to be paralyzed!

The doctors, I found out on that occasion, don't know everything. And the best of the profession don't even claim to know everything. Half a dozen of them examined Melcor. They talked about crushed nerves. They made educated guesses. But even with a quarter of a million at stake, you can't go cutting into human flesh to see exactly what the story is. If we'd tried to do that, the payoff—quite possibly—might have been even bigger.

And this bird Melcor was an actor. He shouldn't have wasted his time as a salesman. He should have been in Hollywood. He could have collected Oscars by the dozen. And then we wouldn't have been bothered with him.

The guy *said* he was paralyzed. And who's going to say he isn't, when he lies there in the hospital for days and weeks at a time and doesn't move? Why, we even

spied on him. I personally corrupted a nurse to keep an eye on him. At one point we managed to install a movie camera, an automatic, mechanical eye to watch him when there were no other human beings in his room. And not once—not a single, solitary once—did Paul Melcor twitch a muscle anywhere between his neck and his feet.

So how, do you ask, did I get the idea that the guy was a fake? I don't know exactly. It came first as a feeling—the reaction, I guess, of an instinct. Maybe it was this . . . the guy just seemed too *happy* about the fact he'd been hit by a truck.

After all, nobody in his right mind—money or no money—is really glad to be injured, much less completely paralyzed. No amount of dough can make you feel as good as when you feel healthy. So there had to be a catch to it, when Melcor was so ecstatic at being flat on his back.

How did I know he was so pleased with everything? Again the old instinct maybe. It wasn't that he said he was overjoyed, because he didn't. He didn't smile or laugh or tell funny jokes. He just had a look about him —the look of a canary who's swallowed a cat.

The only one I mentioned it to was Doc Lasater. Lasater did a lot of examining for our company, and he had given Melcor a thorough going over. "Look, Doc," I said, "you're not on the witness stand now. This isn't official. Is Melcor as bad off as he claims to be?"

Lasater was a young man, and a pretty sharp medic. He had never hesitated to give a frank opinion. But now he hedged. "How can we say for sure? You seem to forget something, Rogan. One of a doctor's best tools of diagnosis is what the patient tells him. On that basis, Melcor is in bad shape."

"But Melcor has a strong motivation for lying," I argued. "He's after our dough."

Lasater shrugged. "That could be. I could prove a

man is sick or injured for you, Rogan. But it's a lot harder to prove he's healthy."

"Could you prove that it's physically impossible for Melcor to walk?"

"No, I couldn't. There doesn't seem to be that kind of permanent damage. But I can't prove that he *can* walk either."

I gave up on Lasater. He was just telling me what he would tell the court. He could find no certain evidence that Melcor should be paralyzed. But on the other hand, he had no evidence that he shouldn't be.

So I could predict how it was going to be in court. Everybody knows about the big settlements that juries these days are awarding in personal injury cases. And also the fact that when there seems to be any doubt, the injured person always gets the benefit of it. Melcor was suing for a quarter of a million. He'd get that or close to it.

In desperation, I started to investigate Paul Melcor not as a patient, but as a man. And that was how I found Gay France.

As a salesman—fencing, mowers, tools, a complete garden line—Melcor had pulled down between a hundred and a hundred and fifty a week. That's not great dough even for a single man, which Melcor was.

How did he spend it? He lived in a crummy room. His car was a fairly recent model, but had a lot of mileage on it. He used it in his business and he needed a new one. But he hadn't bought a new one. His wardrobe was cheap, sparse. He had no bank account to speak of. His debts, though not excessive, were right up to his income.

What was left for him to spend money on? Liquor maybe, or a woman. The latter was more likely. I looked for her. And I found Gay France.

At the Oasis, where she worked she was billed as a single. I caught her act and discovered immediately that she couldn't sing. She'd obviously been hired be-

cause of the way she looked in an evening gown. I cornered her at the bar after she'd left the spotlight, and introduced myself.

"We have a mutual friend," I said, "Paul Melcor."

She batted her long lashes at me. "Wasn't it too bad about Paul?" she said. "He was a nice guy."

I looked her over thoroughly, and she didn't seem to mind. She was used to being stared at. What I saw just didn't seem to fit into the picture. Even before he'd collided with that truck, Paul Melcor hadn't been very handsome. He was a mere five-eight, a hundred and forty, and had a thin, pinched face. And only made a hundred or a hundred and fifty bucks a week. Why was this woman in the least interested in him?

"Paul spent quite a few evenings here, didn't he?" I said, guessing.

"Almost every night," she said.

"And you've never even gone to the hospital to see him," I scolded her.

"What am I supposed to do?" she asked defensively. "I've got a job here. I don't have much time."

I kept on guessing. "But Paul needs somebody now. He's in bad shape. Are you going to let him down? You know how he feels about you."

"Did Paul send you here," she snapped, "to ask me to come see him?"

"No," I said truthfully.

"Well, you go back and tell him this anyway. Tell him he doesn't own me and he never did. Things were all right the way they were—while they lasted. I never cheated Paul. But tell him now I got to look out for myself."

I said I'd deliver the message. She went back to her spotlight and microphone, and I left the Oasis.

But I was already beginning to add up the score. As Gay France had pointed out, Melcor hadn't owned her. But he'd had a part interest. Part interest had been all that Melcor's income had been able to buy. But

he'd been an ambitious guy, with big ideas. Big ideas in women—and now big ideas about collecting money from my company. It was more than a coincidence.

And one other thing was clear. The blonde was still available. She hadn't said she was through with Melcor, only that she had to "look out for herself." If Melcor had enough money, he might also have her. And he was fairly on his way to having enough money, wasn't he?

But it was only a suspicion. Only something to tell my boss, and have him tell me to keep working on it. Nothing in the way of real evidence. Nothing to bring up in court.

Well, I kept working on it. And I accomplished nothing. The trial ended, and the verdict came in against us. A hundred and eighty thousand bucks.

"It's robbery," I told my boss.

"Yes, but what can we do about it, Rogan?" my boss asked me. "Do you have any ideas?"

"There's just one thing to do," I said, "and that's to keep track of Melcor. Find out how a guy who is paralyzed spends a hundred and eighty grand . . ."

Now comes the bizarre part. I'd wondered what Melcor was going to do with all his money, but I didn't have a shadow of an idea as to what he might do. Time had the answer, and, apparently, only time would tell.

The first thing that happened was that Gay France quit her job at the Oasis. I guessed again—and guessed accurately—that she'd finally found the man who could support her in the style to which she'd like to become accustomed. And the man—I'd half guessed this, but it still kind of surprised me—was Paul Melcor.

It was ludricrous. It was absolutely fantastic and incredible. But Gay France, former show girl, former nightclub chanteuse, former I-didn't-know-what had

taken the job of being Melcor's nurse. And, what was more, they'd gotten married!

But our boy was no dummy. He was well aware that our company, even though we'd lost the case in court, wasn't going to forget the whole affair immediately. If we could prove fraud, we could get our money back. And marrying Gay France had the look and the smell of fraud.

I was beginning to follow Melcor's thought processes by this time. I was presuming that Gay France had figured in his plans right from the beginning, that she had been the reason for his whole scheme, not just an afterthought. Therefore, now that he had the money—to make the deal pay off—he had to take some risk to actually make his little blonde wife content.

I checked on the precise circumstances. Melcor had leased an apartment, not the most exclusive place, but pretty fancy nevertheless. The apartment had three rooms, a kitchen, a bedroom which was the "sick room," and a bed-living room. This last was occupied by Gay France, who was Melcor's full-time and only nurse. He was hiring no other medical attention.

It was just too much. I forgot about caution, and paid the happy couple a visit.

The blonde let me in. She was wearing a blue silky blouse and tight lemon-colored trousers. She looked the way a show girl would look at home.

She took me to the bedroom where Melcor lay in his familiar, motionless position. "Here's that guy who said he was a friend of yours," she said, announcing me. She must have told him about our encounter at the Oasis.

"This guy's no friend," Melcor answered from his pillow. "What do you want, Rogan?"

"I came to see how you're spending our dough," I said frankly.

"What business is it of yours?"

"I'm doing research for Ripley's 'Believe It or Not.'

But I doubt if Ripley himself will believe this one. Beautiful blonde marries hopeless cripple."

"Gay is unselfishly devoted to me."

"I noticed her resemblance to Florence Nightingale the first time I saw her," I told him.

"Rogan, your trouble is that you judge everything and everybody in dollars and cents."

"It's a habit I've formed."

"Well, what are you going to do about it?"

"Nothing at the moment. But I'm a patient guy, Melcor."

He studied me for a while. And I studied him right back. His body, though hidden under the covers, looked rigid and helpless. But he'd had a lot of practice acting this part.

"You're going to keep hounding me, is that it, Rogan?"

"Indefinitely."

We understood each other completely. I'd hated Melcor for a long time. He'd become an obsession with me. But now I saw that the feeling was mutual. Melcor recognized me for what I was—his mortal enemy, the only person who still stood between him and the enjoyment of his money and his blonde.

"I'm going to hound you all right, Melcor," I said. "I knew from the very first that you were a fake, and now I'm more convinced than ever. This setup stinks."

"But I already have the money," he reminded me.

