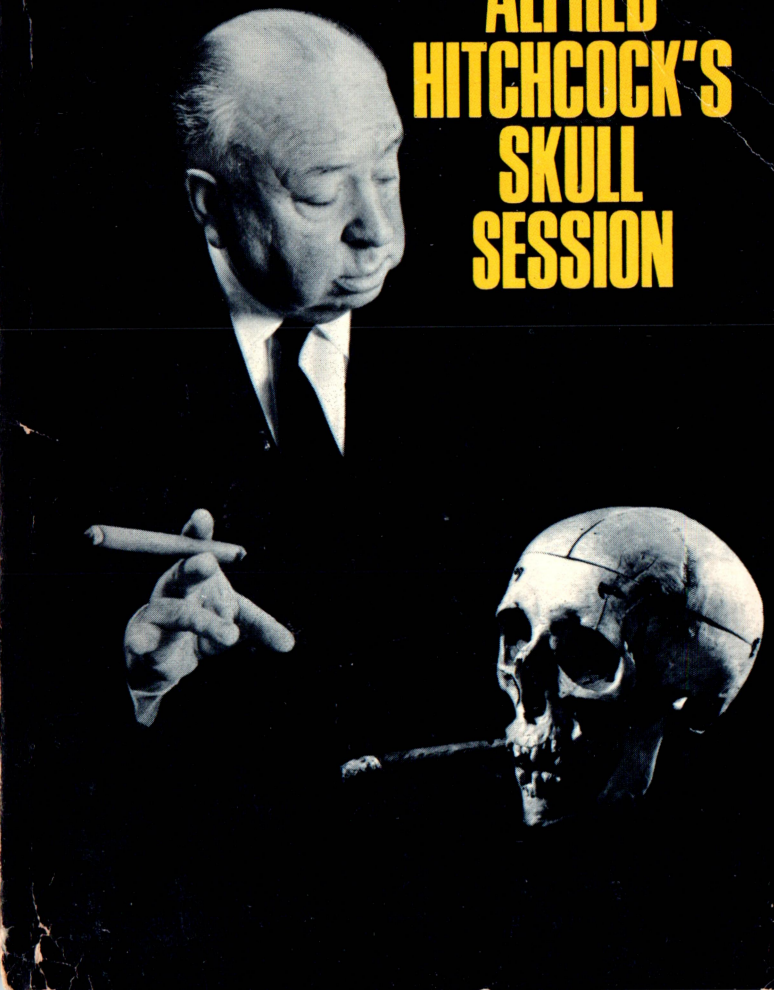
DELL
8016
60c

THE BEST EVER!
FIRST TIME
IN PAPERBACK!

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S SKULL SESSION



THE DO-IT-YOURSELF MURDER KIT

To do a good, honest job of murder (and nowadays you pretty much have to do it yourself, labor costs being what they are) you need several all-important ingredients.

Choose a weapon. That's hard. There are just so many of them. But remember, a workman is no better than his tools.

Find a victim. That's easy. There are just **so** many of them. But remember, an artist is no better than his material.

Then a plan.

That's where this book will come in handy. . . .

SKULL SESSION

Edited by

Alfred Hitchcock

Skull Session

A DELL BOOK

Published by
DELL PUBLISHING CO., INC.
750 Third Avenue
New York, N.Y. 10017

Manufactured in the U.S.A.
Reprinted by arrangement with
H. S. D. Publications, Inc.
First Dell printing—October 1968

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A DEGREE OF INNOCENCE *by Helen Nielsen.* Copyright © 1958 by H. S. D. Publications, Inc. Reprinted by permission of the author and the author's agents, Scott Meredith Literary Agency, Inc.

ONE UNNECESSARY MAN *by Talmage Powell.* Copyright © 1958 by H. S. D. Publications, Inc. Reprinted by permission of the author and the author's agents, Scott Meredith Literary Agency, Inc.

KILL ME, MY SWEET *by C. B. Gilford.* Copyright © 1958 by H. S. D. Publications, Inc. Reprinted by permission of the author and the author's agents, Scott Meredith Literary Agency, Inc.

SAM'S HEART *by Henry Slesar.* Copyright © 1958 by H. S. D. Publications, Inc. Reprinted by permission of the author and the author's agents, Theron Raines Literary Agency, Inc.

THE INCOMPLETE CORPSE *by Jack Webb.* Copyright © 1958 by H. S. D. Publications, Inc. Reprinted by permission of the author and the author's agents, Scott Meredith Literary Agency, Inc.

LUCK IS NO LADY *by Robert Bloch.* Copyright © 1957 by H. S. D. Publications, Inc. Reprinted by permission of the author and the author's agent, Harry Altshuler.

SWEET SPIRIT *by Donald Honig.* Copyright © 1957 by H. S. D. Publications, Inc. Reprinted by permission of the author and the author's agents, Theron Raines Literary Agency, Inc.

THE ONLY BAD POLICEMAN *by Paul Eiden.* Copyright © 1957 by H. S. D. Publications, Inc. Reprinted by permission of the author and the author's agents, Scott Meredith Literary Agency, Inc.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

I would like to state that for twenty years I have entertained thoughts of committing a certain major crime and I am just now beginning to lose my patience because I haven't been able to put it into effect. Alas, the fault does not lie with me or with any other individual for that matter.

If it were that simple, it could be dealt with casually. People can adapt to almost any situation, especially one in which five million dollars is at stake, and those words, whether spoken haltingly, rapidly, in gibberish or in Martian dialect, are not to be taken lightly.

In past introductions I have made plain my views on various crimes. The successful crime is a thing of beauty and a joy forever and always will be. Large-scale robberies have always intrigued me and the recurrent dream I have about stealing an eighteen-car freight train must mean something. However, I don't have the time to go into dream interpretations. Besides, what could I do with an eighteen-car freight train after I'd stolen it? Disposal of the cargo and hiding the train would present too many problems. Unfortunately, I have dismissed the theft of the train as being impractical.

Therefore, from what I have just said, you gather that the successful crime should be one without any problems. Imagine then, if you will, my emotions as they relate to five million dollars in neat green piles in a certain bank vault, just waiting to be plucked. The removal of the money is guaranteed to be trouble-free.

Of course, you know I've given much thought and effort to determine that it is the minimum amount kept at the bank. I've even gone so far as to cultivate the friendship

of the bank manager, who, as luck would have it, tees off at the same golf club where I play. He's informed me regularly over the years that the large amount of cash kept on hand at the bank has been a cause of great concern for him and that it has on occasion caused him sleepless nights.

Be that as it may, I have to admit that thinking about it has also caused me a similar amount of sleeplessness, especially since its removal would be so simple a matter.

To say that it has wreaked havoc with me would be putting it mildly. Indeed, I find it difficult at times to disentangle my own conflicting emotions on that score. It has left me nervous and distraught, and undermined my otherwise cool aplomb. In effect, the money has become a monkey on my back. Since I can very well do without a monkey, I've decided to follow the recommendations of modern psychology, which advocates that a troubled person pass his troubles on to someone else, thereby lessening some of his own load. Psychiatrists refer to this technique as "passing the monkey."

Keeping this in mind, I am about to carefully blueprint a five-million-dollar bank job which hopefully will exorcise any devils that have been plaguing me.

I admit, however, that I reveal these sparkling, foolproof plans to you reluctantly. In all fairness I must warn you that once you have read them you will be hooked and you will inevitably be carrying a similar monkey on your back. But think of it, gentlemen, five million dollars just waiting to be picked up. Can you turn your back upon that? Hardly. I thought not.

Therefore, because I am a man true to my word, I can honestly state that the first requirement for the bank job is snow.

Snow? Did he say snow? you ask yourself, and you begin to wonder if perhaps Hitchcock has taken leave of his senses.

Ultimately, of course, you will realize that snow has a major bearing upon this bank job and you will also come to realize how great a stroke of luck it was that enabled you to be apprised of this carefully devised plan.

I don't know how many people have a need for five

million dollars. I assume there are a few. These explicit instructions are directed to them. I must, of course, have complete attention as I list the details and any other pertinent facts that may apply, otherwise the plan is foredoomed to failure.

You will need three huge snowplows and a snow blower suitable for the removal of vast amounts of snow. And last, but most important, you will need patience in large amounts. As I have waited for twenty years for a thirty-five-inch snowfall, you must also wait. When this scientifically formulated depth of snow has fallen, the plan will be activated using the above-mentioned pieces of equipment.

Now here it is, gentlemen. The moment of truth! All streets leading to the bank will be sealed off by the plows, which will create tall, unsurmountable walls of snow. Removing the five million dollars from the bank can then be undertaken with minimum risk. The final transportation of the money from the area can be implemented by a helicopter hovering above the snow enclosure.

What I have given you, then, is my bank-job plan, hereinafter referred to as the "Snow Job" for security reasons.

And now that I've given you the opportunity to make five million dollars, may I respectfully suggest to those of you who do not have the patience to wait for a thirty-five-inch snowfall that you scan the following pages, where you will read of other equally brilliant plans that can be put into effect at once.

ALFRED HITCHCOCK

A DEGREE OF INNOCENCE

By Helen Nielsen

The office of the president of Baker, Benson and Company was on the thirteenth floor. Clint Dodson wasn't consciously aware of that fact when he closed the gold-lettered door behind him and walked slowly toward the tall windows overlooking a sweltering city. He wasn't consciously aware of anything at that moment, except a kind of mental numbness through which memory was beginning to filter like light through a fog. The memory was being formed about Sheila, because nothing important had ever happened to him before Sheila.

"Mr. Dodson, aren't you feeling well?"

Clint Dodson heard the receptionist's voice as if it were an echo. He turned his head toward the sound of the echo. He was a gray-faced, pudgy little man of forty-six, his dark hair receding in a ridiculously deep widow's peak, his eyes lost behind the glittering lens of rimless spectacles.

"I'm all right," he said. "I just wanted to get some air. It seems stuffy."

"It is stuffy. I'll certainly be glad when they get the air conditioning repaired. Did Mr. Benson see you?"

"Yes, Miss Carlisle. He saw me. Thank you."

The receptionist went back to something she was typing, and Clint turned back to the window. Pretty girl, Miss Carlisle, but not half so pretty as Sheila had been the day he came in off the road and saw her for the first time. . . .

What Clint Dodson never understood was how he could have been so lucky in love. It wasn't his appearance, surely. It wasn't his aggressiveness, or brilliance, or charm. Those words were for Roger Benson, the junior partner, who was younger, handsomer, and a dedicated bachelor. The

peculiar thing was how Clint had thought Sheila was Roger's girl in the beginning. The office gossips were responsible for that.

"Make no passes at the blonde bombshell," they warned him. "She's got her cap set for brass. You won't get a tumble."

They were kidding him, of course. Clint never had the nerve to make a pass at any of the office girls, least of all one as attractive as Sheila. She had been hired while he was on the road. She smiled politely when they were introduced, and then went back to taking Roger's dictation. She and Roger lunched together, dined together, went to the office party at the country club together, and then, one day Sheila was back at a typist's desk and a newly hired brunette was taking her place in all capacities. The grapevine buzzed. And Sheila, more lovely than ever with sadness in her eyes, remained silent. It was probably the sad eyes that moved Clint to action; that's how he'd come by his cocker spaniel. He mustered up enough courage to invite her to lunch and, much to his surprise, she accepted. After the dashing Roger Benson, a mild-mannered, middle-aged man was probably a relief to the nervous system. They began to get acquainted, and it didn't take long for Clint to realize how wrong the gossips had been about this girl. Sheila was really shy and sweet. Without actually putting it into words, she soon communicated what had happened with Roger Benson. Roger was ambitious. He had time for romance, but not for marriage, and Sheila wanted a home and a family—something steady and permanent. Clint mulled that thought over for the duration of a very lonely road trip, and then returned and proposed to Sheila. She accepted and they went to Las Vegas for the weekend and returned man and wife. It was the luckiest break of Clint's life.

Sheila quit her job immediately.

"A woman's place is in the home backing up her man," she declared. "I'm going to make you the most wonderful wife in the world!"

"I don't deserve you," Clint said.

She wrinkled her nose at him. Such a pretty nose.

"Clinton Dodson," she scolded, "I love you dearly, but you do have one terrible fault. You must stop belittling yourself. You're an intelligent man—" She pulled her arms from about his neck and began straightening his tie. "And a handsome man." She must have been in love to say that. "And you can be a successful man if you believe in yourself. What's Roger Benson got that you haven't?"

Then she looked straight into his eyes and Clint's nerves began to jingle like Christmas bells. Roger Benson, vice-president of Baker, Benson and Company, hot-shot operator, human dynamo, living Apollo—but who had married Sheila?

"Nothing!" Clint answered. "Nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing!"

And then he had to stop, because they were both laughing from sheer happiness. It was from that point that everything in Clint's life began to change.

On their first wedding anniversary, the Dodsons celebrated the occasion by moving into a house in a new subdivision near the country club. The down payment was covered by Clint's Christmas bonus, based on a percentage of his yearly sales—the top sales record in the office. Under the mistletoe, which Sheila had thoughtfully hung in numerous and strategic spots throughout the house, she suggested that it would be fitting to entertain the Bakers, of Baker, Benson and Company, as their first dinner guests.

"Who needs guests?" Clint wanted to know.

"Silly, the honeymoon is over."

"Why? Why can't we have a rerun, like a television movie?"

"We can, darling. We can have the longest honeymoon in history, but it's still good policy to invite the boss to dinner. I heard you mention last week that McDougal was transferring to the San Francisco office. Now you know that I don't know a thing about business, but even a mere housewife can deduce from that information that Baker, Benson will need a new sales manager. And who has the best sales record of the year?"

It was a thought. Under the mistletoe it didn't seem too

important, but later it returned, and the more Clint considered the suggestion, the better it seemed.

Arnold Baker was an elderly man, rather pompous, much too fat. Clint had met his wife at the country-club office parties—the president of Baker, Benson was automatically elected to the country-club board. Mrs. Baker was a battle-ax and a bore. Clint really didn't expect his invitation to be accepted, but when he mentioned that it was his wife's idea to invite the Bakers as their first guests in their new home, something in old Baker's ego was touched and he accepted.

Sheila did herself—and Clint—proud. The table was a masterpiece, the dinner a delight. As for Sheila, a dream in a white dinner gown purchased especially for the occasion, she could have charmed the basket from under the cobra.

"I've been going over your record, Dodson," Baker announced over demitasse, "and it's amazing how your sales have gone up since your marriage. Now I understand the reason."

"Really, Mr. Baker, you give me too much credit," Sheila demurred. "But I do think a wife is good for a businessman. It makes him more stable and gives him something to really work for. If I were an executive—" Sheila paused and then laughed brightly. "Imagine, me an executive! But if I were, Mr. Baker, I'd make certain that all of my top officers were happily married men."

Mrs. Baker beamed. Mr. Baker nodded. And not until they had gone home and Clint was making a mental recapitulation of the evening, did he realize the implication of Sheila's words. He spoke to her about it rather sharply, and then regretted having spoken to her in that way, for she appeared stunned.

"Oh, I see what you mean, dear. Roger, of course! That was stupid of me, wasn't it? But I just wasn't thinking, darling, at least, not in that direction. I had in mind the sales-manager opening. Naturally, Mr. Baker would never replace Roger Benson."

Sheila was right. Mr. Baker never replaced anyone; he didn't even name the new sales manager. Two days after the dinner party, he suffered a stroke during the entertain-

ment at a businessman's convention party and died three hours later. Roger Benson became president of Baker, Benson and Company.

Sheila was shocked at the news.

"Oh, how terrible!"

"He was an old man, honey."

"But to go like that—so soon."

"It's the best way to go."

"Oh, I know that! What I meant—" She stopped abruptly, then continued in another vein. "We'll have to go to the funeral."

"It's to be private, Sheila."

"Send flowers, then. . . . Clint, who steps into Roger's place?"

"Sam Moorhouse," Clint said.

"That crude man? He doesn't have half your ability!"

"He has half again my seniority. Baker, Benson and Company operate strictly on the seniority system. That's why my job was waiting for me after the war."

"I think that's ridiculous. A company functions on ability, not sentiment." Then Sheila saw him frowning at her and softened. "It's just that I'm so proud of you," she said, "and I want others to see what I see in you. But I am terribly sorry about Mr. Baker—and for Mrs. Baker. It's much worse for her. I think I'll write her a little note."

