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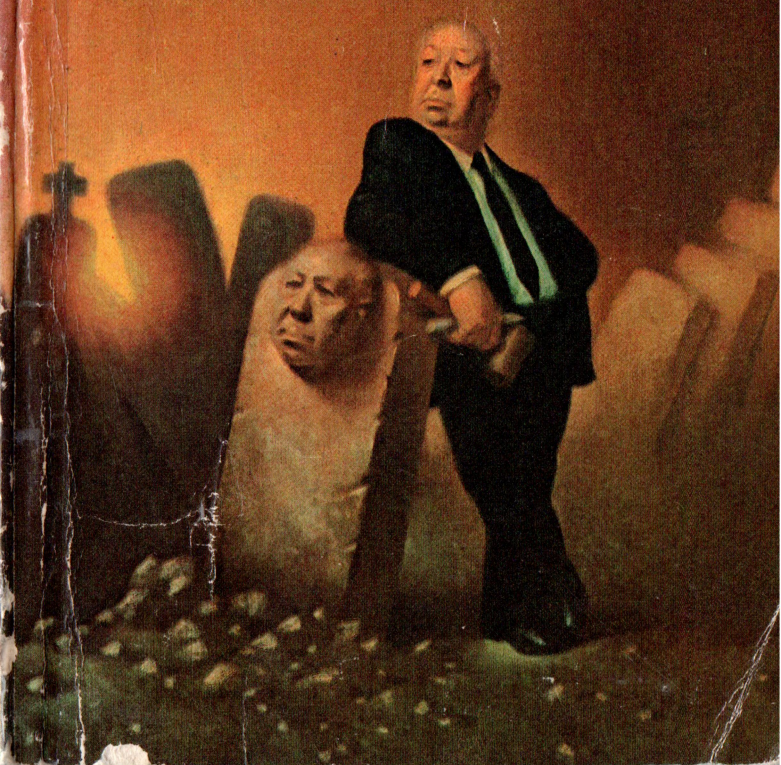

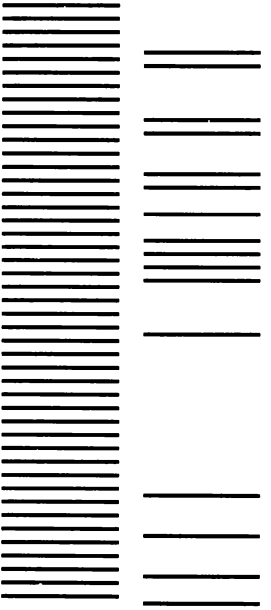

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Unidentified Voice: Thank you, Mr. Hitchcock. I have these awful dreams that somebody is killing me.

Voice of A.H.: And what does this person look like?

U.V.: I hate to say this. I mean, it sounds so silly. Mr. Hitchcock, he looks just like you. . . .

Voice of A. H.: And how does he perform the act? Perhaps like this . . . ?

U.V. . . . (Alfred Hitchcock regretfully reports that the rest of this tape was accidentally erased.)

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GRAVE BUSINESS

Grave Business

Alfred Hitchcock, Editor

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Published by
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1 Dag Hammarskjold Plaza
New York, New York 10017

Printed in the United States of America

First printing—February 1975

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION by Alfred Hitchcock 9
THE RICH GET RICHER by Douglas Farr 13
JUST ABOUT AVERAGE by William Brittain 26
BETWEEN 4 AND 12 by Jack Ritchie 32
THE GIRL IN GOLD (Novelette) by Jonathan Craig 44
THE EXTRA WATCH by Frank Sisk 75
A FAMILIAR VICTORY by Elijah Ellis 86
JURY OF ONE by Talmage Powell 97
THE COMMON FACTOR (Novelette) by Richard Deming 104
A TURN TO THE RIGHT by James Holding 129
TO GAIN AN INCH by Richard Hardwick 139
THE MASTER'S TOUCH by Helen Nielsen 148
HIS BROTHER BAXTER by Theodore Mathieson 163
A KILLER IN THE DARK by Robert Edmond Alter 170
AN IMPORTANT KILL by Robert Colby 186

INTRODUCTION

by Alfred Hitchcock

ON A RECENT flight, I was drawn into a conversation with a young man in the next seat that proved to be both disturbing and enlightening. What began the discussion was the young man's woebegone expression. He had the look of one who had just bitten into an overly mature oyster. Thinking that he was air sick, I asked him if he wanted me to summon a stewardess.

He replied in the negative, then explained his downcast countenance. The young man was a candidate for a doctorate in psychology. Only a final paper stood between him and the coveted degree. He had discovered while looking for a subject to write on, however, that every possible facet of the American character had already been researched and written up.

"From 'A' for anecdote-worship, practiced by biographers of the famous, through 'O', for orgasms, and on to 'Z,' for zodiac-rejection, which is looking up your horoscope every day just so you can say you don't believe in that stuff, it's all been done," he told me.

Needless to say, I was skeptical. I was familiar, of course, with the Masters and Johnson studies, which focused on the 'O.' And I was told once by a young lady at a cocktail party that I was using body language when I inadvertently bumped her from behind while she was nibbling a pimento from a martini olive (she did not immediately vol-

unteer what she thought I was saying and I did not linger to pursue the subject). Too, I had a vague impression of having heard or read about a number of other probings into human behavior. That all opportunities for further examinations had become exhausted, though, struck me as highly unlikely.

Being naturally helpful, I began suggesting possibilities. "I've noticed," I said, "that Americans who chew their fingernails tend to chew the right-hand nails from left to right and the left-hand nails from right to left. There might not be a whole book in that, but a paper, surely."

He shook his head. "There *is* a whole book on it," he advised me. "*Conscious and Unconscious Directional Signals Exhibited by Americans, Puberty through Expiration.* By Hartley L. Grant, University of Alaska Press. Pre-puberty signals are covered in the sequel."

Only mildly daunted, I suggested next that there might be something worth studying in the fact that male Americans usually cross their legs at the ankles, while female Americans cross theirs at the knees. He informed me that the matter had been thoroughly covered in a paper titled *American Legs: Are They At Cross Purposes?*

"It's hopeless," he said. "Buzz the stewardess and we'll have a last hemlock together. I'm buying."

I had no intention of giving up that easily.

"There's an idiosyncracy of mine that I occasionally find mirrored in certain Americans," I told him. "I sneeze in threes. Never once. Never twice. Always thrice. Sneeze. Pause. Sneeze. Pause. Sneeze. I've always considered it rather fascinating. If you'd care to interview on it now . . . or if you'll come around the next time there's pepper in the air—"

"Been done," he informed me. "*The Sneeze—*

Origin, Patterns And Potential. By V. M. Porkni. The chapters on potential are especially interesting. Porkni proposed harnessing the sneeze as a source of energy. But before he even got it off the drawing board along came the steam engine."

I plunged on. "Americans butter their toast," I said. "Not all peoples do."

"The Buttered Toast Compulsion," he responded. "By Alexander Drybell. Published only last year in three installments in an underground newspaper called *Stagnant Pebble.* It's Drybell's contention that buttered toast stimulates the aggression glands. It's no coincidence, he claims, that on the day that Johnson sent bombers into North Vietnam he had buttered toast for breakfast."

"There's your subject!" I said triumphantly. "Aggression glands!"

"You're kidding. Drybell not only blamed aggression glands, he invented them. He announced the discovery in an earlier three-parter, *Why We Fill in Ant Hills,* also in *Stagnant Pebble.*"

I am, fortunately, a person who knows when he has been defeated. I buzzed the stewardess and ordered two hemlocks, straight up.

Happily, I can guarantee you that the stories in this volume have never been done before. They are originals, and the very best of their kind.

THE RICH GET RICHER

by Douglas Farr

ARTHUR STRAND was one of those individuals who go to prove the maxim that murderers aren't born, they're made—made by unfortuitous circumstances. Such as—as in Arthur Strand's case—the absolutely irresistible temptation of committing a simple act of murder that would transform him from a pauper into a genuine millionaire.

He was certainly a pauper to begin with. He came into town that spring day as a non-paying passenger on the New York Central Railroad, on one of their trains designed not for the transportation of people, but rather of livestock. He hopped off considerably short of the main yards, not wanting to encounter any of the railroad's personnel, and he walked the rest of the way. Tired, dusty, and unshaven, he had barely enough money when he arrived in town for a meal, a night's lodging at one of the cheapest hotels, and a shave the next morning. That next morning he went to see Sidney.

Sidney and Arthur Strand were cousins, sons of brothers. They hadn't seen each other for ten years, since shortly after the war. They'd been chummy then, but they'd parted because of differing ambitions. Sidney preferred the east and to make his way by use of his brain, while Arthur had notions of a better life in the wide open spaces of the west. Well, those wide open spaces

hadn't been too friendly, and now Arthur was back, a decade later, down on his luck, and wondering if Sidney's had been any better.

It had. Sidney lived in a penthouse. A uniformed doorman at the street entrance took one look at Arthur's shabby clothes and denied him admittance. Finally, however, a phone call upstairs established Arthur's identity. He was taken up in an elevator, and as the machine slid to a silent stop at the upper end of its route, the door opened, and there was Sidney.

One glance between the cousins told both of them the story. From his dusty Stetson to his frayed boots, and all up and down his lean, starved-looking frame, Arthur was the picture of failure. But Sidney's face was healthily pink and he had a double chin, and the silken sash that tied around his velvet smoking jacket also bound in a tidy little paunch. The hand he extended to grasp Arthur's hardened brown one was white and soft and well manicured.

"Arthur! What a pleasant surprise!"

"Howdy, Sidney."

With his cousin's arm around his shoulders, Arthur walked into a magnificence he'd never experienced before. His boots sank heel-deep into the lush carpets. His eyes were dazzled by the Oriental splendor of colors. His sense of touch was overwhelmed by the downy nothingness of the sofa onto which Sidney gently eased him.

"Well, well, it's been a long time, Arthur boy."

"A little over ten years."

"So how's it been going?"

"Not very good, Sidney. But I guess I don't need to ask you that question. I can just look around this place and see how you've made out. What's the secret?"

"Of my success? It's all up here, Arthur boy." Sidney tapped his forehead with a pudgy finger. "I

got two things, Arthur boy. Brains and instinct. I've been playing the greatest gambling game of all time, and I've had a real winning streak. The stock market, Arthur boy, the stock market, that's the secret."

For a moment Arthur Strand was puzzled. Where he'd just come from, stock meant beef on the hoof. But he sensed that Sidney wasn't referring to that kind of stock.

"You know anything about the market, Arthur boy?"

Arthur shook his head.

"It's pieces of paper, boy. Better 'n money. Shares in America. America's on its way, headed for a golden future. I got shares in the future, boy. Only you got to know which and when to buy, and which and when to sell. And I know. Got a little crystal ball right up here." The finger to the forehead again. "When I sell, the stuff goes down. When I buy, it goes up. Understand?"

Arthur nodded, although he really didn't understand. All he knew in those first few moments was that he was poor and Sidney was rich. And his first reaction to that realization was that there was a terrible injustice in it somewhere.

Arthur didn't move into the apartment to live with his cousin. They weren't that compatible, and so close an arrangement wouldn't have suited either of them. But Arthur stayed in town, in the cheapest hotel he could find, and existed completely on Sidney's dole.

In that way too Arthur served a function and somewhat earned his keep. Once or twice a week he'd go up to the penthouse, and hang around till the appropriate moment arrived. The appropriate moment was always when Sidney had an audience, one of his lawyers or brokers or business associates, or at least his house boy.

For Sidney liked his charity to be noticed by more than the recipient. He'd whip out the fat roll of bills he always had in his pocket and peel one off, a five or a ten or a twenty, depending on the occasion and the frequency of Arthur's visits. "You're looking thin, cousin," he'd say, "go blow this on a steak dinner." Or, "Buy yourself a new suit, Arthur boy, you're coming out at the elbows." Or, "Cowboy, get yourself a haircut or a violin, you sure need one or the other."

Arthur would join dutifully in the laugh, if there was supposed to be one. And always, always, he looked and sounded humbly grateful, and then very quickly, having furnished the audience with a vivid example of Sidney's generosity, he'd depart back to his own world.

Perhaps he should have been really grateful for being kept alive on Sidney's money. Because he knew no trade, had no skill that could have merited him a job in the big town. So he had nothing or no one but Sidney. But Sidney's way of helping him galled Arthur like a sandburr. Arthur had a pride that matched his poverty. He didn't want charity. He wanted to put things on a business basis.

He brought up the subject one day when he caught Sidney alone, when there was no audience for the bill peeled off the fat roll. "Sidney," he began, "I never made good out west because I never had any capital. But I got know-how, Sidney. I know cattle-raising like you know your business. I ain't asking a hand-out though. I was thinking of a partnership. In a ranch, I mean. You put in the money, and I put in the know-how and the work. We could do all right."

Sidney rolled a fat black cigar on his tongue, then lit it. But he remained noncommittal.

"Not a big spread," Arthur went on. "Just a middle-sized one. Wouldn't take too much."

"How much?" Sidney asked warily.

"Well, to get enough acres, and breeding stock, and a bit of equipment, maybe twenty thousand."

"Twenty thousand!" Sidney exploded. "That's a lot of money."

"Not for you it ain't, Sidney."

"Listen, Arthur boy, sit down and let me explain to you." They sat on the air-cushioned sofa. "Let me tell you how I run my business. I don't operate strictly on cash. I buy on margin, part my money, part borrowed money, that is. That way I can deal bigger. But I've got to have plenty of money of my own too, don't you see? Look, I put twenty thousand in your ranch. How much can I make?"

Arthur tried to make it sound good. "I could make you three or four thousand a year, Sidney."

"Three or four thousand? That's chicken feed. The way I wheel and deal, Arthur boy, my twenty thousand might make me a hundred thousand in a month's time. So you see how it is, pal? The more money I have, the more I can make. I can't afford to tie up my capital in a slow-moving business like a ranch."

Arthur saw how it was. He wasn't going to get the money.

"But I'll tell you what I'm going to do, Arthur boy. I'm going to give you something to look forward to. We've got no other relatives. So I'm going to make you the beneficiary of my will. When I die, you can take my money and buy yourself the state of Montana. Texas maybe."

It was the kind of grandstand play that Sidney liked to make, cheap but theatrical. The lawyers were called in the very next day, and the whole thing was made legal. It took several big sheets of paper to record it properly.

"Why, right now, Arthur boy, I'm worth over half a million. And I've barely gotten started."

Arthur took that figure home with him, along with twenty dollars in cash. And for a long time he nursed the figure. Half a million. The land he wanted could be had for ten to twelve dollars an acre. That meant he could acquire a forty to fifty thousand acre ranch!

Arthur could just picture it. He saw himself riding on a fine horse in the middle of it, shading his eyes from the hot western sun and looking out at the land, his own land as far as he could see in every direction.

But Sidney was only forty years old and very healthy.

Arthur Strand really didn't get the idea for murdering his cousin, till the means of accomplishing the deed presented itself.

Calling at the penthouse one day, he found Sidney absent and decided to wait. He wandered out onto the terrace and leaned against the iron railing to enjoy the summer sunshine and the view of the city beneath him.

That was the moment when he received one of the greatest frights of his life. The railing gave under his weight. Not a lot, not more than an inch. But enough to startle him, to make him almost lose his balance. And then, realizing that his subconscious mind had been imagining he was going to fall, he felt the sweat pop out on his face—a cold sweat despite the warm sun.

Actually, he hadn't been close to falling, he corrected himself a minute later. As he bent to examine the railing, he saw that a bolt had rusted out, but the section of railing it held together was still very much intact. It was something that ought to be fixed, but would probably hold even if a dozen people were to lean against it.

Or would it?

Murder can be so simple sometimes. Arthur

Strand was no great intellect. He could not have devised any complicated plan of murder even if he had tried. But he saw the possibilities of the railing immediately.

Sidney was soft and fat from good living. He was no physical match for Arthur. He could be pushed through or over the railing, and then afterwards, the railing could be mangled a bit, bending or disengaging the rusty bolt, and the fall could be made to seem an accident.

As Sidney's heir, however, Arthur would be suspected. But if, for instance, on a Tuesday—any Tuesday, for it was the houseboy's day off—he should come up to the penthouse by the back stairs, avoiding the elevator, and find Sidney alone—why, he could push him overboard without anybody knowing he'd been visiting his cousin at all. So all he had to do was to wait for the right Tuesday.

In fact, he could begin by trying tomorrow.

He sat down for a moment, staring at the iron railing. The sun was warm, and up here, fifteen stories in the sky, the air was clean and fresh. Almost like out west . . .

His mind wandered pleasantly. He was in the saddle, and the horse moved under him with an almost hypnotic rhythm. His lungs were full of the good air. And all around him were his vast acres, rolling seas of green, stretching for miles ahead, up to the purple ridges. Forty or fifty thousand acres!

"Hey, cowboy!"

He turned, rudely startled from his dream, and saw Sidney standing there. Sidney, smiling and rich, fat and defenseless. He was rubbing his pudgy hands together, like a miser gloating over his gold.

"Arthur boy, I'm running in luck."

"How so, cousin?"

"I've got my corner on Consolidated Copper now. And I'm just beginning to turn the screws. Know what I mean?"

Arthur shook his head.

"I've got practically all the stock of this company in my control. Copper ore prices are going up, and Consolidated has just made a new strike. Now some of the big boys that I bought from want back in. So I'm maneuvering the price up. Up a little every day, as long as the interest holds. When I get to what I feel the top ought to be, I unload, and the bottom drops out then for all I care."

"You mean you're making money, Sidney?"

"Hand over fist, boy. But it's a ticklish business. Got to have the knack like I have. Got to watch it every minute."

"It needs your personal attention, huh, Sidney?"

"You bet. I'm up against a bunch of cutthroats on this deal. But if things go all right, boy, in a couple of weeks I'm going to double my money."

"You mean you'll be worth a whole million then, Sidney?"

"You bet I will, Arthur boy!"

Eighty or a hundred thousand acres!

Arthur Strand liked the wide open spaces, and the wider the better. So he didn't even try to push Sidney over the railing that Tuesday. He could well afford to wait. As he had decided, any Tuesday would do.

As the summer wore on, Sidney's luck continued to be fantastically good. His fortune grew, and as it did, so did his cousin Arthur's ranch.

Consolidated Copper worked out exactly as planned. When Sidney cashed in, he was easily a millionaire. But before another Tuesday could roll around, he was up to his pockets in Zenith Zinc.

Sidney plunged heavily, as he explained to Arthur, with his own and a mountain of borrowed money. He'd had a tip and he played a hunch. In three weeks he'd doubled his money again.

Two million! Two hundred thousand acres!

Arthur's dreams were as big as Sidney's now. He had no real idea how much two hundred thousand acres really was. He tried to translate it into square miles, but got bogged down in the arithmetic. But he knew it was big. He knew he could get on a horse in the morning at one end of it, ride all day, and still be inside his own land.

On a Tuesday in July, he visited Sidney and found his cousin all alone. Sidney was at his desk, scribbling figures on big sheets of paper.

"Making money today, Sidney?" he asked.

"Make money every day," Sidney answered.

"Do you ever get tired of making money, Sidney? After all, you've got two million dollars now. Isn't that enough?"

"A man never gets enough. You'd like to have a ranch, you said, Arthur boy. How big?"

"Gosh, I don't know. The bigger the better."

"Right, Arthur boy, go to the head of the class. The bigger the better, that's what I always say. Why should I quit when I'm winning? If the day ever comes when my luck turns, that's the day I'll quit."

That was definite enough for Arthur. As long as Sidney was making money, why stop him? Why not wait till he'd made all he could? Why not wait till the goose had no more golden eggs to lay?

So Arthur delayed again. He was the heir to a fortune that he could claim almost any Tuesday he pleased to. But he stayed, like a miser, in his cheap hotel, wearing cheap clothes, and eating cheap meals, while the money piled up and the acres expanded.

The M and M Railroad . . . Matchless Steel

Corporation . . . August . . . mergers . . . amalgamations . . . stock splits . . . special dividends . . . The Anchor Line . . . Western Telephone . . . Trans-Texas Oil . . . September . . . brokers . . . margins . . .

But on that Tuesday in late October, all events conspired toward the fatal end. First of all, Arthur Strand went to a mid-morning movie, and the movie was a western. Watching the horses, the men in the wide-brimmed hats, the herds of cattle, the sagebrush and the cactus, Arthur became homesick.

Already half decided, he went to Sidney's apartment building, raced all the way up the back stairs without being seen, then found his cousin at home and alone.

But changed. Subtly but profoundly changed. And not for the better. "I suppose you want another hand-out," Sidney snarled the moment his poor relative walked in. "What do you think I am, made of money?"

Sidney had thrown aside his velvet smoking jacket, but the warmth of the afternoon might explain that. But it didn't explain his morose expression, the furtive glint in his eye, the palsied trembling in his hand, or the empty whiskey bottle and the full ashtray on the table.

"What's the matter, Sidney?" Arthur asked with real concern.

"I don't know. I don't know." Sidney paced with remarkable speed for such a fat man. "I just don't know. Maybe my luck's run out."

"You losing money?" Arthur had a horrible vision of a few thousand acres slipping out of his control.

"Not exactly," Sidney answered. "It's just that . . . well, you wouldn't understand, Arthur." Sidney paused in his frenzied pacing, and passed

an already wet handkerchief over his sweating face.

Arthur made his suggestion as calmly and naturally as if it were an innocent one. "Why don't we go out on the terrace, Sidney? You could use a breath of fresh air."

Sidney allowed himself to be half led, half pushed outside into the sunshine. They went all the way to the railing, then stood there looking out over the city.

"We're high up here," Sidney remarked.

"Yep."

"And I'm high up. Right today I must be worth ten million bucks."

A million acres!

"But I've got the feeling that this is as rich as I'm ever going to get."

But a million acres was enough.

"It's a funny feeling, Arthur. Like my life is over."

I'll be doing him a favor, Arthur thought. He'd be unhappy if he had to go on living. This charitable point-of-view gave Arthur the courage to do what he had to do.

Sidney wasn't looking, wasn't paying any attention to his companion. He was immersed in his own bleak thoughts. Arthur took one step backwards, paused, calculated his distance and his target. Then he lunged forward, palms outthrust in front of him.

The blow took Sidney at the shoulders. The railing, catching him at the waist, seemed almost to hold him back for a moment. But then the metal bent a little, like a spring. Sidney went over head first, and disappeared from view.

Arthur heard no noise, not even the scream he'd expected. When that failed, he listened for the thud. It seemed that he waited a long time, but it never came. And the lack of it unnerved

him. The body must have hit the sidewalk by this time, but he didn't dare to try to lean over to see. People would be gathering around it, would be looking up to see where it had come from. He considered the railing instead. It seemed slightly bent, he thought. Ought to be enough. No need to mangle it. Might look too suspicious. He was suddenly in a hurry to get out of the building now.

But on his way through the living room, the phone rang. It was another unexpected development, and in the business of murder Arthur was not skillful at improvisation. Should he answer the phone or shouldn't he? Finally he picked up the receiver, but then he didn't say anything because he remembered that his voice wouldn't sound much like Sidney's.

"Hello . . . hello . . . is that you, Sidney?"

Arthur muttered something. And paralyzed with fright now, he listened, realizing he had made a mistake.

"Sidney, Trans-Texas is going down again. All the way this time. It's a real break, Sidney. American Alloy is going with it. The whole market, Sidney. What'll I do? Can you put up more margin? You got to tell me what to do, Sidney. Maybe you can figure a way out of this. We need you, Sidney boy, we need you . . ."

Panic-stricken, Arthur let the receiver drop, and then dangle from its cord. Distantly the words still came to him. "Sidney boy, you gotta do something. You . . ."

Arthur bolted. But he remembered one thing. He must not be seen in the building. He raced down the back stairs, and out through the rear door. Nobody did see him, because they were all around in front, looking at the body.

In the strict, technical sense, Arthur Strand was never punished for his crime. Sidney's death wasn't ruled an accident as Arthur had planned,

but rather a suicide. The next morning's paper explained everything to Arthur, though it took him years and a certain historical perspective to appreciate it.

"Financier in Suicide Leap," the smaller headline said, referring to the death of Sidney Strand.

"Stock Market Crashes," the larger, blacker headline read. The date, of course, was Wednesday, October 30, 1929.

Tuesday the 29th hadn't been a lucky day to murder a man who played the market on margin. So, needless to say, although he was never punished for his crime, Arthur never profited from it either.

JUST ABOUT AVERAGE

by William Brittain

"I DON'T CARE how long you've been sheriff, you should have checked into it further, asked a few more questions."

Captain Horace Cavanagh of the state highway patrol shot an angry glance at the man seated beside him in the patrol car and then rapidly twisted the wheel to avoid a cow which was grazing at the edge of the road. Andy Bleekerman didn't look much like a county sheriff, that was for sure. His faded plaid shirt had sweat stains spotting the back and underneath the arms, and there were bits of grass and hayseed caught in the cuffs of his wrinkled pants. Hayseed, that was it. Bleekerman looked like a hayseed.

On the Vogler robbery, he'd acted like a hayseed, too. It was time the old gaffer either learned the way real policemen operated or was put out to pasture to make room for a younger man.

"What's worrying you, Horace?" asked Bleekerman in a cracked voice. "You got the man what done it, didn't you?"

"From here on, you call me Captain Cavanagh," was the tight-lipped reply. "Yeah, we got the man. One of my boys spotted the car about an hour ago. We brought the driver to the barracks. The man still had the three hundred dollars. He even had that bill Heinrich Vogler mentioned that had been mended with adhesive tape."

"Well, then, what's the trouble? I got the license number of the car from Vogler, didn't I? And told you about the mended bill? Three hours from crime to capture ain't bad in any league."

"Yeah, sure, but . . ." Cavanagh shook his head in exasperation. "Look, Andy," he said, "suppose the car had slipped by us. Or what if the man had left it somewhere and continued on foot? Then we'd have had to rely on the suspect's description, right?"

"I guess so," replied Bleekerman.

"So what kind of a description did you get out of this Vogler guy?" Cavanagh picked up a typed form from the seat beside him. "Height, average," he droned, glancing from the paper to the narrow road which wound through fields of yellow wheat and high, green corn. "Weight, about average. Hair color, average. Distinguishing marks or characteristics, none."

Cavanagh pulled the car to the side of the road, braked to a stop, and cut the ignition. Twisting his six-foot-two-inch, two-hundred-fifteen-pound body in the seat, he thrust the paper at Bleekerman. "Read it yourself," he ordered. "It's your report."

"Horace . . . Captain Cavanagh . . . I gave you that description, along with the car's license number, just the way Heinrich Vogler gave it to me. Them was my orders from the time I took over this job."

"Look, Andy . . ." Cavanagh shook his head in exasperation. "I told you about Durwald, the man we brought in." He snapped out the phrases as if he were cracking a whip. "Six-feet-five inches tall, weight, two hundred seventy-seven pounds, with a belly on him like there was a basketball under his shirt. He looked like a mountain standing there in front of my desk. And to top it all off, he had a full beard that hung halfway down to his

belt. Average? Hell, Andy, there can't be more than a dozen guys like that in the world."

"I just passed on to you what Vogler said," replied Bleekerman.

"Yeah, and that's why we're going back to see him, which you should have done yourself. There's something fishy about this, I mean, with a guy who looks as odd as Durwald, why would Vogler tell you he was average?"

Bleekerman considered the question in silence while Cavanagh started the car and pulled out onto the road. "Horace?" he said finally.

"I told you to call me . . . Yeah, what is it?"

"If you want to bawl me out for not questioning Vogler closely enough, that's okay. I guess I've got it coming. But I wouldn't lean on Heinrich Vogler too much. Or his brother Adolph, either."

"His brother? I didn't know he had a brother."

"Yeah, Adolph and Heinrich are twins. Live way out near Gurley's Hollow, they do—just the two of 'em. They run their farm and mind their own business. They don't see too many outsiders, especially the police."

"Just the same, they called you in, didn't they? To find the money they said was stolen?"

"Yep. First time I seen either one of 'em in five years. They're not much for socializing. They stick pretty much to themselves. Why, the mailman had been on the route for seven months before he caught sight of either of 'em. Then it was just at a distance. Adolph was up on the barn roof, puttin' on new shingles."

"So? What's that got to do with this phony 'average' description?"

"Well, you see, Heinrich and Adolph are odd, but in some ways they're like a lot of the people around here. They pay their bills and mind their own business, and they're not used to having their word questioned, even by the police. Zipping

around in these fancy cars on the main roads, you don't get to know people like I do."

"If the Voglers want to be hermits and stay on that farm till they rot, I don't care," barked Cavanagh. "But when it comes to reporting a robbery—when they saw the man who did it—and then come up with a description like the one you got, it *is* my business. Especially since you can't seem to do a proper job of questioning."

Bleekerman shrugged. "Their place is about two miles down that dirt road up ahead," he said. "It's the only house on it."

Ten minutes later the police car bumped its way into the Vogler barnyard. Cavanagh wondered if he'd broken a spring in one of the potholes the car had lurched through on the dirt road.

"That leads to the basement of the barn where the cabbage bins are," said Bleekerman, getting out and nodding toward a weathered wooden door let into the foundation of the towering red building. "Either Adolph or Heinrich ought to be in there, or else upstairs in the hayloft."

The two men entered the barn, sliding the door closed behind them. The smell of earth and rotting cabbage leaves hung heavily in the air. From over their heads they could hear the sound of footsteps.

"Heinrich, is that you?" called out Bleekerman.

"Ja, is me," answered a heavily accented voice. "Vat you do back here already, Mr. Bleekerman?"

"I brought Captain Cavanagh with me. He's with the highway patrol," said Bleekerman in a loud voice. "He caught the man who took your money. He'd like to talk to you."

"Money is back? Goodt. Right now I feed the horses. Be down after. You wait."

"Sociable cuss, isn't he?" said Cavanagh in a low voice.

"Like I said, he's not used to visitors."

"Yeah." Cavanagh cupped his hands around his mouth. "Mr. Vogler!" he called out.

"Ja?" came the voice from above.

"You were out here in the barn and saw the burglar leave your house, get into his car, and drive away. Is that right?"

"Is so. Adolph was out with hay-rake. Like now."

"I see. Did you get a good look at him?"

"Very goodt. I got fine eyes for seeing, Mr. Captain." The swishing of hay being forked came to Cavanagh's ears.

"I think you've got some explaining to do," continued Cavanagh.

"Explain? What explain?"

"Well, you see, Mr. Vogler, the man we caught, the man you said stole the money from the kitchen cupboard while you were out here, looked kind of unusual to me."

The clomping footsteps were heard again, and there was the sound of a door latch rattling at the top of the rough stairs at the end of the barn.

"Mr. Vogler, the man we caught was pretty big. He was a lot taller than I am, and I'm over six feet. Besides that, he was awful fat."

Hinges squealed as the door at the top of the stairs opened.

"There's one thing more," Cavanagh went on. "The man had a full beard. Not many men have full beards nowadays, Mr. Vogler, and I was wondering under the circumstances just how you could call him . . ."

Cavanagh's voice faded into silence as he contemplated the man descending the stairs. Heinrich Vogler, reaching the bottom, turned and walked toward the policeman, his head almost brushing the thick beams of the barn. The farmer looked down at Cavanagh from a height that was

eight inches over six feet. His huge belly shook as he brushed the chaff from his magnificent beard.

"Ja," Vogler said slowly. "The man looked like the way I tell it to Mr. Bleekerman here. Choost about average."

BETWEEN 4 AND 12

by Jack Ritchie

FIFTY yards ahead, the traffic light switched to caution yellow. Fred Martin eased his car to a stop just as the red appeared.

He had to be careful now. This was no time for an accident. Not even an insignificant one.

It wasn't that Martin had any fears that Beatrice's body in the trunk of the car might be discovered. He knew that even in the event of a small accident, there would be no reason for anyone to pry back there.