"Yes, but beautiful blondes don't tie themselves to hopeless cripples."

"You can't go back to court with that, Rogan."

"I don't intend to . . . yet. But like I said, I'm going to stick close to you. Oh, I know you got it pretty cozy right now. Just you two here alone. Who's going to know whether you can get out of that bed or not . . . or whether you do get out of it once in a while?"

Behind my back, the blonde snickered. But a snicker isn't evidence in court either. So I let it pass.

"But you know, Melcor," I went on, "you can't keep it going just like this indefinitely. Cozy as it is here, you two can't hide away in this little apartment forever. And especially, you can't keep a beautiful wife like yours cooped up here. Outside, there are the bright lights, and you've got the money now to enjoy things. If you were a healthy man, that is. If you didn't have to stay in this little prison. Tell me, Melcor, how long do you think your beautiful wife is going to be satisfied to be your cell mate here?"

I'd hit a sore spot. Melcor's eyes blazed for a minute. But then he smiled suddenly. A sly, wicked little smile.

"I'm going to tell you something, Rogan, that I wouldn't tell anybody else. Gay and I may not stay here very much longer. We may go out and enjoy those bright lights you mentioned."

"Yeah? How?"

His smile widened. "Who knows?" he said. "I may get well."

I'd underestimated Melcor, and the weird turnings his mind was capable of. His marrying Gay France had been bold enough. He had tempted fate there, and gotten away with it. My company could have tried to appeal the verdict on the basis of that very unusual marriage, but we decided against it. Strange things do happen.

But Melcor's next move topped what had gone before. I got wind of it only indirectly and at almost the last minute. But when I did, I rushed over to Melcor's apartment.

The place was in a turmoil, and it was obvious that the occupants were moving out. There were two trunks and a dozen suitcases—containing mostly, I guessed, the fancy trousseau Gay France had bought with my company's money. But there was also a specially built stretcher waiting, and a couple of hefty guys to carry it.

I found Melcor still in his bed, though, and it almost seemed he was glad to see me. He had a fixation about me, too, and he wanted to gloat.

"Have you come to see me off, Rogan?" he asked almost cheerily.

"It's true what I hear then?"

"About my taking a trip? Yes."

"No, I mean about the——"

"Yes, that's also true, Rogan. You didn't know I was a religious man, did you?"

"No, and neither did anybody else."

"Being religious doesn't always mean going to church. No, I've never gone to any church. Don't believe in it. But down deep, I'm a fervent believer."

"In miracles?"

"Absolutely, Rogan. I have faith. I'm going to visit the shrine at Camafeo, and I'm going to be cured."

The company said I could follow Melcor. I think my boss had as much curiosity about the thing as I had.

"I don't know how we can test a miracle in court, Rogan," he said, "but we just can't sit idly by and let Melcor get away with this."

But I think I would have gone on my own even if my boss hadn't sent me. I went on the same plane as Melcor and his blonde. I don't think Melcor minded at all. I think he enjoyed the idea of having me there at the scene of his final triumph.

Camafeo isn't one of the world's better known shrines. Melcor, of course, wasn't looking for any more publicity than was absolutely necessary. The airport where we set down was a good hundred miles from the place. But a chartered ambulance met the plane. Melcor was loaded aboard it, and his blonde rode with him. I managed to rent a car and trailed after them.

We got to the town late on a Thursday afternoon. It wasn't a bustling place like some of them I'd heard of. But the small hotel was crowded, and there were sick

and crippled people all around—fifty to a hundred of them, maybe.

Gay France was as out of place in that atmosphere as a clown at a funeral. She'd tried, apparently on Melcor's orders, to tone down her style for the occasion. But she couldn't alter her personality. Her dresses were black now, but they were tight, too. And the way she walked was how you'd expect her to walk.

Melcor had a reservation at the hotel, and was carried up to his room. His blonde disappeared upstairs with him. I wandered around the town, trying to figure out how I could upset Melcor's plans.

Camafeo is no more than a village really. Most of it is old, almost medieval, but there are a few newer structures, like the hotel, hastily and rather poorly built to accommodate the small but steady influx of pilgrims. The village nestles at the bottom of a little mountain, and halfway up the mountain is the shrine church, unimposing, constructed of native stone.

I walked up the mountain road, passing someone now and then—always someone being carried on a stretcher, moving along in a wheelchair, or if alone, at least on crutches. None of them was a pretty sight. But the atmosphere wasn't oppressive or sad as one might expect. There was a feeling of fervor in the air itself. Not exactly a happy emotion, perhaps, but at least hopeful. And all motivated by faith, a real faith, the kind Paul Melcor pretended to have.

Thinking about Melcor, I got even angrier as I looked at some of these people. His scheme would do more than defraud my company. It would be a mockery of all the real religious devotion evident here. Melcor would pretend to be cured, and he'd deceive a lot of good, innocent, suffering people. So I had to stop him somehow, some way.

I was full of violent thoughts when I reached the shrine church. It was dusk now, and inside I could see the glow of a hundred candles. On the steps in front

was a small, dark man in a priest's black robe. He held out his hand to greet me as I walked up.

Possibly he wondered what I was doing there. I looked neither very sick nor very devout. We chatted for a few minutes, while the sun dipped behind the western mountains and the darkness climbed up the slope toward us. He said his name was Father Conti, and I told him mine.

"I'm not of your faith, Father," I told him, "but I'm very curious about this place. Tell me, what's the procedure?"

"You mean, what do the sick people do?" He spoke a halting but correct English.

"Yes, the people who come here hoping to get well by a miracle."

"Well, mostly they pray. Sometimes special prayers, sometimes just the old, ordinary ones. To the Virgin, that is. You see, Camafeo is a shrine city because the Virgin appeared here many years ago. So we know that God has blessed this place. It is a holy spot."

"And the people pray to get well?"

"That's right."

"And what happens? Do they get well?"

"Prayer is always good. It is not just sick bodies that come here, but sick souls too. And it is my personal belief that the souls are always cured."

"But what about the bodies?"

"Sometimes. One in many hundreds. On the walls of our church there are many crutches hanging, crutches no longer needed by their owners, and left here as a token of the cure. But God makes no promises to those who come and pray here. It is all up to Him."

"But miracles have happened here?"

"Oh, yes, many times."

I went inside at the Father's bidding, and looked around for a minute. There were the crutches all right, a whole wall full of them. I didn't stop to count them. But up in front, by the altar, the candles, lit in hope

and reverence, outnumbered the crutches by quite a few.

There were people praying too. Very few kneeling down. Most were unable to kneel. Each one was praying that he or she would be favored by God. Melcor would come up here tomorrow. Only he would be different than the others. He'd be praying for a sure thing.

I walked back to the town then and found a small restaurant. I tried to get a drink, too, but apparently no one in Camafeo sold alcoholic beverages. I couldn't even find a bottle of wine to sit and brood over.

But I brooded nevertheless. When I went to bed, I couldn't sleep. I was having pretty evil thoughts, especially for someone in such a religious place.

It was clear to me now that Melcor had had this all planned from the beginning. The truck had been an accident, of course. He couldn't possibly have arranged that. But he'd arranged everything after that—one fakery after another, in the hospital, in the courtroom, and now here. Here he would fake a miracle.

And once he was on his feet again, wouldn't he and his wife lead a delightful life. Gay was in on the act, naturally. And I was ready to bet she'd squander that dough for Melcor within a year's time.

Unless somebody stopped him. It couldn't be done legally. So I concentrated on possible illegal methods. Maybe it was two or three in the morning before I finally went to sleep, and I still hadn't concocted any scheme.

It must have been about five-thirty when I was awakened by the commotion. It didn't take long to discover the cause. The pilgrims were getting ready to be taken up the hill to the shrine for the morning Mass. I got dressed quickly and went out and joined the crowd.

I found Melcor in the middle of it all. He'd hired a couple of stalwarts to carry him—the natives were always available for that sort of work. Gay France was

beside him, trying to look demure and inconspicuous, with a black mantilla over her blonde tresses, but not succeeding very well.

"Good morning, Rogan," Melcor hailed me. "Going to the services? I didn't know you were so religious."

"I'm about as religious as you are, Melcor."

"What are you going to pray for, Rogan?"

"I'll be just a spectator."

"You may have something interesting to watch," he said.

We started up the mountain then. Everybody went up at the same time; it made a procession about a block long. Father Conti was up at the head, and we were nearly at the rear. All along the way, individuals in the moving group recited prayers.

Melcor joined in once in a while, and so did his blonde. I could hear their voices mumbling the words, and listening to them infuriated me. I felt like throttling both of them.

But instead of doing that, I satisfied myself with the determination to make it as difficult for Melcor's fake miracle as I could. I would be an eyewitness, and there would be others, whose evidence I would gather. I had a camera ready with plenty of film. Melcor would have to be a pretty good actor to pull it off convincingly. But then hadn't he been that already?

It took us more than an hour to climb that hill. By the time we arrived, the little church was full and so were the steps in front of it. So we parked off the path, just below the steps. Melcor's carriers set his stretcher down, and went off somewhere, leaving Melcor and Gay France and me alone together. From inside the church came the sound of bells and the smell of incense. The Mass had apparently gotten underway.