Sheila did write a wonderful, warm note. Clint never saw it, but he heard about it the day Moorhouse called him into his office to break the news about Clint's promotion to sales manager.

"It was the old lady's personal request," Moorhouse said. "She has faith in you, Dodson. She said she would have to have faith in anyone who has such an understanding wife."

Clint had a lump in his throat when he went home that night. It was amazing how a man's life could change at a woman's touch.

On their second anniversary, the Dodsons and the Moorhouses dined together at the country club. By this time the Dodsons were members in good standing, due to Sam's sponsorship. That had come about as a result of Sheila's suggestion that Clint wasn't getting enough exercise and,

after all, she didn't want her husband turned into a money machine. Sam was a great sportsman—golf, tennis, swimming. It was exhausting to try to keep up with him, and a relief to be able to merely sit at a table and let Sam, a genial, self-made man, pour the story of his life into Sheila's appreciative ears. Sam's wife, a rugged, outdoorsy matron, who wore a dinner gown as if it were a burlap kimona, contributed to the legend at the infrequent intervals when Sam was silent.

". . . and we were so broke after the crash, Sam had to pawn my engagement ring. 'Mother,' he said, 'someday I'll buy you the biggest diamond west of Texas!' . . ."

She was wearing it, a huge, square stone that blazed like a beacon. Clint turned his head to avoid the glare, and that's when he saw Roger Benson coming toward them across the dance floor. Handsome Roger in a tuxedo that squared his shoulders and hugged his boxer-slim waistline. He had a girl on his arm, as usual. A redhead this time, but he seemed to forget all about her as soon as he reached the table.

"The headwaiter told me there was an anniversary party in progress over here. I want to offer my congratulations—"

And then Roger stopped talking and stared at Sheila as if she'd just been carried in on a papier-mâché cake. She was gorgeous. She kept up with the styles in clothes, coiffure, and cosmetics. She made every woman in the room look as drab as a kulak.

Sam read Roger's mind in the unexpurgated edition.

"Can you believe this beautiful girl is the wife of old Clint Dodson?" he asked. "Two years tonight, for better or for worse."

"Why, it's Sheila," Roger said. "Of course! You look wonderful!"

"I feel wonderful," Sheila said. "Marriage does that for one."

"I can believe it, looking at you. This calls for champagne. Waiter—!"

" 'Way ahead of you," Sam said. "We're already on the second bottle."

"A dance, then. How about it, Sheila? For old time's sake."

Sheila might have made an excuse. If she had, it would have been all right. Instead, she looked at Clint as if to ask his advice or permission; and Clint hesitated, just long enough to make his silence seem affirmation. After all, it was a gala night and a crowded floor, and Roger was the president of Baker, Benson and Company. Later, when Clint analyzed his reasoning that night, it was the last thought that haunted him. He should have realized then that he was heading for trouble.

Sam Moorhouse was a difficult man to work under. He was blunt, honest, and straightforward; but once a man had tasted of ambition, he chafed at the reins of restriction, and Sam, in addition to the aforementioned traits, was a stodgy old fool.

"I could have closed the deal with Amalgamated this afternoon if Sam had been on the ball," Clint complained, "but I just couldn't get to him. 'Baker, Benson and Company always has honored its contracts and always will honor them while I'm in this office!' " Clint's voice took on the tone of Sam's nasal drawl. Sheila listened with half-closed eyes. She was fondling the ears of Slugger, the half-grown boxer who'd replaced Clint's cocker spaniel on his last birthday. "Honor its contracts! That's a fine excuse for letting 50,000 dollars worth of business slip through our hands! Amalgamated would have paid a bonus for that shipment. We could have put off Standard for another six months. Business is business. If trimming sail a bit gets you over the finish line ahead of the competition, what's wrong with that?"

"That reminds me," Sheila said. "Roger Benson's invited us to spend the weekend on his yacht. He's planning to entertain the whole executive staff as a summer treat."

"Roger? When did you see Roger?"

"Today—at lunch."

"Where at lunch?"

She opened her eyes wider now.

"Downtown," she said. "I came down to have lunch with

my husband, but he was all tied up with Sam Moorhouse and Roger wasn't. Jealous?"

Clint was still thinking of the commission he'd missed because of Sam's ridiculous morals. His frown was for Sam, but it carried over when he looked at Sheila. Sheila smiled at him.

"I'm not sure," Clint said. "Maybe I am."

"Wonderful! There's nothing that boosts a wife's fading ego as much as a jealous husband. I'll have to make a practice of lunching with Roger Benson."

"No!"

Clint's sharpness surprised even himself. He'd never quite forgotten his feelings that night at the country club. There was a sense of being pulled in two directions at once, and a subconscious anger at the direction in which he was moving.

"Why, Clint, you really are jealous!" Sheila's smile faded. "Do you want to know what we talked about all during lunch? About you, darling. About the wonderful job you're doing as sales manager, and how much more you could do if you had the authority."

"No, Sheila! Not that!"

The hurt sprang into her eyes, and he was sorry at once that he'd spoken so harshly; but he had to interfere.

"I know how much you like to help my career along," he said, "but you're not going to do it by talking to Roger behind Sam's back. Roger's a young man, but he learned the business from Baker and respects the old man's methods. Among other things that means loyalty to the seniority system. Unless Sam could be caught with his hand in the till, and you know as well as I do that won't happen, he's vice-president and will remain vice-president until the day he retires or drops dead—and Sam's as healthy as a prize Percheron."

Sheila didn't answer, and Clint said nothing more. They sat through a long silence with that last thought hanging like a ghost between them.

Roger Benson's yacht was a floating paradise: a thoroughly stocked bar, a perpetual buffet, taped music for the languid, swimming and skin-diving off the sides,

and fishing off the after deck. Sheila was among the languid, beautifully dressed for the occasion. It made Clint proud just to watch her, graceful and feminine. Not another man on the staff had a wife to compare with her, certainly not Sam Moorhouse. Sam's muscular mate manipulated the fishing pole, while Sam—as if to show the younger men his contempt for his own graying hairs—went in for the more rugged skin-diving. Clint's athletics went as far as donning trunks and sport shirt and sunning himself on deck until Mrs. Moorhouse made a strike which stirred up a lot of excitement. It was a big fish and a fighter. With a cry, Mrs. Moorhouse was dragged from the bucket seat and pulled against the rail. Clint scrambled to his feet. Sam, momentarily out of the water, raced toward her.

"Drop the pole!" he shouted.

"Don't be an idiot!" she gasped. "The hard ones to land are the only catches worthwhile!"

If it had been wholly up to human strength, Mrs. Moorhouse might have landed a whale; but mechanical devices have a load limit. When the line snapped, the force of that occurrence ripped the pole from her hands. At the same instant, Clint saw something flash through the air and bounce across the deck to his feet. He looked down. The big, square diamond blinked up at him like a winking eye. He stooped and picked it up. He was holding it in his hand when Mrs. Moorhouse became aware of her loss.

"Sam, my diamond! It's gone."

"Must have caught on the pole and gone overboard," Sam said. "I'll have a look."

Sam's dive was beautiful. Sam was in condition. Sam feared nothing; he had been enthroned in the vice-president's office and would live forever. All of these thoughts flashed through Clint's mind with the brilliance of the diamond in his hand, and then he acted. He dropped the stone to the deck and hurriedly, furtively, shoved it to one side, toward the cabin, with his foot.

"Gangway!" Clint shouted. "I'm going to help Sam!"

He caught a blurred glimpse of Sheila's face as he ran to the rail—white, startled, incredibly lovely. For Sheila he could do anything—even murder. He plunged over the

side and down deep into the green depths. He was awkward. He was pudgy. He was short of breath before he began, but he knew that down underneath the ship somewhere, Sam Moorhouse was on a dare-devil stunt that would cost him his life. Clint's lungs were almost bursting before he found him; but hatred and desire had breath of its own. And by the time his hands gripped the back of Sam's trunks, Clint hated Sam Moorhouse with all of his strength, and all of his strength was as much as it took to drive Sam's body, head first, like a squirming battering ram against the submerged hull of the yacht. It was done so quickly, Sam never even saw who had had hold of him.

When Clint surfaced seconds later, his lungs were bursting. He had to be dragged aboard, gasping and sobbing. As soon as he had a voice, he called for Roger.

"Sam—down below—hurt—needs help."

Then Clint closed his eyes and let the darkness blot out the rest.

It was three days after Sam Moorhouse's funeral that Clint was called into Roger Benson's office. The interview was a formality, Clint knew that. Baker, Benson and Company operated strictly on the seniority system and he was the next in line. Even so, Clint was nervous. His hands were damp and his mouth was dry.

"Sit down, Clint," Roger said.

Clint was only too willing to sit down. In the chair he felt better. Leather. Soft. Luxurious. There was a chair exactly like it in the vice-president's office.

"I suppose you know why I called you in today," Roger said. He looked grave, but that was only natural under the circumstances.

"I can imagine," Clint said.

Roger's eyes brightened momentarily.

"Yes, you really can imagine, can't you, Clint? Strange. I never realized that quality in you back in the old days. As a matter of fact, I always thought you extremely dull. Marrying Sheila must have made all the difference."

"All the difference," Clint agreed.

"She's a wonderful woman, Clint. I can see how a man would do almost anything for such a woman. I might have

done almost anything for her myself, had she been my wife. But not this—"

Roger had kept one hand under the desk. Now he brought it up, opened it over the desk, and then took the hand away. Mrs. Moorhouse's diamond glittered in the light. The eye didn't wink now; it accused. Clint couldn't look away from it, and he couldn't speak.

"This was mailed to me in a small box," Roger said, "and folded up inside the box was this note."

He took a small square of white paper from his pocket, unfolded it, and read aloud, "Dear Mr. Benson. Before you promote Clint Dodson to the position of vice-president in your company, ask him why he concealed Mrs. Moorhouse's diamond on the deck of your yacht before leaping overboard to presumably help Sam Moorhouse search for it under water."

That was all. Roger Benson sat back in his chair and waited. . . .

Memories, filtering like light through a fog, and all of the memories formed about Sheila because nothing important had ever happened to him before her. Clint stared out of the window with unseeing eyes, and let his mind luxuriate in the fullness of her—her beauty, her love, her faith and loyalty. He hadn't confessed to killing Sam. Roger would never get that out of him, and he couldn't possibly prove anything without a confession. But the career of Clint Dodson was finished. There was only one thing he could do for Sheila now.

Miss Carlisle completed the letter she'd been typing for Mr. Benson and started toward his door. She hesitated as she passed the open window. Something seemed wrong. Mr. Dodson—when had he gone out? She stepped closer to the window and looked down—and then she screamed.

Roger Benson was beside Sheila all through the funeral. Afterwards, he drove her home and went with her into the house. This was the difficult time, and he groped for words.

"I just can't help feeling guilty, Sheila. I should have realized Clint wasn't well."

"No, Roger. You mustn't blame yourself. You've been wonderful."

"I want to be wonderful, Sheila. I want to make it up to you for my carelessness and my stupidity. I know this is no time to talk about it, but ever since that night at the country club I've known what a fool I was to let you get away from me. Ambitious men make mistakes, Sheila. Clint wasn't the only man guilty of that error."

Sheila swayed a little on her feet, and Roger's arm steadied her. Such a young, strong arm. She looked up at him with sad, understanding eyes.

"You haven't been too ambitious, Roger. A man's work is his life. You'll go far, very far. There's just no limit to what you can do if you put your mind to it."

Sheila knew. She'd always known. Mrs. Moorhouse was right—the hard ones to land were the only catches worthwhile, and all she'd invested were a few years with that old fool, Clint Dodson, and the diamond she'd seen him pick up and then drop to the deck of the boat.

ONE UNNECESSARY MAN

By Talmage Powell

I remember how worried she was that night. Worried to the point of distraction. Yet for all the worry, so lovely.

She gave me only a brief kiss. Then she pulled away and the worry was naked in her eyes.

She walked to the sofa in the living room of her small, cozy house and sat down. She was looking at the window. I turned, half expecting to see something there because of the way she was looking. The window was a black, vacant eye framing the night outside. A street light, the lights of a passing car. There was nothing at the window.

She took my hand in hers and I yielded to the pressure of her cold fingers and sat on the sofa beside her.

"We'll have to wait, Roger."

"Why?" I said.

"Because of him."

"He has nothing more to do with it. With us. Or—or with you."

"He doesn't realize that," she said. She looked at the window again. "He says the divorce means nothing to him."

"Has he been bothering you?"

She nodded. A sensation of heat flowed over me as my muscles tightened. I kept feeling from my voice. "In what way?"

"Little ways," she said. "He calls me on the phone. He sends flowers and candy. Every night for a week—"

"He's been there at the window?"

"Yes," she said, the word a soft sigh.

I stood up and walked to the window, hands in my pockets.

"I've never seen him here," I said.

"He comes early in the evening, before you arrive. He raps on the window and pleads softly for me to let him in."

"Have you?"

"No."

"Not a single time?"

"Of course not! Why do you look at me like that, Roger?"

"I'm sorry," I said. "I was just trying to figure out why he would do it. Keep coming back. Calling you. With no encouragement—"

"I tell you I haven't encouraged him in the slightest way!" She was standing now. Framed in hair like pure gold mist, her face was white.

I crossed the room and put my arm about her. "This must be what he wants," I said, "to have us upset and at each other's throats."

"I don't know what he wants. There's no understanding him, Roger."

"He wants you back," I said. "It's easy enough to understand."

"He'll never have me," she said. "I stood between him and the world long enough. I acted as his shield until I couldn't take the bruises any longer."

"If he comes while I'm here," I said, "he won't come back again."

"You mustn't hurt him, Roger. He's so easily hurt."

I let my arm fall from her. "The habit of years," I murmured.

"What, Roger?"

"The habit of the years of taking care of him is not easily overcome, is it?"

Her eyes widened. "I'm still taking care of him, Roger."

"Trying. Wanting to. It won't work."

"I know that."

She stood a moment, deep in thought. Without awareness of her movement, she sat on the edge of the sofa. I waited and the room was silent. And the room wasn't real to her. She was thinking of days and months and years and little incidents of which I knew nothing. A hardness came to her face. Nothing changed, really. Yet she was different. She

began cursing softly and steadily under her breath. I had never heard her use those words before.

"Janet!" I said.

She looked up at me. Her eyes cleared.

"You see what he's doing to me, Roger?" Her voice quivered. She was close to tears.

"Forget him," I said.

"How can I?"

"I don't know. But you'll have to."

"Will you help me, Roger?"

"If I was only sure—"

"Of me?"

"Yes."

"You can be. Kiss me, dear."

I kissed her. It was no good. Like kissing a lifeless image.

She laid her head against my chest. Her voice was muffled. "I'm sorry, Roger."

"It's all right," I said. But I didn't mean that. And she knew I didn't.

"I hate him, Roger."

"Of course," I said, the feeling of the kiss still stiff on my lips.

"I mean it. I do hate him. Hate the way he can make me feel like this, responsible for him and sorry for him and all."

"I understand, Janet."

"I'll mix us a drink," she said.

She drew out of my arms and walked toward the kitchen.

We'd planned the wedding for next month.

She'd get over him. She had to. A marriage is made by two people, not three.

She came back with the drinks, tall ginger ales spiced with a little bourbon. She set the tray on the cocktail table. Just as we started to pick up the glasses, the door chimes sounded.

She rose and went to the door. I saw her open it. Then she stepped back and I saw Harold come into the room.

He looked young, boyish. Except for the gun in his hand.

He glanced at the tray on the cocktail table. "Soft lights, a drink. What could be nicer?"

I was on my feet. I took a step toward him. "Ah . . ." he said, thrusting the gun. "Roger the big man. Roger the hero. Come and play hero, Roger."

I'd never seen such a light in human eyes before. I stopped. I willed myself to do something, but I remained where I was.

"Close the door, darling," he told Janet.

She closed the door. The living room became a gloomy, close world of its own.

"Harold," Janet said, "you shouldn't be here."

"Oh, I'm not afraid," he mocked her. "This is something I'm doing on my own. All by myself. And I'm not afraid. How do you like that, Janet?"

"I'm very glad. There was never any reason for you to be afraid of anything."

"I should have tried myself years ago, Janet. It's a wonderful feeling, to stand on your own feet."

"You and the gun," I said.

"Roger, please," Janet said.

"I'm not afraid of him," I said.

"That's not the question before us, is it?" Harold said. "But you are afraid of the gun, aren't you?"