If the police appeared, they would merely try to determine the cause and responsibility for the accident. Probably they would also check the drivers to find out if either or both of them had been drinking.

And Martin was stone cold sober. At least now he was.

He waited patiently for the green light and then moved forward.

No. An accident in itself was nothing to worry about. But his license number would be taken and Martin couldn't have that done. Not at this particular hour of the night.

He kept his car well within the twenty-five mile speed limit on Capitol. As he approached Seventh, he edged carefully into the left lane, flicked on his turn signal, and swung onto Highway 32.

The traffic was light at seven-thirty that evening and the three-quarter moon made a cool path

of the highway. Whenever he met an on-coming car, Martin dimmed his lights.

He would get to the patch of woods in fifteen minutes. It was off on a side road and everything was ready. He had dug the shallow grave Sunday evening, and it was waiting for Beatrice.

Her disappearance would, naturally, cause some suspicion on the part of the police. After all, it was their job to be suspicious. But in the end they would be forced to come to the conclusion that she had simply packed up and left him.

Martin could imagine his conversation with the police. It would occur at around ten in the morning. Just about an hour after Martin got out of jail.

He would undoubtedly be suffering from a hangover and he would be drinking black coffee. "When I came home this morning," he would say, "I noticed that Beatrice's bed hadn't been slept in."

The sergeant would think that over. "Couldn't she have already made the bed and gone out shopping, or something like that?"

Martin would hesitate. "Well, Beatrice usually sleeps rather late. Until noon or one o'clock."

The sergeant would form an opinion on Beatrice. He might, too, be irked because Martin had bothered the police so soon. "You called us right away?"

"About five minutes after I saw she wasn't home. I thought that perhaps Beatrice might have spent the night at her sister's home. She sometimes does that. But her sister said she hadn't seen Beatrice in two days."

"Did you phone anyone else?"

"No. Beatrice has very few friends. Actually none that I know of. I thought of calling the hospitals, but there are so many in the phone book, I thought it might be better if I phoned the police.

They would be likely to know if there had been an accident."

The sergeant would look at his notes again. "You came home at approximately nine-thirty this morning? You work nights?"

"No. I work from four in the afternoon until midnight." Martin would appear reluctant to go on, but then he would blurt out the truth. "I was in jail until just an hour ago."

The sergeant might raise an eyebrow.

Martin would explain. "After I left the factory, just past midnight, I stopped in at a tavern in the neighborhood."

The sergeant would prod. "Yes?"

"I'm afraid I had a little too much to drink. I drove into a parked car a few doors away when I left." Martin would allow himself to become mildly indignant. "I've never had an accident before in my life. I've never even had a parking ticket. But when the police came, they took me to jail. I was released on bail at nine this morning."

Very likely the sergeant's voice would be dry. "In this city we jail drunken drivers for the night. It keeps them off the streets until they sober up."

That was something Martin knew—and had planned on. But he would appear to be properly abashed.

The sergeant would ask permission to examine the bedroom. He would notice the twin beds and he would look into the half-empty closet.

Martin's mouth would drop slightly. "Almost all of her clothes are gone!"

And they would also discover that two suitcases, the good ones, were missing too.

The sergeant would ask, "What was your wife wearing the last time you saw her?"

Martin would think back. "I'm afraid I can't help you much on that. She was still in her dress-

ing robe when I left at quarter after three yesterday afternoon."

"Did you and your wife have any . . . domestic difficulties?"

Martin would be happy to tell the truth about that. It would supply the motive for her disappearance. However, he would appear to speak reluctantly. "A few. But I think we got along as well as anyone else until . . ." He would stop as though struck by a doubtful thought.

"Until?"

"Well, about six months ago there was a superintendency open in the shop. I thought, and so did Beatrice, that in view of my seniority and work record . . . I'm afraid that we both counted on it too much. It would have meant quite a raise in pay for me."

"She was bitter about it?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Did she blame you? Or the shop?"

Martin would say nothing, but the sergeant could easily draw his conclusion.

Martin remembered his own dark disappointment when he had been passed over. The personnel manager must have felt some guilt about it, because he took the trouble to take Martin aside and explain why it had happened.

The superintendency required a man with more aggression, a man who could give orders, make decisions. Martin's work record was excellent, but still . . .

The personnel manager had laughed self-consciously. "You're sort of colorless, Martin. You fade into the wallpaper. Nobody knows you're around at all."

He hoped that Martin understood and had no hard feelings.

Now Martin reduced his speed and turned onto

the gravel side road. He drove half a mile more and parked in the shadows of birch and pines.

He had some difficulty removing Beatrice's body from the trunk and carrying it the hundred feet to the open grave.

He went back to the car for the shovel and the two suitcases.

Beatrice had died an easy death.

It was something she didn't deserve, Martin reflected, but he hadn't wanted any kind of a mess.

He had accumulated the sleeping pills, one by one, from the bottle Beatrice kept in the medicine cabinet. It had taken some time, but he had wanted to be positive that he had enough to do the job thoroughly.

This morning he had dissolved all of them in the fifth of brandy Beatrice stored in the refrigerator.

It had been a quarter to three in the afternoon when she had filled her glass and added a touch of soda. It was always around that time when she started drinking.

He had been in the kitchen making sandwiches and packing them into his lunch pail and he had been almost unable to suppress his feeling of elation as she took the first sip.

When he had left for the shop a half an hour later, she had been refilling her glass.

Martin replaced the bushes and patted the earth carefully around them. In the moonlight he surveyed the job he had done and could find no fault with it.

Beatrice and the two suitcases were gone forever.

He cleaned the shovel thoroughly and walked back to the car. He turned on the ignition and started the motor.

They had been married ten years and each year had been an eternity of bullying and badgering.

But Martin had always felt a sense of duty toward the marriage and an unwillingness to admit to himself that things would never improve.

He had never even mentioned divorce until after that superintendency thing. When that had fallen through, Beatrice had become more vicious than ever.

As far as Martin was concerned, it had marked the end of their marriage. But the mention of divorce had brought an unalterable stubbornness into her eyes. Perhaps she realized that she could never find another man who would tolerate her tongue, her laziness, her drinking.

At the arterial sign, Martin came to a full stop, and then turned back on Highway 32.

The sergeant would no doubt be thorough. After he discovered that Beatrice was not in a hospital, he would have to ask delicate questions.

"Mr. Martin, was your wife insured?"

Martin would shake his head. "No. She didn't believe in insurance on herself. But I have two policies on my life worth fifteen thousand."

The sergeant would put 'No insurance' on his pad. "You say you were working from four until midnight?"

"Yes." Martin would choose his words. "But I usually leave home at about quarter after three. The drive to the plant is only a half an hour, but I don't like to take the chance of being late and getting locked out of the parking lot."

The sergeant would want to know more about that. "Locked out of the parking lot?"

"Yes. The company parking lot. It's an area of about two square blocks and enclosed by an eight foot fence. You see, several years ago some cars were stolen from the lot while the men were working. So the company enclosed the entire area. The gates are locked ten or fifteen minutes after the shift goes on."

"And if you get to the plant later than that?"

"You're out of luck. You have to find off-the-street parking in the neighborhood."

It might not happen then, but eventually the sergeant would probe the subject further. "How many gates are there?"

"Two. One on the north end of the lot and one on the south. Each has an exit and an entrance lane."

"Your car was inside the lot from approximately four to midnight?"

"Of course, I was working."

The sergeant would be casual. "Would any of the attendants remember that you parked your car inside the lot, rather than on the street?"

Martin would think about it. "I always come in the south gate. That's Joe Byrnes. Yes, I think he would remember. He knows me fairly well."

And Joe Byrnes should remember. When you stop at the entrance to repay a five dollar loan, the man should remember.

"Suppose, for some reason, you had to leave before your shift ended. For example, if you became ill and had to go home. How would you get out?"

"You'd just go to one of the gates and see the attendant. You'd identify yourself and he would take your name and license number. Then he'd let you out." Martin would laugh slightly. "I guess that's to prevent somebody from climbing over the fence and stealing a car. They want to make sure you really own it."

"Is there always an attendant at the gates?"

Martin would nod. "Yes."

But that wasn't really true. Joe Byrnes was supposed to be there, but Martin knew that after the gates were locked, Joe always wandered over to Ed Parker's north gate to kill most of the evening.

Joe figured that anybody who wanted to get out before the shift was over would use the north gate

anyway. It was more convenient and closer to the plant.

But Joe would never admit to the sergeant that he hadn't been at his gate all the time. And Ed Parker would say nothing either, because they both knew that Joe could get fired if that came out.

When Martin had come to work that afternoon, he had parked his car close to the south gate. At seven he had slipped out of the factory, made sure that Joe and Ed were in the north shack, and then gone back to his car.

He had quietly unlocked the south gate, eased his car through, and then locked the gate behind him.

The sergeant might ask, "Does anybody besides the attendant have keys to the gates?"

"I don't really know."

"No duplicates?"

Martin would shrug. "I suppose so. They would be locked up somewhere, I imagine."

But Joe Byrnes was careless about such things. Martin had dropped in to see him often enough to know that. And when Martin had discovered how simple it was to steal a duplicate, he had formed his entire plan to get rid of Beatrice.

He had had the key for more than three months now and as far as he knew, Joe had never missed it. Nevertheless, Martin would have to remember to return it. Just in case somebody checked.

Martin stopped for the light at Capitol and turned right. He noticed that the dark sedan behind him also made the turn.

The sergeant would ask more questions.

"You didn't take your car out of the lot for any reason last night, did you?"

"No. As I said. I was working."

"What is your license number?"

"C25-388."

"And your job at the plant?"

"I'm a stock chaser."

The sergeant wouldn't know what that was.

"I see to it that the assembly line doesn't run short of any parts. For instance, if a certain type of bolts are low at one point, I immediately go to the department of supply concerned with them and make sure that the bolts are rushed over."

"Then you travel around the plant during your shift? A lot of people could verify the fact that you were there from four to midnight?"

"Of course. Dozens."

There was a weakness in that, but it couldn't be helped. No one can be in two places at the same time, but Martin had done the best he could. He had made certain that a great many people had seen him before seven and he would make certain that many more would see him after nine.

He counted on the confusion and movement that existed in the factory to aid him and he felt certain that a number of persons would "remember" that they had seen him between seven and nine—if that should ever be necessary. Or, at the very least, they would not be sure whether they had or not.

"Are you the only stock chaser in the plant?"

"No. There are about ten others. We all work out of Mr. Hanson's office on the plant floor."

"Would you be missed if you were gone a couple of hours?"

Martin would laugh. "I certainly hope so."

But he wouldn't be. Martin was reasonably positive of that. With almost a dozen stock chasers going in and out of his office, Hanson would never notice that Martin was gone two hours. Actually he would have been away from his job only an hour and a half, since the lunch period was included in the time.

Martin glanced at the rear view mirror as he turned south on Twentieth.

The gray sedan was still behind him.

Martin frowned slightly.

"After you left work, how long were you in this tavern?" the sergeant would ask.

"About an hour."

"What's the name of the place?"

"Pete's Tap. It's half a block from the plant."

Pete would be able to back up that part of the story. Ever since Martin had conceived his plan to get rid of Beatrice, he had made it his practice to drop in at the tavern for a drink every night after he finished his shift. Pete knew him very well by now.

The sergeant would have to find out one more thing. "As far as you know, who was the last person to see your wife?"

"The dry cleaning delivery man. He brought some clothes back and picked up some to be cleaned. It was around three o'clock."

The delivery man always came Mondays at three. But Martin had been nervous about it until he appeared.

And that would be about it.

From there on, the sergeant could figure things out for himself.

The delivery man saw her at three. Martin left at quarter after three in order to get to the parking lot by four. His car was locked in the lot until midnight. Then he spent an hour at Pete's Tap. At one, or a few minutes later, he had an accident and was taken to jail. He was released at nine, came directly home, and phoned the police five or ten minutes later.

No. If he had killed his wife, there hadn't been any time to get rid of her body. Unless it was still in the house. And it might be.

Martin smiled.

Perhaps they would even search.

At Greenfield, Martin signaled and made a right turn. The gray sedan followed, approximately fifty feet behind him.

Martin experienced a sense of alarm. Was it a squad car? But why should it be following him?

His eyes lowered to the speedometer. He was under the speed limit. Safely under.

When he stopped at a light, he peered at the rear view mirror.

No. It wasn't a squad car. That much he could make out.

But it could be a plainclothes man, Martin thought, panic growing. Is there something wrong with my car? Did I go through any stop lights?

He shook his head almost angrily. That couldn't be it. He would have stopped me when it happened.

He stole a look over his shoulder. No. He couldn't be a detective. He was a little man. Even from here Martin could see that. The police didn't take men that small.

When the light changed, Martin's car moved forward. He turned at the next corner.

The sedan followed.

Martin began to sweat. This might be some kind of a hold-up. He might be waiting for Martin to stop at a dark street intersection. Perhaps he thought Martin was going home and he planned to rob him as he put his car in the garage.

Martin went around the block to get back to the well-lighted Greenfield Avenue.

His eyes went furtively to the rear view mirror and he exhaled in relief.

The sedan was no longer following him.

It must have been one of those coincidences. The car hadn't been following him at all.

At the factory lot, Martin softly opened the south gate in its lonely semi-darkness. He parked

his car and walked past the north shack on the way back to the factory.

Joe Byrnes and Ed Parker were playing gin rummy.

No one seemed to notice him when Martin reentered the factory. And Hanson was busy at the phone, as usual.

He handed Martin an assignment. "Take care of this right away."

Martin hadn't been missed at all.

"Sure," Martin said to Hanson.

The little man parked his dark sedan and entered the six story building. He took an elevator to the fourth floor and made his way to an unused typewriter in the City Room. He copied a column of numbers from his notebook and took them to one of the editors.

The editor looked up. "I wish I had your job."

"You just think so. Following cars half the night's no picnic."

The editor glanced at the list. "Which is the luckiest one. Who gets the fifty dollar award?"

The little man pointed. "That one. I picked him up a little while ago and followed him for three miles. He didn't even bend a rule in the traffic book."

The editor pursed his lips. "Considering this is Safe Driver Week, we'll run all the license numbers on the front page. Find out who owns C25-388. Get a capsule interview and a picture. We'll use them too."

THE GIRL IN GOLD

by Jonathan Craig

IT WAS SUPPOSED to look like either suicide or accidental death. It was neither. It was murder.

A detective is rarely the first police officer at the scene of a homicide, but this was one of those times. Stan Rayder, my detective partner, and I had been cruising Greenwich Village in an unmarked patrol car, matching faces in the streets against our mental files of wanted criminals, when a small boy had run from the alley behind the Corbin Hotel, shouting that there was a dead man back there.

The boy had kept on running, and Stan, who was driving, turned into the alley.

Now, at a few minutes past six on as steamy an August evening as I could remember, we stood looking down at the body of a well dressed, dark-haired young man who had, it would seem, fallen only minutes ago from the open window of the third-floor hotel room directly above.

He lay flat on his back, spread-eagled, and in spite of the crushing impact of his body on the concrete there was very little blood. There was a dark swelling across the bridge of his nose and a purplish discoloration of the skin on the left side of his face and on his left hand and wrist.

In New York, detectives aren't supposed to touch a body until the medical examiner has looked at it, but sometimes we cheat a little. I pushed a fingertip against the jaw, and the head

moved easily to my touch.

"Any rigor mortis, Pete?" Stan asked.

"No," I said, and slipped the man's wallet from the inside pocket of his jacket. It held eighty-three dollars, some business cards, and an I.D. card that said he was Harry B. Lambert, of 684 East 71st Street. I read the name and address to Stan, put the wallet back, and stood up. We'd make a closer examination, of course, after the M.E. arrived.

"That's quite a bit of postmortem lividity on his left side, there," Stan said. "It'd take about an hour for that much to show up, wouldn't it?"

"About that, yes," I said. Postmortem lividity results from the blood's settling to those parts of the body nearest the floor. In Harry Lambert's case, it meant he had lain on his left side for at least an hour before someone pushed him through that third-floor window.

"He'd been boozing a little, it smells like," Stan said, glancing at me with mild surprise.

Stan, who always appears to be mildly surprised about everything, is a tall, wiry young cop with a soft voice, a sprinkling of premature gray in his old-fashioned brush-cut, and a deceptively mild manner. He also has a black belt, the hardest fists in the department, and an almost complete lack of physical fear.

"You figure that knock he took between the eyes finished him off?" he asked

"Could be," I said. "Maybe somebody hoped he'd hit the pavement face down. Sort of blot out the evidence, so to speak."

"It just might have worked, too," Stan said. "Well, you're the head man on this one, Pete. What now?"

"Stay here with the body until the M.E. gets here. I'll get on the horn in the hotel and stir things up."

I walked around to the entrance of the Corbin and used one of the phone booths in the lobby to call Lieutenant Barney Fells, Stan's and my superior. Barney would take Stan and me off the duty roster and assign us fulltime to the homicide. He would also immediately notify the Communications Bureau. They, in turn, would dispatch an ambulance, and notify the other departments concerned with homicide.

The Corbin was just another small hotel, a little smaller and older and scruffier than most, perhaps, with a minimum of lobby and a bird-cage elevator no larger than a phone booth.

There was no one behind the desk. I tapped the bell a couple of times and waited.

The middle-aged man who finally came out from the room behind the desk was short and slightly built, with a large, almost perfectly round head, thinning strawlike hair, moist gray eyes, and very little chin.

"Yes, sir," he said in a voice much deeper than I would have expected, "May I help you?"

I showed him my badge. "Detective Selby," I said. "You have a Mr. Harry Lambert registered here?"

He nodded. "Yes, sir. He checked in this morning."

"Anyone with him?"

"No."

I got out my notebook. "I'll need your name."

"Dobson. Wayne Dobson."

"Did Mr. Lambert have any visitors?"

"Not that I know of. Why? What's happened?"

"He's dead. Out in the alley behind the hotel. He went out the window."

Dobson sucked in his breath. "A suicide?"

"You know him personally?"

"No. But I . . ." He shook his head slowly.

"This is the first time anything like this has ever happened here."

"You only come to the desk when someone rings the bell?"

"Usually, yes."

"What room was Lambert in?"

"Just a moment." He turned to check his file of registration cards. "Three-oh-four."

"He put his home address on there, on the registration card?"

"Yes, sir. It's the law. He put down Six eighty-four East Seventy-first."

"What time did he check in?"

"Eleven forty-five."

I put my notebook away. "I'll need a key to his room, Mr. Dobson. And please stay close to the desk. There'll be other police along any minute."

He nodded. "Of course," he said as he handed me a master key on a big loop of heavy wire. "I'll do all I can to help."

I crossed to the elevator, but I had second thoughts. I have a thing about elevators of that size and vintage. I took another look at it, and then walked to the other side of the lobby and started up the stairs.

I might have been in a smaller hotel room at one time or another, but I couldn't remember it; I knew I'd never been in a hotter one. The metal bed and metal dresser seemed to have been painted over with green house paint, and the ratty lounge chair looked to be on the verge of giving way to its own weight.

There were no indications of a struggle, but Harry Lambert appeared to have had at least one visitor, and that one a woman. There was a nearly empty fifth of whiskey at one end of the dresser and a couple of hotel glasses at the other, and one of the glasses had a smear of lipstick on the rim.

There was nothing under the bed but dust, and

nothing in the closet but more dust and two rusty coat hangers. There was nothing in the bathroom, either.

I went over to search the dresser. There was a handsome black attaché case in the top drawer, nothing at all in the others. I put the case on the bed, handling it carefully to avoid obliterating fingerprints, and opened it.

The case held, among other things, another black case, about ten inches long, six inches wide, and half an inch thick, embossed with Harry Lambert's name in gold, and to which was attached about two feet of gold chain with a clip on the end of it. I'd seen a number of such cases; they are used by diamond salesmen to carry gems and are known as jewelers' wallets. It was empty.

The attaché case also held, in various compartments, a jeweler's loupe, a miniature pair of scales, and a set of weights in a clear plastic box, and a large number of the squares of white tissue paper in which diamond salesmen wrap their stones.

I put the case back on the dresser, took off my coat, and began stripping down the bed. I found the tube of lipstick in the space between the pillows.

It was no ordinary lipstick. Even the cheapest ones can look expensive, of course, but this one was the genuine article. It was of heavy gold, with a beautifully engraved floral design along its length and the initals "L.C." in a monogram on the cap.

It was the kind of thing women never buy for themselves. It was also the kind of costly, handcrafted item that just might have a secret jeweler's mark. Headquarters maintains a file of hundreds of such marks, just as it does of laundry marks.

I found the mark with the help of my handker-

chief and the loupe from Lambert's attaché case. It was inside the cap, at the top: an anchor surrounded by three concentric circles.

I put the lipstick on the dresser beside the attaché case and finished searching the bed. I was just putting my jacket back on when there was a knock on the door and two techs and a photographer from headquarters came in.

"Hi, Pete," the chief tech said, wiping the sweat from his forehead. "You think it might warm up a little?"

"We can hope," I said. "You finished in the alley?"

"Nothing to do down there. Just the pictures, was all. They're done."

"I'd better get a couple of bird's-eye shots from the window," the photographer said, moving off.

"The M.E. show up yet?" I asked.

"He got there just as we left. Doc Chaney."

"Well, it's all yours, Ed," I said, turning to leave. "I want to have a few more words with the desk clerk."

Before I went downstairs, I knocked at the doors at either side of Lambert's and at the one directly across the hall. There was no answer at any of them.

When I reached the lobby, I found that Wayne Dobson had abandoned his desk again. The door behind it was slightly ajar. I went back and opened it the rest of the way.

Dobson was lying on the bed in a room that, except for a portable TV set and the iron bars usually found on first-floor windows in New York, was the mirror image of the one I'd just left upstairs. He looked even smaller lying down than he had behind the desk, and his eyes seemed drawn with pain.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

He smiled up at me thinly. "Ulcers. That suicide got me pretty upset."

"Can I do anything for you?"

He shook his head and pushed himself up on the side of the bed. "It'll pass. At least it always has."

"Feel up to talking a little?"

He shrugged. "If I have to, I have to. What do you want to know?"

"Well, first, where are the bellhops? I haven't seen any."

"Joe Moody's on. The trick is to find him."

"Moody go up with Lambert when he checked in?"

"No. Joe wasn't around at the time."

"Lambert had some company," I said. "A woman. You see any women pass through the lobby?"

"I saw one, a beauty. She took the elevator."

"You have any idea who she was?"

"No, but she was something to see; silver blonde, a terrific build, and a gold dress like a second skin. Real bright, shiny gold dress. Must have cost a mint."

"When was this?"

"Oh . . . about four, I'd say. Maybe a little later."

"She the only woman you saw?"

"Yes. Mr. Selby, would you do me a favor, please? There's a shoe box out beneath the desk with a lot of odds and ends in it, stuff people have left in their rooms. I just remembered I put a bottle of antacid tablets in it the other day. Maybe they'd help."

I went out to the desk, dug around in the shoe box until I found the tablets, and took them back to Dobson.

"Thanks," he said. "Don't ever get an ulcer."

"Just one more thing, and I'll let you rest. Do

you handle the switchboard?"

"Yes. The desk clerk here does everything but make a living."

"Did Lambert make or receive any calls?"

"Damn!"

"What's wrong?"

"I completely forgot. Yes, he did get a call. And the guy that called him was plenty sore about something. He started right off cussing him. Mr. Lambert kept saying, 'Now, just a minute, Rocky,' and 'Listen, Rocky,' and 'Let me explain,' and things like that."

"All right. But aside from the cussing, what did this man *say*?"

"Nothing. He just kept blessing him out. Then all at once Mr. Lambert hung up."

"The man call back?"

"No."

"When did he call?"

"I can tell you exactly. It was ten minutes of four. As it happened, I'd just set my watch." He suddenly grimaced with pain and lay back on the bed. "Like I told you," he said, "never get yourself an ulcer."

I made a few notes in my book, thanked Dobson for his help, and walked around the hotel to see how Stan Rayder and the M.E. were coming along with their work in the alley.

There were two more police cars and an ambulance there now, and perhaps a hundred or so onlookers.

"Doc Chaney here says he can get a pretty close fix on the time of death, Pete," Stan said, after I'd shouldered my way through the crowd. "He puts it somewhere between four and five p.m."

"That's right," the M.E. said, looking up from where he knelt by the body. "This is the one time in a hundred when I can set fairly tight limits."

"How about that bruise between his eyes, Doc?"

Stan asked. "You figure it could have killed him?"

"*Could* have, yes. It's likely a depressed fracture. But we'll have to wait till I autopsy him, Stan." He stood up and glanced in the direction of the ambulance. "I'm finished, Pete. If you'll release the body, I can take it back with me."

"You get everything out of his pockets, Stan?" I asked.

"Yes," Stan said, tapping the bulge in the side pocket of his jacket. "Nothing helpful, though. There was nothing in his billfold but the cards and money."

I had the M.E. sign a receipt for the body. Then Stan and I pushed through the crowd to the car we'd come in and got inside.

"So Lambert was a diamond salesman, eh?" Stan said, after I'd filled him in on my search of the hotel room and my talks with the desk clerk. "What a way to run a railroad. A hundred people could have gone in and out, but the only one we know about for sure is that girl in the gold dress."

"We may pick up some others from the bellhop." I started the engine and began to back the car out of the alley. "I'm going uptown to check at the address on Lambert's I.D. card, Stan. You—"

"Yes, I know," he said wryly. "I get to stay here and boss the operation in that bake-oven upstairs."

"Somebody always has to do the dirty dishes, Stan."

"Sure, but why does it always have to be me?"

"First of all, get hold of that bellhop. Then see if any of the other guests on Lambert's floor saw or heard anything. Also, there's a newsstand across the street. Maybe the man that runs it noticed something."

I turned the corner and pulled up in front of the hotel entrance. "One more thing," I said. "Send somebody over to headquarters with that

lipstick. I want a check made on the jeweler's mark."

Stan sighed. "You sure you can't think of any other little things I can do for you?"

"Not offhand," I said. "Still, if I really worked at it . . ."

He grinned. "Never mind," he said, opening the door. "I'll see you at the squad room."

Six eighty-four East Seventy-first turned out to be a posh-looking converted brownstone. I found a mailbox with a name card that read LAMBERT/MANNING—2A, and pushed the button beneath it. A moment later the buzzer released the inner door of the foyer and I climbed the stairs to the second floor.

A heavyset man with his arms folded across his chest was standing in the open doorway of 2A, frowning at me as I approached. He was about thirty, I judged, with a lot of thick, sand-colored hair, a deep widow's peak, and unusually heavy brows over very small hazel eyes with yellow flecks in them.

"You the one that buzzed 2A?" he asked, giving it a little edge.

I showed him the tin. "Detective Selby," I said. "Are you a friend of Mr. Lambert's?"

"He lives here. We both do. What's up?"

"We could talk a little better inside."

He hesitated for a moment, then shrugged and motioned me into the apartment.

The livingroom wasn't very large, but the furnishings had cost someone a lot of money. I sat down in a cream-leather easy chair and nodded to the sofa across from it.

"Let's see, now," I said as I got out my book. "Your full name is what?"

He glowered at me, but he came over and sat down. "David D. Manning," he said. "And make yourself right at home, Selby."

"Thanks. You and Mr. Lambert pretty close friends?"

"We're roommates," he said. "We get along. Why?"

"I've a little bad news for you, I'm afraid. He's been killed."

He started to say something, then changed his mind and sat looking at me as if he were trying to decide whether I was telling the truth.

I waited.

"How?" Manning asked.

"We're not just sure. Somebody tried to cover it up by pushing him out a window."

"Somebody? Does that mean you don't know who did it?"

"Not yet."

He got up suddenly and walked over to a bar in the corner. "I could use a drink," he said, pouring a couple of inches into a highball glass. "How about some for you?"

"No, thanks."

He took a pull at his drink, walked slowly back to the sofa, and sat down again. "It's hard to believe," he said.

"He married? Separated?"

"No."

"Divorced?"

"No."

"We'll want to notify his next of kin. You know who that might be?"

"No, I don't. He never mentioned any relatives. His parents are dead, I know."

"He have a good income?"

"We averaged about the same, I guess. Twenty thousand one year, twenty-five the next."

"You're a diamond salesman, too, then?"

"Yes."

"Well, the big question is, of course, do you know anyone who'd want him dead?"

Manning smiled sourly. "I can think of two or three who'd like that just fine."

"Who?"

"Well, there's this girl he used to be engaged to, Barbara Nolan. Harry threw her over for another girl. Barbara swore she'd kill him."

"He take her seriously?"

"Not at first. Then he started to. It was beginning to sweat him plenty. I guess she convinced him."

"You know where she lives?"

"It's in the Village. Five forty-two Waverly Place."

"You said there were others."

He took a sip of his drink. "Well, there's a guy named Mel Pearce, another diamond salesman. He thought Harry stole a big sale from him. He had almost an obsession about it. Once I had to get between them to keep them from climbing all over each other."

"You know where I can find him?"

"He lives on Central Park West, I think. I don't know just where."

I turned over to a new page in my notebook. "That's two," I said. "Anyone else?"

"Not that I know of."

"Harry got a tough phone call from somebody named Rocky. That name mean anything to you?"

Manning frowned thoughtfully, then shook his head. "No."

"Was Harry in trouble of any kind? Any dealings with shylocks? Any civil suits? Gambling debts? Anything at all like that?"

"No. At least not so far as I know."

"You said he threw Barbara Nolan over for another girl. What's her name?"

"Elaine Greer." He nodded toward a large color portrait on the coffee table. "That's her picture."

I went over to examine it. The girl was very young, very blonde and very beautiful, but it was a cold beauty, and the smile that curved her lips had somehow failed to reach her slightly-tilted blue eyes.

"I'll want to talk to her," I said. "You know her address?"

"No. She's in the Manhattan book, though, I know."

"Harry pretty much of a ladies' man, was he?"

"No. He practically had to beat them off with a club, but he always stuck pretty much to one girl at a time." He paused. "She must be a very potent proposition, that girl. Elaine, I mean. Harry was practically out of his skull over her. As I said, he and Barbara were going to get married. But when he met Elaine, he forgot all about Barbara. She had Harry so crazy for her he didn't know which way was up."

"You know Elaine yourself, do you?"

"No, I never met her, and I reached the point where I wished Harry hadn't, either. She was all he talked about. He went around mooning over her like a fifteen-year-old kid with his first big crush. You had to see it to believe it."

I shifted my weight around in the chair a little and ran out a fresh point on my pencil. "Who'd Harry work for?"

"Nobody. He took stones out on memo."

"On memo?"

"On consignment. He might be peddling stones for half a dozen dealers at the same time. A memo is the dealer's record of the stones he gives you. You just sign the memo, and that's it."

"His reputation must have been pretty good, then."

"Better than good. Perfect."

"When was the last time you saw him, Mr. Manning?"

He glanced at me sharply, then raised his glass and finished his drink, watching me over the rim.

" Don't tell me I'm a suspect," he said.

"Just a routine question, Mr. Manning," I said. "But when?"

He put the glass down on the end table beside the sofa. "This morning," he said. "And it was a very strange thing. I didn't know what to make of it."

"What happened?"

"Well, the phone in Harry's room rang early, about six or so. It woke me up. I went out to the kitchen to make coffee, and a few minutes later Harry came in with his attaché case under his arm, all dressed to go out. He looked like something had just scared the hell out of him."

"What did he say to you then?"

"Nothing. I asked him what was wrong, but he walked right past me and grabbed a fifth of whiskey out of the cabinet and took a heavy belt straight out of the bottle. I was amazed. It was the first time I'd seen him take a drink in more than a year. He used to have a drinking problem, you see. No tolerance for the stuff at all. And here he was, suddenly gulping it straight out of the bottle."

