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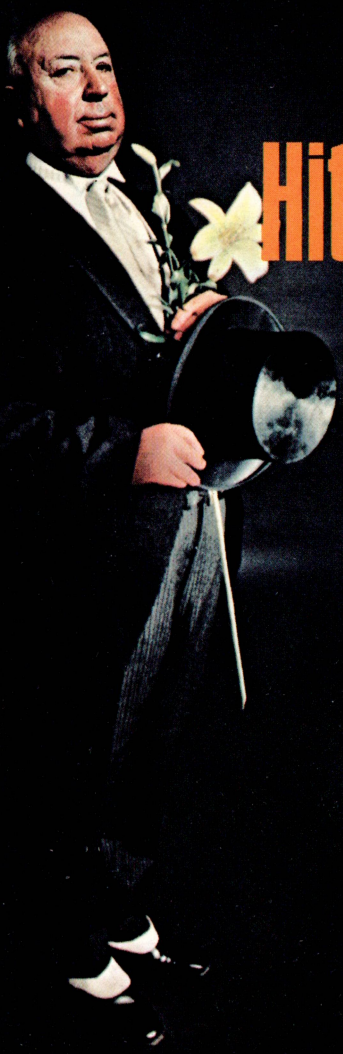
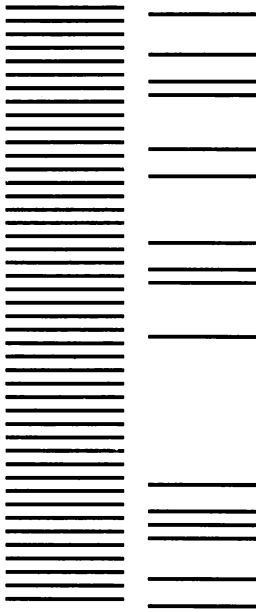


Alfred Hitchcock's Get Me to the Wake on Time



Graveyard Shift

Alfred Hitchcock doesn't like to complain —but sometimes it seems his work is never done.

He's up early every morning, scanning the obituaries. Days are spent racing from funeral to funeral. But the nights are the hardest of all.

Some researchers use libraries to dig up new material. But Alfie's different. To delight his millions of fans, he has to use a flashlight and shovel. . . .

See what Alfred Hitchcock has personally unearthed for your shivering reading pleasure in—

GET ME TO THE WAKE ON TIME

Get Me to the Wake on Time

ALFRED HITCHCOCK,
EDITOR

A DELL BOOK

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INTRODUCTION

I'm sure you have all heard of Rodney Phipps. He is the renowned multimillionaire Yo-Yo manufacturer and sportsman who was recently in the news when he inadvertently sank his own yacht while fishing for marlin. As the story went, Rodney made it a practice to heave surplus World War Two hand grenades at the fish whenever he ran across them. Of course, it was an easy matter for Rodney and his crew to net the stunned fish, and, inasmuch as his method remained a well-kept secret, his fame as the best game fisherman in the world soon spread.

What proved to be his undoing was the sighting of a giant school of sharks. It so unnerved Rodney that he dropped the grenade he was prepared to chuck at them onto the deck after he had pulled the pin. The resultant explosion sank the yacht immediately. There was no loss of life; however, Rodney and his crew were adrift for ten days on a life raft. The crew was quickly disenchanted and tempers flared because of Rodney's inequitable distribution of the drinking water. He insisted that his ration be double that of any crew member, because, as he put it, "I've got to be able to bring this ship in and I can't think when I'm thirsty."

Ominous grumbling by the crew met his observation. Whereupon Rodney threatened to thrash all of them within an inch of their lives. The crew, on the other hand, voted to throw him to the sharks. Rodney recanted by saying something like, "Well, if that's the way you want it, boys—let's forget it."

Soon afterward, the raft was sighted and the disgruntled crew leaked out the story of the hand-grenade tactics Rodney had used. It ruined his reputation as a fisherman and, as a result of the bad publicity, his Yo-Yo business went into bankruptcy. I didn't hear anything about him for two years, and then his wife, Blossom, called me one evening and prevailed upon me to come at once. She said

that something too horrible to discuss over the telephone had befallen Rodney. She was at her wit's end and, if ever she and Rodney needed a friend, then this was the time.

I sensed that this was a genuine cry for help and went at once. Blossom Phipps ushered me into their apartment. When I asked her what had happened to Rodney, she was silent for a moment. Then she led me to another room, where I found Rodney, dazed, bewildered and morose. He was wearing a checkered shirt and hip-high fishing regalia, which he wore regularly. He was sitting in a rocker near a window.

I said, "Hello." He stared, vacant-minded, then said something that sounded like "Ribber, ribber, ribber." Whereupon his wife burst into tears and ran from the room.

I went to him and asked what was the matter. It became plain that something was amiss when he said, "Ribber, ribber, ribber," again. This time I was sure that I had heard him correctly.

When I questioned him as to the meaning of the words, he sprang from his chair and attempted to strangle me and I beat a hasty retreat from the ugly scene.

All Blossom was able to say was that he had appeared quite normal when he had left on a big-game fishing trip. It seemed that a man named Mr. Swift had written to Rodney describing a mysterious sand reef off the Reparian Islands where a vast armada of game fish would gather on the second Tuesday in April every fifth year, commencing at 3:32 A.M. It was sort of a fish "happening." Furthermore, he said, they had such ravenous appetites that they could be caught for as long as the fisherman's strength held out.

For a rather large fee, Mr. Swift offered to take Rodney to the sandbar. Rodney accepted the offer by return mail along with a threat that he would personally thrash Swift within an inch of his life if his story was untrue or even slightly exaggerated. Rodney departed. However, upon his return, Mrs. Phipps immediately ascertained that his vocabulary was limited to the one word, "ribber." She had taken him to various psychiatrists who could do nothing for him, but who all concurred that the key to his cure lay somewhere with ribber.

Naturally, I had to help Mrs. Phipps, so I wrote to Mr. Swift and we arranged to meet in the Reparian Islands. I was hopeful that he could throw some light upon what had happened to Rodney.

He wasn't what I expected. He was a man in the prime of life, a friendly man with a thin, flat face. He had trouble with the letter V. We dined and he ordered fried libber with onions. Then he told me what had happened. He had accompanied Rodney to the sandbar and had witnessed it all.

The fish had gathered as he had promised. In the space of an hour, Rodney caught eighteen swordfish, twenty-seven marlin and twenty-two bonita. The fish literally flung themselves onto the sandbar after they were hooked and Rodney found himself hip high in fish.

What Swift hadn't counted upon was the appearance of a species called a "giant ribber fish" which also made its appearance at 3:32 A.M. on the second Tuesday of April, but only once every twenty years. As luck would have it, it was the twentieth year and Rodney hooked a giant ribber.

The ribber, or river fish, if it is to be pronounced correctly, is a specie which inflates itself with water when it is hooked. After the hook is removed, it spouts water from its mouth, creating a Mississippian stream in which it swims back to the sea. Apparently it was this escape tactic which had given name to the species. Unfortunately for Rodney, his entire catch gleefully swam back to the sea in the newly created river.

It was a nightmare for Rodney.

"What's happening?" he screamed.

"It's a ribber fish," Swift explained quickly.

Rodney broke into real tears and ran into the ocean in an abortive attempt to recapture sixty-eight fish barehanded.

Now that I had unlocked the mystery of "ribber, ribber, ribber," I returned, sure that I could help him. I confronted Rodney and made light of what had happened. "A ribber fish," I said. "It's nothing. It can happen to anyone."

He immediately sprang to his feet and scornfully exclaimed, "A ribber fish? What's that? Have you taken leave of your senses? There aren't any ribber fish."

I had cured him, once and for all.

I am a firm believer in the adage that one good deed deserves another and, if you will read the exciting stories that follow, you will be doing one for me.

—ALFRED HITCHCOCK

GOODBYE, NOW

by Gil Brewer

LILI SOUTHERN was a very dainty dish. She also had many fine connections, so Al Walters could not figure why she went for him, at first. Of course, he had to admit he was handsome, young, energetic, and with a few mild connections of his own. The trouble was, those connections were just that—mild—and this also puzzled Al because Lili was used to traveling with big game. That her regular fat wallet was now in prison, behind bars for robbery, murder and a number of other things, might possibly explain it.

When Al Walters considered his finances, he felt dour. He had very little money but this did not seem to matter to Lili. She had been demonstrating that she cared a great deal for him and the problem of money had not come up. Too, Brent Morgan was in clink, and it was unlikely he would get out for a long time, if ever, so there was nothing to worry about there. Also, Lili had long since given up visiting her ex-affair.

"I like your background. It thrills me," Lili told Al. "Every time I think of you climbing ropes and hurtling through the air, I get goose pimples."

"That was a good time ago," Al said.

They were at her place, listening to music, having a drink, cuddled up on the sofa. She wore shimmering black, and her long blonde hair curled softly on her shoulder. Al inspected the full length of her, moved an inch closer. He could never get enough of her, yet he was preoccupied with the problem of money. This girl, Lili, was meant for money.

"Could you still do those things?" she asked.

"What things?"

He took a sip of expensive Scotch, and lifted an eyebrow quizzically.

"You know. Trapeze work, and all that, like you did when you were with the circus."

"You sure make it sound like something."

"It must've been exciting. Can you still do those things?"

"I suppose it wouldn't take me long to get back in practice. I hope I never have to do it again, though. I hurt myself in a fall once. That's why I quit. Of course, I'm older now, too."

"Would that matter?"

He looked at her quickly, hoping he had not said the wrong thing, and quickly flexed the muscles of one bicep against her arm.

"I'm not that much older," he said. "Don't worry, it's still there."

"Oh, well," she said, "you'll never have to do it again. Gee, though, when I think of you sitting right here next to me—and that you'd fly through the air, and climb all those ropes, and everything—it just flips me, I'll tell you."

"I used to double as a cowboy, too. Did tricks," he said.

Lili took a dainty little sip of her drink, eyeing him quietly over the rim of the glass with big round brown eyes that were as beguiling as a summer's midnight.

He liked having her look up to him—but she was such an expensive package. He was broke all the time now, and he knew if he did not lie about the money he had, telling her he had a lot more than he suspected he would ever get, then she might drop him cold.

"Brent was pretty good, in his way," she said, "but he could never fly through the air, or climb ropes. He could never do anything like that. It just wasn't in him."

She seldom mentioned Brent Morgan.

"You and he were real close, I guess?"

"Yes. Well, that's all past now. You know that, honey." She took another sip of her drink. "Besides, I'd rather think about you—about us. We're much closer than I ever was with Brent."

"Don't snow me, Lili. Best you don't talk about it."

"Well, Brent and I *were* pretty close, and all. I know a lot of things."

Al, finally conscious of deep silence, said, "You know a lot of things?"

"Uh-huh. Lots."

"Brent Morgan was big," Al said. "Even in prison, he's pretty big."

"He's all washed up," she said. "Besides, he's in for life."

Al bet she had secrets, plenty of them, things he would

never know about. Brent Morgan had played the big time, able to do anything, but Al, well, he more or less just scavenged along the edges.

"I have something to tell you," Lili said. "I think it's time you know. I couldn't tell you right away. I had to wait. You'll see why."

Al set his glass down carefully on the cocktail table in front of them. He watched her, waiting.

"Something about Brent and me," she said. "Something you'll be interested in."

"Oh?"

"Al, darling," she said, "I know very well you haven't any money. Face it. We need money, big money, and I can't see how you're going to get it."

For the first time this evening, he didn't feel like speaking.

"So I've figured a way to do something about it," Lili said. "That is, with your help."

"I see," Al said. He did not see anything. He had no idea what was coming, but he hoped he was ready for it.

"You'd better have another drink," she said. "You'll need it."

She fixed him one, rising and moving to the bar across the room. He watched the way her hips moved under the tight-fitting black sheen of dress, and wondered what it was she had to tell him. She returned with the drink, plumped down and snuggled closer to him than before. One of her hands sought out the muscles of his arm. He sipped his drink and waited.

"There was a robbery nobody knows about," she said. "The take was big, and everybody was paid off. Still there was plenty left. This happened just before Brent went to prison."

"So?" he said nonchalantly.

"It was a lot of money."

He looked at her. "How much?"

"Nearly three hundred thousand dollars, after everybody was paid off."

He mused on that for a moment, then sighed softly. That much money was just a dream.

"Brent engineered the job," Lili said.

He turned to her, interested. "Nothing like that came out at the trial, did it?"

"Oh, no. It couldn't. Nobody knew of Brent's connection with the robbery."

"Nobody?"

"Just little old me."

He sat there. Then what he was thinking became part of the dream, and he knew it was impossible.

"You'd better tell me all of it, Lili."

"Well, it was a bank robbery. After everybody but one man was paid off, one man besides Brent, that is—then Brent hid the money."

He watched her.

She blinked. "I know where he hid it, you see?"

"You know where Brent Morgan hid nearly three hundred thousand dollars?"

"That's right."

He began to realize what she was saying. Numbed, his voice was hoarse. "If you know where it is, why don't you get it? Why haven't you gotten it long before this? Brent's in prison. He can't bother you."

"That's where you come in."

He sat there digesting what little he knew.

She said, "Will you help me get it, Al? Then we'll have all the money we need."

Would he help her? It was wild. He could hardly contain himself. He got up and started pacing back and forth across the room.

"There was another man in it?"

"One other man knew where the money was hidden."

"Where is he? Who is he?"

She made a motion with one hand. "He just sort of vanished." She took a sip of her drink. "There's no need to bother yourself about him at all."

"Where's the money hidden?"

"I'll show you. We have to drive there."

"Baby, if you're kidding me about this . . ."

"It's all true, Al. I just had to wait and make certain you were never fibbing to me about how much you love me. You aren't lying, are you?"

He hardly heard her, barely felt her as she put her arms around him and kissed him. It was the big thing and he knew it. He could feel it. You never knew how or when a thing like this would happen. You just waited for it to show. Sometimes you waited a whole lifetime for nothing, but sometimes, like now, one fine day, out of the blue . . . He

had to know where the money was. It was a lot of money. He had to make certain she wasn't just fooling around with him.

"Where do we have to go?" he asked.

"Quite a way," she told him. "We'd better get started, too. The quicker the better, that's what I say."

They drove all that night. On the outskirts of the city, she insisted he buy a rifle and ammunition. A sport store was still open, so he got what he wanted. She said that since they were headed off the main highways into the mountains of West Virginia, where there were wild animals, and since they would have to leave the car, she did not want to take any chances. Al, himself, felt more secure with the rifle at hand.

Driving along through the night, he did a lot of earnest thinking. "Why didn't you get the money long ago? For yourself?"

"It's in a cave," she said. "I could never get it myself. You'll see why."

He glanced at Lili. She was so certain about everything. He must have played every card exactly right with her, to have her tell him about a thing like this. Brent Morgan had really lost a girl when he went to the pen.

Still, it paid to take care.

They stopped at an all-night service station for gas, and Lili went to the rest room. While he waited for her, he did some serious thinking. She returned, smiling, and they drove on.

"It's not much farther," she said finally. "You'll see."

"I hope it isn't. These mountain roads are dangerous at night."

It was tough driving, and now they were on dirt roads that curled up around chasms extending off into black nothingness where he did not dare look. They followed a river for some time, then cut off up a sharp incline.

"This is where we have to abandon the car," she told him. "It's only a short distance to the cave."

They made their way up a steep, wooded slope and across a rocky field thick with briar. Daylight was breaking as they made their way into the mouth of the cave. It was really a cavern, with walls of rock flowing upward to the vaulted ceiling. Ledges and broken cliffs towered above, and more shadowed caverns were revealed beyond the main one. Lili had a flashlight, but a yellow wash from the

morning sun splayed in across the bottom of the cave, lighting it quite well.

They moved deeper into the cavern. Finally, Lili paused where stone walls leaned upward in the hazy light. Al watched as she probed behind some fallen rocks with the rifle butt and came up with a heavy coil of rope.

"You'll have to lift this, honey." She turned and pointed upward. "See that ledge, 'way up there?"

He nodded, his heart thudding. It was high up, just touched by a vagrant finger of sunlight that came in the open mouth of the cave.

"That's where the money is, in a suitcase."

Al's breathing quickened.

"There are two ledges," she said. "See the one to the right? There's a pointed rock, right on the edge, see it?"

"Yeah."

"You throw a loop of rope around that rock, climb up to the first ledge. Then you take the rope, and throw it across that chasm, high up, where there's another rock. Then you can swing over to the other ledge, on the left, and get the money. You being an acrobat, you should be able to do it."

"You mean somebody else was able to do that?"

"Yes. The other man, Al. Brent couldn't do it, but you can. I know you can. Brent made sure it was in a safe place. Nobody could ever find it."

"It's safe, all right."

"Can you do it, Al?" She was excited.

He uncoiled the rope, made a loop at one end, and tried a first heave in an effort to get the loop around the pointed rock on the right-hand ledge. It took time. It was not easy, and he was nervous this close to the money.

"Nobody'd ever find it," Lili said, "unless he knew where it was."

Excitement gripped Al now. He had managed to loop the rope around the pointed rock. He snagged it secure. Now he had to climb up the rope. The past was finally paying off.

"Here we go," he said.

He began to shinny up the rope. He swung in against the rock wall, and showers of dust scattered down, chips of stone rattled on the cave floor.

It was a hard climb, but not too difficult for Al, even though he was out of practice. Moments later, he heaved

himself up on the ledge. He looked down and grinned at Lili, who was eagerly watching.

Quickly, then, he loosened the rope and made ready to cast for the rock above the other ledge. This part would scare most men, but heights did not bother Al.

"Can you make it?" Lili called.

"There she is," Al said. The loop of rope was around the other rock. "Here we go again."

He stepped back, made a leap, grabbed high on the rope, and swung across the chasm to the other ledge. His feet scraped against the rock.

A ray of morning sunlight shone brightly on a large suitcase lightly covered with dust.

"It's here," he gasped. "It's here!" he shouted.

She called something, but he did not catch what it was in his excitement.

"Al!"

He heard her now.

"Al? Tie the rope to the suitcase after you get it loose from the rock. Then let the suitcase down on the rope. That's how we got it up there."

Kneeling, he unsnapped the clasps on the lid of the case, flipped it open. His face tightened. It was packed with greenbacks. A kind of heady calm came over him. All that money, nearly three hundred thousand dollars! He touched it with his fingers.

"Al? What're you doing?"

He fastened the clasps again. Then he unhooked the rope from the rock, tied it to the handle of the suitcase.

"Ready?" he called down to her.

"I'll say I am."

She waited below as he lowered the suitcase. They were looking into each other's eyes, smiling. She caught the case, put it on the cave floor. He stood there loosely holding the rope, laughing.

"We got it," he called.

She looked up at him. Abruptly, she grabbed the rope, yanked it with all her strength. It slipped from his grip. He heard her laugh, and saw her pick up the rifle. He stood there, looking down into the muzzle of the rifle.

"I'm meeting Brent," she said, her voice echoing in the cave, reverberating from the walls. "He's trying for a prison break. He'll make it, too. He engineered this, Al. He had

me hunt for an acrobat, and I finally found you. I picked you up, remember?"

He remembered, all right. The rifle was steady.

She said, "We had to do away with the other fellow, Al, because he knew where the money was. For a while Brent and I were worried we wouldn't ever be able to get it back. I love Brent Morgan. You could never be half the man he is, even if you can shinny up a rope."

"So that's how it is?" he said.

"That's how it is, Al. Goodbye, now."

He saw her squeeze the trigger of the rifle. There was an echoing click. She seemed frustrated. She tried again. Again the rifle clicked on an empty chamber.

"Give it up, Lili," he called to her. "I emptied that gun at the service station where we stopped. Figured I shouldn't take any chances."

"Curse you!" she yelled. She flung the rifle down, fumbled at the suitcase. "It doesn't matter. You'll die up there, and you've got company, too. Look around the corner of that ledge!"

Al took a step, glanced around the corner of rock, and saw the grinning skull, the clothed remains of a man lying on the ledge. Shreds of skin clung to the naked bones. A round hole showed in the center of the skull's forehead. He had been shot when he deposited the money up here.

Then Al grinned. He saw something else—a coil of rope —partially hidden beneath the skeleton. Snatching it up, he made a fast loop, leaped to the brink of the ledge.

"Goodbye, now," Lili called and started walking away with the suitcase.

Al made a desperate throw with the rope. The loop whistled out from the ledge, circled down, coiled around the girl's body. Al snatched it tight. She dropped the suitcase and grabbed at the tightening loop.

Slowly, Al drew her toward the face of the rock wall. "Told you I doubled as a cowboy," he called to her. "I did rope tricks. What d'you think of that?"

He began to hoist her up the side of the wall, toward the ledge. She was screaming now, long throat-shredding screams that bounded wildly from the walls of the cave.

Al dragged her onto the ledge, took the rope off her and shoved her over by the skeleton. She saw that and began to scream still louder.

Al threw the rope and snagged a rock on the other ledge.

Lili leaped at him, clawing at him, but he grinned and shoved her away. Then, jumping off, he swung toward the other ledge and made it. He loosened the rope, fastened it to the pointed rock, then lowered himself to the cave floor.

"Al!" she screamed. "Al, don't leave me! I'll die!"

Picking up the suitcase, Al called, "Goodbye, now."

Far up there on the ledge, Lili screamed and screamed, but once Al was outside the mouth of the cave, he could not hear her screams at all.

WOMAN MISSING

by Helen Nielsen

EINAR PETERSON'S body was wearying of life. He slept at the touch of his silvered head on the pillow; but when his wife, Amelia, fastened her hands on his shoulders and shook with all her housewife strength, he awakened, trying to remember where he was, and why he was no longer the boy he'd been dreaming of, sailing his small boat on a bright Sunday on Lake Vattern. Without his glasses, Amelia's face bobbed above him like a pale balloon.

"Einar—Einar. Something's wrong in back!"

"What? Where?" Einar mumbled.

"In the tenant's house in back. I think it's Mrs. Tracy sick again."

Einar Peterson pulled himself up in the bed and groped on the night table until his slightly arthritic fingers located his eye glasses. With them in place, the pale balloon now had gray hair and troubled eyes.

"Mrs. Tracy?" he repeated. "What is it, Mother? What's wrong?"

"I don't know. I woke up because of the lights in the driveway and the motor running."

"Maybe it's the Mister."

"In the driveway? You know the Mister always comes home up the alley. Anyway, it's only ten-thirty. I looked at the clock when the lights woke me up. Get up, Einar. Go see. That poor little Mrs. Tracy—"

Amelia liked to worry about people, and the night air was damp and chilly outside the blankets. Einar didn't want to get up; but now he could see that the light reflected on his wife's face wasn't from the ceiling fixture—it was from a glaring beam outside the bedroom window, and the noise he heard wasn't from the old refrigerator in the kitchen—it was the sound of an automobile motor. Reluctantly, he parted himself from snug comfort and padded to the window to which Amelia had preceded him.

"Somebody went back to the tenant house," she whispered. "It was a man."

"Did you see him?" Einar asked.

"Hush, not so loud. No, I didn't see; but I heard the footsteps. I think it must be a doctor."

"A doctor! Why would a doctor leave the motor running?"

"I think it's an ambulance. There's a funny light on top."

The window was open two inches. Einar lifted the sash quietly and poked out his head. Amelia was right. The automobile he saw certainly did have a light on top.

"It's a taxi," he said.

"A taxi? Here?"

"Quiet!" Einar drew back inside. "Somebody's coming."

Einar Peterson watched the brightness in front of the headlights; but the heavy, manlike footsteps skirted the light and passed by the window in shadows. They stopped at the taxi. A door opened; then silence behind the idling motor, and darkness behind the lights except for the small, round glow of a cigarette.

"Look," Amelia whispered. "She's coming."

Linda Tracy was such a very young woman, it was difficult to realize that she was married to Mr. Tracy and would have been the mother of his child if it had been God's will. She looked more like one of Einar Peterson's teenage granddaughters except for something . . . Einar Peterson's mind always caught on that odd feeling when he thought of Mrs. Tracy. Something. She walked rapidly into the headlights, head down except for an instant when she turned and stared almost directly at the dark window behind which the two unseen watchers were hidden. She was wearing a light-colored coat and very noisy heels, and —this they would remember to tell the police—a very fearful expression on her face. She passed the window and entered the cab. The glow of a burning cigarette spun into space and was lost in the darkness. The door of the taxi slammed shut. In a matter of seconds, the taxi was gone.

"Well," said Amelia. "What was that?"

Einar Peterson removed his glasses and padded back to the bed.

"Einar, I'm worried. Mrs. Tracy never goes out at night. Her lights always go off just after ten o'clock. Einar—"

Einar's answer was a snore. She lowered the window to

within two inches of the sill and returned to bed; but she didn't sleep. There was something strange about Linda Tracy. Amelia had never mentioned her feelings to anyone, not even Einar; but there was something . . .

Chester Tracy was a slight, sandy-haired man with a peering face. That was how he impressed Sergeant Mike Shelly. He had probably started peering when he was a kid, his nose pressed against the store windows full of Christmas toys he would never receive. Children who had done that never lost the look; it grew older with them. There was fear in his face, too, fear muted by shock. Shelly had to pry words out of him.

"When did you get home, Mr. Tracy?" he asked. "At what time—exactly."

Tracy was possibly forty. He wore suntan cotton pants and a brown leather zipper jacket with an I.D. badge from Flight Research pinned to the breast pocket. The photo on the badge would have embarrassed the Passport Bureau.

"The usual time," he said. "I work the 5:45 P.M. to 2:45 A.M. shift."

"What time?" Shelly persisted.

"It takes me eighteen minutes to drive home. I've clocked it a hundred times—just to keep awake. It may take eighteen and a half if I miss the green light at Slauson."

"Then you were home at a few minutes past three."

"At three minutes past—exactly. I looked at the kitchen clock when I came in."

"The light was on?" Shelly asked.

"It's always on when I come home. Linda leaves it for me when she goes to bed."

"And so everything seemed normal."

"Until I started down the hall to the bathroom," Tracy said. "I saw that the bedroom door was open. It's usually closed because of that light in the kitchen. I looked in to see if Linda was all right, and that's when I discovered—" Tracy's eyes were less glazed now. Emotion was breaking through the numbness. "Why are you asking all these dumb questions?" he demanded. "My wife's gone—don't you understand? I called you because Linda's gone!"

A missing wife can mean many things—Mike Shelly had carried a police badge in his pocket long enough to know that. He'd talked to the old people up front, but he had to question Tracy alone. Outside, Shelly's partner, Sergeant

Keonig, was searching the grounds. Inside, Shelly stood in a living room just large enough for one small divan and two slip-covered chairs, pried away at Chester Tracy, and puzzled over the photographs he'd found in a double frame on the side table. One side of the frame showed Linda Tracy close-up: blonde, smiling, lovely; the other held a full-length Linda attired in an abbreviated bathing suit: blonde, smiling, lovely. She was nineteen years old. The forty-year-old man with the peering face had told him that.

"I know that your wife's gone," Shelly answered quietly. "I'm looking for her. I've been looking for her ever since I got here. A photograph isn't enough, Mr. Tracy. I need to know what kind of woman your wife is."

Reactions could be startling, particularly in the predawn hours of a torturous night. Color flooded to Chester Tracy's face.

"What kind of woman?" he echoed. "Is that any way to talk to a man in my position?"

"Mr. Tracy—"

"She's my wife. That's the kind of woman she is! She's my wife!"

If someone had bought the finest toy in the shop for that kid with his face pressed against the window, and then taken it away, the emotional response would have matched what was written on Chester Tracy's face.

"I was thinking more of her habits," Shelly explained. "Where she goes. Who she sees. . . ."

"But she doesn't see anyone! She doesn't go anywhere—not without me! My wife lost a baby four months ago. Since that time, she hadn't been well. She never goes out unless I take her in the car."

"Where do you go?"

"To the market. Once in awhile to a drive-in movie."

"Never to friends?"

"With me working the hours I work? I went on swing shift for the extra money after Linda got pregnant. Since then, we have no friends. Ask the Petersons up front. Linda walks up to get the mail every morning—the box is on Peterson's house. That's as much as she goes out without me. Every night I call home during the ten-o'clock coffee break—"

"Ten o'clock," Shelly echoed. "Did you talk to your wife at ten o'clock tonight?"

"I did."

"Did she seem nervous or upset?"

"No more than usual. Linda's been nervous and upset ever since she lost the baby. That's why I call her every night. I catch her just before she takes her sleeping pills—"

Tracy's voice ceased as the front door opened. It was Keonig. He glanced at Tracy, then turned to Sergeant Shelly.

"I didn't find a single footprint," he said. "This house is built on a cement slab. It extends along the right side for the width of about ten feet, all the way to the alley. There's an old station wagon parked on that extension."

"That's mine," Tracy volunteered.

"In front," Keonig added, "the cement narrows to a walk leading to Peterson's driveway—the way we came. I'd hoped our man might have stepped off the walk and left a print in the soft flower bed under the Petersons' windows, but all I found was this—"

Cupped in the palm of Keonig's hand was a cigarette butt —standard brand, filter tip.

"Peterson said the man who came for Mrs. Tracy tossed a cigarette into the flower bed," Shelly reflected. "Keep it."

"It was all I could find," Keonig repeated.

"Try the bathroom," Shelly said. "Or does your wife keep those sleeping pills in her bedroom, Mr. Tracy?" Shelly set the double-framed photograph back on the table and turned toward the hall. "You take the bathroom," he told Keonig, "and I'll take the bedroom. You come with me, Tracy. I'll need you."

In a square cell with one window, curtained, shade drawn, the bed was turned down and a soft, pink nightgown laid out for its missing occupant. Shelly studied the display while Chester Tracy, at his request, took stock of his wife's closet.

"I think there's a blue dress missing," he reported.

"A blue dress," Shelly repeated.

"Sort of a suit. You know, a dress with a jacket over it."

"What else?" Shelly prodded. "Shoes?"

The shoe rack held, at quick glance, a good dozen pairs of slippers and pumps.

"I think she usually wore black pumps with the blue dress," Chester said. "I don't see them here."

"Black shoes," Shelly echoed. "What coat?"

"The Petersons said a light coat. That would be the one she called a cashmere. It was new. I got it for her with my last big overtime check."

Shelly picked up one of the pumps from the rack and examined it. Size 5A. It was clear plastic with a spike heel. He turned it over in his hands. The soles were badly worn, especially at the toe. The heels weren't.

"Are these new, too?" he asked.

"I got them for her for Christmas," Chester answered.

"Is anything else missing?"

The question kept Chester busy, while Shelly examined the rest of the rack. Most of the shoes were dress pumps or sandals, but there was one conspicuous pair of walking flats. When Keonig came in from the bathroom with the sleeping pills, Shelly still held one of the flats in his hand. A small crust of dried mud loosened at the prod of his fingernail and fell to the floor.

"I had to dig, but I found them in the medicine chest," Keonig said. "Now maybe you'll tell me why."

"Because Mrs. Tracy took sleeping pills every night after her husband's ten-o'clock call."

"Not tonight," Keonig said.

"Obviously. That's interesting, isn't it? Let me see that bottle." It was nearly half full. Shelly read the prescription label and frowned. "Dr. Youngston," he read aloud. "Two pills before retiring. 10-7-59. Keonig, what's the date?"

"It was the twelfth of January at midnight," Keonig answered.

"Dr. Youngston," Shelly mused. "Your wife did see someone outside of this house, Tracy. Who else?"

The man still seemed to be in a state of shock. He groped for words. "I told you—no one."

"At any time—before your marriage."

"I didn't know Linda very long before our marriage. Leo talked me into going to this party—"

"Leo? Leo who?"

"Leo Manfred. We worked together at Flight Research. Look, why don't you stop asking these questions? Why don't you look for that cab?"

"Where can I find Leo Manfred?" Shelly persisted.

"I don't know! At home, I suppose. I lost track of Leo when I went on nights. I don't even know if he's with Flight Research now."

"But he did know your wife?"

"That was months ago—seven, eight months ago."

"Leo Manfred and Dr. Youngston." Shelly slipped the bottle of pills into his pocket. "Who else, Tracy? Who else

knew that your wife would be here alone at ten-thirty? Who might she have gone with without fear?"

"But she was afraid," Keonig protested. "The Petersons said—"

"Who else, Tracy?"

Chester Tracy sank down on the edge of the bed. The kid with his face pressed against the window wanted to cry; but the kid was a man of forty, and so, instead, he took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket, standard brand, no filter tip, pulled out one cigarette and held it between thumb and forefinger, until the thumb clenched white and the cigarette snapped in two. He looked up.

"I can't think!" he protested. "You're the police. Find my wife! Please, find my wife!"

> Linda Tracy, white Caucasian, female. Age: 19. Height, 5′3″. Weight, 110. Blonde hair. Hazel eyes. Probably wearing a blue jacket dress, black pumps, and a light tan cashmere coat. Last seen entering a taxi at 1412 North . . .

A description of the missing woman was going out over the police radio before Shelly and Keonig left the Peterson property. Shelly took a turn about the premises, while Keonig used the telephone. It was still a good hour before dawn, and a light fog had wrapped the world in a close, damp blanket. At the side of the tenant house, Shelly found the station wagon, the windshield and windows curtained with moisture. Beyond it, the paved area terminated at an unpaved alleyway. He took a few steps into the alley and peered toward the street lamp at the nearest corner. It was at least four lots distant—darkness and fog prohibited a closer guess—and no backyard taxpayer units such as the Petersons had added were in evidence. This was the route by which Chester Tracy had arrived home—the only other access to the property except the front drive. Underfoot, the stubborn adobe had absorbed most of a none too recent gravel topping, and the pale light from the corner lamp caught in small, wet shallows of leftover rain. Shelly scraped his shoes clean on the parking slab and returned to the car and Keonig.

"It's a break—that cab business," Keonig said. "A cab can be traced."

"I know it can," Shelly mused. "That's what is bothering me."

A cab can be traced, but it takes time. Time to check each office of each company; run down each call sheet; pry out of bed a driver who had worked most of the night. Meanwhile, a sun rises, a city comes awake, the air begins to fill with the aromas of coffee, frying bacon, and, predominantly, carbon monoxide. Shelly couldn't wait. The Southern Area telephone directory listed a Dr. Carl Youngston on Manchester Boulevard; hours: nine to five.

At ten minutes before nine, Mike Shelly waited in the foyer of a handsome new medical building and watched a slender, blond young man in a gray topcoat unlock the slab door leading to Dr. Youngston's office. He stooped to retrieve an advertising folder that had been deposited in the mail slot, and arose, pulling a pair of tortoise rimmed glasses from an inner pocket. These he donned in time to bring the full width and height of Mike Shelly into focus.

Surprise didn't seem to unnerve the doctor.

"Do you have an appointment?" he asked.

Shelly's appointment was a badge that bridged all priorities. Inside the office, Dr. Youngston removed his topcoat, straightened a tie that caught the blue of his eyes behind the tortoise rims, and then scrutinized the bottle of sleeping pills Shelly now held in his hand.

"Linda Tracy," he read aloud. " 'Two every night before retiring.' Yes, I remember Mrs. Tracy. Quite a young woman. Quite—" He hesitated. "—attractive," he added.

"You *remember* Mrs. Tracy," Shelly echoed. "Isn't she your patient now?"

"I suppose she is. Her record is in my files. It's just that I haven't seen her for some time."

"Since she lost her baby?"

"Oh, yes. Certainly. Before, at the time, and after."

"She took it hard, then?"

"Every woman takes it hard. Some may seem indifferent, but that's superficial."

"But doesn't a miscarriage affect different women in different ways?"

Dr. Youngston wasn't over thirty-five. His blond hair was clipped close; his clean-shaven face had a military alertness about it.

"What's your problem, Sergeant?" he queried. "Is Mrs. Tracy in trouble?"

"Why do you ask that question?"

"Why is a police officer at my door when I open the office in the morning?"

"It could be Mr. Tracy who's in trouble."

"Mr. Tracy was never my patient. Mrs. Tracy was."

"You're using the past tense again, Doctor."

"All right, Sergeant, I'll take your bait. Has Mrs. Tracy been murdered?"

It was early morning, but the fog had lifted and the sun was shining through the windows. The world was bright, and Dr. Youngston didn't seem a morbid-minded man.

"That's an interesting thought," Shelly mused, "but, so far as the police know, Mrs. Tracy is only the victim of abduction."

"Abduction? What do you mean?"

"I'm not sure. That's why I came to you. A doctor does more than treat the body, doesn't he? You have to understand something of the psychological makeup of the patient."

"I'm merely an obstetrician," Youngston protested.

"Merely? Wouldn't an obstetrician need to know quite a bit about feminine psychology—not to mention family relationships? Now, consider this situation, Doctor. Knowing Mrs. Tracy, and there you have me at an advantage, what would you make of it if I told you that some man, unidentified, had called for her in a taxi last night at ten-thirty while her husband was at work on the night shift. The landlord and his wife, awakened by the sound of the motor outside the window, got out of bed and watched through the window. They saw the taxi waiting. Moments later, they heard a man—careful, apparently, not to step into the beam of the headlights—come from the Tracy house at the rear of the lot."

"I'm familiar with the Tracy house at the rear of the lot," Dr. Youngston said. "I was called there when Mrs. Tracy lost her child."

"Good. You see the picture, then. Shortly after the man reached the cab, Mrs. Tracy came from the house. She didn't avoid the lights. The landlord and his wife both insist that she looked frightened. She went to the cab, entered it, and the cab drove off."

Youngston had followed the story carefully.

"And hasn't been heard of since, I presume."

"Exactly," Shelly said. "By the way, could I trouble you for a cigarette, Doctor?"

"Sorry," Youngston answered. "I never acquired the habit." He appeared thoughtful for a moment, then asked, "What does the cab driver have to say?"

"We're tracking him down now," Shelly replied. "What I'm interested in is your reaction. What do you think happened last night?"

It was a tough question to spring on a man so early in the morning. Youngston frowned, thoughtfully.

"While Mr. Tracy was at work, did you say?"

"Night shift—5:45 to 2:45. Calls his wife every night during the ten-o'clock coffee break to make sure she's all right."

Dr. Youngston took the pill bottle from Shelly's hand and studied the label again.

"Being a physician," he said, slowly, "my mind may run in a rut; but isn't it possible that the man who came in the cab told Mrs. Tracy that her husband had been injured on the job?"

"Highly possible," Shelly agreed. "But why did he tell her that?"

"She was a very attractive woman," the doctor suggested.

"Is that what you see typed on the prescription label, Doctor?"

Youngston didn't answer with words. Instead, he went to his files. A few minutes later, he returned with the information that Linda Tracy had come to him on the seventh of October complaining of severe nervous tension and an inability to sleep. He had given her a prescription for sixty pills, together with the admonition not to use more than two at a time.

"How many pills would you guess are in that bottle, Doctor?" Shelly asked.

Youngston adjusted his glasses.

"I won't guess," he said. "I'll just ask. How many, Sergeant?"

"Twenty-eight," Shelly said. "That means only thirty-two pills used, or sixteen nights—"

"It's not unusual for a patient to fail to follow instructions," Youngston said.

"—out of better than three months," Shelly concluded. "Has Mrs. Tracy been back since you issued that prescription?"

"No," Youngston said. "If she had, it would have been entered in the files."

"When she came, did she come alone?"

Dr. Youngston hesitated. "No," he said, thoughtfully. "Mr. Tracy was with her. In fact, it was he who made her come. He was always very concerned about her."

"How did he take it when she lost the baby?"

"Hard. No, actually, not too hard. It was Mrs. Tracy's safety that concerned him. He had an almost paternal—" Youngston paused until the silence grew awkward, "—possessiveness," he added.

"Did Mrs. Tracy reciprocate?"

Youngston smiled wryly.

"With paternal possessiveness?"

"You know what I mean? Did she love him?"

"That's a peculiar question, Sergeant."

"But a necessary one, Doctor. For a few months you were close to this woman—closer than anyone. Closer even than her husband in many ways. Did she seem a happy woman?"