"Yes," I said.

"I'm glad you have that much intelligence, Roger. I've wondered what Janet ever saw in you."

"She's the only one who can answer that," I said.

"Answer, Janet," he said. "Put your sublime feeling into words for me. I must hear it."

"Harold, you must go."

"Why? This is my house, too, you know."

"Was," I said.

He smiled. "Oh? And how do you like my favorite chair, Roger?"

"I'm not sure Janet ever told me which chair it is."

He glanced around the room. A livid ring formed about his lips. "Gone!" he said. "What have you done with my chair, darling?"

"I sold it, Harold."

"And my pipes?"

She bit her lips. "Please go."

"My pipes!" he said.

"I—gave them away."

"Gave my pipes away?" He passed his free hand over his forehead. "Who is smoking my pipes now, Janet?"

"The yard man," she said, as if she were all washed out inside.

"And the clothes I left here?"

"Packed in the closet, Harold. I sent them to you, but you—"

"I know, I know. I returned the package to the sender."

"You must take them, Harold."

"Oh, no. They belong here. With you. As I do. As I always will, Janet."

Janet sank into a wing chair. "What are we to do, Roger?"

"He can't stand and hold the gun forever," I said.

"Really, I don't intend to," Harold said.

"Then you are leaving?"

"Oh, no."

"Then you are planning to use the gun?"

"Certainly."

"What'll it get you?"

"Janet."

"You lost Janet a long time ago."

"I shall never lose Janet," he said. "Janet I shall have always."

I took a step toward him. The hammer of the gun eared back. Click! Loud and hard in the confines of the room's close, hot little world.

"Don't rush things, Roger," he said. His voice became very steady. "Nothing is enjoyable, if rushed. Don't you know that?"

"I know you'd better leave," I said. I was glad my own voice was steady; I was feeling anything but steady inside.

"When the little act is played out," Harold said, "I'll leave. Not a moment before. It must all be timed nicely, Roger. We don't want to kill the effect by hurrying things, do we? I want you to look at Janet, Roger."

I looked at Janet.

"See how beautiful she is?" he said. "The woman you wanted most in life. Doesn't it sadden you to know you'll never have her? Now you, Janet, look at Roger."

She raised her eyes to mine.

"See the nice face, Janet? The quiet way he carries himself? The strength of him? You like those things, Janet."

A sob came from her.

"Tell me!" he said, his voice faintly shrill. "Tell me how much you like him!"

"Harold . . ."

"Dear, dear Janet," he said. "Shall I do the talking for you? You love him, need him. Yet you'll never have him, because I'm here. I'll always be here. You'll never forget this moment, Janet. You'll never forget that in order to get him you had to destroy me! Each time he touches you, whenever you hear his footsteps, you'll remember! Now look at me, Janet."

She looked towards him.

He looked straight into her eyes.

He laughed.

Then he put the gun at his temple and pulled the trigger.

The room was still slamming and tumbling with the explosion when I reached her side.

"He's gone, Roger," she said dazedly.

"Yes."

"He needed me. All those years that poor soul needed me."

I had to snap her out of it. "It's over!" I said.

"There's nothing I can do for him now."

I shook my head.

"He's not sad and miserable and longing for me, when he wants to call for help."

"Not any longer," I said, taking her hands in mine.

There was suddenly a look of great relief in her eyes, making her eyes sparkle.

And for the first time, I rather liked Harold.

KILL ME, MY SWEET

By C. B. Gilford

Lewis Barlow deserved to be shot. The only trouble was that his acquaintances—he had no friends—seemed to lack the courage needed in shooting him. Shooting Barlow would mean both dealing with the police and also the loss of a meal ticket. So Lewis Barlow stayed alive, led what is sometimes described as a charmed life. But of course no state of affairs can endure forever.

The change, the inevitable change, began on one of those nights when he was throwing a party. As usual it was something of a lavish party, with champagne and all the trimmings. Lewis, whatever else he was, was no penny pincher. His wife Veronica, expensively gowned, was the official, if unhappy, hostess. All the employees of Barlow Associates, Inc., down to the lowliest office boy, were the dragooned, unwilling guests. The Robinsons, the Lorimers, the Steinbergers, the Yosts, the Nestors, the Smiths, the Crenshaws, Jerry Lee, Madge Sturdivant, Betty Myers, Morrie Johnson. And they all pretended to be enjoying themselves immensely.

"Wonderful party, wonderful party, Mr. Barlow," Tom Nestor told his boss. Tom Nestor was young and ambitious and a reasonably good liar. He had to be at the moment. Underneath, if he were anything of a man, he would have to be furious. Carol Nestor, Tom's pretty little wife, was the reason.

Lewis Barlow wasn't a woman chaser. Never had been. In fact, people had wondered sometimes why he had ever married. There was a reason, of course. He hadn't married for love, but for cruelty. He was a barbarian, a despot. He

had his employees to mistreat in the daytime. He needed someone at night, at home. So he had married Veronica.

And now to torment Veronica, he was making passes at Carol Nestor.

He wasn't good at it. He was clumsy. He had no way with women. He was, besides, an ugly man. Prematurely semi-bald, given to fat, he had small, piggish eyes, pendulous lips, and flabby, flapping jowls. Though impeccable in his dress, his behavior was uncouth. He spoke directly and frankly, with barbs and insults. Or sometimes if it suited him, he didn't speak at all.

That was what he was doing now with Tom Nestor. He was ignoring him. The moment Tom arrived at his boss' swank apartment, the boss had taken Carol by the arm and hadn't let go of her. Tom had followed the pair around, confused, anxious, embarrassed, perhaps waiting to have his wife thrown back to him as a dog waits for a bone. So far Lewis Barlow hadn't elected to throw her.

Veronica hadn't imitated Tom's example. She hadn't chased her husband and his new consort around the place. Instead she had done her best to be the hostess, to talk to everybody, to smile at everybody, to see that they always had full glasses. But she had watched her husband. Her eyes had followed him.

The people at the party knew that she was watching. The silent drama of her watching him and his studied awareness of being watched was the entertainment of the evening, morbid and macabre though it was. They were witnessing a woman being scorned, whipped, punished for some crime they couldn't fathom. They were like a group of people down in a street, waiting for someone to decide whether or not to jump off a building. They waited in the same way to see what Veronica would do.

Thus far Veronica seemed inclined to do nothing. She was hardly an aggressive, belligerent woman. Her spirit had been severely mauled during her years of marriage with Barlow. Never beautiful, her looks had deteriorated. Though still youthful—she was only thirty—there were lines of strain in her face, and she obviously had dyed her hair black. She'd had a nice figure, but now she was a bit

thin, a fact which the expensive dresses Lewis bought her could not hide. But she looked neither sad nor hurt. She had long since learned to wear a mask, and she had it on now. Her audience watched her, but they could not divine her thoughts.

It was this refusal of hers to react, perhaps, that goaded her husband into continuing his efforts, even increasing them. When he first captured Carol from her husband, he held her by the arm. The pudgy, hairy fingers of his left hand gripped her right arm just above the elbow, and wouldn't let go. She went with him wherever he roamed among the guests. But when that gambit failed to get a visible response from Veronica, he transferred his grasp from Carol's arm to her waist. Beyond several frantic glances toward her husband, Carol Nestor did nothing to resist Barlow.

Veronica maintained a stony calm.

The party went on, but the uneasiness grew. Lewis Barlow's parties were never happy affairs for anyone except perhaps the host. This one was promising to be one of the worst. Yet none of the twenty individuals present dared to show their displeasure. They continued to guzzle champagne, talk volubly, and keep on smiling. Morrie Johnson, the only musician among them, sat down at the piano and began playing. People gathered around him, grateful for the distraction.

Only young Tom Nestor dared to sulk. When Barlow put his arm around Carol's waist, it seemed that Tom was on the verge of saying something. But he didn't. He retired instead to a corner and sat down, glaring at the rest of the company.

Perhaps it was because she pitied Tom that Veronica finally did something. She watched Tom for awhile and perhaps she guessed he was about to explode. Perhaps she wanted to save him from saying or doing something that might cost him his job. Anyway, she crossed the room to where Barlow had Tom's pretty little wife imprisoned.

"Carol," she said softly, "would you come out to the kitchen and help me with the hors d'oeuvres?" Barlow

never had any servants officiating at his parties. It was a reasonable, logical request that Veronica made.

But Lewis Barlow wasn't a reasonable or logical man. "Go on, leave Carol alone," he told his wife. "She's having a good time and doesn't want to be annoyed."

"I'd like to help," Carol said. She was small, cute, and blonde. And it was the most obvious thing in the world that she didn't like Barlow's arm around her. Perhaps she was even a little afraid of him.

"Let go of her please, Lewis," Veronica said.

Husband and wife measured each other with their eyes. Carol wouldn't have had to be telepathic to be aware of the mutual hatred passing between. She tried to squirm her slim body out of Barlow's grip, but his fingers only dug deeper into her side. So she finally stopped squirming.

"What's the matter?" Barlow asked his wife. "Why don't you get somebody else to help you with that stuff? You aren't jealous, are you?"

Veronica couldn't help rising to the bait. "I couldn't possibly be jealous," she answered. "I would have to be in love with you to be jealous."

Barlow grinned. This was the kind of thing he'd been trying for. "You mean you don't love me any more, Veronica?"

She attempted to draw back from the trap too late. "Let's not discuss this in front of strangers . . ."

"Oh, but we have to discuss it now," he interrupted quickly. "You started it, Veronica." He turned to Carol. "Honey, my wife doesn't love me any more. What do you think you and I can do about that little problem?"

Carol's face was suddenly white. She seemed truly afraid now. But it was Veronica who spoke. "Let her alone, Lewis," she said. "I'm warning you."

He laughed aloud, ignoring her. He went on talking to Carol. "Do you hear that? She's warning me. And she's pretending she's worried about you, honey. You know what she's worried about? Herself, that's what. Her pride is hurt. Because I'm paying attention to you. She thinks she's being insulted in front of everybody. I wonder who in the hell she thinks she is anyway."

Veronica was pale now too. Not with fear, but with anger. Her fists clenched and she moved a step closer to her husband. "I'm warning you for the last time," she told him.

For an answer he turned his body toward Carol, put his hand under her chin, and bent down and kissed her on the mouth. The girl seemed too surprised and frightened to do anything but let him. When he took his face away from hers, however, a flush came into her cheeks.

Veronica must have thought the girl was ready to slap him. "Don't do it, Carol," she said sharply. "Don't bother. I'll take care of him."

Nearly everybody in the room heard her threat. A silence settled down. Morrie Johnson had been playing softly at the piano, and now his notes tinkled into extinction. In the silence, Veronica hesitated only a moment. Then she turned and walked away swiftly. Every eye in the room followed her.

When she had disappeared into the hallway leading to the bedrooms, Barlow laughed. The laugh sounded loud in the quiet. But nobody laughed with him. They didn't take the boss' cue. A pall of embarrassment hung over the room.

"She can't take it, can she?" Barlow said. "She doesn't have a sense of humor, that's the trouble with her."

Apparently no one else had either. And they sensed something that their host had perhaps failed to notice. There'd been a purposefulness in Veronica's exit.

She returned almost instantly, and again everyone looked at her. She held a gun. It was a small revolver, and it was pointed at her husband.

There was a reaction from the watchers, a small, sharp, audible intake of breath. Carol Nestor pushed herself out of Barlow's arms, and he let her go. He was looking at Veronica and at the gun too.

"What are you doing with that?" he asked. His voice cracked, and the question ended on a falsetto note. He was suddenly a ridiculous figure of fear.

"What a silly question, Lewis," she said. Her voice, in contrast, was steady and firm.

He stared at the gun, recognizing it. He owned several guns, because guns had always held a fascination for him. But no gun had ever fascinated him quite as this one did now.

"Put that down, Veronica," he quavered.

She advanced farther into the room. People who might have been in her way backed off a little. No one argued with her. No one made the slightest move to try to take the gun away from her.

"I'm going to do a good deed," she said. "For my own sake, and for the sake of everybody in this room. You've bullied us all, and we've let you get away with it. We've kowtowed to you. I did it because I got in the habit. I knew if I didn't I'd be flung out into the street. So I endured you for three meals a day and a roof over my head. What a silly reason. I see it now. But all these people let you kick them around for the same reason. For their paychecks. I could walk out on you, Lewis. I could manage somehow. But these people won't. So I'm doing this for them, Lewis. I'm going to save them in spite of themselves. I'm going to set them all free."

Then, very deliberately, she pulled the trigger. There was a hollow click, and nothing else. The gun wasn't loaded.

Nobody, it seemed, looked at the expression of immense relief that washed over Lewis Barlow's face. They were looking instead at Veronica. The horror in her eyes as she stared down at the gun. The horror of knowing that in the supreme moment both she and the gun had failed.

Then they saw her faint.

The party was officially over, but none of the guests had departed. The new guest, Detective-Sergeant Carmichael, stood in the center of the room. He was a small, harmless-seeming man. He still wore his topcoat and his hat, which he had pushed back away from his forehead. His suit was rumpled and not new. Only his eyes betrayed his calling. They were gray, hard, sharp, and disconcerting in the intent way they could stare at a person.

He was staring at Veronica Barlow. But she wasn't returning his look. She was sitting stiff and straight on the

forward edge of her chair, and she was considering her hands folded in her lap.

"Now let me get this good and clear," Carmichael said. "Mr. Barlow was being kind of cute with the little blonde, and Mrs. Barlow didn't like it. So she went to the bedroom and fetched a gun. When she came back with it, she told everybody she was going to kill her husband. She pulled the trigger, but nothing happened. The gun wasn't loaded."

"That's right," Lewis Barlow answered. He was leaning against the piano, smiling with geniality and good-fellowship as though this were a new type of parlor game, and everyone was enjoying the fun.

"I've got the names of everybody here," Carmichael went on. "And everybody agrees that the facts are what I've just stated."

"Everybody agrees," Barlow answered.

"Mrs. Barlow admits it."

Veronica, without glancing up, nodded.

Carmichael switched his gimlet gaze to Barlow. "But you're not going to press charges. That right, Mr. Barlow?"

"I'm not going to press charges." Barlow was still smiling. "I prefer to give my wife the benefit of the doubt. I prefer to believe that she knew the revolver was empty. She was angry, of course. Jealous, I should say. So she wanted to scare me. She really didn't intend to kill me."

Carmichael pursed his lips thoughtfully. "Then if that's the case," he said softly, "why did you call the police?"

"I wanted the incident to go on record," Barlow answered with smiling calm. "I wanted the police to know about this. Then they would know it wasn't an accident if . . . in the future sometime . . . something similar happened . . . and turned out differently. . . ."

The guests were all gone, and the detective was gone with them, and Lewis Barlow sat on the edge of the bed in his pajamas. "Talk about a funny scene," he said. "Veronica, you were positively a riot, a real scream."

She sat at her dressing table, her back toward him, and didn't reply. She was putting up her hair on pin-curlers, which she did every night. But tonight her hands were

shaking, and she was dreadfully long getting the job done.

"Imagine," he went on. "The wife maddened with jealousy and hurt pride. She stalks out of the room and comes back with a gun. 'I'm going to kill you, you nasty man,' she says, and pulls the trigger. And nothing happens, absolutely nothing. . . . Veronica, you should have seen the look on your face. Oh, for a camera at that moment. What a picture I could have gotten. Wonderful for the Sunday supplements. Caption, 'Jealous wife shoots husband with empty gun.' "

He roared with laughter. She turned on him finally, forgetting the pin-curlers. "You were scared, Lewis," she said.

He nodded, still quivering with mirth. "Yes, I was. But I should have known better. You don't know enough about guns to load one. And we both know I never let the guns sit around loaded. And besides, you wouldn't have the nerve to shoot at me with a gun you knew was loaded."

She stood up, trembling with helpless rage. "I thought it was loaded," she screamed at him.

But he only laughed again. "Maybe you did," he said. "Maybe you did. That makes it even funnier. You're a sniveling, scared little woman, Veronica. But maybe you found a little courage for that one moment. One moment of courage in a whole lifetime, and then the gun isn't loaded. Oh boy, that's terrific."

She took a step in his direction. "Maybe I'll find another moment," she said.

He stood up, suddenly sober and unsmiling. He shook his head.

"Not you, Veronica. It isn't in you." He walked toward her slowly. "Don't you think I know you after all these years?"