"He didn't say anything at all?"

"Not a word. I think he was only half aware I was there. I asked him who had called so early, but I don't think he even heard me. He wasn't in the kitchen more than half a minute."

"And he left the apartment right away?"

"Yes."

"Did you overhear any of what he said on the phone?"

"No," Manning said, and got up to pour himself another drink.

I watched him carefully. There was something about Dave Manning that bothered me. He was

just too cool for the circumstances; but when he came back and took his seat again, I noticed something that told me the coolness was all on the surface. He sat leaning back comfortably against the cushion, apparently completely relaxed, perhaps even a little bored, but he was gripping his highball glass so tightly that the knuckles of his hand were bone-white.

I thumbed back through my notes, then got to my feet. "Your phone book handy?" I asked.

"Over there, by the bar."

"This diamond salesman you said was feuding with Harry," I said. "Mel Pearce. His first name Melvin?"

"No. Melford."

I located a Melford Pearce at 216 Central Park West. Elaine Greer, the girl for whom Harry had thrown over Barbara Nolan, was listed at 734 East 58th.

"I think that'll do it for this time, Mr. Manning," I said as I crossed to the door. "Thanks very much."

"No trouble at all," Manning said easily. "I wish you luck."

I went down to the street and walked along to where I'd left the car. It was completely dark now, but the soggy air was just as stifling as it had been at noon, and it would be that way all night. There was a lot of heat lightning flickering around the spire of the Empire State Building to the south, and the blare of the boat horns from the East River had that muffled sound they have when an early-evening fog has set in.

I worked the car out into the traffic and headed downtown for a talk with Barbara Nolan, the girl whose threat against Harry Lambert's life had caused him considerable concern.

The one-room apartment above the curio shop

on Waverly Place was small, even by Greenwich Village standards, and the girl who had let me inside was petite and pretty and very angry. She had shoulder-length hair so black that it had blue highlights in it, a small oval face with skin like fresh cream, and deep-brown eyes under sooty lashes so long that at first I'd thought they were false.

"So why come to me about it?" she said, glaring at me from her perch on a hassock. "What am I supposed to do? Throw myself on his funeral pyre or something?"

"Not necessarily," I said. "I'll settle for the answers to a few questions."

She brushed the hair back from her forehead with the back of her hand and crossed her legs the other way.

"You're pretty sure I killed him, aren't you?" she said.

"I didn't say that, Miss Nolan."

"You don't have to. It's written all over your big, ugly cop's face."

"We also have a big, ugly station house. Would you rather talk there?"

"Well, just for the record, I didn't do it. And also, just for the record, I definitely wish I had."

"And yet, at one time, you were going to marry him."

"Dave Manning certainly gave you a full briefing, didn't he?"

"What do you do for a living, Miss Nolan?"

"I'm a designer. Jewelry, mostly. Also money clips, belt buckles, compacts, lipsticks, perfume bottles, eyeglass frames—et cetera."

"You at work this afternoon? Say, between four and five?"

"Oh, so that's it. That's when he was murdered, wasn't it?" she said.

"Just answer the question, please."

"I work at home. I haven't been out of the place all day."

"You threatened Mr. Lambert's life more than once, I believe."

"I meant it, too." She paused to light a cigarette. "Dave Manning told you about that too, I suppose?"

"Most girls don't threaten to kill a man just because he changes his mind about getting married."

"Just *because!* You make it sound like nothing at all, like he merely changed his mind about going to a movie or something." She took a short, angry drag on the cigarette and exhaled the smoke through her nostrils. "And besides, I'm not 'most girls.' I'm me. And I just don't take a thing like that."

"And is that all he did to you?"

"Is that all!" Her dark eyes seemed to have tiny fires behind them. "Why, yes, you simple man, that's all he did to me. What more would he have to do? Stake me out on an anthill?"

"You know a girl named Elaine Greer?"

"No. Should I?"

"How about someone named Rocky?"

"No. No Rockys, either."

"You ever been in the Corbin Hotel?"

"I've never even *heard* of the Corbin Hotel."

"You know anyone who'd have liked to see Lambert dead?"

"Yes. Me. I—"

"Let's cooperate a little here, Miss Nolan. All right?"

She stabbed the cigarette out in a tray on the floor beside the hassock and crossed her legs again. "Just for starters," she said, "how about that fink, Dave Manning? He hated Harry, you know. I mean, *really* hated him."

"Why?"

"Because of me. Harry took me away from him. Did he tell you that? No, of course he didn't." She paused meaningfully. "Dave took it very hard. *Very* hard. It tore him up in little pieces." She raised one eyebrow and smiled at me. "Get the picture?"

"They continued to live together, though."

"What does *that* prove, for heaven's sake?"

I asked Miss Nolan a few more questions, none of which bought me anything, and got up to leave.

"Thanks for your help," I said. "It's possible we'll want to talk to you again, Miss Nolan."

"Oh, no doubt about it," she said. "And thank *you*—for bringing me such good news."

When I reached the squad room at the station house the hands on the big electric clock over the wall speaker stood at 9:42. Stan Rayder was at his desk, hammering at his ancient typewriter, a look of faint surprise on his lean face, as if the complaint report in his typewriter were the first one he'd ever seen.

I draped my jacket over the back of my chair and sat down. "How'd it go over at the hotel?" I asked.

"All buttoned up," Stan said. "Police seal on the door and all."

"Come up with anything?"

"Not in the room, no. Somebody'd wiped all the prints off the bottle and the glasses, though. I sent them over to the lab anyhow, along with everything else."

"Good. How about the lipstick? You ask for a check on the jeweler's mark?"

He nodded. "We just had a call on it. They had the mark on file, all right. The engraver lives in Brooklyn. I had them send a man over to see if he can round him up."

"You talk to the bellhop?"

"Yes, for all the good it did. Same goes for the maids. And none of the people in the rooms around Lambert's were in. The newsstand operator across the street saw the girl in the gold dress, though, the one the desk clerk told you about. She went in somewhere around four, he thinks. He didn't notice her come out again."

"Did you get anything else?"

"Yes. We've had a couple of panic calls from diamond dealers. It seems Harry Lambert took out about fifty thousand dollars' worth of stones on consignment this morning." He paused. "Maybe he was murdered for them, maybe not. Maybe he was going to run with them. Maybe a lot of things."

I told Stan what I'd learned from Dave Manning and Barbara Nolan, and then phoned the I.D. Bureau to ask for checks on Dave Manning, Barbara Nolan, Elaine Greer, Mel Pearce, and Harry Lambert himself.

A few minutes later they called back to say they had nothing on any of them except Elaine Greer. A cross-reference check had shown that she was the wife of an ex-convict named Ralph Greer, who had been released four days ago from the State Hospital for the Criminal Insane at Matteawan.

Ralph Greer's rap sheet showed bits for grand larceny, aggravated assault, and extortion. His only known criminal associate was another ex-con, Floyd Stoner, now thought to be living at 631 West 74th Street. The present whereabouts of Greer himself were unknown.

"So Lambert's new girlfriend had a husband," Stan said when I relayed the information to him.

"And the husband hits the street only four days ago. That sounds pretty good, Pete."

I dialed Communications, asked that a pickup order be put out for Ralph Greer, then stood up and reached for my jacket.

"I think Mrs. Greer deserves the pleasure of our company, Stan," I said. "Let's not deny her any longer."

As it happened, Mrs. Greer was to be denied that pleasure, after all. She wasn't home.

We had the same luck when we drove uptown to talk to Floyd Stoner, the man who had once been Ralph Greer's criminal associate. Stoner wasn't home, either.

"We're batting a thousand," Stan said as we walked back down the stairs. "At this rate, we'll wrap things up just in time to put in for our pensions."

I used the wall phone in the first-floor hall to ask for pickups on both Elaine Greer and Floyd Stoner, and arranged for plainclothes stakeouts to be stationed at their apartment houses. Then we went out to the car.

"I'll drive," Stan said as he got behind the wheel. "Your driving's too hairy for my nerves. Where to?"

"Two sixteen Central Park West."

"Who's there?"

"Mel Pearce, the diamond salesman who thought Lambert cheated him out of a sale."

Stan sighed. "Poor Lambert," he said. "There must be at least one person in this town who wasn't gunning for him. I wonder who it could be?"

Mel Pearce was about fifty, I judged, a graying, slightly stooped man with protuberant eyes behind thick, rimless glasses, abnormally long arms, and very fast answers to every question except the one about his whereabouts between four and five p.m.

He had, he said, spent the time "just walking around the midtown area, mulling over some deals I hoped to make."

As for his troubles with Lambert over the disputed diamond sale, that had all been a misunderstanding. He'd found that he had been in error, had apologized to Lambert, and that had been the end of it.

I called the squad room to see whether there had been any developments. There had.

The stakeout I'd had stationed at Floyd Stoner's apartment house had called to say that a man answering the description of Ralph Greer's former criminal associate had been seen entering the building.

It was a five-story house with paper tape across the cracks in the first-floor windows, trash in the foyer, and garbage on the stairs. There was no problem getting in; someone had propped the door open with the tattered remains of a phone book in a futile effort to encourage ventilation.

I knocked at the door of 301. There was a faint sound of movement from somewhere inside, but no one came to the door. I knocked again. This time, there was no sound at all.

"Police," I said.

"You're too polite," Stan said. "You got to give it more clout." He stepped close to the door. "It's the law!" he called loudly. "Open up here!"

About fifteen seconds passed.

I drew Stan a little way back from the door. "Stay here," I said. "I'll cover the fire escape. If you hear anything interesting, break in."

I went up to the top floor, climbed the metal ladder to the roof, and eased myself down the fire escape until I was outside the rear window of the apartment.

There was a half-inch gap between the bottom of the window shade and the sill. I peered

through it into the room beyond. The blonde girl with the slightly tilted eyes who lay trussed and gagged on the bed was the same girl I'd seen in the photograph in Dave Manning's apartment: Elaine Greer. She was struggling against the towels with which she'd been bound, her bright gold dress bunched up around her hips.

I tried the window. It was locked. I stood back and kicked the glass out of the frame. Then I unholstered my gun, jumped inside, and ran toward the bedroom door.

I jerked the door open just as Stan, alerted by the sound of breaking glass, burst through the front door with a crash of splintering wood, gun in hand.

We stood looking at each other across an empty room.

"What the hell?" Stan said. "I heard something in here. So did you."

"There's a girl tied up in the bedroom," I said. "Elaine Greer. What we heard was her trying to get loose."

"Elaine Greer?"

I nodded. "In a shiny gold dress. Just like the girl at the Corbin Hotel was wearing."

The noise had brought some of the tenants to investigate, and now they stood gaping at us from the hallway.

"Police business," I said. "Clear the hall, please."

Mrs. Greer was almost hysterical. It was several minutes before she calmed down enough to talk to us. Even then, it took considerable backtracking before we got a coherent story from her.

She had, she said, been an unwilling participant in a phony kidnapping. Her husband, of whom she was terrified, had learned of her affair with Harry Lambert while he was still in the state mental hospital. When he had been released, four

days ago, he had looked up his old friend, Floyd Stoner, and together they had worked out a way to make the most of Lambert's feelings for Mrs. Greer.

The two men had taken her to Stoner's apartment, where, under threat of death if she refused, she had been forced to make the early-morning phone call that Lambert's roommate had told us about. She had told Lambert she had been kidnapped, and that she would be killed unless he came up with a ransom of $50,000 worth of small, easily sold diamonds. Lambert, whose insurance would cover that amount, was to claim that he had been robbed by two armed men who had forced themselves into his car.

Lambert was to put the gems in a chamois bag, take a room at the Corbin Hotel under his own name, and wait for a phone call giving him further instructions. When Ralph Greer had called him there, however, Lambert had not answered the phone. Greer got mad.

"I was half out of my mind," Elaine Greer said. "I knew I had to do something about it. Then I saw a chance to slip out of the apartment, and I did."

"And?" Stan said.

"I'd heard my husband tell Stoner what Harry's room number was at the Corbin. I got a cab and went there. I knocked and knocked, but Harry didn't answer his door. Then I heard someone behind me—and there was my husband, with a gun in his hand. For a minute I thought he was going to kill me right there. I could see it in his eyes. But then he put the gun away and said something about getting the diamonds one way or another. He opened Harry's door with a piece of celluloid. He slipped it between the door and the jamb and—"

"We know the technique," Stan said. "Go on."

"Well, the door opened right up. We went in, and—and Harry was lying there on the bed. He was dead. I must have gasped or something, because Ralph slapped me hard and told me to shut up. He looked for the diamonds, but they weren't there. Then he slapped me again and put his jacket over his arm so nobody could see he was holding a gun on me, and brought me back here in a cab."

"Why'd they tie you up?" Stan asked.

"They were going to kill me. I heard Ralph say so. They didn't want me left around to tell what they'd been up to."

"Where are they now?" I asked.

"I don't know. They left about twenty minutes ago." Her eyes suddenly flooded with tears. "They made me do what I did," she said. "They'd have killed me if I hadn't. They were going to kill me anyway."

Stan and I stood looking at her.

"It's true!" she said. "Everything I've told you is the truth!"

We arranged for additional stakeouts in and around the apartment building, beefed up the pickup order on Greer and Stoner to a thirteen-state alarm, and then took Mrs. Greer down to the station house.

On our way through the squad room to one of the interrogation rooms at the rear, I paused at my desk to see whether there was anything on my call spike or in my IN basket that pertained to the homicide.

There was a lab report saying that the lipstick in the tube I'd found in Lambert's bed and the lipstick on the glass were the same. The smear on the glass, however, had not been left there by a woman's lips; it appeared, rather, to have been put there with the ball of someone's thumb or fingertip. A test had revealed that at the time of his

death Lambert's blood had a point five concentration of alcohol.

There was a brief, preliminary report from the medical examiner saying, in essence, that Lambert had died as the result of a blow inflicted by some blunt object to the base of his nose.

There was also a message on my call spike to phone Ed Gault, the detective who had checked out the jeweler's mark in the lipstick I had found in Lambert's room.

"Good news on that lipstick, Pete," Ed said when I got through to him. "I not only found the guy that made it, I even talked to the girl he made it for. It was a gift from a friend of hers, and her name was on the gift certificate."

It had been the wrong thing for Ed to do, since he might have flushed a prime suspect, but I let it go.

"What'd you find out?" I asked.

"Well, the girl's name is Linda Cole. She lives at the Pendleton, and a prettier little liar you won't find, believe me. She finally admitted being at the Corbin Hotel, and she even admitted that she might have lost her lipstick there. But she says she was there almost a month ago, and she hasn't been near the place since." He laughed. "Some story."

"Thanks, Ed," I said. "We'll take it from there."

I hung up and sat drumming my fingertips on the desk for a moment. There had been some lying done, all right, but I had a feeling it hadn't been done by Linda Cole.

I motioned Mrs. Greer to a seat on the chair beside my desk, and then drew Stan away a few paces to tell him about the reports and my talk with Ed Gault.

Stan shook his head, and for once some of the surprise on his face was real. "It looks like somebody ought to get his mouth fixed, doesn't it?" he

said. "It just doesn't work right."

"Make sure Mrs. Greer knows her rights and gets a lawyer."

"You're going over there?"

"Yes."

"I'll go with you."

"I don't expect that much trouble, Stan," I said. "Besides, one of us ought to be here in case something breaks on Greer and Stoner."

I went downstairs, checked out a car, and drove the few blocks to the Corbin Hotel.

Once again there was no one behind the desk, but there was a light beneath the door of Wayne Dobson's room beyond it, and I could hear someone moving around in there. I went back to the door, turned the knob very slowly, and inched it open.

The desk clerk was moving between his bed and the dresser, packing a suitcase. He was completely dressed for the street, even to a hat, and he was moving quickly, as if he had a lot to do and very little time in which to do it.

"Leaving us, Mr. Dobson?" I said as I stepped inside.

He spun to face me. His jaw sagged for an instant, but he recovered fast. "What's this?" he demanded. "Why didn't you knock?"

"We're old friends by now," I said. "I thought I'd be welcome."

There was an airline envelope on the dresser. I took the ticket out and looked at the name on it. It was made out to "J. Jackson" for a flight to Los Angeles.

"And a one-way ticket, too," I said.

"That belongs to a guest. What's the meaning of this, Selby?"

"And is that suitcase you're packing also a guest's?"

"It's no concern of yours, either way. Is there

any law that says I can't go anywhere I want to, *when* I want to?"

"There just might be," I said. "Impeding a homicide investigation is a serious charge."

"Impede? What's the matter with you? Impede in what way?"

"You told me Harry Lambert got a phone call from someone named Rocky at exactly 3:50 p.m. You were certain about it."

"So?"

"There wasn't any Rocky, Mr. Dobson. And Lambert didn't do any talking on the phone. He was an ex-alcoholic with no tolerance for liquor at all, but he drank a lot of it in that room, and he died with a point five concentration of alcohol in his blood. At 3:50 he wasn't only drunk, he was too drunk even to mumble." I paused. "Why'd you lie?"

"I didn't. I—"

"And there's that fancy tube of lipstick you planted in Lambert's bed. It was lost here a month ago, and you put it in the shoe box under the desk, the one from which you had me get the antacid tablets. What you took for just another jazzy drugstore lipstick was an expensive, hand-engraved—"

"Now I get it," Dobson broke in. "You think you're going to frame me for—"

"And another thing," I said. "You smeared some of the lipstick on a glass to make us think Lambert had company in his room. That puzzles me a little, Mr. Dobson. Why'd you do it?"

"I—" Dobson began, then suddenly compressed his lips and stood there, glaring at me.

I moved to the bed and lifted the top layer of clothing out of the suitcase. It was there, all right—a chamois-leather bag, no bigger than the kind that kids keep their marbles in.

I glimpsed the bag in the same instant I felt the stab of Dobson's gun in my back. We stood that way, neither of us moving or speaking, for what must have been a full ten seconds.

Then, "Get into the bathroom," Dobson said. "Take it real slow."

"Why?" I said. "A gunshot will carry just as well from there as it will here."

"Real slow, now," he said. "Get going, Selby."

I shrugged, took one slow step in the direction of the bathroom—and then dropped, clawing for my gun, starting to roll the instant I hit the floor.

Dobson's first shot missed, but his second burned a path across my left bicep. Then my own gun bucked in my hand and I saw Dobson's body jerk back from the impact of a slug in his stomach.

It was like watching a slow-motion film. Dobson's right arm lowered almost inch by inch until the gun fell from his hand, and he folded first one arm and then the other across his middle, stood there swaying back and forth for several seconds. Then, very slowly, he sank to his knees.

I kicked Dobson's gun under the bed, put my own back in its holster, and took two of the clean undershirts from the suitcase.

Dobson had lost interest in everything except the blood seeping from the bullet hole in his abdomen. He watched with dull eyes as I wadded one undershirt beneath his belt to serve as a compress and wrapped the other one around my arm where his slug had furrowed the skin. Then I went out to the switchboard to call an ambulance. The shots had brought several guests to the lobby, but I ignored them.

The ambulance was there in eight minutes. I helped the intern put Dobson's stretcher in the back and took a seat on the bench across from it.

The intern climbed in beside me, and a moment later the ambulance lurched away from the curb.

"I'm going to die," Dobson said, almost completely without emotion. "You've killed me, Selby. I'm dying."

There wasn't a chance in a thousand of his dying, of course, and the intern opened his mouth to say so, but I kicked his ankle and he shut his mouth again. When a person is sure he is dying, even though he is not, anything he says has the full legal weight of a "deathbed confession," technically known as a dying declaration. It was my job to get such a declaration if I could.

"I guess there are some things you'd like to say, Mr. Dobson," I said. "Maybe now would be the time."

He lay looking at me unblinkingly while the ambulance traveled the better part of a block. Then his eyes drifted away from mine and he moved his head slowly and sadly from side to side.

"I should never have learned karate," he said quietly, almost as if to himself. "If I hadn't, Lambert would still be alive and I . . . I wouldn't be here dying." His voice was resigned and weak, but steady, with an undertone of irony in it.

"Is that how he died?" I asked softly. "From a karate blow?"

"Yes. When I saw all those diamonds, I . . ." He took a deep breath, held it for a moment, and let it out with a sigh. "I was passing his room. The door was half-open and I could see him in there on the bed with a bottle in his hand. I thought it was just another case of a drunk leaving his door open, and I started to close it for him, but then I saw the diamonds, where he'd spread them out on the bed beside him."

I waited. When he didn't go on, I said, "Too much temptation?"

He nodded. "I knew it would be the only chance I'd ever have to be rich. I've always had to scrounge for every dime. It's been just one grubby little job after another all my life, and I . . . I don't know, I thought I could just take them, and who would ever know?"

"And then, Mr. Dobson?" I said.

"I put them in a leather bag that was there, and started to leave, but Lambert's head moved a little, and I . . . Like I said, I should never have learned karate. I didn't even think about hitting him; I just did. I was afraid he was coming to and that he'd see me and . . . You have to understand. It was suddenly like they were *my* diamonds, not his, and he was about to take them away from me."

"And you thought that by pushing him out the window you might cover up?"

"Yes. But I didn't think of that till later. Then I went back upstairs and did it."

He paused, breathing a little more slowly now, his voice a bit fainter. "All the rest was like you said, the lipstick and the phone call and all. It was all pretty clumsy, I guess. I was trying to divert suspicion, but I was so nervous and rattled and sick with my ulcer that I just . . ."

"Go on, Mr. Dobson," I said.

He turned his face away from me. "I've always been a fool," he said, almost inaudibly, and closed his eyes.

The ambulance was nearing the hospital. I sat watching the neon streak past through the window beyond Dobson's stretcher, suddenly tired to the bone. I didn't like the idea of leaving a man, Dobson or anyone else, under the impression he was going to die any longer than I had to.

"All right," I said to the intern beside me. "You can tell him the truth now."

The intern leaned forward, studying Dobson's face. Then he reached out and raised one of his eyelids.

"He didn't make it," he said. "He's dead."

THE EXTRA WATCH

by Frank Sisk

THAT morning young Bolton checked into the Bureau a half hour late and blamed it on his watch. "It keeps losing time unless you wind it just right," he told Rinehart.

"Don't tell me," Rinehart said. "Tell the captain. He likes to hear things like that."

"Is he in yet, Rino?"

"Bet your dollar watch he's in, kid. He's already handed me a list of stolen cars as long as your leg."

"Did he notice my absence?" Bolton asked nervously.

"Put it another way, he failed to notice your presence."

"He say anything?"

"He remained speechless about the matter, but reading his mind, I got the message."

"Yeah?"

"You'll be wearing a blue suit again, kid, with those big shiny buttons, and doing the third shift on Flatfoot Avenue."

"Hell, it's only the second time I've been late in six weeks," Bolton said.

"Listen, a regular detective is allowed to be late only once in his career. A probationer like you—never."

"Then I guess I better buy a new watch."

"I guess you better." Rinehart took the yellow teleflex summary of the night's crimes from the

action basket on his scarred desk and scanned it quickly. "Speaking of watches," he said after a moment, "don't ever buy one from a little guy named Dominic L. Piano."

"What's that supposed to mean, Sarge?"

"It means Mister Piano at this very moment may be sidling around town with nine fine watches for sale, all of them half price and all of them red hot."

"Dominic L. Piano." Bolton grinned. "A name like that, you must be kidding."

"Read paragraph fourteen," Rinehart said.

Bolton took the teleflex sheet and read #14 *Theft Nitetime, from premises Guthrie & Poole, 378 Lincoln av. Entrance thru rear basement window. Alarm system bypassed with glass cutter, wire clipper, ground clamp. Complainant A. E. Poole, prop., alleges evidence of theft discovered upon midnight return to store to get reading glasses left there at closing 9 p.m. Nine Swiss watches, retail value $2733, missing. Items of less value in same display case intact as were diamonds of much greater value. Makes and serials in morning report filed by Ptlm F. Josephson, Pct. 3.*

Handing the yellow sheet back to Rinehart, Bolton said, "Yeah, but where does the Piano come in?"

"I keep forgetting how green you are, kid," Rinehart said.

"I only wish you would, Rino."

"Piano's signature is all over this little job, for anyone who has the slightest acquaintance with Piano."

"Clue me in like a good guy."

"As we cover ground, I may just do that," Rinehart said, settling an old felt hat on his balding head.

A few minutes later, in the unmarked police

car with Bolton at the wheel, Rinehart began to expatiate on Dominic L. Piano. "The first tipoff that the job is probably Dom's is the time of day. Before midnight, usually between ten and eleven—that's Dom's time. He seems to reason that the streets are too quiet after that. The cop on the beat can hear a wrench drop or spot a flashlight beam a block away. And before ten there's always the danger of some conscientious creep working overtime under a desk lamp in a back room.

"The next clue is the mode of entrance—a rear basement window, especially if the window is very small. Dom is a very small man, and generally these little windows aren't hooked into the alarm system because nobody expects anything bigger than a cat could get through them—a cat and Dominic L. But in case there is a hook-in, our little lad has quite a professional touch with the proper tools.

"So now he's inside the shop with total contents at his disposal. What does he do now that he's in?"

"What does he do?" Bolton asked rhetorically.

"Well, for one thing, he's never dominated by greed, kid. He's selective, very selective. All he wants is Swiss watches and only the finest of those. He's probably the country's most unsung authority on expensive Swiss movement—'the inaudible movement of absolute precision,' he calls it."

"He really calls it that?"

"Wait till you meet him. Once he told me that the only watch worth owning is one whose movement can barely be detected by a stethoscope. So all he steals is fine Swiss watches. He never touches stones. The market is too limited. A fence for diamonds pays a top of twenty-five per cent of list and the corner customer shies away from a di-

amond deal because he can't tell a carat from a turnip. Besides, a flashy stone draws attention to the one who wears it, stirs up comment, invites investigation. Dominic L. Piano knows all this and that's why he specializes. A watch is a necessity, a part of a man or woman's wrist, and if it's a fine watch with a snob-appeal name and can be bought for half the list price, the market is *broad*, kid, and don't you forget it. Even guys in pool halls and bowling alleys know what a Movado is worth, or an Eterna. They know a bargain when they see it. So Dominic has no trouble disposing of his stock fast and pretty much on the open market."

"He sounds like a smart operator," Bolton said.

"That's about like saying a plumber is a smart operator because he knows how to wipe a joint," Rinehart said severely.

"You know what I mean, Rino."

"I know what you think you mean, kid, but look at the record. Dominic L. Piano is so smart he's spent eight of the last twelve years in concrete custody. If our little connoisseur would listen just once to his own inner workings as carefully as he listens to Swiss movement, he'd know right off that he's losing time—and losing a lot faster than your own drugstore timepiece, baby. Take my word for it."

Bolton looked thoughtfully sidelong at Rinehart but said nothing.

"Pull over here," Rinehart said a minute later.

Bolton drove the cruiser to the curb outside a small apartment building of yellow brick. An old man and a young boy sat on the cement steps that led to the lobby. The plate glass in the entrance door displayed a plethora of smudged fingerprints to the morning sunlight.

"This where Piano lives?" Bolton asked as they left the car.

"Since he quit living with the warden a few months back, yeah." Rinehart was examining the names on the mailboxes. "Here's our boy. Apartment thirteen."

"Lucky number."

"Maybe not."

The inner door wasn't locked. The detectives strolled down the central corridor, noisome with the battling odors of floor wax, cooking cabbage and disinfectant, and found Piano's door at the extreme end of it, conveniently near the rear entrance. Rinehart knocked with maternal gentleness. No answer. Once again his massive fist beat a gentle tattoo but with the same results.

"Heavy sleeper," Bolton said, taking an impressive ring of keys from his pocket.

"Put those away, kid," Rinehart said. "We haven't got a warrant."

"But this guy's a known criminal, isn't he?"

"With constitutional rights like every other known criminal."

"You're the boss."

"Go find the janitor and tell him to bring his pass key. Tell him we're making a hazard survey for the fire marshal's office."

"That makes it legal?"

"More or less."

Twenty minutes later, after a methodical search of the two-room apartment under the bleary stare of a gin-drinker named Pearsons, the detectives declared the place to be wholly in conformance with the fire safety ordinances and departed.

Back in the cruiser, Rinehart said, "Drive to Cooley's Bar over on Seventh Street. It's one of Piano's favorite hangouts."

"He's a morning drinker?"

"He's a non-drinker. Gets high on black coffee. But most of Cooley's customers are wearing

watches they bought at terrific discounts."

"Can we prove that?"

"Only when we pull 'em in for some other misdemeanor. Then, if we're lucky, we sometimes trace the watch to its source through the serial number—if the jeweler has kept a record of the numbers."

"Great. Then what?"

"Well, then the guy with the hot watch says he found it in a garbage can."

"They don't rat on Piano?"

"They never heard of Piano." Rinehart's pose of old resignation suddenly changed. "Hey, kid, that green car coming our way—the convertible."

"Yeah?"

"Read the marker."

"Cue ex two six five three," Bolton read automatically.

"Get on its tail," Rinehart ordered, taking a tattered notebook from his coat pocket.

Bolton deftly executed a tire-squealing U turn. "Off Piano and back on buggies. You switch quick, Sarge."

Rinehart was consulting personal hieroglyphics in the notebook. "Cue ex two six five three. Check?"

"Check," Bolton said.

"That's Piano's car all right."

"How do you know?"

"I got it from Motor Vehicles this morning as soon as I saw that watch heist on the morning report. Dom always had a weakness for late-model convertibles."

Bolton said with genuine admiration, "You're on the ball, Rino. I got to admit it."

"I got an alarm clock at home and I get to work on time," Rinehart said flatly.

"Ouch."

"But step on it, kid. I want to find out who's driving that car."

"It isn't Piano?"

"It isn't Piano."

Bolton fed the cruiser more gas. The driver of the convertible must have been a rear-view mirror man because he responded with a spurt of acceleration and soon the two cars were speeding along Charles Street at sixty mph.

"The guy's a pro," Rinehart said. "He knows now we're not just private citizens out to break the speed limit."

"He's got a red light in the next block," Bolton said, looking ahead.

"He'll run it," Rinehart said, and he was right.

In running the red light, however, the car had to swerve sharply to avoid hitting a pickup truck innocently crossing the intersection, and it veered and rocked out of control, then swung its right rear into a utility pole, coming to a trembling stop. The driver sprang from the car and sprinted up an alley. He was gone beyond recall by the time Rinehart, gun in hand, trotted heavily along the street for a look.

Rinehart drove the convertible back to headquarters, protecting any potential fingerprints on the wheel with a handkerchief. Bolton followed him into the police garage.

"Search the trunk, kid," Rinehart said. "There's nothing in the glove compartment."

In the tire well under the spare, Bolton discovered a chamois bag containing a number of Swiss watches. "I'll be darned, Sarge," he said. "You sure called this one right."

Rinehart came out from under the raised hood where he had been examining the engine number with a magnifying glass. "It seems to be our lucky day," he said, wiping grease from his fingers with

a handkerchief. "Unless my hunches are slipping, this is a stolen car." He took a list from his pocket and checked it smilingly. "It used to be black, a month ago when the owner reported it missing."

"And the engine numbers are the same?" Bolton asked.

"Our acid boys can tell us that later. The numbers have been filed away but whoever did the filing failed to completely obliterate the last two digits. I could just about make 'em out as a nine and a zero, which coincides with the last two digits on the engine number of the black convertible stolen a month ago. The year and model are the same too."

Upstairs in the Bureau Rinehart and Bolton found a small man, nattily dressed in tailored sharkskin, registering a complaint with the divisional clerk. It seems he had parked his car, a new green convertible, in the parking lot adjacent to Cooley's Bar on Seventh Street for no more than five minutes, but when he returned—

"Well, if it isn't D. L. Piano, esquire," Rinehart said, patting the small man affectionately on the back.

Piano faced Rinehart with a nervous smile. "Good morning, Sergeant. It's been quite some time, hasn't it?"