"Is it going to be this morning?" I asked Melcor.

"Why not?" he answered. "Why waste these people's time and my own? I could stay a week or a month or longer, as some people do. But it'll be no less a miracle

if it happens on the first day here. Then Gay and I can leave and start enjoying ourselves a little."

"You had this planned this way right from the first, didn't you?" I accused him. "You probably even had this place picked out."

"As a matter of fact, Rogan, yes."

"Then you admit you've been faking all this time?"

He hesitated for a moment, but the temptation to brag was too strong for him. "I'll never admit it in court," he said. "But I'll admit to you. Yes, I've been faking."

"You realize, of course, that what you've done is dishonest, just the same as stealing."

He smiled. "Oh, come on now, Rogan. Your company has millions. It'll never miss the few thousand I collected. Besides, I've earned that money, Rogan. It isn't easy, lying still and not moving a bit. You know what I did? I might as well tell you now. Back there in the hospital, I used to take exercises every night in the middle of the night. That was the only way to keep my muscles from shrivelling up from lack of use. Even so, I was in pretty bad shape when the trial was over."

"But when you got married, things were a little easier, I suppose?" I kept wishing I could record this conversation, but I had no equipment for that. I hadn't expected a confession.

"Oh, yes," he agreed, "it was easy after I got married. Gay is an angel, let me tell you that, Rogan, an absolute angel. You know, she had to teach me to walk all over again. I'd forgotten how. I'd forgotten how to shave, to feed myself, a million things. But I'm okay now. I could get up right now and walk all the way back to the hotel."

"And that's what you're going to do, and you're going to call it a miracle?"

He positively grinned. "Come on now, Rogan. Admit it. I've beaten you. Congratulate me, huh? No hard feelings. What do you say?"

From inside the church came the sound of chanted prayers. Believing persons begging for the real thing. And out here a charlatan, a faker, was getting ready to go into his act.

"Go to hell, Melcor," I said.

"You're a poor sport, Rogan."

"Come on, get it over with. Get up and walk so these poor folks can see what a miracle looks like."

Melcor glanced over at his blonde and then back to me. "Okay," he said, "it might as well be now. I'm getting a little fed up with all this superstitious hoopla anyway. Lo and behold, Rogan, before your eyes, a miracle! Abracadabra . . . alagazam . . ."

But he didn't move.

"Get up on your feet, Melcor," I said, "so I can knock you down."

But he still didn't move. I could see the muscles in his jaw straining oddly, and now in the chilly morning, there was sweat on his face.

"What's the matter?" I asked him. "Are you afraid of me? Get up!"

"I can't, Rogan," he said. "God help me, I can't move . . . I can't move . . ."

Well, that's the way it was. Paul Melcor and I had an argument over money, and he won. He got to keep the dough. We're not contesting it now.

As for Gay France, don't ask me where she is. All I know is that she left Melcor, but quick. Hadn't I said it all along—no beautiful blonde is going to get tied up with a hopeless cripple?

Regarding those other miracles at the shrine at Camafeo, I can't say anything about them. But I know there was one. Only there weren't any crutches to hang on the wall. This miracle was the other way around. And who can say miracles can't work both ways?

KURDISTAN PAYLOAD

Pat Stadley

I knew when she walked in the door, she had no business being in my office, and the sight of Roy's eager, young face behind her didn't calm me a bit. Not that I'm not used to women. Any truck driver who roams the state meets all kinds, but seldom a babe like this one.

She stood still for a moment, arching her eyebrows at me, and then she moved to the chair in front of my desk and the kid brother fell over both his big feet trying to hold it for her.

Then I really looked at her and I had to admit she was high voltage. She had bright, blond hair, big green eyes, a figure that curved and recurved and, young as she was, her eyes told me she already knew everything a woman should (or shouldn't) know.

If her victim had been anybody but Roy, I would've laughed, but he's all the family I've got and ever since he was four I've wiped his nose, heard his prayers, bullied him halfway to an engineering degree and taught him to lead with his left. But I never did convince him there wasn't any Santa Claus.

I was waiting for the opening gambit, when the door opened again and a small man in a neat oxford suit sidled through the door. He carried a briefcase, held tenderly, as though it contained eggs. Roy smiled at him and pulled up another chair and then he turned back to me.

"Dave, this is Ann—Miss Bordeen. You remember. We've been shipping her furniture a few pieces at a time to Los Angeles."

I didn't remember, but I nodded anyway. And then I looked pointedly at the man with the briefcase.

Roy laughed self-consciously and I winced. He's always been the one with the manners. "Sorry, Dave. This is Mr. Menot. He's Ann's attorney."

Well, that explains the briefcase, I thought. They can't all look like Perry Mason. I nodded to Menot and looked back at Roy.

"Ann wants the rest of her furniture to go to Los Angeles right away," he said. "This afternoon."

I quit looking at him and looked at her. "That's pretty short notice," I said.

She had an unlit cigarette in her mouth so I held the desk lighter towards her, and she put a slim gloved hand around mine to steady it. Then she looked straight at me, and if I hadn't been ten years Roy's senior and considerably more wary, she'd have had both the Anders boys on her string.

I kept my eyes fastened on the lighter and concentrated. After all, I'm a small-time operator, so when a twenty-carat doll asks me to handle the moving of her furniture I'm skeptical, or cautious, maybe.

And then I growled at myself. Roy had brought her in and he had looks and the college polish and they'd probably had a lot of laughs—so, it was a nice payload and I was acting like a hibernating bear.

I put the order pad in front of me, slipped in three carbons, and smiled at her. Roy looked relieved.

"How many rooms, Miss Bordeen?" I asked.

"About six—more or less." She pitched her voice low and honey flowed through it.

I asked the usual questions, pushed the pad toward her and held out a pencil. "If you'll sign—at the bottom."

She hesitated but only a second. And then she took the pencil and scribbled. It looked like Ann Bordeen if you wanted to read it that way.

"There's just one thing," she said, "I want my furniture moved all by itself."

I started to protest. "With a load this small, we usually combine several going the same way."

"I know it sounds odd," she said and I watched her hand go out towards Roy. He took it and scowled at me. "But I hate all that waiting around while the truck loads and unloads everybody. Roy said you'd understand." And she turned and smiled at him. Roy turned pink.

Okay, I thought. Anything, Roy, to separate you from this little A-bomb.

"You'll have to pay the minimum," I said aloud. "Five hundred dollars. Now, how much insurance would you like?"

She glanced at Mr. Menot and he pursed his lips and looked thoughtful and then shook his head. "You're covered sufficiently Miss Bordeen."

So I wrote in large letters No Insurance and I tore off a carbon copy and handed it to her. Roy hopped up and held her chair. I stood up, too, and she put out her hand.

"You've been very nice," she said and gave me those eyes again.

I was hunting for an answer when the office door opened and Jack Marshall, my foreman, came in. He grinned broadly when he saw Ann.

"Hi, Miss Bordeen," he said. "Shipping the rest of the furniture?"

I didn't listen to her reply. I was watching Roy and when he started guiding her to the door, I said, "Roy, I'm shorthanded this morning. You'll have to help Jack load."

He nodded at me. I waited until they were through the door and then I crossed the room and watched through the side window. Mr. Menot had climbed in the front seat still holding his briefcase carefully and Roy had followed Ann around to the driver's side. He

was holding the door for her and she reached out and gave his shoulder a little pat and then she slid in behind the wheel. Roy was grinning like he'd been chosen King For a Day.

"Where'd he meet her?" I growled to Jack.

Jack looked amused. "The time she shipped those pictures to Los Angeles. He was helping me that day." Then the grin spread over his face. "When you gonna stop the big brother routine, Dave?"

"The day he gets that Engineering degree," I said and held out the Bordeen order. "No insurance, so pack it good."

He nodded and left and I went for the files. Somewhere in there were the other Bordeen moves and I was curious to see how she'd signed those orders. Surely, a babe like her ought to do better than scribble.

It took a bit of hunting and then I came up with three orders. They were little moves—a grand piano, a bedroom set, five pictures—all to the same address and spaced two months apart. And she hadn't signed any of the orders.

I looked for the driver's name. Jack's! And that shook me, because it was the first time he'd ever failed to get a signature. Hell, I thought, green must be his favorite color, too.

I went out, found Skip, the warehouseman, told him to listen for the phone and hopped into the pickup. The Bordeen's street cut a wide, quiet curve between green lawns, big trees and rambling glass houses. I pulled into the Bordeen driveway and parked behind a bright green sports car. When I walked by I saw the Cashmere sweater on the seat, the green silk scarf and the dark glasses on the dash. It wasn't hard to picture golden-haired Ann behind the wheel. I wondered if she ever let Roy do the driving and suddenly my chest felt tight.

When I reached the truck, Jack and Roy were carry-

ing an expensive highboy up the long planks. I helped them push it into place, wrap and tie it down.

Roy mopped his face. "Boy, this stuff weighs a ton. Much more of this and I'll be ready for football without practice."

I poked him one lightly and started toward the house.

"Ann's in the den," he called.

I nodded, walked inside the open door and down the hall. All the furniture was gone from the living room. A long crate was left.