"I've been a coward, I know, but . . ."

"Yes, a coward. That's why you married me. Because you were afraid no other man would ever want you. And you were right. You weren't very attractive to men, you know."

He was close to her now, and she sneered up into his face. "Why did you bother with me then? Because you wanted a coward? Someone you could bully?"

"Perhaps. And I got a coward, didn't I? Sure, that is

what attracted me. I'll admit it. You weren't like the other women I knew. They were coy. They wanted to play games with me, to fight little duels, maneuver around to see which one of us would run the show. But you never fought. You never resisted, not from the first time we went out together. So I decided that you were the girl I wanted to marry."

There were tears in her eyes, and she couldn't speak. And her tears made him smile again.

"The best thing I liked about it, Veronica, was that you didn't have the nerve to say you didn't want to marry me. You didn't want to, but you were afraid. And you were afraid of not marrying. You were afraid of everything. That's your history, Veronica. Fear. That's the story of our marriage. You were afraid of me, but you were afraid to leave me. What could you do if you left me? You couldn't manage your own life. And if you found another man who'd have you, he might be the same as me. So you stuck around. Good old Veronica. Through thick and thin."

She started to turn away from him, but he grabbed her shoulders and jerked her back. The tears were flowing freely down her cheeks now, and she couldn't stop them.

"And tonight you found the solution," he went on remorselessly. "It was the only real solution for your problem. You'd probably thought of it before. But it took courage, something you didn't have. But tonight you found that. Courage. For one little moment. Just long enough. And then the gun wasn't loaded."

She was limp, a weight in his arms. But he held her up, forced her to listen.

"But I'm going to make you sorry for that little moment, Veronica. It's amusing now, now that it's over. But you scared me for that little moment. In front of those people too. I'm going to punish you, Veronica. I'm going to make you sorry you were ever brave."

He was luxuriating in his bath. Long ago he'd had an outsize tub installed that would better accommodate his bulking body. Now he lay there, the water up to his chin, and on top of it a layer of silky suds so thick he had to blow it away now and then.

On the wide lip of the tub was a portable radio, plugged into an electrical outlet, and turned on. It was playing soft music on very low volume. The music was as soothing as the bath.

"Veronica!" he called.

He knew she was in the adjoining bedroom, because he'd heard her. She made only small sounds, but he heard them even above the music. The sounds of her pacing back and forth, like a caged animal. But she didn't answer.

"Veronica," he went on, "I'm lying here in a tub of water. And you know how water conducts electricity. I have the radio playing here on the side of the tub. Does that interest you? Surely you've heard about people in this situation. It's very dangerous, they say. Sometimes the radio falls in, and the person in the water is electrocuted. It's even been used in murders, I understand. And you'd like to murder me, wouldn't you, Veronica? Why don't you come here and push the radio in?"

She didn't answer, but her pacing had stopped. She was listening to him.

"Of course, there's a difficulty, Veronica. That detective, Carmichael. And all those people who were at our party the other night. You'd have a hard time making it look like an accident. What do you think? Is it worth trying?"

He waited, and he fancied he could hear the sound of her breathing—labored, as if she were in some kind of emotional turmoil.

"The question as I see it, Veronica, is whether or not you hate me enough to take the risk. You're full of little fears, you know. Would you be afraid of going to prison? Do you have any aversion to being locked up? Most people do. Of course, you sometimes think you're in prison here. Would you care to exchange prisons, Veronica? There's always the possibility, however, of being executed. There's capital punishment in this state, you know. Are you afraid of death, Veronica? They say the worst part about execution is the fact that the person knows he's going to die and knows when."

He listened again. It seemed that she had even stopped breathing.

"This is your chance, Veronica. The door's unlocked. Just walk in and give this radio the littlest, tiniest push. So simple . . . so simple . . ."

Then finally the silence was broken. He heard her throw herself on the bed. Her sobbing was hysterical, out of control. He decided she wouldn't be coming in, so he began leisurely to scrub himself.

He had insisted that she go riding with him. It was a pleasant Sunday afternoon, and, judging by the number of cars, everybody else seemed to be out. But he managed to find a country side road where there was almost no traffic.

They drove on that road for about half a mile, and then when he was fairly certain no one else was in sight, he claimed that he heard a strange noise in the engine. He stopped the car and got out to investigate. He went around to the front of the car, lifted the hood, and spent some time considering what he saw there.

"Start her up," he called to his wife.

Veronica dutifully slid over into the driver's place and pressed the starter. The engine responded smoothly. Her husband, however, wasn't satisfied. He didn't lower the hood. Instead, he came around to the side of the car and spoke to her through the window.

"There's nobody in sight," he said. "We're completely alone now, Veronica."

"What are you getting at?" she wanted to know.

He smiled his usual smile. "When I step around to the front of the car to close the hood, you'll have your chance. All you'd have to do is step on the accelerator. The car would roll right over me, and I'd die instantly."

She didn't answer.

"You might get away with calling it an accident. Your husband was working on the engine and he told you to start it for him. Then he told you to give it some gas. You didn't realize the car was in gear. They might believe you. It *could* be an accident."

She looked at him, incredulous as always when he talked like this. "Would you really like me to do that?" she asked him.

"I'm giving you the chance," he said.

"Because you believe firmly that I won't?"

"I have my ideas about that, yes."

"You do these things just to torture me, don't you?"

"That's the wrong word. I'm punishing you."

"I could put an end to the punishment."

"You could, theoretically. But I don't believe you will," he said thoughtfully.

"I agree with you, Lewis. I don't think I will either. I've thought a lot about it. In a way I think you'd be glad if I accepted one of your invitations. You'd like to see me go to prison, or to hang. You'd manage to enjoy that, I suppose, even if you were dead."

"I'd try."

"Well, I won't give you the satisfaction."

He laughed confidently. "But there's a gamble involved, Veronica. Think about that part of it. You *might* be able to convince the police it was an accident. If you could convince the officer in charge of the investigation, that is. That Carmichael, for instance. If you could do that, you'd be in the clear." He laughed again.

And then he went around to the front of the car. She sat there. She was perfectly aware of how she could do it. Push a button. Press down with her right foot. He slammed the hood shut, and stood there a moment, looking at her through the windshield.

She slid over to her side of the seat. And she cried on the way home.

Lewis Barlow liked giving parties. The fact that the only people who would come to his parties were those who worked for him, those who depended on his good graces for their livelihood, did not deter him in the least. And he liked parties more than ever now that he had his new parlor game to play.

"Remember that very dramatic scene at our last shindig?" he began.

They remembered, but they all pretended they didn't.

"I mean the one where my wife came in with a gun."

There'd been a small buzz of conversation before, but

now even that ceased. He had captured their attention. At the piano Morrie Johnson took his hands off the keyboard and put them in his lap. Tom and Carol Nestor, standing warily close together in a far corner, glanced at each other with a certain nervousness. Barlow hadn't bothered Carol all evening, but she stayed close to her husband as though she feared he might renew his advances at any time.

"I haven't heard you mention it," Barlow was saying to everyone, "but I have no doubt you've all discussed it pretty thoroughly. Not that I blame you. It was too interesting not to discuss. Nice juicy little bit of scandal, eh? And what did you all conclude?"

Nobody dared to answer. There was a great deal of shuffling of feet, however, and clearing of throats.

Barlow plunged ahead undaunted. "I imagine you came to the conclusion I did. My wife really thought the gun was loaded and fully intended to kill me. Now that takes real courage, doesn't it? Especially in front of so many witnesses. I suggest we all give the little lady a big hand."

He clapped softly. A few out of his audience, mesmerized by his outrageous frankness, started to join him. Then they realized what they were doing, and stopped in great embarrassment.

"That's what it was, folks. A moment of courage. A supreme effort. My wife and I have discussed it too, you see. And I think we've come to a kind of agreement. We agreed she could probably never manage such a moment again. Not that she doesn't continue to have a motive for killing me. Not that she's stopped hating me. In fact, I'd guess now that she hates me more than ever, if that's possible."

He paused and looked for the first time at Veronica. She was standing just across the room from him, erect, rigid, unmoving, like a marble statue and just as white. But the mask was on her face again, and it revealed nothing of her thoughts.

"Veronica's problem, you see, is this. She's perfectly willing to kill me. I've got lots of insurance, enough to provide for her for the rest of her life. But she's afraid of the risks. She's afraid of prison or execution. The first

time she might have gotten away with it. Temporary insanity caused by jealousy or something like that. But it wouldn't be so easy now. I took care of that, remember? With that detective. Having tried once, if Veronica would succeed in killing me now, the police would be pretty certain it was deliberate and premeditated. . . . But it was such an interesting scene, and I thought maybe we could play something like it again. . . ."

All eyes were upon him as he reached into his pocket and drew out a revolver—the same revolver. Then he reached into the opposite pocket and brought out a handful of bullets. Everyone watched him as he loaded the gun, snapping a cartridge into each chamber with deliberateness.

"Now," he announced, "my fingerprints are all over this little weapon. And you all know how many people have been killed playing with guns. If I were to be shot with this gun now, my wife might be able to convince the police I was shot accidentally. Accidentally while I was handing her the gun, in fact."

He walked across the room to Veronica, and holding the revolver by the barrel, thrust it at her. Mechanically, seemingly without thinking, she accepted it. Her finger curled against the trigger.

"She might," Barlow continued, "convince the police with an accident story. But she'd be taking a big risk, because there are more than twenty witnesses in the room."

He retreated a step, and looked at his wife. He smiled. "What are you going to do, Veronica?" he asked her.

For answer she shot him in the heart. Just once, but with deadly aim. Once was enough.

Detective-Sergeant Carmichael busied himself with his notebook and pencil. He interviewed all the guests separately, but found a remarkable consistency in their stories.

"Well, I guess he had a sort of fixation about it," Tom Nestor said. "Ever since that first time, you know . . ."

Mr. Crenshaw was one of the oldest employees of the firm. "It was all Barlow's idea," he said. "He had the gun in his pocket, and he loaded it right in front of us. . . ."

Betty Meyers was quite certain. "He was acting real mean, he was. Like he was looking for trouble . . ."

". . . He handed her the gun," Mrs. Yost said, blinking back nervous tears. "Made her take it. She didn't want to take it. . . . "

"There was a sort of scuffle," Carol Nestor affirmed, "and the gun went off. . . ."

"Yes," Veronica concluded, "it was an accident."

SAM'S HEART

By Henry Slesar

He was through worrying about it. Crowley and the rest of them could have the headaches of the company for the rest of the week; he'd go to a sporting-goods store and pick out the heftiest Winchester he could find in stock, and call Eastern and get that nine-o'clock flight of theirs to the mountains. Then he'd shoot the biggest, meanest-looking buck he could track, and think of Iverson's ugly face all the time he was sighting along the barrel and squeezing the trigger. No business was really worth the aggravation you had to take from Joe Iverson, that skunk, that sadist, that hunk of rotten cheese.

He was getting worked up again, and Sam Victor put a hand over where he thought his heart was, and patted the spot gently. It was as if he was saying, easy, easy, old heart; don't let that thing happen again. A million Joe Iversons aren't really worth it, a million good accounts aren't really worth one tiny beat.

It was what the Doctor had said. Doctor with a capital D. Sam Victor had never thought much of doctors, small d, before *it had happened.* Now it was Doctor, big D, and anything the Doctor said was all right with Sam Victor. And what did he say? What Sam was saying now. Take it easy, old heart, he said. Relax. Don't do me like you did me before.

He left the office at five, with an empty attaché case, and walked down the hall to the elevator with his heels exploding like firecrackers on the tile. As usual, he was the shortest man in the elevator car, but it didn't make him squirm. He looked at the second buttons of topcoats and didn't mind. Life was the thing, life beating under his own

expensive topcoat, in his chubby wrists, at the base of his heavy throat, at the temples of his bald head. Life was what mattered, not Height, not Youth, only Life.

Sam was feeling so good by the time he hit the street that he could almost have shaken hands with Iverson. After all, it was more than a good account; the very existence of his company depended upon it. And so he'd had reason to be grateful that the account was still theirs. If Iverson would only sew up his ugly mouth, and keep his dirty words and unfair requests to himself, if he could act like a decent human being—Agh! Sam thought in disgust. The hell with Joe Iverson. It's too nice a day, too good for thoughts of that man.

He took a taxi to the sporting-goods store, and savored the window displays before entering. The gun department was on the second floor, and the racks of rifles began to make him feel uneasy. He hadn't been hunting since he was a kid. Would he make a fool of himself in front of the clerk? Sam hated to look foolish.

The salesman gave him a wide smile, as if he had cleverly gauged the high price of Sam's topcoat and soft felt hat and well-made British shoes. He seemed to know a good customer when he saw one, and Sam felt easier.

"I want a good, hefty rifle," Sam said. "Maybe that Winchester 70 Bolt Action; I used to own one of those, but I gave it away. To my nephew." He flushed, realizing he was talking too much.

"Let's start from the beginning," the salesman said gently. "You want this for large game?"

"Yeah, that's right." Sam fingered the pocket where the cigars used to be carried. "I figured on going upstate tonight, do a little hunting."

"Deer hunting?"

"Yeah. I used to be pretty good. Shot me a buck when I was fourteen, up in Maine."

"I'm afraid you won't do much shooting right now, sir. Not that I don't want to make the sale." He grinned, trying to be likable. "I don't think the season's open on deer, not just yet. But there's some small game you can go for."

"Season." Sam's hand fluttered to his chin. "Oh, yeah,

season." He was embarrassed. "Well, sure, small game would be fine. All I care for is the fun, you know what I mean, the relaxation."

"If you'd like something in a lightweight rifle? Or maybe you'd consider a handgun—"

"Sure, I wouldn't mind," Sam said. "Never owned a handgun. That might be a good idea."

The salesman moved him to a glassed-in case. "Got the best collection in town, I think. A lot depends on your personal preferences, of course. Now personally, I'm sort of partial to the Colt Commander, this .45 autoloader. Just heft this little baby—"

Sam took the proferred weapon and liked the way it fitted his hand, stirring childhood memories of cops and robbers on the street in front of the west-side tenements.

"It's a rugged piece of equipment," the salesman said, his voice soft, trained, compelling. "Very popular. It's the lightweight version of the government model. But if you'd care to see something a little less formidable—"

"No, no," Sam said, feeling his manliness impugned. "This is fine, great, just what I'm looking for. My hunting license cover this?"

"Certainly. Now as to price—"

The clerk ticked off the amount, took the weapon from Sam's moist hand, and concluded the transaction. It was child's play for him to make the related sales, the leather shoulder holster with its clean new smell, the ammunition, packed solidly in weighty wooden boxes, the gun case with its neat and shiny lock and hinges. The salesman offered to send the purchases directly to his home, but Sam said no, he'd put the case and ammo into his attaché case; he'd wear the holster and gun, get used to its feel. The salesman smiled, cautioned him against carrying it too long (there are laws, you know, he grinned) and helped Sam into the outfit. When he dropped the gun into its pocket, Sam was surprised how heavy it felt, but he didn't complain.

He was feeling pretty perky by the time he reached the ground floor, and his first reaction was a flattered smile when the floorwalker called his name.

"Mr. Victor? You Mr. Victor?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"There's a call for you on the telephone in the sportswear department. It's right this way."

"Call?" Sam blinked.

"The man gave me a pretty good description." The floorwalker smiled and preceded him toward the phone whose receiver lay expectantly on a glass counter top. "I think it's your office, Mr. Victor."

Sam picked up the receiver.

"Sam? This is Dave. Listen, Iverson's in some kind of hysterical state. Now don't say when ain't he, because this is different. He practically tore my head off when he called and I said you weren't here—"

"What? What are you talking about?"

"Maybe ten minutes ago he called, and I said what you told me, that you're out, through for the week, I dunno where. That only made him scream louder, Sam. I heard him talk crazy before, but this was the worst."

"So what does he want?" Sam said angrily. "What are you bothering me for?"

"I had to, Sam, believe me. In case he meant it. He said he wants you to call him right away or he's through, finished with us."

"It's almost six o'clock! What does the man want from my life?"

"I dunno, Sam, but you know how he is. For God's sake call him—right away."

"All right," Sam snapped. "I'll call."

He replaced the receiver, but kept his hand on the phone. He looked up to find the floorwalker, but he was out of sight. He shrugged and dialed the number of Joe Iverson's office.

"Hello, Joe? Sam Victor."

"Well, well, well! So thanks for the favor."