"About two years," Rinehart said. "With four months off for good behavior."

Piano forced a tiny laugh. "You enjoy the gift of humor, Sergeant, as I've noted before."

"Thank you, Dom. And now it delights me to say that I've got good news for you. Three guesses."

"I'm afraid I'm not in the guessing mood at the moment," the small man said mournfully. "I've just undergone a most distressing experience."

"Then let *me* guess," Rinehart said. "Some crook has stolen your new car."

Piano's soft brown eyes widened. "You're a man of many surprises, as I've noted before."

"And here's another surprise for you, Dom. We have already recovered your lost property."

"Incredible, sir. Why, I haven't even finished filling out the complaint."

"And one more thing, Dominic— But wait a second. I don't believe you've met Detective Bolton, have you?" Rinehart asked.

"I don't think I've had that pleasure."

"Well, Dom, you may not regard it as entirely a pleasure if you notice what Detective Bolton is carrying in his hand."

Piano now saw the chamois bag and his neat little face sagged. "Alas," was all he said, while a film of moisture crept across the brown iris of each eye.

Rinehart permitted Bolton to wrap up the case, much as a teacher might give his pupil a final exam, and the young probationer acquitted himself rather well.

Settling in the interrogation room with Piano, Bolton did not immediately mention the Swiss watches. He simply placed the chamois bag on the table between them. This was good technique.

"Now about this car of yours," he began. "Did you know it was stolen?"

"Why, certainly I knew it was stolen," Piano said. "That is why I presented myself here of my own free will to—"

"Perhaps I'm going too fast for you, Mister Piano. Did you know it was stolen from its original owner a month ago?"

You could have knocked the small man over with a feather.

"I suppose you purchased the car from a reputable dealer?"

Well, it had been more of a transaction with a private citizen.

"Of course, you have a bill of sale."

Naturally. Otherwise the car could not be registered.

"And how much did you pay for the vehicle, Mister Piano?"

Suffice it to say it was an advantageous deal.

"Suffice be damned. How much?"

Fifteen hundred. Cash. Cold cash.

Bolton shook his head wearily in imitation of Rinehart and said, "Didn't it strike you as suspicious that you could buy a nearly new car, worth perhaps four grand, for less than half price?"

Well, now that you mention it.

Within an hour Dominic L. Piano had given Bolton, in return for vague promises to go light on the watch heist, enough information to start a solid crackdown on the hot-car syndicate.

"I'll book him now, kid," Rinehart finally said. "You sit here and write the report while its still fresh in your head."

A few minutes later Rinehart was standing outside the interrogation room and looking through the one-way glass at his assistant. Bolton had taken the watches from the chamois bag and lined them up in a single glittering row on the black tabletop. He counted them. Then he counted them again.

Ten, Rinehart was thinking to himself. *That's right, kid. Ten. Not nine like it says in the report. That's how the captain really tests a probationer.*

Bolton selected one of the watches and held it to his wrist, next to the one that kept losing time unless you wound it just right.

Don't let me down, kid, Rinehart prayed. *Because I think you've got the makings.*

Bolton returned the watch to the chamois bag and then, with a silent shake of his head, gathered up the others. Rinehart opened the door and walked in.

"You know, Rino," Bolton said, "there's an extra watch here. Ten altogether. Not nine as it states on the morning report. Somebody goofed."

"Well, I'll be damned," Rinehart said. "Let's go tell the captain."

A FAMILIAR VICTORY

by Elijah Ellis

"I'M AFRAID you're lying, Mr. Hastings," the police lieutenant said mildly; so mildly that at first I didn't grasp the import of his words. Then I did.

I sat forward in my chair and tried to meet his gaze. He was a large, rumpled man with an ironic quirk to his lips and dark-circled eyes. He was about my age, forty or so.

"Now, look here," I said, and tried to sound indignant.

"No, you look here," the lieutenant snapped. "We can prove that you're lying about a couple of things, and that in turn tears down your whole story about what happened to your wife this afternoon. You botched it, Hastings."

I studied the pattern in the brown and gray rug under my feet. There was no help there. I experienced the grinding sense of failure that was a familiar feeling with me, but insisted, "I've told you the truth."

Neither of the detectives, Lieutenant Snyder and a sergeant named Corsi, bothered to answer. The three of us were in the livingroom of my apartment. It was almost midnight, and I was tired, very tired; and afraid—though not for the obvious reason. It hadn't yet occurred to me that I might be charged with murdering my wife.

Now Sergeant Corsi spoke for the first time since the two detectives had arrived, a quarter of an hour before. "Why don't you tell us what actu-

ally happened here? Get it off your chest. You'll feel a lot better."

I shook my head.

"All right. Let's go over it once more," Lieutenant Snyder said. "You got home a little after five this afternoon. Your wife wasn't in the apartment. You noticed that the back door of the kitchen was open, so you stepped out onto the little porch. You saw your wife lying down at the foot of the service stairs. You ran down the steps and found that she was dead—evidently from the fall. Is that right?"

I scrubbed a hand over my face. "I told you all this when you were here before. Told you, and told you, yet you still question—"

"Is that right?" the lieutenant repeated.

"Yes, that's right," I cried.

"No, that's wrong. You were seen entering this building at four-thirty, not five o'clock."

"Well, I—I could have been mistaken about the time."

"Yeah. Half an hour, forty-five minutes worth . . . You found your wife at the foot of the service stairs. You assumed she'd fallen. Right?"

I nodded warily.

"Wrong again," Sergeant Corsi said. "Oh, she fell, all right, but she was dead at the time."

I blurted, "How—"

"How do we know?" Lieutenant Snyder broke in. "From the medical examiner. Your wife was strangled to death, Mr. Hastings. She died at approximately three in the afternoon, more than two hours before you say you found her."

I could feel large beads of sweat sliding down my face. I hadn't thought of that. I'd been in such a panic I hadn't thought of anything, except getting Marie's body out of the apartment and trying to make it look as if she'd died accidentally.

Yes, I'd botched it, all right.

"And please don't try to tell us that she must have been murdered down there in the back yard where you found her. The people who have the ground-floor apartment under yours, a Mr. and Mrs. Brown, came in that way just a few minutes before five, and they would've had to step over the body to reach their back door. They didn't. How about it, Hastings?"

"I don't know." I was trying desperately to think of some feasible explanation but my brain seemed frozen.

"You still say you told us the truth?"

"Yes. Yes!"

"Have it your way, then." The two detectives got to their feet. Lieutenant Snyder said, "You're under arrest, Mr. Hastings, for the murder of your wife, Marie Hastings. I advise you that you're entitled to counsel, and under no obligation to make any statement—"

He went on speaking, but I didn't hear him. Incredible as it sounds, until that moment I hadn't realized I could be suspected of killing Marie.

In a daze, I let the two detectives guide me out of the apartment, waiting while Corsi turned off lights and locked the front door, and then on out of the building to their car.

During the ride to police headquarters, Corsi, who was beside me in the back seat, asked softly, "Why did you kill her? Just a sudden burst of anger about something? Heck, I can understand that. My wife and I fight like cats and dogs."

I turned to stare at him with genuine amazement. "I didn't kill her. I loved her more than anything in the world. I can't even imagine myself hurting her. I loved her!"

It was the truth, and that overriding truth was the reason I could not admit the lesser truth—not to anyone; not even to myself.

At headquarters the questioning began in ear-

nest, but only after more explanations of my rights, and the signing of waivers, and more explanations at such tedious length that at another time it might have been amusing.

I stuck to my story, with the single admission that I had been wrong about the time I got home.

On a couple of occasions I noticed Sergeant Corsi staring at me, his forehead wrinkled in thought, as if he were trying, without success, to make me out.

Finally, at four in the morning, I was booked into jail, put into a cell, and left alone. I was so tired I could hardly stand up, but there was no question of sleep. Instead, I sat on the edge of the iron bunk, smoked cigarettes one after the other, and, though unwillingly, I thought about the afternoon before, reconstructed it mentally.

I'd been out of the city most of the day on business, and when I returned I drove straight home without checking in at the office. I worked for a public relations firm that represented a number of small businessmen. My day had been lousy, as usual, and I was feeling depressed and out of sorts when I keyed open the apartment door and went inside.

The first thing I saw was my wife, Marie. She was sprawled on the living room floor near the sofa. Her face was turned away, hidden by the mass of her shiny dark hair, and I thought she was asleep—at first.

I knelt beside her, vaguely noticing that she wore only underclothing and a filmy pink negligee that I hadn't seen since our honeymoon, a year and a half before.

"Marie?" I said numbly. "What happened—"

Then I saw her face, and the faint bruises marring the white skin of her throat. I fumbled for her wrist and tried to find a pulse, but she was dead, her flesh already cool to the touch. For a

time I just squatted there beside her, staring at her face, lovely even in death.

Finally I roused enough to look around the room. A chair lay on its side, but that was the only sign of a struggle. Two half-empty highball glasses were on the coffee table, and an ashtray containing a few cigarette butts. They weren't my brand, and Marie didn't smoke.

I got slowly to my feet and crossed to the open door that led into our bedroom. When I'd left that morning, the big double bed had been neatly made up. It wasn't now.

"No," I whispered, and shook my head violently. "No!"

A lot of things I had refused to see during the last few months crushed in on me now—Marie's evasiveness sometimes, the sidelong glances, the way she'd acted when I had to be out of town overnight on business, as if she could hardly wait to see me go—but I simply couldn't, wouldn't believe that there was another man. That my wife had a—lover.

I had failed at everything I had ever tried; miserable, grinding little failures, without even the redemption of tragedy; at school, in business, and now this—failure as a man.

If I admitted that I couldn't hold my wife, what was left? Nothing; just—nothing.

I walked to the bed and hurriedly straightened the sheets, pulled the spread up over the pillows and smoothed out the wrinkles. Then, still without conscious thought, I returned to the living room. I set the overturned chair upright. I emptied the ashtray and washed the two highball glasses and put them away in the kitchen. I went through the apartment, but found nothing else out of the way.

That left only Marie.

I knelt again beside her body. I said, "It was my

fault. I'm sorry. I loved you. I'm sorry it wasn't enough . . ."

For the last time I gathered her up in my arms. I carried her out to the tiny back porch. There was no one in sight in the brick-paved courtyard below. I stood at the top of the steep flight of steps, closed my eyes, and let her limp body fall away.

I went back inside and called the police. "There's been an accident," I said. "A terrible accident."

The time was five-fifteen. I honestly didn't know I'd been in the apartment forty-five minutes.

The police came, led by Lieutenant Snyder. At first he and the others were quite sympathetic. They seemed to believe my story, and that Marie had been on the porch, somehow lost her balance and fallen down the outside stairs. They left about seven o'clock.

I'm still not sure just what I did between then and the time Synder and Corsi returned. I dimly remember pacing about the silent apartment, going again and again to the bedroom to look at the now neatly made bed.

I don't know. I suppose I was trying to convince myself that what I told the police was true, that I had imagined the rest of it. That since there was no sign now that Marie had entertained a man there, that afternoon—it hadn't happened.

Crazy? Who's to say, unless he's been in my position, with my drab background of never-ending failure?

Strangely enough, I didn't feel any great hate or rage toward the man who had made love to my wife—and then killed her. I had no idea who he was. Someone from Marie's past, perhaps, or even someone I knew and thought of as a friend.

I didn't know—and didn't want to know.

Now, in the small isolated cell at the city jail, I

ground out a last cigarette on the concrete floor and lay back on the bunk and tried to sleep.

An hour later they came for me. The questioning resumed. At first I tried answering the questions, but after awhile I simply sat there in the dingy, cigar-smelling room on the second floor of the jail, and stared into space.

Then Lieutenant Snyder threw up his hands, and said, "Hastings, let's face it. Either you murdered your wife yourself, or you're trying to cover up for the murderer. Either way you're guilty!"

"Yes," I muttered, surprising even myself. "Yes, yes, I'm guilty. Now leave me be."

In the silence that followed, I saw Corsi's face. He was looking at me as he had the night before, a puzzled, unsatisfied look, but it didn't bother me.

I was enjoying the wave of relief that had suddenly washed over me. I was guilty; guilty of being a futile, rather ludicrous man—made a fool of by a wife he loved beyond reason—and to me that was worse than being thought a killer.

At last they let me go back to my cell. I wasn't bothered again for several hours. Lunchtime came and I found that I was hungry, even for the unappetizing mess the jailer handed me on a tin plate, along with a plastic spoon.

After I'd eaten, I sipped black coffee from a tin cup, and smoked a cigarette. I felt almost—good.

I can't really explain it. There I was, facing a charge of first-degree murder, with every chance of going to prison for life for a crime I hadn't committed, wasn't even capable of committing.

My life was ruined. My relatives and few friends would despise me. Thousands, millions, of people who had never seen or heard of me before would hate me, curse me as a killer—but no one would laugh at me.

The real killer? I had an idea he had too many

worries about trying to save his own skin to spend any time laughing at me, or anything else.

Yes, I actually felt good.

Then, along toward evening, Sergeant Corsi appeared in the corridor outside my cell. He was alone. "Wanted to check something with you," he said.

I studied his rather narrow, olive-skinned face. "What is it?" I asked.

"You told us that you came home at roughly two-thirty yesterday afternoon. You and Mrs. Hastings got into an argument about money—she wanted to buy a fur coat, and so on. You got mad, finally. You grabbed her by the throat and choked her. When you realized she was dead—"

"I panicked," I said. "I ran out, and drove around the city, trying to think of some way to get away with it."

"Uh huh. So you decided to make it look like an accident. Figured that was better than running. That about it?"

I nodded, and he turned abruptly and walked away.

Puzzled, I stood there at the door a moment, gripping the cold steel bars. I wasn't sure I cared for Sergeant Corsi.

Actually I'd still been in a suburb of the city at two-thirty the day before. My last appointment had ended about two, and I spent the next hour or so in a bar, brooding over a couple of drinks. I'd never been in that bar before, and there was no reason anyone there should remember me.

With a shrug I lay down on my bunk and waited for the jailer to bring my supper—and I thought about Marie.

She was so lovely, so very lovely. It was hard to believe I'd never see her again, never hold her pliant body in my arms again, and yet—

I sat up suddenly on my bunk.

I had loved her, yes, and yet I wasn't altogether sorry that she was dead. Now she was mine forever. All mine. In a way she was much closer than she'd ever been before . . .

Slowly I lay back and reached for a cigarette and lit it. I closed my eyes, and saw Marie smiling gently at me. Now she came toward me, her arms outstretched, her eyes dancing with invitation.

"Darling," I whispered. "I love you so . . ."

The night passed, and the next day, and the next night. No one came near me except the jailer with my meals. I began to discover that jail wasn't really too bad.

I had no decisions to make, no business problems, no appointments to keep. There was not much of anything I could do about anything, even if I wanted to, so why worry?

I'd never been in the armed forces, but men who had sometimes had tried to explain the paradoxical freedom of regimentation. Everything is so simple when you don't have to think for yourself, just do what you're told.

Now I was beginning to see what they meant. I found that I was almost looking forward to going to prison.

After all, now that my Marie only lived within my mind, what was there for me in the outside world? Nothing.

At mid-morning of my third day in jail, two officers I didn't know came to me. They only shook their heads at my questions, but they didn't seem unfriendly. One of them was actually smiling as we left the jail and crossed a patch of sun-drenched lawn to the headquarters building. The glare hurt my eyes after the cool dimness of my cell.

They took me to an office filled with men. Lieutenant Snyder came forward, grinning ruefully. "I

don't know what to do about you," he said. "I should belt you one, but there are . . ."

I looked around, uncomprehending.

Sergeant Corsi was leaning against the wall beside the door. He gave me a sardonic nod.

"You can thank Corsi there for saving you," Snyder was saying. "For some reason, the guy didn't believe your confession."

I mumbled, "I don't—"

"Remember when we brought you in?" Corsi said. "You told me how you loved your wife—and I just never could buy the idea you were faking. No matter what you said, later on."

I still didn't understand.

Snyder said. "On his own time, Corsi did some in-depth checking on your story, Mr. Hastings. He found that bar over in Perryville where you were during the time your wife was killed. After that, it was easy."

There was an empty chair close to where I was standing. I went to it, sat down, and buried my face in my hands.

"Once we knew for sure that you were innocent, it was just a matter of routine," Corsi said quietly. "Checking into your wife's background, her friends, and so on, almost at once we came up with a name—Thomas Derrick. Know him?"

I shook my head without speaking.

"Uh huh. Well, your wife did. Derrick cracked the minute we put pressure on him. He'd been seeing your wife, but then he wanted to break it off—and your wife didn't. So he blew his top and killed her."

Some man in the group murmured. "What I'll never understand is why this guy confessed."

I looked up at Lieutenant Snyder. "It'll all come out now, about Marie—and this Derrick."

"Oh, sure. But you're clean, Mr. Hastings. You're free."

I dropped my eyes to the floor, and felt the old, gray sense of defeat. I'd failed again. I got up and walked over to Corsi.

"Thank you, Sergeant," I said. "Thank you very much."

I wondered if he could see the hatred in my eyes.

JURY OF ONE

by Talmage Powell

I KNEW right away that the district attorney wanted this Mrs. Clevenger on the jury.

Pretending to listen to my lawyer question a prospective male juror, the D.A. studied Mrs. Clevenger, sized her up out of the corner of his eye.

There was a dryness in my throat, a fluttering in my stomach—I was on trial for my life. Murder was a capital crime in this state, and they didn't use anything merciful and clean like a gas chamber. They made you take that last long walk and sit down in a chair wired for death.

It was a nice spring day. The tall windows of the vaulted courtroom were open, letting in a soft, lazy breeze. Speaking quietly and without hurry, the lawyers had been going about the business of picking a jury for a day and a half. The fat, bald judge looked sleepy, as if his thoughts were of trout streams. The whole thing so far had been casual, almost informal. I wondered, considering the difference this day and half had made inside of me, if I was going to be able to sit through the whole trial without screaming and making a break for one of the windows.

To get my mind off myself, I swiveled my head enough to take a new look at Mrs. Clevenger. She was well into middle age, her armor of girdles and corsets reminding me of a concrete pillbox. Her clothing, jewels, and the mink neckpiece

draped carelessly over the arm of her chair all added up to a big dollar sign.

I looked at the heavy, blunt outlines of her face which even the services of an expensive cosmetician had failed to soften. You didn't have to know her; just looking at her would tell you she was rich, arrogant, selfish, merciless. Nothing, quite obviously, mattered to Mrs. Clevenger, except Mrs. Clevenger. And as she cast a passing glance in my direction, her eyes were beady and cold. There was no doubt about her being the kind of person who would have her way, no matter what.

I didn't like the way she glanced at me, but the D.A. did. He was the sort who could impress women easing past their prime. He had a tall, rangy, athletic build, a rugged face, sandy hair worn in a crew cut. He'd spotted Mrs. Clevenger already as the key juror, the one he would turn those open, warm, brown eyes on, the one he'd address his quiet, reasonable remarks to—if she were chosen. Win her, and he would have the jury. Win her, and the rest of the jury might as well try to move a mountain.

My lawyer finished his examination of the male juror. "He's acceptable to us, Your Honor," he said.

The judge stifled a yawn, nodded, plunked indolently with his gavel, and told the juror to step down.

Mrs. Clevenger was the next one to be up for examination. Mentally, I squirmed to the edge of my seat.

My lawyer came to the defense counsel table. His name was Cyril Abbott. His given name fitted him very well, perfectly. He was lanky, had a thin face which made his nose look like a big afterthought, carelessly stuck between drooping lips and narrow eyes. A gray thatch of unruly hair completed the rube picture. But if you looked

closely into his eyes, you saw he was a tough old fox with wisdom garnered from countless legal battles.

As he shuffled some papers, Cyril Abbott said, "How you feeling, Taylor?"

"Not so good," I said.

"Relax. Everything's under control so far."

"It's getting Clevenger on the jury that's got me worried," I said.

I was more worried on that point than I was about the witness.

The witness had been one of those fluke things. The killing had looked perfectly routine, just another job, though a little out of my usual line.

It was the only time I'd taken on anything outside the Syndicate. I'd been with the Syndicate quite a number of years. I guess I'd grown to take the job for granted. I was never touched by the law. Few professionals are. We're given an assignment, flown into a strange city. Our man is pointed out to us. We choose an immediate time and place. We perform our service and are whisked out of town.

The Len Doty job had seemed simple. A scrawny, down-at-the-heels crook, he'd arrived here recently and taken up residence in a fourth rate hotel.

I'd studied Doty's movements for two days. A thin, harried, nervous man, he'd seemed to have a lot on his mind. He'd been under a strain, as if something big was imminent in his life.

I was the imminent something, only he didn't know it.

I'd tried to approach this job with the same lack of feeling I had on Syndicate jobs. But here I'd been doing my own planning, and not enjoying the security you had when you were a cog in a huge machine.

By the end of the two days, I knew I had to get

the job done. I was feeling a growing nervousness. I didn't go for solitude. I wanted to be back in the big town, having a drink with men I knew or stepping out with a particular woman who was gaga over *my* tall, dark ranginess.

I'd kept the thought of fifteen grand—what Doty was worth dead—in the front of my mind. What could go wrong? It was the same as all the others, nothing to connect me with Doty. He'd die, and I'd disappear. The case would eventually slip into the local police department's unsolved file. There may be no perfect crimes, but the records are full of unsolved ones, and the record was good enough for me.

I decided on the time and place. Both nights, late, Doty went from his flea-bag hotel to a greasy spoon far down on the corner for a snack before retiring.

The block was long and dark, with an alley at its midpoint connecting the street with one that ran parallel to it. It's always wise to choose an alley that's open at both ends.

The parallel street was a slum section artery, crowded with juke joints, penny arcades, hash houses. In short, the kind of street to swallow a man up.

I knew the Syndicate big-shots had a rule of planning they tried never to break. Keep it simple.

I kept it simple. The plan was to shoot Doty with a silenced gun in the alley, walk to a garbage can, ditch the unregistered, wiped-clean gun, continue to the crowded street of joints, mingle, catch a city bus to the downtown area. There, I'd return to the good hotel where I'd registered under an alias, take a cab to the airport, and return to the big city fifteen grand richer.

Doty came from his hotel at the expected time. In the mouth of the alley, I listened to his footsteps on the dark street.

When he came abreast of the alley, I said, "Doty."

He stopped.

"Come here," I said, "I want to talk to you." I let him glimpse the gun.

He began to shake. He looked around frantically.

I pushed him twenty feet into the alley. He pleaded for his life.

The sound of the gun was a balloon popping. Doty's knees gave way, and he fell dead.

At that moment, the witness had screamed, long and loud as only a frizzy-headed blonde, in cheap clothes and makeup, can scream. She and her boy friend had decided on the alley as a short cut from one of the amusement places on the parallel street to the tenement where she lived.

Her boy friend was having none of it. He took off on the instant. The girl was right behind him, but just the same she'd glimpsed my face.

Two more balloons had popped in the alley, but in the darkness the shooting was bad. I'd missed her. Then I'd violated another Syndicate rule. I'd panicked—run straight out of the alley almost into the arms of a beat cop who'd heard the screams and was charging up for a look-see.

The cop was no sitting duck. He was big and fast—and armed.

I dropped the silenced pistol and held both my hands up as high as they'd go.

The Syndicate of course had never heard of me. I'd put myself out on the limb. Still, I had dough to hire Cyril Abbot. First day he'd come to jail to see me, he'd asked how much the job had paid. I'd had sense enough to say ten grand. He'd taken the whole ten and told me not to worry.

It was like telling me not to breathe. Maybe a lawyer as foxy as Abbott could cast some doubt on the blonde's testimony. After all, the alley had

been pretty dark. I'd faced the street glow only briefly. And everything had happened awfully fast.

The big question—to me—was whether or not this overbearing old lady Clevenger qualified to sit on the jury.

The D.A. buttered her up with those boyish, friendly brown eyes. "Your name please?"

"Mrs. Clarissa Butterworth Clevenger."

"You're an American citizen?"

"Of course."

"Do you have any moral or religious convictions against capital punishment which would disqualify you to sit on a jury in a capital case in this state?"

"None whatever, young man."

I reached for a handkerchief to wipe my face. In my mind I reviewed what little I'd heard of Mrs. Clarissa Butterworth Clevenger. She had lived here twenty years, meeting and marrying one of the town's leading citizens when he was on a Florida vacation. Abbott had mentioned that she'd been boldly, strikingly beautiful in those days, before time, luxury, and her inner self broadened the beam and altered the surface. Her husband had been fifteen years her senior. Three years ago he'd died in a private hospital after a long illness.

The D.A. gave her a considerate smile that silently said he disliked putting a lady of her position through a nonsensical routine. "Do you have any opinions already formed regarding this case, Mrs. Clevenger?"

"None."

"Do you know the defendant, Max Taylor?"

She looked down her nose at the D.A. "Hardly."

"Of course. But this is all necessary, Mrs. Clevenger."

"I quite understand. Get on with it, young man."

"I think we need go no further," the D.A. said. He turned toward the judge. "Your Honor, we find the juror acceptable."

The judge nodded. "Counsel for the defense may question the juror."

Cyril Abbott shuffled a few steps toward the Bench. He stood with that country bumpkin slump and scratched his gray tangle. "Your Honor, I guess the District Attorney has asked the important questions. I don't see any grounds for disqualification of the juror. The Defense accepts her."

I stared at Abbott's slouching back for a moment. Then I sagged in my chair and let a hard-held breath break from my lungs.

As Abbott turned to face me, I'm sure he controlled an urge to wink. For a second I was almost sorry I'd lied to him, hadn't given him the whole fifteen grand.

I don't know what Mrs. Clevenger was before she married old man Clevenger, when he made that trip to a dazzling vacation-land in a tropical clime. I don't know what Len Doty had on her when he came looming out of her past. It must have been plenty to cause her to spend a young fortune seeking out a trustworthy name—my name—and making the arrangements to get rid of him.

I'd never know that part of it, and I didn't care. I did know that there was only one thing she could do now, if she didn't want me singing my head off.

I knew how great it was going to be, getting back to the city and telling the boys how I'd been tried with my own client on the jury.

THE COMMON FACTOR

by Richard Deming

THE BUILDING was one of the small apartment hotels which dot Kingshighway in the blocks immediately north of the Chase Hotel. There was a young man of about twenty behind the desk in the lobby.

Showing my badge, I said, "Sergeant Sod Harris of Homicide. Was it you who called in?"

"No, sir. It was the building manager, Mr. Thorn. The other police officer told him to stand by in his apartment until you arrived. Shall I get him?"

"Never mind," I said. "I'll take a look upstairs first."

In the wing of the third-floor hall, where apartment 313 was located, about half the apartment doors were open. The tenants were either standing in their doorways or in the hall, gaping toward 313. A young uniformed cop stood in front of the door.

Before I could get out my wallet, the cop said, "Afternoon, Sergeant Harris," so I forgot it.

"Do I know you?" I asked.

"Patrolman Carl Budd, Sergeant. You lectured our class at Police Academy on the *Preservation of Evidence in Homicide Cases.*"

Since the lecture he referred to had been less than a month ago, obviously he had just graduated from Police Academy and was a brand new rookie.

Motioning him aside, I opened the door and entered the apartment. Patrolman Budd came in behind me, closed the door and leaned against it.

The place was what is known as a "bachelor apartment." There was one large room which served as a combination living and dining room daytimes, and converted to a bedroom at night when you wheeled a rollaway bed from its closet. An alcove off it contained a sink, cabinet, refrigerator and apartment-sized range, but was hardly big enough to classify as a kitchenette. The bath door led from one side of the alcove, and a sliding closet door comprised the other wall.

At the moment the rollaway bed was in use. A woman of somewhere around forty lay sprawled across it. She had a plump figure which had begun to sag in all the wrong places. It was hard to tell how attractive her face had been, because it was swollen all out of shape from the wire which had been drawn so tight around her throat it was imbedded in the flesh. She wore what was left of a pink nightgown which had been ripped all the way from the neck to the bottom hem.

I bent over the body to examine the wire. It was thin, flexible piano wire which had been formed into a noose, with the slipknot just below the victim's right ear. About a foot and a half of loose wire protruded beyond the slipknot, and it was twisted as though it had been wrapped around a hand. As wire that thin would have cut into the killer's unprotected hand, and there was no evidence of blood on the protruding end, it seemed probable that a heavy glove of some kind had been worn.

Carl Budd said, "That's what they call a garroting wire. Commandos during World War II used them on enemy sentries."

"I know," I said. "You won't believe I'm old enough, but I was in World War II."

He looked at me doubtfully, his expression suggesting he thought it more likely I was a veteran of World War I. I wandered around looking at things for a few moments without spotting anything which might be classified as a clue.

Then I said to Budd, "Okay. Let's hear it."

"The woman's name is Mrs. Ethel Aarons, and the apartment manager says she's lived here alone about six months. A widow or divorcee, I guess. She worked as a beauty operator at the Dove Beauty Salon on Euclid. Friday she didn't show for work. The proprietor phoned here several times, but got no answer. Today, when she failed to show again, the boss made a few more phone calls. Finally she got worried enough to come over. She got the manager to open up and they found this."

I frowned. That made it probable the murder had taken place Thursday night, and the condition of the body tended to confirm it had been at least that long ago. Looking at my watch, I saw it was three-thirty.

"What time did these people discover the body?"

"Well, the call from the manager came in at three. My partner and I got here at three-ten. He's out in the car, monitoring the radio."

I said, "I understand the building manager is standing by in his flat, but where's this beauty shop proprietor you mentioned earlier?"

"She's in his flat too. She was kind of upset, and Mr. Thorn offered her a drink of brandy."

I left Budd guarding the door again and went downstairs. The young desk clerk steered me to the building manager's apartment.

Everett Thorn turned out to be a tall, lanky man of about sixty who was either a bachelor or widower, because there was no evidence of a

woman occupying the one-room apartment with him. The beauty shop proprietor was a firm-bodied artificial blonde of perhaps fifty-five named Marie Baumgartner. They were companionably having brandy and coffee together. At Thorn's invitation I accepted coffee without brandy.

"I really don't know much about Mrs. Aarons," the building manager said. "She was prompt with her rent, never caused any trouble and seemed a pleasant person. But we were barely acquaintances."

"Somebody on duty at your lobby desk around the clock?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Only until midnight. After that the lobby is deserted and anybody could come in."

"Who was on duty Thursday night?"

"Roy Johnson, the boy on right now. He works from two P.M. until midnight, every day but Sunday," the manager said quietly.

I turned to Marie Baumgartner. "Did you know Mrs. Aarons well?"

The brandy she was working on couldn't have been her first, because she had to concentrate in order to get an appropriately sad expression on her face. "Oh, sure. We've been friends for years. She's worked at my shop ever since I opened ten years ago, and we were friends before that."

"Tell me about her."

"Well, she was an extremely nice person, gay and full of fun. At parties the way she carried on was a scream. She was a performer, you know. She was always the one to get up on the table and do the Can-Can, or start everybody singing. Stuff like that. You know the type."

"Uh-huh," I said. "The life of the party. How was she when she wasn't partying?"

"Oh, she was still a gay one, always cracking

jokes. She never had any luck with men, though. She'd been married three times."

"Oh? You know the names of her ex-husbands?"

When she said she did, I took out my notebook. "Okay. Shoot."

She said the first husband's name had been Julius Berger. Ethel Aarons had been divorced from him for ten years, and he had died about five years ago. Her second husband had been a Henry Jacobson. She had been divorced from him about four years, and he now lives somewhere in California. Marie didn't know where. The last husband was named Lyle Aarons. He and Ethel had been divorced about six months ago, at the time Ethel moved here, and he still lives in the apartment they had occupied together while they were married. She said that was in the forty-one hundred block of Maryland, but she didn't know the exact address.