"Sergeant, a pregnant woman is every kind of woman. Happy, unhappy, fearful, miserable—"

"Dr. Youngston, I remind you, for sixteen nights, consecutively or otherwise, Linda Tracy took the sleeping pills you prescribed for her and, presumably, went to sleep. And yet, her husband told me that he called his wife every night at ten o'clock just before she took her sleeping pills and went to bed. Somebody lied, Doctor. Either Chester Tracy lied to me, or Linda Tracy lied to her husband. That's why I asked you if the woman who disappeared last night loved her husband."

Dr. Youngston wasn't naïve. People married for many reasons; occasionally, love. He hesitated a long time before replying.

"I can't answer that," he said.

"Can't, or won't, Doctor?"

"Can't, Sergeant. You need facts, don't you? Ask me something I can answer factually, and I'll cooperate."

He was adamant. This was the time for diagnosis, analysis, conjecture, or just plain old-fashioned gossip; but Dr. Youngston had chosen none of these, and there was a hardness about his mouth that was impervious to change. Shelly recognized defeat when he met it.

"Just one more question," he said. "What was Mrs.

Tracy's condition, aside from nervousness, when you last saw her?"

"Physically—excellent," Youngston said.

"Thank you, Doctor. If you think of anything else—factual, of course—that might help us, my name is Shelly. Mike Shelly. You can reach me at headquarters."

Twenty-eight pills in a bottle and dried mud on her walking shoes. The words made a kind of jingle in Shelly's mind. He was still looking for Linda Tracy—not, of course, in that small room at headquarters where Chester Tracy was pleading for action:

"Haven't you found that cab driver yet? My God, my wife's been gone for nearly twelve hours!"

"We've located the cab company, Mr. Tracy. It's one of the big ones, and it took a while to trace the call sheet. The driver was a man named Berendo—Don Berendo."

"What does he say?"

"He's off duty. We've sent a couple of men to pick him up."

"All right, all right! But when are you going to find Linda? My God!"

No, Shelly couldn't take much of Chester Tracy. A man with more control was easier to interview. A man half a head taller than Tracy, wiry but strong. Black curly hair, teeth that gleamed white in an easy smile.

His name was Leo Manfred. He was thirtyish. He lived in a small apartment over a garage that housed—visible through raised doors—half a section of discarded rental furnishings, a single horse trailer, and a two-year-old convertible with trailer hitch. The interior of the apartment, furnished chiefly by two large couches and a jazz-playing stereo set, was profusely decorated with mounted photos of horses, as well as a small collection of loving cups. Manfred himself was attired in fitted twill pants, a heavy-knit turtleneck sweater, and western boots. Between the white teeth was a rough brier pipe, which he removed at the sight of Shelly's badge. It was still early in the morning, and he hadn't expected a visitor.

"Just got back from the stable," he explained. "Showing a horse I've got to sell to a prospective buyer. A palomino, good strain. I like to work him out early when he's frisky."

"I thought you were on the day shift," Shelly said.

"What? Where?"

"At Flight Research."

And so the call was official, with Leo Manfred involved enough to have given Sergeant Shelly reason to acquire some background. There was no evidence of Manfred's easy smile now.

"Not for a week," he said.

"What happened a week ago?"

"I quit. Life's too short to waste on a job you don't like."

Manfred stepped back to the stereo set and tuned down the volume. The jazz continued behind the conversation like a muted heartbeat.

"Low pay?" Shelly queried.

"Good pay," Manfred said. "I just wanted a change. Look, what is this? Did somebody make off with the payroll?"

"Somebody," Shelly answered, "made off with Chester Tracy's wife."

Mike Shelly appreciated good jazz, and what was coming from the stereo was very good jazz. It was smooth and cool and well organized, and so was Leo Manfred, who took this information with just a trace of muscular reaction in his face that only an expert could have noticed. And then he waited, because, if he waited, Mike Shelly would have to stop listening to the jazz and tell the story that had previously been told to the only other man known to have been acquainted with Linda Tracy.

"Why have you told me this?" he asked, when Shelly finished.

"Chester Tracy mentioned your name."

"Does he think I made off with Linda?"

Manfred's facial expression was controlled, but his voice wasn't. An unmistakable note of derision had crept into his tone.

"Is something wrong with Linda Tracy?" Shelly asked.

"No comment," Manfred answered.

"In that case, I'll have to ask where you were last night at ten-thirty."

Chester Tracy had named two men who knew his wife. One was a doctor who didn't smoke; the other was a man with a horse to sell who had one forefinger laced tightly around the stem of a brier pipe.

"Now I'm getting it," Manfred said. "I introduced Linda to Chester—he must have told you that."

"He did," Shelly answered.

"And now you want to know what I know about her. Well, I don't. Linda was half of a double date I once went on. I don't think I even knew her last name before she nailed Chester."

"Nailed?" Shelly echoed.

"She was one of those—that's why I gave her to Chester. She was hunting, and Chester had that certain look."

The face of a kid pressed against the window, Shelly thought.

"The potential-husband look," Manfred explained. "I don't have it. Most women sense that right away; to some it has to come subtly—like a blow on the head."

"How did it come to Linda?" Shelly asked.

He was getting tired of jazz. The photos of horses mounted on the walls were more interesting. Some of them had Leo Manfred astride the horse, standing beside the horse; one was of Manfred introducing the horse to a beautiful blonde. Both Manfred and the blonde were wearing dark glasses, but both were recognizable. The blonde was Linda Tracy.

"Who was the other half of the blind date?" Shelly prodded. "A palomino?"

Manfred said nothing for a few seconds. His face was still controlled, but his glands didn't know it. The frown lines on his forehead were getting moist.

"Look," he said, suddenly, "I wasn't even in the city last night. I drove down to San Diego yesterday to see about a job I'm angling for. I didn't get back until almost midnight."

"Did you drive alone?"

"Alone? Sure. Sergeant, I knew this girl a couple of weeks before I introduced her to Chester. We went dancing—things like that. Pairing her off with Chester was a joke. He was afraid of women. I had no idea he'd fall for her. My guess is that Linda was just too much woman for Chester. I think she rigged that whole deal last night in order to get away from him."

"Why?" Shelly demanded.

"Love in bloom. Linda was always the romantic type. She had a big imagination."

"She's not the only one," Shelly said dryly. "If Mrs. Tracy wanted to run off with another man, she could have staged a fight with Chester and then disappeared. We would have classed it as just another domestic quarrel and waited

seventy-two hours before issuing a Missing Persons bulletin."

It was good jazz, but it ended. Leo Manfred walked to the stereo set and switched it off. For a moment, his back was to Shelly, and in that moment, it seemed to stiffen.

When he turned around, he said, "I was only trying to be helpful, Sergeant."

"Thanks," Shelly answered. "You can be a lot more helpful if you find someone in San Diego, or on the road back, who can verify the story that you were driving home alone at ten-thirty last night."

Don Berendo. He still looked sleepy. A pile of comb-resistant black hair crowded for space on the top of his head, spilling over to his forehead. He hadn't had time to shave before being taken in for questioning, and his beard came out black. He wore a brown leather jacket, and twisted his taxi driver's cap in his hands.

"I picked this guy up at the airport," he said. "He came out of the Inter-Continental waiting room and hailed me just as I was getting ready to pull away after unloading a gent and a lady who were flying to Paris. Must have been all of seventy—both of them, but cute as a couple of kids starting out on a honeymoon. Paris." Berendo's face broke in a sleepy smile. "I bet they have a devil of a time at the Folies Bergère."

"The man who came out of the waiting room," Keonig prodded. "What was he like?"

"Him? Let's see. He wore a raincoat—one of those private-eye kind, and a brown felt hat with the brim snapped down, and dark glasses."

"Dark glasses *and* a raincoat?" Shelly echoed.

"You get all kinds at International, Sergeant."

"How tall was he?" Keonig asked. "How heavy? Fat or thin?"

Berendo scowled. He stared at Keonig; he stared at Shelly. Then he stared at Chester Tracy, who crouched at the edge of his chair listening with his whole body. Suddenly, Berendo brightened.

"He was about my size," he said. "About medium. I didn't get a good look at his face—that hat brim and the glasses."

"Did he have luggage?" Shelly asked.

"No, he didn't. I asked about that. 'It's checked through,'

he told me. 'I have to go home. I forgot something.' Then he gave me that address—the place you call Peterson's where this guy Tracy lives. He kept telling me to hurry."

"What time was it when you picked him up?"

"Ten after ten. I marked it on my sheet. I got him to the address he gave me before ten-thirty. He told me to wait in the drive with the motor running while he went to the place in the back. He was gone about two minutes. When he came back, I thought we'd go again; but he just opened the back door and stood there smoking a cigarette. A minute or so later, the woman came."

"You saw my wife?" Chester demanded. "How did she look?"

"Scared," Berendo said. "No, there's a better word—shocked."

"As if she'd received bad news?" Shelly suggested.

"Something like that. She got into the cab and the guy after her. I backed out of the drive and started back to the airport, thinking we had a plane to catch and wondering, I'll tell you, how a guy could go off and forget a woman like that at home."

"Did they talk?" Keonig asked. "Did you hear any conversation?"

Berendo hesitated. "I was pretty busy driving," he said at last. "Wait—there was something. The cigarette. The guy gave her a cigarette. She must have been nervous because she used three matches trying to get a light."

"*She* used the matches?" Shelly repeated. "The man didn't give her a light?"

"No. He didn't even sit near her. He sat on one side of the seat and she sat on the other—all tense. I thought maybe they'd had a fight and that was why he had to go back for her. Then a funny thing happened. You know where Airport Boulevard crosses Century—that intersection just before you pull into the airport? Well, I was barreling along, still thinking I had a plane to catch, and I started to speed up so's I'd make the green. This guy leans forward and says, 'Turn left here!' I slam on the brakes, thinking he's kidding. 'Look, Mister,' I started to say; but he comes right back at me. 'I said, turn left here!' Okay, so he's the customer. I turn left."

"Where did you go then?" Shelly asked.

"Just about half a block—to this engineering place, Flight Research. 'Stop here,' he says, and I stopped. The

woman got out and the man got out and paid me. 'Shall I wait?' I asked him. 'Don't bother,' he said. I couldn't figure it, but, like I said, you get all kinds."

"Did they go inside?" Keonig queried.

"That's the funny thing," Berendo answered. "I started to pull out into traffic again, but I smelled something burning. I stopped and looked in the back. This woman had dropped her cigarette and the floor mat was smoldering. I stopped and yanked open the back door, and I naturally looked back at where I'd let them out because I was thinking a few choice things I'd like to say, and they were gone."

"What do you mean—gone?"

"What I said—gone! I felt downright spooky."

"Do you mean that they had gone inside the building?" Shelly demanded.

"They couldn't have gone inside the building. It sets way back off the street—one of those real modern places with no windows, just a big glass entrance to a lobby with a reception desk and a row of doors behind it. A couple of months ago, they landscaped in front and put in a long, winding walk of some kind of flagstone, or maybe slate. They put in new grass, that kind you never have to cut, and trees and shrubs so it doesn't look like a factory at all. At night they've got ground lights on the walk, and the lights shining out from that lobby. There was nobody on the walk and nobody in the lobby."

"They might have gone through one of the inner doors," Keonig suggested.

And then Don Berendo smiled sleepily, but knowingly. "That walk goes back a good two hundred feet," he said, "and I hadn't even got pulled away from the curb. What did they use for transportation—rockets?"

There was only one way to check Berendo's story—a trip to Flight Research. It was a little past eleven when Shelly and Keonig arrived. Berendo was right. The walk, slate slabs set in white gravel, formed a hugh S curving back to the plate glass entrance. The entire foyer was visible from the street.

"It was dark," Keonig reminded. "The shrubs might have thrown shadows."

"The shrubs might have given shelter," Shelly said.

Halfway to the doors, at the first reverse curve of the walk, a cluster of semitropical growth raised a barrier which

fanned back to join the edge of the building. Shelly stepped off the walk onto the Dicondra. The growth was tight and cushiony, like a closely woven carpet. It absorbed footprints and sprang back into place. But the foliage, he discovered, was more than decorative. It hid from the street the less scenic tight wire fence which enclosed the loading and parking areas at the side and rear of the building. At first, there seemed to be no break in the fence; then Shelly noticed a small gate, probably for the gardener's use. He started toward it, then stopped. Behind the foliage, there was a break in the grass—a small, round hole about the size of a penny with one side slightly flattened. Nearby, a sprinkler embedded in the earth was leaking, releasing just enough moisture to soften the ground. Shelly's eyes scanned the area. There were no other holes. He continued to the gate, Keonig at his heels, and found it locked. Over a buzzer on the wall of the building was a small sign: "Ring For Admittance." Shelly rang. Moments later, a uniformed guard appeared, demanded I.D. cards and received, instead, police badges. The gate opened. From the inside, Shelly turned and examined the lock.

"Can this be set to remain unlocked?" he asked.

"From the inside," the guard answered.

"That's good enough," Shelly said.

They continued past the guard, past the loading platform, and on to where the parking lot fanned out before them in six rows of double-parked vehicles. By this time, a shirt-sleeved official, summoned by the guard, joined them to inquire the nature of their business. His badge announced that he was C. H. Dawson, Supervisor, Dep't. E.

"How many employees do you have here?" Shelly asked.

"Four hundred and fifty—approximately," Dawson replied. "Three hundred on the day shift and a hundred and fifty on swing and graveyard."

"Skeleton crews," Keonig suggested.

"Somewhat. You see, we produce high-precision equipment for the Air Force. The day shift is largely production, but much of our experimental work demands around-the-clock schedules. We keep skeleton shop and shipping crew at night, but a fairly complete technical force."

Shelly was still staring at the parking lot.

"Precision equipment," he said. "That means I.D. cards and gate inspection for all employees of all shifts."

"Exactly."

"And no one could enter or leave these premises, by foot or by automobile, who wasn't known to either the guard or the receptionist on duty."

"Not without proper credentials," Dawson replied. "What is the difficulty, officers? We have an Air Force Intelligence officer inside."

"It's nothing like that," Shelly said. And then he paused, reflecting. "Around the clock," he said musingly. "Mr. Dawson, do you have anyone in the plant now who was here all last night?"

Dawson smiled wearily. "Several," he admitted, "including myself. We're running some tests—"

"Do you know an employee named Chester Tracy?"

For a moment it seemed that he'd hit a blank wall, and then Dawson brightened. Chester. Of course, he knew Chester. He was in charge of the tool crib, night shift.

"Did you see him last night?"

Dawson was puzzled, but still cooperative. Chester'd spent most of the night in the lab, but had stepped out for a coffee—

"At what time?" Shelly asked.

"Time? We lose all sense of time when we're running tests. No, I do remember. It was eleven. Just eleven. I looked at the clock over the coffee machine, still thinking I might get home by midnight. Well, I'm still here."

"Where was Chester?"

"At the machine. The sugar pull jammed and he loosened it for me. 'It's a dull night,' he said. 'I need something to keep me awake.' I think he was making an excuse for being there when it wasn't time for the regular break. Some shop men never lose their awe of the white collar, even when it's open at the neck and frayed on both sides." And then Dawson paused and seemed to reflect on the total conversation. "I hope Chester isn't in some kind of trouble," he said, "—or his wife."

"Why do you mention his wife?" Keonig asked.

"Because she's not well. I know for a fact that Chester telephones her every night during the ten-o'clock break. One night—oh, six weeks or so ago—I found him at the phones, frantic. We had a big wind that night and the telephone wires were down. He explained how nervous she had been since losing their child. He was so upset, I told him to goof off and go home to see how she was taking the storm."

"Goof off?" Shelly said.

"It was a simple matter for Chester. His work is chiefly at the beginning and the end of the shift. He could duck out the loading exit without being missed."

"Did he do it?"

"Yes, he did. About forty-five minutes later, I noticed he was back in the crib. I kidded him about not even turning off the motor, and he told me that his wife was asleep and he hadn't wanted to disturb her. Chester's a conscientious worker, officer. I wouldn't have made such a suggestion to anyone else."

"He still had to drive past the gateman," Shelly observed.

"Yes, he did."

"Would there be any way of finding out if anyone drove out of your parking lot last night between shift changes."

There was a way. It took a little time, and left everything as it had been in the first place. Two army officers had left the parking lot, and also the wife of one of the late-working technicians who had brought him a dietetic supper. No one else. That left only one question to ask the cooperative Mr. Dawson.

"Did you know a former employee named Leo Manfred?" Shelly inquired.

This time Dawson smiled. "The 'Don Juan' of the drafting board," he said. "Leo was a good man, but he's a drifter. He's left us before. He'll be back when it blows over."

"When what blows over, Mr. Dawson?"

"Whatever made him decide it was time to move on—a woman, probably. Leo loves 'em, but leaves 'em." Then Dawson paused and examined the expressionless faces before him. "I don't suppose it would do any good if I asked what this inquiry is all about," he added.

Shelly gave him the only possible reply.

"As much good," he said, "as if we asked what you were testing last night."

Back on the sidewalk, Mike Shelly stood for awhile watching the traffic at the intersection in front of the airport entrance. Most of it bound for the airport consisted of taxi cabs. He counted six before Keonig called him back to the radio car. They were wanted at headquarters. Dr. Youngston had come in to make a statement.

Factual. That was the word Shelly had left with Dr. Youngston. He waited alone in a small room. His statement, he prefaced, was confidential.

"This is Sergeant Keonig," Shelly explained. "He's working on the case with me."

"Very well," Youngston said. "I suppose I should have told you this when you called at my office this morning, but I hadn't had time to absorb the gravity of the situation. Besides, there are moments between a doctor and a patient that are as sacred as those between a confessor and a priest. I told you that I was called to the Tracy home when Mrs. Tracy lost her child. I was called by Mrs. Peterson. It was all over then, but Mrs. Tracy wasn't aware of what had happened. When I told her, she said something that might have a bearing on her disappearance."

"What did she say?" Shelly asked.

"She called out for someone."

"Her husband?"

"Her husband's name is Chester. The name she called was Leo."

Youngston might have said more, but he didn't have the opportunity. There was a sound from the doorway; Youngston, Shelly, Keonig, all turned at once. Chester Tracy stood staring at them with tragic eyes.

"Leo—" he echoed.

"I thought we were alone," Youngston protested.

"He took Linda. Leo. I'll kill him!"

Chester Tracy was in the doorway one instant, gone from it the next. A moment of shocked surprise, and then Shelly led the exodus to the door. The corridor was already empty; the elevator indicator was starting downward.

"Who is Leo?" Keonig demanded. "Where is he?"

Leo was a target on the other side of the city. Leo was in a garage apartment Shelly had visited once, and Chester Tracy probably a dozen times. Now the elevator indicator had reached street level, and Tracy would be racing for his station wagon. With a grim face, Shelly watched the indicator crawl upward again.

"Leo," he said, "is where we're going right now!"

On the far side of the garage apartment, the side not visible from the street, a sliding glass door opened onto a small sundeck. Shortly after noon, the sun leaned across the roof and bathed the deck in winter warmth. Leo Manfred sprawled in a low-slung deck chair. He still wore his boots and western pants, but had removed the sweater. He tossed his dark glasses on a nearby cocktail table and closed his

eyes. He might have fallen asleep if it weren't for an annoying sound in the driveway below. Finally, it ceased and Leo relaxed. He remained relaxed until a shadow fell across his naked chest. Without benefit of the direct sun, the air was cold. Leo opened his eyes and looked up. Chester Tracy stood over him with a trench coat over his right arm and a brown felt hat in his left hand. He watched Leo's eyes open, and then tossed the hat on his chest in a gesture of contempt.

Leo slid one foot to the floor for leverage.

"Chester—" he said.

The coat slid off Chester's arm. In his hand, he held a gun. There was no time for conversation, only an instant for action. Tossing the hat in Chester's face, Leo lunged forward. Chester had time to fire one shot, wildly, and then Leo's arms were about his body, hurling him back into the room behind the glass doors. When Chester fell, Leo broke free and ran for the front stairway. He had scrambled down to the garage level when suddenly brought up short by the solid substance of Mike Shelly, pistol in hand.

"Drop that gun!" Shelly ordered.

Leo whirled. Chester stood above him at the top of the stairs. He'd retrieved the gun and was leveling it at Leo's head.

"I found the raincoat," he yelled, "and the brown hat—"

"Drop the gun!" Shelly repeated.

"I found 'em—in Leo's closet!"

"Drop it or I'll shoot it out of your hand!"

It wasn't just Mike Shelly facing Chester now; Keonig had come up behind him. Slowly, the gun lowered—then dropped.

"Come down," Shelly said.

Chester obeyed. He came down and stood within a few feet of Leo, while Keonig raced upstairs to find and bring back the hat and coat. At the sight of them, Chester found his voice.

"Make him tell what he's done with my Linda," he demanded. "Make Leo tell!"

"I haven't done anything with Linda," Leo protested. "I was in San Diego—"

"You took her away in a taxi! You always were crazy about Linda!"

Shelly took the hat and coat from Keonig's hands. Both showed signs of a lot of use.

"*I* was crazy about Linda?" Leo howled. "Let's get this

straight. Linda was crazy about me! Why do you think she married you, Chester? I'll tell you why. Because she was crazy about me and I wouldn't have her. She married you out of spite—"

Chester no longer had a gun, but he had a body. Before anyone could stop him, he rushed at Leo and hurled him back against the chrome handle of a refrigerator stacked among the landlord's furnishings. Leo groaned and staggered forward, and then the door of the refrigerator slowly opened, bringing Mike Shelly's search to an end. All of the racks had been removed to make room for Linda Tracy's body.

"My God!" Leo gasped. "Oh, my God!"

It was Dr. Youngston who recovered first from the shock of discovery. He went to the body and made a quick examination. Linda Tracy had been struck a blow on the head "—with the usual blunt instrument," he said. "Dead for at least twelve hours."

"A little longer," Shelly said quietly. "Since about 10:55 last night."

His words sounded strange against the stunned silence which still pervaded the garage.

"How do you know that?" Keonig demanded.

"Because," Shelly answered, "if it takes eighteen minutes to drive from Flight Research to the Tracy house, it must take the same time to drive from the Tracy house to Flight Research. Think back, Keonig. The cab driver told us that he had picked up a man wearing a trench coat, a brown felt hat, and dark glasses at ten minutes past ten in front of the Inter-Continental waiting room at the airport. He drove to the Tracy address, reaching it shortly before 10:30, picked up Linda Tracy and drove to Flight Research, where he discharged his passengers."

"Where they promptly disappeared," Keonig added. "Completely."

"But they didn't. They stepped behind the shrubbery and started to walk toward the gate in the wide fence, and then—" Shelly handed the coat and hat back to Keonig and went to the body. It was fully clothed—light tan coat, blue suit, black pumps. He wrenched loose the right pump and examined the heel. It was very high and narrow with a tip about the size of a penny with one side flattened. "Dr. Youngston, if a woman wearing a pump such as this were struck a heavy blow, hard enough to kill, from the back,

left side, wouldn't the weight of her body fall on the right foot?"

"I suppose it would," Youngston said.

Shelly's thumb pricked at the residue of dried mud on the heel. "The grass on the grounds at Flight Research doesn't leave tracks," he mused, "but there was one small round hole near a leaky sprinkler valve that would just fit this heel. A woman's shoes are very interesting, particularly Mrs. Tracy's. She has a pair of plastic slippers in her closet less than a month old; but the soles are worn down as if she'd been doing a lot of dancing. And she has a pair of walking shoes in that same closet with mud on them. Now there's no mud on the way to the mail box, but there could be mud in the unpaved alley leading to the street."

Still holding the pump, Shelly made his way past a dazed Leo and a stunned Chester to the trunk of Leo's convertible. He opened it and peered inside. A jack, a tire iron, a spare tire and a folded saddle blanket. He shook out the blanket with one hand and then tossed it back inside the trunk.

"And then," he continued, "there's the matter of the sleeping pills Linda Tracy didn't take—but told her husband she did. What was to stop her, after that ten-o'clock call, from slipping out the back way, walking down the alley, and meeting some Prince Charming to take her to the ball? But, like Cinderella, she had a witching hour—three A.M. Before three, when faithful husband returned, she had to be back in bed, asleep."

"Cinderella slipped up," Keonig observed.

"So did Linda Tracy. And so did her killer."

"I was in San Diego!" Leo protested. "I was on the road driving home at 10:55!"

"What about the night the wind blew down the telephone wires?" Shelly demanded. "Where were you then?"

Leo didn't answer. He was still struggling with shock.

"Weren't you waiting in your convertible at the end of the alley—"

"I didn't kill her," Leo protested.

"—wearing that trench coat and the brown hat—"

"I went out with her a few times, that's all. Just—just a few times—"

"—under the street lamp where you could be watched by anyone who had cause to be suspicious?"

"I didn't want to go out with her!" Leo cried. "I was sick of her. That's why I put in for this job in San Diego."

"He's lying—" Chester began.

"No," Shelly said, firmly, "I don't think he is. But rumors fly fast in a small plant, don't they? What did you think when you heard that Leo Manfred had quit and was moving south, Mr. Tracy? Were you afraid he was going to take your wife with him?"

The question caught Chester Tracy by surprise. He blinked stupidly, like a man blinded by sudden light.

"It's Leo's coat," he stammered. "It's Leo's hat—"

"Yes, and your wife had seen both of them often enough to have recognized Leo in an instant if he'd been the man who came for her in the cab. But she couldn't have recognized a new trench coat and a new hat—particularly not if she'd been called at ten o'clock and told that her husband had been injured on the job and the company was sending someone after her in a cab. The man who came for her was careful not to talk more than necessary. He sat on the opposite side of the seat. When he gave her a cigarette—not the brand he smoked, but a brand picked up in the airport waiting room where he must have kept the coat and hat in a locker—he let her get her own light. There could be only one reason for such caution."

Shelly stood with the black pump in his hands, and the tense faces of four men before him. But one face was more tense than the others.

"If Linda Tracy hadn't been upset," he added, "she would have recognized the man who came for her, in spite of his disguise. She knew him well enough. He was her husband."

"No!" Tracy protested. "It was Leo—"

"It was meant to sound like Leo when the cab driver told his story, as you knew he would do. That cab bothered me from the beginning. It was too easy to trace. Hadn't you been watching your wife since the night Dawson sent you home to inadvertently discover that she wasn't taking her pills at ten o'clock?"

"I work!" Tracy said. "I work nights!"

"But Dawson showed you a way to get in and out of the plant any time you wanted to without being missed. You knew she was going out with Manfred, and you knew Manfred was moving. You killed your wife, Mr. Tracy."

"No—"

"And made a clumsy attempt to frame Leo Manfred. The way you pushed him against that refrigerator just now was a little obvious. If Manfred had put your wife's body in

there, he wouldn't have stood within twenty feet of it!"

Chester Tracy's station wagon was parked just outside the open garage. Shelly went to it and opened the tailgate. Early in the morning, the windows had been curtained with fog; nothing inside could be seen. But now he found a canvas tarpaulin, old and dirty but spotted with stains the police lab would find interesting.

"Time of death: approximately 10:55, Doctor," he said, "and then the body was carried to the parking lot until the usual time. After that, Chester Tracy went inside to have a cup of coffee before finishing his shift. But it wasn't a dull night, was it, Tracy?"

Shelly turned around and waited for a protest that didn't come. Chester Tracy had lowered his head and was crying, softly.

"Linda," he said. "My Linda—"

He had the face of a kid who had been given the loveliest toy in the shop window—and broken it.

MURDER ME GENTLY

by C. B. Gilford

WHEN Wint Marshall heard the sound, distant and faint though it was, he knew it was a shot. Had he been expecting it? Or hoping for it?

"Wint, what was that?" asked his wife, Vivian, at the opposite end of the long dining table, serene, cool.

"I don't know."

He lied. He *knew*. That had been a shot.

"Really, darling, it sounded almost like a gunshot." Her gray eyes glittered in the candlelight. "Phil, Harriet, didn't that sound like a shot to you?" She had turned to their dinner guests, the Jennings.

He knew the sound had been a shot. He knew from what direction it had come.

"Wint darling, it must have come from the Listers'." Her lips, only her lips, smiled. "Do you suppose they're shooting at each other?"

He closed his eyes, conscious of the hard knot of fear in his stomach. He closed his eyes, and there it all was.

Diana Lister had lived in that sprawling ranch bungalow next door almost a year before he became involved with her. The Listers had a pool, and in the summer Diana spent most of her time in it and beside it. There were pool parties, there was the noise of them coming across the hedge, and twice he and Vivian were invited. He liked Diana's figure on those occasions, and the direct glances she gave him. It might be interesting, it occurred to him, to try to discover the meaning of those glances.

But perhaps the most interesting aspect of the whole affair was the curious little problem presented by Diana's being a next-door neighbor. It was a kind of sport to elude Vivian's observation, to deceive her, merely to enjoy the deception.

What really began it was the phone call, on a rainy Sat-

urday. On sunny Saturdays he usually played golf. Perhaps Diana knew that much of his habits. Perhaps she knew, too, that Vivian's car had just swept out of the driveway. But she asked for Vivian.

"My wife's gone to some bazaar or other," he told her.

Then there was a silence.

"I guess we're both left in the lurch today," she said finally. "Howard had to go to California this morning."

He smiled, congratulating himself. His patience had paid off. She had taken the initiative. Now he waited, forcing her to make the complete invitation.

"Would you like a cup of coffee?" she asked.

"Sounds good," he admitted casually.

"It's brewing right now. Why don't you come over?"

"All right."

"You can come through the garage. It's a shortcut."

He left his own house via the small door in the garage. He noticed how the trees and shrubbery concealed him almost completely if he didn't go down the driveway to the street, but if instead he dodged through a gap in the hedge. Wet leaves dampened his sport jacket. Another few steps—it was amazing, how dense was the screen of foliage in the Lister yard also—and he came to the small door in the Lister garage.

He hesitated there, savoring the enticement, the temptation, the risk. Then he went in.

Diana was in the kitchen. She was wearing slacks and a full blouse, neat, well done, attractive, nothing obvious but more than was necessary for a last-minute coffee date.

In the living room, at far opposite ends of the sofa, they somehow became quickly confidential. "Vivian keeps busy, doesn't she?" Diana began.

"She's the active clubwoman type."

"Not the homemaker?"

"Our part-time maid seems to be adequate for most of that."

"She would have been a perfect mate for Howard."

"What do you mean?"

"He's away so much. Out of town. He doesn't make many demands."

Their eyes met in a long, frank look. It was just a matter of time, of preliminaries, of amenities. They were both civilized people. . . .

"Wint darling," Vivian said across the dining table, "aren't you the least bit curious about that noise?"

"No!"

He'd blurted the answer too quickly. Vivian's eyebrows raised almost imperceptibly. Unable to meet her gaze, he stabbed at the slice of roast on his plate, sawed viciously at it with his knife. But both his hands were trembling, and she must have noticed. She noticed everything. He mustn't give the show away now, having deceived her so successfully all these months.

"Doesn't Vivian know a thing about us?" Diana had asked. It wasn't a new question. Diana had an almost morbid curiosity about everything concerning his wife.

"I told you," he answered, trying to be patient, "that Vivian is far too busy with all her own little activities."

They were having dinner at Leon's, the kind of place which neither Vivian nor any of her friends would ever possibly frequent. Howard was safe in Chicago. In fact, the setup was very cozy, absolutely nothing to complain about. If Diana would only leave it at that. He never nagged her about Howard.

"I just can't understand," Diana persisted, "how a woman can have an unfaithful husband and not sense something, not suspect at least."

"Is Howard always true blue on these long business trips of his?"

"Absolutely." She said it with utter finality.

"How can you be so sure?"

She shrugged her almost bare shoulders. "He loves me."

He speculated upon that proposition for a moment, while Diana sipped at her martini. She was delectable. Physically, that is, with her honey-blonde hair, her richly textured, flawless skin, and all of her always so fresh, fragrant.

But at the same time she was shallow, sometimes he thought almost stupid. He had discerned that rather quickly in their relationship. But then how many women could be expected to be physically satisfying and clever besides? Now Vivian was clever. Intelligent.

Howard Lister probably did love this pretty wife of his. Howard was an oaf. Hardworking, ambitious, a very dull sort, but he was capable of loving Diana, of giving her the

full measure of affection and devotion, and too dumb to imagine his wife would return him any less.

"When are you going to tell Vivian?" Diana asked suddenly.

"Tell her what?"

"About us, you and me," she said.

He felt a prickly sensation of uneasiness crawl through him. "I haven't made any plans to tell her," he answered.

"But you must, my love. That's what I want to talk about now. Because I want to tell Howard at the same time. . . ."

He squeezed her hand hard, stopping her. "I don't see why," he said frankly, "why we should tell anybody anything."

"But we'll have to."

"Why?"

"We'll have to start divorce proceedings sometime."

"Divorce!"

"We can't go on like this forever."

He stared at her. No, of course, he hadn't presumed that this situation would endure quite forever. It was simply pleasant while it lasted.

"So if Vivian hasn't guessed by this time, you'll simply have to tell her."

"Diana, please listen to me." He moved closer to her on the leather seat so their shoulders and their knees touched. While one hand squeezed hers affectionately and reassuringly, his other stroked her bare arm lightly. "Darling, don't you understand the spot I'm in?"

She shook her head frankly.

"My job . . . my business . . . I owe everything to Vivian's family connections."

"What difference does that make?"

"What difference! If I divorced Vivian, I'd starve. We'd starve."

Her eyes were warm, loving. She leaned even closer, lifted her lips and brushed his softly. "Wint darling, I wouldn't mind. It would be thrilling to starve with you."

If he had ever had any doubts concerning her shallowness and stupidity, those doubts dissolved at that moment.

"Don't you want to marry me, Wint?"

"Well, of course, I do. But don't you think . . ." He made one last, desperate, hopeful stab. "Don't you think

everything is pretty good as it is now? After all, we have the advantages without the disadvantages."

The look in her eyes didn't change—a look that combined complete love with just as complete determination. He decided at that moment, regretfully, that the end had come.

Vivian, from across the dining table, eyed him carefully. "Wint, aren't you going to do something?"

"What should I do?"

"Maybe you should go next door and investigate."

He tried to orient himself in the present, to disengage from the past. How much time had elapsed since they'd heard the shot? A minute? A minute and a half?

"Whatever it was, it's all over with now," he said.

"It's over with," he had told Diana.

She had been looking at him steadily for some time, leaving her martini untasted. Her eyes were glass, with no real expression in them, mere imitations of human eyes. The essence of Diana Lister had retreated deep into some hidden recess, trying to keep from being hurt.

But he pursued her. "It's finished," he said.

She would neither comment nor ask questions. True, this was a little bombshell, and he had not expected eloquence. But he didn't like this silence of hers. It had an ominous quality.

"You see, Diana, it really didn't start out to be serious. We were both rather bored, and we discovered we could amuse each other. Then it just sort of crept up on us. You fell in love with me, and, of course, I fell in love with you." He told the lie without hesitation. "But if I tried to divorce Vivian, it would be curtains for me. I'm thirty-six, Diana. You don't go out and start all over again at that age. Now, I know we can't go on just amusing each other because, like I said, we're in love. So there's only one thing to do. Make a clean break. It'll be hard at first, but it'll be the best thing in the long run."

He stopped talking because he realized he was making no progress. She was sitting there, still staring at him, and dumbly shaking her head.

"I can't let you go, Wint." Words came suddenly, in a low, frightened voice. "I couldn't go on living without you. I love you, Wint."

"I know that, darling. I love you, and we'll have this knowledge of each other's love to carry us through this tough period of adjustment."

"All right, I won't insist that you divorce Vivian right now. We can work it out some way, as long as we have each other, as long as . . ."

"No! It's got to be a clean break, Diana. Complete and final."

The tears were coming at last.

"I'll kill myself!"

And now, while he and Vivian entertained the Jennings at a quiet dinner, across the way at the Listers there had been the sound of a shot.

Panic threatened him. Vivian had quipped about the Listers shooting at each other, but he was fairly certain that Howard was gone on one of his frequent trips. He hadn't seen Diana for four weeks, but he'd kept a wary eye on the place. She hadn't tried to call him, or to write letters. He had even begun to hope that he'd gotten rid of her, had escaped unscathed.

But now had she been so stupid, so foolish, as to shoot herself? Not that he would really mind. If she were dead, he would be permanently rid of her, as long as he wasn't involved. The awful question was, was he involved?

His mind, fogged for the past moment by memories of how he'd gotten into this mess, began finally to focus upon the grim present. If Diana had shot herself, if she were dead, what would link the suicide to him? Was he in the clear?

His *picture!* With a horrible, sick feeling, he remembered that he'd succumbed to her little romantic request for a picture. "To hold next to my heart when you're not with me," she'd said, and he had fallen for it. His ego had been pleased that she so adored him. He'd given her a small snapshot, the wallet or passport variety, and she'd been so happy she'd kissed it before she put it into her purse. *Where was it now?*

Once his mind began to search for dangers, they multiplied. Had Diana written a note? Suicides often do. Would that note name him, point at him? And how would that look, to his business associates, to Vivian?

Suppose . . . suppose the suicide attempt hadn't been quite successful? He could see the newspapers, hear the

gossip—attempted suicide of attractive blonde blamed on philandering neighbor—and Diana, with a tiny scratch on her arm, gaudily bandaged, chattering hysterically about her shattered romance with Wint Marshall.

"Wint!"

"Yes?" He halted, realizing that he'd moved, that he'd risen from the table, and had been leaving the room.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to see what's happening at the Listers'."

He rushed out, taking the quickest way, through the garage. It was still raining. He remembered vaguely now that a drizzle had started when the Jennings came. But he was already late, maybe too late, so he took the shortcut anyway. He didn't mind the wet leaves as he went through the hedge, didn't mind the mud there that he almost slipped on.

Lights were on in several rooms of the Lister house. But he could see nothing, because the draperies were drawn in the lighted rooms. The place was silent, as if it were empty.

He took two steps toward the front door, ready to knock or ring the bell, till it occurred to him that somebody in there might be alive and holding a gun—Howard, who would turn it on him, or Diana, who might want to take her lover with her, and do the same thing. He still had the key to the small door into the garage. He rummaged in his wallet, found it, put it into the lock, and opened the door.

The garage was dark, but he knew the route well enough to be able to feel along the wall till he came to the kitchen door. The kitchen was dark too, but again he was in familiar territory. He managed to find his way without making any noise.

The nearest illumination was in the living room. He stole toward it. One lamp, he could see, was on. The light from it was dim. Then, around the edge of a wall, he saw Diana.

She was alone, dressed in a black cocktail dress, sitting in the very center of the sofa. The gun rested on her lap, but clutched in her right hand, with her finger still inside the trigger guard. Faint in the room was the acrid smell of cordite. The gun had been fired. On Diana's left arm, high, near the shoulder, was a red gash, from which blood had run down, down to her elbow, onto her skirt, and from there to the seat of the sofa.

He stared at her in amazement. She'd lost weight. There

was a boniness in her features now, a hollowness in her cheeks. Under her eyes were dark, puffy half-moons, accentuated by the dreadful pallor of her face, but the eyes themselves were reddish, blurred. Those eyes looked at nothingness, and Wint Marshall wondered—could she possibly imagine that she has killed herself, that she's already dead?

But worse thoughts raced through his brain, thoughts of his own predicament. News of this would inevitably leak out, as well as the explanation. The notoriety, the accusations, infidelity, Vivian an object of pity and ridicule; she wouldn't endure it for a moment. He'd be out, ruined, with no hope of a comeback.

If this stupid female here could be silenced!

He acted, from that point on, according to the dictates of the deepest instinct for self-preservation. He didn't pause to plan or consider. He approached her cautiously, behind the sofa, to get on her right side. She didn't move, and at first did not even seem to be aware of his presence. He sat down next to her, but not too close, and away from the direction the gun was pointing.

"Wint, I've missed you so much."

"And I've missed you."

"You've come back then?" A light flickered in her dead eyes.

"I'm here . . ."

"I guess I didn't put the gun in the right place, it jumped. I'll find some other way to do it, Wint, if you don't stay with me. . . ."

Of course, she would. She was stubborn. So he had no choice.

"Darling, let me have the gun. I don't want you to get hurt."