The hated voice, the heavy, nasal, half-snarl, half-smile voice of Joe Iverson lost nothing in transmission. Sam shut his eyes and lost himself in a dreamy state of passive loathing. This man was taking years from his life. How long could one's heart stand—

"I think maybe you oughta come up here," Iverson was saying. "I think it's important. I'll be here 'til six-thirty."

"But I can't, Joe. I got something to do—"

"You didn't catch my drift. I got a fella here, Sam. He just showed me something interesting. It's a casting like the ones you make for me, only he thinks maybe he'll make them four cents cheaper a dozen. You hear what I'm saying?"

"I hear you," Sam said.

"He showed me a little sample, maybe it's good, maybe it's a piece of junk. I want you should come up and look it over. I don't want to sacrifice quality, you understand? So I think you better come up. Maybe you can convince me it's a piece of junk."

"Joe, we been doing business for seven years—"

"Yeah, sure, and every year the prices go up. This fella thinks maybe I pay too much, Sam. So I think you better come up."

The struggle within Sam Victor's narrow chest raged only briefly.

"All right, Joe," he said. "I'll be there in twenty minutes."

He took a cab that was parked outside the store, and felt like weeping in rage and helplessness all the way to Iverson's loft building on Twenty-third Street. He wasn't upset about the threat, not the real, practical threat of being undercut by a competitor. Sam knew his business, and Sam knew that Joe Iverson recognized the bargain he had. A few pennies difference wouldn't change Iverson's mind; there were other factors, too, like the promptness and reliability of Sam's company, and its willingness to take abuse and invective for the sake of the profits involved.

The downtown streets were emptying, and the cab made the trip in half the usual time. The building was shuttered, and Sam had to rap on the glass panes of the door to attract the attention of the building employee who was beginning to mop the dirty marble floor. He grumbled when he opened up, and grumbled as he put the elevator into action.

The door slid open on the fourth floor, and Sam stepped

out of the car. The man who was heading for the elevator stopped when he caught Sam's eye. He wore a bulky, shabby topcoat, and his hands were stuffed into its pockets.

"Down?" the operator said.

The muscles around the man's mouth twitched; then he bolted past the elevator towards the door marked "EXIT."

"What's eatin' him?"

"Acting pretty funny," Sam said. "Do you know him?

"Doesn't work in the building, that's for sure. Maybe I better go down and check."

Sam nodded, and walked down the hallway as the elevator descended, expecting to hear the sound of conversation from Iverson's offices. There was only silence. The door marked "IVERSON PLASTICS" was half-open, and he entered without knocking. Some of the lights were still on in the outer offices, and the cluttered desks gave evidence of the hasty departure of the employees. But the silence was peculiar, and Sam didn't like it. Ordinarily, there was never much silence when Joe Iverson was around.

He pushed the swinging gate that led inside and went down the corridor to the corner office.

"Joe? You here, Joe?"

He turned into the doorway, and the first thing he saw was the venetian blind hanging at a crazy angle from the window. Then he saw Iverson's desk with the swivel chair unoccupied. His eyes traveled from desk to floor, and he saw the feet. The shoes needed polishing.

For a single moment, he theorized, he projected, he remembered his own fears, his own doubts about the efficiency of his ventricles, and he thought, with decided pleasure, that Iverson was dead. But when he bent over and examined the unconscious man, he heard the rush of air from lungs to mouth, and knew that Joe Iverson would live to scream his rage at the assault on him.

Sam looked about him. There was a squat black safe in the corner of Iverson's office, and the door was open. Iverson always kept too much petty cash on hand, and now he was paying the penalty. The man who had pretended to be a competitor of Sam Victor's, the man who had rushed by him in the hall, had reaped the benefits.

Sam started out of the office, thinking thoughts of getting help, not concerned by Iverson's predicament. He deserved it, the stinker, he deserved worse.

The elevator operator appeared behind the swinging gate, looking puzzled.

"Couldn't find the guy; musta got outa the building. Mr. Iverson okay?"

"No," Sam said harshly. "There's been a holdup. You better get the police."

The operator blinked and swallowed.

"Well, go on!" Sam said. "Get the police!"

"Yes, sir."

The man turned and left.

Sam walked slowly back to Iverson's offices, his head throbbing. There was a thought being born in his brain, a thought so terrible and alarming (and so sweet, so desirable!) that the labor pains were almost unbearable. It had been conceived the moment he saw Iverson's unmoving figure, when doubt and hope had been commingled, when he had felt a wave of joy at the idea of Iverson's death. The loss would be a small one. The world would spin on blissfully without Joe Iverson. The account would remain at Sam Victor's company, through Joe Iverson's better-mannered heirs. And no longer would aggravation imperil Sam's life. There certainly would have been much to gain, if the thief had been more thorough.

But was it too late? Was there still time for—thoroughness? And without risk?

He stepped into the room.

"You know what I think of you, you crumb?" he whispered at the still figure. "This is what I think of you."

He hoisted the heavy attaché case to the desk. He clicked it open and took out the box of ammunition. He slid off the lid and removed one shiny bullet. Then he yanked the gun from the shoulder holster and loaded it.

His hand was trembling when it closed around the gun butt, and the finger on the trigger seemed frozen into inaction. For a moment, he thought he could never accomplish the cold-blooded act. Then he thought of the buck he had killed in Maine so many years before, the beautiful,

long-shanked, proud animal that had deserved its fate far less than Joe Iverson, and the thought gave him just enough incentive to move his finger a fraction of an inch.

The gun fired, and the man on the floor jerked convulsively. Then he lay still.

Sam was far calmer when the job was done. He replaced the gun in the holster, snapped the case shut, and buttoned his topcoat carefully. Then he walked outside, toward the elevator.

He was about to press the button when the overhead light *pinged* and the door slid open. The operator stepped out, and two men followed him. One was in patrolman's uniform, the other in civilian dress.

"In here," Sam Victor said, swallowing hard. "Poor Joe."

It was easy after that. It was amazingly easy. They asked a lot of questions, but the answers came mechanically, convincingly. Who was he? He was Sam Victor, President, Victor Manufacturing, and Joe was his client. When did he arrive? About ten minutes ago, after the deed had been done. The elevator operator nodded his corroboration. Could he describe the man who bolted and ran? No, the hallway light was too dim. Why was he here? Sam told his story, and suggested they double-check it with his office. Did Iverson always keep much money in the safe? As far as he knew, yes, too much. Was he dead when Sam Victor arrived? Yes, he was dead, poor Joe, he was very dead.

"All right," the detective frowned. "All right, Mr. Victor. Thank you very much. I'd keep myself available for the next few days, if I were you."

"Certainly," Sam Victor said. "Anything I can do. Anything at all."

He sighed, shook his head mournfully, and turned toward the exit. He felt the detective's eyes on his back as he walked out, but he knew everything was all right. All he had to do was go past the swinging gate, down the hall to the elevator, down to the ground floor, over the marble tiles, and out into the street. Then he would take a taxi, and he would go home to the comfort of his wife and family. He

might even have a drink tonight, despite what the Doctor said.

The walk to the front door seemed long. His legs were leaden and his breath was coming short. He paused to lean a hand on the wooden railing, before he continued on.

"Mr. Victor?" the detective said. "You all right?"

"Yes," Sam answered, inaudibly.

He shut his eyes, and swallowed as much air as his throat could hold. It went down his windpipe and seemed to stick in his chest. His left arm twinged with sudden sharp pain.

He stopped fighting and let himself slide to the floor. He was all right. He knew it was all right. It was nothing like the last time; just a mild one, another little warning, just a little one. . . .

"Mr. Victor!" the detective's face was over him.

"It's all right," Sam said weakly. "My heart . . ."

The detective slipped a hand beneath the topcoat, to feel for Sam Victor's heartbeat, and Sam remembered too late that his heart was inaccessible, hidden beneath new leather and shiny steel and the barrel of a gun still warm and starkly accusing.

THE INCOMPLETE CORPSE

By Jack Webb

Five minutes changed Norman Roth's life. In a strict sense, it was just a second. That one second when he saw his wife in that strange, unexpected place and when the terrible knowledge descended upon him. One second was all it took. Norman Roth had been a happy man, a mild man, with no enemies, no hatreds. In one second he became a maniac, sadistic, craving revenge above all else in the world. He could have committed murder in that one second. But murder wouldn't have satisfied him. Murder wasn't enough.

When those five important minutes began, he was only thirty miles from home. But he had driven all the way from Chicago that day and he was dead-tired. Sidney, his wife, was waiting for him—not expecting him for four or five more days, to be sure—but waiting for him, nevertheless. His arrival would be a pleasant surprise for her. It was already past ten, and he wanted to get home before she went to sleep.

But, meanwhile, he was fighting sleep himself. He'd always had a horror of falling asleep at the wheel on one of his trips and piling up somewhere in a ditch or against a pole. He didn't want to do that. He had too much to live for. A brief stop and a cup of coffee was what he needed.

Somehow, the kind of place where you just get a cup of coffee, the roadside diner, didn't appear. In desperation, he finally settled for a fancier establishment. There were a couple of dozen other cars cramming the small parking lot, but he found a spot into which he could squeeze his car.

Music hit him when he climbed out, music a little louder than he liked. But it might help wake him up, he reasoned. He pushed his way inside, where he found there wasn't

much more light than outdoors. It was the usual roadside tavern, just a bit above shabbiness. There were four musicians in the orchestra, and in front of them was a small cleared space where a few people were dancing. There were booths and tables, and there was a bar. The bar looked the emptiest, so he chose that.

"A cup of coffee," he said to the bartender.

"Coffee comes from the kitchen," the man said.

Norman Roth wasn't belligerent, just firm. And he was well-dressed, sort of important-looking. "You could have somebody bring me a cup of coffee here, couldn't you?" he said.

The man went away grumbling, spoke to a waitress. Roth's eyes were becoming more accustomed to the dimness. But he wasn't curious about the place. He closed his eyes, resting them. It felt awfully good. If it weren't for getting home to Sidney, he'd go out in the car and take a nap. But the coffee idea was better.

The coffee came, finally, rousing him. A thick, saucerless mug, steaming though, and black enough. He laid a dollar bill on the bar in a way that indicated he didn't expect change. Then he sipped the coffee, as fast as its heat would let him.

He had almost finished the cup and would have left the place, but that was when he saw them. From that first blinding instant of seeing them he had no illusions. He knew exactly and fully the significance of what he saw.

They were together in a booth against the farthest wall. It was probably because the dancing couples moved back and forth in front of them that he hadn't noticed them before. Tommy Barron and Sidney.

Tommy Barron was just a kid. Big, good-looking, masculine, but only a kid nevertheless. Five years, at least, younger than Sidney. Tommy Barron, a sharp youngster with a college degree and not long out of military service, a born salesman. Roth had hired him because he could see he had talent, and Tommy had proved himself. In three years, he had put Roth and Company on the map single-handedly. Two months ago Roth had made him a junior partner. And the boy, though he deserved it, had almost wept with

gratitude. And now he was in a tavern booth opposite Sidney.

Norman Roth's Sidney. Lovely, lovely Sidney. Not really beautiful in the technical sense. Her lips a trifle too full, her face a bit too long, aquiline. But handsome. Striking. Sidney was thirty-two, but she looked the same as she'd looked on the day of their marriage. Her eyes were dark, flashing. She wore her black hair pulled straight back from her face, either in a knot, or a bun, or a tail. The method varied, but the effect was always terribly chic. People, both men and women, always looked at her. Tommy Barron must have looked at her.

He was looking at her now. They were looking at each other, unaware of the other inhabitants of the place, unaware of a short, rather stout man at the bar with a coffee cup, arrested in midair. There was a pair of full highball glasses on the table between them, but the glasses had been pushed a little aside, unimportant, forgotten. Both of Sidney's hands were in the center of the table, and Tommy Barron's hands were resting on them. Sidney's hair was done in a ponytail tonight. Her skin was like pale ivory in the dim light. She wore a black dress, as black as her hair, a dress Norman Roth had never seen before. It revealed the smooth beauty of her shoulders and back.

They were talking. Or rather it was Tommy, the born salesman, who talked. Sidney's replies were a silent laugh, or a negative shake of her head which sent the ponytail wagging. Her laugh was sensual, open-mouthed, taunting. And the shake of her head only pretended to be negative. She was saying yes, really. Yes, oh yes, yes, yes. . . . Norman Roth could see it. And of course Tommy Barron, who was closer, could see it too.

Now he beckoned to the waitress, reached into his pocket and put some bills out on the table. The waitress came and seemed to wonder about the full glasses remaining there. Tommy Barron laughed, lifted his glass and drained it in a couple of swallows. Sidney merely watched him, terribly amused, left her glass untouched. Then he took her arm and they started to leave.

Norman Roth bent his head low over his coffee cup, put

up his left hand to hide his profile. But he needn't have bothered. They wouldn't have noticed him. They were looking and laughing into each other's eyes.

Norman Roth waited until they were gone. Then he moved swiftly for a man of his age, condition, and stoutness. He found a front window out of which to look. He saw the pair get into Barron's blue-and-white convertible. He watched the convertible back, turn, and back again. Each time it dug gravel. Finally, it lurched out of the parking lot, turned left, the direction from which Roth had come, away from town.

Roth went out the door at a run, piled into his own car. He managed the wheel deftly, got out of the parking lot quicker than the convertible had. He turned left too, away from the home he'd previously been so anxious to reach. He drove fast, giving the car all the gas it would take. Even so, it was several minutes before he sighted Barron's tail lights. He crept closer, cinched the identification, then dropped back again, but kept those tail lights in view.

He knew where they were going, but he would follow anyway. He wanted to make absolutely sure. Then they would pay. The full price. And more. The hatred in him was already full-blown, mature, deadly. But it was a cold hatred that knew what it was doing, would not act too soon, would not make a mistake.

He followed the convertible for twenty miles. Then it slowed, as he had expected it would. A red light in its tail blinked for a right turn. He had expected that too. He slowed appropriately. But he made no preparation to turn himself. He wouldn't have to follow them any longer to learn their final destination. And his plans weren't yet complete.

The convertible made the turn, just barely. Apparently an unfamiliar turn to Barron. Familiar only to Sidney. The convertible hadn't slowed quite as much as it should have. Barron was impatient. The convertible leaned precariously. But it was a heavy, expensive car, and didn't roll over.

Roth loafed past the intersection, watching Barron's tail lights disappear to the right in a cloud of gravel dust. A curve in the road, a line of trees, and it was gone. Roth

knew where and how far it was going. To the cabin. His hunting cabin. Where there would be complete privacy.

Even though he'd known, the certainty hit him now. He had to slow his own car suddenly. He pulled over to the shoulder, and braked to a quick, jerking stop. Then he leaped out, and in the darkness, totally alone, he was sick.

He did not go home for four days. These were days he was supposed still to have been in Chicago. But he spent them in his home town. He registered under an assumed name at a cheap hotel, ate his meals at greasy, out-of-the-way little restaurants, careful to avoid places where he might encounter acquaintances.

He spent much of this time thinking. One entire day he spent at the public library, reading medical books. He had once wanted to be a doctor, had spent a year in a medical school. He made knowledgeable notes from the books he read. By the end of the four days his planning was complete.

The passage of time had not abated his hatred. But to look at him now, no one would ever guess that he was a man possessed by an all-consuming passion. He didn't get sick any more. He was even able to smile. He knew, because he practiced doing it. He had learned to conceal completely the way he really felt. He seemed like Norman Roth again, amiable, successful, content, happy.

It was in that guise that he went home to Sidney. When she put her arms out to him, he went to her, and they kissed. His kiss was normal, affectionate. His talk of his stay in Chicago was convincing.

Her behavior was entirely as he'd expected it would be. She was merely having an affair with his business partner. She wasn't running away from her husband. Because Tommy Barron, a boy five years younger than she and with his career at stake, hadn't proposed running away. Sidney might maneuver him into that later, but right now things were going according to Barron. A born salesman, a smooth talker, an enchanting personality. So enchanting that under his spell, Sidney could even be persuaded to endure her husband for awhile yet.

Thus the husband and wife acted for each other's benefit. Only the husband was aware, however, that two people were acting.

Norman Roth let it go on like that for almost two weeks. Then one day he got Tommy Barron in his office, and he began as planned.

"Tommy, it's open season for squirrels and rabbits. How about coming up to the cabin with me this weekend and trying for a few?"