She also told me that Ethel's current boy friend was a truck driver named Earl Burke, but she didn't know where he lived. Insofar as Marie Baumgartner knew, Ethel had no enemies.

I thanked Everett Thorn for the coffee and went back out to the desk.

"You're Roy Johnson?" I asked the youngster on duty.

"Yes, sir."

"You were on duty until midnight Thursday night?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you see Mrs. Aarons that evening?"

He nodded. "She came in from work about a quarter after five and went out again about five-thirty. For dinner, I guess, because she came back about seven and didn't appear again."

"Anyone you didn't recognize enter the building after that?"

He started to shake his head, then paused. "Well, a messenger delivered a telegram. About nine P.M."

"To whom?"

"I don't know," he said with a shrug. "He came in carrying the telegram, got on the elevator and rode up. I didn't notice what floor. He wasn't up there more than five minutes."

"This an outside line?" I asked, pointing to the phone on the counter.

"I can give you one on it," he said, turning to a switchboard behind the desk. "What number do you want?"

"United Telegraph."

When I told the woman who answered who I was and what I wanted, she had me wait while she looked up last Thursday's records.

When she came back on the phone, she said, "A telegram was delivered to a Mrs. Ethel Aarons Thursday evening at that address. It was called in from a local pay phone, and the sender gave his name as Lester Mason of 5328 South Grace Street."

After writing the name in my notebook, I asked, "What was the message?"

"It was one of our standard birthday greetings. It goes, *Happy birthday to a dear friend. Have a hundred more.* It was signed *Les.*"

"Thanks," I said.

When I got back upstairs I found Art Ward from the lab standing by with his lab kit. I took him into the apartment and explained exactly what I wanted. I told him to dust for prints first, as I wanted to do some searching as soon as he was through. Then I left him alone and went to interview some other of the neighbors.

No one on the third floor had seen or heard anything unusual Thursday night, though a woman who lived down the hall remembered

seeing Ethel return from dinner about seven P.M. and enter her apartment. No one recalled seeing the messenger boy. I tried the apartments immediately above and below 313, but neither tenant had heard or seen anything. When I got back to the murder apartment, Art Ward had finished his work.

He said, "I took three photos from different angles. There are no prints in the place clear enough for comparison purposes except hers. No sign of forcible entry, but the door lock is only a simple spring lock, and a piece of celluloid could open it, providing the inner bolt wasn't thrown."

"It wasn't," I said. "The manager got in with a pass key."

"That doesn't necessarily rule out a visit by someone known to her. She could have unbolted for a familiar voice, then the killer simply could have set the spring lock when he left."

"You're just supposed to collect evidence," I said. "Not theorize. You looking for a job on Homicide?"

"Never," he said with an expression of revulsion on his face. He gathered up his equipment and left.

Carl Budd stuck his head in the door. "Some guys are here to take the body to the morgue."

"Okay. Tell them to come in and get it."

"She hasn't been looked at by a medical examiner yet."

I looked at him. Apparently I had missed a few points during my lecture at the Police Academy. "You think an M.E. comes rushing to the scene of every homicide, like in the movies?"

"Well—" He scratched his head and let it trail off.

"The coroner's physician has two assistants," I said. "They do their work without ever leaving the Coroner's Court Building, where they have a mod-

ern autopsy room to work in. Why should they come out here, when all their equipment is there?"

"Doesn't a doctor have to pronounce her dead?" he asked uncertainly.

I could have explained that there usually is a private physician at murder scenes, because generally one is called before we are. I could also have explained that in cases where none has been called, we call in the nearest available M.D. if there is the slightest doubt that the victim is actually dead. But I was here to conduct an investigation, not deliver a long lecture.

"They'll pronounce her dead at the morgue," I said. After something like sixty hours with a wire wrapped around her neck, I didn't think I needed a preliminary medical opinion in this case.

Reluctantly Budd allowed the men in to cart off the body. When they were gone I made a thorough search of the apartment. The only thing of importance I found was an address book containing the names and addresses of Ethel's three exhusbands and her current boy friend. A line was drawn through the name Julius Berger and "dead" was written in the margin. An address in Burbank, California was listed behind the second husband, Henry Jacobson. No Lester Mason was listed in the book.

There was also no sign of the birthday telegram in the apartment.

I phoned headquarters to put out wants on third husband Lyle Aarons, current boy friend Earl Burke and telegram sender Lester Mason. I also dictated a telegram of inquiry to the Burbank police concerning second husband Henry Jacobson.

By now it was nearly five, when I was supposed to go off duty. But you don't walk off a homicide case when the whistle blows. I phoned my wife,

Maggie, to tell her I wouldn't be home for dinner. Then I told Budd to lock and seal the apartment, after which he could take off.

I caught some dinner on the way downtown and arrived at the squadroom about six-thirty. Sam Wiggens was on night duty. There were also two uniformed cops there who had brought in Lyle Aarons and Earl Burke.

"Anything on Lester Mason?" I asked Sam.

"Yeah," he said. "There isn't any 5300 block on South Grace. It jumps from fifty-two to fifty-four. And there's no Lester Mason listed either in the phone book or city directory."

I frowned, then said to one of the cops, "Run over to the telegraph office, find out who the messenger was who delivered that telegram and bring him in."

With a nod he walked out.

Lyle Aarons was a tall, slim man of about forty-five who said he worked as an accountant for a local brewery. There had been a company banquet Thursday night and he was able to account for his time from seven P.M. until he went to work Friday morning. The party had lasted until one A.M., after which he had spent the night with a friend instead of going home. I had him phone his friend, who then verified his alibi.

Aarons claimed his divorce from the victim had been an amicable one, and that they had remained on friendly terms. He said she had just been too much of a party girl for him, and he was too much of a homebody for her. They had parted by mutual agreement. He had never heard of anyone named Lester Mason.

I let him go with instructions to stay available.

Earl Burke was a burly man of about forty. He had an ironclad alibi too. He drove a cross-country rig and had been in Indianapolis Thursday night. As a matter of fact, he had only arrived

back in town at noon today. He gave me the phone number of his company dispatcher; I called the man and Burke's alibi checked out.

Burke said he had last seen Ethel Aarons Wednesday night, when they had a date. He had left for Indianapolis Thursday morning, spent the night there, drove on to Dayton, Ohio, on Friday, then turned around and came home. He claimed he and the victim had been on the best of terms.

"We wasn't engaged or anything," he said. "I just took her out for kicks. But we got along swell."

He also had never heard of anyone named Lester Mason. I let him go with the same instructions I had given Lyle Aarons.

While waiting for the messenger to be brought in, I started phoning the Masons in the phone book. There was a whole page of them.

Every time someone answered the phone, I asked, "Does a Lester Mason live there?"

I was halfway through the list, and had turned up only one Lester Mason, who proved to be a six-year-old boy, when the cop I had sent after the messenger brought him in.

He was a slim, wiry, thin-faced lad of about twenty-five named Peter Hendrix. He said he remembered delivering the telegram to Mrs. Ethel Aarons on Thursday evening.

"Was she alone?" I asked.

"I didn't see anyone else there. I didn't go inside, but the door was open and I could see in. Somebody could have been to one side of the door or in the bathroom, of course."

"What was her reaction to the telegram?"

He shrugged. "She didn't open it in front of me. She just gave me a dime and closed the door."

"How was she dressed?"

He thought before saying, "In a robe, I think. One of those terry cloth things. She looked ready

for bed. Had her hair up in curlers."

"How come the telegram was delivered instead of phoned to her?" I asked.

"We always deliver form messages," he said. "They're kind of like cards, and people want to see them. It isn't the same over the phone."

"Okay," I said. "I guess that's all. Were you dragged away from work?"

"Uh-huh. I'm on until nine." He glanced at the wall clock. "I'm off now, though."

Following his gaze, I saw it was nine-thirty. A general roundup of known nuts and deviates was already underway, I knew, and they would be coming in by droves before long. But the night trick could handle that.

I knocked off and offered to drive Peter Hendrix home. He said he had a car parked at the telegraph office, so I drove him there instead.

Sunday was my day off, but I dropped by headquarters in the morning anyway. There was a wire from Burbank saying Henry Jacobson had been located and had established he hadn't been out of town for weeks.

Twenty-six suspects pulled in by the dragnet had been questioned and released.

There were no reports from the lab or from the coroner's office yet, so I left.

Monday morning I found reports from both on my desk. The post mortem report said death had been by strangulation, and fixed the time as somewhere between midnight and four A.M. Friday morning. Fingernail scrapings were negative, indicating the killer hadn't been scratched, which didn't surprise me since the position of the noose's slipknot suggested he had attacked from the rear. The victim had been criminally molested after death.

The only new information in the lab report was the gauge and type of wire from which the noose

had been made. It was a common type which could be purchased in any hardware store or dime store.

I checked out the rest of the Masons in the phone book without locating the man who had sent the birthday greeting.

By the end of the week a hundred and sixteen known sex offenders had been screened and cleared. We were no closer to a solution than we had been when the crime was reported.

Then, on Saturday, the second victim turned up.

This time it was a twenty-two-year-old private secretary who had a three-room apartment on Bates, down on the south side. Her name, we were told, was Leona Bacon.

Like the first victim, she failed to show at work on Friday and didn't answer the phone when her boss called. She didn't work on Saturday, but she was supposed to go shopping with a girl friend who worked at the same office. When the girl friend called for her and got no answer, she became worried because she knew Leona had missed work the day before. She relayed her worry to one of the neighbors. It was a first-floor apartment and the neighbor found an unlocked window. He crawled inside to investigate.

Leona Bacon had been strangled in the identical manner Ethel Aaron had, and had also been criminally molested after death. There was no sign of forcible entry, but again this didn't mean that the killer had been admitted by the victim. The apartment had its own outside entrance, and the lock was the same simple spring type Ethel Aarons had. It could easily have been opened with either a skeleton key or a small piece of celluloid slid into the crack of the door next to the lock.

In this case there were no ex-husbands or boy friends to investigate. Leona had been engaged to

a serviceman in Viet Nam and went with no other man. She was an orphan without relatives. Her social life consisted of church meetings and singing in a choir. She was described by her friends as a shy, quiet girl who spent most evenings at home and never had an enemy in her life.

The post mortem report said she had died between midnight and four A.M. Friday.

The newspapers made the most of the coincidence that the two murders had been exactly one week apart, practically to the hour. Some newsman dubbed the killer the *Thursday-night Strangler* and he became page-one news.

We again rounded up all the known nuts and deviates, and again got nowhere.

The following Friday morning the next victim was discovered. Her name was Anita Cabral, and she lived in a firetrap room above a tavern in the 3900 block of Olive, which isn't the best part of town. She was discovered by her landlady, who had called to evict her for non-payment of rent. Anita was thirty-eight.

Insofar as clues were concerned it was the same story all over again, except that because of the earlier discovery of the body the coroner's physician was able to fix time of death a little closer. He estimated it as between one A.M. and three A.M. Friday. Otherwise we had no more leads than we had in the previous two murders.

Again there was no sign of forcible entry. The street door which gave onto the stairs leading upward to the rooms above the tavern was never locked, so anyone could have gone as far as her door unobserved. The door, as usual, was protected only by a spring lock.

After the third murder, the Thursday-night Strangler made the front page daily, even when there was nothing to report but a rehash of his murders. The newspapers urged lone women to

bolt their doors on Thursday nights and allow no one in they didn't know.

I had accumulated and typed up vast amounts of data on all three victims. I read it over and over until my eyes turned red, trying to find some common factor among the three women.

That was the result of a suggestion by the lieutenant. He had said, "Look for a common factor, Harris. In these nut cases, there's always some method of choosing his victims which seems logical to the killer. He never makes just random hits. There had to be some common factor."

"Like what?" I inquired.

"Well, in the case of Jack-the-ripper, all the victims were prostitutes. With the Boston Strangler, a number of his victims had some connection with a local hospital, either as patients, employees or volunteer workers."

"Both cases still unsolved," I said sourly. "That cheers me considerably."

"Don't be a defeatist," he snapped at me. "Find the common factor and you'll at least have a clue to the killer. Maybe he picks women with the same color eyes, or who are bowlegged, or knock-kneed, or wear their hair in a particular style. There's bound to be some kind of pattern."

I was still trying to find the pattern at log-out time the following Thursday, under the desperate pressure of knowing that if I didn't find it, probably another woman would die that night. The lieutenant stopped by my desk on the way out.

"Anything?" he inquired.

"Yeah," I said. "The common factor is that they were all female and lived alone. I never ran into three such different women in my life. You want to listen to a resume?"

"Go ahead."

"Physical appearance: Ethel Aarons was plump and sloppy, Leona Bacon built like a dream, Anita

Cabral thin and bony. Ethel brunette, Leona auburn, Anita blonde. Eyes brown, hazel and blue. Ages forty-two, twenty-two, thirty-eight. Backgrounds: Ethel was born in Jackson, Mississippi, had two years of high school plus a beauty course. Leona was born in St. Louis, had two years of college plus a secretarial course. Anita Cabral's past record we couldn't trace, but people who knew her say she mentioned coming from the east and she couldn't have had as much as a grammar school education because she was all but illiterate. Personalities: Ethel was a gay party gal with three ex-husbands; Leona was a quiet little mouse who spent most of her time in church; Anita was a hustler and a near alcoholic. Want me to go on?"

"Not unless you can do better than that," the lieutenant said.

I arranged the three case folders in front of me and gazed down at them broodingly. The names on the tabs were typed last-name-first to read: *Aarons, Ethel; Bacon, Leona; Cabral, Anita.*

Suddenly something hit me. "Hey, these are in alphabetical order. A, B, C. Do you suppose this nut is just picking names out of the phone book in order?"

The lieutenant gave me an indulgent pat on the shoulder. "If he was doing that they'd all be A's. The second name in the phone book doesn't start with B."

"Maybe the second one listed to a woman instead of a man does," I said, reaching for the phone book. "Maybe the killer locates his lone women by picking feminine names from the book."

The lieutenant started to show some interest. He leaned over my shoulder to follow my finger as it moved down the first column of the first page.

I got a small lift when I saw that the first unquestionably feminine name listed was *Aarons,*

Ethel. Depression set in again when I found that about ten lines below that was *Abbott, Angel,* and a half column below that was *Abcock, Lucille.* I had never realized so many phones were in women's names. There must have been twenty on the first page.

"I guess that sinks that theory," the lieutenant said. "Good night."

After he walked out I got another idea. Suppose the strangler was moving through the alphabet, taking the first feminine A, then the first B, then the first C and so on?

I reopened the phone book to the B section and got a disappointment. The first feminine name listed was *Babcock, Josephine.* The next, several lines down, was *Bachmann, Cleo. Bacon, Leona* was the third feminine listing.

I turned to the C section. *Cable, Edith* was the first feminine name and *Cabral, Anita* was the second.

So much for that brainstorm, I thought. It was just coincidence that the first victim's name started with A, the second with B, and third with C.

I logged out and went home.

After dinner, as we were having coffee in the front room, Maggie said, "You've been brooding ever since you got home, Sod. Is it because it's Thursday night?"

"Yeah," I said. "Let's hope every lone female in town takes the newspaper's advice about keeping her doors bolted."

"Are you making any progress in your search for a common factor?"

"I thought I had it today, but it fizzled out." I told her of my theory that the Strangler may have been picking women from the phone book alphabetically, but that while the first victim had been the first female A listed, the second had been the third B and the third had been the second C.

"Well, for goodness sakes, that doesn't mean anything," my wife said. "The first two B's may not live alone. Maybe he cased them and decided they were too well protected. Perhaps he is going through the alphabet and picking the first woman in each section who lives all alone."

I gazed at her. Even after twenty years of married life, it still startles me every time I rediscover that my wife has more brains than I do.

Rising, I went over and gave her a kiss. Then I went into the hall to make some phone calls. But on the verge of dialing the first number, I decided it would be too hard to explain myself over the phone. Instead I copied down the addresses from the phone book.

Josephine Babcock was listed as living on South Grand. The address turned out to be a two-story house. A stocky young man of about twenty came to the door.

Showing my badge, I said, "I'm Sergeant Sod Harris of the police. Is Josephine Babcock home?"

"Mom?" he said with raised brows. "Sure. Come on in."

He ushered me into the front room, where a graying woman of about fifty and a tall lad of about eighteen were watching television.

"This is Sergeant Harris of the police, Mom," the stocky youth announced. "He asked for you."

The woman greeted me with surprised courtesy and introduced the two young men as her sons, Fred and George. I shook hands with both.

"Sit down, Sergeant," Mrs. Babcock invited.

"I won't be here that long," I said. "I'm in rather of a hurry. I don't want to alarm you, but I have reason to believe the Thursday-night Strangler may have cased your home a couple of weeks ago. If he did, he decided to by-pass you as the potential victim, so you don't have to get excited."

The woman's eyes were wide with astonishment. The two boys frowned with a touch of belligerence. George, the younger, contemplatively tapped a fist into his palm.

"If he comes nosing around here, we'll deliver you a dead strangler," he said ominously.

"I'm sure he won't. He picks only women who live alone. So if he did case this house, he would have rejected it the moment he learned two grown males lived here. Now I would like all of you to concentrate on the week between the first two murders. Did you notice anyone observing the place, or did anything at all unusual happen? A stranger coming to the door selling something, for instance?"

The three looked at each other. Mrs. Babcock said, "I can't think of anything."

Neither could the two boys. Thanking them, I left and drove to the second address.

The apartment where Cleo Bachmann lived was on Tower Grove. She turned out to be a girl of about twenty-five who shared the apartment with three other girls. None of them could recall any suspicious characters hanging around during the week preceding the second murder.

Edith Cable lived way up on North Twentieth in a large brick house which she ran as a male boardinghouse. She was a muscular woman in her early sixties.

So far, Maggie's suggestion was checking out perfectly. The Thursday-night Strangler would have had to be not only nuts, but extremely brave to pick a victim as well surrounded by people as the first three feminine C's in the phone book.

When I had explained what I wanted to the boardinghouse landlady, she shook her head. "Men come asking about rooms all the time, but I can't recall any acting suspicious."

"Can you remember anything at all unusual happening recently? Any odd phone calls, for instance?"

She started to shake her head, then grinned. "Well, it wasn't anything sinister. I got a birthday greeting when it wasn't my birthday."

I felt a tingle run along my spine. "When was this?"

She thought for a moment. "The Wednesday before last. About eight at night a birthday telegram was delivered. It not only wasn't my birthday, but I never heard of the man it came from."

I said, "Did you accept the telegram personally?"

"No. Everybody runs to the door here when the bell rings. Three of the men answered in a bunch, but I don't know which one took the telegram."

It was easy to see how that kind of reception would discourage any strangler, I thought. I said, "Mind if I use your phone?"

"Go right ahead."

I phoned Mrs. Josephine Babcock first. When I got her on the phone, I said, "This is Sergeant Harris again, Mrs. Babcock. Did you happen to receive a form telegram anytime recently?"

"Why, yes, a couple of weeks ago," she said. "It was the oddest thing. It was a birthday telegram from somebody I didn't know, and it wasn't even my birthday."

"Do you recall the exact night?"

"Mmm. It was on a Monday. Two weeks from this past Monday."

"Did you accept the telegram personally?"

"Yes."

"Were either of the boys around at the time?"

There was a pause as she thought this over. Finally she said, "I don't believe they were in the front room, but they were somewhere in the house. Why?"

"I haven't time to explain right now," I said. "Did you have any conversation with the messenger boy?"

"Not that I recall—Yes, I did too. He asked if I lived alone in this great big house, and I told him I had two sons."

"Thanks," I said. "I'm in a hurry, so good-by."

When I phoned Cleo Bachmann, I learned she also had received a form telegram the night after Mrs. Babcock got hers. Through the open door the messenger had seen the other girls inside and had asked if they all lived there. Cleo had told him yes.

The women I had visited lived far enough apart so that I had consumed considerable time just driving. It had also taken me a lot of time to explain myself at each stop. I noted by my watch that it was ten after ten.

I still had some margin of safety if the Strangler stuck to his previous pattern, I figured, because so far he had never hit before midnight. I got to headquarters at ten-thirty.

Sam Wiggens looked up in surprise when I entered the squadroom. "What's up?" he inquired.

"I think I've broken the Strangler case," I said.

Going to my desk, I opened the folder on Ethel Aarons and looked at the post mortem report. On the face of a post mortem report is a section for vital statistics, including date of birth.

It had been there for me to see all the time, but I had missed it. Ethel Aaron's birthday was August second, yet her birthday telegram from the non-existent Lester Mason had been delivered the first Thursday in October.

I said to Sam, "Put out a want on that messenger, Peter Hendrix. He gets off work at nine, but you can get his home address from the telegraph office."

"What's the charge?" Wiggens asked.

"Suspicion of homicide. He's the Thursday-night Strangler."

When he looked at me with his mouth open, I said, "He's been sending form birthday greetings to women as an excuse to case their homes. He calls the telegrams in from pay phones, paying for them by dropping coins in the slot, and giving fake names and addresses for the senders. Form telegrams are always delivered personally, so when he returned to the office, they would be handed to him to deliver. It gave him a perfect opportunity to case the lay and make sure his intended victim lived alone. If the setup wasn't right, he would send another to the next woman on his list the next night. When he found a suitable victim, he came back in the middle of the night and strangled her."

Sam closed his mouth and reached for the phone.

While he was getting Peter Hendrix's home address, I was using another phone. The first feminine name listed under the D's was Lulu Daane.

A male voice answered and rather testily told me Mrs. Daane was in bed. What did I want?

"This is Sergeant Sod Harris of the police department," I said. "To whom am I speaking?"

"John Daane," he said a trifle more politely. "Lulu's brother."

"Has Mrs. Daane received any odd telegrams recently?" I asked.

"Why, yes," he said in a surprised tone. "Monday night she got a birthday telegram from some joker we never heard of. Is it some kind of racket?"

"Uh-huh," I said. "Did Mrs. Daane accept the telegram personally?"

"No. I answered the door."

"I'm in too much of a hurry to explain what

this is all about now," I said. "You'll see it in the paper. Thanks."

I hung up and called the second feminine listing, which was a Vera Daffin.

She had received a birthday telegram on Tuesday. But when I learned she had a married couple boarding with her in her house, I knew she wasn't the one.

The next feminine listing was Sandra Dahl. She had received her telegram on Wednesday evening.

"Do you live alone, Miss Dahl?" I asked.

"Why, yes. Why?"

"I'll have a police officer there in five minutes. Please bolt your door and admit no one until he gets there. Understand? Admit no one."

"You're frightening me," she said in a shaking voice. "What is it? The Strangler?"

"There's nothing to worry about," I reassured her. "An officer will be there within minutes."

I broke the connection, called Communications, explained what was up, and asked that the nearest radio car be sent to Sandra Dahl's place at once.

My various phone calls had required so much explanation, by now it was a quarter after eleven. I gave Sam Wiggens an inquiring look.

"A call about Hendrix just came in," he said. "He ain't at his rooming house."

"Then he probably intends to try for the Dahl woman," I said. "Think we ought to have the place surrounded?"

Sam shrugged. "He's only a little guy, armed with a piece of wire. Two radio-car cops ought to be able to handle him."

"I guess I'll run over to lend a hand anyway," I decided.

The address was on Lindell, just beyond Grand.

It was just midnight when I parked in front of the two-story gray stone building. An empty squad car was parked on the opposite side of the street only a quarter block away, I noted with irritation. They should have had sense enough to get it completely out of sight.

The building must be an apartment house, I thought as I walked toward the wide front door. The door was locked, so I rang the bell. It was opened by a uniformed cop who had his hand on his gun.

Showing my badge, I said, "Sergeant Harris of Homicide. Everything under control?"

"Sure," he said, stepping aside to let me in. "I don't see how he could get at the girl here anyway."

I found myself in a large but deserted foyer illuminated only by a night light. A central hall, also dimly lighted, ran toward the back of the building.

"What is this place?" I asked.

"A working girls' dormitory. They all have individual rooms, but there's a couple of dozen women plus a house mother living here. My partner's up in Miss Dahl's room on the second floor."

I felt a cold chill run along my spine. "Where's a phone?" I barked.

He gave me a startled look, then pointed across the foyer. "Right there."

The next feminine D in the book was Evelyn Dane. I was relieved to see she was on Delmar, only a few blocks away.

Evelyn Dane's voice sounded as though she had been awakened from a sound sleep when she answered the phone.

I woke her up completely by saying, "This is Sergeant Sod Harris of the police, Miss Dane. Sorry to disturb you so late, but it's urgent. Have

you received any telegrams lately?"

"Why, yes," she said in a surprised tone. "Earlier this evening I got a birthday wire. And it's not even my birthday."

My chill increased. "Do you live alone?"

"Yes."

"What kind of a place do you have?"

"A four-room flat on the ground floor."

"Listen to me carefully," I said. "We have reason to believe the Strangler intends to pay you a call. Another police officer and I will be there in five minutes. Make sure your doors are bolted, and don't let anyone in until we arrive."

"All right," she said in a frightened voice.

Hanging up, I said to the cop. "Come on. I need your uniform. In plainclothes she might take me for the strangler."

"How about my partner upstairs?" he asked.

"The hell with your partner," I snarled at him. "Let's roll."

We made it in four minutes. This time it was a four-unit apartment house with separate outside entrances to each flat. The address we were looking for was the lower left one.

I was just reaching for the doorbell when a shot sounded from inside.

I tried the door and found it locked. With my pistol butt I knocked out the door pane, reached inside and drew open a slide bolt. Then I also had to turn the inside knob, which was on nightlock.

There wasn't a light in the house, but as we entered one went on in a rear room.

"Is that the police?" a feminine voice called.

"Yes," I called back, making my way toward the voice.

The lighted room was the kitchen. A slim, pretty redhead of about twenty-five, clad in a flimsy nightgown, stood in the doorway between

it and the dining room. She held a small, pearl-handled pistol at her side and a flashlight in her other hand.

Just inside the open back door sprawled the body of Peter Hendrix, a small square of celluloid in one hand and a loop of wire in the other. He wore thick leather gloves.

"I heard him at the back door the minute you hung up," the girl said in a slightly high voice. "I had this gun, so I got it and my flashlight from my dresser and turned off my bedroom light. The rest of the lights were already off. I stood here listening until I heard the door open. Then I turned on my flashlight and saw the wire in his hand. So I shot him."

Giving us a wan smile, she toppled over in a faint.

Unfortunately, Peter Hendrix took the bullet squarely in the heart, so he couldn't answer any questions. When we checked into his background, we discovered that as usual in such cases, he had a long record of previous mental disorder.

I would have liked to have been able to ask him one question. It still bothers me, wondering why he always picked Thursdays.

A TURN TO THE RIGHT

by James Holding

"YOU'RE a cinch to be nailed on the kidnapping charge," my lawyer said to me. "The jury won't even have to leave the box. Right?"

"Right," I admitted.

"And that means your neck, Beau. You understand that. Because kidnapping is a capital crime here. Right?"

"Right."

"So what do we do?" Levin asked, gesturing with his big splayed fingers.

"You tell me," I said. "You're the high-priced lawyer. You got the education. And I got no confidence in myself since last night, anyhow."

Levin shook his head. "No wonder. But it suggests your only possible defense. Insanity. Temporary insanity. You're some kind of a nut, Beau. A kook. You kidnapped Janie Pharr while of unsound mind. Get it?"

"I get it," I said, "but I don't like it. I'm no nut, buddy. If there's anything I'm not, it's crazy. I've always been sane, sensible and relaxed about everything I do. Anybody that knows me will tell you that. I'm as sane as you are."

"Haha," Levine said. "I'm laughing. Sane, the boy says. Did it all happen just the way the papers said it did?"

"Yeah."

"So let me lay it down for you to look at, once, then tell me if you're sane. You're staying at the

same hotel in Riverside as the Pharrs—the rich oil man, his wife, and their little girl, Jane, aged ten. Right?"

I nodded. "You know it, pal."

"Okay. You work out this kidnapping caper. You snatch little Janie Pharr last night when she's on the porch alone, in front of the hotel. You get her into a car you've stolen, tape her mouth shut with adhesive, tie her hands and feet, and put her on the floor in the back of the car. Right?"

"You make it sound easy," I said, "but that's about it."

"Then what do you do? You take off for Campbell's Crossing. You're clean away. You know Janie won't be missed for a couple of hours. By that time, you'll have made Campbell's Crossing, ditched the stolen car, transferred the kid to the cabin cruiser you've rented under an assumed name, and be long gone from the inlet with the whole ocean to lose yourself in until you can collect the ransom. Right?"

"Half a million," I said, remembering. "I was going to ask for half a million."

"But you never got as far as Campbell's Crossing." Levin's thin mouth turned up in a sardonic grin. "You had the kid. You were far enough ahead of an alarm to make your getaway sweet and clean. The half-a-million was as good as in your hand."

"Don't rub it in," I said.

He paid no attention. "So what does our sensible, sane kidnapper do at this crucial point in the commission of his crime?" Levin paced up and down five feet each way, as though addressing a jury. He turned to me. "What *did* you do, Beau?"

I said miserably, "I went to sleep."

He shrugged his shoulders as though his suit scratched, and gave me a triumphant look. "See? A sane, sensible act, if I ever heard of one," he

said sarcastically. "You pulled up your stolen car at the side of the road, carefully parking if off the traffic lanes, and went sound asleep!"

"I didn't want the kid to get hurt," I said.

Levin's voice rasped. "Of course not. Naturally. So you pulled off the road. But was that a sane, sensible moment to decide to take a nap?"

"I don't know what came over me," I said. "It was the strangest feeling, as though I was going to black out, or faint, you know? Not like getting sleepy exactly."

"Whatever it was, you went to sleep, Connors. Because that's how those kind tourists found you when they stopped to see if you were sick, or needed help or anything; sound asleep behind the wheel of the car, slumped over a little. And they found a ten-year-old girl gagged and bound in the back of your car. You can't blame them for calling the police, can you?"

"No," I said, "but I can't figure what happened to me, either. I hadn't been drinking. I wasn't doped. I wasn't sleepy. I was excited, sure. Who wouldn't be, in the middle of a kidnapping? I kept looking over my shoulder into the back seat of the car to see that the kid was okay—not suffocating or anything from the tape on her kisser, you know? But I felt great. Then, all of a sudden, I didn't. When I came to, the police had me."

"And the police doctor who went over you after they brought you in last night agreed that you weren't drunk or doped or having a stroke or a coronary. So face it, pal. You were nuts. You had to be, to take a nap in the middle of a kidnapping. Right?"

"Maybe I was," I admitted finally. "But I certainly didn't feel like it."

"They never do," Levin said. "We'll use it as our defense, anyway. It's our only hope. And Beau,"

he looked at me with genuine sympathy, "If you *are*—uh—slightly unbuttoned, don't worry about it, son. It's probably only temporary. And it will save you from the chair." He looked at his watch. "I'll send in a couple of psychiatrists to look you over good. Goodbye now."

The headshrinkers Levin sent in to examine me were nice enough guys but, believe me, they were operating away out beyond my depth. They asked me screwy questions, talked a lot of doubletalk in technical terms, and put me through some routines that made me think they needed the treatment, not me. But I ended up by being convinced that I was probably nuts, after all, when I stopped to take that nap in the midst of a snatch. "Intolerable tension," they muttered to each other. "Perfectly natural that withdrawal symptoms should appear." And like that. I had to admit that going to sleep in the middle of a crime they can fry you for is quite a withdrawal symptom, at that, all things considered. So from then on, I worried more about being a nut then I did about being a kidnapper caught with the goods, until my trial came up.

The testimony given by Janie Pharr and her parents, by the motorists who had stopped to help me on the road, and by the police officers involved, all left no shadow of a doubt in the jurors' minds that I was a dirty kidnapper caught in the act. And there was nothing my lawyer, Levin, could do about that, except to keep pounding away in his cross-examination at the odd fact that I had been taking a nap beside the road when apprehended; and to intimate, none too subtly, that this was something no kidnapper in his right mind would conceivably do with a death sentence the almost certain result.