I walked across and lifted the lid. Inside lay a rolled rug. I flipped a piece of it back. It was a Kurdistan. I bent down to have a good look at the design when a voice yelled,

"Hey, you! What do you think you're doing?"

I looked up. He was a big guy with shoulders like a wrestler, a round bull neck and a hammer in his hand.

"I'm Anders," I said. "That's my truck in front."

His eyes grew a little less hostile but his voice still wasn't cordial. "Sorry," he grunted. Then he flipped the lid back over the rug and began pounding down the nails.

"Look," I kept my voice level. "That rug looked like an Oriental. I can't be responsible for its condition if we don't see it before it's packed."

He kept right on pounding. When he'd finished one side, he looked up. "Always do this myself. No need for you to worry."

I started to tell him it wasn't really my worry since they weren't insuring it anyway, when Ann appeared in the doorway. She wore black velvet Capri trousers, a bright yellow terrycloth bra, white thong sandals and her smooth gold hair brushed high on her head. She held a drink in one hand and by the look in her green eyes she'd held quite a few before. Anyway, the atmosphere had definitely improved.

"Hello, Dave," she said and held up her glass. "Want a drink?"

I was going to refuse until the guy with the hammer glared at her. "Okay," I said and followed her into the den. There was a small bar across one corner and on the top of it, a tray with a bottle of Irish whisky, three or four small glasses and a bucket of ice.

She waved a hand toward them. "Help yourself." And her smile was warm and friendly.

I made mine light. When I turned around, she was curled on the sofa, her feet tucked under her. She didn't look more than eighteen. "Sit down," she said, and patted the sofa beside her.

I looked toward the living-room door and she giggled. "Come on," she coaxed, "he's just my brother—and I want to hear all about Roy."

I sat down. "There isn't much to tell. Except that he's got two more years of college and then four or five years on a salary that wouldn't buy your shoes."

She looked down at her drink and her voice came very softly. "You can stop worrying about him, Dave. He's fun but he isn't my size."

I looked at her and a breeze slid in through the open window lifting the soft little curls of hair around her neck. She smelled warm and sweet and maybe it was the drink, or those emerald eyes or the honey in her voice but I could feel myself sliding. I tilted my glass toward her, took a long swallow and set it down.

"Look, baby," I said. "I'm ten years older than Roy and twenty years smarter. But I'm not your size either."

And I got out of there.

Outside, Jack, Roy and Bordeen were loading the crated rug into the van. But I didn't stop. Maybe like Jack says—I'm a square when it comes to women, but I couldn't see advertising the fact to hammer-boy.

I got into the pickup and made a U-turn. Halfway down the block a blue sedan was parked. When I drove by, the driver lowered his newspaper and stared

at me. I had the feeling that in those few seconds he mentally photographed, classified, and relegated me to insignificance. All I saw of him was his red hair.

I grabbed a quick lunch and got back to the yard a little after one. It wasn't long until Jack and Roy pulled in. Jack looked pale.

"Heat got you?" I asked.

He shook his head and walked on into the office. I followed him in and went over to the safe and began counting out expense money. When I turned around, he was doubled over.

"I'm sick, Dave," he whispered.

I yelled at Roy. He came running into the office and we helped Jack to the couch.

"Must have been that lemonade Ann made," Roy said, his eyes anxious. "It was too sweet for me so Jack drank most of it."

I grunted. It couldn't have come at a worse time. I didn't have a spare man to send down with Roy and even though I could phone ahead and get him a helper, I kept thinking about that Kurdistan. Insurance or no insurance, I was going to feel better when that rug was delivered and unloaded.

Well, why not, I thought. It'll do you good to wrestle six thousand pounds of furniture. I took Roy by the arm. "Get Skip to take Jack over to the Doc's and we'll take the run to L.A."

He grinned and sprinted out the door. I looked again at Jack. He was really white now and his eyes looked odd like they were too big for his face.

"Relax," I said. "You look scared to death. It's nothing that a week away from beer won't cure."

He put a hand over his face and his voice barely whispered. "Dave—"

"Yeah."

His tongue came out wetting his lips. "Nothing. Only—just be careful."

"Hell," I said. "I was pushing a ten-wheeler when you were still teething."

But he didn't laugh. Then Roy and Skip came bursting in and we got Jack in the pickup. I reached through the window and gripped Jack's shoulder. "Take it easy," I said. "Skip can run things. And we'll be back tomorrow." But if he heard me, he didn't answer.

I couldn't have been happier. Hold a big rig's wheel in your hands enough hours and you'll never get it out of your system. We ate dinner in Fresno, stretched our legs in Bakersfield and talked all the way. By eleven o'clock we had started up the desert side of the ridge route and Roy crawled into the sleeper. The tach was reading 2400 and the motor was taking the hills with a purr sweet enough to make me sing, when out of the black night blinked a red eye. Accident!

I hit the air, easing the truck down, but I was almost on it before I'd stopped. It was one of those little sports cars tipped over on its side. A man stood beside it, waving both arms.

He ran to the far side of my cab. "Hey, buddy, I had a little accident. Can I get a ride up to Manon's for the tow truck?"

"Okay," I said, and leaned across the seat to open the door. I didn't even feel the blow, just kept toppling forward until all the lights went out.

I came to stretched out alongside the roadbed, a mesquite bush hiding me from the curious. It took me longer to get up than I thought it should. The try doubled me back on my knees and my head nearly fell off. I lay still until my stomach quit crawling upward and then I gently explored the back of my head. The blow had been professional and luckily I had been leaning away from it or I might have had a more permanent nap.

And then I remembered Roy. I sat up. He wasn't where I could see him. "Roy." I yelled. There wasn't a

sound, not even of wind. Fear slid through me like a cold drink and I stood up. Surely, they'd dump him too!

I started in a circle, widening it and pretty soon I was running and calling and then there was the highway and an oil tanker slowing down. I ran toward him. "My truck's been hijacked." I yelled.

He fanned his rig to a rolling stop and then he stared at me out of his window, his eyes noting my dirty uniform, my head lopsided from a swelling lump. Finally he nodded and opened his door. I climbed in, nausea heaving inside me. He handed me a cigarette, waited until I had it lit and then asked, levelly, almost casually, "Where'd it happen? And how?"

"The grade just behind us. I stopped for an accident —little sports car tipped over. Driver asked for a lift and that's all I remember."

"What were you carrying?"

"Furniture," I answered and stopped.

His eyes flicked at me like I was really gone and maybe I was. Who the hell would hijack furniture?

"My kid brother's in the sleeper," I said.

His voice softened. "Take it easy. The highway patrol's usually at the top of the ridge."

I lay back and tried to hold down the shakes. Maybe they didn't know Roy was in the sleeper. They hadn't killed me—if he just stayed quiet—didn't play hero——

It was a long haul to the top but suddenly, it was there and the lights of a cafe shone down on a parked patrol car. I was out of the cab and running before it had stopped.

The police didn't waste time. They looked at my chauffeur's license, took a quick description of my rig and got on their radio. Then one of them said, "You wait here. We'll start a roadside search for the boy."

I watched them pull out and then I went inside the

restaurant. I needed coffee, bright lights, somebody to talk to, anything to keep from thinking.

The counter was crowded with drivers and they all turned to look at me. A big Swede stood up. "Sit down," he said. Someone put a cup of coffee in front of me. Someone handed me a lighted cigarette. Nobody said anything.

When the cigarette was down to the last drag, I asked, "Anybody headed for L.A.?"

"Here." My oil tanker friend stood up. I swallowed the last of the coffee and joined him.

"What's your rig look like?" A lanky linedriver called out. I described it quickly.

"Don't worry," he said when I'd finished. "We'll pass the word."

I felt better just looking at them. "Hijack" would spread up and down the highways and they'd be their own kind of army—searching.

"Thanks," I said. "Will someone tell the patrol I've headed for L.A.? I'll be at the truck stop on Alameda."

Two hours later, my tanker friend dropped me off. The truck stop was jammed with rigs—all sizes, all shapes. You could find any type you wanted and from any state you named, but, though I walked up and down the rows, I didn't spot mine. Then I saw the black-and-white patrol car parked to one side, and I hurried over.

"I'm Anders," I said. "Any news on my brother?"

The officer behind the wheel looked me over for a long moment and then shook his head. "We've an all-points bulletin out. We'll find him." Then he nodded at a small black car pulling in beside us.

"That's Lt. Fisher. Los Angeles police force. He'll take it from here."

I turned and a thin, sandy-haired man in a plain, dark suit climbed out of the car. He put his hand out.

"Anders?"

I nodded.

"I'm Fisher. Auto theft. Los Angeles police force."

"Any news?"

He shook his head. "We're working on it. We'll know something soon." He took a good look at me, then, "Have a cigarette and give me a rundown. Start right at the beginning."

When I'd finished, he stood quietly, looking out over the rows of trucks. "Any ideas?" he finally asked.

I shook my head. "Who would want a load of furniture?"

"The Oriental?"

"I only saw a corner of it. It was a good one—Kurdistan, I think, but they aren't rare."

He was quiet again. Then, "Let's go down to headquarters. We'll want a statement."

I hesitated. "I need a shower," I said, "and I want to call my office."