He put his hand under her right hand, wrapped his fingers around hers, squeezed his index finger inside the trigger guard on top of hers. He did it all gently, carefully. She was pliant, unresisting. She didn't even seem to notice what he was doing, or at least the significance of it.

He lifted her hand with the gun still in it. He had to turn her wrist a little in doing so, but he managed to put the barrel of the small pistol between her breasts. Trustful, she did not resist. With the same gentleness as before, he pulled the trigger.

The report was surprisingly loud. Diana's head jerked

around, so that for one tiny second she looked at him, knowing, understanding. Then her head fell to the other side, and her body tipped forward. He let go of her hand and the gun quickly. She slipped off the sofa and onto the rug, in a twisted little heap, silent and motionless.

He got up and moved away instantly. He saw the pool of blood widening beneath the corpse. And then he saw too his own muddy tracks on the rug. Panic threatened him for a moment, till he realized that he wasn't going to try to conceal his presence here.

But he would have to move fast. His dinner companions would have heard the second shot. Vivian might be concerned about him. She might send Phil Jennings across to investigate, or she might even come herself. Anyway, someone would be here in minutes.

He couldn't conduct his search in those muddy shoes, leaving an obvious trail wherever he went, so he slipped out of them and headed immediately for Diana's bedroom. Then he stopped and cursed aloud. Why hadn't he asked Diana where the picture was, or whether she'd left a note? It would have been so simple!

He fought against his own near panic. In the bedroom the ceiling light was on. Disarray was everywhere. Do your job, he told himself.

A suicide leaves a note in a conspicuous place, wanting it to be found. A hasty glance told him there was no note, at least in this bedroom. Picture—when he'd first given it to her, she'd stuck it into her purse. Why shouldn't it be there now?

He moved swiftly, handkerchief out, wiping his prints off everything he touched. Purses, there were a dozen of them in the closet. No picture. Diana's money purse was on her boudoir table. Credit cards, membership cards, assorted junk, but no picture. Drawers—the ones that belonged to Diana—nothing. Jewelry box . . .

Why hadn't he asked her where it was! He was losing his grip, wasting energy, wasting time. He had to think.

Then it was too late. The doorbell rang. He had to answer it. When he opened the front door, Phil Jennings was standing there. He looked relieved when he saw Wint.

"The woman shot herself," Wint said. "Go back and call the police and a doctor."

Phil had been trying to see past Wint's shoulder. Wint

stepped aside enough for him to look, but not enough to let him in. "What are you going to do?" Phil asked.

"I'll stay here."

Phil was pale, too confused to question the division of tasks. He disappeared into the darkness of the yard, and Wint shut the door behind him.

Now he had a few extra minutes in which to work. Maybe not more than five, depending on how fast Phil was with the telephone. So he was bold now, in his stockinged feet. He turned on lights freely, searched every room for the note. In two minutes he was satisfied there wasn't any, which made sense. Diana's mind hadn't been on her husband, and she wouldn't leave a note to her lover here in this house. That was almost certain.

The problem of the picture remained. Would the police search the house? Why should they? No, Howard would find it, later on. Howard might be talked out of it. Maybe . . .

But there was nowhere else to look, short of turning the house upside down. She could have lost it, he thought suddenly. Yes, there were a lot of things she could have done with it.

The doorbell rang again. It was too late for anything now except a brazen pretense of innocence. Protected by the drawn draperies, he slipped back into his muddied shoes. When he opened the door, he saw a pair of uniformed policemen and a car in the driveway.

"We were eating dinner and we heard the first shot," he began. "I live next door. . . ."

But the two cops weren't interested in his story. They'd only come to take charge of the scene, to see that people like him didn't disturb anything. He watched them as they looked around and took notes.

The notes were for Lieutenant Benjamin of Homicide. He was a small, dark man who came and talked quietly and never smiled. He surveyed the situation, looked at the notes, and gave some orders. Then he turned to Wint Marshall.

"We heard this shot from next door," Wint told him. "We had guests for dinner, and we were still sitting around the table. We didn't do anything for a couple of minutes, while my wife kept saying it sounded like a shot and I ought to come over here and see. Well, I came over and rang the bell, but nobody answered. But some lights were on, and I

thought maybe there was somebody hurt in here. Well, I managed to get in through the garage, and there was Diana —Mrs. Lister—sitting on the sofa with her arm all bloody and the gun still in her hand. I started toward her and I said, 'Give me that gun.' She waved the gun around and told me to stay away from her, so I backed off. I tried to talk to her but she wouldn't answer. . . ."

"She didn't say anything, huh?"

"Just warned me not to come near her."

"Okay, then what?"

"Well, my talking didn't do any good. She shot herself."

"You saw her actually fire the second shot?"

"Yes."

"Did you try to stop her then?"

Wint hesitated. He knew about tests that could be made on a person's hand to determine whether that hand had fired a gun.

"Well, I'm kind of confused about what happened exactly. When I saw her point the gun at herself, I jumped toward her to try to stop her."

"You wrestled for the gun?"

Wint felt sweat on his palms. "Well, no. I think I got to her just as she fired, or a split second afterward, but we didn't fight over the gun."

"You saw her die?"

"Yes, she just fell off the sofa and landed there on the rug."

It was a good story, a little blurred, as it naturally would be. As a witness to a suicide, he ought to be in a state of semi-shock. Lieutenant Benjamin acted neither sympathetic nor suspicious. He told Wint he could go home now, and he'd be questioned again later.

Vivian and the Jennings were waiting for him. Vivian was so amazed at having a suicide next door she didn't think to be suspicious.

"Why do you suppose she did it?" she wondered. "She was young, pretty, well off. Trouble with Howard maybe?"

"Howard will have to enlighten us about that."

He excused himself as quickly as he could, went to the bathroom and washed his hands thoroughly. He was beginning to feel sick now, a delayed reaction, not to Diana's death nor to his having caused it, but to the tremendous risk he had taken.

Beyond the hedge the Listers' house was ablaze with

lights; Benjamin's men searching. What if they found that picture? A hitherto obvious suicide would take on new dimensions.

They'd heard the first shot about eight-thirty. At a quarter to ten the Marshalls' doorbell rang, and it was Benjamin. Wint came out of the bathroom, pale and queasy.

Benjamin asked quiet questions, and received corroboration of at least part of Wint's story. It was clear that the first shot had come while the Marshalls and the Jennings were dining. It was also clear that Wint Marshall investigated the shot only at his wife's insistence. As Wint listened, he felt more confident. He had an alibi.

Then the lieutenant sprang his little surprise. "This is a case of homicide," he began, "and we always take that as a serious matter. We want to get the precise facts. Mr. Jennings, Mr. Marshall, we hope you don't mind giving us your fingerprints."

"Fingerprints!" It was Phil.

Benjamin nodded. "We've taken a print off the doorbell button. That should be yours, Mr. Jennings. And the print on the key in the lock in the garage door, that should be yours, Mr. Marshall."

The key! The key Diana had given him so he could come in any time he wanted to! Had he actually left it in the lock?

"By the way, Mr. Marshall, how did you find that key to get in the garage door?" Smooth, calm. Benjamin lighted a cigarette as he asked the question.

Wint's answer was equally as smooth. "I remember now, it was in the lock. I was glad of that because I didn't have to break a window or anything."

Benjamin seemed satisfied. He phoned the Listers', called his man over, and in five minutes he had both sets of prints. "What I'm really after," the lieutenant explained, "is to make sure there are no strange prints around the Lister house."

"Strange prints?" Wint asked.

"You didn't see anybody around the place, Mr. Marshall, so I guess there wasn't anybody while you were there at least, but there might have been somebody earlier. You see, what we haven't established yet is the motive. Why should a pretty young woman like Mrs. Lister have committed suicide?"

"You might check with her husband on that," Vivian suggested.

"I will when he gets here," Benjamin promised. "He's been notified. One other little thing, Mr. Marshall. I said we wanted to get the precise details on this. You told us you grabbed for Mrs. Lister as she pulled the trigger. We'd like to know how close you got. Could you come down to headquarters and take a paraffin test? That might show us whether you actually got a hand on the gun as it was being fired."

Wint didn't like the way things were going. Why couldn't Benjamin be satisfied with the obvious facts? He could scarcely refuse to take the test, so he rode downtown with the lieutenant. On the way there was desultory conversation. Benjamin wanted to know about Diana Lister. Wint professed to have been rather poorly acquainted with her.

There was a technician waiting at headquarters for them. He poured a double layer of paraffin over both Wint's hands, since Wint had professed not to remember quite how he had grabbed for the gun, with cotton in between the two layers. When these casts were peeled off, some kind of liquid was poured into them. They waited about twenty minutes. Then, in the right-hand cast a few, a very few, dark blue specks appeared.

"Positive," the lieutenant said. "Mr. Marshall, your hand was very near the gun, or maybe right on it."

"I've already told you that," Wint answered.

"But now we're a little more sure."

Lieutenant Benjamin was going to be a problem. It was as if he knew something he wasn't divulging, but was waiting to put all the pieces together. Could the police have found the picture?

A uniformed cop took Wint home. The Jennings had waited for his arrival. He had to tell them and Vivian everything. When they left, Vivian was thoughtful.

"Why did you have to get yourself involved?" she challenged him.

"You kept telling me to go and investigate."

"Investigating is one thing, but trying to stop Diana Lister from shooting herself was quite another."

"Do you mean I should have just stood and watched?"

She shrugged coolly. "Was it really any of your concern, darling?"

Lieutenant Benjamin dropped by the office the next day. Wint's secretary announced the visitor in a noncommittal voice; the morning papers had carried a partial story.

"Thought you'd like to keep up with the case first-hand," the lieutenant said. "I've spent the morning with Howard Lister."

"Was he any help?"

"The guy's in pretty bad shape. According to him, his wife had been a little moody for the past several months, a little withdrawn. 'Preoccupied' was the word he used. Then about four weeks ago the symptoms got worse. She became very depressed. Of course, he never imagined she would take her own life. But the strange thing is that Mr. Lister, her husband, the man who lived with her and should have understood her, can give no explanation for the preoccupation, for the depression, or for the suicide. He questioned his wife a number of times and she told him nothing. And he claims that he gave her no cause for unhappiness. He was a good provider, and a faithful husband."

Wint declined to comment.

"We found a good thumbprint of your friend Jennings on the front doorbell. None of yours though, Mr. Marshall. You did say you rang the bell, didn't you? That would have given Mrs. Lister a warning that somebody was coming."

"Jennings' print must have erased mine," Wint pointed out. "Yes, I did try the front door first."

"We got a good right thumb print of yours on the key to that garage door, thanks to the fact you left the door open and protected it from the rain. And so far we've got no strange prints."

Wint felt a trifle easier. In their search for evidence of an unknown party, the police apparently had found no indications of his looking for the picture.

"Suicides usually like to be alone," the lieutenant mused, "yet Mrs. Lister shot herself right in front of you."

"People jump off buildings in front of crowds."

"Sure, I know. By the way, Mr. Marshall, we borrowed your muddy shoes from your wife this morning. All the tracks inside and outside the Lister house seem to be yours. My theory hasn't panned out."

"What was your theory, Lieutenant?"

Benjamin sat slumped in his chair, his eyes staring past Wint, maybe to the window, maybe toward nothing. His expression was enigmatic. Yet there was something about

him, a zeal, a dedication, that made him distinctly menacing.

"I was looking for a mystery man. This guy didn't actually pull the trigger on Diana Lister; but he was the guy who made her do it. He was her lover."

Wint stayed calm. "What makes you think she had a lover?"

"I sensed it. Then Howard Lister's story backed me up. What's the thing most likely to send a woman into a depression? Disappointment in love."

Wint refused to panic. If Benjamin had found the picture, he'd have said so. And even if he had, Diana's death was still suicide, not murder.

"That poor woman shot herself, all right," Benjamin went on. "We did the paraffin test on her, too. Her hand fired the gun. But the man who made her do it is the real culprit."

"What could you do to him even if you found him?" Wint asked with appropriate interest, no more.

"That depends," Benjamin said, "on how close I could link him to the crime."

He got up to go. At the door he turned back. "Lister's pretty broken up. Says he doesn't want to live in that house any more. He's moved to a hotel already. My men may be in and out a few times. So if you see any suspicious-looking characters hanging around the place, don't bother to call the police. They'll *be* the police."

Diana Lister was put into the ground. Wint and Vivian attended the burial services. Vivian commented on the widower's stolidity at the graveside.

"He could have at least put on a little better show," she said. "He could display just a little remorse. After all, he drove her to it."

Wint didn't argue. Let her think that. Let everybody think that. It was convenient.

The only trouble was that Lieutenant Benjamin didn't think it. Benjamin knew better, and he wasn't going to let the matter rest. He had a theory, a logical, accurate theory, and he hadn't given up trying to prove it. There was only one thing which could prove it—the picture.

How painstaking a search of the house had the police made? There was no way of telling. But police still went there occasionally; they were up to something. And at any time Howard could change his mind, could return to the

house, start gathering up Diana's belongings, perhaps, or just browse through them.

Wint Marshall would be involved in a scandal then, not just the scandal of a love affair, but of a suicide. And whether Benjamin could prove murder against him or not, his whole social and business world would be ruined. He'd be a dead man.

It was entirely a matter, then, of who found the picture first. Right after the funeral Wint got his chance.

Howard came over to where Wint and Vivian were standing. His big, plain face was almost expressionless, but the muscles were taut, and his voice was hoarse. "Wint, I haven't had a chance to thank you."

"I didn't do anything."

"You tried. I want to thank you."

"Okay, Howard."

"Could you do me a favor? I don't want to go back to that house. I'd like to leave the key with you, in case somebody needs to be let in."

"Sure thing, Howard."

He almost grabbed the key out of Howard's hand. This was a fantastic bit of luck. He only hoped he was concealing his exultation.

But it was a whole week before his opportunity came. He wanted to get into the Lister house in the daytime, so he wouldn't have to light up the place. He faked a bad case of indigestion in order to stay home, and he watched from his window. The teams from Homicide hadn't been around for days. Only the lieutenant himself visited now, the lieutenant and one plainclothesman who chauffeured him. He came every morning, stayed half an hour or so, probably trying to find some lead to that missing "lover." But then he left, and nobody from the police came back the rest of the day.

Vivian had been nursing Wint, but finally she just had to get to the beauty salon, and do some shopping. She left the house at nine. The lieutenant departed minutes afterward.

Wint didn't hesitate. He dressed, took his old route through the hedge, and boldly entered the Lister house with Howard's key. The living room was the same as he'd last seen it, except for one item. Diana's body was gone. There was now only a huge rust-colored stain on the beige carpet. And there too, he saw, were his own muddy footprints, in-

termingled with the old blood, the whole drama of his crime preserved, fossilized, for all to see.

He leaned against the wall, shaken, sick. The picture—the nagging terror of what that little piece of paper could do to him if the wrong people found it—find the thing! Find it, if it takes all day, all night; if you have to tear the house apart!

. He lurched into Diana's bedroom, and searched all over again, the same as on the night of the murder. Jewelry box, purses, drawers—only this time he wasn't as careful. He didn't care about leaving prints. He didn't care about leaving things exactly as they'd been. There was an overriding necessity now—*find it!*

But it wasn't anywhere. He ripped the jewelry box apart, tore the lining out of Diana's purses, went into drawers of clothing, cosmetics, left the contents strewn about. He did the same with closet shelves, hatboxes, garment bags, the bed, pillows, pillowcases, everything. . . .

He was looking behind the pictures on the wall when he saw the man in the doorway, a stranger in a plain dark suit, and with a weary smile on his face. This man looked at him for a moment, then went to the telephone on the table by Diana's bed, and dialed a number.

"Lieutenant," he said into the phone, "he's here."

"There had to be someone involved with Mrs. Lister," Benjamin said. He stood in the middle of the Lister living room, his hands in his trouser pockets, quiet, relaxed, not even triumphant. "You were the most likely candidate."

Wint Marshall tried to think, tried to muster his resources.

"Oh, we realize that Mrs. Lister made a suicide attempt. She fired the first shot. But we all know that shot failed. Then you came to 'investigate.' The business of the key in the garage door wasn't conclusive, but it was strange. Then there was the paraffin test. Again not conclusive, since you had maintained you tried to stop her. What we liked better, Mr. Marshall, was your muddy footprints."

Wint jerked to attention. "What?"

"There was quite a mixture of mud and blood there on the rug. We were a little while untangling it. You said you leaped for Mrs. Lister when she started to fire the gun the second time. Well, the evidence on the rug didn't corroborate that. There were your footprints in front of the sofa indicating that you were *sitting* there next to Mrs. Lister,

before the second shot. How do we know it was before, not after? Because her blood was *on top of* the footprints. You sat next to her while she was still alive. Simple?"

Wint stared at the place on the rug. He thought he saw the pattern, but he couldn't be sure. He'd wait for the explanation.

"So we concluded, Mr. Marshall, that you sort of helped Mrs. Lister fire that second shot."

He shook his head weakly.

"I considered arresting you immediately, but there was a missing factor—motive. Why should the man next door rush over here and help this poor woman complete her attempted suicide? Why, unless he were romantically involved with her? Why should she want to die unless she'd been abandoned? Why should he abandon her unless she were going to expose him? If he'd been involved with her, wouldn't he want to destroy all evidence of that involvement? So we set a little trap. Had Mr. Lister give you a key. Then in sight of your windows, I came and went from this house every day, with a companion, except that the man with whom I left was always a different man from the one with whom I came. I was relieving the guard every morning, you might say. There was always a man here, waiting for you. And you came. But you didn't find the picture, did you?"

Wint Marshall leaped wildly to his feet, and then was restrained by two policemen. "You found it!" he gasped. "Where was it?"

The lieutenant nodded. "Yes, we found it, billfold size. You probably had others made. We'll find those too, and compare them, just to make sure."

Wint managed only a moan this time. "You mean you didn't recognize me from my picture?"

"How could we?"

The lieutenant took a small package from an inner pocket. He unfolded the cardboard, then the tissue paper. Inside was a small wrinkled square of slick paper, bloodstained, and with a round hole in the center of it. A picture without a face.

"It was in a locket Diana Lister wore," Lieutenant Benjamin said. "The bullet went right through it."

BE MY VALENTINE

by Henry Slesar

THERE was a noticeable difference in the width of his smile and the length of his stride as Harrison Fell emerged from the elevator into the lobby of Bliss & Bakerfield, Inc., Advertising. The receptionist got a rousing good morning; the mail boy an unaccustomed hello; Hilda, Fell's secretary, got the carnation he wore in his lapel. For a man already ground up and spewed out by the agency's rumor mill, Harrison Fell was acting strangely unconcerned.

"Get me the big chief," he grinned at Hilda. "Tell him to brace himself. Tell him I'm dropping an H-bomb right in his lap. Well, go on, go on. Tell Bliss I want to see him!"

Hilda swallowed, and picked up her phone. She spoke briefly to Bliss' secretary and arranged for the bomb run. When she informed her boss that Bliss was braced and waiting, Fell shot out of his swivel chair as if from an ejection seat.

On the stairway between the two floors, the account executive lost some of his ebullience. He was a large, broad-chested man with shoulders by Brooks Brothers, hair by Brylcreem, skin by ManTan, and soul by Cadillac. Only a month ago, he had been a shining light in the agency's firmament. Then Winford Stark, advertising manager of the Holdwell Safe Corporation, had asked for his removal from the account. Fell had blamed everyone but himself for the failure of the Holdwell advertising: the copywriter was a drunk, the art director a Communist, the TV producer a dope addict. But Bliss, a wise old fox in the advertising forest, calmly put the blame where it belonged.

Fell came into the executive office radiating confidence. It didn't take the chill out of Bliss' expression. The small, dapper man ruffled his moustache like a whiskery terrier, and growled. "Five minutes," he said. "Five minutes is all I can give you, Harrison."

"That's all I need, chief. I've got just the prescription for what ails Holdwell."

"We've been all through that, Harrison."

"Not through this bale of hay we haven't. I came up with the needle, and I'm going to stick it right into that bubble-head Stark. It's the greatest safe-advertising idea you ever heard. Just let me get it off the launching pad!"

Bliss sighed. "Must you talk like that, Harrison? Half the time I don't understand you."

"You'll understand this, chief. You know that new safe the Holdwell people are about to put in orbit?"

"The 801?"

"That's it. Well, maybe they thought our ideas were thin before, but this one is a regular Charles Atlas. This one's got muscles, chief. Wait 'til you hear it—"

"I'm waiting."

Fell paused, and with a melodramatic gesture pulled a newspaper clipping from his pocket. He slapped it on Bliss' desk, and stood back with folded arms. Bliss looked down at a two-column photograph of a balding man with wide, innocent eyes.

"What's this?" he said.

"It's my candidate for an 801 testimonial. 801—the first *truly* burglar-proof safe!" Fell said.

"Sammy 'The Touch' Morrissey," Bliss read. "You mean you want to put *him* in a Holdwell ad?"

Fell laughed. "Can you think of a better testimonee? That's the trouble with the campaign we got now, chief. What the hell good is a testimonial from Satisfied User? This is a man who *really* knows whether a safe is burglar-proof. The hottest safecracker in the business!"

"Are you serious, Harrison?"

"Of course, I am! Don't you get it? We'll hire Sammy himself to try and crack the 801. In public, with reporters and everything. The works! We'll get terrific publicity and a great ad campaign!"

"But if he's still in jail—"

"He was paroled a year ago. He's been a good boy, crime-wise, ever since. Forced retirement, I guess you'd call it. But he's still got the know-how, chief, and if he can't bust open the 801, who can?"

Bliss mused over the photograph, fingering his moustache. When he looked up, there was grudging admiration in his eyes.

"Well, it's not really a *bad* idea . . ."

"Tell the truth, chief. It's a blockbuster!"

Bliss reached for the phone.

"Let's not go overboard about it. We'll see what Stark thinks of it."

Fell opened the humidor on Bliss' desk and helped himself to a panatela. The boss didn't stop him.

Fell's suit, narrow-brim hat, carnation, and personality were blatantly out of tune with Sammy Morrissey's rooming house. He parked his Jaguar between a meat truck and a vintage Chevvy, growled at the mop-haired urchins who eyed its hubcaps, and took the worn stairs as nonchalantly as if they had been the steps of the University Club. A landlady with a gin breath greeted him and guided him to the top floor, where Sammy Morrissey lived in honest poverty.

Sammy was a disappointment. He was small, scrawny, devoid of menace, cunning, and even character. His eyes were fixed rather than shifty. They were round, the color of faded denim. He looked more like an aging Scoutmaster than a master criminal. Fell sighed inwardly, and tried to visualize the lighting tricks a photographer might use to make Sammy "The Touch" look more dangerous than he appeared.

"Sit down," Sammy said politely. "I got your letter, Mr. Fell, but I don't quite—"

"There's really nothing complicated about it," Fell said urbanely, taking the chair with the least upholstery. "My client, the Holdwell Corporation, has a new product they believe to be wholly burglar-proof. We merely want your help in proving their claim valid."

"Yeah, I understand that part," Sammy said. "Only that's what I mean, Mr. Fell, you shouldn't be askin' me about safe jobs. I'm out of that line of work altogether."

"Oh, there's nothing *illegal* about it," Fell smiled. "Police-wise, it's absolutely legitimate. You see, we think a man of your great reputation—"

"I'm trying to live that down, Mr. Fell."

Fell frowned. This wasn't going to be simple.

"Sammy—I can call you Sammy, can't I?—Sammy, you know what an advertisement is?"

"Yeah, sure, I see ads all the time."

"Well, Sammy, that's all we're talking about. We want you to appear in our advertising, to give your testimony—"

"Testimony?" Sammy said nervously.

"Not like in court," Fell explained. "You'll simply endorse our product, that's all. You'll tell people how you tried to crack the 801, but found it absolutely burglar-proof."

"Gee, Mr. Fell, no safe is really burglar-proof."

"How's that?"

"I mean, there ain't no such thing. Excuse me for saying. But if you got enough time and tools, you can bust any of 'em. Anyway, I'm not interested, Mr. Fell, I'm in a different line of work now—"

Fell gritted his teeth.

"Sammy, try and understand. We're offering you a thousand dollars just to *try* and crack open this safe, with every trick you know. We'll give you three hours to do it in, and there'll be plenty of witnesses. Reporters, cops—"

"Cops?" Sammy blanched.

"Just as witnesses, just to make sure your effort is legitimate. The 801 isn't a very large safe, about four by four, but it's got a new time-lock mechanism the Holdwell people think is foolproof. In fact, they're so *sure* you can't do it, Sammy, they'll make it a real challenge. They'll put an envelope in the safe containing fifty-one-thousand-dollar bills. If you can open the safe in under three hours, the money is yours."

Sammy's innocent eyes blinked.

"You kidding, Mr. Fell? Fifty grand?"

"Fifty thousand, Sammy, and it's all yours if you can do it. It'll be the biggest haul of your life, and you won't have any cops on your trail afterwards. Now doesn't that sound tempting?"

"It sure does," Sammy said. "It's just that—"

"I know," Fell said sourly. "You're in a different line of work. But is it paying off, Sammy? Paying off like this?"

"No," Sammy admitted. "Not like this."

"It'll be great for you, moneywise. And great for us, saleswise. What do you say?"

Sammy rubbed his balding forehead. Then he nodded.

"Okay, Mr. Fell, I'll do it."

"Wonderful! It's a pleasure to do business with you, Sammy."

"Likewise," Sammy said shyly.

The turnout for Harrison Fell's 801 promotion exceeded his predictions to the client. Reporters from five metro-

politan dailies, nine out-of-town newspapers, and two major news services showed up at Holdwell Corporation's Long Island City plant for Operation Safecrack. *The New Yorker* sent their man Stanley, four true-detective magazines were represented, along with six other magazines serving various interests. The best that Fell could produce in the way of official coverage was the Assistant Commissioner of Police, but he brought along three burly patrolmen as an honor guard. The sight of the blue uniforms caused Sammy "The Touch" Morrissey to gulp nervously and start muttering about backing out. As the nine-o'clock deadline approached, the crowd grew greater. Some thirty executives of the Holdwell Corporation, and half that number from envious competitors, entered the empty brick warehouse that had been reserved for the occasion. Bliss, the agency president, was on the scene, and so was Wilton Stark, the Holdwell ad manager, beaming and shaking hands and acting as if the entire promotion had been his own idea. Drinks were served in generous supply, and the atmosphere became festive, smoky, noisy, and reminiscent of New Year's Eve. As the jostling crowds pushed, shoved, spilled liquor, told jokes, and had a whopping good time, Sammy and the 801 waited quietly for their moment of combat.

Finally, Harrison Fell, self-appointed master of ceremonies, stood on a chair to gain attention.

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen, please! May we have quiet?"

It took some time, but he got it.

"Gentlemen, I want to thank you all for this splendid showing, and I know you'll all be glad you came tonight. So without further ado, let me introduce you to the honored guests of the evening. In this corner, gentlemen—" he pointed like a fight announcer, and drew a gratifying chuckle from the crowd, "weighing two thousand, three hundred and seventy pounds, the Holdwell 801, the world's champion burglar-proof safe. And in *this* corner, at one hundred and twelve pounds, Sammy 'The Touch' Morrissey!"

There was even more applause for little Sammy; even the assistant commissioner joined it.

"As you all know," Fell said, enjoying the spotlight, "Safecracking-wise, Sammy Morrissey holds the world's record in every division. Mostly Safe and Loft." He waited for his laugh. "But the Holdwell Corporation believes that the 801 will defy Sammy's best efforts. And so strong is

their faith that they make this incredible challenge." He withdrew a white business envelope from his pocket. "In this envelope are fifty one-thousand-dollar bills, gentlemen. Fifty thousand dollars! Mr. Grady, will you please open the door of the safe?"

Grady, a Holdwell guard, did as instructed.

"Mr. Grady, will you please place the envelope inside the 801?"

Grady took the bulky envelope from his hand, and put it into the safe.

"Now, Mr. Grady, will you please lock the door of the safe and set the time mechanism for nine o'clock tomorrow morning?"

Grady, with a strong, deliberate motion, slammed the laminated steel door shut and twirled the dials.

"All set, sir," he said, and saluted smartly.

"Gentlemen," Harrison Fell told the hushed crowd, "the gauntlet is thrown. The Holdwell Corporation hereby challenges America's number one safecracker, the honorable Sammy 'The Touch' Morrissey, Retired, to open the 801 before midnight. And if Mr. Morrissey succeeds, the contents of this safe become his exclusive property. Are you ready, Sammy?"

Sammy's Adam's apple bobbed.

"I'm ready," he whispered.

"Mr. Grady, would you bring forward the tools that Mr. Morrissey requested?"

Grady came forward, wheeling a long metal bench, its surface covered with implements of every description.

"Will Mr. Morrissey examine his equipment and make sure that everything is in order."

"I already checked it," Sammy said.

"Is everything there? Bits, drills, levers, chisels, hose, acetylene gas containers, torches, explosives?"

"It's all here, Mr. Fell."

"Then, gentlemen, we begin. Those of you who tire of watching Mr. Morrissey's efforts will be welcome in the Holdwell executive dining room in the main building. Refreshments will be served. Go to it, Sammy—and may the best man win!"

He got off the chair to tumultuous applause. Sammy waited until the crowd was silent once more, and then he approached the safe, warily.

A strange, almost eerie hush fell over the room as Sammy

circled the 801. He moved noiselessly on his sneakered feet, like a cat appraising an oddly indifferent mouse. There was something defiant about the look of the steel gray box as it squatted on its four elephant-thick legs; a hulking, belligerent, challenging aspect. Sammy moved slowly, not even touching it, his small, Scoutmaster's face wizened in concentration.

Then he put one finger on the metal surface, and scratched lightly. In the back of the room, a reporter giggled.

Sammy wasn't bothered by the sound. He no longer seemed to be aware of his audience. He scratched, smoothed, petted and fondled the safe. He touched its complex dials lovingly. He bent down and examined the doors, its invisible hinges, its bolts, its array of tiny numbers. There were standing lamps on all four sides of him; he moved one of them just a trifle to eliminate a shadow. Then he studied the safe door again, motionless, squatting like a contemplative Buddha.

The witnesses stirred restlessly, wanting action.

Deliberately, Sammy went to the tool table and selected an electric drill and a sectional jimmy.

As he plugged the drill into the wall socket, the assistant commissioner of police snickered and whispered to one of the patrolmen. It didn't faze the safecracker. He placed the drill bit on the upper left-hand corner of the safe door, and pulled the trigger. The noise of the bit grinding against the metal jarred everyone in the room. Then the bit snapped, and Sammy looked down at the implement sadly. There was a laugh or two.

Sammy's next choice from the table was a simple one: a metal center punch and a sledge hammer. He took them both to the 801, made a close examination of the flat dials, and then shrugged his narrow shoulders. Whatever he had in mind wasn't going to work; with professional good-naturedness, he replaced the tools.

Nearby, Harrison Fell prodded Wilton Stark with his elbow. A month ago, Stark would have reddened at the intimacy; now he grinned back and looked pleased. From the crowd, a news cameraman caught a picture of Sammy in action.

At this point, it wasn't much of a picture. Sammy was studying the 801 with a beleaguered expression. It was obvious that he was up against something new and puzzling.

He put his hands on the side of the safe and heaved; it resisted his puny muscles. With a look almost of pleading, he caught Fell's eye. Then he whispered his request, and Fell obliged. He motioned to the three patrolmen, who came forward and assisted Sammy "The Touch" in laying the 801 on its side. The spectacle of the law's minions cooperating with a safecracker released some of the tension. A chuckle rippled through the room.

Then Sammy went to his knees and began a scrutiny of the safe bottom; Fell knew it wasn't going to help. There were some safes with soft underbellies, but the 801 wasn't one of them. Sammy put a new carbon bit in his electric drill and set to work. The bit snapped, and he looked at the broken end forlornly. With a weary gesture, he motioned to the cops to set the 801 upright.

At nine-forty-five, the safe was unscathed, and Sammy was reaching for the acetylene torch. For half an hour, the hot white flame licked at the 801's laminated steel door.

By the time Sammy gave up, there was a discoloration the size of a dinner plate, but the safe was as solid as ever.

Sammy's shirt was soaked through, and Sammy's eyes were paler and more pathetic than before.

"He can't do it," Wilton Stark whispered to Fell. "He'll never crack that baby!"

Harrison Fell smiled confidently, but watched tensely as Sammy reached for the vial of nitroglycerin. The real test of the 801 was yet to come, and it meant clearing the room all the way back to the doors. Holdwell's laboratory experts hadn't been able to blow the safe open with nitro, not with the small amount necessary to blast only the safe and not the building. But the moment was still a trying one.

"Everybody back," Fell cried authoritatively. "Everyone to the exit, please!"

There were no keyholes or other apertures in the 801 for Sammy to place the explosive, but he solved the problem by taping the vial near the hinge. Then he selected a hammer from the workbench, stepped back ten paces, and hurled it at the vial. It was a good toss; the metal head struck the vial and the explosive did its work; Sammy dropped to the floor and covered his head. The explosion rattled the panes in every window of the building, but when the smoke cleared, the 801 was almost insolent in its stolid impenetrability.

Sammy was really in trouble now. It was almost eleven

o'clock, and he seemed to be getting nowhere. Almost two-thirds of the crowd wandered off to enjoy the hospitality of the Holdwell Corporation's executive dining room. By eleven-thirty, with Sammy squatting on his haunches and picking uselessly at the locks with a steel pin, there were only half a dozen witnesses.

Sammy began using a stethoscope, listening for the sound of falling tumblers. Jimmy Valentine was a myth, and so was Sammy's famous "touch." Sammy had chopped, burned, punched, and ripped safes apart; he had never coaxed one open with sensitive fingertips. And neither, as far as he knew, had anybody else. But Sammy was trying now, the sweat rippling down his forehead and behind his protruding ears, his eyes staring and glassy, his lips dry, his breath short, his hands unsteady. It was desperation, a last hope.

At fifteen minutes to twelve, the crowd returned again to watch the last round of the struggle.

Five minutes later, with all breaths bated and not even a cough in the crowd, Sammy was still fiddling with the time mechanism.

Then there were only minutes left.

Sammy stood up. He swayed on his feet like a drunk. With an animal sound in his throat, he staggered to the bench and began looking for an implement that existed only in his imagination. He scattered tools right and left, picked up one and threw it away, grabbed another, glared at it, and hurled it from him. Then he lifted the sledge hammer and brought it to the safe. With all the strength remaining in his thin arms, he swung the hammer against the door with a resounding *blunk!* The vibrations shot through the handle and into his body, loosening his grip. The sledge hammer dropped to the floor, and Sammy, breathing like a winded horse, stood before the 801 with bowed head, slumped shoulders, and surrender in his eyes.

It was midnight, and the 801 was victorious.

The cheer that went up wasn't for the insensate metal box; it was for Sammy. Even the cops cheered, in that special applause reserved for the gallant loser. Fell rushed over and shook his hand, hugged the little safecracker with his beefy arms. Flashbulbs popped. Some of the reporters, caught in the moment's excitement, rushed for the phones as if they had been covering a space launching. Wilton Stark, grinning in triumph, was busily trying to hand out

literature to the magazine reporters. From the back of the room, a bottle made its way to the safecracker, and Sammy took a long, grateful swallow of good whiskey.

Then Fell stood on his chair and made the curtain speech. He thanked them for their attendance, thanked Sammy for his noble effort, cited American ingenuity and stick-to-it-iveness, and then presented Sammy "The Touch" Morrissey with the loser's share—one thousand dollars, in cash.

"Thanks," Sammy said, accepting the money. "I guess you really got yourselves a safe there."

The crowd went wild.

The party was still going on when Sammy, humbled and anonymous, slipped out the door.

Fell's secretary didn't echo his cheery greeting the next morning. "Message for you," she said crisply. "Wilton Stark wants you to call him immediately."

Fell grinned and dusted his lapel. "More kudos," he sighed. "Get him for me, will you, sweetie?"

Hilda did. When Stark bellowed like a wounded bull at the other end of the receiver, Fell looked at the instrument in surprise. "Why, what's wrong, Wilton?" he said.

"Wrong? I'll tell you what's wrong!" Stark shouted. "When the time lock opened the 801 this morning, we took a look inside. And you know what we found? An envelope containing fifty nice slips of green paper. *Paper,* Fell, you hear me?"

"Paper?" Fell gulped. "Not money?"

"Not money!" Stark screamed. "Just paper! That's fifty thousand bucks, Fell, and it's coming right out of your hide!"

"But it's not possible! I put the money in myself. Somebody—" He sat down quickly. "Somebody must have switched the envelopes—"

Stark's voice was crackling on in a steady stream of abuse, invective, and threats, but Harrison Fell wasn't hearing a word.

"Sammy," he said weakly.

"What's that?"

"Sammy!" Fell groaned. "He *told* me he was in a different line of work. I should have listened to him! Why didn't I listen to him? He's no safecracker any more—he's a pickpocket!"

THE MARQUESA

by Ray Russell

DANNY DANE parked his car in an obscure, tree-canopied covert where it was virtually invisible to the casual eye, and completed the final half-mile of his journey on foot. It was uphill all the way, but the grade was gentle and Danny, though forty-plus, was in good condition; the public paid a mint to see his famous carcass, and he treated it reverently, like any investment.

Night had fallen, but Danny's eyes were masked by great dark wraparound glasses. The air was cool after a hot, dry day, and as he trudged he inhaled luxurious lungfuls of fragrance: lemon, lime, Brazilian pepper tree, the sweet cheap-chocolate-Easter-egg smell of laurel, for all these and more flourished here in the Hollywood Hills.

The house he reached after his short exercise was of moderate size and cost, and what he could see of it in the scant light seemed to be in excellent, if not exceptional, taste. He approached the door, and judged it to be centuries old, imported, Spanish of course, possibly from a monastery, the real thing. There seemed to be no bell, so he lifted the heavy brass knocker and tapped sharply several times. At the sound, frightened birds in nearby trees flapped away, squawking in outrage.

The moments between the rapping and the answer were filled with happy expectation for Danny. He was about to be the guest—the sole guest—of the most exciting woman he had ever met and as Danny might have put it, he had met plenty.

Emphatically Iberian, compounded of numberless dark lustres, a masterwork carved by Nature from some rare lambent aromatic substance, she had been the first person he had seen at Fran Plotkin's party the week before. He had not been able to stop looking at her and, he noted with satisfaction, she appeared to be having the same difficulty as regards his own admittedly luscious, internationally publicized exterior.

When his new young wife, Number Six, was safely out of earshot, Danny had asked Fran, "Who *is* she?"

"Down, boy. You're a newlywed again, remember?"

"Sugar Lump, you know me better than that."

"I do, but does your child bride? Yet?"

"She's got to learn sometime. Come on, Fran, give."

"She's Elena Mendoza, Marquesa de Altamadura."

"Mendoza. Why do I know that name? And a marquesa? I like it. You may not believe this, but I've never . . . Is she a real marquesa?"

"By marriage."

"Does that dirty word mean there's a marques in the vicinity?"

"Well, not exactly the vicinity. Dr. Mendoza is six feet under."

"Groovy. Fran, you must introduce me to this fascinating widow."

"You really are an awful louse, Danny."

"Look who's talking. Your husband's got so many horns growing out of his head he's beginning to look like a sea urchin."

"Danny, she's not one of your bubble-headed starlets who's going to fall over backward and say ah just because The Great Dane looked in her direction. She's an extremely respectable Spanish lady. I don't know why she stayed on here in Pillville after her husband died; by rights, she should be properly ensconced back in the family homestead in Granada or whatever, complete mit mantilla. Face it, man, she's not for you."

"Then tell me this, smart guy—why has she been flashing languorous Latin glances at me ever since I arrived? Do the honors, baby, or I'll get nasty. And you know how nasty I get when I get nasty."

The monastery door was opened by Elena Mendoza herself, more stunning even than the image in Danny's memory.

"Mr. Dane. Come in," she said, with a little smile. Her eyes were black vortices.

"Marquesa," he said, and kissed her hand, and entered.

She closed the heavy door. "I did not hear your car," she said.