Pretty soon, the jurors were obviously beginning to agree with Levin that I was as nutty as a

fruitcake. The sneaky frightened looks they gave me out of the corners of their eyes told me that, so everything was going along pretty good for our side. Levin had our two headshrinkers lined up to testify to my derangement when our time came, and he had primed me to act as confused and uncertain in the witness chair as I could.

"It's in the bag, Beau," Levin murmured to me out of the corner of his mouth.

Then the prosecution called Dr. Julius Sanderson to the stand. I recognized him as the doctor who had looked me over when I was first arrested. He settled himself quietly in the witness chair and from that moment on, my trial went as crazy as I was supposed to be.

After the D.A. had qualified him, he said to Sanderson, "Have you heard the nickname that has been applied to the accused several times in this court, Doctor?"

"Yes, sir."

"What is it?"

"Beau."

"And what would you say this meant, Doctor? That the accused is a natty dresser, perhaps?"

"Yes, I would, judging from the prisoner's spruce appearance when he was brought to me for examination the night of his arrest."

"I see."

My lawyer said in a puzzled voice, "I object, your Honor. This is surely irrelevant."

"Then it can't hurt your client," said the Judge. He was getting interested in Dr. Sanderson's screwy testimony. "Proceed, Counselor."

"Dr. Sanderson," said the D.A., "will you tell the court what kind of shirt the prisoner was wearing the night he was arrested?"

"A clean white shirt with a detachable collar. The collar was heavily starched."

"Thank you. Now, will you tell us, please,

whether the prisoner, when you examined him after he was brought in that night, was suffering from the effects of sleeping pills, liquor, narcotics, a stroke, an incipient coronary, anything that might have accounted for his stopping along the road to take a nap while committing a major crime?"

"He was not, as far as I could tell. His health seemed excellent in all respects."

"But you heard from the arresting officers that he had been captured while napping?"

"I did. Everybody was babbling about it. That's why I was asked to examine him, of course."

"And what did you think?"

Sanderson grinned. "I thought the guy was nuts," he said.

Levin nudged me. "Wow!" he said softly. "Their own witness admits it!"

The D.A. didn't even pause. "Do you still think so?"

"No, sir. I have since changed my mind."

"I see. And what made you change your mind about this?"

"The kidnapped child's own testimony on the stand yesterday."

"What specific testimony was that?"

"About those turns to the right."

Levin hopped up. "Objection!" he yelled.

The Judge tapped his gavel. "You keep out of this," he said to Levin, really interested now. "Let the doctor testify. You intend to connect up this strange testimony, of course?" he asked the D.A., just to keep things looking legal.

"Certainly, your Honor. Now, Doctor, what exactly do you mean by that phrase, 'turns to the right'? Tell us in your own words, please."

"Well, Jane Pharr told us how the accused, as he drove from Riverside toward Campbell's Crossing, kept turning his head at frequent intervals

and looking over his right shoulder at her as she lay bound and gagged in the back of the car," the doctor explained.

"Yes," said the D.A., "that's in the record."

"And suddenly," Dr. Sanderson went on, "I found myself remembering an obscure case history I had read when I was in medical school—a diagnosis that was made, I believe, by a famous physician at the Mayo Clinic."

"I object!" Levin said, obviously just on general principles since he hadn't the foggiest notion of what was going on, any more than I did. Or the Judge, either, for that matter. The Judge was hanging over his bench, openly eager to hear more. "Overruled," he said sharply. "Go on, Counselor."

"I now ask you, Dr. Sanderson," said the D.A., "what these turns to the right, as you term them, had to do with the commission of this crime?"

"Plenty," Sanderson said inelegantly. "They're the reason why the accused stopped to take a nap while in the middle of his kidnapping."

This caused a sensation. Everybody buzzed at once until the Judge pounded his gavel. "Silence!" he shouted. "I can't hear the testimony with all that racket! Proceed, Counselor. And you," he said to Sanderson, "remember that levity has no place in this court. A man is being tried for his life here today."

Everybody looked at me, then, as though they'd forgotten who the fuss was all about.

Sanderson bowed to the bench. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm afraid I'm telling this very badly."

"You're doing all right so far," the Judge said with a twinkle, "if you're really serious."

"I'm serious. Never more so," said the doctor, neatly bypassing the D.A. and speaking directly to the Judge. "As a doctor of medicine, I was naturally interested in why the accused would

stop and take a nap at such a time. I realized it could have been as the result of mental derangement, which I understand is the contention of the defense. As I say, I thought at first the kidnapper was unbalanced myself. But couldn't the accused's nap, I asked myself, be the result of anything else? Couldn't some purely physical or anatomical explanation account for it equally well? Because the young man seemed quite well-balanced to me the night of the arrest—before he had seen his attorney."

"I object!" Levin yelled. "He's talking about me!"

"You may need the publicity before this is over," the Judge told him. "Overruled. Go on, Counselor. Ask the witness to clarify."

"Clarify, Doctor," said the D.A.

"Well," the doctor said, "I can't clarify without getting a little technical. Just a little."

"So get technical," the D.A. said with a grin.

"Jane Pharr's testimony, and the fact that the accused was wearing a stiff collar the night of the kidnapping," said the doctor modestly, "put me on the track, along with that old case history I've mentioned. I should have seen it sooner than I did, of course, and I would have, if I'd given the accused a really thorough physical examination when he was brought in."

Here the Judge became too impatient to restrain himself. "Skip the apologies and give us the facts!" he barked at the witness. "The Court's patience is wearing thin."

Sanderson came out with it then. "The only reasonable hypothesis to account for the accused acting as he did, your Honor, is that he has a sensitive—I might even say a hypersensitive—right carotid sinus. The carotid arteries, as you are no doubt aware, carry the blood supply and its energizing oxygen to the brain. If the flow of blood

through one of these arteries is shut off, or even interrupted sufficiently often, a black-out results—a fainting spell, if you prefer. It need not happen instantaneously, however. It sometimes occurs gradually enough so that a man could conceivably feel it coming over him, and have time to pull a car to the side of the road and shut off the motor before he lost consciousness entirely. And that's just what happened to the accused, I believe."

The D.A. said, "You are saying that such an interruption of the blood supply in the right carotid artery of the accused caused him to black out and appear to be taking a nap?"

"I am."

"Can you explain why?"

"I think I already have. Each time the accused turned his head sharply to his right over his shoulder to check on the condition of the child in the back of his car the stiffly starched point of his collar pressed into his neck, exerting pressure on his right carotid sinus. It wouldn't take much of this turning to the right to cause him to black out. In fact, your Honor, I'm morally certain that the accused is not deranged as the defense contends. He just happens to have an unusually sensitive right carotid sinus."

Levin, my lawyer, jumped to his feet. "This is ridiculous!" he yelled, completely oblivious of courtroom protocol. "Do you mean to sit there and tell me, Doctor, that a stiff collar and a few turns of the head made my poor demented client lose consciousness? What is this carotid sinus, anyway? I've never even heard of it!" Levin reached out and grabbed me by the neck in the hollow between my right shoulder and chin. "Is this where it is? Here?" He turned to the jury and said with magnificent contempt, "I'll show you how much truth there is in this quack's testimony! Look!" He

squeezed down hard with his thumb on the right side of my neck.

A little while later, when I was conscious again and had collected my wits, I looked at Levin and said, "Who's crazy now, Counselor?"

"Your defense attorney," he said savagely. "Who else?"

So I'm to be executed tomorrow. But I can't tell you how relieved I am to find out before I die that I'm not some kind of a nut, after all, but just a sane kidnapper with a sensitive sinus.

TO GAIN AN INCH

by Richard Hardwick

MURRAY heard the first murder, and saw the second, and was himself nearly the third. It was Saturday, his day off from the job at the shoe store, and he was keeping little Bobby for Helen Brewer while she did her marketing. It was like a lot of other Saturday mornings the past few months, the boy lying prone on the floor watching the cowboys on television, the sound turned low in deference to Murray, who sat at his desk by the window poring over the texts on accounting. Night school was no snap, and he used his weekends to bone up on debits and credits.

The abrupt sound of a shot broke into his thoughts. It was too loud to have come from the television. He glanced out the window of his second floor apartment just as a man burst from the door of the Acme Loan Company across Mintner Street. There was a pistol in the man's right hand, and he stood there on the sidewalk as if momentarily undecided.

The decision was made for him. All along the street people darted into doorways or jumped behind parked cars. Somebody yelled to a policeman who had just walked around the corner at the end of the block. The patrolman began running toward the man, tugging his pistol from his holster as he came. The man lifted his gun. It kicked in his hand, three times, the shots echoing in the

street. The patrolman stumbled and sprawled forward on the pavement.

The man hesitated no longer. He ran directly across the street toward the apartment house. Just below Murray's window he whirled and fired two more shots in the opposite direction. Then he darted into the building.

The happenings were so incredible, so bizarre, as to be momentarily divorced from reality, and Murray sat as if frozen in his chair, staring down into the street. But the instant the gunman disappeared from view, the reality struck him. The shooting had been real enough, the policeman lying on the sidewalk was no mirage, and the gunman was in *this* building. Across the room Murray's door stood invitingly open at the head of the stairs.

He came out of his chair at a run, leaping across Bobby, but the man apparently had taken the stairs two at a time, for before Murray was halfway across the room the gunman was standing there in the corridor. Their eyes locked briefly, and then the man stepped inside, slamming and locking the door behind him.

His gaze swept the room. "Anybody here but you and the kid?"

"What is this?"

The big automatic waved impatiently. "Don't give me any lip, mister! I ain't got time for games!"

Murray glanced down at the four-year-old, who was staring wide-eyed at the intruder. "No," he said. "There's nobody here but the two of us."

The man stalked past him and quickly checked the bedroom, kitchenette, and bath to his own satisfaction. Then he moved cautiously to the window, and standing to one side, peered out. "Of all the rotten luck . . ." he muttered.

The sound of sirens grew, coming from both di-

rections along the street. There were shouts, and running feet.

Murray felt something touch his hand. It was Bobby, standing close by his side. "Who is the man, Uncle Gene?"

The gunman looked around briefly at the boy. "A pal of your uncle's, sonny. Now you just keep quiet like a good boy."

"I saw you shoot the officer," Murray said. "Why?"

"I shot that jerk in the loan office first. He should have had better sense than to try for a gun. You'd think the lousy dough belonged to him." He came away from the window, seeming to size Murray up for a moment. "As for the cop, it was him or me."

"People out there saw you come into this building. The police will come looking for you."

The gunman moved back and peered again at the street. "There's cops all over out there right now." He turned, and with the gun still hanging from his hand, squatted in front of the boy. "What's your name, sonny?"

The boy looked questioningly at Murray, then he said, "Bobby."

The man took his hand and pulled him to a chair away from the window. "Get up here on my lap, Bobby. C'mon."

Murray took a step toward them. "Leave the boy alone! Don't hurt him!" He reached out, hoping.

The gun barrel tipped up and pointed at Murray's face. "I don't like people to say 'don't' to me, mister. You know what I gave those guys out there, don't you? It could happen to you."

"Look, I'm just watching the kid while his mother shops. He doesn't even live here."

"Like you said, the cops know I'm in this build-

ing. They'll be up here before long." The gunbarrel swung away from Murray, and the muzzle settled lightly against the side of the boy's head. "They're going to have to make a deal with me, mister. They ain't going to have any choice about it."

Gene Murray had come to feel like a part-time father to the boy in the eight months since Lt. Jim Brewer had been killed in Vietnam. It was not a matter of replacing the boy's real father. Bobby had been a bit over three years old when it had happened, and his father had been overseas for almost a year prior to that. He had no memory of a father.

Murray and Bobby had taken a liking to each other from the very first, when Murray had offered to keep him one day while Helen Brewer went shopping. There were others in the apartment house who would have been glad to do it, but she saw the need of the companionship of a man for the boy. In the weeks and months that followed, the simple job of babysitting had evolved into trips to the zoo, fishing in the park, and occasional rides into the country.

Something else had unexpectedly happened to Murray. On a Saturday not many weeks ago Helen had stopped at his door to pick Bobby up. Her arms were full of groceries, and her hair was tousled and one lock hung down over her forehead. In that instant it hit Murray. He had fallen in love with the young widow from down the hall. She still wore black for her husband, but he was determined to wait. For the time, Bobby and Helen were a sort of weekend family for him.

And yet, it was not until the moment he saw the barrel of the pistol resting against the boy's head that he thought of him as a responsibility. Murray, at the age of twenty-five, had never really

been accountable in his personal life to anyone other than himself. The gunman's last words echoed in his mind, and he knew that he was responsible for the present situation. What would the boy's father have done if he had been there? He would very likely have had the presence of mind to lock his door when he saw what was happening outside, or maybe he would have gotten a gun and shot it out with the bandit.

Murray had not had that presence of mind. Nor did he have a gun. He had never had one and knew very little about them.

The sudden banging on the door startled him. "Open up! Police!"

Murray stared at the man, waiting to see what his reaction would be. He felt the threat would not be carried out unless everything else failed. There was no panic in the man's eyes, not yet.

The knock came again. "Anybody in there?" There was a short pause, then the muffled sound of voices as a key rattled in the lock. That meant Mr. Jarmen, the apartment super, was with them.

"Okay," the gunman said. "Tell 'em, mister."

Murray cleared his throat. "You—you can't come in." His voice sounded like little more than a dry whisper to him.

"Mr. Murray? It's Jarmen. There's been a shooting outside and the police say the gunman ran into our building. They've surrounded the place and are searching all the apartments."

"Come on, mister!" the first voice broke in. "We ain't got all day!"

"I—you can't come in. He's here, the man you're looking for. He's got a gun and there's a little boy in here."

There was another flurry of voices in the hallway. Then, above the others, there was a woman's voice. "Gene! Is Bobby alright?" It was Helen Brewer. He could almost see her face, and the ter-

ror that would be in her eyes at this moment.

"He's alright, Helen."

"Let me in! I want to be with him! Please . . ."

Someone said, "You'd better go downstairs, ma'am. Sergeant, you take the young lady downstairs."

"No! Gene! Oh God, don't let anything happen to my baby!"

Suddenly oblivious to the man with the gun, Murray said, "He'll be alright, Helen. I won't let anything happen to him." He knew even before the words were out of his mouth how absurd it must have sounded. He saw the faint flicker of contempt in the gunman's eyes.

People were moving about in the corridor. Inside the room, Murray could almost hear the hammering of his own heart above the sirens and voices outside, and the subdued tones of the television.

"Alright in there," came a policeman's voice. "What is it you want?"

"I want out," the gunman snapped. "You try anything and this guy and the kid both get it! I want another gun in here, and then I want a car. Leave it right out in front of the building and then clear the street. Me and the kid and this guy are leaving together!"

It sank in completely on Murray then. A wild escape plan like that would not work. The police would not—*could* not—let this killer loose.

Helen had lost her husband. Murray had promised her that nothing would happen to her son.

The voice in the hallway said, "I don"t have the authority to make a deal with you. I'll have to clear it with the Police Commissioner. It'll take time."

"You got five minutes, cop! In five minutes the three of us are leaving here, one way or another!"

Murray found himself staring blankly at the

television. Even if the man did not have the gun, he was bigger than Murray. His promise to Helen had been merely words. A minute ticked off. Two minutes. Cowboys galloped across the small screen, firing, firing. One grimaced, clutched at his chest, and tumbled expertly from his horse. What would it feel like, Murray wondered. What would it feel like to be shot . . .

The guns blasted away unceasingly.

The idea struck him with the force of a blow. He shifted his attention to the gunman sitting there tensely with the boy on his lap. Bobby seemed to think it was some kind of game they were playing, and he sat quietly. It was possible, Murray thought. Barely possible.

He began to count. One in the loan office, three on the other side of the street, and two more just beneath the window. There would not have been time on the way up the stairs, it had happened so quickly. And since the man had entered the apartment he had not been out of Murray's sight.

Murray had to be sure. He counted again, now certain there was no mistake. He touched his tongue to his lips and drew a deep breath.

"Three minutes gone!" the gunman called out to the men in the corridor. "Two to go, cop!"

Murray took a step toward him. "You're wrong there," he heard his own voice saying, surprisingly calm and even. "The time's up now."

The gunman blinked. "What did you say?"

Murray took another step. "I said the time's up. I'm coming to get you."

"Be careful in there, mister!" the police officer called through the door. "Leave this to us!"

"Have you flipped?" The gunman brought the barrel of the automatic around, away from Bobby's head, starting in Murray's direction. "You get the hell back over there where you were!"

Murray did not reply. He took another step.

The gun came to bear on him and his knees suddenly felt as if they had turned to gelatin. *Suppose I'm wrong . . .* Suppose . . . He shook his head. There was no backing down now. He had to do it.

"I'm telling you for the last time, buddy . . ." At that moment Murray saw something new in the man's eyes. He recognized it because he was suffused with it himself. It was the bright look of fear, and it was like a spurt of adrenalin to Murray. His knees starched up. He was Popeye after a can of spinach, invincible. He knew he was right.

"*Now!*" he yelled, like an Indian on the warpath, and launched himself across the dozen feet separating him from the gunman. He had to be right, and the look in the man's eyes told him he was.

There was a deafening blast, the impact of a freight train, a split second of searing pain, and then nothing.

"He's coming around now, Captain," someone said.

Murray opened his eyes. It seemed he was returning from a long, already forgotten journey. Then he remembered something. "Bobby—where's the boy?"

"He's alright, young man. Safe and sound."

There were three faces hovering over him. One man and a woman were dressed in white. The other man had a weathered, bulldog face. His tan shirt was a little frayed and his tie pulled loose.

"I'm Captain Latham. I was in the corridor when you jumped him. You're a foolhardy man, Mr. Murray. Foolhardy—and brave."

"You can add lucky to that," said the man in white, the doctor. "A few inches to the right and we'd be talking about you, not to you."

"The guy must have been too surprised to shoot

straight," said the captain.

"But I counted them," Murray said. "I was very careful. I must have made a mistake."

"You counted what?"

"The shots. I counted six times he shot, and I didn't see how he could have reloaded without my seeing him."

The police officer pushed one hand slowly across his balding head. "Now wait a minute! You mean that's why you jumped him, because you thought his gun was *em*pty?"

Murray nodded, feeling the pain of the slight movement stab through his shoulder and arm. "I guess that's it. I thought he shot six times."

The captain sighed. "You've been watching too many cowboy shows. Oh, you counted right. The trouble was, this bird didn't have a six-shot revolver, he had an automatic. The clip holds seven cartridges. It was the last one that winged you. As soon as we heard it we busted the door in. We thought he had gotten the kid."

Seven shots . . . Still, he thought, if he had known for certain there was one more in the gun, he would have had to do it just the same. Bobby was his responsibility.

The captain went on. "Doc says you shouldn't talk to the newspaper boys yet, but there are a couple of folks outside you might want to see."

"A pretty young lady in a yellow dress and a little boy," the nurse smiled. "Shall I have them come in?"

Yellow dress? The mourning black was gone.

Murray grinned. "One thing, Captain? You don't have to tell her the whole story just yet, do you? We shoe clerks need every inch we can get."

THE MASTER'S TOUCH

by Helen Nielsen

AMBROSE DU PAGE had billed himself as the World's Greatest Hypnotist for ten years. Then the flurry of interest in his craft, roused by the much publicized Bridey Murphy incident, waned and Ambrose went into an immediate professional decline which culminated in the establishment of the Du Page School of Hypnotism on the second floor of an aging medical building on Melrose Avenue.

It was from his office in his unintentionally non-profit establishment that he observed the razing of a furniture storage building on the adjoining lot which, in turn, made visible the Blue Front discount store on the next lot. Screened only by narrow wrought iron grillwork, the rear window exposed an extra large safe inside the manager's office. With little to occupy time except a growing stack of unpaid bills, the safe in the window became magnetic. Long before Du Page, master of the unconscious, knew what his own gray cells were plotting, he had ascertained that the Blue Front did an astonishingly high volume of business on weekends and, due to banking hours, the cash receipts were locked in the safe from closing time Sunday until the banks opened Monday morning. With the aid of a pair of high-powered binoculars (purchased at Blue Front) he was further able to estimate the average weekend gross at somewhere near twenty

thousand dollars, not including the unreadable checks.

It was an inspiring view.

Du Page's passion for the safe grew stronger. A mind trained to dazzle and delight audiences could conceive a thousand delights purchasable with the contents: new equipment, a new assistant with the proper body structure and a projecting personality of equal proportions, a new agent and contracts, a grand tour—Spain. The big money, the smart money was in Spain. Du Page's slender fingers stroked the gray beginning to show at his temples. Distinguished; and he had kept his figure—not a pound gained in twenty years. As for talent, that was never lost. It was locked inside, waiting only for the sound of the overture and the parting of the curtains to bring it out.

On the fourth Sunday after the razing, Du Page lifted the binoculars to his eyes and watched a man carefully count a stack of twenty dollar bills. It was the sixth such stack and Du Page had noted the sum of each on the memo pad before him. Engrossed in his work, he wasn't aware of the entry into his office until roused by a loud hiccough. He whirled about, the binoculars still in his hands.

"I'm sorry to (hic) disturb you," gasped a slightly built man with a blue face, "but I saw your (hic) light and I've (hic, hic) tried everything!"

The last word ended in a pathetic wail as the man slumped against the desk. Frantic fingers clawed at the mahogany and reddened eyes begged for assistance. Du Page understood. The man was suffering from a severe case of hiccoughs and sought aid through hypnosis.

"Not everyone can be hypnotized," Du Page explained. "You must be willing—"

"I am!" the man cried.

Reluctantly, Du Page turned his back on the safe in the Blue Front window. He began with the revolving disc, and the results were almost instantaneous. In his desperation, the patient had no resistance.

"Now you can relax," Du Page said. "You are breathing normally. You have no hiccoughs. When my fingers snap you will awaken and be perfectly free."

Du Page snapped his fingers and the man's eyes opened. Normal color returned to his face and he smiled wanly.

"Thanks, Doc," he said. "You saved my life. You're a genius!"

It was a slight exaggeration but Du Page was appreciative. Now that the hiccoughs were healed and the man's face no longer blue, he looked familiar.

"My name is Wing," he explained. "Carmichael Wing."

"D.D.S.," Du Page added. "You're the dentist who took over the office directly under—" He paused and glanced back at the lighted window where the manager was still counting money. "—mine," he added thoughtfully. "And it's strange that you would have your office open Sunday evening, particularly when I never hear drills."

"I can't practice," Wing said. "I have no license."

"But you rented—"

"Bought," Wing corrected. "I bought the dental office downstairs. I was practicing in Arizona but for family reasons, namely my ex-wife, I moved to California. Now I can't get a license."

Automatically, Carmichael Wing's eyes sought the lighted windows of the Blue Front. Then he noted the binoculars on Du Page's desk, the column of figures on the memo pad, and two

minds met in perfect rapport.

"I still have my army binoculars," Wing added. "I like them better than the ones the Blue Front sells. Do you know that last week they peddled twenty-two thousand and fifty-six dollars worth of that discount junk, not including coin?"

Twenty-two thousand and fifty-six dollars.

Ambrose Du Page picked up the binoculars and turned back to the window. Now the money was counted. He watched the manager place it in a series of bank sacks and go to the safe.

"And have you noticed," Wing said, as if there had been no pause in the conversation, "that the skylight on the roof is directly over the manager's office. It's fireglass—double thickness with steel mesh and heavy gauge steel framing."

"Mr. Wing," Du Page began.

"Call me doctor, please," Wing said.

"Dr. Wing, do you realize that what you're suggesting is grand larceny?"

"Not," Wing reflected, "unless we can figure a way to open that safe."

Some partnerships were made in heaven. Once he had recognized the thievery in Carmichael Wing's heart, Du Page found it easier to live with his own. Neither Du Page nor Wing knew how to open the safe. The store undoubtedly had an alarm system and was protected by a commercial night patrol. The job clearly called for the services of a professional. But safecrackers didn't have guilds, nor were they listed in the yellow book.

Then Du Page recalled that he had once done a series of benefits for the state penal system and dredged up from his subconscious the name of Willie Evans, burglar, who served as a subject during the demonstration of the master's hypnotic powers. He contacted the institution where Willie

served his time and learned that he was paroled eight months ago and subsequently employed by Hover's Machine Tools in Culver City. By this time the magnetism in the Blue Front safe was overpowering. Ambrose Du Page donned his least threadbare suit, rented a small sedan and drove to Hover's.

Except for acquiring a suntan, Willie hadn't changed. He was a stocky, blunt-featured young man with a small vocabulary and a stubborn mind. Du Page picked him up at the employee's gate at quitting time, and drove to Artie's Beer Bar in the next block. Over a pair of cold lagers they discussed the business at hand.

"Who sent you?" Willie asked suspiciously, scrutinizing him.

"Nobody sent me, Willie," Du Page insisted. "You remember me, the Great Du Page. We worked together at a San Quentin Christmas Party."

"I remember," Willie admitted, "but somebody must have sent you. The safe jobs are all syndicate now. You gotta have a contract."

"Not for this safe job. This is something only two people know about, myself and my partner. We want to cut you in."

"Why?"

"Because we need you. Is that honest enough?"

"I'm retired," Willie said.

"We split three ways, Willie. Twenty thousand minimum, and no risk."

"I'm retired and reformed," Willie said. "I gave my word to Genevieve, my fiancee, that I'd never go near a safe again. I served one stretch. That's enough."

"Genevieve," Du Page reflected. "She sounds shrewish."

"Genevieve is a lady!" Willie explained. "I'll prove it to you. Hey, Artie!"

The bartender looked up expectantly.

"Artie, another round," Willie said, "and have Genevieve serve 'em. I want her to meet a celebrity."

So Willie's Genevieve was a waitress at Artie's Beer Bar. Du Page was due for a surprise when she came to the table. She was very lovely. Her smile was warm. Her eyes were blue. Her hair was a soft yellow-gold. Had Du Page been in a position then to hire an assistant for his Spanish tour, he would have looked no farther than Genevieve.

Willie made the introductions and then said, "Genevieve only works in this place evenings. Her real job is teaching in a private school. Teaching retarded children."

"That's a highly specialized field," Du Page said. "You're to be congratulated."

Willie beamed. "After we're married, Genevieve is going to try teaching me. I'm the most retarded student she'll ever have."

"Willie!" Genevieve scolded. "Don't say such things! You have a very bright mind."

"Sure," Willie agreed. "Why not? It's never been used."

Genevieve's nose wrinkled deliciously when she frowned at Willie. She gave every evidence of being a woman in love. Mother instinct, Du Page surmised. There were women like that—always attracted to some pitiful underdog they could rehabilitate. He wondered if Willie would be up to it. When Genevieve walked back to the bar, her hips swaying in innocent abandon, Du Page turned to Willie with feigned understanding.

"Well, I guess that's that, Willie," he sighed. "Now that I've seen Genevieve, I can understand your retirement."

"She's really something, isn't she?" Willie agreed.

She was behind the bar now, smiling and exchanging light banter with half a dozen admiring male customers. Willie seemed very sure of himself, to leave her so exposed.

"When are you to be married?" Du Page asked.

"As soon as I save a grand," Willie said. "Genevieve has already saved a grand, but she wants us to start out equal in every way. I've only been out of stir eight months and I've already saved three hundred and twenty bucks."

"Splendid," Du Page mused. "At that rate, Willie, it will be only nineteen and one-half months until you and fair Genevieve are wed. My congratulations to you both."

Du Page pushed aside his beer and came to his feet. He had planted seed in fertile soil. He could feel Willie's suddenly anxious eyes pulling him back.

"Nineteen and one-half months?" Willie echoed.

"Or," Du Page added, "one year and seven and one-half months." He glanced at the gay gathering at the bar and smiled knowingly. "I hope," he said pointedly, "your Genevieve is a patient filly."

It was just forty-eight hours later that Willie Evers came to Du Page's office. He hadn't even taken time to go home after work. He still wore shop clothes and carried a lunch pail.

"Nineteen and one-half months is a long time to wait," he admitted. "I've been thinking—that's almost as long as I was in stir."

"It's like serving a second sentence, Willie," Du Page agreed.

"It sure is. And you know something? I don't think I can sweat out a stretch like this one. I mean, seeing Genevieve every day—"

"—and with all those other men around her."

"That's what I mean. Du Page, where is that safe you were talking about?"

Du Page got out the binoculars and handed them to Willie. He pointed out the right window and gave Willie his head. It was still daylight, but the lights burned inside the manager's office in the Blue Front building and this time there was no one to block the view of the safe. After several minutes, Willie lowered the glasses.

"It's child's play," he said. "I cut my teeth on a safe like that. How do I get in?"

"Through the skylight on the roof," Du Page said. "After we get the skylight open, I'll lower you by rope into the office. Wing will watch for the night patrol. We've kept a schedule for the past week and know when it's due."

"All right," Willie said. "I'll do it—but you've got to promise me that Genevieve will never know. I gave her my word."

"No one will know," Du Page said. "They'll blame juvenile delinquents. Be careful you don't make it look too professional."

Willie flexed his fingers. "My hands are stiff," he said. "If I could just practice a little . . ."

It so happened that Du Page had a small safe in his back room. There was little in it but dust, but he led Willie back and let him practice. Willie spun the dial on the combination a few times and confidence began to animate his body.

"I haven't lost it!" he cried. "It's like old times. You watch. In thirty seconds I'll have this box open."

He took hold of the dial again and then froze. Thirty seconds passed without a muscle moving. "What's wrong?" DuPage said. "What is it?"

"I don't know," Willie said. "I can't move my doggone fingers."

"You can't move—Are they cramped?"

"No. I just can't make them work."

Willie looked up pathetically. Until Du Page saw his eyes, he suspected a trick. Willie might

want a bigger cut. Willie might be stalling. But he wasn't. He was paralyzed. He got up and smoked a cigarette and tried again. Again he hit that same block. He was crouched before the safe, staring blankly at the lock, when Carmichael Wing came in and was briefed on the situation.

"He doesn't want to open the safe," Wing said.

"You're crazy!" Willie cried. "Of course I want to open the safe. That's why I came here, even if I did promise Genevieve I'd never pull another job."

"That's it," Wing insisted. "He doesn't *really* want to open the safe. In his subconscious mind he's afraid that opening the safe will cause him to lose his girl."

Willie Evers didn't know if he had a subconscious mind. He only knew that he couldn't marry Genevieve until he had a thousand dollars, and that he couldn't wait more than a year and a half to get it. He tried the safe once more but his fingers were as stiff as nails.

"Willie, sit down and relax," Du Page said. "Take my chair—it's softer. Now, lean back. Close your eyes and relax. You're among friends here and there's no danger. You're Willie Evers, the World's Greatest Safe Cracker, and you've never failed. You never would have served time if some fink hadn't squealed."

Willie hovered at the brink of a comatose state. "That's the truth," he mumbled. "How did you know?"

"Because I know you, Willie. You're the best in your field, and you have nerves of steel. But you lack confidence. Now listen to me, Willie. I want to tell you about that safe. Inside it is Genevieve's dowry—one thousand dollars that belongs to you. But you have to prove you're worthy of Genevieve by opening the safe to get it. When I snap my fingers you will get out of the chair and open the safe."

Du Page snapped his fingers.

Willie awakened, went directly to the safe and opened it.

"You really are a genius!" Carmichael Wing exclaimed. "You're a regular Svengali!"

"I'm lucky," Du Page answered. "Willie's reformation is one of convenience rather than conviction. If he'd been morally opposed to opening the safe, we'd be right back where we started. Now, Willie, close the safe and let's rehearse once more."