The younger man was as good an actor as any of them. Only he acted from ignorance. "I never hunted in my life, Mr. Roth." He still called his senior partner "Mr. Roth." He was clever. Had the proper humility.

"Then you ought to start, Tommy. You don't have any hobbies that I know of. And every man ought to have at least one."

And each one of them laughed secretly within himself at the double meaning.

"I'll stick with my drinking," Barron said.

"Shucks, boy, we can do that up at the cabin too." Roth was gay, good-natured, exuberant. Silently though, he measured his opponent. Of course Barron didn't relish him for a cabin partner. And if he, Roth, went hunting up there, Barron knew he would have it convenient with Mrs. Roth back home.

"Can I have a rain check on this one, boss?" Barron was stubborn.

Roth looked hurt. "Guess you and I don't mix too good socially," he mumbled, seemingly to himself. "Too far apart in age, I guess."

"Look now, it isn't that . . ."

"Ah, that's all right, Tommy. Sidney never liked it up at the cabin either, you know. Too chicken-hearted for hunting. I used to go up there with Max Terrell. But Max had that heart attack, you know. I haven't been up since. Hate to go up there all alone. But I guess if I want to do any hunting . . ."

The forlornness in his face and voice were hard to ignore. And Barron owed this man something. "Look, Mr. Roth . . ."

"That's all right, Tommy. I understand. . . ."

"I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll give it a try. But don't blame me if I shoot you instead of a rabbit."

Roth smiled happily. There was no hidden threat in what Barron said. And Roth knew that Barron didn't have what it took to be a murderer. Because he, Roth, knew exactly what it took.

So they went up there together on the weekend, on Friday evening. They went in Roth's car, and Roth drove. He smiled at the way Barron pretended not to know the way to the place. And when they arrived, how he pretended to be seeing the cabin for the first time.

Roth went through the routine of showing his guest around. "Nice place, you see, Tommy. No roughing it here at all. Two rooms, kitchen–living room and bedroom. Bath too, of course. We have our own well. Fireplace with lots of wood, and an axe if you feel like exercise."

Barron seemed to take the mention of the axe and exercise quite calmly.

"We've got both deep woods and open fields around here. Lots of cover for game. And the little lake down the hill has fish in it sometimes."

They unpacked their gear, and when that was done Barron said he was tired and would like to go to bed. Roth insisted that since his guest had avowed his hobby was drinking, they should do a bit of it. There was no need to get up early the next morning. Roth went to the refrigerator, procured ice cubes, and opened a bottle of bourbon. Barron didn't resist very hard.

But Barron had a considerable capacity for alcohol. His host had rather expected that though, so he was patient. He drank sparingly himself, but managed to make it seem he was holding his own with the younger man. Halfway down the bottle Barron wanted to stop, but Roth wouldn't let him.

It was toward midnight that Barron finally sagged. "Wanna go to bed now, boss," he mumbled.

Roth's answer was to pour his guest another drink. Barron could hardly hold the glass, but he gulped at it obediently. His eyes were vacant, unable to focus. Once

he tried to stand, to head for a bunk, but his legs couldn't manage the effort and he sank back. Roth stood over him, getting impatient now that the end was near.

When the end did come, it came rather suddenly. Barron's head snapped back, lolled to one side. The glass fell from his hand, broke, and whiskey and ice cubes spilled on the floor.

Still, Roth wanted to make sure. He took the inert body under the arms and lifted it to a standing position. "Barron!" he yelled sharply into the other's face. There was no reply. He let the body go, and it slumped down, on top of the broken glass.

Roth went into action quickly. He fetched the axe from the pile of wood by the fireplace, and he had the surgeon's scalpel ready in his pocket. Using these two as cutting instruments, he performed the operation. The whiskey he had drunk himself served both to give him courage and to deaden the pain. He amputated the little finger from his left hand.

It was the finger on which he wore the monogrammed ring. Ring and all, he left the finger lying on the floor. While he worked to close and bandage the wound, he let the blood from it drip freely over Barron and the axe. It didn't disturb Barron at all. He'd begun to snore.

There was little left to do after that. He put Barron's fingerprints on the axe. He got the spade from outside, dirtied it, put Barron's fingerprints and a bit of blood on it too, then flung it outside again.

It was past one when he left the cabin. At six, he knew, Sam Rogers would come knocking at the door. He'd made the date with Sam long before. To bring his hunting dogs over. Sam would get there before Barron woke up, would be the necessary witness, would prevent Barron—if Barron's mind were functioning in the morning—from disposing of the evidence.

Meanwhile he, Roth, had plenty of time. Leaving his car parked in front of the cabin, he walked. He took a way that he knew very well. At dawn he was taking a shortcut across a field to another road. About breakfast time he was buying a ticket on a bus heading west. At noon he was in

another town. He left the bus, took a room in a cheap hotel. There he collapsed from pain and exhaustion, and slept.

He read the newspapers avidly. They told him the whole story. It was just the kind of thing the newspapers liked.

Sam Rogers had done his job well. He found the cabin door open and everything just as Roth had left it, including the still sleeping Tommy Barron. Sam didn't touch anything, but called the police at once.

Alert detectives pieced the situation together. The severed finger could be identified both by the ring and the fingerprint. The axe was obviously the weapon. Where the rest of the corpse was puzzled them, of course. There were two possibilities—in the lake, or in the woods. The spade indicated the latter. It would take a long time to check, possibly could never be completely checked. So they were not sure a crime had been committed.

But then they started poking into motives, prodding, asking questions, getting tips. And the picture of Tommy Barron began to emerge. Aggressive youngster, befriended by his employer, taken into the firm, made a partner. Then showing his gratitude by becoming the lover of his employer's wife. Finally, either a drunken argument with the employer up in the cabin or perhaps even a deliberate plan to eliminate him—though they couldn't prove the wife had been linked to it. Whichever it was though, Tommy Barron was arrested for murder.

Norman Roth smiled as he read these accounts. He tried to imagine what Barron must be thinking. He'd denied everything, of course. But he must be wondering. What did happen to the boss? Is he really dead? Did I, by any wild stretch of the imagination, really kill him? And then Norman Roth laughed silently to himself. Those questions would be answered. But Barron wouldn't like the answers.

Sidney was also getting a bit of publicity, of course. At first she'd denied any romantic connection with Barron. Then she switched, admitted her love for Barron, and started saying uncomplimentary things about her husband. But she was quite sure Barron hadn't killed him.

Norman Roth had to laugh again. Poor Sidney. She was sure her Tommy wasn't a murderer. But if he wasn't, what had happened up at the cabin? And what was going to happen to Tommy now?

Norman Roth bought all the newspapers he could find. He spent hours reading them. And, meanwhile, he began to live his new life.

He'd planned this carefully too. He'd done nothing to arouse any suspicion that he had intended to disappear. He hadn't touched his joint checking account. He hadn't sold anything that would have attracted attention. But he'd always kept a couple of thousand in cash in his safety-deposit box. Sidney hadn't known of it. Nor had the bank. He had that money now. It would carry him—if he were careful—as long as necessary. So he didn't have to get a job, or become involved in any way where identification would be necessary. On the hotel register he was Norman Jones. The perfect disappearance.

His hand was a problem, of course. He didn't dare go to a doctor. He had to treat it himself. He knew the chance he was taking. A serious infection could either kill him or drive him to seek medical attention at the risk of exposure. But no serious infection developed. With his own small knowledge and the drugs he could buy without prescription, he fought the battle and won it. The wound began slowly to heal.

Not without pain, however. The pain was intense at times. The amputation had been rough, unskilful, had inflicted unnecessary damage. But he endured the pain willingly, even happily. Because he knew the pain he was causing was greater than the pain he was suffering.

Meanwhile, Tommy Barron was indicted for first-degree murder and the date of his trial was set. Norman Roth was impatient with the slow grinding of the wheels of justice, was angry when Barron dropped temporarily out of the news. But he consoled himself with the knowledge that neither Barron nor Sidney were having a pleasant time of it either.

He had ample warning when the time of the trial approached. The newspapers became interested again. He

learned from their accounts that the status of the case hadn't changed. As far as the prosecution was concerned, the fact of a murder could be amply proved despite the lack of a complete corpse. And if there had been a murder, who else but Tommy could have committed it?

On the first day of the trial, Norman Roth moved back to his home town. He traveled inconspicuously by bus, registered in one of those fleabag hotels to which he had become so accustomed. But this hotel was one with a view of the courthouse where the trial would be held.

He didn't, of course, attend the trial itself. He would have liked to, and was tempted to. His appearance had changed considerably. Pain and solitude had accomplished that. No mere chance acquaintance would be very likely to recognize him. But he declined to take the unnecessary risk. Especially when he had already risked so much.

On the morning of the first day of the trial, he sat at his fourth-story window and watched Barron being escorted to the courthouse from the jail building across the street. He had a good, unhindered view from his window, and a cheap pair of binoculars to help. He noted the details of the little scene with careful attention.

Barron came across the street walking between two plainclothes detectives. He was handcuffed to one of them. A fair little crowd of the curious, perhaps a hundred or so, gathered to gape at the accused man as he went by. It was, Roth decided, the perfect situation.

But it wasn't till the third day of the trial that he was able to work up the courage to put this next stage of his plan into effect. The trial was getting good newspaper coverage, so that the little crowd increased a bit each day. They were mostly the courthouse bums and loafers, a few sensation-loving stenographers who worked in the near vicinity, and probably a sprinkling of mere passersby.

On this third morning, Roth joined them. Gently he edged up to the front of the group. It was a noisy gathering. They were all talking about the case, not really concerned about the man involved. To them he was just an animal in a cage. But they quieted down when Barron and his

escort appeared. A silence like the silence of a funeral settled over them.

Roth watched the approach of his erstwhile partner. He walked between the same two noncommittal, bored plainclothesmen. He didn't look around him, but stared straight ahead. He's frightened, Roth told himself. I've never seen a man look so frightened. He's not cocky as he used to be. He has suffered. But his suffering is just beginning.

The three men approached. As they passed, a sleeve of one of the detectives brushed against Norman Roth's coat. That was when Roth chose to speak. He spoke softly but clearly, in his natural voice.

"Good luck, Tommy!"

The prisoner's head jerked around, looked back over his shoulder, wildly searching the crowd for the owner of that familiar voice. Roth put up his hand—the maimed, three-fingered hand—and waved.

Roth had the satisfaction of seeing Barron's face go white. And seeing him suddenly, but futilely, try to drag his captors back with him to determine if the vision had been real. And hearing his incoherent screams as the detectives fought to prevent what they thought was an attempt to escape. Pandemonium ensued. Screams from frightened spectators drowned out Barron's desperate babbling.

In the midst of all the excitement, Norman Roth walked quietly away, melted through the crowd, disappeared long before anybody made any sense out of what Barron was trying to tell them. Unmolested, he went back to his hotel, rode the elevator up to the fourth floor, and entered his room. Only there, in complete privacy and aloneness, did he give vent to his feelings. He laughed and laughed, not loudly but with infinite pleasure.

It came out in the noon edition of the papers. The man on trial for murder was claiming that he had seen his supposed victim in a crowd outside the courthouse. Comment varied, from toying with the bizarre possibility that Norman Roth had never been murdered, to caustic speculation that the accused man was merely trying a trick to implant doubt in the minds of the people who would judge him. When Barron took the stand, he would surely try to

make the jury believe he had seen a presumed dead man alive.

The evening papers carried on with it. A police official pointed out that it was strange that Barron had been the only one to see the man he described as resembling Norman Roth. And it was equally strange that when police officers went searching for the man, he seemed to have disappeared.

Safe in his hotel room, Roth enjoyed himself tremendously. But he also knew he had to be especially careful. He stayed in his room that evening, foregoing his dinner, feasting instead on the torture of uncertainty that Barron was undoubtedly experiencing. It was unlikely, he felt, that Barron, or for that matter Sidney, were dining very peacefully that night.

Next morning he still kept to his room. He sat at the window with the binoculars, waited for Barron's arrival outside the courthouse. He hadn't planned to repeat yesterday's performance, but he also suspected a trap. A police stakeout of some sort, operating on the dim chance that Barron had been telling the truth and that Norman Roth might turn up again.

But Norman Roth stayed in his room. He saw that there was a big crowd around the courthouse steps. And there were undoubtedly detectives scattered among them. He laughed as he looked down, godlike, upon them, knowing beforehand the futility of their efforts.

At the usual time Barron and his escort emerged from the jail building and started across the street. Roth could see his former business partner very clearly through the binoculars. He wasn't staring straight ahead today. He was looking about him in every direction. Roth fancied he could detect the expression of desperate hope on the young man's face. Vain hope, of course. Nothing happened. Norman Roth wasn't there. It had been an illusion, a mirage, the last striving of a man who was doomed. Barron and his two captors went up the courthouse steps and disappeared inside the building.

That afternoon Roth sneaked downstairs and bought a newspaper. It carried a front-page picture of Tommy Barron. And underneath the picture the accused man's call

for help. "Please come back, Mr. Roth. Let them know you're alive. Please . . ."

The jury was out, deciding the Barron case. And Norman Roth, for the first time in months, was going home.

He had begun watching the house at dusk. He knew Sidney was inside, but he was interested in whether she had company. And whether somebody else might be watching the place besides himself. But all was clear, he finally decided. No one seemed to have the imagination to predict what Norman Roth, if he were alive, might do next.

It was long past dark when he went to the door. He stood close to the wall of the house, where Sidney couldn't see him if she decided to peek out first. And he was ready to flee if anything went wrong. But he had no trouble. Sidney came to the door almost immediately, and before she could even identify who he was, he pushed his way inside.

When she saw who it was, she started to scream, but put a hand to her mouth to cut off the sound of it.

"Surprised to see me, Sidney?" he said pleasantly.

She nodded, and seemed about to faint. She steadied herself against the wall. Her eyes stared at him.

"Are you happy, Sidney, to find out your long-lost husband isn't dead after all?"

She didn't answer.

"Shall we go into the living room and sit down? I'd like to talk to you, but I haven't much time."

In obedience to his gesture, she walked ahead of him. She'd gotten a bit thin, he noticed. And she wasn't taking care of herself. She still wore her hair tied back, but loosely, carelessly now, and it had lost something of its ebony sheen. She wore a quilted bathrobe, and it was wrinkled, lumpy, as if she'd slept on it.

"Sit down, Sidney."

She went to the sofa and he took the chair opposite. She stared at him, while he inspected her face. Once pale ivory, it was only sallow now. Her lips were bloodless. Only her eyes still had the fire of life in them. The fire was burning feverishly.

"So Tommy did see you in front of the courthouse," she said.

"Yes, he did. I wanted him to see me. I wanted to put his mind at rest that he hadn't really killed me."

Her woman's intuition divined his purpose. "But you didn't want the police to find you."

"That's correct."

"You framed Tommy for a murder, and now you want to torture him by letting him know you're alive."

"You understand the situation perfectly."

"Why did you come here?"

"To put your mind at rest too, dearest Sidney."

"But you still don't intend to reveal yourself to the police?"

"Of course not."

He pulled off his left glove slowly. She watched his movements with fascination. Her mouth tightened though, and she closed her eyes for a moment, after she saw his maimed hand.

"You went to a lot of trouble to arrange all this, didn't you?" she said finally.

"A great deal of trouble."

She studied his face for a moment. "I can't help wondering why," she said.

"Because I hated both of you. I thought of killing you both. But you didn't deserve an easy death. It was worth all the trouble it took giving you what you really deserved."

"Why did you hate us?"

The question surprised him. "Why?"

"I can't see why you hated me, Norman. I can't see why you cared so much that I was unfaithful. Because you never really loved me."

"Look," he said angrily, "If you're trying to get me to change my mind—"

"No, I doubt if you'll change your mind. But it fits. Everything you've done fits you, Norman. You married me because I was a woman you could be proud of. Not for love, Norman. But pride. And my affair with Tommy hurt your pride. But your pride is well again now. You're

getting revenge. You're playing God, watching Tommy and me squirm and scream. We may have done wrong, but I don't think we deserve this—"

He rose from his chair, interrupting her. "If you're begging for mercy—"

"Mercy!" She stood up too. Her mouth sneered at him. "Mercy from a man who'd carve himself up, who'd pour out his own blood to get blood. No, Norman, I'm not going to crawl, if that's what you came to see."

He turned his back on her, pulled on his glove as he walked to the front door. He stopped there. "I suppose," he said, "you'll go to the police now and try to convince them I was here, alive, in your house."