"In an hour, then?"

I nodded and he climbed back into his car. I watched him drive away. And then I went to a pay phone and I called Skip. He looked up Ann Bordeen's L.A. address and his voice shook a little when he read it back. He had been fond of Roy.

I showered, got the loan of a suit and the use of a car from one of my pals at the truck stop. It was six o'clock in the morning. I drove west on Slauson towards 5406 Loma drive. I missed the turnoff the first time and had to circle the block. It wasn't the neighborhood I had been expecting. It was a rundown, small business section, crowded against old frame houses sprouting Rooms for Rent signs. Number 5406 was an empty lot, big and lonely looking with tall-standing weeds deadened and yellowed by the heat.

I parked the car and looked out across them and remembered Ann Bordeen's yellow hair and beguiling ways, and only the anger pounding inside me kept me from being sick.

I swung the car back towards town. I'd go and haunt the police station—and then I saw the blue sedan tailing me and the bright, red hair of the driver. I slammed on the brakes and headed for the curb. He swung in behind me.

There were two of them and I left my motor running while they walked toward me. The redhead was small, slender and he moved like a boxer; the other was gorilla size with a dark-brown birthmark that spread like a stain over the side of his face.

The redhead did the talking. "Where's the truck?" he demanded.

It wasn't the question I'd expected. I could feel the anger moving inside me—*easy, easy, Roy's the only important thing.*

"The last I saw of it," I said, "was on the ridge route. Somebody hijacked it."

The redhead studied my face and his eyes were chipped ice. "Who?" he asked.

"You tell *me*. You were still at Bordeen's when I left."

The gorilla reached through the window, his arm snaking around my neck. He gave a slight twist and my head banged against the door. Red burst through my head making circles of sound that converged into each other until they were a whirlpool. I went down slowly, the redness pouring into my mouth, my throat, my lungs.

When I came to, the car was moving, the gorilla behind the wheel. He looked at me and grinned. "A smart one," he said.

We drove a long ways out into the Santa Monica hills and then took one of those little canyon roads that cut back into the green trees. We stopped in front of a house that was big, rambling and respectable-looking.

The big one looked at me. "Get out, smart guy," he said.

I walked between them, the redhead slightly in front. We entered a big hall, passed a bigger living room, walked through a comfortable den and out glass doors to a patio. In front of us sparkled the blue waters of a swimming pool.

Three men in conservative business suits sat around a small wrought-iron table, drinking coffee. The one with a dark movie star handsomeness put down his cup and nodded at me.

"Come in, Mr. Anders. We've been waiting for you."

I opened my mouth but the redhead spoke first. "He says his truck was hijacked last night, Dino. We picked him up on Loma."

Dark and handsome surveyed me. He smiled. "I only want a little information, Mr. Anders. And if, as you say, your truck is missing, you'll want it back. Right? Maybe we can help each other."

I waited and I could hear the gorilla breathing behind me.

"Where did the furniture go, Mr. Anders?"

"Before I answer that one," I said, "where do you fit in?"

I didn't get an answer. The big one clipped me right across the neck muscles. The pain came up my spinal cord and exploded in my head. Finally, I stopped choking and the haze went away.

They were watching me, their eyes bored; one of them picked his teeth. The redhead stared out at the swimming pool. Dino shook his head.

"That isn't cooperating, Mr. Anders. Now, where is Mr. Bordeen's furniture?"

I shook my head. "I've got more in this than that, Dino. When the truck disappeared, my kid brother went with it. I'm telling nothing, until I know what you know."

"He's being cute again," the big one said.

I didn't wait. I spun inside his circle and sunk my fist just above his belt line and when the big, bull neck

came down towards me, I chopped his adams apple. He toppled forward, his breath gurgling noisily. He didn't try to get up.

I looked around at the rest of them. The boredom had vanished, tension replacing it with thin, tight springs. The redhead, his eyes no longer ice, held a gun. Then Dino shrugged and they relaxed.

"We'll trade, Mr. Anders," he said. "Mr. Bordeen had a Kurdistan rug—mine. Perhaps you saw it?"

I nodded.

His eyes got very black. "I loaned it to—to Miss Bordeen. It is a very valuable rug. I don't want it lost."

I considered that for a minute. At least it was a beginning. "The furniture was going to 5406 Loma Ave., Los Angeles. It's a vacant lot. Someone stopped me with a fake accident on the ridge route. When I woke up, the truck was gone."

Dino's eyes never left my face.

I went on. "There *was* a Kurdistan—in a wooden crate. But that doesn't seem much of a reason for a hijack. Frankly, I don't care what the reason—the rug, or the whole damn load. And if it gets down fine, I don't even care about the truck. All I want is my kid brother and I want him safe."

"Don't shove, Anders," the redhead said. "Answer the questions and you won't wind up fishbait."

I didn't look at him. I watched Dino. "If you want answers, why don't you ask this redhead for some. He was parked down the street from the Bordeen house when the truck was being loaded. If you were so damn interested in that rug why didn't he trail the truck here?"

Dino's face never changed expression. I shrugged. "That's all I've got. She came to the office—she and that lawyer of her's—Menot. And she said she had to be moved that afternoon. No waiting! I sent a truck, my foreman and my kid brother——" I stopped. He

wasn't listening; his black eyes staring at me blankly. I took a step towards him.

"If you want what's in the truck, Dino." I said slowly, "you'll have to find Ann Bordeen. I've a hunch she doesn't belong to you any longer."

His eyes flickered and he straightened slowly in his chair. I didn't wait. I turned and walked out. Nobody stopped me. I climbed into my car and drove out along the long road to the ocean. And when I got there, I stopped. It was like I couldn't stop looking at the water—miles and miles of blue-green water. Fish-bait, the redhead had said. Was Roy fishbait now?

Now, there was only one place left to go. Fisher's. I found him in his office behind a gray metal desk and untidy piles of paper. His eyes told me there was no news.

"A little longer than an hour," he said and pointed to a chair.

I sat down. "I went out to the address the Bordeens' gave us. It's an empty lot, except for a tree."

"We could have saved you that trip."

"I know, but I had to see for myself. While I was there, I got picked up by a couple of gun boys for someone called Dino. He seemed very interested in the Bordeen furniture—talked all around the Kurdistan. I got the feeling, though, he was more interested in Ann Bordeen."

Fisher's chair squeaked a little as he shifted. "Describe him."

I did and filled him in on the redhead, the gorilla and what I could remember of the others.

He took a mangled cigarette from a pack on his desk. "Didn't you say there were three other shipments by the Bordeens?"

I nodded.

"They all arrive okay?"

"They were small shipments—piano, bedroom set, some pictures."

"Know the dates?"

"I can find out."

He pushed the phone towards me. "Okay. Try it. Miss Bordeen should be putting up a fuss about her stuff by now if she's on the level."

Skip answered on the second ring. No, the Bordeens hadn't called and what went on?

I quieted him down. "Pull those Bordeen orders," I said, "and give me the dates."

It didn't take him long. He read them over the phone and I repeated them to Fisher.

"How's Jack?" I asked.

"He's okay. Called in and I told him what happened. He's coming right in."

"Good. I want to talk to him the minute he gets there. Stick near the phone; let someone else handle the loads."

"I'm not moving outta this office! Where can I reach you?"

"Lt. Fisher's office. Los Angeles Police Department." I hung up. I sat still for a long moment, then: "There's one thing more. When she came to the office yesterday morning, she had her lawyer with her—a Mr. Menot; small, neat, carried a briefcase but like he'd never carried one before. Maybe he has some answers."

Fisher grunted and took the phone. But Information had no San Francisco listing for a lawyer named Menot. He tried the California State Bar Association and the County Bar Association and still drew a blank. He finally put the phone down. He didn't look at me till he had a cigarette going.

"Well?" I said.

"Let's look at the mug file," was all he offered. He sat me down at a desk and loaded it with files and then he went away. I spent the next hour looking at pictures but nobody I had ever seen appeared.

Then, suddenly, Fisher was at the door. "Come on," he said. "A trucker spotted your rig."

When we got there, the highway patrol had blocked it off. I grabbed at the nearest uniform. "My brother—is he——"

He shook his head. "The truck's empty."

I stood there, looking at the big Kellison with the orange and black lettering telling the world that this was an Anders truck and suddenly I was running. Fisher caught me. "Let the fingerprint boys go over it first," he said quietly.

An hour later, Fisher dropped me off at the Sheraton Hotel. "Get some rest," he said. "When we hear something—I'll call you. And we'll keep an open line to your office."

I took his advice but it didn't work. I lay on the bed and that Kurdistan played geometric designs on the ceiling. I got up and stood in the shower hoping the sting of water would loosen me up. Nothing helped. I finally got up and dressed and went downstairs.

The bar was cool and quiet and I sat on a stool and said, "Scotch." The first one slid down easily. I pushed the glass toward the bartender again. He filled it up and then went back to his paper.

"Gonna have a full scale gang war if this keeps up," he offered conversationally.

I looked over his arm and read the headlines. "Los Angeles Mobster Shot." I went back to my Scotch.

The bartender tapped a picture. "Look at this. Honest man works all his life and when he dies he goes out on a $2.98 sheet if he's lucky; but not the money boys. Not the ones like Menotti. He dies right on a ten thousand dollar Oriental."