"Stashed it half a mile down the hill," he replied. "You see, I pay attention. What you said about discretion, when I phoned you. Your reputation and all that."

"For your sake as well as mine," she reminded him.

He chuckled. "My reputation? Tarnished beyond hope, I'm afraid."

"Perhaps I am too old-fashioned," she said as she guided him toward the living room, "but I sent the servants away so there would be no chance of gossip." She offered him strong coffee. "Or perhaps you would like something stronger?"

"This'll do for now. A little later I'd like . . ." his eyes drilled her, ". . . something a *lot* more potent."

"And Mrs. Dane," she said, pouring, "what does she think you are doing this evening?"

"Pea Brain? She thinks I'm playing poker with the boys."

"When you telephoned," she said softly, "I was taken off-guard. I had not expected to see you again after that party. Yet I wished very much to see you again."

He let her talk.

"In your country, it is more easy," she said, and then corrected herself. "Easier. Your women, if they wish to see more of a man, they take the initiative if the man will not. But it is not so with us. I am pleased that you telephoned. I am pleased that you are here."

"No more pleased than I, Marquesa."

"Elena."

"Danny, then."

"Yes. Danny."

"Good! Look what progress we've made in just five minutes."

She did not look at him, her eyes studied the carpet as she said, "I do not know what you must think of me. I am recently widowed and you are recently married, we should not be here together. I should have been cold to you when you telephoned. Instead, I invited you to come here, and I have conspired with you to make sure no one will know, conspired to be secretive, to deceive your wife. It is shameful of me, but my loneliness and my grief are so immense . . . You must please not think of me as a bad woman."

"No, no, my dear Elena. Only as a warm and beautiful lady. The most beautiful lady in the world." The Dane charm pulsed from him like electronic waves.

She smiled shyly. "I must make a confession. At first I did not plan to attend that party. I still consider myself in mourning. But when Mrs. Plotkin told me you would be there . . ."

"I'm flattered," he said, and he was.

"I have seen you on the screen so many times. I have always had such a—do you say 'crush'?—for you. It was a kind of little joke between me and the marques. My husband was a great doctor, you know, and I was a nurse in a hospital in Madrid, that is where we met. He escorted me to the cinema on our first 'date,' as you say. It was the film in which you rescued the blonde lady from the pirate ship. Ah, you were so brave! All those men against you and you killed them all with your sword! How you swung across the deck on the rope and knocked the pirate captain into the water!"

He laughed. "I've got news for you, Elena. That wasn't me, that was Bill Wallman."

"Bill . . . Wallman?"

Danny smiled and nodded. "Ordinarily, I'd take the credit, but you're something special, Elena; you're not some little star-struck fan in a hick town. Bill Wallman is my—*was* my stunt man, and a dead ringer for me in the longshots. Up close, of course, there's less of a resemblance, but in the dueling scenes, and that rope-swinging stuff, and jumping from one speeding car to another, that sort of thing, that was always Bill. Best in the business. I miss him very much."

"He is dead, this Mr. Wallman?"

"No, he hit-and-run a little Mexican kid with my car a couple of months ago and I'm afraid he's in a jail, poor guy. May I have some more coffee?" Danny did indeed miss Bill Wallman, and not only for professional reasons. Bill had bailed him out of plenty of scrapes in the past, by taking the rap for Danny's drunken brawls and automotive mishaps. Worth his weight in gold, was Bill. After all, there was that clause on Page 8 of Danny's contract: "The undersigned agrees to conduct himself with due regard to public conventions and morals. He also agrees not to commit any act that will degrade him or subject him to public hatred, contempt, scorn, ridicule or disrepute, or shock or offend the community or violate public morals or decency," et cetera. Bill Wallman had been a real lifesaver, and he would be awfully hard to replace.

"Perhaps," said Elena, "you would prefer some wine?"

"Thank you, yes."

She opened a cabinet. "Oh," she said, "there is nothing very good here."

"Anything at all."

"No. Not for you. You are . . . how did you say it? Something special." She smiled, and he was dazzled. "I know," she said suddenly. "There is one bottle left. Please come with me. It is silly, but I am afraid."

"Afraid?"

"The wine cellar. I do not like to go down there alone."

Danny rose. "A cellar? That's a novelty in Southern California. Lead the way."

"Enrique, my husband," she said as she followed him down the narrow, steep stairs to the cellar, "searched a long time before he found this house. He had come here to teach at the University of California. He was very dedicated about his work, very devoted to the passing on of his knowledge to younger men, but he was still a grandee, a lover of wine, a connoisseur, a man who had to live in a certain way, and he did not give up until he found a house with a real cellar for his wine. There, next to you, is the light switch."

He clicked it and a perspective of dusty bottles came into view, each resting patiently in its niche. Danny stepped forward and began examining some of the labels. A small golden spider, the color of sauterne, skittered away in panic. "You have an excellent cellar," Danny said.

She walked past him and selected a very old bottle. "Ah! Yes, it is here," she said delightedly. "The oldest existing sherry in the world. Vintage 1750!"

"1750!" echoed Danny, duly impressed. "*That* I've got to sample." He took the ancient bottle from her and turned toward the cellar stairs.

"Wait," she said. "I think there is no corkscrew up there. At least I have not seen it. Since the death of my husband, I have not tasted wine."

It was the perfect cue for him to say, softly, tenderly, "Since the death of your husband, you have not tasted other things, as well. And that is wrong, Ana—I mean Elena—a waste of warmth and womanhood. A waste of life." He had always liked that line from *King's Captain.* He'd used it, with variations, many times. But why had he said Ana, just now? He knew no Ana. . . .

"Here it is" she said with a joyful chirp.

"What?"

"The corkscrew. Open the bottle, please."

"Now? Down here?"

"It is very old. It should not be too much jostled. My husband always said this."

Not without effort, Danny carefully and slowly withdrew the cork that had stoppered the bottle for over two hundred years. It was desiccated by time and dangerously close to crumbling, but Danny performed the act deftly, successfully.

"Here is a glass," she said, wiping the dust from a lone crystal goblet with a cloth.

"Only one?"

"We will both drink from it," she said, and there were unspoken promises in her voice.

We'll drink, say, half the bottle, Danny planned; no more, and then, what with the effects of the wine, and her loneliness, and her hot Spanish blood, and her crush on me, she'll fall right into my arms.

He poured the wine, an ichor of molten amber. She sipped from the goblet, her lips glistening, then she handed it back to him and he drained it in one bravura draught.

"Ah," he said, "like Tristan and Isolde, pledging our troth in the eternal grape, swearing fealty to each other, binding ourselves to . . . Wow, that stuff sure packs a wallop! Do you think it could be spoiled? I mean, 1750, after all. It's gone right to my head. Are *you* all right?"

She nodded.

"Don't feel woozy? Sick?"

She shook her head.

"I wonder . . . if I could . . . just sit down . . . for a minute . . ." He groped toward a stool and settled upon it shakily. Then, as fluidly as if he were a six-foot glob of mercury, he flowed from the stool to the cellar floor. He blinked up at Elena, miles above him, and saw her turn and spit out the wine she had been holding in her mouth. Then he was sucked into oblivion.

Dead, that was it, dead and buried. When Danny felt his personality laboriously swim back to him from infinite distances, he came to that grim conclusion almost immediately. He was in darkness, dense, impenetrable darkness. He opened his mouth to speak, to shout, to whisper, but he could do none of these things; his jaw would not even open. It was shut tight as the jaw of a corpse. He could not move, could not raise his head, could not bend his arms or legs. Dead and buried, that had to be it. Elena had poisoned him, murdered him, buried his body in the cellar.

But why? Mendoza, something about Mendoza, but not Elena Mendoza, and not Enrique, something else, something like . . . Ana. That was it, Ana Mendoza. Something about an Ana Mendoza . . .

"Are you awake, Mr. Dane?"

The marquesa's voice came from his right, and he found he could move his head, just a little, in that direction, but not enough to see her.

"Ah, I see you are. Now I wish you to listen closely to me, because it is important that you understand what is happening to you. Perhaps you have already guessed that the wine was tampered with. A simple matter to do so: a long hypodermic needle thrust through the old cork, and a syringe full of a powerful drug emptied into the wine. Drugs and needles and other medical equipment I have free access to, the late marques being a doctor and myself a nurse. You are lying in a bed, the type of bed found in hospitals. You are strapped into that bed securely, and you are gagged and you are blindfolded. The bed was brought to this house for my husband, in the last months of his illness. When he died, it was stored in the cellar. You will wish to know why I have done this to you. The reason is revenge. We Spaniards believe in revenge, fervently. It nourishes us. It can make life worth living, a life from which all other reason for living is gone. And we are experts at fashioning revenges, long, elaborate revenges."

The woman's crazy, Danny told himself.

"The first thing you must realize, Mr. Dane, is that you are a missing person, and you will remain a missing person. No ones knows you are here. You saw to that yourself, did you not? You told your poor gullible little wife that you were going out to play cards with your male companions. You parked your car half a mile down the hill from this house, and walked the rest of the way. That car has already been moved even farther away, so much farther away that, when it is found, it will never occur to anyone to connect it with me or this house.

"When you complimented me on my cellar, I relished the irony. It is indeed an excellent cellar. It was designed by its previous owner to serve, if need be, as an air-raid shelter, and it therefore has a secret chamber unknown even to the servants, very solidly constructed, air-conditioned, heated, sanitary, and comfortable. A person could live down here behind the wine bottles for a long time. Yes, Mr.

Dane, *down here.* You are at present in that cellar; at present and forever."

With a muffled groan of frustration, Danny struggled against his bonds, but he was gripped at neck and chest and belly, at wrists and knees and ankles.

"Those straps are of the stoutest leather, Mr. Dane, half an inch thick, reinforced with steel, secured by a series of padlocks to which only I have the keys."

Sweat stood out on his skin; his veins bulged; he strained massively, twisted in frantic spasms, but he could not budge an inch from the position in which he had been riveted. He stopped, his heart pounding, his nostrils flaring for air.

Her voice now came from his left. "You mentioned, earlier this evening, 'a little Mexican kid' struck down by your Mr. Wallman. That was a double inaccuracy. It was a little Spanish kid—my six-year-old daughter, Ana. And, as I do not have to tell you, it was not Mr. Wallman at the wheel. It was you, was it not, Mr. Dane?

"Oh, yes, it was you." Her voice receded and drew closer, by turns, as she paced, her heels clicking on the concrete floor. "You were able to deceive the police and the newspapers, but you do not deceive me. A private detective has provided me with a dossier on you as thick as the Los Angeles telephone book. Do not hope that this detective will inform the police of my curiosity when he reads in the newspapers of your strange disappearance; he did this job for me out of heartfelt gratitude to my husband, who once saved his life, and that same gratitude will seal his lips. Among other sordid things, I know about your past arrangements with Mr. Wallman—how he has been the whipping boy for your mistakes, your indiscretions, your petty rages, your crimes. He has saved you from just punishment on many occasions, but he will not save you this time. This time you will pay. The people who witnessed that crime *all* said it was the famous film star, Danny Dane, who struck down my child. They recognized you—until your Mr. Wallman 'confessed' and they were persuaded to believe they were mistaken. So, as you had done so often before, you were free to go your way, free to continue stepping on human beings, leaving a trail of grief and pain and suffering, with complete impunity . . . until now.

"As for what you call proof, of course, I have none in the legal sense, none that would convict you in a court of

law, none that would convince a judge and jury. The proof I have is *here,* in my heart, a mother's heart, and I will be my own judge and jury."

With a sudden surge of strength, Danny tried to topple the bed over, make a noise, smash the locks, but the bed didn't even shake.

"I wish you to understand, if you can," she continued, "what you took away from me when you took away my Ana. Perhaps you are incapable of understanding, you of many divorces, but when my husband died, Ana became all I had in this world. My only child, and the bearing of her made it not possible for me to have more children. In Ana was my whole universe, and when you ran her down with your car—"

All of Danny's soul converged on his vocal chords as he strained to speak, to make words, to communicate with her, but he could muster only a pathetic whimper.

"When you ran her down, that defenseless child, you damaged her little skull, damaged it dreadfully. She should have died, but by an evil miracle, an intervention of Satan, she lived. She lives now, in a hospital bed, paralyzed, unable to move even a finger, unable to speak, unable to see. *A child!* A little bright bird of a child, born to frolic and run and play, condemned to the unspeakable agony of immobility, of darkness, of death-in-life!"

She was silent for some time. He could hear her breathe. She was not weeping.

"You will share her fate, Mr. Dane. I am a good nurse and I will take very good care of you, the best of care, just like the fine care with which my child is being treated. For the rest of your life, Mr. Dane. The rest of your life."

Again he tried to talk to her, in vain.

"The doctors tell me there is no way of saying how long Ana will live. A month, a year, two years, five? But however long she lives, Mr. Dane, that is precisely how long you will live. When she dies, you will die. Not before. If I were you, I would pray that she dies soon."

He heard a scraping sound, a wooden chair being pulled to the side of the bed. He heard the rustle of her dress as she sat down. "I wish to be fair," she said. "I wish to deprive you of nothing my daughter has, in the way of comforts. I visit her every day; I will visit you every day. I read stories to her; I will read those same stories to you. You are fortunate, for they are not Spanish stories, they are in your own

language. I suppose you will resist this solace at first, but I look forward to a day, perhaps a month from now, perhaps a year, when I will come down here to visit you, after visiting Ana at the hospital, and pull my chair close and tell you that I will *not* read to you that night. I foresee how you will try to say something behind your gag, a pleading sound, for words of any sort, a human voice, no matter whose, some sound of life, some stimulus, something, anything to occupy you, to keep from going totally mad. So I hope you will enjoy the stories, Mr. Dane. They are Ana's favorites. Make an effort to enjoy them. Believe me, you will not enjoy anything else."

He heard pages turn, and he screamed silently inside his skull, Oh God, tell her, somebody tell her, dear God please tell her, make her understand that this time it wasn't me, it wasn't me, it wasn't me, this time it *really was Bill Wallman!*

" 'Chapter One,' " she said. " 'Here is Edward Bear, coming downstairs now, bump, bump, bump, on the back of his head, behind Christopher Robin . . .' "

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

by Michael Brett

THE desk clerk called and said that there was a man named Harry Grant who wanted to see me. I asked if Harry Grant was alone. When the clerk confirmed that he was I said, "Send him up."

It was exactly seven-thirty in the morning and I didn't have to look at my wristwatch. I always have my coffee at seven-thirty. It's a matter of routine. It's the way I run my business. I believe the way to succeed in any business is through strict routine, meticulous planning, and never leaving anything to chance. Veer off course and there are too many things to distract, too many irrelevant demands, and too much mind wandering that can prove costly. Keep your mind on your work is my credo.

It took me twenty seconds to get my gun with its attached silencer from the hiding place. I don't have a license for a gun, but since a gun is the most important tool of my trade, it has to be available when I need it. I unlocked the door, left it slightly ajar, then walked to my bedroom. From my position there I could see the door.

Harry Grant knocked and the door opened slightly.

I called, "Come in and lock it after you, Harry."

He stepped inside, pushed the door shut and locked it. When he turned around I had stepped out of the bedroom. I aimed the .38 at his chest and it produced the predictable result.

Grant's face lost color. "What are you doing, Darbash? It's me, Harry Grant!"

"Get your hands up, Harry. Let's see what you're carrying." I frisked him, then lowered my gun.

"I stopped wearing a gun years ago. The cops would fix me if they found a gun on me. You think I'm crazy, or something?" Grant protested.

"No. You're all right. Relax, take it easy. I didn't single you out. I make it a practice never to speak to anyone un-

less I know he's clean." I grinned. "I don't trust anybody, Harry. That's why I'm still in business."

"Yeah, I know that, but it shakes me every time I walk in here and you pull that gun on me. I've been here before. You ought to know by now that I don't carry a gun."

"I do, but I don't know when you're going to start."

He smiled and his tiny eyes were almost obscured by the fat around them. He eased himself into a chair facing me and shook his head. "If anybody in the whole world would say that Harry Grant allowed himself to be frisked by a guy like you, I'd tell him that he was nuts."

"Believe it, Harry. Believe it," I said.

Harry Grant was about fifty-five. Balding, he combed the long black thin hair on the left side of his head all the way over to the right side, so that each strand stood out distinctly against his pink scalp. He wore an expensive, immaculately tailored suit. Grant, one of the top syndicate bosses, had bludgeoned and broken heads in his youth. Now he had the good life. Now all he wanted was peace of mind. That's why he came to me.

I said, "Do you want some coffee, Harry?"

He shook his head, "I didn't come here for that, Darbash."

"I know," I said.

He hesitated. "You know Joe Lafayette."

It was a statement of fact. "I know him," I said. "Have some coffee, Harry. You'll feel better."

"I'll feel better when I know that you're going to take care of Lafayette. That's why I came here."

"Sure, Harry. Why not?"

"What's it going to cost me?" he asked.

I thought about Joe Lafayette. He was about sixty. He was a product of the New Orleans slums. He'd hammered his way to a top position in the narcotics crime hierarchy. He'd traveled a long way from the youth who'd been busted for hustling small shopkeepers. When he got out, he pushed narcotics and finally worked himself up to retailing and wholesale distribution. He became a top man in the syndicate. When the federal boys applied heat he'd invested in legitimate businesses. Today Joe Lafayette had money, power, connections, two bodyguards.

Nobody in his right mind would attempt to knock off Joe Lafayette, because an attempt, whether successful or not, would meet with instant retaliation.

I said, "Fifty thousand, Harry."

He roared, "You're crazy, Darbash! You asked forty grand for the last job."

"You got a bargain."

"What kind of a bargain is forty thousand dollars?" he growled out of the side of his mouth.

"When it was over, was there anybody who could point a finger at you as the guy who ordered him hit?"

"No."

I said, "You and your boys all had an alibi. You were all in the clear. That makes it a bargain, Harry. You didn't have any trouble."

He nodded. "We've got a deal. Fifty grand. When are you going to do it?"

"Don't worry about it, it'll be done, Harry. You pay your money and a guy gets knocked off. What more do you want? Description? Details? Forget it. I don't operate that way."

He laughed. "A guy shells out fifty thousand dollars and you'd think he'd be entitled to know how he was spending his money."

I winked. "You know how you're spending it, but you still haven't told me why you want me to make a stiff out of a live one."

He pointed a finger at me and shook his head. "Where do you get off, Darbash? How does it figure that a guy like you has to know the reasons?" He smiled, but there was no mirth on his face. "It confuses me."

"It does more than confuse you, Harry. It steams you. You can't understand it. You've hired a professional murderer for big money. So you start thinking that the man he's going to murder is all he has to know. That's it, isn't it, Harry?"

"That's the way I see it," Harry said.

"That's the way you see it, but not me. I've got to know why it's worth fifty thousand dollars to you."

"What you don't know can't hurt you, Darbash."

"I see it the other way."

He shook his head wonderingly. "I could have this job done for a fraction of the money I'm paying you."

I said nothing.

"All right. Joe Lafayette is a great concern to me and to other top people in the outfit. He's ambitious. He's money-hungry and he keeps taking chances. He does crazy things.

He acts on his own and when he does, he puts us all in a very dangerous position with the cops."

"I don't buy it. Nobody is going to shell out fifty grand for a reason like that. If his boys took a fall, they'd keep their mouths shut. So what makes it worth fifty big ones to put Lafayette to sleep?"

He sighed. "You know we don't have anything to do with narcotics."

I shrugged, said, "Sure."

"No, we don't fool with that," Harry said. "Not anymore. You play with that kind of stuff and the federal government doesn't give you any rest. They watch your movements. They check your background, your business investments and the people you associate with. They don't get off your back."

I said, "Sure."

"You get careless. You get greedy, and they fall on you like a ton of bricks. The government's rough. They're handing out twenty-year sentences for each count. The Feds are managing to get two- and three-count indictments." Harry grimaced. "The boys on top are too old to play that kind of game. Like that you can die in prison. We got out of it."

"You mean importing it," I said. "Let's make it clear."

He nodded. "Yeah, but the chance to make big dough keeps Lafayette in. He takes 'one shot' deals from time to time. Federal agents, United States attorneys and people in the District Attorney's office know about him doing it. They haven't enough evidence to touch him yet, but sooner or later he's going to take a fall. It figures. When that happens he's going to make a deal with them and he's going to name names. He isn't going to let them put him away for years. He'll talk. He's a threat to us."

"That's better, Harry. That's more like it." I grinned. "When I finish with him, he won't be a threat. Now, that's worth fifty grand."

"When are you going to do it?" he asked.

"Leave that to me. A week, two weeks, maybe a month. The time has to be right."

He was watching me intently. "I'll send someone around tomorrow with the money."

"Wrong. You deliver it personally. No bills larger than twenties. We don't want to give advance notice to the world that we're going to knock somebody off, do we, Harry?"

I thought I saw Grant shudder. Harry was getting soft.

"I'll bring it tomorrow," he said.

Twenty years ago he would have killed Lafayette himself. He rose and started to leave.

I said, "This fifty thousand dollars—you paying the money yourself, or is it a group expenditure?"

"All of us," he said brusquely, "although I had to work to convince them that Lafayette is a threat." He stared past me. "He's got them frightened, but finally they all agreed after somebody suggested that I give you the job. It was hard to convince them. I had to keep telling them how Lafayette could get us all sent up if he took a fall. You can't take chances with somebody like that. He can put your life in jeopardy.

"I'll see you tomorrow," he said, and began walking toward the door again.

The silencer held the noise down when I shot and killed him. I opened the windows and switched on the fan to get rid of the cordite fumes. Then I walked over and stared at Harry Grant. He'd lost his nerve. He'd grown soft, like a fat cat. That made him dangerous, a threat to everybody.

I called the syndicate number and said, "I want to ship a steamer trunk."

"That's fine." I recognized Joe Lafayette's voice immediately. "We have a trunk in the area. We'll be there in ten minutes," he said.

I hung up, got the steamer trunk from the closet and started packing Harry Grant for shipment.

OLD MAN EMMONS

by Talmage Powell

THE FEEBLE outcry from the old man's bedroom penetrated Charlie Collins' slumber. His senses swam back to consciousness. Then a light flashed on and he was aware that Laura was getting out of the twin bed next to his.

"I thought I heard father," she said.

"I heard something myself."

They threw back covers, slipped into robes, and hurried to the bedroom the old man had wanted when he came to live with them, the corner bedroom, the one with lots of windows, cross ventilation.

The old man's bed was empty. He had made his way into the adjoining bathroom. He seemed to be through with being sick, and stood shivering.

Charlie and Laura rushed to him.

"Father," Laura said, "you should have called us."

"I did. You wouldn't answer," the old man said accusingly.

"We came the second we woke," Charlie said.

The old man fumbled for the drinking glass in the porcelain rack beside the medicine cabinet. Charlie grabbed the glass, rinsed it, filled it with water.

The old man washed his mouth out, gargled noisily, his mouth a sunken, wrinkled hole in his face. His skin held a grayish cast. A bundle of dried sticks inside the old-fashioned nightgown, the old man was a terrifyingly cadaverous comment on the mortality of human flesh.

"I'll get the doctor," Laura said.

"I don't want the doctor," the old man said, pulling away from them belligerently and shuffling toward his own bed, across the room.

"It must have been those pickles at dinner," Charlie said.

"I've eaten pickles before! I know what made me sick!"

Charlie and Laura looked at each other, then at the old man wavering toward the bed.

"What, sir?" Charlie asked.

"I know," the old man said ominously. "I got a good stomach. I don't get sick easy. I know what caused it."

The old man crawled into bed and pulled the covers over his head. Laura touched Charlie's arm. They slipped out of the room. In the hallway, she whispered, "You can't do much with him when he sets his mind this way."

"How about the doctor?"

"I'm sure he's all right, Charlie. It was those pickles. You go on back to bed. You've got to work tomorrow—today. I'll listen for him."

Charlie didn't think he would get back to sleep. He lay and smoked, thinking of Laura in the chair she'd drawn close to her father's door.

He'd thought he had a full awareness of the circumstances when he married Laura. An only child, she'd cared for her father a long time, since the death of her mother. She'd explained that she wanted to keep her father with her, and Charlie had said okay. It wasn't, after all, as if they were a pair of teenagers running away to get married. Both were in their thirties.

Charlie's first wife had accidentally killed herself nearly ten years ago, rushing home from a bridge game late one icy afternoon. Laura had never married, never had much chance to know men, for that matter.

She and Charlie had met prosaically enough in a supermarket. They were, he guessed, prosaic people. Laura was no raving beauty, though she was well built and had a pleasant face framed in brown hair. Charlie was a tall, pleasant-looking man, a little on the thin side, who looked as if he worked long hours at a desk in a large office, which was exactly the case.

The old man's strenuous objections had marred what should have been one of life's more perfect moments. Charlie had regretted this more for Laura's sake than his own. He'd figured he understood the old man and was old enough himself to overlook the shortcomings of a close, demanding in-law.

But now, after only a few weeks of marriage, Charlie wasn't so sure. There was a point where churlishness became too barbed for comfort, where a martyred air of being persecuted permeated the whole house.

Charlie napped finally, awoke too quickly, and dragged through the day. Driving home, he hoped Laura'd had a

chance to catch a nap this afternoon. She'd looked plenty bushed when he left the house this morning.

Old man Emmons was in the living room, cackling toothlessly at a TV run of an old W. C. Fields comedy. Charlie spoke cordially, and the old man speared him with a look from his cavernous eyes. "You back?"

Charlie let it pass. "Where is Laura?"

"Gone to the store," the old man said. "Can't you keep still while the movie's on?"

With a sigh and shake of his head, Charlie passed through the house, crossed the rear yard and entered the garage. He was outfitting a woodworking shop, using one side of the garage. The place was chilly. He turned on the butane heater and began to tinker with a drill press, setting it in position and bolting it down.

He was spending more and more time out here, he realized. The thought caused him to drop his wrench, sit on a saw horse, and light a cigarette. He wondered if he were already in the process of becoming one of those hobbyist husbands, shunted out of his own house by an in-law.

He threw the cigarette on the floor and ground it under his heel. Damn it, that old man was going to have to change his ways, and that's all there was to it.

Charlie went back in the house. The living room was empty. Laura was home—there was a bag of groceries on the table just inside the front door.

Then Charlie heard their voices, hers and her father's, in argument, from the old man's bedroom.

"He hid my pills, I tell you!" the old man said.

"No, Father," Laura said patiently, "they were right there in the cabinet where you put them—behind the soda box."

"You're working hand in glove with him!"

"Father . . ."

"I can see it now! He's turning you against me."

"No, Father. We both love you and want you to be happy. We want to take care of you."

The old man snorted in disbelief as Laura came into the living room, picked up the groceries, and started toward the kitchen.

"I'll hurry dinner up, Charlie. I was late getting to the store."

Laura's worn look caused Charlie to put off what he'd intended to say.

"I'll give you a hand," he said.

The right emotional distillation didn't again take place inside of Charlie, and he didn't speak his mind during the following week.

Then, on Tuesday, Laura called him at the office. The old man had fallen down the basement steps and would Charlie please hurry home?

He explained briefly to his boss, ran to the parking lot, and fought traffic out to the development.

Laura met him at the door.

"How is he?" Charlie asked.

"He's all right." She passed the back of her hand over her forehead. "I guess I shouldn't have called you, Charlie, but when I heard him go tumbling . . ."

"I know. What does the doctor say?"

"That my father is a very lucky man, or indestructible," her face twisted, giving it a strange expression Charlie had never seen before. "The doctor just left."

"Is he coming back?"

"Not today. He wants me to bring father into his office tomorrow morning, just for a checkup."

She'd need the car, then. That meant riding the bus to work. Schedules out here put Charlie either fifteen minutes late or forty-five minutes early to the office.

He sighed. "Well, I guess I better look in on him."

"Charlie . . ."

"Yes?"

"Don't get him . . . I mean . . ."

"I'm the soul of patience," Charlie assured her, a touch of bitterness in his voice.

Charlie opened the old man's bedroom door softly and stepped inside. The old man had his eyes closed. His bones made creases in the covers and that was all.

As Charlie neared the bed, the old man opened his eyes and looked at him.

"How are you, sir?"

"I'll survive," the old man said softly. "I'll survive a long time."

"We hope so. How did it happen?"

"I fell down the basement steps."

"I know. Laura told me that on the phone."

"I could have been killed."

"But you weren't, and we're grateful for that. The doctor says you're fine."

"Could have been killed . . ." the old man said, as if Charlie hadn't spoken. "All because there was a carton of old shoes on the steps. Right near the top."

Charlie tried to understand the old man's feelings. "I meant to take them down last night."

"But you didn't," the old man said in that soft voice that sounded like a whisper from an eternal tomb.

"No, I . . . Laura asked me to . . . Listen, what am I explaining every detail to you for! . . ."

He caught the glint of warped satisfaction in the old man's eye. He felt awkward and foolish. His quick anger drained to be replaced by something else.

"You hate me," the old man whispered.

And it was true. For the first time, Charlie knew it was true. The old man seemed to have a profound knowledge of it.

"You're a little upset," Charlie said through stiff lips. "You know we care greatly for you."

He turned and went out. He found refuge in the shop, turning on a lathe and letting the chips fly.

Finally, he realized that Laura was calling him from the house. He switched off the lathe, turned off the heater, and hurried across the backyard. He had no right to act childishly toward her, to pity himself because he lacked the manhood to be the head of his own house.

He waited until late that night, until he was certain the old man was asleep and wouldn't come creeping in. He cut the legs for a cocktail table without his mind being on the task. When he came into the house, he washed his hands in the kitchen, thinking of what he would say.

Laura was on the end of the couch, feet curled under her while she watched TV. Charlie felt a great reluctance inside of him as he approached her. The word "showdown" came to his mind, frightening him a little.

He eased down beside her. She looked at him and smiled. He really did love her, he thought. Under different circumstances, with some kids around . . .

"How's the table coming, Charlie?"

"Fine."

"Can I have a look tomorrow?"

"Sure, if you want. Laura . . ."

Thundering hooves and banging sixguns filtered into the space between them.

"I wanted to talk to you," he said, his collar feeling tight.

"About father," she said.

"Yes, I guess so."

"You want him out."

"I'm afraid I do," he said.

"Why be afraid, Charlie?" she asked, almost gently.

He stared at her, again with that feeling of strangeness.

"I'm not afraid, Charlie. I'll be glad when he's dead."

"Laura . . ."

"Why deny it? You feel the same way. I'm not surprised. He taints and kills everything he touches."

"Then we'll put him in a home?" Even with her attitude, which had surprised him so, the words sounded callous, cruel.

"No, Charlie, we won't put him in a home. I knew from the beginning this was something we'd have to discuss."

"But if we keep him here . . ."

"That's what we're going to do, Charlie."

"But you just said . . ."

"That I'd be glad when he's dead? I mean it. We're going to keep him right here, right with us, until the day he dies."

"I see," he said glumly, although he didn't see any solution at all.

"You think I'm choosing between duty to a father and love for a husband, Charlie?" She stirred with a faint rustling sound of her clothing against the couch upholstery. Her hand reached to touch his cheek.

"I love you, Charlie. And I don't feel any duty toward him. His miserliness and meanness killed my mother and ruined my childhood. If the question were so simple, there wouldn't be any problem."

"I don't think I understand, Laura."

"Of course, you don't. You've never been told that he's a rich man."

"Rich?"

She leaned toward him slightly. "He's worth over a quarter of a million dollars, Charlie."

"But that gloomy old barn you lived in before we were married!"

"I know. But it isn't so strange or unusual. Not as extreme as those cases you read about where some recluse dies in filth, with a million dollars glued under the wall-

paper or tucked under the mattress. My father's a miser and always has been. I didn't know he was worth so much myself until my mother died. There were some papers I had to sign. I made inquiries, and when I found out—well, Charlie, right then and there I began waiting for him to die. I'm his only heir, you know. It will all come to me."

The walls seemed to tilt a little, and the TV was a crazy, animated painting by Dali. Charles wiped his hand across his face. It came away wet. The discovery of the old man's wealth was not the real shock. This new side of Laura—that's what took him a moment to absorb.

"You think I'm evil, Charlie?"

"No, I realize . . . I mean, years of living with him wouldn't endear him to anyone. . . ."

"He's never suspected my feelings. Isn't that a greater, more laudable sacrifice than acting out of pure love?"

"Yes," Charlie said, his voice hoarse and quick. "Yes, it is, Laura."

"If we throw him out, there is the chance a nurse will marry him for all that money."

"Yes, there is a strong chance."

"Or out of spite, he'd will the money to some charity. I know he'd do that, Charlie."

"I'm pretty sure of it myself, knowing him."

"So we don't have any alternative, do we?"

"Not that I can see."

She smoothed the hem of her dress over her knees and stared thoughtfully at the carpet.

"A quarter million, Charlie."

"I can't imagine that much honest-to-goodness money."

"Trips around the world. Good clothes. Thumb your nose at the mortgage company. Think in those terms, Charlie. When he is at his most trying."

"I'll do that."

She raised her eyes slowly to his. "We'll earn the money, Charlie."

"I guess we will."

"We must always be kind to him. As long as he lives."

"Yes. Kind."

"Are you afraid, Charlie?"

"Of taking care of an old man until he dies?" He laughed softly. "No, I'm not afraid, Laura."

Charlie felt five years younger when he woke the next morning. He hummed while he shaved. His undreamed-of

good fortune caused him to look at himself in the mirror "Old pal," he said to his image, "you're going to be a rich man."

A feeling of love and respect for the old man surged up in Charlie. *When I spend that money,* Charlie thought, *I want it free and untainted. I want you to know that it's mine by right. I want to remember that I eased your last days, Father Emmons.*

The old man noticed the change. Two days later when Charlie brought him a box of his favorite sugar-stick candy, the old man's eyes seemed to sink in even deeper depths, cloaked with caution.

They were in the old man's bedroom, the nice, sunny room. "Charlie," the old man said, "what are you up to?"

"I don't know what you mean, Father Emmons."

"This business of holding a chair for me, calling me 'father,' of bringing me stuff like this candy."

"Why, I . . ."

"And no accidents, Charlie, for the last couple days."

"Accidents?"

"You know what I mean," the old man said softly. "Nothing in my food to make me sick. No hiding of my pills. No boxes on the basement stairs."

"Just accidents, that's all," Charlie said. "I hope you like the candy."

"Here," the old man said suspiciously, "you eat a piece of it."

Charlie stared at him. Then he took a stick of candy from the box.

"Not that one," the old man said, grabbing the candy away. "I'll eat this one." He pulled a piece from the box and thrust it at Charlie.

Charlie took a bite while the old man watched him closely.

"Is the candy good, Charlie?"

"Sure, but if I had your . . ."

"What was that? You meant to say something, didn't you, Charlie. If you had my what? My what, Charlie? If you had my what?"

Charlie swallowed. "If I had your taste, I'd try some better candy."

"I like this candy," the old man said.

He remained standing there, just staring, until Charlie

finally said awkwardly, "Well, it's pretty good candy at that."

He went to his own room and closed the door. He leaned limply against it. The first misgiving since his talk with Laura came to him. Already he suspects that I'm planning something . . . that I know about his money . . . that I'm going to kill him.

Kill him.

Charlie put his hands over his ears, went in the bathroom, and took two aspirin. Through the small window, he saw the old man puttering in the backyard, nibbling at his stick candy.

Charlie was in the living room trying to concentrate on the newspaper when the old man came back in. The old man stood holding his candy. He was stringy inside his heavy sweater and baggy pants.

"Have some candy, Charlie."

"No, thanks, I . . ."

"It's real good."

The overture seemed genuine enough. Charlie took a stick of candy, and the old man went to his room and closed the door.

Charlie carried the candy to the kitchen and dropped it in the garbage can.

"Dinner in a few minutes, Charlie," Laura said, busy at the stove.

"Sure," he said absently.

He stepped out of the kitchen, crossed the yard, opened the shop door, and clicked the light switch.

The small room was full of butane from the heater's open petcock. The electric spark and the butane produced a chemical reaction that sent the garage mushrooming into the twilight sky. A piece of the garage knocked down an antenna across the street. A woman in the next block went hysterical when she heard the explosion and screamed something about the Russians. Charlie had barely time for one last thought: "Old Man Emmons had it all worked out, blast him, but he's blasting me right out of his money!"

THE DRUM MAJOR

by Arthur Porges

THE TENOR of his dream changed suddenly. The lovely girl he was pursuing through a sunny garden vanished without a trace. He looked about for her everywhere, feeling deeply frustrated at her disappearance. Only in dreams were young, slim girls at his disposal.

He was preparing to stalk one of her shadowy sisters when he first noticed the darkening sky. A subtle mist, strangely manifest to the eye, settled slowly but relentlessly over the gay, irresponsible world. The sun was obscured, and an oily purple half-light made the cheerful landscape of moments earlier into something strange and sinister.

It was often so, lately. Unsuspecting and happy in the bright amoral Land Beyond Sleep, his youth magically restored, he disported himself, reveling in the godlike powers, the freedom from all restraint, that were his only in dreams. But occasionally, at first, and now too frequently, there occurred at a certain point in his intoxicating Odyssey through the night an abrupt change of mood—the beginning of torment.

All about him the tenuous, subtly deformed creatures of his dream fled like ants before a poison spray; and as they drifted by on soundless feet, all seemed to cry with one voice of fear, "The Drum Major! The Drum Major!"

The Drum Major! Once again he remembered and, remembering, quailed. It came to him with unwelcome clarity that *he* was now the object of pursuit, that from his exalted position of mastery over a whole dream world he had been flung into a gulf of degrading fear. Instead of enforcing his arrogant mandates upon the plastic beings about him, he was in flight, himself, from a nameless pursuer—not merely death—all the more terrifying for being unknown.

As so often before, he would run until his whole body was one flame of muscle agony, and at the last, gasping

and sobbing, would draw away from his pursuer to find his home just ahead. He would leap in, barely clear, lock the door, and awake. Wet through with icy sweat, his heart pounding wildly, but awake—oh, the joy of that awakening! —and safe in bed.

He paused irresolutely where he was, wasting precious moments in locating the thing that hunted him. Dazed and sick with sudden fanged memories, he peered about, half-afraid to look directly lest he see too plainly what was best hidden.

There across the smoky, unreal terrain, a huge red shape, hairy, evil in its shambling motion, quartered the dream coverts with fierce eagerness. Its great arms were held aloft, and it bowed itself from side to side as it cast about for his trail.

Frozen in a matrix of fear, the dreamer saw his margin of safety vanishing.

There was still a chance. He would hide. That tree—where had it come from?—with the thick bole. He leaped behind it, and panting, hugged the friendly trunk. For a moment he felt secure, then the bark lost its roughness, becoming smooth and cool. The tree flickered and changed; it was transparent—a thing of glass. And the Drum Major stared . . .

The bowed figure rose to stiff erectness, arms flung aloft in triumph; the dreamer's paralysis dissolved, and he whirled to flee.

Behind him a hoarse bellow rang out. The chase was on.

For a few moments the dream-lightness of his feet gave him hope. He leaped with unflinching confidence over ditches, fences, logs, and rivers. He ran effortlessly up obstacle-strewn hills that ascended almost vertically. His feet found paths through apparently impervious tangles of thorny brush, and he cleared with fantastic soaring leaps sky-flung barriers that sprang from nowhere to block his path. Nothing could match his agility; he would race the sun out of the sky; spurn the whole world with his flying feet; he was the god Mercury. . . .

But the cries of the Drum Major rang again in his ears, and the subtle quicksand that torments the hunted of the Land Beyond Sleep slowed his desperate stride. Every step now meant heart-taxing exertion as he fought his way through meadows of wet grass, deserted streets, cluttered rooms that had never known human inhabitants, long, long

corridors lined with doors behind which crouched horrors waiting to spring.

He struggled on, shrieking with fear of imminent hurt, through a vast cellar, black and chill, its damp floor heaped with rusty parts of improbable machinery.

And always just behind, he heard the thudding of splay feet as the Drum Major followed with unfaltering bounds.