She didn't follow him to the door. "I won't waste my time trying to convince them of anything, Norman. Your scheme has worked too well."

He stalked out angrily. Half a mile from the house he found a taxi, rode in it to a few blocks from his hotel. He wasn't happy. The interview had left him unsatisfied. It hadn't been quite what he'd wanted somehow.

But he felt a little bit better when he heard the newsboy's shout.

"Extra! Extra! Barron guilty! Extra! Extra . . ."

He kept track of Sidney all the time. Through Tommy Barron's being sentenced to the chair. Through the legal appeals, as one after another they failed. Through the attempt for clemency from the governor, which failed too. Through the waiting for the date of the execution.

That was how he knew that she went up to the hunting cabin, the day before Tommy was to die.

And that was when he knew that the final bit of satisfaction that he craved could be had in only one way. He had to be with Sidney at the moment of Tommy Barron's death.

The time, as all the newspapers noted, was to be eleven P.M. Norman Roth spent the daylight hours concealed in the woods and watching the cabin. Sidney's car stayed parked in front. She emerged from the cabin just once, to get a package out of the car. Then she went back inside and

remained. He could hear the radio playing. She was undoubtedly listening to the news broadcasts.

He waited till dark, and long past dark. He crept up close to the cabin and tried to look inside. But the shades were drawn and he couldn't see in. He could hear the radio very plainly, however. Tommy Barron was mentioned several times.

At a quarter to eleven, he knocked on the door. He didn't expect her to open it, out here alone in the woods, without having to threaten her. He was quite prepared to break a window to get in. But she answered the knock almost immediately.

"I've been expecting you, Norman," she said.

That he had again been taken by surprise angered him. "Let me in," he said gruffly.

She unlocked the screen, and he walked in. She was wearing a sweater and slacks, and she stood close to him, looking up at him, a maddeningly superior smile on her pale lips.

"You see how well I understand you, Norman. I knew somehow you'd be shadowing me. And I knew you'd want to share this last, climactic moment with me. That's why I came up here. I thought this would be the fitting stage setting for you. I don't want to rob you of anything."

He turned away from her, surveyed the interior of the cabin. The mess and the blood had been cleaned up long ago, of course. Now it showed signs of feminine occupancy. But Sidney hadn't been quite her neat self. Some of her clothes were scattered about on chairs and the floor, unwashed dishes littered the sink, a half-empty bottle and a glass with an inch of whiskey were on the table.

"You've been drinking, I see," he began.

"I'll admit it helps," she said.

"We can drink together," he said. "We can drink a toast to the passing of someone for whom you felt affection."

He got a clean glass from the cupboard and poured whiskey for himself. Then he sat down and gestured for her to join him. She sat in the opposite chair.

"No reprieve for Tommy yet?" he asked.

"I don't expect any," she said.

They stared at each other in a long silence. There was music on the radio, sweet, soft, restful. He found himself listening to it.

"I was considering," he said later, "that after Tommy was dead a few days, I might turn up somewhere, claim my identity. I'm working on the story I could tell. I think I could make it sound good. Tommy and I had a bloody, drunken fight and I barely escaped. I wandered out of the cabin, lost my memory for awhile. Then I recovered my memory and found to my horror that Tommy had been executed for murdering me. How does that sound to you?"

"They'd probably believe you."

"You see, my dear, I'd like to prevent you, as my widow, from enjoying the money I left behind."

Her face was inscrutable. He wanted to get up and slap her, make her scream, make her cry. But he didn't. He was hurting her all right. She had to be hurt. She wasn't made of stone. Even if she refused to show it, she was hurt.

"We might even, Sidney dear, resume our interrupted life together. I might forgive you, take you back. You wouldn't have much choice, you know. Your affair is a matter of public record. I could divorce you without alimony. You'd have a choice of staying with me or being thrown out."

"Would our new life together be happy, Norman?"

He smiled. "Ecstatic," he said.

It was exactly eleven o'clock, the radio announced.

"To Tommy Barron," he said, raising his glass.

She didn't speak, but with a spasmodic shudder that seized her whole body as the radio tone sounded the hour, she lifted her glass and drained it. He matched her gesture, downed his own whiskey. To Tommy Barron!

There was a fifteen-minute news broadcast at eleven. Toward the end of it, the flash came through. Tommy Barron had gone to the electric chair in the state prison exactly on schedule. The prison doctor had pronounced him officially dead.

"Well, well," he said. "Your friend is no more. Nothing stands between us now really. And we've had such a hard day. Shall we retire?" He was mocking her, of course, but

actually he felt tired. Drained. Exhausted of all energy and emotion.

She was smiling at him suddenly, and he wondered why. "I'm afraid you couldn't walk as far as the bed, Norman," she told him.

"What do you mean?"

"There was a drug that causes paralysis in that whiskey you drank."

He was alert again now, exquisitely aware of danger. Because there was a strange feeling flooding through his torso and his legs. His brain told his legs to move, and they wouldn't obey. But he wasn't afraid yet.

"You drank the whiskey too," he said.

She shook her head. "My glass was already poured when you came in. Remember? You were the only one who drank from that bottle."

He watched as she proved the point by rising from her chair and strolling over to where an axe leaned against the fireplace. She lifted the weapon gently, and turned back to look at him. Sweat came out on his forehead.

"Do you realize, Norman," she began with a wicked smile, "that you're already legally dead? If I were to hack you up with this, and took reasonable care in disposing of the pieces, no one would know the difference. And if someone some day did find something—like perhaps another finger—why of course Tommy did it."

She came toward him. He was alive, conscious. He would be able to watch her as she did what she was going to do.

"Darling," she said, "this was all your own idea."

LUCK IS NO LADY

By Robert Bloch

Frankie hung onto the bar with both hands. If he let go, he might fall down. He didn't want to pass out, because this old Professor guy was talking to him. If he listened, maybe the old boy would keep on buying the drinks.

"Luck," said the old Professor guy. "That's what makes all the difference in the world. Five years ago I was a respected member of the faculty here at the university. Today, owing to the vicissitudes of fortune—"

He paused and sighed. Frankie sighed, too. "I know what you mean," Frankie said. "I ain't used to being on the bum myself." Which was a lie, because Frankie had always been a bum. But he wanted to stay friendly; he wanted another drink. And sure enough, the old guy was signaling the bartender. He pulled out a half-dollar and held it up in the air.

"Heads or tails," the Professor said. "Who can tell which it will be when I drop this coin on the bar? I can't. You can't. And neither can the bartender. A mathematician will say the chances are even, either way. Professor Rhine will tell you the odds can be modified. But no one knows. And there you have the Mystery of the Universe. None of us can foresee what luck will bring. Behold!"

Frankie had his eyes in focus now and he watched the coin drop. It hit the bar, bounced, then stood still—balanced on edge.

"Luck!" chuckled the old Professor guy. "Sheer luck, operating all around us, governing every move of our lives. If Lincoln had stooped to tie his shoelace at the moment Booth fired his shot—if the bird had not appeared when

Columbus faced the mutineers—*if!* But we're all victims of Tyche."

"Tight," Frankie said. "I know I'm tight."

"You misunderstand. I was speaking of Tyche. Fortuna, the Romans called her. One of the Fates, a sister of the Parcae."

"Never met the dame."

"I can well imagine that." The old Professor guy smiled at Frankie over his glass. "But the ancients realized her importance. They held an annual festival in her honor. June twenty-fourth, I believe, was the date. I've seen her represented with a cornucopia in her hands, standing on a ball—"

"Let's have a ball," Frankie muttered. "One more drink and I'm gonna be all set for a ball."

"You shouldn't drink so much," the old guy told him.

Frankie shrugged. "Why not? What else is there to do? I ain't never had the breaks, not once. Look at me—a lousy, washed-up wino. I shake like an old man, and I'm only thirty-three. If I just got a decent chance—"

The Professor guy was nodding. "I know," he said. "I could tell you a similar story. And so could every man. One man takes his last hundred dollars and buys a shack on the beach—six months later they find him there, dead of starvation. Another does the same thing—six months later they strike oil on the shore, and he sells his property for a million plus royalties. One man walks down the street and finds a fat wallet in the gutter. Another walks down the same street a moment later, just in time to be hit by a falling cornerstone. Fortune is a fickle goddess, my friend. But who knows? Being fickle, she may reverse her attitude and visit you with wealth and happiness."

"Nuts!" said Frankie.

"There speaks the scientific mind," said the old Professor guy. "But I'm not so sure. If I could only learn the secret of what attracts Fortune, I'd ask for nothing else. Perhaps it's just a matter of real belief, or of worship. Fortune is a goddess and goddesses demand adoration. Being female, she requires constancy. Could it be that the so-called

fortunate ones are merely those who have learned this secret and swear fealty to Fortune in return for her favors?"

"I dunno," Frankie mumbled. "Me, I'd go all-out for any dame who'd change my luck."

He picked up his glass, swallowed, then turned. But the old Professor guy had stumbled out. The bartender came up, shaking his head. "Funny how it hits them all of a sudden," he said.

"Yeah," Frankie answered. "But what gets me is why a guy like him hangs around this joint."

"I dunno about that," the bartender said. "We get some pretty classy trade, on account of the game in back."

Then Frankie remembered. Sure, there was a back room here. Roulette, dice, the works. He'd never been back there because he never had a stake. But come to think of it, people had been crowding through all evening, passing behind him. Like the baldheaded jerk walking by now, and the college boy with the glasses, and the dame in red.

The dame in red—there was a real item!

Frankie hadn't paid any attention to dames for a couple of months now. When you're really on the juice, you get so dames don't interest you. But this one did.

She wore this red sort of evening dress, and her skin was white as marble, and her hair was jet black. Jet black, like her eyes. She looked at Frankie when she passed, and she smiled.

She smiled at *him*. The way he looked mustn't have bothered her.

Frankie was high, or he'd never have done it. But he was high, so he floated after her. Floated to the door of the back room and stood behind her while the eye looked her over and gave the nod. And Frankie went right through to the back with her—the eye didn't try to stop him. In fact, Frankie had an idea the eye was looking at *him* more than at her.

The room in back was bigger than he'd thought, and they had quite a layout. That crumby bar up front was only a blind. This was the McCoy—three big tables for roulette and four pool tables in the corners, for dice. And there must have been fifty people at least.

It was smoky back there, but not noisy. Even the dice players were quiet, and when the wheel was spinning at a table you could notice the sound of the ball clicking. Frankie followed the dame in red over to one of the roulette tables. Lots of fat faces here, well-dressed citizens with plenty of moola. Big piles of chips in front of some. Little piles in front of others. And the wheel in the middle turning, the wheel with the 36 numbers and the 0 and the double 0, the wheel with the red and the black. Every time it turned, some of the piles would get smaller and other ones would get bigger.

Why?

Here it was, the thing the old Professor had been blabbing about. Fortune. Luck.

Some of the guys must have had a G or more in chips in front of them, and they kept on winning. Some of the others kept on losing and buying more: a dollar for whites, ten for reds, twenty for blues.

But win or lose, everybody was excited. Frankie could feel it coming off them in waves, the excitement around the table. Everybody watched every spin, every play. He watched too, and felt the pressure. If he only had a stake, now!

He looked over at the dame in red. She wasn't playing either, just standing and looking, same as him. Not quite the same, because she wasn't excited. Frankie could tell from the way she stood there, like a statue, sort of. Nobody else paid any attention to her, even though she was the hottest-looking dish in the joint. You'd think they didn't even know she was there, the way they ignored her and kept their eyes on the table, on the little silver ball bouncing around on the rim of the wheel.

And she watched, but her eyes never changed. She didn't clench her fists or breathe hard or even look interested, really. It was almost as if she knew who was going to win and who was going to lose.

Frankie stared at her, stared hard. All at once she turned her head and looked at him again. Those eyes were like a couple of black stones. He wanted to look away, but she looked away first. Her eyes glanced down at the floor.

Frankie bent over to see what she was looking at. And then he noticed it.

There was a chip lying there, right at his feet. It must have fallen off somebody's stack. Frankie bent over and picked it up, held it in his hand. A blue chip—twenty bucks. He could cash it in right now. There was some luck for you!

He started to look around for one of the cashiers who went through the crowd with their little boxes strapped on, but he couldn't spot one. And the stick was going into his act. "Place your bets, ladies and gentlemen—"

Why not? Twenty bucks found, that was luck. And maybe luck would hold. Twenty could get you forty. But which should he play, the red or the black?

Frankie looked over at the dame again. She had a red dress, that was a hunch. But her hair was black and her eyes were black. The black eyes were staring at him now—

Sure, he'd play the black. Frankie started to put his chip down, but his hand wasn't steady and the chip got away from him. It rolled and landed smack on number 33.

He made a move to reach out, but the stick said, "The bank is closed," and the wheel was spinning, and all he could do was stand there and watch. Twenty bucks tossed away like nothing, a rotten piece of luck. The wheel went round and round, the ball went round and round, the room went round and round.

The ball stopped. The wheel stopped. And the room stopped too, so Frankie could hear the stick saying, "Thirty-three, black."

His number!

Then it started. The stick pushed this big stack of chips his way. And the dame in red smiled, so he put half the chips back on red. Red came up. He left the stack there and red came up again. Three straight wins in a row and he couldn't lose.

But the dame in red shook her head and edged away from the table, so he scooped all his chips together and gave them to the cashier. The cashier paid him off in twenties and fifties and hundreds. Three thousand and twenty bucks, cash!

Frankie stuffed it in his pockets, hurrying through the crowd because he wanted to see the dame again, thank her, maybe even give her a split.

The eye held the door open for him and the dame walked out ahead, and he called, "Hey, wait a minute!" and the eye looked at him.

"What's that, buddy?"

"I wasn't talking to you," Frankie said. "I was talking to the dame."

"What dame?" asked the eye.

Frankie didn't answer, because he could see her going out the front door of the tavern. He caught up with her on the corner. The fresh air hit him, made him feel slightly sick, but he floated over to her and said, "Thanks. You brought me luck."

She just smiled, and in the dim light her eyes were darker than ever.

"Here." He scooped out a handful of bills. "I figure you got this coming."

She didn't take the money.

"I mean it," Frankie said. "Go ahead." Then he stopped. "What's the matter, you deaf or something?"

No answer. That was it, all right. Imagine a classy dame like that, deaf. But couldn't they read your lips?

"Where you headed for?" Frankie asked her. Still no answer.

Maybe the dame was a dummy, too. No wonder she didn't have any boy friend.

"Wanna come with me?" Frankie asked. It didn't make sense that she would—a dame like her being picked up by a crumby bum. But nothing made sense any more; besides, he was too tired for sense. All he knew was that he had to get some rest and sober up. If she wanted to come with him, let her. Nobody'd say anything at the fleabag where he stayed. But he had to sleep now, had to.

He began to walk and sure enough, she followed him. Not a sound out of her, not even the clicking of high heels, because she was wearing sandals. No rings, no jewelry to clank. A beautiful dish, but like a statue.

And she stood like a statue in the middle of his dirty room.

Was she waiting for him to make a pass at her? All he knew was that he was tired, terribly tired. He dragged himself across the room, plopped down on the bed. He knew he couldn't stop himself from falling . . .

He must have slept that way all night, with his head in her lap. And she must have just sat there, not sleeping. Because it was morning now and she was looking down at him and smiling.

She smiled while he washed and shaved and changed into his other shirt. He tried to talk to her again, but she didn't answer. Just smiled and waited, waited until he put on his coat and picked up his hat.

"Come on," he said. "I'm hungry."

They went downstairs and out onto the street. Frankie was going into the Ace Lunch until he remembered he had three grand in his pocket. Why not eat in one of those nice big restaurants over on Main? But he couldn't go to a place like that, looking the way he did.

"Wait a minute," he told her. "I got shopping to do first."

She waited, smiled and waited, while he went into the Hub and bought himself an outfit. Everything from shoes up to a twenty-dollar hat. The ready-made fitted perfectly and he looked like a million bucks for only a hundred and thirty.

The clerk was plenty polite, but he ignored the dame. Frankie didn't notice this so much, but afterwards in the restaurant the waitress acted the same way—brought him a glass of water and a menu, but nothing for her.

But it turned out she wouldn't eat anything, anyhow. He pointed at the menu and she just shook her head.