I took the paper. It was an interior shot and the photo boys had moved right in on the body. He was a little man, dressed in a neat oxford suit. He no longer had the briefcase. I looked at the rug and it was the Kurdistan and then I spotted the highboy and I could see Jack and Roy again, moving it up into the truck.

I read the news caption under the picture. An anonymous call had been made to the Los Angeles Police. The caller had said there was a dead man at the above address. When the police arrived they found Menotti. He had been shot while standing on the Oriental—a Kurdistan, worth approximately ten thousand dollars.

I quit reading. Everybody had played me for a sucker—Ann Bordeen, Menotti, hammer-boy, Dino and now Fisher. While I'd been wasting my time looking at mug files, he'd been looking at the real thing!

I threw a couple of dollars on the bar. "Where's the phone?"

He pointed out into the corridor. I left, half-running, the paper still in my hand. The phone booths were down the corridor all right, but I never reached them. Ann Bordeen was standing at the front desk and turning my way. The late afternoon sun, coming through the window, was bright in her hair and the smile she gave me caused the desk clerk to stare enviously.

I walked toward her and my hands were sweating. I held the picture in the paper towards her. "Where's Roy?" I said and I didn't recognize my voice.

Her green eyes slid down to the picture and back to me. "That's why I've come," she half-whispered, "to explain about Roy—and everything."

"You can skip the explanations," I said and wrapped a hand around her arm. "Just tell me where he is."

She hesitated, her body swinging close to me. I could smell the perfume and feel the warmth of her.

"He's really all right, Dave."

"I want to see for myself," I growled and pushed her ahead of me. We walked through the lobby, out the front door and towards the green sports car. I opened the door, pushing Ann forward and then I saw Bordeen. He sat in a corner on the rear seat, only now he held a thirty-eight instead of a hammer.

"All the way in, bud," he said.

I didn't argue. Ann slid behind the wheel and when

she pulled away from the curb, the tires screamed. I looked out the window and wished desperately for Fisher. He wasn't there. How could he know the many kinds of fool I could be?

Ann moved the Thunderbird in and out traffic like a professional. I couldn't be sure but it seemed she was taking the same route towards the ocean and Dino's house.

"If this is because I saw you crating the Kurdistan," I finally said, "you're too late. I've already told everything I know to the police and—to Dino."

Her hands gripped the wheel and then relaxed. She didn't look at me. "Dino? Who is Dino?"

"A man I met this morning. He was looking for you and your—brother, seemed quite concerned."

She wet her lips. "I've never even heard of him."

"Really? I suppose *brother* paid for the house in the bay area and the car *and* the Oriental."

She flashed a glance at me. "Shut up," she said and the honey was gone.

Bordeen leaned forward. "Let him talk. It's giving me a laugh and he isn't going to repeat it."

I shifted in my seat a little so that I could watch her face. "I think you belong to Dino, Ann. And I don't think he ever lets go of anything. You and hammer-boy can't run far or fast enough." There was a thinness in her face now, an outlining of the fragile cheekbones. She took the car around a curve too fast but she never lost control.

I looked back at Bordeen. He was still holding the gun and he was grinning. "Go on, Anders," he said, "you sound like one of those crime writers."

I shrugged. I'd nothing to lose and if I could shake her control—"It was the hijacking I couldn't figure. A load of furniture! I suppose all the other loads went to Dino. Why not this one? Or didn't he know there was a body rolled in his Oriental? And why bother to ship

a body? Why not just drop it in the bay? Quick, neat —no fuss. No one asking questions."

I waited. Nobody said anything. I went on. "There's only one answer to that one. You *wanted* someone asking questions. And asking them of Dino. So you kill Menotti—who was he, Dino's contact man?—wrap him in the Oriental, ship it along with all the furniture, hijack the truck and set everything up in an empty house in L.A. Then you tip off the cops, they think Menotti was killed right here in Los Angeles, and they keep Dino busy answering questions while you two fade away."

Bordeen laughed. "Fade away. That's pretty good, Anders. I like 'fade away'."

I shifted again in my seat. Now I could see the whole side of her face and the legs and hands of Bordeen. "But that's only the prologue," I said, "or rather the smoke screen. Because if you had just wanted to run, you could have done that in San Francisco."

I paused, studying her, then, "You're quite a dame. What were you once—a get-away driver for Dino on a two-bit heist job?"

She flashed me a look, angry, contemptuous. I laughed; it sounded hollow. "I guess not. You're more 'a front.' Rich, beautiful, available. But a front for what? Liquor? Can't ship that with furniture. Gambling? Hardly, not with Nevada so close. Counterfeiting? Possibly, but you attract *too much* attention. Then what? Dino was hot for that load. He was expecting something in that Kurdistan—something he'd been getting in other shipments. Something big enough to tempt you away from him. And there's only one thing that big. Dope!"

I waited. There was only silence. I stretched an arm out along the top of the seat. "So you send Dino Menotti, wrapped in the rug instead of the dope and while Dino's shaking the police you unload the dope and disappear. It's pretty good but it had one flaw.

Dino found out too soon you'd crossed him, Ann. He got to me first."

She looked at me then and I watched the fear slide into her eyes.

"Where's Roy, Ann?" I said. "If you killed him, why didn't you kill me?"

"You're the smart one," Bordeen jeered. "Figure it out."

I listened to his voice. There wasn't a reason, I told myself. It was a slipup. It had to be.

He thrust his face close to mine. "Think about it this way, Anders, maybe the guy who hit you was tenderhearted. Or maybe he didn't want to kill his own brother."

The words slammed into me. Roy, mixed up in dope! In killing!

Bordeen's voice whispered in my ear, slow and brutal. "Why would we pick your crummy outfit if we didn't have an in? Look at her, Anders. She can make a man do anything!"

I stared at her. She looked at me and the color drained from her face. And I was cold—I was ice. There was a roaring in my head and inside I was sick. Then Bordeen laughed and I saw Roy's face—his cocky, young grin—the clean, eager look—and the world rocked and settled again.

"You're a liar, Bordeen. A vicious, yellow liar!" I swung my hand, flat and level, towards the bridge of his nose and he ducked under my arm, slamming the gun into my throat. "Go ahead," he said, "I'd just as soon kill you now."

I shut up. There weren't any words left, anyway. I looked out the window. I could see the ocean and the hills and a few homes. Soon there'd be nothing but hills ending in long, high cliffs reaching down to the water. I looked up into the mirror to see the kind of idiot I'd become and I saw the second car. It was coming fast and the driver was redheaded.

And then Ann swung off the highway onto the broad plateau of a cliff. She stopped the motor. I waited for the second car to pull in beside us. It didn't show.

"Get out," Bordeen said. "I'm going to show you I'm a real sport. You can take your choice—either jump or be pushed."

I eased out the door, Bordeen right behind me. "We have company," I said. I heard Ann gasp.

Bordeen turned, saw the five men running towards us, fanning out in a half-circle. The redhead was in the lead, the gorilla close behind.

To my left were bushes, thick and heavy. I grabbed Ann and ran, pulling her. Nobody stopped us; they were after Bordeen and we couldn't go far.

I pushed Ann through the first wall of brush and down to the ground, squirming in behind her. I heard the redhead call Bordeen and then laugh, almost in unison with the sound of his gun.

Bordeen didn't have a chance. But he tried. He fired—missed; snapped another. The gorilla stopped, surprise twisting his face; then he fell, crashing, like a big oak.

The redhead didn't stop. He came running, straight for Bordeen, his gun a live thing in his hand. Somewhere to the side, another gun roared. Bordeen rocked, spun away, then crumpled slowly. He didn't even twitch. Life had gone out of him before he touched the ground.

I grabbed Ann's purse. She struggled, pulling away from me. "Give it to me," I whispered. "I need a gun. They'll be after us, next."

Her eyes widened. She whimpered and held the purse locked in her arms. I got on my knees and tore it away from her. Then I turned it upside down. Everything fell out—lipstick, wallet, comb, a large oilskin sack, and a little .32. She grabbed for the sack; I

let her have it. I picked up the .32 and hugged the ground.

She slithered close to me. "Don't let him get me," she whispered.

I pulled her closer. She lay still, breathing raggedly. A twig snapped beside me and I felt a tremor go through her.

Then we heard Dino's voice. It came soft as a whisper. "Ann?"

She gave a convulsive leap. I closed my fingers hard around her arm and shook my head. Her eyes came to me but they weren't watching me any longer. She was listening to that voice.

"Ann. Come here, Ann. I won't hurt you." The voice was silken caressing. I could see Dino's face again, picture the blackness of those eyes.

Suddenly, she tore loose, scrambling up out of the bushes, her heels catching, her dress tearing against the branches. I heard Dino shout and I stood up. She was running away from him toward the cliff, her hair streaming red gold in the dying sunlight. And then I was running too, and calling.

I was still ten feet away when she reached the edge. She hesitated, turned partly toward me, her body balanced.

"Dave," she said. "Roy's in——"

I reached for her, my fingers closing on emptiness. She fell a long ways until the waves reached for her and took her down and against the black rocks. I could hear Dino screaming behind me.