The dreamer came to an abrupt decision, one so simple he had overlooked it before. There, just ahead, was a precipitous cliff, the very place from which to plunge, leaving his pursuer cheated on the brink.

He climbed gasping up the rocky slope, dragging each foot with prodigious effort from the clinging muck. At the summit he yelled defiance at the Drum Major, and with a deep breath of exultation hurled himself over. Below, a foaming torrent, black and lusterless, boiled in a narrow gorge.

He fell for hours with nauseating acceleration, and the thin whistle of air past his ears became maddening. But finally the wild river rose to meet him. He knew it well, now. It formed the frontispiece of an edition of *Grimm's Fairy Tales,* a childhood favorite, long forgotten. He braced himself for the icy water.

But somehow, when he landed, he was waist deep in a swamp, and the Drum Major's bubbling cry seared his weary brain.

And then a railroad track appeared before him with a long streamliner, gaily alight, rolling over the rails. He saw the club car, a blaze of color against the lowering sky. It was filled with smartly dressed people, chatting merrily over their drinks, and his heart swelled with longing.

He would be rescued, and join the safe, happy passengers, or he would die beneath the great wheels. He was squarely on the track, daring the enormous black steamer to run him down.

But the train ground to a stop with the grim, old-fashioned steel cowcatcher an inch from his face; every light flashed out, and in vain he ran up and down hammering at the dark cars screaming, "Help! Let me in! Please, please—for the love of God!" There was no response except the sullen drip of oil, the faint hiss of escaping steam, and the sardonic chuckle of a valve.

Again the relentless beat of clawed pads, strangely rhythmic: Lubb-DUPP! Lubb-DUPP! and abandoning his futile

pleas, he set off once more, scarcely noting as in mocking irony the train, now brilliantly illuminated, puffed on its carefree way to the world of security and light.

Somewhere deep in his brain an ominous voice chanted a meaningless phrase like an echo to the Drum Major's bounds. "Systole! Diastole! Systole! Diastole!" something jeered as the dreamer fled on his aimless course.

He had reached the uttermost limit of his endurance, and at that moment, as always, his home flashed into view, cheerful and friendly, a refuge within its sturdy brick walls.

He staggered up the porch stairs with the Drum Major breathing hoarsely just behind him. A scaly paw brushed his bare neck as it ripped the collar of his shirt, and the chill contact plucked his deepest heartstring of panic. Then the door slammed to cut off his nemesis, and he was lurching down the long, dim corridor to his room. Again a heavy door was closed and locked behind him, as, weeping with exhaustion, he flung himself upon the bed and lay still.

Never before had he escaped by such a narrow margin, and as he lay there sobbing quietly and framing incoherent phrases of gratitude, a gradual dislimning and refocusing of the room revealed familiar objects in the dawn of a fine spring morning. He was damp with perspiration; his heart throbbed jarringly, but the finches chirped outside in the garden, and he was awake—safe.

As he realized this, a wave of relief, excruciating in its intensity, swept over him, and he stretched luxuriously in the tangled bedclothes. "That damned greasy food last night," he muttered. "I'm not supposed to eat—" He went rigid in horrified disbelief. What was that heavy tread in the hall?

Something was moving down the corridor toward the bedroom, and his heart beat in time to those steps that made the floor creak.

Then there was a crash as the massive door split down the center like wet cardboard. A hairy arm, stranded with wire-distinct muscles, thrust savagely through the splintered panel, groping, groping . . .

He closed his eyes. The drumming of his heart swelled to a mad crescendo. Crouching beneath the covers, numb with fright, he sensed but could not see the Drum Major's leap that brought its bulk full upon his heaving chest.

With that intolerable contact, uncouth and furry, the tom-tom of his heart ceased as if a conductor had waved an authoritative baton. For one endless moment he felt the thing crouching on his breast, its warm, foul breath offending his nostrils.

From this second dream, which so falsely had seemed to bring a monster into the real world, he was not destined to escape. Two gulfs, one black and cold, the other crimson and warm, surged toward him in silent contest. He realized, too late, what was on his chest, and the knowledge came just as the blackness won out, dropping him into a night without end.

They found him that morning. Upon his chest, paws neatly folded, and purring gently, Belshazzar, the big Persian, dozed in the warm sunlight that bathed his master's twisted face.

The diagnosis was coronary thrombosis—a fatal heart attack.

UPSIDE-DOWN WORLD

by Jack Ritchie

"ARE YOU with me, Regan?"

"Yes," I said.

Albright shook his head. "What would you do if you didn't have to work for a living? Stare at the sky all day and think?"

"I'm listening."

"I know you're listening, but try to show it. When you look out of the window, I keep feeling jealous of what it is out there that's got your interest. You're paying ten percent attention to me and my little earthly difficulties and the other ninety percent seems to be bumping around the universe."

"You were talking about Robert Cramer?"

Sam Albright sighed and handed me the folder. "Robert Cramer took out the policy five years ago. His heart was perfect then. Or, at least, sound."

My eyes went over the top sheet.

"But he died of a heart attack?"

"Yes."

"How much is the death benefit?"

"Two hundred thousand dollars."

"There was an autopsy?"

"Of course. One of our company doctors was present when it was performed. Cause of death was a diseased heart. The condition had been developing for two or three years, he estimates."

"But still you want me to investigate?"

"Two hundred thousand dollars is a lot of money. The company *has* to investigate." He rubbed the back of his neck. "As far as I can see, there's nothing wrong, except for one little thing that bothers me. At the autopsy our doctor noticed that Cramer's right hand—the fingers, thumb, and ball of the thumb—appeared to be seared. Not a great deal, but enough so that blisters would have developed if he had lived."

"He burned himself just before he died?"

Albright nodded. "Almost immediately before. Our doctor also extracted tiny fragments of glass from Cramer's fingers and hand. We had them identified at a laboratory. They were pieces of an electric light bulb."

"You're positive he died of a heart attack? He wasn't electrocuted?"

"Definitely a heart attack. An electric shock could have brought it on, but there's no way of proving that. He might have been removing a hot bulb from a socket when it burst."

"Might have been?"

Albright smiled. "The interesting point is that it wasn't mentioned in the account of his death."

"When did he die?"

"Three days ago. He was at the apartment of a friend. A Peter Norton. According to Norton, Cramer dropped in one evening three days ago for a couple of drinks. He seemed to have been loaded before he got there."

"He drank heavily with his heart condition?"

"Either he didn't know about it or he didn't care. Around ten o'clock he became pale and complained that he didn't feel very well. Norton went to get him a glass of water. While he was in the kitchen, he heard Cramer cry out. When Norton hurried back to the living room, Cramer was on the floor and apparently dead. Norton called a rescue squad and they worked on Cramer for about an hour, but it was no use."

"Norton didn't have anything to say about the burnt fingers and the glass fragments?"

"He didn't mention them at all. I'll leave it up to you to ask."

"Who is Cramer's beneficiary?"

"A Miss Helen Morland."

"Miss?"

Albright smiled faintly. "It's even more interesting than that. He had a wife. Thelma. Until six months ago, *she* was his beneficiary."

"Does she know he made that change?"

"I don't know. But she'll find out soon enough."

"Were Cramer and his wife separated?"

"Not that we know of."

"What is the relationship between beneficiary and deceased?"

"We don't know that, either. Technically it's none of our business. We can only guess."

"Can you tell me any more about Cramer?"

"He inherited money, but from what I've heard, he had spent just about all of it. I think he had to scrape to make his insurance premiums."

"Anything on Norton?"

"He's single and he has money. That's about all I know."

I decided to see Peter Norton first.

He had an apartment on the third floor of the Merridith Building on the lake shore.

When he opened the door, I gave him my name, showed him my credentials, and stated my business.

Peter Norton was a big man with small, wary eyes. He frowned. "What is there to investigate?"

"Just routine," I said. "We have to fill out forms."

He let me come in.

I saw only the large living room, but I had the impression that there were at least three or four other rooms in the apartment.

"What do you want to know?" Norton asked.

"Just tell me what happened here the night he died."

He lit a cigarette. "There isn't much to tell. Cramer came here at about eight that night. Wanted a couple of drinks and a lot of talk. Jim Barrows—that's my lawyer—was here and we all had a drink. Then Jim left, but Cramer stayed on. We talked and did some more drinking and then around ten Cramer suddenly got pale and asked for some water. I went to get it. While I was in the kitchen, I heard him cry out. When I got back here, he was on the floor. I called the rescue squad, but that didn't do any good. He was dead." Norton puffed the cigarette. "That's all there was to it."

"What was Cramer doing when he died?"

He frowned. "Doing? Nothing. Just sitting on the davenport."

"At the autopsy it was found that the fingers of Cramer's right hand had been seared slightly and also that fragments of glass were imbedded in them. Would you know how that happened?"

Norton went to the liquor cabinet. "I'm afraid I can't help you."

"It didn't happen here?"

"No."

"Then when he came here, his hand was already injured?"

"I didn't notice. I suppose so."

"Was his hand bleeding?"

Norton flushed irritably. "I told you I didn't notice. Why all the questions about his hand? What's that got to do with his death? He died of a heart attack."

"Yes," I said. I was conscious of the faint odor of paint and turpentine coming from somewhere in the apartment. Didn't Cramer complain about his hand?"

"He didn't say anything to me." Norton poured a drink and then remembered me. "Care for anything?"

"No, thank you."

"Cramer was pretty loaded when he came here. He was feeling no pain, and you could take that literally. I don't know where he cut his hand."

"How long have you known Cramer?"

Norton shrugged. "Two, three years. Got introduced at some party or other. I don't remember."

"Do you know a Miss Helen Morland?"

He looked at me and then after a while he said, "Why?"

"She's his beneficiary."

Norton's eyes narrowed and a thin, hard smile came to his face. But he said nothing.

"Cramer had a wife," I said.

Norton's hand gripped the glass tightly. "You've never seen Helen Morland?"

"No. I don't know her."

His mouth twisted. "Nobody does. You get the feeling that she's on earth just to look around and decide if there's anything worth being interested in. I don't think she's found anything and I don't think she ever will. If she has any emotions, she's never used them."

Norton swallowed half the drink. "She's not bored. It's not that simple. She's just mildly surprised that anybody else exists and she wishes they would go away. I wonder sometimes if she isn't lonely. If she *can* get lonely. You almost feel like asking her, 'Where did you come from?'"

"Was Cramer in love with her?"

"Yes," Norton said savagely. "'Everybody who . . .' He finished the drink. "I'm sorry I can't help you any more about Cramer, Mr. Regan."

I looked out of the window at the frame-to-frame blue of the lake and the sky. "You mentioned that, when Cramer

came here, a Mr. Barrows, your lawyer, was here too. Had Cramer ever met him before?"

"No."

"And so naturally you introduced them to each other?"

"Of course."

"And they shook hands?"

"Natur . . ." He stopped.

I smiled faintly. "If Cramer had injured his hand before he got here, I wonder if he would shake hands with anybody. Even if he did, I'm sure that Mr. Barrows would have noticed the condition of the hand and at least made some remark about it. I'll ask Mr. Barrows."

There was silence and Norton glared at me.

"There is one other thing I'd like to mention," I said. "Norton received his injury shortly before, or at the time, he died."

Norton took a deep breath. "All right. Around ten o'clock one of the light bulbs in a lamp burned out. Cramer decided to replace it. He burned his hand when he touched it and it burst. Maybe he just grabbed it too hard. I told you he had a lot to drink."

"The bulb burst and then he died?"

Norton went back to the liquor cabinet. "I didn't even know that he had heart trouble. He just collapsed and died."

"Why did you think it so important to deny that Cramer got cut and burned here?"

Norton waved a hand. "I just didn't think it mattered. The only important thing is that Cramer is dead."

"Which lamp burned out?"

Norton almost shrugged. "That one over there."

I went to the lamp on the end table next to the davenport. I removed the shade and looked at the bulb.

"What did you expect?" Norton snapped. "I put another bulb in the lamp."

I ran my finger over the bulb and showed it to him. "Dust. A couple weeks' worth."

Norton's face darkened. "I took a bulb from another lamp and it happened to be dusty."

But his fingerprints would have shown in the dust on the bulb—and there had been none. I decided not to mention that for now. I picked up my hat. "Thank you for your trouble, Mr. Norton."

The superintendent-janitor of the building was a thin

man with the harassed look common in his job. He relaxed when I identified myself and he found out that I wasn't going to ask him to do something.

"Did you know Mr. Cramer? The man who died here three days ago?"

"I saw him off and on. He always seemed pretty well loaded."

"What kind of a tenant is Mr. Norton?"

The janitor grinned slowly. "Okay. But you have to watch him."

"Why?"

"Like don't shake hands with him until you're sure he doesn't have one of those buzzers in his palm." His grin broadened. "I don't mind too much, though. He's generous to me at Christmastime."

He nodded his head at a thought. "He's got a real sense of humor. Once he had me switch the water faucets in the bathroom of a couple in the next apartment. You know, make the cold water come out of the hot tap and the other way around."

"Did he know the people?"

"Just to talk to, I guess."

"You let yourself into their apartment when they were gone?"

He nodded cautiously. "It was just a joke. No harm done. When they complained to me about their plumbing, I went up there and fixed things right again. But they're still wondering what happened. Mr. Norton and me never let them in on the gag."

"Is Mr. Norton's apartment now in the process of redecoration?"

"Not by the owners of the building."

"But he is having something done?"

"Sure. Been three or four workmen going up there. But I guess they're through. Haven't seen them today."

"When a tenant wants to redecorate his apartment himself, he has to have permission from the owners of the building?"

"That's right. We don't want them to do anything wild."

"And Norton asked for permission?"

"Well . . . he forgot. I talked to him about it, though, and he said he was just having a little work done to make the place more cheerful. So I told him okay. He's a good tenant and he's been here for years."

"Did you see what kind of work was being done?"

"No. I got my own work to do."

When I left him, I drove to Lincoln Avenue. The Cramer apartment was cluttered with oversized furniture. I had the impression it had originally furnished a larger apartment.

Thelma Cramer was dark-haired and tense. "Yes, Mr. Regan?"

I decided to tell her about the change of beneficiary, if she didn't know already. "Mrs. Cramer, do you know that you are no longer the beneficiary of your husband's insurance policy?"

The color drained slowly from her face. "But that's . . . that's impossible. When Bob took out the policy, I *know* that I was designated as beneficiary."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Cramer, but he changed that. Six months ago."

Her eyes narrowed. "Who is the beneficiary now?"

"A Miss Helen Morland."

"Why didn't your company tell me about this before?"

"It's not our business, Mrs. Cramer. A man may change his beneficiary at any time he wishes and it is up to him to inform the interested parties—if he chooses to do so."

Mrs. Cramer twisted a handkerchief. "She's not going to get away with this. I'll take it to court."

"That's your prerogative, Mrs. Cramer. Do you know Miss Morland?"

She laughed harshly. "I've *seen* her. That much I can say. But whether she really saw me or not, I couldn't say. I was just an interruption, an unimportant interruption."

She was silent for a moment and then continued. "There have been other women in Bob's life. He was that kind of a man. But they were just incidents to him. It was different when he met Helen. I could tell that right away. When I found out who was . . . doing that . . . to my husband, I went to her and asked her to leave him alone. I don't know what I expected. Perhaps a scene. But she looked at me . . . those strange gray eyes studied me curiously for a few seconds, and then she said that as far as she was concerned, I could keep Bob home."

Thelma flushed at the recollection. "He was completely infatuated with her, but she didn't want him. I don't think she wants anybody. After she told me to take back my husband, she just turned and went back to the picture she

was painting. I wasn't even in the room anymore. She forgot that I was still there. There was nothing for me to do but leave."

"But your husband kept seeing her?"

"Yes. There was nothing I could do about it." Her face showed perplexity. "I don't think anything ever really . . . happened between them. He even talked to me about her. He told me that he would go to her studio and just watch her. He never knew if she was aware of him or not."

Thelma shook her head. "There's no expression on her face, really. I don't believe she's ever happy or sad, like other people."

"Miss Morland is an artist?"

"I suppose. She paints, but I don't believe she ever exhibits or sells anything. I don't even think she's interested in painting. It's just something to do . . . while she's waiting."

"Waiting?"

Her eyes widened. "I don't know why I said that. But it's true. I feel that she's waiting for . . . something."

"Did you know that your husband had heart trouble?"

"No. He never mentioned anything about it to me."

"Do you think that he knew about it himself?"

"I couldn't say. The last six months—ever since he'd met her—he'd been ill. You could see that. It might have been his heart, but I don't think it was that alone. He drank a lot, although he shouldn't have. He always passed out after a while. He couldn't sleep, and he wouldn't eat."

"How did your husband happen to meet Miss Morland?"

"Peter Norton introduced him." Her hands clenched. "I think he did it just to see how she would affect Bob. Almost a practical joke."

"Who was his doctor?"

"Dr. Farrell. He has an office in the Brumner Building."

I rose. "Thank you for your time, Mrs. Cramer."

I drove to the Brumner Building and took the elevator up to Dr. Farrell's office. When the receptionist showed me in, I presented my credentials.

"Dr. Farrell," I said. "A Robert Cramer, one of your patients and insured by our company, died three days ago."

Dr. Farrell was a graying man in his middle fifties. He nodded. "I read about that." He had his nurse bring a card from the filing cabinet and studied it. "Cramer's been a

patient of mine for over ten years. About two and a half years ago, I noticed the heart condition. I told him about it, trying not to alarm him unduly. I put him on a sensible schedule and gave him all the usual cautions and advice." He looked up. "When I saw him six months ago, the heart condition had considerably worsened. Also, he was in other ways not in the best of health—general rundown condition. This time I impressed upon him strongly the need to take care of himself. Apparently he did not follow my advice."

"His wife said that he didn't tell her about his heart."

"I suppose he thought she'd worry."

"Yes. I suppose that was it."

And then I drove to 231 Brainard Street. It was a four-story building among other red brick buildings, in an older part of the city where quietness remained.

I sat in my car and smoked a cigarette and, when I had finished, I went into the building and up to the studio on the top floor.

Yes, Helen Morland had gray eyes and she watched me without expression while I told her why I was there.

"Did you know that Cramer had trouble with his heart?"

Her lips had been about to say, "No," but then she seemed almost to frown for a moment. She stared at me and said, "Yes. He told me." Then she turned and moved away from me.

"Did you know that you are the beneficiary of Cramer's insurance policy?"

She stopped in front of an easel. "Yes."

It wasn't my business, but I said, "Why?"

She picked up a brush and painted a single line. "He said he loved me. He had no money, but he wanted to give me something eventually."

"He was giving you his life. Did that interest you?"

She made another line and went over it.

I moved about the room. There were paintings completed and uncompleted and I felt that all of them had been forgotten the moment they had been taken off the easel. Some were representations, some impressions, and often there were just simple strokes, up and down, that meant nothing except to say that she had been thinking of something else when they were made.

"Do you think you have a right to the money?"

"He wanted to give it to me." Her eyes were on me now. "Are you angry about that?"

She had soft light hair, but it was difficult to tell the exact shade. It seemed to shimmer in the sunlight.

"Mrs. Cramer is going to fight the bequest."

"Of course," Helen said. "I expect that. But I don't believe we will get to court. We will agree upon something. I will be satisfied with fifty thousand."

"When Cramer died, his right hand was slightly burned and he had bits of glass in it. Do you know anything about that?"

"No."

I went to the big windows overlooking the rooftops. "What is money to you—fifty thousand dollars of it?"

"It frees time."

"To think of people? Of things? Of ideas?"

"To wonder."

I could see the public library, the castle of books. When I was a boy, I had tried to read them all. Perhaps I should never have tried. And above the buildings, the sky. The top of a cage? I found myself saying, "Do you listen when you look up there? Do you hear anything?"

She was beside me. "So faintly. A music I cannot quite understand." Her eyes were on my face. "Why did you ask that?"

"I don't know." I came back to this time and this earth. "Thank you for your time, Miss Morland. I'll be leaving now."

At the door we looked at each other again and then I turned and went away.

Once during that night I got out of bed and stood at the window. The stars were clear and just a step beyond the reach of the mind.

Someone else was watching them too. Yes.

What was she thinking?

In the morning I saw Albright. I told him how Norton had explained about the light bulb and I told him about the undisturbed dust on the one I'd examined.

He frowned. "It doesn't sound important, but why would he lie about something like that? Do you think it's worth working on this a little more?"

"Yes."

"You'll talk to Norton again?"

"Yes. But first I'd like to see his apartment when he's not home."

Albright looked unhappy.

"You can get me a ring of keys?"

"Sure, but you just can't . . ."

"I lost the key to my apartment, Sam. I just don't want to bother the janitor."

He sighed. "All right. But if you get caught, the company knows nothing about it." He studied me. "I have the vague feeling that you're actually interested in this case."

"Yes," I said.

Albright left the office for five minutes and came back with the ring of keys. "I haven't used these for fifteen years. I hope locks haven't changed much since then."

I phoned Norton before I left Albright's office. There was no answer. I tried again from a drugstore a block from Norton's apartment building with the same result.

When I got up to the third floor, I spent ten minutes at the door buzzer and when that got me nothing, I took it for granted that Norton wasn't home.

I used the ring of keys and on the fourth try the door opened for me.

Norton was home.

He sat in an armchair facing the door and his eyes stared at me.

But he didn't move and he never would.

I closed the door behind me and moved closer to him.

Whatever had killed him, it was something that left no mess. There was no gunshot wound, no stab.

I went past him and through the apartment. It was large and well furnished, but whatever Norton's personality, it was not reflected in his furniture. The place was as impersonal as a stage set.

I came to the bedroom, where the smell of new paint lingered. It had the neutral look of a hotel room—twin beds, tables and lamps, and two dressers. I tried the drawers and found that they were empty. The closet was bare.

The room was new. Everything about it was new. I examined the woodwork, the doors, the window framing, the floor moulding. All of them were of wood painted for the first time.

Everything was in order—an average guest room. Everything just the way it was supposed to be except . . .

The switch plate controlling the overhead light fixture was too high. They are usually from four to four and a half feet from the floor. But this one was at face level.

I tried the switch and the overhead light flashed on. I

flipped the toggle several more times. There was something else wrong . . . something I could feel . . . yes, I could *feel* it.

I looked at the switch. Normally you press the toggle up to turn on the light and down to shut it off. But this one was reversed—down to turn on the light and up to turn it off.

I went back to the living room and now the wastebasket next to the French desk caught my eye. I extracted brown wrapping paper and string. Beneath them lay scraps of picture moulding and torn scraps of heavy cardboard.

I put the pieces together. It had been a framed print, twelve by sixteen inches, and the small lettering at the bottom gave it a name. *The Surrender of Cornwallis.* A column of men, resplendent in their red uniforms were marching from their redoubts.

I smoothed the wrapping paper. The package had come from the Barclay Art Shop on Wells. There were no stamps and so evidently the package had been delivered—probably since the last time I saw Norton alive, or I would have noticed the wrapping in the wastebasket when I had been here before.

Norton had received the package, opened it, and then smashed the frame and tore the print into small pieces.

I studied the pieces I'd put together again. Yorktown, October 1781, and the troops marching out to surrender behind a band that played a tune called . . .

I stared at Norton. He had been a man with money and a man who thought switching water faucets an example of wit. Perhaps . . .

I went through his wallet. Nothing interested me except a small business card.

Arthur Franklin
General Contractor
2714 Virginia Street
BOardman 7-8136

Norton's topcoat lay over the back of the davenport. I went through the pockets and in one of them I found a handkerchief stained with faint brown. Blood?

I put it in my pocket and then I went through the apartment again wiping fingerprints off anything I might have touched.

When I left, I allowed the door to the hall to remain

slightly ajar. I wanted somebody to find Norton soon and I wanted to know how he had died.

I took the handkerchief to the Lytton & Brandt Laboratories and after a while one of their technicians came back to me with the report.

"It's paint," he said. "Brown. Or rather auburn. Low saturation, low brilliance. Ordinary, somewhat cheap grade interior gloss paint. Could be used for any number of purposes."

Arthur Franklin's office was a small building in one corner of a yard in the valley under the viaduct on Twenty-seventh. He was a big man who enjoyed the stub of a cigar. "What can I do for you?"

I showed him my credentials. "I understand that you recently did some work for a Mr. Norton?"

He grinned faintly. "Some."

"Just what did you do?"

He thought it over for a moment. "You a friend of his?"

"No. This is my work."

He decided to tell me. "Craziest order I ever had. But it was his money and he wanted it done. Wanted it kept quiet, too. He gave me and each of the boys something extra while we were working so that we wouldn't let anything slip to anybody around there."

Franklin settled back in the chair. "We went through a lot of trouble. Had to change everything. Everything. Put the rug on the ceiling and bolted all the other furniture up there too. We had the chandelier sticking up from the floor."

Yes, I had been right.

"An upside-down room," he said. "Yes, sir. Lot of work for a practical joke, but I guess he could afford it. We put the floor moulding on the wall at the ceiling and reversed and hiked up the doors. Had to blank out the windows too and make it look like a wall. Wouldn't want the victim to look out of the window and see that the world wasn't upside down, too."

He savored the situation. "Norton didn't tell me what the room was for, but I could guess. Heard about things like that before. He has somebody up at his apartment and gets him to drink enough to pass out. Then Norton carries him into the room and leaves him there. And Norton waits outside, looking through a peephole."

Franklin chuckled. "His friend comes to, but he's still groggy. He looks around and he thinks he's on the ceiling.

The guy gets panicky. He tries to crawl up the walls to get down to what he thinks is the floor. I hear it's a riot."

Yes, I thought, Cramer woke up in the room. The furniture loomed up above him and he was on the ceiling. He would be frightened—terrified. What horrible thing had happened? In a moment he would fall. Instinctively he had clutched for the nearest thing—the chandelier. His heart had pounded madly and in that instant he had suffered his heart attack and his fingers had crushed the bulb.

"I guess it was a short-time joke, though," Franklin said. "Norton called us back two days ago and he had us tear out the whole thing. A rush job, too. We had to put everything back where it was before. Just exactly."

But you forgot one thing, I thought. You forgot to move the light switch back down to where it belonged and forgot to reverse it.

Cramer had died in the upside-down room and then it had been Norton's turn to panic. Cramer couldn't be found there. There would be publicity. Perhaps even criminal charges.

Norton would have preferred to have Cramer's body out of the apartment altogether, but that was almost impossible. He might be seen carrying it. So he had dragged Cramer to the living room and pretended that he died there. There had been no reason for anyone to search Norton's apartment and discover the upside-down room.

Probably Norton hadn't even noticed the injury to Cramer's hand. Even if he had, he had thought that it was unimportant. Cramer had died of a heart attack and that was the big thing. Why should anyone ask about the hand?

The upside-down room. Perfect in every detail and he had even ordered a special print to fasten to the wall—a final touch. It hadn't arrived in time to be there for Cramer's death, but it had come yesterday or early this morning and he had torn it to bits and dropped them into the wastebasket. The print had shown British troops marching to surrender —marching behind a band playing an old English air, "The World Turned Upside Down."

"I wonder if his trick worked," Franklin said, amused by the idea.

Franklin wouldn't know, of course. He hadn't known Cramer, and hundreds of people die in the city of heart attacks. And when Cramer had died, there had been nothing

more specific in the newspapers than the mention that he had died "in the apartment of a friend."

When I left Franklin, I drove past Norton's apartment building. A squad car and an ambulance were parked at the curb.

I went downtown to the main office and saw Albright.

He listened to my story and then shook his head. "It's pretty fantastic, but it still won't help us any except to satisfy our curiosity. We still have to pay the claim. Norton could have gotten into a lot of trouble, but since he's dead, there doesn't even seem to be much point in bringing the story to light."

"It all depends on how Norton died. If he had a heart attack, the case is over."

Albright nodded. "I'll get in touch with the coroner and have him phone me when he gets around to looking at Norton. There ought to be an autopsy. I don't imagine a doctor was around when Norton died."

In the evening I was in my apartment when Albright phoned.

"Norton died of poisoning," he told me, without preliminaries.

"Suicide?"

"Doesn't look like it. No note or anything like that. The police are making it their business now. I just talked to Lt. Henricks. He had the apartment searched from top to bottom. Couldn't find any poison."

"Norton might have swallowed all of it."

"Maybe. But he'd have kept it in something. A box or an envelope. Henricks didn't find anything. And it looked as though Norton had just come home when the poison took effect—his topcoat was lying on the davenport. It seems likely that he was poisoned somewhere else."

"Do the police have any place in mind?"

"Henricks didn't tell me, but I doubt it. This thing is only a few hours old. I imagine he'll start seeing everybody Norton knew."

"When did Norton die?"

"The coroner put it at about eleven last night, give or take a little."

When I hung up, I made a drink and smoked a cigarette. I thought of things and I thought of her. Was she waiting? Would I be like the others? Would it be enough for me to watch and wait?

At ten-thirty I crushed out a last cigarette and drove to 231 Brainard. When I got out of the car, I looked up. Stubby columns of lights pushed up at the darkness from the skylight.

When I opened the street door, I smelled paint.

In the dim hall light it was difficult to make out the exact colors, but I thought that the walls had been painted dark green and the wooden banisters, brown. Auburn.

Six feet up the stairs, almost obscured by the shadow of the railing, hung a "Wet Paint" sign.

I pushed the buzzer at apartment No. 1.

The janitor was in carpet slippers and about him hung the odor of beer. "Well?"

"When did you paint your hall?"

He scowled. "You got me out here just to ask me that?"

"Yes."

And then he saw my face and he knew that I wanted an answer. "Today," he said uneasily.

"Just today?"

"Sure." And then he corrected that. "Well, it was started the day before. The top floor. My son-in-law started around four in the afternoon. He's got a regular job and this was something extra."

I went up the stairs and behind me I heard him lock and bolt the door.

Helen's eyes went over me when she opened the door and let me in. She smiled softly. "I waited for you."

"Peter Norton is dead," I said. "He was poisoned."

She moved to the record player and turned the volume down slightly. "Yes?"

"Did Norton come here often?"

"He came to watch me and to talk. Sometimes I listened."

"Were you listening when he told you about the upside-down room?"

"Yes."

"Norton was here last night, wasn't he?"

"Would you like something to drink?"

"He was here last night," I said. "The halls are dim and he touched the wet paint. He wiped his hand on his handkerchief, but his fingerprints should still be on one of the banisters. They would prove that he was here last night."

She took two crystal goblets from a cabinet. "The police have not been here."

"They don't know about it. Only I do."

She smiled. "Then I needn't worry."

"Helen, I'll have to tell them."

She looked at me. "But why?"

"This is a murder case."

"And I would be the most obvious suspect? There would be an investigation? The police would find out who I am? Where I was?"

"Yes."

"I would not want that."

"Helen," I said. "Did you kill Norton?"

She held one of the glasses to the light for a moment. And then she said, "Yes."

On the record player the music came to an end. There was a click as another record fell into place. The music returned, but the room was cold.

"You didn't have to tell me."

"You asked. I can't lie to you. You know why, don't you? And you will not tell the police."

I said nothing.

She put down the glasses and moved abruptly to a picture leaning against a chair. "I don't even remember painting this. What was I thinking?"

"Did you have anything to do with Cramer's death?"

"Norton told me he was building the room. I knew that Cramer's heart was bad, very bad. And I knew that Cramer's insurance was in my name. I suggested to Norton that Cramer be his first victim. Norton didn't know why, of course." Her eyes searched mine. "Are you shocked? Why?"

"Suppose Cramer hadn't died?"

"I would have thought of something else."

"Is life or death so simple to you?"

She stared at another painting. "I like blue. More than any other color. I've never told anyone that before."

"Why did you kill Norton?"

"He was going to tell the police about me—unless he could have me. It was not an unpleasant way to die. Sleep in one half an hour. Death in fifteen minutes more."

"But what could he have told them? There was nothing anyone could prove. And he would have gotten into trouble himself."

"He wouldn't have mentioned Cramer at all. He would simply have written an anonymous note to the police. He would have told them about the others. He did not know

about all of them, but he knew of one before Cramer and he suspected more."

"How many others?"

"Five." She frowned. "Six. It is unimportant. But they are all dead and the police would find something to harm me. I have not always been Helen Morland." She regarded me. "I cannot go to prison. I would die first. I would kill before I would go to prison."

"Perhaps not a prison."

Her eyes widened. "If others think I am insane, I do not mind. But do you?"

"I will have to go to the police. You know that."

"But we are different from the others. Must we obey their rules?"

"Yes."

Her face was pale. "I have never loved anyone before. Must I lose everything that I have now?"

I said nothing. I could not answer her.

"When are you going to the police?"

"I don't know."

"In the morning. That will be time enough. I will not run away. There is no place to go now. No one to wait for." She smiled faintly. "A kiss? Our only kiss?"

And then I went home. I drank and I waited.

It was cold dawn when I phoned Helen's apartment. There was no answer and I had expected none.

She had not run away, but she was gone.

And the world was lonely again.

NICE WORK IF YOU CAN GET IT

by Donald Honig

THE THREAT of competition, an ugly noise that generally starts when your back is turned, can waken a man's pride and arouse his self-respect until it glitters like the eye of a tiger. Competition is a disease that sooner or later infects every trade and profession and makes it take a long step forward. Still, it remains the obligation of every honorable man to oppose it with all his skills.

As a matter of record, me and my associates, Jack and Buck, have long been the leading exponents of the delicate art of scoop-'em-up, which is the art of abduction fined down to a science whereby not a footprint, fingerprint, howl, yelp, or regret is left behind. Perfection is the only formula for success in this tricky profession. Tyros have long studied our techniques and have tried, with no luck, to emulate them.

So I was quite surprised to hear one day that another organization had scraped up the men, the courage and the resources, to go into competition with us. I met the captain of the crew one afternoon while paying my semiannual visit to my aged father (a retired second-story man who had developed vertigo) at the Home for Retired Vikings, which is a fine old institution maintained by the trade, catering to sore-footed footpads, conscience-stricken swindlers, abstemious rum runners, arthritic forgers and cattle thieves turned vegetarian.

On the way back to the bus I chanced to run into Barney Blue, an old friend from bars both legal and alcoholic. Barney had been visiting his father, an old safecracker who had been forced into premature retirement after developing an unaccountable fear of the dark.

"Bush," said Barney to me as we headed for the bus, "I have long admired your organization. You and your boys have stood preeminent and par-excellent in the field for years. Your capers have captured the hearts of bold men everywhere and become veritable textbooks on the art. I know all this because I've been studying them for years.

Now, having learned the craft from the master, I've organized a little group of my own and we're going into competition with you."

"We're a nation of free enterprise, Barney," I said. "There's nothing wrong with you going into business for yourself, but I ought to warn you that you'll be doing yourself a severe disservice by announcing yourself as a competitor. You're encroaching on very, very private ground. Why try and buck perfection? Why don't you take your boys and go into something that calls for initiative, like holding up stagecoaches or selling protection to the vendors on the Oregon Trail?"

He laughed; but it was a terse sound.

"Don't like the idea of somebody coming into your pasture, eh, Bush," he said. "Well, maybe the profession can stand a little more dash and daring. The talk is that you and your boys have become a bit smug and conservative lately. The grapes are withering on your vine, old boy," he said.

Well, I laughed him off gently. But when I returned home, I found myself brooding a bit. Perhaps it *was* true that we had been doing some laurel-resting of late. I felt that we were on top and could afford to coast. But now this threat of competition cast a new light on everything. It was just possible that Barney Blue and his boys could score some tremendous coup and put us in the background. I decided there was but one thing to do: give my career a fresh crown. So I gathered together the boys and let them know.

"In order to repel this dreary threat," I said to Buck and Jack, "we have to perform a job which, for skill and audacity, will belittle anything that Barney Blue and his boys can conceive, as well as make all our previous efforts look like blueprints. We have to swing a job that will gladden every heart in the Home for Retired Vikings, give inspiration to novices and hope to failures, as well as teach an enduring lesson to Barney Blue and his boys." And I meant *enduring.*

"It sounds big," said Jack.

"It will have to be big," I said. "It can be nothing less than the greatest scoop job in history. I want a job of such magnitude that it will bathe our competitors in shame, of such brilliance that historians the world over will skip a hundred pages in their manuscripts and begin recording us in the next century."

Jack beamed happily; the boys had an ardent and spirited attitude in these matters. Big Buck remained sullen, but I could tell that even he was inspired.

"Who do you have in mind as a subject, Bush?" Jack asked.

"See if you can guess: who is the richest man in the world?"

"Not him," said Jack, shocked.

"Yes, him," I said.

"But it's practically impossible to get near him," Jack said. "He's only too well aware of people like us. His car is a tank and his bodyguards are Neanderthals."

"Those are his achievements," I said. "He also has his weak points. He's impressed and disarmed by millionaires and other dubious celebrities."

"Who are we talking about?" Buck asked, making a rare utterance. He was strictly brawn.

"J. J. Griggen, the bilious billionaire," I said.

"The oil man," Jack said.

"Yes," I said, "oil. Whenever anything in the world stops, stalls, or squeaks, it's another windfall for J. J. Griggen."

"He sounds likely," Buck said.

"We can ask five million for him," I said. "And get it. We'd be depriving him of a week's salary, but what of it? He'll buy up a few Congressmen, have them put through a ransom-is-deductible law, and then forget about the whole thing."

"But how do you make the scoop?" Jack asked.

"I've got that worked out," I said. "Barney Blue's audacious intrusion upon our personal domain has inspired me to conceive the noblest attempt of our career. J. J. Griggen is going to attend a Charity Ball for Overprivileged Children two weeks from tonight. The ball is being held in order to raise funds to build mosaic handball courts for these kids in their Adirondack summer retreats. And the enchanting thing is it's going to be a masquerade ball. It was in the papers today. Boys," I said, "pick out your costumes, unbutton your alter egos, and let your hearts sing out—for we're going to a ball!"

From Handy Harry, the corner forger, we obtained our invitations to the ball. It was being primed as the social event of the season, and little did the primers know how eventful it was going to be. The affair was going to be held

at one of those commodious Long Island mansions where they play polo in the living room on rainy days. We drove out there several times to inspect the premises, then back to the city to formulate the plan which, as it took shape, was by turn feasible, infallible, ingenious and diabolic.

I chose the costumes for my entourage. Buck was going to go as a caveman, *Homo extinctus,* with loin cloth, club and scowl. Jack was going to be Lord Byron, with frills and ruffles and pithy couplets. I was going to be Millard Fillmore, dignified and undistinguished. And with us we were bringing an added, unannounced guest who was going to play an important role later in the evening.

We arrived at the ball at about nine-thirty. The place was ablaze with lights and jewels. They were all there, dukes and duchesses and princes and princesses from places that are remembered today only by stamp collectors and retired map makers; and all the playboys and tycoons and titans, and the men who live in Wall Street's shadow and the women who shadow Wall Street's men. All of them in costume. The grand ballroom was a whirl of bizarre celebrities. I shook hands with Oliver Cromwell, Talleyrand, William McKinley (there were three of them), Julius Caesar, Beau Brummel, Marie Antoinette, Madame Du Barry and dozens of others.

After an hour or so of calculated mingling, I finally caught sight of J. J. Griggen. Humble man that he was, he had come as Moses; not Michelangelo's Moses, but Griggen's Moses, short and paunchy and ferret-eyed. He might have been the real article, the way everyone stepped aside for him and stared after him.

I jostled him at the punch table.

"Excuse me, Moses," I said, and he laughed. He liked that.

"So you recognized me, eh?" he said.

"It was easy."

"And who might you be?" he asked.

"President Millard Fillmore," I said.

"President of what? G.M.?"

"U.S."

"Ah, Steel!" he said and graciously patted me on the back. "Always a pleasure, always a pleasure. Are you really in steel, sir?"

"In a way, if you want to say it's a play on words."

We talked, and while I beguiled the old boy with anec-

dotes, I was maneuvering him out onto a balcony. Outside, on the balcony, out of sight, we met a caveman. With a club.

"Ah," said Griggen with a laugh, "a representative of Organized Labor!" He offered to shake hands. But this caveman was not one for social niceties. One tap with the club and J. J. Griggen was stretched out on the balcony.