Hypnotic suggestion was all Willie needed. He ran through the safe opening routine two more times before Du Page brought him out of the trance, and on the Saturday night before the scheduled burglary the three partners returned for a dress rehearsal. Du Page had found a quantity of stage money in his prop trunk and placed it inside the safe. He also purchased a leather attaché case. Willie's tool kit, to be used in the event the Blue Front safe didn't respond to his magic fingers, would supply leverage for the skylight. Carmichael Wing appropriated thirty feet of somebody's extra-strength clothesline for Willie's descent from the roof to the safe.

"Willie," Du Page said, seating the subject in his chair, "this is our last dry run. Tomorrow night everything has to be perfect the first time because there will be only one performance. We all have our parts, and we all have motivation. You need money so you can marry Genevieve. Dr. Wing needs money so he can get his license. I need money so—" Du Page restrained a shudder "—I can get out from under these falling walls. Now lean back and relax. When I snap my fingers you take this attaché case and go to the safe. You will open the safe, transfer the money to the case, close the safe and return to me. You will do everything I instruct you to do until I snap my fingers a

second time, and when I do you will remember nothing of what you have done."

Du Page snapped his fingers.

Willie rose from the chair, opened the safe, transferred the stage money to the attaché case, closed the safe and returned to Du Page.

"He did it!" Wing exclaimed.

"Like clockwork," Du Page answered.

"What you said about him not remembering—is that true?"

"Of course it is! It's post-hypnotic suggestion."

"But if he doesn't remember robbing the safe tomorrow night, he won't—"

"Willie," Du Page said sharply, "we won't need the stage money anymore, and I don't want it here if the police come around on Monday asking questions. There's an incinerator for trash at the back of the empty lot. Take the stage money downstairs and burn it."

Willie was still under hypnosis. He obeyed without protest. As soon as he had gone Du Page answered Dr. Wing's almost-phrased question.

"Willie won't remember his cut," he said. "That's the master's touch, Dr. Wing. Post-hypnotic suggestion. If Willie can't remember, he can't inform. But I'm not a heartless man. I intend to mail him one thousand dollars so he can marry his Genevieve. He won't know where it came from, but he'll know what to do with it."

Willie returned with the empty attaché case, and Du Page brought him out of the trance. Willie looked about, puzzled. He was still in a semi-dazed state and seemed unable to recall what he had done. Du Page explained again about the Blue Front safe and then drove Willie home. But first they drove to the alleyway and stopped behind the incinerator.

"I want you to remember this, Willie," Du Page said. "Tomorrow night I'll park the car here. The

manager finishes counting the money by eight, and the patrol doesn't make its first check until nine. That leaves us one hour to do the job. Dr. Wing will stay downstairs in front of the building as our lookout. We'll open the skylight and I will lower you by rope. When you have the money I'll haul you up. Then we part company. You take the attaché case and leave it here in the car. We all meet at my place at ten."

Willie absorbed all the instructions and seemed to understand, but there was trouble on his doorstep when Du Page drove him home. Trouble was Genevieve, militant as an Amazon in her anxiety for Willie.

"Willie, we had a date tonight!" she scolded. "You promised—"

"Willie is doing some alteration work in my office," Du Page explained quickly. "It has to be done after hours. We finish tomorrow night, Willie. Don't forget. Eight o'clock sharp."

He left Willie to soothe the lovely Genevieve, an enviable chore, and devoted the rest of the evening to planning new tricks to delight the Iberians. At eight o'clock on the following evening Willie and Dr. Wing appeared in Du Page's office. Across the vacant lot the manager of the Blue Front was locking up the take from a heavy weekend trade. Du Page immediately put Willie into deep hypnosis and repeated each step of the operation ahead.

"Do exactly what I told you to do last night," he said. "Everything exactly as I told you. Then go home and go to bed. You will sleep soundly, and in the morning you will remember nothing of this night. Nothing at all. Now," Du Page snapped his fingers. "Let's go."

Everything worked as planned. The window of the manager's office had been hidden behind the walls of the old storage building so long everyone

had grown careless. The skylight frame was loose and popped up at the first application of leverage. Willie was lowered into the office carrying his tool kit, but sent it back up immediately. The safe opened easily. He filled the attaché case and tugged on the rope. Du Page hauled him up to the roof and Willie retrieved his tool kit.

"Now do exactly what I told you to do last night," Du Page reminded. "The car is parked in the alley."

Willie went off into the darkness and Du Page replaced the skylight. He coiled the clothesline and made an unhurried descent from the roof. Reaching the sidewalk, he signaled Wing and then walked back to the sedan in the alley. Willie had remembered. The attaché case was on the front seat. Du Page got into the car and slipped the key into the ignition. It was eight-fifty by the dashboard clock—just ten minutes before the patrol was due. He rolled down the window and listened. Dr. Wing climbed into the front seat and placed the attaché case on his lap. Du Page switched on the ignition as Wing snapped the catches of the case.

And then Dr. Wing howled. "Du Page—it's empty! The case is empty!"

Carmichael Wing was right. There wasn't even dust in the case.

"What happened? Willie was under hypnosis! You told him to do exactly what he was told to do last night. Exactly." Then Wing paused and sniffed the air. "Du Page," he said hollowly, "do you smell smoke?"

They raced to the incinerator, where bright orange flames were feasting on a pile of greenbacks. Du Page watched in horror as one clearly identifiable fifty dollar bill caught fire and was quickly reduced to ash. He made a wild grab for a

stack of twenties and pulled back a handful of scorched fingers.

"Everything *exactly* as he did it last night!" Wing screamed. "*Exactly!* . . . But last night you told Willie *to burn the money in the incinerator*!"

Du Page was weeping softly when the bright spotlight of the night patrol made a white runway of the alley and sent them scampering back to the sedan. There was nothing to do but drive away while the incinerator completed cremating twenty thousand dollars. . . .

Twenty thousand, six hundred and seventy. Willie concluded counting the take from the Blue Front safe and replaced it in his tool case, all but the one thousand dollars he would deposit in the bank before he bought Genevieve's ring. The rest of the money would go into a safety deposit box. It was always a good idea for a bridegroom to have a little money tucked away somewhere.

Willie locked the tool kit in the dresser and faced his own image in the mirror.

"Relax, Willie," he said, in imitation of Du Page. "Just relax and put yourself in my power." Willie laughed sharply. "Okay, so I needed hypnosis the first time. I was out of practice. But I got smart, Du Page. You said there was one thousand in the safe for me. Why not my full one-third? But you never noticed that little slip. Willie is just a dumb ex-con too stupid to suspect a frame." He lapsed into the Du Page voice again. "Do everything I tell you to do, Willie. Open the safe. Take out the money. Go down to the incinerator and burn it while I tell the dentist how we're going to cheat you out of your share—and don't listen at the door. Don't think for yourself and stash that stage money in the tool box so the Great Du Page will think you goofed and burned the real money."

Willie was tired. He stretched out on the bed and smiled happily at Genevieve's photograph on the dresser.

"And if Du Page ever comes around asking questions—what then, Willie?" Willie closed his eyes. "You will sleep soundly and in the morning you will remember nothing . . . nothing at all."

HIS BROTHER BAXTER

by Theodore Mathieson

FOR A MOMENT he sensed her inner trembling, which was like the quivering of a compass needle the instant before it swings to magnetic north, and he knew somehow that on her answer depended his future—and his life.

"I'm sorry, Carl," she said softly, "but I can't marry you."

"That isn't north!" he cried. She looked at him with a trace of alarm.

"I mean . . . there's something bugging your decision, Nancy. I know we've known each other only a few weeks, but you wouldn't have gone out with me as often if . . . Haven't you enjoyed it as much as I have? The concerts, the shows, the lectures, our . . . talks? I know you care for me. I can feel it; and I love you as I've never loved anyone!"

"Yes, I care for you, Carl. But I've made up my mind."

"Is there someone else?"

"You know there isn't."

"Then *why*?"

When she didn't answer, he bowed his head and murmured: "My brother?"

She moved silently to her apartment window and looked down into the city street. The sunlight, diluted by wisps of high fog, bathed her face in a lambent glow, like a spiritual aura, so that as he stared at her, there flashed across his

mind a line from a poem he'd known long ago: *I love thee with a love I seemed to lose with my lost saints.*

"Nancy!" he cried, and going to her he tried to put his arms around her, but she struggled free.

"Don't do that again, Carl."

"But why? What has my brother got to do with us?"

"How can you ask that?"

He didn't answer. After almost every date he'd had with her, Baxter had rung her up and called her filthy names, told her unspeakable lies about him. Somehow he, Carl, had always been able to talk her into going out with him again, but it had become increasingly difficult, and now she made it sound as if it were the end for them.

"My brother isn't responsible," he said finally.

"That's obvious. I've waited and thought . . . Oh, Carl, can't you see? I was sure you'd put an end to it, for our sakes, but the calls have continued, and I know I don't want to marry a man who can't protect me against vicious attacks from his own brother!"

"It's more than that, isn't it?"

"I've wondered about your inability to stop him. Does he have some kind of hold over you?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"You never do, and that has bothered me, too. Can't you see—"

"It's bad enough to have him hanging around my neck!" he cried, his words gushing out as if an impediment had been removed. "I've taken care of him, supported him, and he's paid me with nothing but trouble. More than one job I've lost because of his interference. He's jealous, vain, egocentric and sadistic, Nancy. I've had to put up with a lifetime of him!"

"But why?"

"He was my . . . mother's favorite. I know she

suspected he was no good, but before she died she told me she wanted me to look after him."

"It was asking too much of you, Carl. Baxter sounds unbalanced. It would be kinder, I think, if you'd had him put away, where he could neither harm himself nor ruin your life."

"I did have him committed to a sanitarium a few years ago, and what a relief it was to be rid of him. It was the best year of my life; but they released him as cured, and he came back to live with me."

"If they judged him competent, why didn't you tell him, once and for all, to get out, to leave you alone?"

"Baxter is used to having his own way," he said miserably. "It's hard to talk to him."

"I'm sorry, Carl. Truly sorry. I wish I could help."

"If you'll just say there's hope for us."

"No. And this is the last time I shall see you. The very last."

Going down in the elevator, knowing that for Nancy it was indeed the end, and that a vital part of his life had just died, a rage rose in him so strong that he growled in his throat, and the operator turned to look at him.

There was so much he hadn't told Nancy, although she was shrewd enough to sense the unnatural bond that had existed between him and Baxter ever since they were children, as well as the ascendancy Baxter had usurped.

"You're my doormat," his brother had said. "I can wipe my feet on you any time I like. And you know why? Not only because I was mother's favorite, but because I know you inside out, and how phony you are. Conservative draftsman with the black tie and pinstripe suit? Who're you fooling?"

When he'd denounced Baxter for calling Nancy

and speaking filth, Baxter had sneered. "It's no more than she deserves, Carl. Is that the kind of woman you want to marry?"

"She's had lovers before me. She didn't try to hide it. But it doesn't matter. I love her!"

"You leave it to me. Mother wouldn't have approved of your tying up with a girl like Nancy!"

Carl had struck out at Baxter then, with an insane desire to maim or kill, but his brother had only laughed because he'd always been stronger than Carl, and he'd handled him easily.

On leaving Nancy's apartment, Carl decided to walk home, and instead of bypassing St. Christopher's Cathedral as he usually did, he stopped in to visit, kneeling in the shadows near the confessionals where, in a niche, an icon of the Virgin blessed the air. He remembered when he was very little how his mother had taken him and his brother once to a Christmas Eve Mass, and he'd enjoyed the pageantry and the organ music, and then his brother had gotten them into trouble by ripping pages from the missal.

"Please, God, let Baxter be there when I get home," he prayed, "so that the strength you give me this moment is still with me!"

But when Carl reached his studio apartment, there was no one there. For hours he walked the floor, waiting for his brother to come. Around midnight, he rang up Nancy.

"Sorry if I awakened you," he said. "Even though you've made up your mind about me, I want you to know I'm waiting for Baxter, and I'll have it out with him tonight. He hasn't called? Good. I'll see he won't bother you anymore!"

When daylight crept into the apartment, Carl was at his desk, sleeping with his head on his arms. When he awoke it was full daylight. He phoned his office and told them he was ill. It was

Saturday. He waited until noon for Baxter to appear, and then the waiting became unbearable, for he realized his confidence was flagging.

"It's got to be a showdown," he mumbled, and opening a bureau drawer, he took out an old .38 revolver that had once belonged to his father, that shadowy figure whom his mother often referred to in a disparaging tone as "a huntin' and fishin' kind of man." He'd died when Carl was three or four, and his mother probably wouldn't have kept his gun, if she hadn't wanted to protect herself and Baxter in that lonely old house in Redwood City.

The feel of the loaded gun gave him renewed confidence. "Just let him come now," he said.

But his brother stayed away all that afternoon. In the evening, Carl went pub crawling, careful to drink no more than a beer in each place, sitting silently on a stool waiting for Baxter to come. He didn't have to look around. There was a kind of ESP that existed between him and Baxter that alerted Carl when his brother was nearby. In his mind's eye he could see Baxter's fat, sweaty face, with the fleshy, mobile lips, and how his insinuating eyes would light up at the sight of Carl sitting there.

When midnight came and Baxter had still not shown, Carl went home to bed and fell asleep exhausted. At dawn he awoke. It was Sunday, and as he lay listening to the muted sounds of traffic, he suddenly knew what he would do.

Around ten o'clock he went to Mass at St. Christopher's and prayed again for strength. The gun was in his pocket. After Mass he took a bus and rode out to Golden Gate Park. Sundays, Baxter often came out here and loitered around in the children's playground area.

The playground was fairly full, and cries of children rose above the calliope music of a

merry-go-round. He circled the men's rest rooms once, and even looked inside. Then he went and sat down on a sequestered bench nearby.

The day wore on, and suddenly he knew he'd been right. His brother was coming. He looked up as Baxter sat down beside him, grinning that evil greeting of his. Carl felt himself go suddenly weak.

"You looking for me?" Baxter demanded.

"You've ruined all my chances with Nancy, do you know that?"

"I've done you a favor."

"If you saw me shot down in the street for rape, you'd still say you'd done me a favor."

Baxter waved airily around him. "Isn't it better to be your own man, Carl? To do as you wish? Not to be tied down to a wife and a home?"

"No, damn you, it isn't. Do you think I want to be a degenerate like you, who comes out here eyeing little children?" he shouted.

"Now, now, isn't this like the pot calling the kettle black?"

Once again the rage surged up in Carl, and he rose and stood over his brother, his hand grasping the gun in his pocket.

"I don't care what you found out about Nancy. She held out a hope for me that was like a sunrise! And you took it away with your damned filth. You took it away, Baxter. Why couldn't you let me alone?"

"Don't you know?"

"Stop. I won't listen!"

"It's time you faced the truth, Carl. Maybe Nancy really has helped you to do it!"

"Stop!"

"Too late now. It's never been Baxter . . . not even in the sanitarium. It's *always* been Carl—and only Carl—right from the beginning, because

mother never had two children, you know. Only one."

In the split second between the time Carl put the gun to his head and pulled the trigger, he knew his other self had spoken the truth.

A KILLER IN THE DARK

by Robert Edmund Alter

IT HAD been a long hot dry summer and the little mice had come down from the foothills and into the residential district to look for water. And that was why the diamondback had left the hills; not to look for water—to look for mice.

Daylight was on the ebb. The hot, splintery sun was on its way down the far side of the western hills and the diamondback hadn't had any luck. He was in a garden, in the soft loam of a rose bed, and the back of a house was right in front of him. There were weeds there, banked along the sill, and he was going to have a look in them.

The reason he didn't know about the little boy on the wall was because he was deaf and his eyes were only accurate up to about fifteen feet. The boy watched him slither along for a moment with a sort of spellbound fascination. Then he pulled his slingshot from his jeans and loaded it, drew back, aiming, and let the elastic fly.

The stone would have missed by six inches at any rate, but even before it struck the dirt the diamondback knew about it and he S-shaped his glistening body and took off in zigzag alarm.

"Mom!" the boy yelled. "Mom! Come quick! I hit a rattler!"

About ten minutes earlier Peter Douglas had made the last cut on his lawn and, leaving the mower standing idle at one corner of his yard, he

had strolled down to George Hudson's house, three doors away. George had been out weeding; now both men were standing in George's driveway chatting and smoking. They were half-seriously thinking of going in together on a power mower.

Then Mrs. Ferris, Peter's neighbor on the west, came down Peter's driveway in a state of agitation and called to him very excitedly.

"Pete! Pete! Jimmy found a rattlesnake in your backyard!"

Peter turned, narrowing his eyes at the distant woman.

"What did she say?"

George's mouth formed a down-cornered smile. "Something about a snake in your yard. Leave it up to that busybody and her kid to know more about what's going on in *your* yard than in her own."

"Pete! Pete, you better hurry!"

Peter grinned, lowering his head, and flipped his cigarette away.

"Better go see what has her bugged, I suppose," he murmured.

Both men started across the Thompsons' lawn, both still smiling, the way men do whenever they encounter the exaggerated fears of a female. But Peter's smile felt a little forced in his cheeks. A snake, he wondered. Had she said a *rattle*snake?

Mrs. Pedroni came out on her front porch as the two men cut across Ed Pedroni's lawn. "What is it, Pete? Something wrong?"

George answered, casually. "Little Jimmy thinks he saw a snake in Pete's backyard."

Mrs. Ferris was acting like a child holding up her hand in the classroom when no question had been asked. Her large eyes were shifting about in her face in a very distracted manner. She was actually wringing her hands anxiously.

"Hurry, Pete," she said. "Jimmy was sitting on

our wall and he saw it come through your rose bed and he hit it with his slingshot."

Which probably accounts for the broken pane in my basement window two weeks ago, Peter thought. He was still wearing the inquiring halfsmile on his face, and it still didn't feel quite right. Mrs. Ferris was already trotting back up his drive, calling, "Jimmy! Where *are* you? I told you to stay out in the *drive*way!"

Mrs. Pedroni was coming along behind George and Peter. And now the ten-year-old Jimmy appeared at the head of the drive. He had his slingshot in his hands, loaded too.

"F'goshsake, Mom. He can't hurt me. He's gone already."

Somehow, those words made Peter feel a lot better. He was a little surprised, now, to realize just how apprehensive Mrs. Ferris' news and agitated manner had made him. He didn't suppose everyone reacted the same way to snakes, but . . .

"He went down that hole in your basement window, Mr. Douglas. I seen him. I was sittin' up there on the wall and he came right along through those roses—and *boy* was he big! And I took my slingshot—"

"All right, all right, Jimmy!" Peter snapped without meaning to. The apprehension was back again. It wasn't overpowering or anything like that, but it was there. He felt it in his stomach.

"Are you sure it went through the window?"

"Sure!" The boy scampered across the lawn toward the small fourpane window which sat on the sill. One of the lower panes was smashed.

"He scooted into these weeds and went right in through here."

"Jimmy! Get away from those weeds!"

Peter sucked in his breath. He wished that Mrs. Ferris would put a soft-pedal on her voice. She was getting on his nerves.

Jimmy turned to his mother with a pained expression. "I tol' you, Mom, he ain't here any more. He's down in Mr. Douglas' cellar."

George was grinning at Peter. "That's a nice little visitor to come calling. Maybe you can charge him room and board."

Peter smiled mechanically, saying, "Yeah." He looked at the boy.

"You sure it was a rattler, Jimmy? Not just a garden snake?"

"Aw naw. I seen him. He was a great big ol' rattler."

That's swell, Peter thought. That's really a swell thing to have in your basement. "Well," he said brightly, "I think a telephone call to the sheriff's office is in order right about—"

The backdoor opened and Madge Douglas in her apron looked out at the five people with friendly curiosity.

"Well, what on earth is all this?"

Peter started toward her with a smile.

"It's all right, hon. Jimmy thinks he saw a snake" (and even before he finished he saw the apprehension come into her eyes and he knew his intuition had been right all along—that it was going to be bad; because fear, he supposed, was atavistic in women. All the way back to the dim females of the caves it had been kids and accidents, kids and sickness, or husbands and wars, husbands and heart attacks) "go down in our basement."

There was a pause as she stared at his eyes, as she took in breath to say it with a rush. And in that brief moment they were the only two people there—man and wife, parents.

"Peggy's down there."

Already she was turning away, moving toward the closed basement door in the back-porch. Peter went after her with a start, clumping up the steps

and through the open door, and caught her by the shoulders, turning her back.

"All right," he said quietly. "Now wait a minute, take it easy."

Her eyes didn't jump about like swallows trapped in a barn, the way Mrs. Ferris' did. They were fixed, frozen, staring up at him.

"She and little Glady went down to play Monster."

He nodded jerkily, saying, "All right. Phone the sheriff. I'll go down now. It's all right, honey."

He reached for the light switch by the side of the closed door . . . but he was hearing in memory what Madge had said to him a week ago: *Pete, you'll have to put a new bulb in the basement. The light's burned out.* And himself answering absently, his mind half on the evening paper: *Yeah, I'll get it. Tomorrow. . . .*

Tomorrow, tomorrow . . . Peggy in the dark basement. Seven years old. Happy blue eyes in a pale tender face, standing in a blonde mist of hair, at his elbow, as he watched TV. *'Night, Daddy. . . .*

"Pete, you didn't—"

"It's all right," he insisted, reaching for the doorknob instead. "Give me the flashlight from the drawer there." And again he saw it in her eyes and he knew that that wasn't going to work either.

"Oh, Pete, the batteries . . . I forgot to buy the batteries!"

"Okay. Okay. A candle—give me one of the candles."

They had followed him up to the door, Mrs. Pedroni, Mrs. Ferris, Jimmy and George. George had a peculiar look on his face. He was saying, "I've got a gun, Pete. A thirty-two. I'll—"

Peter swung on him. "I can't take a pistol down there! Not with two little girls!"

"Well," George murmured. "Well . . ."

Then he knew that George wasn't going with him, and there wasn't any sense in embarrassing him by asking him to. *Can I blame him? Would I, if Peggy wasn't down there? For someone else's kid?* At that moment he didn't honestly know.

"Phone the sheriff, George," he said. He took the candle from Madge and he jerked his head at her. In movies—at this moment—there always seemed to be ample time for the man to reassure the girl; oceans of time for him to tell the woman he loved just how much she meant to him. But it wasn't true. He didn't have a spare second. Just a quick reluctant nod. That's all the time there was.

He opened the door and started down the breakneck steps into a waiting black pit, fishing for a match in his pocket.

The stairs were in a well. You stepped straight down until you reached the concrete floor. Then you turned left around the corner of the plastered wall and you were in the basement.

The basement was large and dark and very cluttered. It had been the Douglas catch-all for nearly ten years. Peter couldn't see anything—except, here and there, the far-away little windows, like small, square, opaque eyes. They didn't help him at all. Dusk was settling outside, quietly bringing along the threat of night.

He hesitated at the corner of the stairwell, peering into the dark, listening. But there wasn't anything to hear.

"Peggy?" He hadn't whispered consciously, and it startled him to hear the tremulous, wispy sound come out of his throat.

"Peggy?" he said clearly.

Monster was their favorite game. Peggy and her little friend Gladys would rather play Monster than eat. It had to be played in the dark, of course, otherwise they couldn't scare themselves

into delicious hysterics. So they would hide in a dark place and one would be Monster and the other would be Victim. Monster had to remain stationary; Victim had to move about. When Victim sneaked close to Monster, Monster would let out an awful mouth noise—which not only shocked poor Victim into delighted shrieks of horror, but also managed to scare Monster half to death as well. Then Monster would chase Victim in the dark. It was a very merry little game.

"Peggy!" His voice turned insistent. He scraped the matchhead along the plaster wall, dragging a flare of orange fire after it, and held the quivering little bulb of light to the candlewick.

Then he heard a noise. *Gggggggheehee.* Low and throaty and restrained. He let out his breath, raising the little island of candlelight against the black set of the basement. Inky shadows lurched away from him, turning into a multitude of orange and brown objects.

"Peggy. Glady. I hear you. Don't move . . . don't move at all, girls. Just tell Daddy where you are. I'm going to play Monster with you."

There was a pause; then the faint ghostly little gurgle of giggling again, from the far end of the basement. *Gggggggheehee.*

"Peggy, are you by the furnace, honey? Don't move. Just tell me."

And suddenly, shockingly, the little outraged voice of his seven-year-old, coming at him from nowhere like an unexpected blow.

"That's not fair, Daddy! You can't use a light! My goodness!"

By the water heater—wasn't it? He thought so.

"All right, honey. I'll blow it out in a minute. I'll be the Monster and come find you and Glady."

"No! *You're* supposed to hide and jump out on us when we—"

"Yes, I know. But let's play it this other way.

It'll be more fun. Just stay where you are, now. Glady—where are you, honey?"

"Over here."

Behind the furnace. Good. That put both of them at the same end of the cellar. He started forward, slowly, holding the candle high, peering everywhere, sharply.

Stacks of old newspapers and magazines . . . the fat, smiling, dust covered face of Khruschev on the cover of a *Life* . . . old inner tubes, tools, a fallen rake . . . cardboard boxes packed with all the nameless, seemingly purposeless articles that wives never really discard . . . a steamer trunk that had belonged to Peter's father . . . an old backless bookshelf filled with paint cans and brushes and old jars . . .

Maybe the damned thing wasn't down here at all . . . except in Jimmy's imagination. But what if he had seen a snake? *Calling* it a rattler was just the kind of thing a ten-year-old would think of, even if it was only an old garden snake. Still, that rake would make a good weapon, just in . . .

CH-CH-CH-CH-CH-HHH!

It went off like a telephone right behind him, and its immensity of sound seemed to fill the entire basement. It jerked him to full stop and the short hairs on the back of his neck felt just like pins and needles in his flesh.

It didn't sound the same as it did in movies or TV. It didn't really sound like a baby's rattle. It was too overpoweringly loud, and it went on and on. At that moment, all he could think of was a freight train rattling and bouncing and lurching along, endlessly coming.

He jumped, spun about, seeing it there on the dusty cement floor, coiled neatly near a stack of old encyclopedias with the flat triangular head cocked down in the center, the forked tongue flicking through the closed traplike mouth as if

tasting the cool air, the beady-bright, vertical eyes watching him dispassionately, and the caudal rattle vibrating the horny epidermal rings warningly.

Panicky, he wondered how long the rattler would wait before it decided to strike; or would it wait indefinitely, as long as he didn't move? *It's cold,* he thought, *sluggish, but it's awake enough to know that it doesn't like me.*

"*Ooooh,* Daddy! What's the funny noise, Daddy?"

He couldn't help himself. He was triggered as tightly as a bear trap. He stepped backward in a rush, his right foot coming down on the iron prongs of the rake. The handle swished up and slammed him just behind the right shoulder, snapping the candle from his hand.

In the vivid instant before the falling light winked out he saw the rattler uncoil all at once, shooting its flat head at the candle as its hinged mouth jerked open and those two hypodermic needle-like fangs snapped forward.

Then, for a gut-grabbing moment, there was nothing. No sound, no sight. Peter was on his left knee, both hands touching the floor. He wasn't exactly sure how he had come to this crouching position. The right side of his back was stabbing him with pain and his entire right arm was tingling. He was afraid to move.

He didn't know much about rattlesnakes, only a few vaguely remembered facts he'd read somewhere, or been told. The snake's eyesight wasn't good, and it was utterly useless in the dark. And he was stone deaf. But those things didn't matter, because the snake had a built-in gimmick in his head which made him as deadly as a highpowered rifle in the hands of an insane expert marksman.

Some said it had to do with the facial pit between the snake's eye and nostril; others said it

had to do with the tongue or an inner organ of the throat—Jacob's Organ. Whatever it was, it acted as a specialized sense organ which reacted to warm and cold objects. It could strike unerringly at a temperature aura.

"Daddy! Daddy!" Peggy's voice came imperiously. "No fair starting yet. You know where we are. Wait till we hide again. Okay, Daddy?"

"*No!*" Then he caught himself, his nerve, and lowered his tone.

"No, wait, honey. Don't move yet. Gladys, don't you move either. Daddy wants to do something first. Just a minute, honey."

He leaned back on his haunches to put his left hand into his pants pocket. But the pocket was empty. No matches.

Peter wet his lips and put his right knee down and his left hand, to try in his right pocket. His left hand descended on something round and cold and slightly yielding.

A surging cry gagged in his throat as he threw himself backwards with a slam against the metal face of the furnace, creating a hollow *tooomm* of sound.

Wait! Wait! he told himself. *It wasn't him. Not the snake. Garden hose! A piece of plastic garden hose.* For a crazy moment he thought he was going to giggle. He checked himself, and remembered the matches. He dug into his right pants pocket.

It was like reaching his hand into blank despair. He wouldn't believe it—that in his frantic anxiety he hadn't even had the sense to check for matches before he came down into the cellar. He felt his shirt pockets. His pack of cigarettes was still there, but not—of course—the half-empty book of matches he had started the day with.

Keep 'em, he heard himself saying to George again, as they stood and talked in George's driveway. *I've got some kitchen matches.*

He started to edge around the furnace, groping with his left hand.

"Glady—Glady, are you there, honey?"

He heard her leather soles crunch on the grit of the cement floor. She giggled quietly in the dark in front of him.

"No, don't move, Gladys. Come here, dear. I want to explain about the game before we start."

Then his trembling fingers found the fabric of her play clothes and he almost grabbed her violently. But he restrained himself, taking her gently under the armpits and lifting her.

"We're going to play it differently," he whispered. "Now sit here and wait while I go for Peggy."

He fumbled with the little girl's soft body, setting her up on the top of the furnace, telling her, "Now take ahold of one of the ducts—the pipes. Got it?"

"It's all dusty dirty," she told him.

"That's all right. Just hold on to it, so you won't fall. Okay? Now I'll be right back."

He let go of her and turned in the dark, hating the thought of making his blind way from the furnace clear over to the water heater. Why didn't that fool sheriff hurry?

"Pete?" The shock of the sudden voice in the dark almost unmanned him. His heart lurched. Then he steadied himself. It was Madge calling from the stairwell.

"Pete, are you all right?"

"Yes. Yes, Madge. We're all right. Madge—don't come down here!"

"Is Peggy—"

"Yes, they're both all right."

"Pete, is the—is it down there?"

She was thinking of the kids; they would know what the word Snake meant, and it would probably scare them. Peter didn't want to scare her. He lied. "I don't think so. I haven't seen it."

"Mrs. Ferris is bringing a flashlight."

"All right. All right, Madge. We'll be up in a minute."

Why did I say that? he wondered. *We won't be. We don't dare try to move out of here. We'll have to sit tight until the sheriff's men get here.*

"When're we gonna start the game, Daddy? You said we were gonna play Monster!"

We're playing it, honey. Oh, yes, we're really playing it.

"In just a minute, Peg. Just as soon as I get everything ready."

There was just the faintest flicker of dull light on the floor before him. The covered pilot light in the water heater. He reached out, feeling for his daughter. "Now—here Daddy is."

Ch-CH-CH-CH-CH-HHH!

He couldn't believe it. But he had to because it was there, rattling—it seemed—right beside him. Frantically, he sprang away from the heater, and heard almost instantly the sharp *sssip* of the snake's momentum as it snapped blindly forward. Then he sprang again, to divert the thing's attention away from the vicinity of the heater and his daughter.

"*Ooooh,* Daddy! You're making that funny noise again!"

"*Don't move, Peggy!* Don't move. Peggy, you mind Daddy—don't move an inch."

"Pete! Pete, what's that noise? Is it the—"

"Shut *up*, Madge! Stay there."

He was gasping now, standing in the dense dark in a half crouch, trying to listen. He thought he could hear the soft slither of the snake's belly sliding across the gritty floor.

Coming this way? he asked. God—is he coming this way?

It was inconceivable to him that this soulless, vicious little length of muscle, bone and venom might cost him his life. It was senseless and mad. He was the product of innumerable generations, the result of a complicated process of evolution since the creation of the earth. It was outrageous to think that that filthy little pitviper could kill him.