Something slugged me, fire-red and burning. I fell, rolled and when I looked up, the redhead was bending over me. I raised Ann's gun and shot the smile off his face.

And now there's just Dino, I thought. Dino and me. I tried to get up but the ground held me. Somewhere I heard Fisher's voice. I listened but it was hazy and unreal and he kept moving farther away.

When I woke up, someone was shoving a coat under my head. I tried to sit up and a hand pressed me back down. The hand was Fisher's.

"Lie still," he said gruffly. "I've bandaged your shoulder and I don't want you squirming around."

"You were a long time getting here."

He grinned. "Anders, you haven't been out of our sight since you reached the Alameda truck stop this morning. You were our only link to the Bordeens and the dope." He held the oilskin sack up and his voice gentled. "I'm sorry we had to do it this way, but you were the first break we'd had. And you made a damn fine catalyst."

I lay there and thought about that. They had what they wanted but I was no closer to Roy. I closed my eyes and I saw Ann down in the dark, green water. She'd tried to tell me something. I listened again. "Roy's in——"

I opened my eyes and looked at Fisher. "She said Roy's in—something. Maybe he isn't dead. Maybe ——" I pushed myself up. I looked around—the bushes, the edge of the cliff, the squad car where Dino sat and then I saw Ann's sports car. And I know what she'd meant. "The car," I said. "Roy's in the trunk."

Fisher shouted to someone and then he put an arm around me and pulled me up. When we got there, they had the trunk open and Roy was in it. He was dirty, gagged, arms bound behind him, legs pulled to his chest but still breathing. They lifted him out and he opened his eyes and looked at me.

"Dave," he whispered, "you found me."

I reached out and rumpled his hair. "Who else, kid," I said and I didn't give a damn who saw I was crying.

Fisher touched me. "Come on. You're both headed for the hospital."

I shook my head. "Roy is but not me. There's still something undone."

"But we've got the dope. And enough to put Dino away forever."

I looked at him. "That's not it. I want the guy that put Roy and me in the middle."

Fisher's face grew grim. "It's no use, Anders. You can't prove a thing."

I listened to him but Bordeen's voice came louder. "Why would we pick your crummy outfit if we didn't have an in?"

"All I want," and my voice was ugly, "is to hear him explain—why *he* always ran the Bordeen loads, why *he* suddenly got sick when Dino's gun boy showed up. *Who* told Bordeen I was still alive?"

Fisher's voice was hard. "You're too late. Jack was gone the moment he learned you weren't dead."

"I'll find him," I promised.

Fisher's calm gray eyes watched me. "Dave," he said softly, "you aren't the only one Jack played for a sucker. There's nothing you can do. But there's Dino, and Dino has a long memory."

THE FLAT MALE

Frank Sisk

Reaching deftly behind the jug of formaldehyde, Thaddeus Conway brought forth from the closet shelf a bottle of his own brand of embalming fluid. It was a fifth of Pennsylvania rye now reduced to about half of its original contents. Uncorking, Thaddeus set a mustached lip to the task of further diminishment. The apple in his scrawny throat bobbed twice. He caught his breath with a shudder and then sighed, "Aaah, better, better . . ."

At that, a four-noted chime rang discreetly in the distance, *How dry I am.* Or so it seemed to say to Thaddeus.

"Want me to get it, Thad?" asked a man's voice from behind the half-open door to the preparation room.

"No, John. I'm on the way." He replaced the bottle of rye on the shelf. At a nearby sink he drew a glass of water and swallowed an ounce distastefully. He then looked at himself in the mirror above the sink. His sharp nose was nearly as red as the carnation in his left lapel.

There had been a real nip in the air at the cemetery that morning, he reminded himself. Bad burial weather, if there was any such thing as good.

Again the distant chimes caroled *How dry I am* and Thaddeus, sober-faced as befit his profession, moved on quiet shoes of black patent leather to answer.

At the big door of darkened oak stood a small woman in her late middle years. Many who approached

the mortuary establishment of F. X. Conway & Son wore an expression of stunned grief or unquenchable sorrow, but this woman looked essentially brisk, even businesslike. She also looked like a lady of some refinement. Thaddeus based this last assessment on a practiced glance at her apparel and accessories. Not too expensive, but in good taste and of good quality.

"I am Thaddeus Conway, madam," he announced most mellifluously. "Will you step inside?"

"Thank you," the woman said. "My name is Cora Peddington and I do need your assistance."

"Whatever the circumstances, madam, it will be my pleasure to assist. This way if you will."

The pert little lady accompanied him to the Statistic Room, so named by his recently departed father, and he seated her in a deep leather chair which nearly engulfed her to the midriff. Such a chair, in Dad's opinion, trapped a person into telling the truth.

"May I offer you coffee as we converse? Or tea?" The inflection in his voice recalled Dad's on similar occasions, and Thaddeus resented it in spite of himself.

"Tea will be fine," the woman said.

"With or without, Mrs. Peddington? It is *Mrs.* Peddington?"

"Yes it is. With lemon and without cream."

Thaddeus pressed a white button on the wall which actuated a buzzer in the preparation room, thereby informing John to set aside the embalming apparatus and put on the water to boil.

"I'd like to smoke if I may," Mrs. Peddington said.

"You most certainly may," Thaddeus responded.

"But not in this chair," she said. "If you will help extricate me, I'll take the wooden chair by the window."

Proffering a hand, Thaddeus classified this little lady as one who might have outwitted his father. He supplied her with a light for the cigarette and an ashtray. Then, settling himself in the swivel chair which

stood in front of a rolltop desk, he turned and bent a sympathetic gaze upon her.

"I suppose I may as well get to the point," said Mrs. Peddington.

"My time is at your disposal." Thaddeus swiveled the chair a couple of inches and reached for a pad of yellow paper.

"I am looking for a good economical undertaker," Mrs. Peddington continued.

Thaddeus extracted a ballpoint pen from the inner pocket of his coat. "Undertaker" was a term he abhorred and, when modified by "economical," it was a treacherous phrase. He smiled blandly. "We are extremely flexible here, madam. Let me assure you of that at the outset."

"Good," said Mrs. Peddington. "That's more than one can say for some of your competitors. If that's the word."

Thaddeus began to feel the need for a drink. "You've dealt, then, with other morticians in the past?"

"I've been dealing with them this morning," said Mrs. Peddington.

"Please forgive me, madam, but I don't seem to follow you."

"It's simple enough, Mr. Conway. I've got to cut costs to the bone. As a result, I must shop around."

"Shop around?" Something new had been added to the professional lexicon, and Thaddeus knew it would have shocked dear old Dad out of countenance. "Shop around? Well, yes, of course. Naturally."

"I'm glad you understand," said Mrs. Peddington. "None of the others did, really."

"Well, that's understandable too," said Thaddeus. "Some of us are more progressive than others. But before we proceed with the financial aspects of the matter, I should like to get a few of the pertinent data together, biographical and the like. For the obituary, you know, and certain statistical records."

"Of course."

"First, may I assume that we're talking about—ah—Mr. Peddington, who is your husband?"

"Oh, definitely." Mrs. Peddington's small smile was rueful. "I forgot to mention him, didn't I?"

"I'm afraid so." Thaddeus began to jot on the pad. "He has left us?"

Mrs. Peddington cocked her head birdlike. "Left us?"

"In a manner of speaking."

"Oh, I see what you mean. Yes. You may say he has left us."

Thaddeus set down his pen and said, quite formally, "Permit me to convey my sincere condolences, madam. It is a moment like this that . . ." He let the sentence melt to a mumble under the rather flabbergasted look in Mrs. Peddington's eyes. Unlike his late parent, Thaddeus was often beset by doubts as to the importance of what he was doing. Sometimes he felt he would have been happier as a floorwalker or a bartender, and this was one of those times. "Well now," he said, retrieving his pen, "we may as well begin with your husband's full name."

"Adam L. Peddington."

"Age?"

"Fifty-one."

"Address?"

"Eleven Briarwood Gardens."

Thaddeus was acquainted with this luxury-apartment complex. Residence there hardly indicated the need for cut-rate funeral service unless the Peddingtons were a butler-housekeeper team.

"Occupation?" he asked.

"Adam is comptroller—*was* comptroller, I should say, of Videlectronics Corporation."

This made the reason for economy more elusive than ever, for Videlectronics was large and still growing. Its comptroller would be a man of ample means.

But rather than probe that area at the moment, Thaddeus shifted to another level of questioning. "Did he leave suddenly, Mrs. Peddington, or was he taken by a lingering illness?"

"No, it was quite sudden, quite sudden." An odd light, almost of amusement, shone briefly in her eyes. "One could call it precipitate."

"It can be a blessing that way," said Thaddeus, reverential. "A blessing on both sides. And just how did he go?"

Mrs. Peddington stamped her cigarette into its ash. "Out the window," she said.

"Here today and gone tomorrow," said Thaddeus, and then appeared to hear himself and Mrs. Peddington in counterpoint. "Did you say Mr. Peddington went *out the window*?"

"The window in our living room, yes."

"Oh, my," said Thaddeus.