Then we went to work. Buck retrieved the parcel we had cached there, containing the unannounced guest—a bearskin which we had bought from a store that sells bearskins and halberds and morions and shrunken heads and Minié balls from the Gettysburg battlefield. While I propped up old J. J., Buck fitted him into the bearskin and zipped him up. Then Buck hefted the bear into his arms and I led them back into the ballroom.

"Thomas Jefferson," I announced to all the smiling, costumed guests, "leading behind me the symbolic brawn and brute strength of America." Several men, Lewis and Clark particularly, cheered, while a woman said how cunning it was.

I led the symbols out the front door and down the path to the parking lot. There I found Lord Byron at the wheel of our car, the motor running, the back door open. Buck dropped the bear onto the back seat and got in beside it. Then we took off down the driveway and through the gate, where the special police in charge there for the evening saluted us nicely; after all, it wasn't every night they saw Millard Fillmore, Lord Byron, a caveman and the world's richest bear.

We sped along the dark, woodsy Long Island lanes, toward the little cabin I had prepared, up a dirt road, perfectly secluded. While it wasn't one of the great mansions that Griggen was accustomed to, he was going to have to call it home for the next few days.

By the time we pulled up to the place in dark, warm, crickety night, Griggen was beginning to stir. I don't suppose he had any idea what he was wearing (I think there is hardly a man anywhere who can conceive of himself waking up in a bearskin), but he began to yell for us to get the horrid thing off of him, and in a voice that bespoke authority, hurrying subordinates, scurrying waiters, scuttling doormen and gushing oil wells. But we were having none of his impertinence. Buck—Buck, who was rich only in brawn and friends—Buck told him to shut up. Griggen almost

gagged on that.

We led him into the cabin and then removed the bearskin. Griggen looked with amazement at the thing, then peered at us in our costumes, and I guess the knock on the head made him lose his bearings for a moment, as he said:

"What have I fallen into—a time machine or a lunatic asylum?"

"Neither, Mr. Griggen," I said. "We're all fugitives from the charity ball and you're our guest. In the spirit of the evening, I might say that we're masquerading as your abductors and you as our victim, but don't believe it—the ball is over and this is the real thing."

"This is an outrage!" he howled.

"Agreed," I said. "But we haven't brought you here because we needed a fourth for bridge. I warn you, we're desperate men who will stop at nothing to achieve our aims. So please sit down and make yourself comfortable. This whole outrageous business won't take more than a day or two, depending upon what cooperation we receive from you."

"Cooperation? What are you talking about?" he demanded, cutting quite an indignant figure in his toga.

"We're going to trade you for five million dollars, and at the same time make you famous not only in the world of high finance and low dealings, but in the history books, too. You are now a key figure in the greatest scoop-up caper of all time. Welcome to the history books, Mr. Griggen. You've risen this evening from the footnotes to a chapter heading." He was perversely unimpressed, however.

"You'll never get away with this, Mr. . . . Mr. . . ."

"Fillmore."

"Damn you, Fillmore. You can't do this to me. It's an outrage, and besides, I can't stand notoriety."

"It's already half done, Mr. Griggen. Now, we've got beer and baloney in the ice box. Not very substantial, but homey. Won't you join us?"

Later we changed clothes, and Moses, Byron, Fillmore and the nameless caveman vanished. As befitted a man of his economic stature, Griggen proved quite a nuisance. He was forever demanding a battery of telephones with which to call his lawyers. Only when we threatened to put him back into the bearskin and train him to ride a bicycle, did he finally desist and go to sleep. Buck sat watch over him while Jack and I sat in the kitchen and drank beer and congratu-

lated ourselves.

"Let Blue and his boys top this one," I said with pardonable pride. "Once they hear about it, they'll pull in their nets and close shop and leave the field to the professionals."

"I have to hand it to you, Bush," said Jack. "You've got genius. But do you really think we'll get five million for him?"

"No question about it," I said. "Now, you could never get five million for the King of England or for a billionaire's grandson; but for somebody like J. J. Griggen, yes, absolutely—because he's still capable of making that a hundred times over; that's why whoever we contact will be only too eager to dish it out and get him back. Griggen can go right back to his desk, roll up his sleeves and start making money again. Get it?"

"What a theory," Jack said admiringly. "Pure genius." It was a conservative estimate at best, but I blushed nevertheless.

The next morning we jostled Griggen out of bed, treated him to a free breakfast and then got down to brass facts, as my old grandpa used to say.

"Whom do we contact for the payment?" I asked.

"I'm not saying a word," Griggen said.

"Mr. Griggen," I said, giving him my darkest and deadliest look, "we have in the basement of this cabin a medieval torture chamber, replete with racks, whips, vises and long-playing records of television commercials. If you don't prove to be an amenable client, you'll find yourself subjected to the more barbaric side of human nature. Now—answer the question."

He sighed. He was beaten and, shrewd businessman that he was, saw it. But he made the best of it.

"You contact my wife, Mrs. Hildegarde Griggen." He gave us the number. "She's the only one who can do anything. She has the key to my vault."

"Is she an hysterical woman?"

"Cold as ice."

"She'll follow my instructions?"

"If she knows my welfare depends on it, certainly."

"Excellent."

That afternoon I drove into town and stepped into a phone booth, about to make a thin dime turn into five million dollars. I dialed the number J. J. had given me, and waited. The phone rang and rang, and rang and rang. After

five minutes I decided there wasn't going to be an answer. I returned to the cabin.

"What did you give me here, boy," I asked Griggen, "Custer's number on the Little Big Horn?"

"What do you mean?" he asked. "That's Mrs. Griggen's private phone."

"It's so private that nobody answered."

"That's not so odd. Mrs. Griggen is very active."

"Won't she be sort of alarmed at your being missing?"

"Not yet she won't. I often spend the night away from home. My interests are far-flung, Mr. Fillmore; they demand constant attention, day and night; as you'll soon learn."

I tried again, later that afternoon, then that evening again. No answer. I was beginning to get nervous about things. A man like J. J. Griggen does not remain missing for long without about a thousand people starting to miss him. Once somebody caught wise to what was going on, there would be enough heat put on to fry every egg in New Jersey.

"Didn't your wife accompany you to the ball?" I asked this creature of opulence.

"No," said Griggen. "She doesn't like those things. I wish you would get hold of her and consummate this deal. I'm getting damned sick of this place."

That night passed and then it was morning again.

"This has to be it," I said to Jack. "We either contact the old lady today or we have to let him go. By tonight he'll be so thoroughly missed that I wouldn't be surprised if both Wall Street and the Wall of China collapsed. We'll have the Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force, Coast Guard and a re-activated CCC looking for us."

So I drove back to town, thinking again about the thin dime that stood between me and five million dollars. I would tell Mrs. Griggen not to be panicky, not to tell a soul, merely to go into the vault with a shovel and a barrel and she could have her husband back.

But I didn't tell her anything. Because she wasn't there. All I got for my dime was a soft, constant ringing of a telephone. Then I had to hang up and go back to the cabin.

"Mr. Griggen," I said to him, "you're a free man. Go back to your oil wells."

"Are you getting the five million?" he asked with a certain fascinated interest.

"Go home, Mr. Griggen," I said. I couldn't wait to get him out of my sight. It hurt me to look at him.

We watched him walk through the door, down the path and out into the road.

"There goes five million dollars, taxfree," I said to my tragic-faced associates. "Lost for want of a woman's voice. All she had to do was come home from the beauty parlor or the tea at Mrs. Vanderfeller's or wherever she was, and say hello into the phone, and we had five million."

"This will become a day of mourning for me," said Jack.

Buck grunted.

Being an odd fellow, not wanting notoriety, J. J. Griggen said nothing to the police of what had happened. And I, of course, was not about to go mentioning it to people. For one thing, I didn't want our abysmal competitors, the Barney Blue boys, to hear about how I had to let five million dollars pass through the door. It would have cast a tarnish on my reputation that not even the latest detergent could have gotten out.

As it was, I ran across the Barney Blue some weeks later at a downtown tavern where gentlemen of a certain stripe generally converged.

"How is my competitor?" I asked him.

Instead of the bright smile and flippant remark, all I got from him was a glum look.

"We're out of it, Bush," he said. "The field is all yours again. And believe me, after getting my feet wet in the profession and seeing what a complicated business it is, you have all my esteem and admiration."

"Well, thank you, Barney, thank you very much. You're giving up?"

"We tried something big, but it didn't work out. I guess we just didn't have your know-how. Do you know who we scooped up, Bush?"

"Tell me."

"The wife of the richest man in the world—Mrs. J. J. Griggen. It worked out perfect, except we couldn't get the old man on the phone to hold him up."

"This was about three weeks ago?" I asked, trying to maintain my composure as the blood left my body.

"Exactly. How did you know?"

"There are no secrets in this business, Barney. None at all," I said. And for the first time I could see myself sitting on a rocking chair on the porch of the Home for Retired Vikings, discussing burglar alarms, alert policemen, eyewitnesses, and all the other pitfalls of the profession.

BACH IN A FEW MINUTES

by Fletcher Flora

AT EIGHT O'CLOCK, Andrew MacVey received three old friends at the front door of his home. At a quarter after, he was hurrying out the back door to keep a date with a lady.

This was on the evening of the third Thursday of this particular month, which happened to be November. The three old friends were Felix Mauser, Mathematics, Max Ingersoll, Biology, and Abel Hooker, Philosophy. Andrew himself was Medieval History. All were professors in their respective fields at Abernathy University, and all were dedicated amateur musicians. Felix and Max were violinists. Abel was a cellist, and Andrew played the viola.

On the third Thursday of every month of the academic year, the four friends met in the home of each in his turn, for the purpose of indulging their mutual devotion, which was lavished mostly upon the string quartets of Bach and Hayden and Beethoven. So it was that they met on this particular Thursday night of this particular month in the home of Andrew MacVey, Medieval History and violist. It was sometimes generously claimed by fellow academicians that they were as good, as a quartet, as the Juilliard or the Budapest. This was an exaggeration, of course, but they were good enough. It was their habit to play from about a quarter after eight until a quarter after ten, at which time a break was taken for beer and sandwiches. At eleven they resumed playing and played for another half hour before adjourning until the third Thursday of the following month in another home.

Greeting his friends at the door, Andrew led them into his library, where they began, after shedding hats and coats, to remove their instruments from their cases. All, that is, except Andrew. He stood a little aside and listened to the tender tuning of strings for Bach, who had been agreed upon for tonight, until the other three became aware after a minute or two that the viola was silent. Then they turned their heads in a kind of comic unison and stared at him with a kind of comic concern.

"I'm sorry," Andrew said, "but I'm afraid you'll have to begin tonight as a trio. I must finish some urgent work in my study that will take perhaps ten minutes. Fifteen at the most."

"Can't it wait?" Max Ingersoll said.

"No," Andrew said. "I simply must finish it at once. Anyhow, I shouldn't be able to give my attention to Bach if I didn't."

To the kind of men they were, this was a valid point they could readily accept and understand.

"Perhaps you'd rather we waited for you," Felix Mauser said.

"No, no. Not at all. I wouldn't hear of it."

"Let's get on with it, then," Abel Hooker said. "I've been eager all week to have another crack at old Bach to polish him off."

Leaving his friends assuming positions at their respective music racks, Andrew went from the library into the adjoining study, closing the door silently behind him. He stood just inside the door, his head cocked in an attitude of listening, until the first notes of Bach followed him through, and then he moved across to a table on which, among scattered books, his viola lay in an open case. Swiftly removing one of the viola's strings, he wound it around his fingers in a tight little coil and dropped it into a side pocket of his coat. He gave no attention whatever to the identity of the string, and it was only afterward that he was delighted by the wry humor of his chance selection in relation to another factor. Now, putting on his hat and overcoat, he left the study through a door leading directly into a hall, and left the house by the back way.

If it was an exaggeration to say that the string quartet composed of Andrew and his friends was as good as the Juilliard or the Budapest, it was equally an exaggeration to say that the woman Andrew was going to see was a lady. If she had been a lady, it is doubtful that Andrew, who knew plenty of those already, would have become involved with her, or would have now been going to see her. He had quite a distance to go, and he could not possibly be back within the ten or fifteen minutes to which he was committed, but he had, knowing his friends so well, made the impossible commitment quite deliberately. Caught in old Johann Sebastian's intricate magic web of sound, time to the fiddlers would be immeasurable. When he returned in half an hour

or so, depending upon luck and circumstances, they would remember only that he had promised to return within fifteen minutes at the most, and they would be perfectly willing to swear by the spirits of Newton, Harvey and Immanuel Kant that he had been gone not an instant longer. Not that Andrew expected the swearing to become necessary. He had been far too discreet in what had preceded this moment, he felt, to be associated by anyone with what he intended to follow it. It was merely the habit of his precise mind to consider details and weigh possibilities, however remote.

He walked briskly along the dark street, moving by a familiar route toward the campus of the university several blocks away. He met no one. Passing intermittently through long stretches of shadow and pale pools of corner street light, he thought with a kind of thin and waning warmth about the woman he was going to meet, and about his reason for meeting her. Her name was Nicky Nye, and he was going to kill her, if things went as he had planned, with the good gut string he carried coiled in his pocket.

Nicky Nye was not her real name, of course. It was merely an alliterative absurdity she had adopted for professional identification. If, that is, one were liberal enough to allow her professional status. She was a dancer in a downtown nightclub, to be precise, and if she lacked training and imagination, it did not really matter very much, for her success, such as it was, depended almost completely upon the leisurely exposure, right down to the last strategic patch required by law, of a supple, bronze-colored body that lived exclusively by night and looked as if it lived always in the sun. In brief, Andrew MacVey, widower and scholar and devotee of Bach, had for some time been having an affair with a stripper.

He did not, now that it was ending, regret it. Certainly not. On the contrary, he considered it an invigorating and exciting experience, an enrichment by unexpected passion and tenderness of his latter years. His only regret was that it could not, apparently, end rationally and amicably, without the corruption of violence. He was fundamentally a gentle man, although sometimes irrascible with dull or indifferent students, and it was perhaps for this reason that he had been able to plan Nicky's death, once he had accepted its palpable necessity, with such detached efficiency. Unpleasant things, he had learned, were much better done

and forgotten as quickly as possible.

Crossing the boundary of the university campus, he thought suddenly: *The blood of youth burns not to such excess as gravity's revolt to wantonness.*

Shakespeare. From one of the lesser plays. Well, old Will had had something pertinent to say about almost everything, and it was hardly remarkable that he should now have something to say, after more than three centuries, about Andrew MacVey and Nicky Nye. An incongruous couple, surely. Unlikely lovers, to say the least.

Walking and remembering, Andrew chuckled to himself, a thin sound in the chill darkness. He had met Nicky quite by accident a little over a year ago, in the diner of a train on which he was returning from a speaking engagement at a downstate college. There had been only one vacant chair in the diner, and he had, after a request for the permission of the person across the table, sat down in it to order his dinner. It was not until the waiter had departed with the order that he became aware that he was sharing the tiny table with a smoky-eyed child with hair the color of cotton, and skin the color of bronze. A moment later, his eyes descending to other attributes, he realized that she was not such a child after all, but it was quite a long time later than that, after a great deal had happened, when he realized that she probably had never been a child at all, and was immeasurably older than he would ever be.

"I do hope I'm not intruding," he said.

"Be my guest," she said.

The words had a flippant sound, but her expression was amiable and her eyes, grave. She seemed, in fact, to be studying him with considerable interest, which was flattering, and he reminded himself that he was, after all, only fifty years old, and that he was, although aging and graying, still thoroughly thatched, still lean and hard and vigorous.

"Perhaps I should introduce myself," he said. "My name is Andrew MacVey."

"Mine's Nicky Nye," she said. "Not really, that is, but it'll do."

He did not recognize her absurd name, not being an habitué of nightclubs or a student of the girls who undressed in them, and neither did she recognize his, of course, not being a student of medieval history, or of anything at all.

"Why do you use a name that's not really yours?" he said.

"It's a professional name," she said. "I'm a dancer. Almost all girls in show business use professional names. Didn't you know that?"

"I suppose I did, now that you mention it."

"Are you a professional person yourself?"

"You might say so. I'm a professor at Abernathy University."

"Honest to God? What do you teach?"

"Medieval history."

"Can you read Latin and all?"

"Oh, yes. In medieval history, if you hope to be a genuine scholar, it's essential."

She had braced her elbows on the table and made fists of her hands, and now she rested her chin on the fists, staring at him frankly without embarrassment.

"I certainly admire brains," she said. "Honest to God, I do."

She was really *quite* stimulating, he thought, feeling within himself the slow diffusion of a sort of sensuous warmth. She was so clearly a receptive and generous little thing that he was prompted to say something equally generous in return.

"No more, I'm sure," he said, "than I admire lovely young women."

"What a nice thing to say." Her smoky grave eyes widened a little. "Do you think I'm pretty?"

"Yes, indeed."

"I'm glad. It's important for a dancer to be thought pretty. It's far more important for the body, though, than the face. Do you think my body is nice?"

"Well, I haven't had a fair chance to observe it, but I'm sure that it is. Is it naturally that charming bronze color?"

"Oh, no. I do that with something that comes in a bottle. It's simply amazing what you can do with things in bottles these days."

It was only later that he found time to marvel at the almost instant intimacy of their conversation, and most of all at the perfectly casual way in which he accepted it and indulged in it.

"Where do you dance?" he said.

"In a nightclub called the Blue Gardenia. Have you heard of it?"

"I believe I have, but I've never been there."

"It's very expensive, but it's the best club in town. It really is. Why don't you come and see me dance one night?"

"Perhaps I shall."

"I go on at eleven and at one."

"If I come, I shall certainly come early and stay for both performances."

"There you go, saying something nice again. I suppose I should be frightened of such an important person, a college professor and all, but I'm not in the least, because you're so nice and say such nice things."

And so it turned out to be a very agreeable encounter. They had their dinners together and afterward a drink or two in the club car. Then, after arriving at the station in the city, they shared a taxi, he saying goodnight to her at the curb in front of her apartment building before going on alone to his home in the university area.

"Will you honestly come to see me dance?" she said.

"I'm looking forward to it," he said.

"I suppose professors have to be careful about going to nightclubs and such places."

"I doubt that anyone will object, or even notice, if I'm discreet and don't make a practice of it."

"Will you let me know when you come?" she said. "You could send a note to my dressing room."

"I shall," he said.

"I hope so," she said, "because I like you so much."

He went home filled with diffused warmth, a kind of gentle excitement, and it was exactly a week later, the next Friday night, when he went downtown to the Blue Gardenia to see her dance. This time he had more than a fair chance to observe her body, which was indeed as nice as even a dancer could wish for, and he was at once ambivalently annoyed and delighted, compelled as he was to share his observation with so many others. He wondered if he could possibly be jealous, which was a notion so ridiculous that he decided he probably was, and he was encouraged by this to believe that he might be capable of other youthful reactions that he had previously considered, if he had considered them at all, as belonging irretrievably to his past.

As good as his word, he sent a note to her dressing room and received in return an invitation to come back in per-

son. He was a little uneasy as to the discretion of going, but he went, nevertheless, and he was glad that he did. She was obviously childishly pleased to see him again, and he was childishly pleased that she was pleased. She seemed entirely unconscious of, or at least unconcerned about, the difference in their ages.

"I've been hoping and hoping you'd come," she said.

"Well," he said, "here I am."

"Did you enjoy my dance?"

"Yes, indeed. Very much."

"Do you think it's bad of me to take my clothes off like that?"

"I've never been much of a moralist."

"That's good. I don't care for people who are moralists."

He stayed with her in her dressing room until it was time for her one-o'clock show, and afterward he took her home. He never returned to the Blue Gardenia again, but he continued to meet Nicky at other places with proper secrecy, and it was one of the things that pleased him most about her that she accepted so readily and realistically his position that the utmost discretion was essential to the affair. Sometimes he went to her place, and sometimes, although less frequently, he arranged the absence of his housekeeper and cook so that he could, under cover of night, bring Nicky to his.

She had a fine aptitude for the erotic, and for the better part of a year he was highly stimulated and entertained, but then, quite suddenly, he was a little tired of her, a little more conscious each time they met of the appalling vacuity of her mind. This was to be expected, of course, in a man like him, and he was increasingly aware, moreover, that discretion could not indefinitely assure secrecy. He came, in brief, to the reasonable conclusion that they had better break it off while the breaking was good, and he told her so. That was when he understood for the first time that she was, in spite of birthdates, immeasurably older than he would ever be.

Looking at him with her head cocked and her eyes speculative, she said, "Well, I don't think I like the idea very much."

"What do you mean?" he said.

"I've sort of got used to you. You're a pretty effective old boy for your age, you know. I've been thinking maybe we ought to get married."

"Don't be absurd."

"What's so absurd about it?"

"It should be perfectly obvious. As the wife of a man in my position, you would be impossible."

"What's so wonderful about being a lousy schoolteacher?"

"Never mind. You'll simply have to give up any such notion."

"Maybe you think you're too good for me or something."

"I don't think we need to evaluate our relative worth. It's a clear matter of incompatibility, that's all."

"Well, maybe you're right. At your age it's likely that you wouldn't be much good to me much longer, and you'd probably become exceedingly dull. Even senile. It would be better if we just came to some kind of financial agreement."

"Are you attempting blackmail?"

"Nothing of the sort. It's just that I've earned something for my trouble, and I intend to have it."

"I'm a poor man. Professors, you know, are not highly paid."

"There are all those books you've written. Don't tell me you haven't made a pot off them."

"It's a popular fallacy that all writers get rich. My books are scholarly and have limited sales. I've made very little money from them."

"That's your problem. You'll give me ten grand, or I'll blow your tight little roof off."

"That's fantastic."

"Is it? I don't think so. I think it's cheap enough for services rendered. If you don't come through in a hurry, I may raise the price."

She went away, leaving him to consider his position. He was beginning to understand now why she had cooperated so willingly in keeping their affair a secret. If it had become known earlier, she would not now, at a time she must surely have anticipated, have anything to threaten him with. Having already suffered the consequences of his revolt to wantonness, which he wished to evade at any cost, he would be invulnerable. On the other hand, inasmuch as he *was* still vulnerable and the affair *was* still secret, he was, when he came to consider it, in a beautiful position for something drastic at nominal risk.

He saw her again a week or so later and tried to persuade

her to relent, but she was out of reach. She treated him, indeed, with an infuriating casual contempt. If he had tried, he could have scraped ten thousand dollars together, although with difficulty, but he was shrewd enough to know that this would not necessarily be the end of the matter, and he could not tolerate, besides, the thought of being exploited by an obvious inferior. In his quiet way, he was a very vain man, which made him, in a quiet way, a very dangerous man. Nicky did not realize this, or she might have decided against trying to blackmail him.

A fairly long period elapsed in which nothing at all was done, and then she had called him on the telephone to deliver an ultimatum, and he had decided in an instant to kill her. Pretending to capitulate, he had arranged a meeting for this particular night in a place below the campanile on the university campus. She had objected to meeting him there, sniffing, perhaps, a faint scent of danger, but he had explained that he was engaged for the night and could not afford the time to come all the way downtown. She could allow him the convenience of meeting him where he chose, he said, or he would reverse his decision and let her do as she pleased about it. She had agreed, and so he was going now to meet her in the appointed place, walking briskly through the darkness and carrying in his pocket, not the ten thousand dollars he had promised to bring, but a coil of good gut string instead.

He had passed the Museum of Natural History and the Fine Arts Building, and beyond the latter he turned off between evergreen shrubs onto a narrow gravel path that led him up a gentle slope among leafless trees to the crest on which the bell tower stood. He went around the tower and down on the other side into a small hollow cupping a small lake. It was very dark in the hollow, and he moved silently over the dead grass of the slope. Pretty soon, stopping and peering ahead, he saw the motionless figure of Nicky on a stone bench. He was a little late, as he had planned to be, and as he watched her from behind, a few yards up the slope, she stood up suddenly and took a step away from the bench and looked right and left with apparent impatience. He was afraid for a moment that she would leave, which would have put him to the bother of setting the whole business up again, but after a couple of seconds she sat down again, her back turned toward him, and he removed the gut string from his pocket and walked

quickly and silently down the last few remaining yards between them.

It was done so easily. So swiftly. It was really incredible, he thought, how little time and effort were required to reduce so tough and durable a specimen of charming duplicity to a limp residue of what had been, after all, not quite so tough and durable as she had believed. In a way, he was rather disappointed in her for not making things more difficult. Still, it was immensely exciting. Standing over her, coiling the gut string and replacing it in his pocket, he thought with a strange and singing sense of exhilaration that she had brought him in the end an even greater excitement than she had brought in the beginning.

But he must get away. It was improbable that anyone would be strolling in this place on such a chilly night, but it was still a possibility that could not be ignored. Besides, it was essential that he get back to his friends before they roused sufficiently from their Bachian spell to become vaguely aware that he had been gone somewhat longer than he had estimated. Turning, walking as fast as he could without breaking into a trot, he went up the slope and out between the evergreen shrubs onto the campus sidewalk and back the way he had come to the place he had come from.

In his study, after removing his hat and coat, he took the string from his pocket and uncoiled it and started to attach it to the viola on the table. The string, he noticed, was slightly stained near the middle where it had cut into the flesh of Nicky's throat, and it was, he noticed also, a particularly appropriate string to have been the instrument of Nicky's death. This appealed to his sense of humor, which was astringent, and there was a whisper of laughter in his own throat, uncut, as he wiped at the string with a piece of tissue. The laughter was still there in his throat a minute later as he claimed his chair in the library. It grew and grew and grew and threatened to explode into the room, Bach and Nicky and death collaborating with two fiddles and a cello to produce a grim and delicious joke for the secret amusement of Andrew MacVey.

The trio of friends, not yet aware of Andrew's return, played on.

They played *Air for the G-String.*

POLKA-DOT BLONDE

by Richard Hardwick

THE ROTUND form of Horace Allen was pacing back and forth like an expectant father before the veranda of the old Guale Inn when Dan Peavy and I pulled up in the county's new Pontiac. Horace had his hand on the door before the car stopped rolling.

"Nothin' like this has ever happened to me before!" he said, hustling us out of the car and up the broad wooden steps and through the front door with its four stained-glass panels. "No siree, nothin'! I been runnin' the Inn myself for more'n thirty years and there was my Paw before me. Since 1892 when Grandaddy built it, we Allens been runnin' it, and there ain't been *nothin'* like this!"

All Dan Peavy and I knew up to this point was that we had gotten an hysterical phone call from Horace, telling us one of his guests had just witnessed a brutal murder.

Horace led the way down the dark, high-ceilinged front hall and turned off into an equally dark sitting room at the end of the hall. On a settee across the room was the figure of a man. A cigarette glowed red just above his knees.

Horace turned on a lamp. "Here he is," he said with obvious relief at transferring responsibility. "Doc, this here's Sheriff Dan Peavy of Guale County, and his deputy, Pete Miller. This here is Doc Sheldon, one o' my guests. He'll tell you what he saw."

The man stood up. He was tall and bony, and getting up from the settee, he gave the impression of a carpenter's rule being unfolded. Standing erect, he towered a good five inches over my own six-two. He was dressed in walking shorts and a short-sleeved Hawaiian shirt sporting multicolored jungle scenes. His knees and elbows had the knobby exaggeration of the connectors in a Tinker-toy set against the long, frail bones extending from them.

His face was angular and thin, with a high, intense brow. The expression was haggard, that of a hunted man. Some-

how he gave the overall impression of being younger, but the face put him, in my estimation, at forty-five or so.

"Go on, Doc," Horace prompted. "Tell 'em about it."

Sheldon rubbed his chin. "It was as Mr. Allen told you on the telephone, Sheriff. I was taking my usual early morning stroll to the inlet and back—" He broke off. "Perhaps it would be better if I showed you. We can reach the spot by taking the beach road."

Dan agreed that would be better. The four of us went out to the Pontiac, Dan Peavy and I getting in front and Horace and Sheldon in the rear. Dan turned on the seat as I backed around and headed out the hard-packed white-shell drive.

"It was a bit over halfway to the inlet," Sheldon said. "Perhaps two miles from the Inn."

"Let Pete know when you think we're at the right place," Dan said to him. "Meanwhile, fill us in."

In the rearview mirror I saw Sheldon pull himself up to the edge of the seat. He said, "I had reached the inlet and started back. I'd stopped momentarily to inspect a string of horned whelk eggs when I heard a strange sound. At first I thought it might have been the cry of a gull or some other sea bird. But then—then I heard it again, and this time it was unmistakable. It was the scream of a terrified woman. As I could see for miles in both directions along the beach and the beach was deserted except for myself, it obviously had come from beyond the dunes in the direction of the beach road. I quickly ascended the dune nearest me. . . ." He paused and fumbled a cigarette out of his pocket. Dan struck a match for him. Sheldon absently nodded thanks. "I ascended the dune and . . . and there they were, not fifty feet away. A man and a woman, struggling! He was a powerfully built man with an intensely ugly face, almost a caricature of a face. The woman was no match for him. I am not a hero, gentlemen, and it was obvious I was no more a match for this man than was the . . . the woman. But a decision proved unnecessary, for suddenly I saw the knife in his hand. He plunged it, drawing it around in a short arc. He stabbed her . . . twice. High in the chest both times." Sheldon rubbed a hand over his eyes as if to erase the picture he still saw. "She fell to the sand and the man stood over her for a moment, then suddenly looked up and—saw *me!* Our eyes locked. He still held the knife in his hand, and with a cry of rage he sprinted toward me.

Fortunately, I was here in my element. Some years back, as an undergraduate at the university, I was a track man. I once did the mile in 4 : 8 : 6, and I've managed to keep in pretty fair trim since by taking adequate exercise.

"I ran. I ran as fast as my two legs would carry me straight up the beach toward the Inn. After two or three hundred yards I looked over my shoulder and saw that my pursuer had realized the futility of trying to overtake me and had given up the pursuit. He was nowhere to be seen."

Sheldon paused again and, leaning forward even further, peered out the window of the car. "It was along here, Mr. Miller. Yes . . ." he pointed with one of his long arms. "See that small cluster of palms? It was very close by that."

I slowed the Pontiac and pulled over to the side of the road. When I had stopped, Sheldon opened his door. But before getting out, he said to Dan Peavy. "There was something else, Sheriff. Something that—well, I thought I recognized the woman as someone I had not seen in more than five years."

Dan and I both looked at him inquiringly. "She was—or I *thought* she was—a woman named Monica Burroughs."

"Well," Dan Peavy said, "let's get out and have us a look-see."

The four of us got out and stood beside the car. The dunes that lay between us and the beach were not unusually high, though they were high enough to blot out any view of ocean or beach. In the quiet of the early morning the surf boomed loudly beyond the dunes.

A declivity of some thirty yards lay between the beach road and the first rise of the dunes.

"It was right there," Sheldon said. "He's . . . he's taken the body away. . . ."

He was right about that, for there was nothing but sand there where he pointed.

Dan Peavy moved toward the spot, the rest of us following. "Careful," Dan said. "Try not to mess up any footprints or bloodstains or whatever might be around."

We walked down into the slight bowl-like depression in the sand, all of us intently regarding its surface. There was no sign that anyone had ever been there at all.

When we had passed over the entire area and reached the foot of the dunes, I turned to Sheldon. "You sure this is the spot, Doc?"

On his face was a look of bewilderment. He moved

suddenly up the side of the dune, like a beagle on the scent of a rabbit, sand spurting from beneath his shoes. At the top he paused and looked about. His face suddenly brightened. "Yes! *Yes!* Look here! Here are my own tracks where I came up from the beach!"

Dan and I went up after him, Horace Allen puffing and bringing up the rear. The tracks were plain in the dry white sand. I backtracked them to the hard-packed beach. The footprints were as clearly discernible on the beach, I even found the string of whelk eggs he had said he dropped when he heard the cry. I went back to the crest of the dune. Dan Peavy was examining the tracks that led off in the other direction, toward the Inn. They were much wider-spaced and deeper, indicating that Sheldon had without doubt hightailed it out of there.

But equally as certain was the fact that there was not the slightest sign anyone else had been there. We looked to him with the silent question.

"I . . . I don't understand it! They were *there!* Right there! The woman wore a polka-dotted sunsuit affair, and the car was there at the edge of the road—"

"The car?" Dan said.

"Yes. I . . . forgot to tell you there was a car. It was a late-model sedan. I'm—I'm afraid I failed to take much notice of it in detail. I think it might have been a Ford or Chevrolet, something like that. It was headed in the direction of the Inn."

"Did you hear this car after you went back down to the beach?" I asked him.

Sheldon shook his head. "No. The surf was too loud to have heard it beyond the dunes."

"Yet you did hear a woman scream?"

"Yes. But that was a piercing sound, and as I said, at first I wasn't even sure about that."

Sheldon made his way down the dune and began another inspection of the powdery sand in the declivity below. I felt a hand on my arm. It was Horace Allen's. "Pete . . . Dan . . . I reckon I owe you two an apology for this, considerin' the circumstances. It was just that he made it sound so dang *real.* . . ."

"Considerin' what circumstances, Horace?" Dan said.

"The circumstances that brought this Doc Sheldon here in the first place. I plumb forgot about that up to this very minute." He paused a moment and dug a toe into the sand.

"He had one of them nervous breakdowns. I reckon the whole thing's just up here." He tapped himself meaningfully on the temple.

"Meaning Sheldon just thought he saw all this stabbing?" I said.

" 'Fraid so."

I looked down and saw that Sheldon had paused in his hunt and was staring up at us. "You think I imagined this? You think I imagined I saw a—a *murder?* I—"

"Me and Pete very seldom jump to any conclusions, Doc," Dan said by way of reassurance. "About this—woman. Can you give us a description of her, besides the fact that she wore a polka-dot sunsuit?"

"Yes," Sheldon said. "She was about medium height, thirty or so, blonde, pretty in a vaguely hard way which was obvious even in her terrified condition. Her hair was clipped short—"

Horace Allen broke in. "That's what I call a pretty fair description of Miss Trudie Masefield," he mumbled.

Horace explained that Miss Trudie Masefield was another of his guests. I asked Sheldon if he knew Miss Masefield.

He shook his head. "No. I've been here only a few days and I cook in. I don't eat at the Inn."

"That's right," Horace affirmed. "Doc Sheldon's got one o' my beach cabins. You know, they're across the road from the main building. He kinda keeps to himself."

"I'm here for a—a rest," Sheldon said.

"Well," Dan Peavy said, "let's get back up to the Inn and see if this Miss Masefield is there."

We drove back up the beach road. Coming along the road from the inlet, all that was visible of the Inn above the tangled thickets that grew all around it was the steep slope of the roof. I wondered why Horace didn't cut away some of the growth, make the place look a little more attractive, let the sea breeze get through, but I suppose it just wasn't his nature to change something that had been good enough for his father. The only change Horace had effected was the building of a half a dozen beach cabins across the road from the Inn proper. He had done this about fifteen years ago, and having plenty of beachfront property, he had spaced the cabins wide enough so that each would afford complete privacy for its tenant. Each cabin had a separate drive leading in from the beach road,

and over the years tall thickets of sea myrtle and cabbage palms had grown up between them.

Sheldon's cabin was No. 1, located at the north end of the group. Miss Trudie Masefield was staying in cabin No. 2. Horace informed us that the only other cabin rented at the time was cabin No. 4, to a couple by the name of Dunwoody who had come down for the fishing.

"There's also old man London staying up at the main house," said Horace. "He's been comin' here since 'way back. Nut about trout fishing."

At Horace's direction I turned the Pontiac into the short sand drive leading to cabin No. 2. The cabin itself was hidden from the Inn and surrounding cabins by dense thickets. However, there was an unobstructed view past the cabin of the beach and the ocean.

A two-year-old yellow Plymouth was parked beside the cabin. Horace got out and went to the door. He rapped several times, then getting no answer, came back to the car. "She's probably out on the beach, Dan," he said. "Or she could be up at the Inn havin' breakfast."

Sheldon said he'd walk down the beach to his own cabin. He apologized for causing us the trouble and ambled off, as thin and angular as a praying mantis, across the sand toward the beach.

We drove Horace back to the Inn, where it proved that Miss Masefield was not there, nor had she been in since suppertime the previous evening.

Dan and I got back in the car. It was still early, only a few minutes past eight.

"When the Masefield girl turns up, give us a call," Dan said to Horace.

"No use botherin' yourself over this any further, Dan," Horace said. "The poor fella simply saw somethin' that wasn't there."

"Well," Dan repeated, motioning for me to start up, "you give us a call anyhow."

Dan Peavy slowly scratched his head through the uncontrollable bush of white hair. "Kinda strange, wouldn't you say, Pete?"

"Kind of a waste of time, I'd say," I answered him.

He was quiet for a few seconds. Then, "Get this thing rollin'. I got a good bit of work at the office and I got to be in court at ten."

After we'd gone another mile or two in silence, Dan spoke again. "Seemed like a right sensible fella, too, that Sheldon."

I stayed on at the office while Sheriff Dan Peavy was in court. I kept thinking of Sheldon and the strange account of the early morning. What would make a man have a—what did they call a thing like that?—hallucination? Why would a man calmly walking down a deserted, peaceful beach suddenly imagine he saw a murder?

About eleven I called Horace Allen and asked him if the Masefield woman had turned up. He said she hadn't, but not to worry because he was sure she would. But there was something less than relief in Horace's tone.

It was after lunch that the call came. Dan Peavy was back from court, sitting at his desk. Jerry Sealey, Dan's other deputy, had gone across the street to the café to get us all a round of coffee.

Dan answered the phone. He listened for a couple of seconds, then he said; "Now, get ahold of yourself. Just calm down and start at the beginning. There, that's better." He listened intently, the weathered face puckering, nodding. He pulled once at his bulbous nose, said, "Okay, me and Pete'll be right there," and hung up.

He looked up at me. "The Masefield woman's been found."

"What'd she have to say about this morning?"

"Not much, I'm afraid," Dan said, wearily hauling himself up from behind the desk and reaching for his hat. "She's dead. Been murdered."

Horace Allen was noticeably whiter than when I'd last seen him. Also, his eyes were larger and his mouth was hanging open when he waved us down at the juncture of the beach road and the drive that led through the tall, thick growth of myrtle to cabin No. 2. I stopped the car and Horace climbed in the back seat. He was breathing hard.

"Lord! Dan, I swear I couldn't live through a thing like that again! I was bringin' fresh linen down for her. I knocked on the door a long time, then I used my master key. I was just gonna stick the linen inside so if it rained it wouldn't get wet—" He stopped, because we had reached the cabin now, and I pulled the Pontiac up beside the Plymouth that had been there earlier.

"If it's all the same to you," Horace said, "I won't go inside with you." He handed me a brass key.

"That'll be all right, Horace. You just wait out here because we'll probably have a few questions," Dan said.

We got out and went up to the door of the cabin. I fitted the key in the lock and turned it, pushing the door open. Just inside the door was the pile of linen—sheets and towels—that Horace had dropped. I stepped over it, Dan right behind me.

The woman lay on her back at the foot of one of the twin beds which stood against the south wall of the cabin. There was a wound, or wounds, high on her chest, just above the halter of the playsuit she was wearing.

Suddenly, it hit me. "Dan—"

He was already nodding, "Yeah, I know. That's a polka-dot sunsuit. And I'm already willing to bet she's been stabbed."

He went over and hunkered down beside the body. I stooped behind him and looked over his shoulder. The woman was a short-clipped blonde, seemed to be about medium height. In fact, the description seemed to match everything Sheldon had said about her.

I looked around the cabin. It wasn't fancy. Against the back wall there was a combination bureau-dresser. Next to that was a small table and a pair of straight chairs. Behind the door we had entered was a compact kitchenette, and off the north wall toward the front of the cabin was a closet and a bathroom. Big screened windows covered the east wall, affording a good view of the ocean.

"You suppose it did happen like Sheldon said? Maybe that guy he saw killed her and then brought her back here to the cabin. He could have got here easy in the car before Sheldon made it back on foot, and the way these things are situated he could have driven in here with a moving van without anybody seeing him."

"Except for one thing, Pete," Dan said.

"Yeah?"