Because death was something that happened to other people in other cities, other lands. It didn't happen to your friends or family. It never really happened to you.

Not Peggy, he prayed. *Not Gladys—because she's as much my responsibility as my own child is.*

"Pete! I've got Mrs. Ferris' flashlight. Shall I—"

"Don't come down here, Madge!" He half turned in the direction of the stairwell.

CH-CH-CH-CH-HHH!

It went off again, surrounding him in the horror of its clamor, and he sprang to the left . . . right into the shelves of old paint cans and jars. He went down, his equilibrium lost in the black crash of falling objects, tin cans clattering and glass shattering.

He rolled in the mess, trying to get the leverage to get up and get out of there, and his right hand caught something and he grabbed, and then—too late—he couldn't let go.

It quivered, jerked, seemed to kick in his hand. He felt his whole arm jolt. It was like grabbing a live wire, only it was cold and slick and it rippled with writhing muscle as it wrapped around his wrist and forearm. The caudal rattle went off in his ear.

Throw it away! My God, throw it away! But he wouldn't, couldn't. He was wild with fear and re-

vulsion, and he was all turned around. He might unwittingly throw it into his daughter's face.

The sinuous length of body coiled and tightened and whipped around his arm, the rattle going going going.

He couldn't think. He started staggering into the dark aimlessly, holding his jerking arm out. Far far away he heard the sad wail of the siren coming. But it didn't have meaning to him. It belonged to the normal outside world. He was here in blackness with this damned thing wrapped around his arm and he didn't know what to do with it.

"It hasn't struck me," he muttered dazedly. "I must have it right behind the head, and it can't get the swing. But dear God, what am I to *do* with the filthy thing?"

His feet blundered into something and he almost went down. Tools . . . tools under my feet. He dropped to his knees, his left hand groping among the clutter of metal and wood and plastic, and found a hammer.

Ch-CH-CH-CH-HHH!

"Shut up!" he hissed. *"Shut up!"*

He put his right hand down on the cement floor and held the thrashing, rattling thing there and swung the hammer at it.

The first blow caught the knuckle of his forefinger and he gasped against the white jolt of pain, and he swung again and again and . . .

He wasn't himself when he came up the stairs; he knew it, but couldn't seem to do anything about it. He felt like a somnambulist.

The two deputies had already pushed by him with their flashlights to go down into the basement, and Madge was on her knees on the backporch with one arm around Peggy and the other around Gladys, and Peggy was explaining to her how he, Daddy, hadn't played the game correctly,

how he had tried to scare them merely by making a "funny old noise."

And Madge was saying, "Yes dear, yes dear," over and over, and doing her best not to cry.

The deputies had brought an ambulance with them, and now the intern was leading Peter down the backsteps, plucking at the sleeve of his shirt trying to see the mangled hand.

It seemed as though half the neighborhood was in his backyard. George was there with his .32 and with a sheepish look on his face.

"I brought the gun anyhow, Pete," he said apologetically.

Peter nodded. "Thanks, George."

"Come on," the intern insisted. "Let's go out to the wagon and have a look at that hand."

Peter let himself be led down the drive. People were stepping aside all along the way, staring at him. He blinked and looked around dully when he heard Jimmy call to him.

"Gosh, Mr. Douglas, why'd you have to kill it? Couldn't you just hold it till the cops got here? I'd like to keep that ol' rattler."

Some of the spectators chuckled, watching Peter askance.

"Sorry, Jimmy," Peter murmured.

"C'mon," the intern ordered.

He closed the doors in the rear of the ambulance and had Peter sit on the cot. He gave Peter a penetrating glance, and then he gave him a shot of something. After that he offered him a cigarette.

"All right now?" he asked.

Peter nodded. "Yeah, sure."

Then he grinned spastically at the intern.

"I got him, huh? I couldn't see in the dark, you know? Couldn't see my hand before my face. I think he must have launched himself when I blundered into the paint cans. Then, before he

could collect himself again, I caught him by accident. I just kept pounding him and pounding him until he was pulp—or my hand was. Couldn't tell. Then all at once I found myself standing and I was feeling my right hand with my left and the snake was gone. I—I couldn't stop pounding him, you know? I just kept . . ."

Abruptly the emotional discharge of words ran out. He fumbled for something to say, as a rapt look of horrified revulsion came into his eyes.

The intern nodded, watching him.

All at once Peter was sobbing, his entire body trembling violently. He dropped his cigarette and his head went down, as the intern reached for him, wrapping one arm around his bowed shoulders, and holding him like a frightened child.

AN IMPORTANT KILL

by Robert Colby

FRANK DONATO waited in Martinelli's livingroom. The mansion seemed as stern as a courthouse and the room gave him the impression of some dim cathedral. Emilio had brought Frank to see Martinelli just once before, so this was supposed to be a significant occasion, but Frank was just mildly curious about the meeting with Martinelli. He was much more interested in his hunger demands which had not been fed since early morning, though it was well past noon.

Emilio appeared after a long interval and beckoned. Together they went down a dusky hallway. Emilio was short, practically hairless and middle-aged. He took eager little steps and walked with one shoulder canted a bit forward, as if leaning into a perpetual wind. Much taller, and younger, Frank moved with a lazy grace, the solid beam of his shoulders casually lifted and squared. He had a rather long nose, but his features were cleanly wrought and capped by a glistening mass of wavy black hair. There was about him a constant look of cool composure, his face rarely expressing any strong currents of emotion.

In the outsized library, Vincent P. Martinelli was seated behind a gigantic, carved mahogany desk. He had a great square block of a face, full of hard angles and crevices, and despite his hard-muscled, disciplined physique, Frank guessed he was beyond sixty.

As they entered, Martinelli came slowly to his feet and offered his hand, as one who makes a reluctant concession to a ridiculous custom. Frank took the hand and shook it briefly. Martinelli sat down and laced thick fingers across his broad chest.

Frank sat down and Emilio became lost in another chair as Martinelli said, "Okay, let's talk." He glanced at his watch as if to suggest the pressure of urgent matters waiting in the wings of his command.

"Now, Frank, I told Emilio to bring you over because there was a meeting and we decided to give you a key spot in the organization. We've tried you in about every phase of the business and you've never failed us. When we gave you the real test, enforcement, you came up with a perfect score. If there's a call for an important contract out of town, everybody knows they can count on Frank Donato.

"But you deserve something better, Frank. You're well-educated, you've got brains and imagination. Above all, you're a man to be trusted. Now, Emilio has a contract I want you to handle for the New York outfit. It's a very special contract—I have a personal interest. And then we're going to move you up the ladder."

Martinelli lit a cigarette and toyed with a manila envelope on his desk. "We think you're the right man for this position, but we want you to make up your own mind about it. Do you like the enforcement end of the business, Frank?"

"I don't like it or dislike it. It's a job that has to be done, that's all."

"Exactly, Frank. A job that has to be done. Because without discipline, the organization would fall apart. Our own would steal us blind from within, the outsiders would take us over. But we're businessmen, not hoods, Frank, and the

way the world is moving, the law might legalize what it calls vice and the church calls sin." He flashed a smile.

"Meanwhile, we've got this spot picked for you. You'll be a kind of troubleshooter. You'll go into a territory where we're having problems and you'll shape it up. You'll cut out all the deadwood, chop a few heads, reorganize. Enforcement will come under this department and you'll be in complete charge of that, too.

"We'll give you a crack at it and if you can manage it, as I know you can, Frank, it'll be worth a hundred grand a year to you, for openers."

Martinelli settled back in his chair. "How does that sound to you, Frank?"

"Without knowing the details, I couldn't give you an intelligent answer, Mr. Martinelli, but on the surface it seems just the sort of thing I'm qualified to do best—reorganization, with the power to enforce changes."

"Then it's done," said Martinelli, who now stood in an attitude of dismissal. "I want that New York job to come off without any feedback, no loose ends. It's extremely important to me, Frank, and that's why you've been elected. It should be flawless. They should get the message and they should know who sent it—but should never be able to prove it. You understand?"

"Yes, sir. Absolutely."

"Okay, come and see me when it's finished." He smiled and went around the desk to pat Frank on the shoulder. "And now I'll leave you with Emilio." He glanced again at his watch. "I have a golfing date with some high brass from city hall and I'm running late. So good day, gentlemen." He handed the manila envelope which had been on his desk to Emilio, and went out.

Emilio opened the envelope and passed the

contents to Frank. There was a sheet of typed information to which an 8x10 photograph was attached. Frank studied the photo.

A pretty young woman with short dark hair was shown alighting from a cab, assisted by a doorman in splendid uniform. The picture was taken obliquely from above, with a telephoto lens, he guessed. The girl's head was raised so that she looked almost directly into the camera.

"This broad in New York City is an important kill," said Emilio. "Vince wants that one so bad he can taste it. And he wants it to go like a machine because we have a mountain of cash invested in a part of the Eastern operation. The girl's daddy is a big power in the city. The New York outfit put him up there. He gave them promises and they backed him with a big hunk of bread.

"But then, no warning, he spits right in the eye. He turns on the heat and business comes to a dead stop. He says it's pressure from the top but we know it's a political kick. He's going to try for a jump upstairs next election. The New York outfit gave him plenty of time to ease off, but now they have to nail him or lose their grip in the East."

"They're afraid to take this guy out, so they waste the daughter," Frank said.

"Yeah, because with a guy like this, the publicity might stir up a landslide that could bury the whole operation for years. So we go in the back door and we get him where it hurts the most. The wife is dead and the kid is all he's got. With him, she's what you call an obsession."

"Okay," said Frank, "I'll handle it."

"Take your time, but don't miss. She's divorced, lives alone, has a soft job with some cosmetic company."

Frank examined the photo for another minute. Then, as Emilio sat behind a newspaper, he

studied the information on the attached sheet of paper. Finally, he made some brief, coded notations on the back of a card from his wallet.

Standing, he returned the items to Emilio, who said, "Come on, I'll drive you to the airport."

It was raining in New York, had been raining since his arrival. There was a charcoal sky and a feeling of night, augmented by the lights in all the somber towers of the city. Pedestrians were hunched and hurried, a glut of nearly stationary vehicles overflowed the streets. Sounds, even of angry horns, came muted, as if smothered under the blanket of spilling clouds.

It was the rush hour, near five-thirty, and Frank Donato was waiting in one of those "drops" or hideouts, where shadowy persons in transit and curious equipment were deposited, and where enigmatic information was exchanged. The small, furnished apartment was in a sooty-gray building on West 54th. From its third-floor window there was an unpleasant, watery view of the narrow street, across from which the dreary faces of opposing structures pressed too close.

Frank sat behind the desk in a corner of the livingroom. He brought a ring of keys from his pocket. Unlocking the bottom drawer, he took out a black leather case, placed it atop the desk and opened it. Inside were the tools of his trade. There was a holstered snub-nosed .38 revolver and a box of new cartridges. He never carried a gun between jobs and would return this one when the contract was completed.

There was also a tiny brush and a small bottle containing a clear liquid with which to coat his fingertips. The substance would quickly dry and harden to cover his prints.

There was a bonus in the kit, a key to fit the door of his victim. Mostly, Frank employed lock-

challenging gimmicks, and a key was a luxury, the ultimate in simplicity.

He put the key in his pocket and inspected the .38 minutely. Then he loaded the gun, nosed it back into the holster and sealed the leather case inside the desk drawer.

The New York outfit had not provided a contact for this job. At the airport, Emilio had told Frank it had been decided that such was the need for secrecy, he was to go it alone, at his own pace. Then Emilio had given him an envelope containing the money for the contract, delivered in advance by a messenger from the New York brass.

When Frank counted the bills he discovered that he had been paid twice the expected amount.

Such jobs could be done by one of the pros in town, of course, but they never were. By tradition, the talent was imported in the belief that the local experts were known to the cops and were therefore under scrutiny. Besides, Frank was considered one of the best in the country, if not the world, and he had learned with some amusement that, like booze for special occasions, imports tended to command the most respect.

The mark had been identified as Gloria Whimbley. At least that was her married name, continued after the divorce.

Frank had her phone number. Near six, when she should have been home from whatever it was she did, likely more for kicks than money, he began calling her every few minutes. He wanted to check by faking a wrong number before he went over.

When she didn't answer, he was irritated, restive. It was for him an odd reaction—to feel anything but cool determination—and he tried to examine it. Perhaps, he reasoned, it was because this was the last job and he was impatient to be done with it, move on and up to his promised re-

ward, with its power and the joy of spending heavy cash.

Yes, that was part of it, but there was something else. He had never killed a woman; and from the outset, when Emilio assigned him to waste the dark-haired one, who was young and also pretty, he had wondered just a little if he could bring it off with his accustomed indifference.

It was not a thing he could mention to Emilio, who seemed to consider him a kind of guided missile which need only be aimed at any target. So he had put the matter out of mind, as he did with all intangibles and uncertainties, confident that he could cope with them when the time came.

Now, in the final stage of commitment, there was still the uneasy churn of a mild doubt, so that abruptly he was driven by the need to hurry, to lose himself in action.

He dialed again. She came on after the fourth ring, a little breathless, as if she had dashed in from outside. He asked for "Walter," and of course she said that he must have the wrong number, though she did not seem annoyed and there was in her voice a hint of good nature.

"Sorry," he said, and erased the connection.

A sense of urgency growing upon him, he rapidly coated his fingers with the stuff of the little bottle. Then, with gun in holster, he adjusted his tie, pulled on a trench coat. He seldom wore a hat and did not bring one, but no matter. He went out.

He distrusted cabs, or cabdrivers who might remember, so he walked a couple of blocks in the pelting rain and caught a bus uptown, then another crosstown to Fifth and Central Park.

It was a good address in one of the fine old buildings of that moneyed area. A long, forest-green, canvas marquee bore the address in gold script. The uniformed doorman stood just inside

the glass double doors, Frank noted in passing. Doormen were to be shunned religiously. They examined faces and questioned, and called the tenant to announce your arrival.

There was often a subterranean garage from which one might gain entry without being observed. He turned the corner to check. Garage, yes; unobserved, no. An attendant was on duty.

Frank stood near a soaked bench in the bus zone with two others, his eyes searching down the avenue. It gave him a bit of business while he thought about it in a rain which had now diminished to a sprinkle.

A bus, impossibly crammed, swished by implacably. Then a cab approached the building of Gloria Whimbley, and even before the driver braked to a stop in front, with the obvious intent of discharging his passengers, Frank was on the go.

As expected, the doorman rushed out with an oversized umbrella. While he was thus preoccupied, with exact timing Frank rushed in.

There were two elevators, one of these agape at ground level. Inside it, Frank poked a button and rose to the 14th floor.

The corridor of that floor, carpeted in dusty gold and decorated with brocaded panels of a richer gold, was deserted. The door to 14D was around a corner and could not be seen from the elevators. He pressed an ear against it and listened attentively. There was only a sound of music, distant and subdued.

With a glance about the corridor, he reached for the .38 and brought the key from his pocket. The door opened smoothly; he closed it behind him.

The music, an instrumental of some weepy ballad, pulsed softly from beyond. He was in a narrow hallway which opened upon a sunken livingroom, a white-carpeted oval furnished with a

great semi-circle of sofa, deep chairs and solid-looking tables, all quite elegant, but not very feminine.

It flashed to him that these were probably pieces which were a hangover from the broken marriage, but he was busy calculating more immediate problems as he lifted the gun and moved behind it.

He advanced to the livingroom, not caring very much if he were heard above the whisper of music, apparently piped in from a wall speaker. If she discovered him, there was no place to run, but what could she do? Scream? Well, then, bye-bye Gloria.

In any case, he wanted to do it quickly and be gone.

She was not in the livingroom so he went on, crossing it to follow another hallway. He had taken only a few steps when he came upon a door, partly open. He heard a female voice and halted.

The girl was in a small, cheerful den, leaning against a desk and talking into the telephone. There was in her standing posture an attitude of haste, as if she were in a hurry to break off the conversation.

She was facing the door but her eyes were not focused upon it and she did not notice him. Frank could see at once that there had been a goof somewhere, a giant mistake. This long-haired, corn-silk blonde with the lusty chest was *not* that girl of the photo, who had short dark hair, was mildly developed, her features larger, much less delicate.

Emilio would not make such a mistake. Yet he was only a kind of agent for the New York outfit and it was their contract, under their control. The girl could be simply a visitor, and with this in mind, Frank toed away to check further.

There was a single bedroom with a big, frilly bed. The room and its adjoining bath were empty of life.

Frank decided to retreat, to back away until he could call Emilio and find out what the hell was going on here.

He left the room, began a cautious exit down the hallway. At the same moment, the blonde stepped from the den and walked toward him. With a gasp, she pulled up short and stood rooted, reminding Frank of some quivering doe poised for flight—intensely beautiful, and soft, and vulnerable.

In the hushed voice of terror, she said, "What are you doing in— Who—who *are* you?"

"No," he shook his head firmly. "Who are *you*? That's the question, baby."

When she didn't answer, he went toward her with the gun loosely extended. He motioned her back into the den and told her to sit. He stood above her and leveled the gun directly at her head. "Come on, what's your name, honey?"

"I—I'm Nicky Gillmore," she said meekly.

He nodded, pursing his lips. "Is that so, now? Nicky Gillmore. And what happened to Gloria?"

"Gloria?"

"Gloria," he said, "and I'm not gonna ask you again."

"Well, she—I've taken over her apartment for a while."

"That's bad news, Nicky—for you. Unless you can pick up that phone and convince her to hop right over here."

"No, I can't do that."

"You can't?"

"No. She's on vacation and I don't know where she is."

"Sure you do. And you'll tell me all about it, won't you, Nicky?"

"Well, she's out in California. She's staying at my place in Santa Monica. She has friends there and I have friends here. So we exchanged apartments for a couple of weeks' vacation. It's an arrangement."

She was staring at the gun, tilting her head back from it, shrinking in her chair. "Please," she said with a nervous smile, "would you take that thing away? I'm only a girl and I'm not going to—to overpower you or anything."

"And when," he said, "did she leave for California? Gloria Whimbley."

"It must have been very early this morning. I don't know exactly because she was gone when I got here. But her flight was due in L.A. at nine-thirty-five a.m., their time."

He stuck the gun under his belt. Crossing to the desk, he dropped a hand to the phone. "Santa Monica, is it? What's your address out there?"

"Eight-forty-two Ocean Avenue."

"And the phone is under your name, right?"

"Yes. Under Nicole Gillmore."

"What's the area code?"

"Uh, two-one-three."

Watching her, he dialed 213 and followed it with the standard long-distance information number. She had not been lying. The operator gave him the number. He plucked a pen from the desk holder and wrote it on a calendar pad.

"So far, so good," he said. "Now, Nicky, we'll give Gloria a friendly little call—just to see how she's doing out there, right? You'll speak to her and I'll be listening, so be careful what you say."

She nodded and he dialed the number. There was no answer. He gave it a count of ten and rang off. Arms folded across his chest, he sat on a corner of the desk and gazed at her in silence, his mind circling the problem, speculating.

She was wearing an off-white low-neck satin

gown with a mini-skirt. It seemed a formal dress and he guessed that she must have been planning to go out for the evening. She had marvelous legs and an attractive figure, but the face intrigued him most. It was so utterly fragile, so delicately feminine. Altogether, she appeared his prototype woman created from pieces of dreams, the composite of all his vague imaginings.

"Well, now," she pleaded to his silence, "you have to understand that it's three hours earlier on the West Coast. It's still afternoon there. And—and Gloria is probably down on the beach."

He tore the page from the calendar pad, folded it and tucked the notation into a pocket. "We'll call again, Nicky. We'll keep trying, won't we?"

"Yes, we'll keep trying," she chanted. "And—and then what? I mean, once I've proved to you that she's really there, what will you do?"

"Do? I'll take the next plane to California."

His sharp little smile invited the next question and she said, "Why? Why do you want to kill Gloria? Apparently you don't even know her."

"Did I say I was going to kill Gloria?"

"You didn't have to say it."

"Forget it, baby, it's out of your league. You wouldn't understand."

She shook her head, blonde strands gently dancing across bare shoulders. "No, I wouldn't, that's true." She was at the edge of tears. "May I get up and move around?" She smiled wanly. "I'm a little nervous, you see."

"Go ahead."

She crossed to a rain-splashed window, looked down into the darkness pensively for a moment, then turned. "No, I can't understand the killing of any human being," she told him in a stronger voice, her little chin bravely set. "Especially your kind of killing, in cold blood."

He chuckled and said, "The girl voice of the Es-

tablishment speaks the cornball religion of sweetness and light—goodwill toward all men. You people are really naive."

"Maybe so." She went to stand directly in front of him, eyes locked with his. "But at least we come equipped with a heart and soul. Can you say the same? What's missing inside you? Don't you ever feel love?" She reached timidly to touch his cheek. "Didn't anyone ever give you love?"

He sat motionless and expressionless, immobilized by her touch, the subtle fragrance of her, the nearness of that slightly tremulous, tender mouth to his own.

There was a sound from beyond, the harsh demand of a buzzer.

He stepped around her to the doorway. The sound was repeated in the livingroom. "What's it mean?" he snapped.

"That will be my date," she said, "the doorman calling to tell me he's here. We were going out to dinner."

"And when you don't answer, what'll he do?"

"My date?" She shrugged. "I don't know."

"Yes, you do. Think about it. Think!"

"Well, if the doorman lets him pass, he'll come up and knock. Otherwise, he'll go away, I suppose."

The buzzing continued now, with a longer insistence.

"Just like that, he'll go away, will he?"

"No, he'll be upset. He'll think something's wrong. He'll take some kind of action—I don't know what."

"But he's a little gentleman, so he won't make it a big deal. Right, Nicky?"

"No. I imagine he'll phone from outside before he—"

"Okay. You just hope he'll be a good boy because otherwise— Okay, we'll wait and see.

Whatever happens, you'd better work up an excuse to get rid of him."

The buzzing had ceased and as they waited, now seated in facing chairs, she said surprisingly, "What's your name?"

"My name?" That struck him funny and he laughed shortly. "People like me, no heart, no soul, we don't have names, either. But if you need a name, pick one—any old name."

She considered. "Roger," she decided.

"Roger, huh?" He snorted, shaking his head. "Roger—that's far out."

"Well, I've never had a Roger in my life and you're not like anyone I've ever known."

"Yeah, that's true, that's for sure."

"Yes, but I find you interesting."

"An interesting specimen is what you mean, baby. That's your language."

"No, no, not at all. I wasn't being condescending. But that shows you're sensitive. No, I meant that you have a kind of dark magnetism, a coiled, relentless quality that one side of me finds appealing, to word it nicely."

"To word it nicely, huh? Don't bother putting me on, Nicky. I've been conned by the best." It was an automatic response. He sensed that she was not really putting him on, perhaps merely exaggerating a bit.

"I see that we can't communicate," she said.

"Maybe in another time and another place. In another world, huh?"

"Well, at least tell me what you intend to do with me. I don't know who you are and where you come from. And so far as I'm concerned, you were never here. So, uh, will you let me go?"

"Sure, sure, I'll let you go," he said, nodding rapidly.

"What else could you do with me? Tie me up? Kill me?"

He didn't answer, didn't know the answer. He clearly did not want to kill her. It might have been simple if she were Gloria Whimbley and he had walked right in and shot her without a word between them; but now there had been this contact, this communication, as she called it, however strained.

She had become a warm, female entity, and in her way, she had reached inside him. More, the power of her attraction as a woman was so overwhelming it clouded his purpose, consumed his will.

Further, the killing of bystanders was considered a dangerous complication, not to be taken lightly. On the other hand, when there was the risk of exposure involved, the choice was absolute. Thumbs down. Because the job, and especially the protective screen of secrecy, came first.

No excuse. Any way you looked at her, Nicky was a block to the kill and a threat to the organization, not to mention himself. Yes, she had to go. And yet . . .

"I suppose," she was saying, "that your silence means you intend to kill me. Is that what you want?" Again she was close to tears.

"No," he said. "It's not what I want. But what I want doesn't count."

Then the phone rang.

"That should be your boy, Nicky. Shake him off and do it right, hear?"

She did. She told the caller that she had been in the shower and didn't hear the buzzer. She had been feeling rotten all day, couldn't hold anything on her stomach. Perhaps the long flight, during which she had been airsick . . . And would he mind postponing?

"You lie like an old pro," Frank said when she hung up. "That would convince anyone but me.

I'd want to know what time you were meeting the other guy so I could slug him." He chuckled.

He had been standing next to her so that he could grab the phone if need be, and now she reached awkwardly for his hand. Squeezing it between her own, electric fingers pulsing, she began to cry. "Oh please," she brokenly begged, "let me go, and I'll keep your secret as long as I live."

He withdrew his hand. "Long as you live?" He smiled bitterly. "Cross your heart? Ah, grow up. You expect me to believe you?"

"Try," she said, brushing tears. "Is it so hard to believe someone like me?"

"Yeah. Now tell me, Nicky, if I let you go, how will it be? I'm on a rough team. They play for keeps. So I'll have to take care of Gloria, the little girlfriend. But you won't mind, right? You won't warn her and you won't snitch to the cops. That wouldn't enter your mind, would it?"

Her eyes drifted from his. "I guess it's hopeless. I couldn't honestly tell you that I'd betray Gloria—just let it happen to her."

"Hey, now we're communicating. That much I believe."

"But if you won't harm her, if you'll just go away and pretend you couldn't find her, then you have my word. You didn't come here looking for her, you don't even exist."

"You don't know what you're talking about, little girl. You don't have any idea what you're asking of me."

He sat behind the desk and, lighting a cigarette, thought about it, the enormity of it. Because of his record, the organization would be apt to swallow a good story and he could return the contract payment; but he would have failed the most important of his assignments and they would not forgive. They would find a reason to stall his re-

ward, his boost up the ladder. They might not give him the job at all, and he'd have to go on in the same rut, a kind of super garbage man in the organization, grudgingly respected, if not regarded with a certain contempt.

Gone would be the hundred grand per and all the goodies, gone the power and the status; and if they ever found him out, bye-bye Frank Donato.

"In your whole life," she was saying, "if you're ever going to do one decent thing, do it now."

Now, he knew he would. Really, he had known it from the moment she stretched her hand to touch his cheek.

"Perhaps you can't see the least benefit now," she continued more confidently, as she studied his face intently, "but it will open you up and give you back what you lost somewhere."

"Let's see how it would play," he began, talking it aloud. "I would put it all on them, make it their fumble, not mine. I would say that I crept in here and got a peek at you while you were gabbing on the phone. But it's the wrong girl, not even close. You haven't seen me, so I back off, vanish. I couldn't find item one on the location of Gloria Whimbley."

He stood. "They'll get her sooner or later, so you'll have to warn her. Tell her you got a threatening phone call from some guy who thought you were Gloria. That should do it. But otherwise, you keep your mouth shut about this, baby. Or I'll come looking for you—understand?"

"Oh, yes, yes, thank you!" She sagged against him, trembling in his arms. "Who are you?" she asked in a husky voice. "Who sent you?"

"Never," he said. "No way, baby. Listen, did you mean what you told me, that I appeal to you? The dark magnetism bit?"

She nodded carefully. "Yes—yes, I meant it, of course."

"Prove it," he said; for even now he could not break the pattern, could not give anything without some reward.

She looked up at him, her expression slowly shifting from disappointment to resignation. "All right, then," she murmured, and shyly taking his hand, led him toward the bedroom.

Long later, sometime in the night, neither awake nor asleep but somewhere between, he felt her stir beside him and cautiously climb from the bed. Lying in perfect stillness, he watched her. She dressed swiftly, then went slinking toward the door. Lingering beside it for nearly a minute, she returned.

She stood peering at him in the gloom, then moved with stealthy little steps to the clothing he had piled on a chair.

With real shock and a vast sense of loss, the draining away of an emotion so unfamiliar yet so sweetly coming, he saw her lift the gun from his holster. Advancing behind it with feline cunning, she held it firmly, and taking deliberate aim at his head, pulled the trigger—again and again, with only the snick of the hammer falling, the chambers empty.

He found the switch and turned on the lamp. Then he leaped up and grabbed her, snatched the gun from her hand.

"I—I couldn't get out," she sobbed. "The door was jammed, and I was so afraid because I thought you would change your mind. That's—that's why I did it. The *only* reason. Oh, won't you believe me?"

"Sure, sure, I believe you baby," he told her as he reached under his pillow and produced a handful of cartridges. "And you gotta believe *me*, baby. The only reason that I hid these little fellows under my pillow was because it's just a habit, you see, not to trust anyone with a loaded gun around

that might go off and kill somebody—by accident, of course."

He broke the weapon and began to load the chambers as she stood watching with horrible fascination. "Now, about the door," he continued blandly. "I jammed it with this little steel wedge I carry; it comes in handy because you can't see it in the dark and you can't get it off unless you know the trick. So while you were in the bathroom, I fixed it in a jiffy.

"Nothing personal, you know. Same habit that needled me to hide the bullets. In my business you don't ever lose *all* of your cool," he explained as he moved in close and extended the gun toward her, "even if just once in your life you fell hard for what turned out to be just another cheap little broad.

"Yeah, would you believe it, Nicky, baby? I was really gonna risk my neck to let you go free."

He shot her then, once neatly through the head, and when she collapsed to the floor in a bloody wash, he examined her carefully, dispassionately, to be certain that she was dead.

He went out to the street by way of the subterranean garage. The attendant had gone off duty, or was asleep in the back of somebody's car. It was still raining and he hurried toward a bus stop, feeling neither happy nor sad, but somehow satisfied, restored.

For a space there, he had lost some part of himself which was the key to his success and without which he knew that he never again would have been able to function; but now it had been recovered and as he climbed aboard the bus, he decided to call Emilio in the morning and tell him the complete score, leaving out only a few unnecessary details. He would say that the New York boys had fumbled, causing him to make an extra

kill to protect the system, but he had saved the ball game by uncovering the hideout of the mark —and he would take the next plane for L.A.

With these final thoughts the whole crazy night slid from his mind, and suddenly he was hungry.

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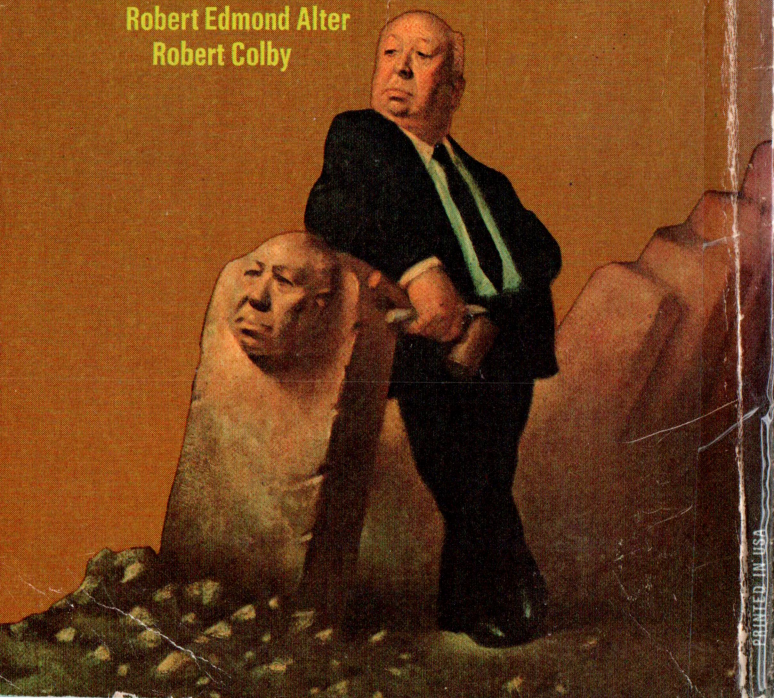

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