"It opens out onto a tiny balcony as a rule," said Mrs. Peddington. "But the balcony was removed a few days ago when it was discovered that several of the supporting lag bolts—I believe that's what they're called—had rusted away at the mortise."

"Oh, my," repeated Thaddeus.

"It presented a hazard as it was," said Mrs. Peddington. "And so it was removed until a new balcony could be installed. Unfortunately, I forgot to tell this to Adam. He's so seldom at home these days. But this morning he wanted a breath of crisp air, as he called it——"

"It was nippy earlier," said Thaddeus, transfixed.

"—and before I realized what he was doing, he pushed open the window and stepped out."

"And this—this caused his death?"

"Instantly. Our apartment is on the top floor, the tenth."

"Oh, my," said Thaddeus, shivering.

At this moment John entered the Statistic Room

bearing a silver tray. Wordlessly he set it on a table convenient to Thaddeus, then retired. Thaddeus needed the respite. He poured tea for his guest and coffee for himself. Holding the cup a few inches from his mustache, he sniffed appreciatively; the sweet smell of rye mingled complementarily with the steamy aroma of coffee. John was on the ball.

As they sipped, Thaddeus directed the conversation away from the immediate question and learned that the Peddingtons had been married twenty years and had no children. Besides his wife, Mr. Peddington was survived only by a sister in Canada and a few nephews whom he had never seen.

"Well, you had twenty years together," said Thaddeus with his father's pseudo-philosophic intonation. "That's more than many of us have. Twenty years make many memories." He placed his cup on the saucer, wondering if the rye was making him talk like this.

"Adam is all—*was* all business," said Mrs. Peddington. "I won't be a hypocrite about it. Twenty years of living with a business machine, that's what it amounts to."

"Takes all kinds," said Thaddeus, quaffing deep of the cup.

"When we were first married, we had to save every penny for his night-school course. After he became an accountant, we saved for a house which we finally bought, only to sell almost immediately at a profit. The profits went into other real estate, then into stock-option plans. We never had a honeymoon."

"Nor I," said Thaddeus who had not yet even been married.

"I won't mourn him," said Mrs. Peddington. "That would be hypocritical. Frankly, Mr. Conway, we have been far from close together during these last years. Each time his company promoted him, the gulf between us grew wider. He preferred younger women as he got older."

"A common failing, I fear," said Thaddeus. "Worldly success does not guarantee happiness. This, by the way, leads me to wonder about the contradictions in your situation, madam."

"What contradictions are those?"

"Well, obviously Mr. Peddington was on the way up, so to speak, before he went out and down. This would seem to mean money, if I may say so."

"It does mean money. I don't know how much. Adam excluded me from his financial secrets. But I should guess he is rich or very close to it."

"I am at a loss then to understand why you, as his widow, are so concerned with cutting the cost of his funeral to the bone, as you put it. Not that I believe in extravagance at such times, but——"

"I have no choice," said Mrs. Peddington. "I *must* cut the cost to the bone."

"But you inherit, don't you?"

"Not immediately. My husband always professed a strong antipathy for rich widows. He felt that, between the time of their husbands' deaths and the time they gained control of the legacies, a purgative period should ensue. This would give the widows a more balanced view of the past and the future. Or so he often said. In my case, his will stipulates that I inherit nothing except the money from his life insurance for a period of two years after his death."

"Life insurance, ah," said Thaddeus. This was something more up his professional alley. "Well, there we have it."

"Perhaps not," said Mrs. Peddington.

"Life insurance, certainly, is immediately collectable."

"Yes, true," said Mrs. Peddington. "But my husband's will further stipulates that I must live exclusively on this life-insurance money for two years after his death. I must not work to supplement this money. I must not borrow. I may beg if I wish, or use any mon-

ies I may possess at the time of his death. But I must not pawn any personal items, such as jewelry. Not that I have much jewelry."

"An unusual document," commented Thaddeus. "What are the consequences of just ignoring it?"

"Clear. I inherit, in that case, only a tenth of the estate, the remainder going to his sister and her sons."

"How much insurance did he leave?"

"Two thousand dollars is the face value."

"You mean you are expected to live on two thousand dollars for two years?" Thaddeus made a mental calculation. "Why my dear lady, that is only about twenty dollars a week."

"I know. Adam was quite businesslike about it when he pointed this out to me. When we were first married, he was earning two thousand a year. We lived on it and saved money besides."

"But the cost of living was much lower in those days."

"Also the cost of dying."

"But two thousand dollars, madam, is ridiculous. You can't possibly survive, except by charity."

"I do have nearly five hundred in a secret savings account. That's one thing he doesn't—didn't know about."

"Every little bit helps."

"Oh, and the insurance policy does carry a double indemnity clause. So that makes it four thousand in case of accidental death, doesn't it?"

"Yes," said Thaddeus, reaching again for the coffee, lukewarm though it was.

"And falling from a tenth story window upon a balcony which isn't there—that's usually construed as an accidental death, I believe."

"I believe so," said Thaddeus.

Mrs. Peddington opened her handbag and produced a small spiral-bound notebook and a silver pencil. "Shall we discuss basic costs now, Mr. Conway?"

Thaddeus heaved a sigh and nodded. "To begin with, Mrs. Peddington, in most instances of violent death, such as a fatal fall, certain cosmetic services are required to restore the features of the deceased to a semblance of——"

"We can dispense with that," said Mrs. Peddington briskly, making a note in her book.

"I see. A closed-casket ceremony."

"I don't plan on a casket at all."

"If not a casket, then what, madam?"

"A basket should do, I think. Do they come with lids?"

Thaddeus sighed sadly. "Yes, they do come with lids."

"Fine."

"Now, as to his burial attire, do you wish to supply it, or would you prefer to leave it to our discretion?"

"Why not let him go as he is?"

"Well, it's never done, I can assure you of that. Whatever the poor man was wearing when he fell is probably all—ah—rumpled or worse."

"Probably a bloody mess," said Mrs. Peddington. "No earthly good to anyone else. So we'll let him take it with him. Adam would really like the economics of it. He hated waste."

"Oh, my! Well, next we must decide on the place of interment. Unless you already subscribe to a memorial association."

"We'll cremate him," said Mrs. Peddington. "Adam respected the value of real estate."

An hour later, as he reached behind the jug of formaldehyde, Thaddeus said to John, "This afternoon we may have to go out and pick up a flat male."

John answered from the preparation room. "In the city?"

"Yes, but I'm not sure where yet."

"High diver?"

"I hate to say this, John, but I have a funny feeling that his wife pushed him."

"That little dame up front with you?"

"No other." Thaddeus sluiced his throat with rye and nearly decided this time he was in the wrong business. "Little but wiry. Mind like a steel trap, John. Lived for twenty years with this glorified bookkeeper. Miser type, rest his soul. Taught her how to pinch pennies."

"Can't we pick him up now, Thad? I'm finished with this one, just about."

"Not till we hear from the little lady, John."

"I don't get it, Thad."

"If we're low bidder——" Thaddeus shook his head slowly and gravely as if commiserating with a fast-fading image of himself as the dutiful son of F. X. Conway. "If we're low bidder, John, we'll get the body. The little lady is home now comparing the cost figures from four funeral directors. Her husband should be proud of her."

"F. X. must be turning over in his grave right about this time."

"Amen," said Thaddeus, setting the bottle of rye reluctantly back on the shelf.

The afternoon went pleasantly. Thaddeus drank beer and watched television. John ran the vacuum cleaner haphazardly from room to room. It was nearly six o'clock before they realized it, and then it was the sound of a siren that alerted them to the time.

Thaddeus looked at his wristwatch as the shrill sound grew closer, closer. John looked out the front window.

"Fire engine?" asked Thaddeus.

"Ambulance," said John. "Police ambulance, and coming right up our driveway, Thad."

"Well, since we don't operate a hospital," said Thaddeus, "I guess Mrs. Peddington is awarding the body to us."

"First time I ever heard of the cops running taxi service like this," said John, going to the door.

"That's true," said Thaddeus, puzzled. "Unusual."

After the remains of Adam L. Peddington, contained in a long burlap sack, were deposited in the preparation room, Thaddeus invited the ambulance driver and his assistant to join him in a drink. They accepted. He broached a fresh bottle of rye and even brought out glasses and ice.

When the glasses were aloft, Thaddeus said, "I'm much obliged to you boys for transporting the corpse from the morgue or wherever it was."

"Morgue!" exclaimed the driver. "We picked it off the street."

"As soon as the coroner gave his okay," said the assistant.

"You mean to say the city let a body lay around the street all day?" asked Thaddeus incredulously.

"All day, hell!" said the driver. "The guy fell out a window a little more than an hour ago." He looked at his watch. "The cops got there before he stopped bouncing and we got there almost as soon. Then the coroner came with the medical examiner, like they'd both been standing around the corner. Right, Moe?"

"Right," said Moe. "Good booze you got here."

The driver continued, "The whole investigation was finished in fifty, fifty-five minutes. Moe and me had the bundle ready to drive to the morgue when the wife comes up with the coroner, and they tell us to take it here and get a receipt."

"A receipt," murmured Thaddeus, sitting down at the table in front of his empty glass. As he wrote, he tried to whistle *How dry I am* but his lips were too dry.

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