"It looks like she was killed right here in this room. Look at the blood on the floor there under her, and there ain't any bloodstains anywhere else in the room that I can see."

He was right. It was apparent that she had been killed right where she now lay, that she bled profusely before her heart beat its last.

Dan slowly rose to his feet. "Body's cooled. Been dead a

while, probably was lyin' right there this morning when Horace came down here and knocked on the door."

He moved over to the dresser and let his eyes roam over the usual items a female will have on a dresser, lotions, makeup of various kinds, powder. A purse lay at one end of the dresser. Dan picked it up and upended it, letting the contents drop out on the surface of the dresser. There, also, were the usual things. Bobbypins, coins, shreds of cigarette tobacco. There was a folded piece of paper, which Dan opened. I glanced at it and saw that there was a telephone number—MU 8-6213—scrawled on it, and that was all. Her billfold was there and Dan counted sixty-three dollars in it. There was also a diamond ring.

"Looks like robbery wasn't the motive," I said.

Dan took some of the cards from the billfold, glanced through them until he found her driver's license. He read it aloud, "Monica Burroughs, female, white, 31, 3106 Wakefield Street, Apt. 6, Kingston." He turned it over in his hand. "No offenses."

He scratched his head again and looked back at the body. "Go on up to the Inn and phone for Jerry and Doc Stebbins to come out."

I started out, but Dan stopped me. "When you come back, Pete, drop over and see if Sheldon's in his cabin. Tell him I'd like to talk to him."

When I had got the ball rolling in town, I walked down the drive to the end cabin, No. 1, and rapped softly. Sheldon's MG was parked beside the cabin.

"Yes? Who is it?" came the voice from inside.

"It's Deputy Miller, Doc."

"Come in, the door's not locked."

I turned the knob and pushed the door open. The cabin was identical to the other one. Sheldon was lying on one of the beds in his shorts, smoking a cigarette and looking up at the ceiling. An open book lay face down on the bed table.

"Sheriff Peavy would like to have a word with you, Doc," I said.

He sat up slowly on the bed and ground out his cigarette in a glass ashtray. He reached for his shirt, which lay on the other bed. "Has the woman turned up yet?"

"She's turned up."

He poked the long arms into the sleeves, buttoned the

shirt, and pulled on his walking shorts, then stuck his bare feet into a pair of huge moccasins. I noticed a large druggist vial half full of capsules on the table beside the book.

"Then what does Sheriff Peavy want with me?" Sheldon said.

"I'll let him explain that, Doc. I just work for him."

We walked out and Sheldon followed me down onto the beach. I turned in the direction of cabin 2. As we walked along in silence, I looked out at the creamy-white surf and wondered if the bass might be hitting on Saturday. I decided I'd try them.

When we climbed the wooden steps from the beach to cabin 2 and Sheldon saw the new car there with the legend "Guale County Sheriff's Office" stenciled across the door panel, he gave me a puzzled look.

"Isn't this Miss Masefield's cabin?" he asked.

I nodded, and seeing Dan Peavy and Horace standing beyond the Pontiac, I lengthened my steps.

Dan came around the back of the car as we approached. "Doc," he said, "Miss Masefield's been found, I reckon Pete told you that."

Sheldon nodded and waited for Dan to go on.

"She's in there, in the cabin," Dan said. His eyes narrowed a fraction of an inch. "She's dead. Been murdered."

Sheldon's mouth fell open. *"M-m-murdered?"*

"That's right. And there's some strange angles to it, Doc. Now I know from what Horace tells me that you're down here for a rest, something about your nerves, but I'd like you to take a look at the deceased if you feel up to it."

"Why?" Sheldon said. "The only other guest of Mr. Allen's I've seen since coming here is Mr. Dunwoody. We played chess last evening."

"I identified her, Dan," Horace reminded him. "How come you want Doc Sheldon to look at her? She ain't a very pretty sight."

"How about it, Doc?" Dan said.

"If—if you think it necessary, Sheriff. But I still—"

Dan went to the cabin door, opened it, and turned to wait for Sheldon. I followed Dan and Sheldon into the cabin. I saw Sheldon stiffen ahead of me when he caught sight of the body. It was a natural reaction.

Then—with Dan watching him carefully—he moved forward slowly and stared down at the dead woman's face.

His right arm came away from his side and a longer finger pointedly shakily at the face. "It's . . . it's *her!* It's *Monica—*"

"That's the name you mentioned this morning," Dan Peavy said. "That's also what her identification says."

"What was your relationship to Monica Burroughs?" I asked.

Sheldon turned away from the body. "Monica was a girl I . . . knew some years ago. That's all. I haven't seen her in five or six years, possibly longer. Sheriff . . . I don't understand this . . ."

"Maybe you noticed somethin' else, Doc."

Sheldon's head nodded slowly, his eyes closed. "She's dressed as I described her and she seems to have been killed exactly as I said." He whirled and looked at Dan Peavy. "I *knew* I saw it. I *knew* it was no hallucination!"

"Except that this Miss Masefield, or Burroughs, or whatever her name is, was killed right there where she's at," Dan said quietly.

Jerry Sealey, Dan's other deputy, and Doc Stebbins, Guale County's medical examiner and coroner, arrived in a half hour and Dan, Sheldon, and myself went up to the Inn and Horace's cluttered office. At Sheldon's request, I had gone to his cabin and gotten the vial of capsules I had seen there earlier.

"You say you haven't seen this Burroughs woman for more than five years?" Dan said, watching as Sheldon downed several of the pills.

Sheldon nodded. "Sheriff, this whole thing is . . . I don't know exactly how to put it. It's as if I had a sort of— of vision, seeing the way she was dressed, the way she was killed, recognizing her."

"It could be more than a vision, Dr. Sheldon," Dan said.

Sheldon looked at him strangely for several seconds. Then, "Yes, I understand what you mean. Too much coincidence to take at face value. I realize my position is not an enviable one." He laced his fingers, causing the knuckles to crack sharply. "May I make a telephone call, Sheriff Peavy? Frankly, I'd—rather have someone here."

"All right," said Dan. "First, what kinda doctor are you? Medic? Dentist?"

"I'm a Ph.D., Sheriff. I'm in charge of the research laboratory of the Bowen Corporation, in Kingston."

Dan's eyebrows went up. "I know the outfit. That's a big job for a fella young as you. I'd guess you couldn't be over forty-one or two. Suppose you been with Bowen quite a while."

Sheldon smiled ruefully. "Actually, I'm thirty-five, though I suppose after today I'm lucky not to look eighty-five. And, no, I haven't been with Bowen but a little over a year. I was in government experimental work before that."

Dan grunted and moved away from the desk. "Go ahead and make your call, Doc."

Sheldon went to the desk and picked up the phone. "Operator, I'd like you to get me Kingston. I want to place a collect person-to-person call to Dr. Amos Eddleman at the Bowen Corporation. The number is Murray 8-6213. Yes, that's right. Kingston. Certainly, I'll hold."

I caught the slow flick of Dan Peavy's eye. The number Sheldon gave had been the one on the scrap of paper in Monica Burrough's purse.

Dan and I busied ourselves with an examination of our fingernails and the piles of junk and fishing-tackle catalogs scattered about Horace's office. I picked up a magazine with a 1946 date on its cover and grinningly showed it to Dan.

"Hello, Amos?" Sheldon said suddenly. "Yes, it's Paul. What? No, I'm afraid everything isn't all right. As a matter of fact, something extremely odd has happened down here. Would it be convenient for you to drive down? Yes, right away if at all possible. Amos, I'd rather not go into detail on the telephone. Yes. Fine. And, Amos . . . thanks."

When he had replaced the phone on its cradle, he looked to Dan and me. "That was Dr. Eddleman. He's my assistant at the lab, as well as a very close friend. He's got a level head on his shoulders and I'll feel a great deal easier with him here. Under the circumstances."

Dan ambled over to the desk and sat on its corner. He ran a hand through his white hair and said to Sheldon, "Maybe you ought to tell us about these circumstances, Doc. I mean the ones that brought you down here."

Sheldon chewed his lip for a moment, then nodded his head in sudden decision. "Yes. It has to come out. Better it came from me. I had a sort of, well, I suppose nervous breakdown is as good a term as any for it. Overwork, the doctor told me. He advised a complete rest, away from

everyone and everything connected with my work."

"How'd you happen to come here to the Guale Inn?" I asked.

"Amos—Dr. Eddleman—recommended it. He had been coming here himself for a number of years. Amos' hobby is fishing. Mr. Allen knows him well."

"Now, I ain't a psychiatrist, Doc," Dan said, "but suppose you give us some idea of how this breakdown of yours worked."

He gave a short, humorless laugh. "I must admit, I thought I was losing my mind. At first—this was about six or eight months ago—I found that things were not where I thought I left them, things like notes, books, even my hat. I grew worse. A number of times my automobile wasn't where I thought I parked it." He paused a moment as though considering whether to go on. "There were—two occasions on which I—well, I *heard* things."

"Heard things?" said Dan Peavy.

"Voices. Voices that weren't there."

A picture was coming together in my mind. The picture of a man who had committed—for some yet unknown motive—a murder while in an extreme state of disorientation and then had actually had an hallucination in which he saw someone else commit that same murder.

I gave Dan an uneasy look, but Sheldon went on in a defeated voice. "I consulted a physician, who referred me to a psychiatrist. The psychiatrist recommended the idea of a complete rest, a leave of absence from my duties. He said I had been working too hard, and perhaps he was right, although I'm accustomed to hard work."

Dan got up and paced about the room for a moment, his brow furrowed in thought. He looked up at Sheldon. "It don't look too good, Doc, you can see that. Right at the moment I'd like to do a little more checkin'. I want you to stay in your cabin."

"I understand, Sheriff Peavy."

"Pete, take the Doc on back down to his place, then meet me at the Masefield cabin. We'll check on what Jerry and Stebbins mighta turned up."

As I walked away from Sheldon's cabin, I was thinking that I really liked the man, and I was feeling sorry for a nice guy like that getting himself so jammed up.

Old Doc Stebbins was talking to Dan outside the cabin when I reached cabin No. 2.

"—rigor mortis," I heard him saying, "I'd say that death occurred not later than six or eight hours ago. There're two wounds, both look like stab wounds. Jerry said he didn't find no knife and neither did you. I can give you the time of death closer after the autopsy."

"Well," I said, looking at my watch, "it's about two now, so that means she wasn't killed any later than eight this morning, possibly before that."

"Brilliant," said Doc Stebbins sourly. "Dan, you ready for us to remove the body? I wouldn't leave it layin' around in this heat."

Jerry Sealey came out of the cabin, a camera hanging from his right hand. "Got all the pictures we'll need, Dan."

The ambulance from Faircloth's Funeral Home was standing by and Dan told Doc it would be all right to remove the remains.

I stood in the yard and watched Jerry and the ambulance driver come out of the cabin with the sheet-covered form. Dan Peavy sighed. "Well, let's check with Horace's other guests and see if any of them know anything."

Mr. C. L. Dunwoody and his wife occupied cabin 4. They were a middle-aged couple from upstate and the place had been recommended to them by friends.

"We've been here a week now, Sheriff," Dunwoody said. "Horrible thing about the Masefield woman. Seems like I recall seeing her out on the beach a couple days ago, judging from your description. Otherwise, she kinda kept to herself."

"Were you in your cabin about seven or eight this morning?" I asked.

"That's right. We didn't get up until nine. The tide wasn't right early this morning so it wasn't any use getting up before that."

"Did you hear anything from the direction of cabin No. 2?" Dan asked. "A car, or maybe even a woman screaming or calling for help?"

"I didn't hear a thing until I woke up at nine. Slept like a rock." He turned to his wife. "What about you, Maybelle? You hear anything?"

"Nothing at all," Maybelle said with a firm shake of her head.

"I played a little chess with Dr. Sheldon last night down at his cabin. He whipped the pants off me. Smart young fella, Sheldon. I like him. If you ask me, he didn't have a

damn thing to do with this woman's death."

"Well," Dan said, "if you folks recall anything you think might be of help to us, just let Horace know."

We checked next with Mr. Adam London. He had a room in the Inn proper and, being a man of advanced years, assured us he knew Horace Allen's daddy well. He also assured us he knew nothing about what went on down at the beach cabins. "Horace made a damn-fool mistake when he built them things. I told him as much at the time." He nodded sagely. "This proves it."

A car pulled into the area before the Inn, a red Ford convertible.

"That's Eddleman," Horace Allen said. "Made pretty good time from Kingston, less'n an hour for the sixty-five miles."

A thick-set, balding man in his early fifties got out. He wore a tie which had been loosened, and the sleeves of his white shirt were rolled up to his elbows. He had a serious, evenly balanced face as he approached us on the shaded veranda.

Horace Allen introduced us and, as soon as that was done, Eddleman looked about quickly. "What's this all about? Where's Paul? Where's Dr. Sheldon?"

"He's down in his cabin," Dan said. "He says you're his assistant up there at Bowen."

Eddleman nodded as if a fly were buzzing about his head. "I'd like to see Paul, talk to him. Is he in some sort of trouble?"

Dan nodded. "He could be, Dr. Eddleman. We ain't sure. Not just yet, at any rate. We'll walk down with you."

Dan and Eddleman and I walked down the drive toward the beach cabins.

"You seem to be a real close friend of Sheldon's," Dan said. "The two of you in that government work Sheldon told us about?"

"No. I've been with Bowen since I took my degree. The company's my career. I was assistant to Dr. Longino before he died, before Paul came in to take his place. I've been Paul's assistant since then. We had a lot of common interests outside our work and since we're both single—Paul's divorced—we sort of naturally gravitated together."

"There's been a killin' here, Doc," Dan said. "A woman by the name of Monica Burroughs, an old acquaintance of Sheldon's."

Eddleman stopped stock-still in the middle of the drive and looked at Dan. "You said . . . Monica Burroughs?"

"That's right."

His brow wrinkled sharply. "No wonder Paul's in hot water. The blackmailing little—" He stopped and ran a hand over his smooth head. "Can you—would you tell me exactly what happened? I want to help Paul in any way I can, but I'd like to know the whole story, from an unbiased viewpoint before I see him. I had no idea . . ."

"First," Dan said, "you fill us in on this blackmailing business."

"You mean Paul didn't . . ."

Dan shook his head slowly. "But now we know about it, we can check it out the hard way, or you can cooperate and give it to us the easy way."

Guilt showed in Eddleman's eyes, as if he had unwittingly betrayed a friend. "Well, it was some time back, ten or eleven years. Paul was in an important government project. He was married then. They never had children. Anyhow, Paul's work called for considerable traveling between various installations, keeping him away from home a good deal of the time. He was, well, a man. A human being, regardless of his brilliance. He slipped, and unluckily, it was with the wrong woman. She had proof of his infidelity and she blackmailed him with it. Paul paid out a not inconsiderable amount over a period of a couple of years, and then he and Evelyn—that was his wife—came to the parting of the ways for completely different reasons. They were divorced, the club over his head held no more power, and he was out of the clutches of Monica Burroughs. He told me the whole story just a few months ago."

"Do you believe this woman might have cooked up another blackmail scheme?" I said.

Eddleman shook his head vehemently. "Certainly not!"

"Well," Dan said, "here we are. This is the drive in to Sheldon's cabin. We've asked him to stay close, but you go on up and see him."

"Thank you, Sheriff," Eddleman said, and strode off purposefully toward Sheldon's place.

I said to Dan, "Don't you think this gives us something to go on? We've at least got something like a motive now."

"Maybe. What time you got, Pete?"

I looked at my watch. "It's quarter past three. What do you mean, *maybe?* Suppose the dame had come up with

something new, something she could use to get money out of Sheldon? I can't see any other reason she'd have been at a place like this, unless that was the case. Only this time, Sheldon was already half-cuckoo from working too hard. He loses control of himself and *voilà,* the blackmailer gets in all right. Right in the chest with a knife."

"What about all that business out there on the beach this morning?" Dan said. "Was that an act?"

I shrugged. "We'd have to check a thing like this out with Doc Stebbins, find out if a man could commit a murder, walk away from it, and then actually imagine he saw someone else kill this same woman. Sort of relieve himself of the guilt of it."

Dan Peavy grunted and rubbed his chin. "There's a few things I want to do back at the office. Jerry's combing the underbrush looking for the murder weapon. Maybe you could give him a hand and—"

At that moment, Jerry came trotting up the walk from Sheldon's cabin, a big grin splitting his face. He drew up to us, breathing hard, and held out a white handkerchief in which lay a blood-encrusted kitchen knife. "Maybe this is it, Dan," he said. "Found it out back o' Sheldon's place. Been tossed in a thicket back there. 'Way too smeared to show any prints, though."

Dan wanted to see exactly where Jerry had found it and we all went back to the thicket Jerry pointed out. "It was right in there, Dan. Still see a little blood on the sand."

Dan Peavy looked carefully at the spot and the branches of sea myrtle that surrounded it. "Pete, Jerry, take a look here. Don't this look like blood on this leaf, like maybe the knife touched it before it hit the ground. Maybe if we line up that place there on the sand and the leaf we can tell from which direction the knife was thrown."

Dan sighted the two points, drew a line on the sand, then turned around and sighted the line the other way.

"Looks to me it was thrown from beyond that thicket, I'd say from somewhere around the back door of the Masefield cottage."

I thought I was beginning to see what he was getting at and as Dan squinted his eyes in thought, I said, "Why would a man tryin' to get rid of a murder weapon throw it into his own back yard where the investigation would surely turn it up?"

"That was sorta what I was thinkin' when I found it," Jerry mumbled.

"Pete," Dan said, "you stay out here and keep an eye on Sheldon."

"It looks to me like it wouldn't be a bad idea to take him in and lock him up. At least on suspicion."

"Maybe later. Anyhow, you keep an eye on things."

Dan and Jerry drove back to town. I went back up to the Inn and sat on the porch. After I'd been there a few minutes, Eddleman came up from Sheldon's cabin.

He stopped on the veranda and, frowning, shook his head. "Paul's in far worse shape than I thought. What has Sheriff Peavy decided to do?"

"I don't know right at the moment," I told him.

"He considered for a moment. "I'm afraid Paul is in danger."

"Danger? How come?"

"Danger of himself. I think insanity, at least temporary insanity, can be proved in the case of Monica Burroughs's death. The thing that worries me is Paul himself. Is the sheriff here now?"

"Nope. He ought to be back before long though. Just had to go in town for a while."

"I'm going to engage a room here in the Inn. Will you tell Sheriff Peavy I'd like to talk to him when he comes back?"

I said I would and Eddleman went on into the Inn. I heard him calling for Horace.

I began thinking of what Eddleman had said about Sheldon and I went down to his cabin and knocked on the door. I knocked again, feeling a sudden fear.

Then he answered. "Come in."

He was just as he had been the previous time, lying on the bed clad only in his shorts, smoking a cigarette. The late-afternoon sea breeze had built up considerably and was whining and keening through the front screens of the cabin.

"You all right, Doc? Your friend was kind of worried about you."

"I'm all right, Mr. Miller. I'm a bit puzzled, though. I thought by this time I'd be enjoying the hospitality of your county."

"Dan Peavy's a deliberate man, Doc. Never knew him yet to go off half-cocked. 'Course, there's always a first time for everything."

"I suppose he left you here to keep an eye on me."

"That's right."

He took a long drag on his cigarette and continued studying the ceiling. "You want to know something, Mr. Miller? I'm half-convinced that I did kill her. The human mind can play strange tricks on itself."

He sat up on the bed and gave me a tired smile. "Do you play chess, Mr. Miller?"

"Afraid not, Doc. Now, gin rummy, that's my game."

It was almost seven o'clock when I heard the car pull up outside the cabin. Sheldon had steadily raked me over the coals in gin, but he was the sort of man you could lose to and enjoy it. I got up from the table and went to the door. Dan Peavy was just getting out of the car.

"Doc Sheldon in there, Pete?" he said.

I nodded and Dan came in. "I want a word or two with the Doc. I called and Horace told me Eddleman's taken a room up at the Inn. You and Jerry go up there and make sure he don't come down here, at least until you hear from me."

"What—" I started.

"You run on," he said, ushering me out the door.

In the car I asked Jerry what had happened in town.

"Dan called his old buddy, Hobart, police chief up at Kingston. Had him send a couple of detectives out to the Burroughs woman's apartment. They didn't find nothing." Jerry peeled the paper off a stick of chewing gum and popped it into his mouth. "Then he called some bigshot up there at the Bowen Corporation. All he told me is that he's got something he wants to try before we take Sheldon in."

Dan Peavy had apparently forgotten that deputies have to eat, same as other people. I wangled a couple of sandwiches in Horace's kitchen and Jerry and I sat out on the veranda, where we could spot Eddleman if he left the building.

In about thirty minutes, Dan Peavy came up the drive. It was beginning to grow dark by this time.

"Doc Eddleman said he wanted a word with you when you got here, Dan," I said.

"Where's Horace?" he said.

"He was back in the kitchen a while ago. Probably still there."

Dan grunted and went on in, the screen door slapping

shut behind him. When he came out a few minutes later, he started down the front steps, calling over his shoulder, "Come on, boys. Let's get back to town."

"Get back to—" Jerry started, leaping up out of his chair. "What about that guy Sheldon down there? You ain't gonna just leave him there, are you?"

"Get in the car, Jerry," Dan said flatly. He motioned me in behind the wheel.

In silence we went down the drive and turned onto the beach road, heading in the direction of town. As soon as we made the turn, Dan Peavy said quickly, "Turn down to the cabin where the Burroughs woman was staying."

"We ain't going back to town?" said Jerry.

"No, we ain't. Pull up there by the cabin, Pete. We're gonna try something."

"Whattaya mean, Dan?" said Jerry.

"I mean we might catch a murderer. Come on. And be quiet."

Dan Peavy led the way down to the beach, turned left, and went up the steps toward Sheldon's cabin. Darkness had settled rapidly. Lights were on in the cabin. Like a warily advancing infantryman, Dan went across the space toward the cabin and crouched below the screened front windows. The moon was a yellow slice in the western sky beyond the cabin.

"Hunker down here," Dan whispered.

We did as he instructed. Within half a minute a squadron of mosquitos had located us.

We had been there perhaps twenty minutes, and I was beginning to wonder if Dan Peavy's age had at last caught up with him, when there came a sound of someone rapping on a door.

"Paul?" a voice called. I recognized the voice as belonging to Dr. Eddleman. "Paul?" he repeated.

"Amos?"

"Yes. Allen said you wanted to see me after dinner."

"See you—oh, yes. Come in, Amos. I do want to talk to you."

Footsteps sounded inside the cabin and then there was the sound of the door being opened.

"I was almost to the point of taking this gun and ending it, Amos," Sheldon said. "All that business back at the lab, I really thought I was losing my mind—"

"It wasn't that at all, Paul. It was simply nerves, nerves resulting from overwork."

"And now this. I'm sure this Sheriff Peavy thinks I killed Monica. He thinks she came here under another name simply to meet me discreetly and confront me with some other blackmail demand. After all, I am a logical suspect."

"You don't have to worry, Paul. I'll arrange for legal counsel first thing tomorrow morning—"

"Do you think I did it, Amos? Do you?" There was the sound of a body relaxing on bedsprings.

"I think we should get that psychiatrist down here—"

"But," Sheldon interrupted, his voice showing a sudden vigor, "there's another angle from which to attack this thing. We're both practical and empirical men, Amos. We're experimenters. After all, that's our business.

"Sheriff Peavy mentioned to me that in Monica's purse there was a slip of paper, on which was scrawled a telephone number. It was the number of the lab. Even though I've had some unusual, shall we say, *mental* aberrations, in the past few months, I know that I have not heard from Monica by telephone or otherwise in more than five years."

"Can you be certain—"

"I can be certain. Therefore, Amos, it becomes apparent to me that Monica had that number jotted down in order to call someone else at the laboratory."

"Maybe she noted it in order to get in touch with you in the future."

Sheldon laughed shortly. "Monica? You didn't know her, at least not as I did. If she jotted a number down, it was because she was going to use it within the next hour and maybe again at some future date. No, she was calling someone else at the lab."

"In your logical and empirical method, Paul, just who might this mysterious person have been?" Eddleman's voice took on a hard, brittle edge. It was not the voice of a man counseling his troubled friend.

"I should think that would be the most obvious thing of all. She was calling you, Amos."

After a brief silence, Eddleman laughed softly. "Really, Paul! If you carry on like this, I might agree with you that you are losing your mind. I'd be inclined to think you're more than a little paranoiac."

"I'd go further," Sheldon went on. "I'd say that you arranged all the little things that happened to me, that the

night you and I were in the lab alone, Amos, and I heard those voices, that you also heard them. In fact, you arranged them with that cute little tape recorder you once showed me."

"Assuming for an instant this insane accusation is correct, why would I do such a thing? We're friends—"

"The company brought me in from outside, Amos, a man of less than thirty-five, and they put me over you, made me Research Director. You had been there all your working life. I can see that it would be a blow to you, Amos, particularly since I was a great deal younger than you and, conceivably, the directorship would never again be open during your working lifetime—"

There was a pause. Behind us the waves broke softly on the beach. Then, "But it will be open, Paul, and very soon. Do you think Bowen will keep a homicidal maniac on in charge? The directorship will be open and this time it will go to the man who should have had it all along. Amos Eddleman!"

"You realize I'll have to tell all this to the sheriff, don't you, Amos? I think a thorough police investigation will be able to establish a tie between you and Monica. But let me ask you one thing, just how did you get her to go along on that little act in the dunes?"

"Money, Paul. You of all people should know how Monica loved money. As a matter of fact, that 'delusion' in itself might have driven you over the brink, at least into such a state that you would have been unable to resume your duties. That would have accomplished my end. But, knowing Monica from what you told me of your experience with her, I knew that very shortly I would be approached by her. I knew she had blackmail in her little mind ever since I first contacted her about this. Therefore, after we staged our little scene for you, I brought her back to her cabin, killed her just as you would have described it to the police, and drove back to Kingston. I was only a few minutes late reporting for work."

"The face. You were wearing one of those plastic masks."

"That's right, Paul. And I carefully brushed over mine and Monica's tracks after you'd run off down the beach."

"I'm sorry about this, Amos. Really sorry. I valued your friendship—"

I rose up slowly and looked in through the screened win-

dow. Inside the room I saw Eddleman take up a pistol from the dresser.

"Hold it, Paul," he said. "You're not going anywhere. You said yourself that you had seriously considered using this gun on yourself. Well, that is exactly what you are going to do. I can make it look like a suicide, and these Keystone cops they have down here will accept it without question—"

I punched Dan violently on the arm. It was apparent that Eddleman intended killing Sheldon, probably within the next few seconds.

"I guess we can go in now," Dan said, getting to his feet.

"For cryin' out loud, we'd better hurry!"

"No hurry, Pete," he drawled. "The gun's mine and it ain't loaded." He started around the corner of the house for the door. I heard him mumble: "Keystone cops . . ."

Dr. Amos Eddleman was safely ensconced in Guale County's finest cell. I sat perched on the edge of Dan Peavy's desk, and around the desk were Sheldon, Horace Allen, Jerry, Doc Stebbins, and Jim Benson, from the *Weekly Clarion.*

"I owe you a great deal, Sheriff Peavy," Sheldon said. "I suppose I was too close to Amos to imagine he could have had anything to do with this."

"Suppose somebody tells me just what happened and why?" said Doc Stebbins. "I got a private practice, too, and I can't hang around here all day and night."

"Yeah, Dan," Jerry Sealey said, "what got you going on this Eddleman fella? No offense, Doc Sheldon, but I could of swore it was you."

"There were two or three things," Dan said. "Things that said somebody mighta been tryin' to frame Sheldon. O' course, we knew this Bowen outfit had brought Sheldon in and put him over Eddleman, after Eddleman being the assistant of the man that was there ahead of Sheldon. I called the president of the company up there this afternoon and asked him about that. He was pretty surprised, said Eddleman never had any real reason to believe he'd be put in charge of the research lab. Said Eddleman was a pretty good tackle, but not a quarterback.

"And it was Eddleman that recommended this place to Sheldon. Eddleman knew how these cabins were set up,

knew you couldn't see nothing from one cabin to the next. He knew from talking to Sheldon on the phone that Sheldon took himself a morning walk at six o'clock every morning, all the way to the inlet and back. And when Sheldon said he hadn't had any calls from this Burroughs woman in more'n five or six years, there was the possibility that she was phoning somebody else at the lab. So I cooked up our little trap that we sprung tonight."

"What if it hadn't sprung?" Jim Benson asked. "What if Eddleman hadn't fallen for it?"

"What did we have to lose?" Dan asked. "If he was guilty, he was bound to fall. There was the gun, and Sheldon talking about suicide, and then the idea that Eddleman and this Burroughs woman could be traced to each other. The doubts were planted, and that left him only one thing to do. Kill Sheldon, make it appear a suicide, and he would be in the clear and have what he set out for, to boot. If he wasn't guilty . . . well, we wasn't trying to pin it on the wrong man."

Jim Benson knuckled down on the edge of the battered desk and grinned over at Dan. "Not a bad feather in your cap, Dan, considering you're up for election this fall."

"A man has to accept the good with the bad," Dan said sagely. "Be sure to spell the name right, Benson. It's Peavy, P-E-A-V-Y."

EXPERIENCE IS HELPFUL

by Rog Phillips

WHEN Mark Spencer paid off the cab and saw his boss' car parked at the curb, it was as though he had known unconsciously all along, from the day he had been promoted out of the shop to the newly created job of Special Field Engineer, two years ago.

The boss' car parked in front of *his* apartment building. Mark looked up at the windows of the third-floor apartment where he lived. They were dark.

He went slowly to the driver's side of the sleek car and stooped down, peering through the window. It was Hugo Rice's car, all right. And the keys dangled from the ignition. That was a bad habit Hugo had, leaving his keys in the car. And now that Mark thought of it, Hugo had other bad habits, like carrying a gun in the glove compartment.

Rejecting the whole thing, Mark Spencer straightened up and shook his head violently, then looked again. He was still on the darkened street; the car was still there; the apartment windows up above stared at the sky, ignoring him. He wished, suddenly and fervently, that he were still in Chicago where he was supposed to be for another day. Then he wouldn't know . . .

It occurred to him that he still didn't know for sure. There could be lots of explanations. He set his suitcase down and carefully opened the car door and took the keys, closing the door with gentle pressure that brought only a faint click. He put the keys in his pocket and picked up his suitcase.

With his own keys he let himself into the building, and hid his suitcase in the janitor's closet under the stairs before ascending the thickly padded stairs to the third floor. His apartment was 3C. He pressed his ear to the door panel, then slipped the key into the lock, turning it gently until the door gave inward.

A moment later he was inside.

The bedroom door was open a few inches. There was no light, but there didn't need to be; there were sounds. Mark Spencer took a step forward, his fingers stretching into claws. Then, slowly, he stepped back and out into the hall, closing the door.

There had been one other time, about six months ago, when Mark had come home a day early. That time he had called Claire from the airport before catching a taxi. He thought of that time now. Claire had seemed slightly breathless over the phone that time, but nothing had seemed wrong to his unsuspicious mind when he arrived home.

But Hugo hadn't seemed particularly glad to see him back the next morning at work. Mark could understand why, now. Hugo had been routed out of bed the night before and had probably had to check in at some hotel for the rest of the night—because Hugo undoubtedly told his own wife, Mildred, that he was going "out of town."

Mildred. How was she going to take this? A rather plain woman in her forties, but with a quiet pride at being Mrs. Hugo Price. It would kill her.

Mark stopped on the second-floor landing and half-turned, looking back up the infinitely lonely stair well. What was this going to do to him?

It would cost him his job, of course, besides kicking Claire out of the apartment and suing her for divorce. He would have to get a job as a machinist again, somewhere. Jobs of Special Field Engineer didn't grow on trees.

He was a good field engineer. He had found he had a special talent for working the bugs out of highly complex instruments and machines in the field. But Hugo, after being exposed for what he was, could hardly be expected to give him a high recommendation.

Mark Spencer continued down the stairs, one slow step at a time. Out on the sidewalk he stopped, a slow smile growing on his face.

He took Hugo's key ring out of his pocket. Car keys, the key to the office, the key to the back door of the plant, and two keys Mark didn't recognize.

He went to Hugo's car and slid in behind the wheel. Before he started the motor, he reached into the glove compartment and made sure the gun was there. As an afterthought he took it out and made sure the clip was loaded.

Then he started the motor and drove off into the night.

Killing Mildred was not as difficult as Mark had anticipated. She had not even stirred in her sleep when he went into her bedroom quietly and turned on the light.

By now Mark was thinking in terms of later police investigation. Or even earlier police investigation. He touched nothing except with his handkerchief. He kept in mind the fact that he was doing Mildred a kindness. How many women with unfaithful husbands died in their sleep without ever having found out what was going on? Mildred was really very lucky.

Mark left the bedroom light on and the front door unlocked. He paused in the shadows on the porch and waited to make sure he would not meet anyone on the way back to Hugo's car, parked at the curb.

He detoured to the factory and let himself in with Hugo's key. He put the gun in the center drawer of Hugo's desk after rubbing it clean of fingerprints again, including the clip. That second unfamiliar key on Hugo's key ring was for that desk drawer, Mark discovered. He locked the drawer.

Before he left the plant he went to his own office and called the police, disguising his voice and making it sound sleepy.

"Hello? Police station?" he said, his voice devoid of energy. "I think I heard a shot next door at the Rice's place. Maybe Hugo shot Mildred, they don't get along too well. They live at nineteen thirty-six Crest Drive. Got that? Nineteen thirty-six Crest Drive." He hung up while the desk sergeant was asking for his name and phone number.

He drove straight to his apartment house and parked Hugo's car in the same spot it had been parked before, and left the keys dangling from the ignition.

He walked two blocks to the neighborhood gas station, now closed for the night. He used the outside phone booth and dialed his apartment number and let it ring. He could visualize Claire and Hugo in bed, Claire debating whether to answer, and Hugo pointing out that, if it was Mark coming back a day early, she'd better answer.

On the seventh ring she answered, her voice sleepy and questioning.

"Darling!" Mark said excitedly. "I'm at the airport. I finished the job a day early. I couldn't wait to get home. I'll catch a taxi and be there in twenty minutes."

"Oh . . ." Claire was silent a moment. "I'm so glad,

darling. I'll have some coffee on when you get home. Bye . . ."

Mark waited in the phone booth twenty minutes, smoking his first cigarette since leaving the airport—how long ago? In another life!

He walked the two blocks back to the apartment building. Hugo's car was gone. Mark retrieved his suitcase from the janitor's closet under the stairway and took the stairs two at a time, working himself into an appearance of his normal enthusiasm and happiness.

Claire met him at the door with her usual tight little hug and quick kiss and secret smile.

Only now, Mark too had a secret smile.

It was surprising, Mark discovered, how easy it was to look at Claire and smile, now that he knew what she was and he no longer loved her. The coffee was delicious. He discovered he was hungry. Claire fixed him a tuna-salad sandwich on white toast. It reminded him that she had once told him she had worked as a waitress for a year while attending business school. The sandwich had a definite professional touch.

After finishing the sandwich, Mark stretched and yawned. "Am I tired!" he exaggerated. He stood up, fished in his pants pocket for a quarter, and dropped it on the table beside his plate.

"What's that for?" Claire said.

"What?" Mark said. "Oh." He looked down at the quarter, then smiled at Claire. "Habit. I'm away from home so often. But why shouldn't wives get tips?" He yawned widely and turned away from the table, leaving the quarter there.

"Thank you, sir," Claire said as he pushed open the door to the living room. Her voice was just a shade too high and too thin.

"Which reminds me," Mark said, pausing and turning around. "I saw some nice-looking bedroom sets in a show window in Chicago this morning. You know, people ought to get new furniture once in a while. I don't have to go back to the office tomorrow. I think I'll sleep through the morning."

"All right, Mark," Claire said. "I'll be right with you as soon as I do the dishes."

"Take your time," Mark said. "I'm tired. Been a long day. Going to sleep."

He let the kitchen door swing shut and went to the bedroom. The bed was neatly made. Claire must have really worked during that twenty minutes; making the bed, tidying up, doing the dishes, making sure that Hugo hadn't left any cigar butts she hadn't found, and spraying the air. He could smell the faint odor of lilacs from the spray deodorizer.

Mark went to bed. When Claire came in later, he pretended to be asleep. He lay on his stomach with his face half buried in the pillow and his cradled arms.

After a few moments, the lights went out. Mark steeled himself not to flinch if Claire touched him. She slid into bed without touching him and lay on her side of the bed without moving.

The darkness and silence built up into a loneliness in which he lay, dry-eyed. Finally he went to sleep. When he awoke, it was morning and he could hear the vacuum cleaner going in the living room. He looked at the clock and it was eleven-thirty. He flopped over and sat up, reaching for a cigarette, while last night came back to him.

Last night kicked him in the stomach as it came back, bit by vivid bit. He dragged deeply on the cigarette, letting the fresh smoke bite into his lungs as a counterirritant. Finally he was able to view things with the detachment he had captured last night.

Grinding out his cigarette, he got up and began the automatic routine of showering, brushing his teeth, shaving, combing his hair, and dressing. It was nice not to think for a full ten minutes.

He took a deep breath before opening the bedroom door. Claire was at the front door looking at someone outside in the hall. She turned her head. Her face had aged ten years.

"Mark," she said, "it's the police. They want to talk to us."

"Well, have them come in!" Mark said, "And get me some coffee." He hurried to the door and took over while Claire escaped to the kitchen.

The two men wore ordinary business suits. "I'm Lieutenant Jones and he's Lieutenant Stevens," the taller of the two men said, holding up his identification.

"Come on in," Mark said. "I'm Mark Spencer. What's happened? A burglary in the building? Do you want some coffee? Claire, bring two more cups."

Claire was already backing through the kitchen door with a tray. She hurried over and put it down on the coffee table.

"No coffee, please—well, since you've brought extra cups. It does smell good," Lieutenant Jones said.

"I need my coffee," Mark said in the silence after the two men had sat down on the davenport and Claire was pouring. "I just got up. Slept late. Uh, what apartment was robbed?"

"No burglary," Lieutenant Jones said. "Say, this coffee is good! We just want to ask a few routine questions. You and your wife home last night?"

"She was," Mark said. "I wasn't. I got back from Chicago, and called her from the airport to let her know I was home, then caught a taxi straight home from the airport. We were here together for the rest of the night."

"Is that right," Lieutenant Jones said, turning to Claire.

"Why, of course," she said, "but what's this all about?"

"What time did your plane arrive, Mr. Spencer?" Jones asked.

"Ten, ten-thirty, I don't know," Mark said. "It was flight eight-oh-seven."

"Remember what kind of a cab you caught?" Jones asked.

Mark identified the company.

"You give him this address?" Jones continued.

"Well, sure!" Mark said.

"Good." Jones flicked a friendly smile on and off. "We can check you out. Oh yes, one more thing. Did you have any visitors last night, either of you?"

Mark looked boldly at Claire. "Did you have any visitors last night, Claire?" he asked with just the right tone. She shook her head, swallowing loudly. Mark smiled at Lieutenant Jones and his partner. "No visitors at all," he said.

"Good," Jones said. He and Lieutenant Stevens flashed each other a smile of self-satisfaction. "We'll be going now." He emptied his cup and put it down. "Very good coffee, Mrs. Spencer," he said, standing up.

"What's it all about?" Mark said, managing to put the sound of genuine curiosity into his voice as he followed them to the door.

"Just a routine check on everyone who might even be

remotely connected with a case," Jones said in the doorway. "Nothing to be alarmed about."

"But what is it?" Mark said.

"Murder," Lieutenant Jones said. "You know the man. He works for the same company you do. Hugo Rice."

"He was murdered?" Claire's voice sounded in Mark's ears, raw and jagged.

"No, no," Lieutenant Jones said. "He was arrested this morning for killing his wife." He closed the door.

"Hugo?" Mark said in carefully controlled tones of amazement, staring at the closed door, ". . . murdered Mildred?" He waited a measured moment, then turned to face Claire.

Claire was putting the cups and saucers onto the tray.

"You never know, do you," she said carelessly, but there were teeth marks on her knuckles. "Murderers are just something you read about in the papers. Then one day you know one."

She picked up the tray and went into the kitchen. Mark started to follow her, then changed his mind and sat down on the davenport. What had Claire meant, *Then one day you know one?* Did she mean him or Hugo? Hugo had obviously tried to get the cops to believe he had been here last night at the time of the murder. The police hadn't believed him, but had checked it out. Claire had certainly been so upset last night with getting Hugo out of the apartment and straightening things that she actually didn't know what time he had called her and what time he arrived home. The flight stewardess and the cab driver would alibi him perfectly right to the apartment house. It was all beautiful, beautiful—like a machine in top working order!

Mark lit a cigarette and stretched his legs, letting them come to rest, crossed, on a small stack of magazines on the coffee table. He breathed deeply and blew smoke toward the ceiling.

"Claire!" he called, "how about some more coffee?"

"Coming right up, darling!" Claire answered. Her voice sounded cheerful. When she came in with the coffee pot and a clean cup and saucer, she even looked cheerful. "You sit right there," she said after she poured his coffee. "I'll have your breakfast ready in a minute and serve it in here."

He stared in unbelief at her back as she returned to the kitchen. She was certainly doing a remarkably good job of concealing her grief!

Too good a job. An uneasy thought came to Mark. Now that Mildred was dead, if Hugo got off, he would be free to marry Claire. Maybe the thought had occurred to Claire, too. Momentary panic churned up acid in his stomach. He forced it out of his mind. He had *nothing to fear!* And he knew it, so his good spirits returned.

Claire brought his breakfast, set it out neatly on the coffee table, then sat on the floor with her elbows on the coffee table and watched him eat. She smiled quickly when he looked at her.

Suddenly it annoyed him.

He sneered at Claire and fished in his pocket, bringing out a half dollar and dropping it on the table.

"Thank you, sir!" Claire said, getting to her feet and putting the half dollar in her housecoat pocket.

His sneer grew more open. He fought down the contempt he felt for Claire. He knew it showed in his eyes. He closed them. He doubled his fists, waiting for her to start shouting at him. Instead . . .

"I know how you must feel, Mark," he heard her say. "You admired Mr. Rice and could think no wrong of him. But it came as no surprise to me. He is a selfish, egotistical man. Don't grieve for him, grieve for his wife."

Mark opened his eyes and stared unbelievingly at Claire. She must be a superb actress—no, no one could be that good. She was stupid. A moron. He had never realized it before. His contempt was lost on her. It went over her head, just as the insult of the tips did.

"I'm going out," he said.

"All right, Mark," Claire said.

She started picking up the dishes, putting them on the tray again. *A pathetic, moronic waitress!* Mark got his suit coat, and slammed the door on his way out of the apartment. What did it take to make her understand he knew?

He walked several blocks fiercely, frustrated. What did it take to put across to Claire that she could stay in his house as a housekeeper for her room and board, as a waitress who served him for tips, as a prostitute who got paid when and if he decided to sample her wares? Probably if he left a twenty-dollar bill on the nightstand on her side of the bed, she would be stupid enough to think it a special gift to go out and buy a dress with!

Was he going to have to come right out and tell her in

black and white the new state of affairs?

Suddenly he stopped walking, his face lighting up with delight. There *was* someone who didn't have to have things spelled out for him.

Hugo Rice! *He* was the someone!

Mark flagged down a cruising cab. On the way to the police department he leaned back and half-closed his eyes, smiling with great contentment. He would play the stupid but faithful friend bit while Hugo ranted. Hugo knew who had killed Mildred, and why. Hugo knew he was in a frame he couldn't escape.

At the police station Mark asked for Lieutenant Jones, and then told Jones he wanted to visit with Hugo, see if there was anything he could do for his "friend and boss."

"I don't see why not," Lieutenant Jones said in a kindly tone. "It's funny how friends desert a person when he's arrested. You're the only one who's come to visit him."

Mark was taken to a room with bare walls, a table and four chairs. The door closed, and he was alone for almost ten minutes. He spent the time looking for hidden microphones, not finding any, but convinced they were there. No matter what Hugo said, he would have to be careful not to make any incriminating remarks himself.

A smile kept tugging at the corner of Mark's lips. He was going to enjoy this thoroughly.

Finally the door opened and Hugo strode in, a scowl of anger on his face, his eyes smoldering.

Lieutenant Jones looked at Mark significantly. "The officer will be just outside the door," he said.

"Stay and get an earful, Lieutenant," Hugo snarled. "I'm going to make this ingrate admit he killed my wife."

"Are you sure you want to go on with this visit, Mr. Spencer?" Jones said. "I wouldn't advise it."

"Yes," Mark said, "but maybe you'd better stay here. What's happened to you, Hugo?"

Jones closed the door and took a chair off to one side, crossing his legs and lighting a cigarette.

"What's happened to me?" Hugo asked. "You killed Mildred and framed me for it. You used my gun and put it in my desk at the plant. And I could prove it if this moron detective here would do what I tell him."

"What's that?" Mark said.

"Go to your apartment and fingerprint it," Hugo said. "My fingerprints are all over the place. Fresh fingerprints. I

was there last night when you swiped my car, went and killed Mildred, put my gun in my desk at the office, parked the car where it had been, then called to tell your wife you had just arrived at the airport, to get me out of there while the police found my wife's body on your anonymous phone call."

A cold chill crept up Mark's spine. Hugo had put his finger on the one clue that would uncover the truth.

"You're not being yourself, Hugo," he said, his voice unsteady.

"Don't be upset, Mr. Spencer," Jones said. "I see this happen all the time. A guy is caught and knows it, and he goes nuts, lashing out in every direction for an escape."

"Well, why don't you fingerprint Spencer's apartment and find out?" Hugo demanded.

"I wouldn't waste my time," Lieutenant Jones said.

"Why don't you?" Mark said. "It might set poor Hugo's mind at rest."

"And have your wife landing on me for dusting up her walls and woodwork?" Jones said. "Besides, you have no idea of the work involved, the thousands of fingerprints we'll find—all belonging to you and your wife. No thanks. Especially not since you invited me to."

"I'll get you some way if it's the last thing I ever do, you stupid moron," Hugo said to Mark. "To think that I lifted you out of the shop and gave you the job of Special Field Engineer. Why do you suppose I did it? Because you had some special talent? Hell no! I did it because at the plant picnic I made a pass at your wife and she responded. I gave you that job so I could get you out of town for three or four days whenever I wanted to see her."

"Poor Hugo," Mark said, shaking his head in mock pity. "How you've changed." He turned to Lieutenant Jones and asked with mock seriousness, "Can he get off with a plea of insanity? I would say he's insane. Now he is, at least."

"I'm surprised you don't hit him," Jones said.

Mark looked into Hugo's eyes and smiled slightly.

"He's *sick,* Lieutenant," Mark said.

The veins in Hugo's temples stood out and pulsed visibly.

"They don't hang *sick* people, do they?" Mark added.

"In this state it's the gas chamber," Jones said. "He's going there."

"I wish I could do something to help him," Mark said.

"CONFESS, DAMN YOU!" Hugo shouted. "AFTER ALL I'VE DONE FOR YOU . . . !"

Mark looked at Lieutenant Jones and spread his arms in a shrug. Jones went to the door and opened it. The uniformed officer led Hugo away.

"I'm really upset," Mark said.

"Don't be," Jones said. "This is a fairly common thing with people who have been fairly law-abiding and then become murderers and get caught. And don't go suspecting your wife. If what he said was true, he would die before he would implicate her. Not only to protect her, but because it's the most damaging kind of alibi he could dream up. I admit I did check you out, Spencer, and you did come in on that plane and go directly to your apartment in a cab as you said. But I didn't check you out because I thought you might be guilty. I did it so the D.A. could prevent the defense lawyer from forcing you or your wife to appear in court. No use subjecting either of you to unpleasantness."

"Thank you," Mark said. He and the Lieutenant shook hands. Then he was leaving the building, bubbling with happiness inside, a small smile on his lips.

Outside, he hesitated. He had most of the afternoon ahead of him. He didn't want to go home. Should he check in at the plant? He would have to go home and get his briefcase out of his suitcase so he could turn in his time and expenses on that job in Chicago. He decided against it.

He walked slowly, stopping at store windows and studying the products on display. Some were interesting, some weren't.

He came to a furniture store. A bedroom display reminded him. He went inside and inspected the twin-bed displays. He settled on a bedroom set, a really nice one. Yes, they would be happy to take his old bedroom set in trade and would be fair to him, but he must remember that used mattresses were worth nothing, by the time they were renovated all they could sell for would be the cost of renovation. No, delivery couldn't possibly be made today. Not for three days. The order would have to go to the warehouse, the crated set have to be brought out to the loading platform, the truck had many other deliveries, it took three days.

Yes, his credit was good, they would take a ten-dollar deposit, notify him of the allowance they gave him on

the old set, and he could pay the balance in thirty days with no carrying charge, that would be fine.

Mark paid the ten dollars and left the store disappointed. He would be forced to sleep in the same bed with Claire for two more nights. Well, she could keep on her side of the bed. If he wanted her, he would let her know. And pay her. Maybe she would think the twenty bucks was a present to buy a new dress with, but to him it would be for services rendered. Let her go on deluding herself if she wished.

He did more window shopping. He came to a restaurant and decided to have some coffee, maybe a sandwich.

He sat at the counter. The waitress cleared the dishes off and wiped the counter with a damp cloth, leaving wet streaks that slowly dried, off-color. Her hair was bleached to straw color with an exaggerated upsweep that was partly unhinged. Her nail polish was flaking off.

She was generous with the coffee. Some of it had splashed into the saucer. There was a nick in the cup so that he had to turn it around and not use the handle, to avoid the nick. He decided against a sandwich.

The waitress' panty girdle, outlined by her tight white uniform skirt, was bunched at the waist. The coffee tasted bad. Stale.

Suddenly lonely, Mark left a quarter on the counter and walked out.

He stood on the sidewalk, depressed. He glanced at his watch. It was only three o'clock—a couple of minutes after. A taxi was coming down the street. On impulse he stepped out into the street and stopped it. He gave the driver the address of the plant, and settled back.

Maybe they would have something waiting for him so he could get out of town again for a couple of days until the twin beds were delivered. Yeah! Maybe they would! He was glad he had decided to go to the plant.

Gertrude, the receptionist, welcomed him with a bright smile that quickly clouded. "Have you heard the news, Mark?" she said.

"I've heard," Mark said, going past her to his own private cubicle. He looked eagerly at his in-basket. It was empty.

He sat down at the desk, and the phone rang. He scooped up the receiver and said, "Spencer. . . ."

"Mark?" It was Gertrude. "I forgot to tell you. Mr. McHale wanted to see you as soon as you came in. He's in his office now. He could see you."

"Oh?" Mark said. "See if it's okay. I'll go right in."

It hadn't occurred to Mark. With Hugo out of the picture there was a vacancy in the Upper Echelons! It would have to be filled immediately, of course.

He took the small mirror out of the top desk drawer and inspected himself, straightening his tie and picking a fleck off his shoulder.

The phone rang again. It was Gertrude. "He'll see you immediately," she said.

McHale was the president. He sat behind an acre of gleaming mahogany desk, yet seemed to dominate it like a mountaintop. A freshly lit, expensive cigar was in his mouth, sending blue smoke streamers out over the room. He took the cigar out of his mouth and pointed with it to a chair.

"Sit down, Spencer," the president said.

"Yes, sir," Mark said. He dipped into the chair, and sat with bright expectancy.

"Too bad about Hugo," McHale said, scowling, putting his cigar back in his mouth and puffing swiftly to bring it to life.

"Yes, it is," Mark said. "He's a fine man. He—he's probably innocent—wouldn't you say?"

"He's through." McHale said it with finality. "He's been a problem all along. We held an emergency Board Meeting at noon. Hugo's *out.*" The president of the company scowled, looking past Mark to distant, important horizons of his highly skilled executive mind. Mark experienced a sense of awe. It would be wonderful working for this man . . .

"Now about you . . ." the president said.

"Yes?" Mark said eagerly.

"I never could understand why Hugo took you out of the shop," McHale said. "He knows our company policy. I have to be fair, though. I got out your record. I've been studying it." He opened the center drawer of his desk and took out a file folder, thick with papers. He put it on the desktop, closed the center drawer, then waved vaguely at the folder with his cigar.

"Do you know what this record shows?" he said.

"No, sir," Mark said, suppressing his eagerness.

"It shows that company policy is right," McHale said. "You are a good machinist. But in the field? You make repairs. You don't make suggestions for improvements.

You don't have a college mind. Oh, Hugo's been covering for you; but the fact remains that it takes a college man in the field, not a repairman. You don't have the technical know-how to suggest changes in design."

Mark was silent, ice forming in his blood.

"I just don't know why Hugo promoted you out of the shop," McHale said. "But I have to be fair to you. You can't keep your present job. In fact, we don't need a special field engineer, we have resident engineers all over the country to handle breakdown problems and suggest changes in design. But you're a good company man. I don't see how I can just send you back to a lathe. It's a problem. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll make a job for you as swing-shift efficiency expert—until a lead-man job opens up. It will be quite a salary cut, but no one needs to know about that but the payroll department. They have to know, of course. Or, if you'd rather look for another job, I'll see that you get the highest recommendation. Go for the top. If you can handle the job, I won't hinder you with another company."

Stunned, Mark remained like a statue. Once, his face muscles cramped visibly. Slowly his eyes went dead.

McHale looked at the ceiling, puffing furiously on his cigar, and waited. "Maybe you'd like to think it over," he said abruptly. "Take a couple of weeks vacation and think about it. You have it coming. If you don't, I'll clear it. At your present salary, too!"

"No!" Mark said, his voice harsh. He took a deep breath. "That is, I'll take the vacation at my present salary. Why not?" His grin was twisted, apologetic. "But I'll take the job. It *is* a promotion—from what I *was,* isn't it? . . ."

"That's the spirit," McHale said, obviously relieved. "And you can be sure I'll keep my eye on you." He came around his desk and shook hands with Mark. "A man with your field experience should make a good shop foreman, once he gets a few years of management experience in his background."

He pushed Mark toward the door, shaking his hand enthusiastically, puffing blue smoke from his rich cigar.

Mark smiled brightly at Gertrude on his way back to his cubicle. With his door closed, he sat down at his desk. He looked at his name, shadowed in reverse on the frosted glass of his closed door. And a slow flush built up on his face.

Claire had bought him this cubicle with his name on the door. The whole, simple truth had come home to Mark at last. *Her relief which she couldn't conceal when she learned Hugo had been arrested and she would no longer have to keep paying.*

"You admired Mr. Rice and could think no wrong of him," Claire had said, *"but it came as no surprise to me. He is a selfish egotistical man. Don't grieve for him, grieve for his wife."*

And Mr. McHale, frowning, "I JUST DON'T KNOW why Hugo promoted you out of the shop . . ."

And Hugo's hate-curved lips, saying, "Why do you suppose I lifted you out of the shop? Because you had some very special talent?"

Suddenly Mark's lips began to tremble. Tears streamed from his eyes. Then his head was cradled in his arms on the desk while he sobbed openly, shaking with the torment that possessed him, the grief he could never share, the thing he could never let Claire know he knew.

He became quiet. Finally he lifted his head. He took out a cigarette and lit it, staring unseeingly at the surface of his desk.

He fished in his side coat pocket and brought out a slip of paper. He unfolded it and flattened it on the desk. He studied it, then reached for the phone.

"Outside, Gertrude," he said in a quiet, subdued voice.

He read the phone number off the slip of paper as he dialed it.

"I would like to speak to Mr. Rosen," he said.

There was quite a wait.

"Mr. Rosen?" Mark Spencer said. "I was in earlier this afternoon and ordered a bedroom set with twin beds. Remember? I'm calling to cancel the order."

LUCREZIA

by H. A. DeRosso

I HAD NEVER thought to rejoice over a man's death, but I did when Nicolo di Donato died. It was not an overt glee that I displayed; I did not shout and sing my joy to the world. I maintained the proper sad countenance and made the proper lamentations when in the company of others, mourning that one so good and kind, such a loving husband and conscientious provider, should have died so suddenly. There were times when I placed a hand across my eyes as though to hide my grief, and those who saw this never knew that behind the hand there were no tears and that inside I was laughing.

Do not misunderstand me. I did not hate Nicolo di Donato. It was not because of some base emotion that I rejoiced. I did not hate him nor did I love him. But I did love his wife, Lucrezia.

I had known Nicolo in the old country, back in our native Velo d'Astico. We were *paesani,* fellow villagers, and when one travels an enormous distance, across a wide ocean and then across half a continent to dwell in a strange land, it is natural for one to seek out a place in which to live where one has *paesani.* The strangeness, the loneliness become bearable then; the homesickness is never quite so sharp and aching. Thus it was that I became a *bordante,* a boarder, at the home of Nicolo and his wife, Lucrezia.

Carson Location, where Nicolo had his home, was a part of a mining town in northern Wisconsin. It was like a little piece of Italy set down in the middle of a strange land, for there were many of us immigrants living there and we maintained many of the ways and customs of the old country. Every man who was fortunate enough to be married built a large home and kept *bordanti,* boarders, who were single and otherwise would have had no place to stay. So, since Nicolo and I were *paesani* and there was a vacancy in his house, I moved in and fell in love with Lucrezia.

She was not a *paesana* of Nicolo and me. She was from a small village on the Tiber, near Rome, and Nicolo had met her and married her after he had come to this country. She had hair that turned the color of rich wine in the sun and eyes a smoky purple and beautiful shoulders and ample breasts and the large, well-shaped buttocks of her countrywomen. Her laughter was quick and sincere, her eyes held a glint of the devil when she smiled at men, and I instantly understood why Nicolo had fallen in love with her and married her, because falling in love with her was just as sudden with me.

I did not make my love known to her, but endured its torments in silence. She was another man's wife and he had never done anything to me and so I could not bring myself to betray him. If Lucrezia was ever aware of my feelings, she never showed that she knew.

It was in the house of Lucrezia that I met Gian Carlo Corradini. As was the custom in the boardinghouses, Gian Carlo and I shared the same room. We got to know each other very well, Gian Carlo understanding me even better than I understood him. It did not take him long to sense my feelings for Lucrezia.

"Ah, ah, Annibale," he would say to me, grinning his handsome grin and wagging his finger, "you were looking at Lucrezia again tonight at supper. Such a love-sick look on your face. One of these days Nicolo is going to catch on and then, poof—out the door you go. You should be more discreet, Annibale."

"Ma vala," I'd say. "You are talking sheer nonsense."

"Nonsense? Then why is your face so red? From too much wine?"

Gian Carlo and I were partners in the mine. In fact, it was Gian Carlo who got me the job, drilling and blasting for iron ore deep in the bowels of the earth. The work was hard and dangerous and the hours were long, but the pay was good compared to the wages in the old country—if one were fortunate enough to find work there. So we never complained. We worked our twelve hours and went home and shared a bottle of Lucrezia's wine while waiting for her to set one of her excellent tables.

I find it hard, after these many years, to remember what Nicolo looked like. He was always such a self-effacing man, withdrawn and given to long silences—such a contrast to the vivid Lucrezia, who had the capacity of making

one forget everything and everyone when she was present. She dominated every room she was in; even outdoors she made one unaware of the beauty or the bleakness of a day. So it was quite natural that no one referred to it as the house of Nicolo di Donato. It was the house of Lucrezia, the yard of Lucrezia, the cow of Lucrezia, the cheese of Lucrezia, the wine of Lucrezia. Everything in and about that house bore her name.

Nicolo, however, seemed quite satisfied with the arrangement or, if he did not like it, he never made his feelings known. It was assumed that he and Lucrezia were growing wealthy, though there was no ostentation about them. Nicolo worked in the Carson Mine, where Gian Carlo and I were employed, and with the money from this and the half-dozen boarders and the wine that he made and sold and the *boccia balla* court in the yard, he and Lucrezia were bound to make money.

Those were the days of Prohibition and people came not only from the Location, but from all the neighboring towns to drink and play *bocci* and swell the coffers of Nicolo and Lucrezia. Those were the happiest days of my life, those warm, sunny Sunday afternoons when I was giddy with wine and caught up in the excitement of the game played with the hard wooden balls, for these were the times when Lucrezia's eyes sparkled like glowing jewels and the rose was bright on her cheeks and I thought I detected a little, special warmth in her voice when she spoke to me.

"Annibale," she would say when I went to purchase still another bottle of wine, the forfeit losers paid at *bocci*, "it is so good to see you laugh. You are always so solemn. You should laugh more."

"It is because you are laughing that I laugh, *padrona*," I would answer in an attempt at gallantry.

"*Ma vala*, go on, save your sweet words for your sweetheart. She is the one who should hear them, not I."

Yes, I was happy in those days, though my love was a torment for me and I ached to tell her the truth about what was in my heart. But I held my silence, because it was not proper to speak of what tortured me and because, in those days, I could not bring myself to hurt anyone, not even an enemy.

Then I began to sense a change in me. My first awareness of it came with the death of autumn and the beginning

of the long, cruel winter, so unlike the winters of the old country which are mild even in the mountains of northern Italy. One night as I lay awake, listening to the sharp popping of the nails in the walls in the below-zero weather, I found myself thinking how nice it would be if something were to happen to Nicolo. A quick and painless death and Lucrezia would be a widow and after the proper length of time I could speak my heart to her.

Not that I would have initiated any violence against Nicolo. I shuddered at the horror of that implication. The working of divine providence, the closing of the final page when a man's life story has run out, that is what I had in mind and what I dreamed about every day and night afterward.

Nicolo was quite a bit older than Lucrezia and the boarders and all the others who came to Lucrezia's used to joke about it among themselves, saying he was too old to cope with her. They hinted also that she might long for a younger man. There seemed to be truth in their speculations, for Nicolo's silences grew even longer than before and he rarely smiled and took to drinking rather heavily, finishing off two or more bottles of wine each night before crawling into bed in a drunken stupor. As much as I wanted Lucrezia and hoped that he would die, I still somehow experienced a sense of pity for Nicolo and it angered me to be so soft.

Gian Carlo kept teasing me about Lucrezia until once I lost my temper and came to blows with him. He was quicker and stronger than I and the beating I took brought me to my senses. We fought on the way home from work and I was thankful that there had been no witnesses to my shame. Gian Carlo was not one to bear a grudge. He helped me to my feet, after he had knocked me down so many times I could no longer rise.

"*Sacramento,* Annibale!" he exclaimed. "It was all in fun. Can you not take a joke?"

"Not when it concerns her."

He bent close to peer at my face, for these were the short winter days when we went to work in darkness and returned home in darkness. After awhile, he grunted.

"This is not good, Annibale," he said. "Find yourself a woman, marry, raise a family. You are the type for that. Let fools like me go after the Lucrezias. She is not the kind to tie herself to one man."

"What do you mean by that?" I said, raising my voice.

"Take it easy," he said, holding up his hands to ward me off. "Are you going to make me knock you down again? Let us continue as friends. There shall be no more talk of Lucrezia from me."

"No more teasing?"

"On my honor," Gian Carlo said.

When it happened, it was as though my prayers had been answered. Not that I had ever got down on my kneees and actually prayed or even gone to church and prayed, for such prayers would have been a blasphemy, a sacrilege. But the willing of it had been in my heart, the wanting of it had been a fierce and brutal wishing in my mind. And then it came about in the very manner I had so often dreamt about.

Nicolo woke up sick one morning, raving and burning with fever. Lucrezia wrung her hands with anxiety and dread while we waited for the doctor to come.

"Stupido ghiotto," she sobbed, half in pain and half in anger, "I keep telling him all that wine before going to bed is no good for him. Does he have to be such a glutton? Is not a glass now and then enough? No. He must make a pig of himself. He must drink himself to sleep and sweat and now he is ill."

I patted her shoulder awkwardly, seeking to reassure and comfort her. "It is probably nothing. A day or two in bed after the doctor gives him some medicine and he'll be as good as ever."

She raised tear-spilling eyes up to me. "Oh, Annibale, I am so afraid. I am sure he has pneumonia. I had a *bordante,* before you came, who had the very same symptoms and it turned out to be pneumonia and he died. Oh, my poor Nicolo. *Che dolore.* Annibale, Annibale."

Lucrezia was right. Nicolo did have pneumonia and, despite the medicine and the hot-water bottles and the mustard plasters, in two days Nicolo di Donato was dead. . . .

The spring that year was the most beautiful I have ever seen. The warm winds came early, at the end of March, and the sun shone, while the water from the melting snow ran with a bright, rippling glitter, and early in April, after a night of heavy, warm rain, we woke to find the snow all

gone and a soft, aromatic mist rising from the drenched earth.

But as the days lengthened and the grass turned green and every day saw a salad of *radici*—the soft, succulent early dandelions—on the table, my heart grew heavier with a torment greater than before. Only half my dreams had come true. Nicolo was dead and I had rejoiced, but now I was sad for Lucrezia favored Gian Carlo over me.

I had thought to bide a proper time, a decent interval for mourning though there was only gladness in my heart, before speaking of my love to Lucrezia. In the meantime I would do the little things that would tell her, without words, of my love for her. I would rise while it was still dark to milk the cow for her and clean the barn and carry in the firewood, all this before leaving for work. And in the evening, after my twelve hours in the mine, I would milk the cow again and do a dozen other chores for her. I had thought these were sufficient to make her aware of my feelings for her but, while I was slaving away, Gian Carlo was turning all his charm on her.

I still remember the evening I was coming from the barn, carrying the pail of milk and whistling because I had decided that enough time had elapsed for mourning and any day now, when the moment should present itself, I would tell Lucrezia of my love and ask her to marry me. I heard them laughing inside the kitchen, Lucrezia and Gian Carlo laughing with the happiness of being with each other, and I felt my own happiness drain out of me, leaving me only with the taste of bile and dregs. I do not know how long I stood there, listening to their laughter, while a great and black anger kept brushing me with its wings. You waited too long, I told myself. *Stupido, senza cervello,* what else could you expect?

Finally, I told myself I had to enter; I could not stand outside all night. My presence did not diminish their joy. They both seemed unaware of the sadness, the weeping inside me, or if they were aware, they did not care.

"Ah, Annibale," Gian Carlo cried, face flushed with wine, "you are just in time." He waved the empty wine pitcher, turned it upside down. "You see it's empty. Please, go fetch some more."

Lucrezia, too, was flushed with wine, the rose deeper than ever on her cheeks, dark eyes smoking. She threw her

arms around me, while I stood there in embarrassment and shame for her.

"You are so good to me, Annibale," she said, patting my cheek, *"cosi bravo.* You have done so much for me since my poor Nicolo passed away. I will reward you one day. Perhaps now." And she pressed her warm, moist mouth fiercely against mine, while Gian Carlo slapped his thigh and roared his laughter. She drew back, breathing heavily and laughing softly, and patted my cheek again. "So now you will fetch more wine? For me?"

Because of the Prohibition agents, we kept the wine in the barn, concealed behind the haymow. I went there and opened the spigot of the barrel while tears of rage and hurt blinded me so that I was not aware of the pitcher being full until it ran over. I closed the spigot and wiped my eyes and composed my face and returned.

"A glass for you also, Annibale?" Lucrezia said to me as I turned to go upstairs. "No? What is the matter?"

"I am not well," I lied.

"All the reason why you should have a glass. It will make you feel better. Come, Annibale."

"Not tonight."

She looked at me with what could have been concern on her face and I would have taken it for that had it not been for the happy, possessive look on Gian Carlo's features.

"What is wrong?" she murmured.

I improvised a cough, "Some rock dust in my throat. We drilled a lot today. Ask Gian Carlo."

"Yeah," Gian Carlo said, nodding vigorously. He was suddenly scowling, remembering what we had done in the raise that day. "I will be glad when we are back in the *ferro,* the iron ore, again."

I was aware of Lucrezia watching me as I went up the stairs and for a few brief moments my spirits lifted, for she seemed worried about my feigned illness, but then, as I was entering my room, I heard her hearty laughter again and the darkness descended over me once more.

I lay in the gloom, trying to sleep, but it was no use with the sounds of Lucrezia and Gian Carlo laughing and joking seeping through the walls. So I lay there and thought and remembered—Gian Carlo's many absences from our room at night and his feeble excuses and the many little favors Lucrezia had been doing for him lately, such as

fixing him his favorite meals and even putting wine instead of coffee in his lunch pail.

With Nicolo there had been no hate, even a sort of pity and sense of guilt because of my thoughts, but now, with Gian Carlo, I began to know a dark and evil malice that I had never before experienced. This feeling of loathing and animosity grew and became almost unbearable because I knew I could not cope with Gian Carlo. He had beaten me up once; he could do it again. He was much too strong and clever for me. So I would have to do it some other way.

I explored the dark ways of hate and when the answer came it left me sick and trembling. I turned my face to the wall and squeezed my eyes shut, trying to erase the temptation from my mind, but even as I tried I knew I could not succeed. Temptation would haunt and torture me as long as Gian Carlo lived.

Perhaps she remembered my excuse of the night before, or perhaps my face was haggard after a restless, sleepless night. Lucrezia looked at me closely as I entered the kitchen with the morning milk. She had the fire going in the stove and the smell of boiling coffee cheered me, but only for a moment. Then the dullness returned and the feeling of futility, for I had come to realize, in the cool, sobering light of dawn, that what had seemed such a perfect answer the night before was actually something that I could not possibly do.

She looked grave and solemn, too. There were fine lines at the corners of her mouth and at the edges of her eyes, lines I had never seen there before. She motioned me into a chair at the kitchen table and sat beside me. Her hand touched my arm a moment, like a whisper, then fell away.

"Are you better this morning, Annibale?" Her voice was low and soft and I looked at her questioningly and she smiled slightly, but only with her lips. "Gian Carlo. He had so much wine last night. I think it would be wise to let him sleep as long as possible. I do not think he will be too overjoyed at the prospect of going to work when he awakens. So we will let him sleep a little more, no?"

"If I know Gian Carlo, he will not be too disappointed if you never wake him up. That man loves his sleep."

She was staring at me with a look of solicitousness in those smoky eyes. "You have not answered me, Annibale.

Are you well today?"

"I am fine."

"If you are not well, you should not go to work. Is it not dangerous, the job you and Gian Carlo do?"

I shrugged. "We must be careful, all the time."

"Is there not a great possibility of an accident?"

I could feel the prickling of the skin on the back of my neck. Had she seen into my mind?

"We do not think about that. It is not good to think about that. *Povera fortuna,* bad luck."

"I used to worry so much about my poor Nicolo and all in vain. It was his drinking and pneumonia I should have worried about." She turned those eyes on me again. They looked sad yet warm. Was that a special warmness for me? Then a memory of her and Gian Carlo laughing together mocked me and I felt the ugly malice rise in me again. "Would you tell me how it is where you and Gian Carlo work, Annibale?"

"It would not interest you."

"But I would so much like to talk with you this morning. It is so seldom we have the opportunity." She showed me a smile that put a pain in my heart. "Tell me how it is where you work. I so much want to know."

"It is in what they call a 'raise.' We are making a shaft from the level into the vein of ore above. When we have reached the ore, we will drill into it and blast it down and then it will be taken to the main shaft and hauled to the surface."

"Where is the danger in that, Annibale? Ever since I came to this country there have been so many miners hurt and even killed. It is not as bad as it was in the old days, I understand, but it is still very dangerous, is it not? What makes it so?"

I did not like to talk about it. A sense of superstition, a feeling not to tempt the ever-presence of death by talking about it made me reluctant, but I went on because I knew she wanted me to.

"There is always the danger of falling rock or drilling into a charge of dynamite that didn't go off or falling. There are lots of things, *un moltitudine.*"

"Falling? Do you work very high?"

"Very high," I said. "Right now we are over a hundred feet up the raise."

"What do you work on?"

"A couple of planks."

"You mean there is nothing more than that?" She sounded horrified. "You have nothing else under you?"

"Nothing."

"What if you were to get dizzy?" Her eyes were wide with fright. "What could you do?"

"Hang on or fall."

He shuddered. "You were right, Annibale. It is not good to talk about things like that. I do not blame you. Have you never thought of getting out of the mine?"

I spread my hands. "What else is there for me to do? A stranger in a strange land. I can barely speak their tongue. Where else would I get a job?"

She shuddered once again, then looked at the clock on the wall. "Oh, look how late. I had better wake Gian Carlo. . . ."

If she had not spoken as she had, I might not have found the courage. The thought occurred to me that she might have been prompting me, but that was out of the question. How could she know the dark and evil purpose that had developed in my mind during the long, dragging hours of the endless night?

In any event, I was determined to go through with it and, I told myself, the sooner I got it over with, the better it would be for my peace of mind. Gian Carlo had tormented me long enough about Lucrezia.

He was very quiet as we walked to work that morning, but he was suffering from too much wine the night before and he never talked much when he was like that. He was usually full of fun and jokes in the "dry" where we changed into our mining clothes. Someone commented on his silence and Gian Carlo grinned and pressed a hand against his forehead.

"*Troppo vino,* too much wine," he said.

We made the swift drop in the "cage" to two thousand feet below the surface and then we walked along the level to where our raise rose over a hundred feet above our heads. The air was damp and warm down here, our only illumination was the carbide lamps clipped to our mining hats. Gian Carlo started the ascent up the ladders to our staging, the planks on which we stood while we drilled into the rock overhead. I followed him, aware now of the

gathering dryness in my throat, the quivering in the muscles of my thighs, the threatening nausea in my belly.

The hours before I found the courage were a nightmare to me. I sweated as though I were immersed in a river. I trembled so that it was almost I who fell off the staging. Once I almost dropped the jackhammer down the raise.

Gian Carlo looked at me. "Are you not well, Annibale? You said something last night about not feeling well, did you not?"

In the light from my lamp, his face, covered with rock dust, looked as white as that of a ghost. The imagery sent a clammy crawling across my shoulders. Then a burst of anger came. Why did he have to be so solicitous? Did he think that, by showing concern for me, he could turn me from my purpose? Why did he not think about me when he was pursuing Lucrezia?

"It is nothing," I said, and was surprised at how calm my voice sounded. "A case of nerves. I will soon be over them."

As the hours wore on, I began to feel my resolve slipping. I started to think that there would be no harm in putting it off until tomorrow, but I realized if I did that, I might keep on putting it off and putting it off until he was wedded to Lucrezia. That thought maddened me and gave me the final strength.

It was just before we were ready to quit to eat our lunch. He was standing there, wiping sweat off his chalky face, when the evil prodded me and I just reached out and pushed. He staggered back and then, for an agonizing eternity teetered there on the edge of the staging, flapping his arms like some giant bird trying to soar into flight, while I could have wept with horror for I could not bring myself to push him again. Then he fell back and screamed and then screamed again as he dropped like a plummet and then there was one more drawn-out scream that ended abruptly.

I still spring awake at night with that screaming in my ears. Only death will ever erase that memory. It seemed a century that I stood frozen on the staging before starting the long, slow, trembling descent down the ladders.

I would not look at the lump of clay that had been Gian Carlo. Pitying hands led me away, hushed voices sought to soothe me. I moved as though dazed. I remember gath-

ering up our tools and my lunch pail and Gian Carlo's lunch pail and wondering if Lucrezia would keep it as a memento of him as she had kept Nicolo's. Lucrezia was a frugal woman, not given to wasting anything. She would make a good wife, whose thrift would allow a man to lay away a comfortable sum, but even these thoughts did not cheer me. I could still hear Gian Carlo screaming.

That evening I did not know if I would have the courage to face Lucrezia. I told myself she need never know; she would never even suspect. All had gone well afterward at the mine. No one had doubted my story that Gian Carlo had grown dizzy and then had slipped and fallen off the staging. No one would ever suspect that I had had a hand in Gian Carlo's death. My way to Lucrezia at last was without an obstacle. Only the most delicious happiness lay ahead of me. Thinking thus cheered me up a little, enough so that I could enter the house without flinching.

The other boarders had gone elsewhere to do their drinking and commiserating over Gian Carlo's unfortunate accident. Lucrezia had wanted to be alone. She heard me set the lunch pails down on the table and called to me from her room.

I found her lying fully clothed on her bed. She turned toward me a face from which the rose had fled. The dark eyes were haunted by a horror and sadness that had not been there when Nicolo had died, and this made me wonder how much she had loved Gian Carlo. A moment's doubt chilled me. What if she had loved him so much that she would never marry again? But that could not be. She was not one to carry a burden of sorrow and mourning forever.

I could not speak. I dropped to a knee beside the bed and pressed my face against the blankets and, after awhile, her hand came and stroked my head.

"Poveretto," she murmured. "Was it really so terrible, Annibale?"

I could not lift my head. I took her hand and kissed it and then held it tightly.

"Poveretto," she said again. "You have always loved me, have you not?" I started guiltily, but she made a soothing sound. "I have always known it and always wondered why you never spoke."

I was, finally, able to look at her. "Gian Carlo. I thought —" I could not go on.

She smiled sadly. "There are things about Gian Carlo

that I might speak of to you someday. He was gay, charming, good company, but I did not love him. Still, this has been a terrible shock to me. Was—was it as I heard them tell it? That he—Gian Carlo—?" She could not finish.

I nodded. "He became dizzy and—and before I could catch him, he fell." I shuddered, seeing it again in my mind.

"I do not feel well," she said. "Would you fetch me a glass of water?"

"You are so pale. Perhaps a glass of wine will go better, don't you think?"

She smiled a sweet smile at me and my heart leaped. "As you wish, Annibale."

The wine pitcher was empty and I was about to go to the barn where the wine barrels were hidden, when I remembered the wine she had always placed in Gian Carlo's lunch pail. I poured a glass of this and took it to her and she smiled sweetly at me again and drank the whole glass. In a few moments the rose began to return to her cheeks.

We spoke of many things then, chattering happily as sweethearts will. She told me of her days in her village on the Tiber and I told her of my boyhood in Velo d'Astico. Time flew as it never had for me. Then all at once she grew silent and pressed a hand against her throat and then against her stomach. Her eyes grew wide as she stared at me.

"The wine," she whispered. "I have just remembered. I emptied the pitcher this morning. Which wine did you give me?"

"I do not mean to upset you," I said humbly. "There is no sense in wasting it. I did not think you would mind."

"Insensato!" she shouted, sitting up on the bed. "Idiot! What wine? Tell me!"

"The wine in Gian Carlo's pail."

Her shriek shook the rafters. *"Stupido!* I am poisoned!"

A horror, greater than that when Gian Carlo was falling, swept over me. "Poisoned?" I echoed. "How?"

"The wine, the wine!" she shouted, the words tumbling out one upon the other in frenzied hurry. "I meant it for Gian Carlo. I meant for him to get sick and fall to his death and no one then would think it to be poison. But you—you have poisoned me instead."

"But why poison Gian Carlo?" I asked, paralyzed and numb with fright and horror.

"He knew what I did to Nicolo that night, how I stripped him and opened the window while he lay drunk on our bed. That was how he got the pneumonia that killed him. Gian Carlo threatened to tell the police if I did not pay him money, but no matter how much I paid, he always wanted more. So I decided to get him drunk last night, so he would be good and sick and weak today and, together with the poison, would surely fall to his death. All so carefully planned and now you have poisoned me." A spasm of pain doubled her. *"Madre di Cuore, Beati Santi!"* she shrieked. "Help, help me!"

I ran, panting, for the doctor, but it was hours before he could be found. When we finally arrived at the house, they would not let me see Lucrezia. Someone came and told me that she had accused me of poisoning her. I no longer cared. I sat on the wall of the *boccia balla* court with my head in my hands and I knew it was all over when the sheriff came to me and said:

"Annibale Lucca, I arrest you for the murder of Lucrezia . . ."

THE SILENT MINORITY

Alfred Hitchcock isn't one for politics—but he does feel there is a group of citizens who go unrecognized by the media. True, they prefer it that way. In fact, the last thing they want is publicity. Nevertheless, Alfie has dedicated his life to making known the special talents of these modest murderers and quiet killers—and he's hit a new high in such tales by today's masters of macabre mystery and spine tingling suspense.

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