So he ended up eating alone. Then he sat back and tried to figure things out. Here he was with almost three grand still in his pocket. But he had her, too. Miss can't-hear, Miss can't-talk, Miss won't-sleep, Miss won't-eat. How about that, now?

She smiled at him and Frankie smiled back, but he was

beginning to wonder. Sure, she brought him luck, but there was something screwy about her—something awful screwy. He'd have to find a way to shake her before he got in some kind of trouble.

He walked out of the restaurant and she tagged along. Usually he headed for a park bench in the morning, but now as he got ready to cross the street he stopped. The dame was holding his arm and looking up at a sign: "ACME METAL PRODUCTS COMPANY." So what?

There was another sign in the front window of the building. She was staring at it: "MEN WANTED."

He tried to take another step, but she held him. And now she was pointing. Frankie blinked. Was that what she meant? Did she figure on him going in there and asking for a job?

He could, of course. That'd been his line years ago. Still had his Social Security card, and he could probably get back in the union somehow, even in spite of the bum rap on him. But how could she know that? And what made her think he'd go back to being a working stiff, now that he had all that dough in his kick?

So Frankie shook his head. But she kept right on smiling and her arm kept right on tugging at his sleeve.

All at once he got an idea. "Okay," he said. "I'll do it. But you wait here." He pointed to the doorway, and sure enough, she walked over and stood there. He brushed past her to go inside and she gave him a big smile.

Once he got inside, Frankie started to smile, too. He knew what to do now. This joint must have a back entrance. He'd just slip out the other way. Simple.

Only this guy was standing in the hall, and he spotted Frankie and said, "You a machinist 'r a metalworker?"

"Coremaker," Frankie said. It slipped out natural, before he could stop it. "But I'm not union—"

"Neither is this plant, buddy. Come on in, fill out an application. Got a rush order, the boss's crying for help, and this town's murder when it comes to getting experienced—"

Before he knew it, the guy had him in the office and a fat character named Chesley was handing him a form.

Frankie was getting ready to tell him off, when the door opened behind him.

They came in fast, two of them, walking like a couple of wound-up toys. Both of them had bandanas over their mouths. They must have put them on outside in the hall, before they'd pulled their rods.

Their rods were out now, and pointing. And one of them said, from under his bandana, "Stick 'em up and don't move."

There was Frankie and this Chesley and an old bookkeeper guy and the man who'd brought him into the office. They all got their hands up in a hurry.

"Over against the wall," said the first bandana-mouth. "Make it snappy." He walked over to the big wall-safe and waited.

They started moving. The old bookkeeper guy looked like he was ready to pass out. In fact, all at once, he did pass out.

"Catch him!" Chesley yelled. "He's got a bad heart!"

Both of the bandana-mouths turned and watched him fall. Frankie was watching, too. He didn't notice the big wastebasket in front of him until he walked right into it.

The basket went over with a clatter and rolled. It hit one of the gunsels in the shins. Frankie stumbled because of his encounter with the basket and fell forward. He grabbed for something to hang onto. And that turned out to be the nearest gunman's neck. All at once this fellow and Frankie were down on the floor in a heap and Frankie saw the gun in front of him. He reached for it because he was so scared he couldn't think to do something sensible like not grabbing the gun.

The other crook saw him grab for it and he jerked away from the safe. Just then the rolling wastebasket hit him in the shins. This startled him and he gave out a yell and turned. But now his back was to Chesley, and Chesley jumped him. Frankie got this crook's gun away from him, with a hard crack on the wrist, and covered both of the men while Chesley turned on the burglar alarm.

There was plenty of excitement for the next half-hour. When the cops got through talking to Frankie, there were

reporters. When the reporters got through, there was Chesley again, and Frankie never did have to fill out that form.

Chesley was delighted that Frankie would be working for him, starting tomorrow.

Frankie was so confused he ended up walking out the front door. By the time he realized what he was doing, it was too late to turn around. And there she was. She had been waiting for him all this time, and now she spotted him.

Like the old Professor guy said, everything was luck. The roulette wheel, and stumbling over the wastebasket, and now this job and a new, decent life ahead of him. Blind luck.

He stared at her. Now what? She was always around when things happened.

Frankie asked her to come to him with a jerk of his head, and she smiled. They walked down the street together and he bought some luggage and then he went into the Ardmoor and took a furnished suite, just like that. Two hundred clams a month, but no questions asked. The clerk didn't even look at *her,* and the bellboy took them up without a word, or even a know-it-all grin.

He flipped the kid a half-dollar and then sat down on the bed. She stood in the center of the room and smiled.

"This is it, huh, kid? Well, make yourself at home."

He tried to light a cigarette, but it got on his nerves to see her just sitting there, smiling like a statue carved out of stone. Maybe the dame was feebleminded. . . .

What he needed was a drink. A nice little drink before dinner. There was a cocktail lounge right downstairs in the Ardmoor, one of those high-class places, all dim and quiet. Peaceful as a church. A place where you could relax and drink.

Frankie stood up. "Wait here a minute," he said. "I'm gonna go down to the lobby and buy a paper."

She didn't try to stop him—just smiled.

He walked downstairs and into the lounge. The bartender asked him what'll it be and Frankie almost said, "Glass of musky," before he remembered he didn't have to drink rotgut muscatel wine any more.

"Rye on the rocks," he said.

It tasted good.

"Do it again," Frankie told the guy.

The guy did it. And this one tasted good, too. Everything was good here. The nice, soft darkness and the nice soft music in the background. A guy could relax.

"The same," Frankie said to the bartender.

He was feeling better and better. Why not? With his luck, nothing could go wrong. Not even with the dame.

Or *because* of the dame.

It hit him on the third drink. It had been in the back of his mind all along, and with the third drink it didn't seem so crazy. The dame in red was Lady Luck.

"Hit 'er again!" Frankie said to the bartender.

What had the old Professor guy said? Maybe if you believed in her enough, she'd come to you. And he'd sort of had that feeling last night. It was screwy, but then luck is always screwy. Like the Professor said, some guys get all the breaks and others always wind up with the wrong end of the stick.

Sense or not, it had happened to him. He had Lady Luck right where he wanted her, on his side.

"One more," Frankie said.

It was the strangest, greatest feeling in the world, just sitting there and knowing that luck was with him now, smiling on him. Blind luck, dumb luck, but always smiling. Ready to give him everything and anything he wanted.

Frankie began to think about all the things he'd wanted during all the years he'd been wanting. One of those snazzy English cars. A place up in the woods maybe, with a private lake for fishing. And when he'd been in stir, he'd wanted a blonde more than he'd wanted anything else. Like that one sitting over there at the end of the bar.

She was a tall dame with bare legs. She had one of those fancy cigarette holders and there was class written all over her. Kind of a doll Frankie'd never even had the nerve to look at twice.

But now, why not? Things were different now. He had luck with him. If he wanted something he could have it. Maybe *she* sent the blonde on purpose, knowing how he felt.

That was it. All he had to do was lean over and say, "How about a drink, baby?" Or maybe, "Would you care for a drink?" That would sound better, classier.

Sure, it sounded classier, and it worked, too. She was moving over. Frankie stood up, feeling a little dizzy, and helped her onto the stool. Then he sat down again and had another and he felt fine, just fine.

He kept feeling better and better. Easy to talk now. Her name was Margot. Not Margaret, but Margot. Only you said it, "Margo." The "t" was silent. Silent like the dame in red, waiting upstairs. Maybe he ought to get back to her. But what for? She didn't eat; you don't have to feed Luck. Luck was free, everything was free and easy now.

It was easy to talk to Margot, too. Easy to tell her how lucky he was. How everything he touched turned to gold, like this King Midas or whatever the guy's name was they named that flour after.

So Frankie told her, and they drank, and he said how he'd just moved in and how he'd foiled the robbery today and how he'd won all that dough last night. Only this was just the beginning, wait and see.

She said she'd like that—waiting and seeing. She called him "Frankie-boy," and said she was afraid she was getting just a wee bit drunkie.

Then the bar started filling up. And Frankie said how's for getting a bottle and taking it up to his room and drinking in peace?

And she said oh she didn't know about a thing like that, but he could see she was only stalling, and sure enough she finally said yes.

So the bartender wrapped a bottle and she carried it because it was hard for him to walk. And they went up the stairs and he leaned on her and he could feel how warm her skin was under her sleeve and he knew this was it, this was what he wanted more than anything.

But in the hall he remembered and told her to wait right where she was for a minute. He went around a corner and down a corridor until he came to his door.

Frankie unlocked it. *She* was still sitting there, smiling at him—hadn't moved a muscle since he left.

He stumbled over to her and he said, "Thanks. Thanks a million. But you gotta get out now or she'll see you. We wanna be alone, understand?"

She just sat there, not hearing. So he yelled it at her. And then he pulled her up and pushed her over to the door. It was like lugging a statue, but he made it. And he headed her down the hall past the turn in the corridor, hoping she wouldn't see the blonde.

Only she must have, because she looked at him and stopped smiling. She stood there and her black eyes got that stony stare in them as she looked right through him.

He tried to grin and gave her a little push. "Go on," he said. "Come back tomorrow. Tha'sa good girl."

Then she was walking away and Frankie was walking away, back around the corridor to pick up the blond and steer her into his room.

"Who were you talking to?" Margot asked. "Yourself?"

"Never mind," said Frankie.

She didn't mind and they had a drink together. And just to show her he wasn't handing out a line, he showed her his roll.

After that things were even better between him and the blonde. She said she liked him much, much more than a lot. But he was so loaded and so sleepy, he had a hard time keeping his eyes open.

Funny thing, just about then Frankie thought he heard somebody knocking on the door. He figured maybe it was the dame in red. But before he could even try to find out he passed out.

When Frankie woke up, it was morning, full bright daylight. The blonde was gone. So was the dough; so was his new luggage, even. He found a dollar and thirty-five cents change in the back pocket of his suit. And that was it, brother, you've had it.

He'd had it, all right. Because before he could pull himself together, the house manager was on the phone complaining, telling him he was to vacate the premises at once on account of disturbing the neighbors during the night.

Frankie tried to say something about a refund then,

remembering that a buck thirty-five was all that he had left, but the house manager said one more word and he'd call the cops. Besides, he didn't want an ex-con for a tenant.

Frankie's head was splitting; he couldn't figure out how the guy knew about *that.*

Not until he got downstairs and bought a paper and saw the story about the robbery, could he figure it. "EX-CONVICT FOILS HOLDUP" was the headline, and he read the story under it that was all about himself. *All* about himself, because some smart-aleck reporter must have checked the news files to see what he could find out about Frankie and ran across his name in an old story written at the time he got sent up.

So there was no sense going around to see Chesley for his job now. And the dough was gone, all on account of that dizzy, double-crossing blonde—

So it was gone. So what? That was just the breaks of the game. He could get more, with his luck.

With his luck.

But *she* was gone, too! And *she* was luck!

They must have thought Frankie was insane, when he ran back to the Ardmoor and yelled to the manager about a dame in red. The manager hadn't seen her, of course. Nobody had seen her. Nobody but Frankie.

He went back to the restaurant and to the old flop, went everywhere he'd been. Nobody talked.

What had the old Professor guy called her? Fortuna, the fickle goddess. Fickle. Only he'd been the one who was fickle. He'd ditched her for a blonde, thrown her out for a double-crossing thieving blonde.

Frankie went up and down the streets all day, looking for the dame in red. But he never saw her. His feet got tired and his head hurt and he kept talking to himself.

Finally, he decided to try the tavern. That's where he'd met her in the first place. She might be hanging around in the back room, where the Wheel of Fortune turned.

It was getting dark and Frankie was a wreck. What with his hangover, and all that walking, and the funny feeling inside of him—not knowing what was real any more—he could hardly see.

He was just about a block away from the joint when he blinked and straightened up. Somebody was coming out of the front door and it looked like the dame in red.

Frankie started to run. The dame was walking away, fast, and this time he could hear the hard click of high heels. Now that he was closer, he could tell it wasn't the dame in red.

Then he saw who it was. It was the blonde—Margot! She'd been in there, playing the wheel on his dough!

She was walking away fast in the other direction and wasn't yet aware of him sprinting toward her. He caught up with her just alongside an alley, and that was good, too.

Now Frankie knew that even though he hadn't seen the dame in red that morning, she was still with him. Surely, she'd arranged for him to find Margot again. So luck was still in there pitching for him.

So he knew just what to do.

He reached out and grabbed the blonde by her ponytail and yanked her into the alley, fast. She turned around and saw him, her mouth dropping open and her eyes getting as big as they could get.

"Where's the dough!" Frankie shouted, yanking her head back and forth. "Where's my dough!"

The blonde couldn't answer, because he was shaking her so. But her bag fell out of her hand and landed on the bricks. It opened and a lot of lipstick and such spilled out of it. She pointed in the direction of the bag, gasping.

Frankie gave her one last angry shove. Then he got down on his knees and rummaged through the things that had fallen from her bag. He came up with a dollar or two in small change.

"You lost it!" Frankie yelled. "You lost it all! Talk about tough luck—"

Then he looked at her.

She was sitting on the alley pavement where she'd landed, sitting there with her back up against the wall. When Frankie had given her that shove, she'd banged her head, banged it hard, too, because there was blood running down the side of her face.

Frankie bent over and started to feel her forehead. But

her head fell forward at his touch and Frankie could see right away that she was dead.

Frankie got out of the alley fast. He wanted to run, but there was no place to go. When they found the blonde, he knew that they'd trace her back to the hotel, identify her, and tie him in, sooner or later. And with the tough luck he was suddenly having, it might as well be sooner.

In Frankie's hand was the mound of loose change. Just enough to buy a couple of drinks, maybe. So he walked down the block, went into the tavern, and slid onto his regular stool.

The old Professor guy was there, and Frankie wanted to tell him the story. He wanted to tell him because maybe the Professor could settle something for him that was very important. Had there really been a dame in red, or had Frankie imagined the whole deal?

So Frankie started talking to the Professor real fast, spilling it all out. The Professor was pretty loaded, just like Frankie had been the night before, but he seemed to get the drift.

"Hallucination," he said. "It's all in your mind. Reality in such cases becomes purely subjective. But is there an objective world? That, my harried friend, is the question."

And then he set his glass down on the bar and stared at the door to the back room.

"Wait a minute," he said. "Who's she beckoning to?"

"I don't see anybody," Frankie told him.

"Then she must be looking for me," the Professor said. He climbed down off the stool and staggered his way to the door. For a minute Frankie saw him standing there, moving his lips and gesturing, as if he were talking to someone. Then he nodded his head and held the door open for someone to go ahead of him into the back room and to its games of chance.

Frankie still couldn't see anyone, but then he remembered what the Professor had said about Fortune being a fickle goddess and all that. So maybe she had a new friend now, who maybe would treat her better. On the other hand, the Professor could have caught this hallucination business from him like you catch measles or a cold in the chest. But

maybe they were both crazy. Maybe the whole thing was just in their imaginations.

Maybe he'd even imagined murdering the blonde. By this time, Frankie didn't know just what to believe. Until all at once he could hear the sirens outside, and he knew that at least a part of it hadn't been his imagination.

The sirens got louder, and Frankie picked up his glass.

"Here's luck," said Frankie.

And then the cops walked in.

SWEET SPIRIT

By Donald Honig

Fitzhugh often saw them canoeing in this lovely, lonely part of the lake. The little girl would be sitting daintily in the prow, shading herself with a tiny white parasol if the sun was hot; and her stepfather would be paddling from the stern.

Fitzhugh's cabin was concealed by the lakeside shrubbery and by the close, darkly boughed spruce and cedar, and the old man could sit there unseen. He liked when they came. It was seldom that anyone came down this far and it could become very lonely. He would sit on the bench in front of his cabin and watch them, charmed by the slim, fine grace of the canoe in the blue water, by the soft stroke of the paddle. The many years of practicing his rather dubious profession—from which he was now temporarily retired (as he liked to put it—on the lam actually)—had instilled in him an appreciation of things delicately beautiful.

It was all very pleasant looking across the lake at the treetop horizon on the other side, but here was where their argument would always begin. The little girl would want to go farther, through the narrow channel formed by the protruding shoreline through which Big Doe Lake flowed into Big Doe River, but her stepfather would shout irascibly that he had paddled far enough and she would tell him, in a very refined young voice, not to shout, which only angered him more and he would begin hurling curses at her, making the canoe rock with his vehemence.

It was so very still here that their every word rang clearly and Fitzhugh, sitting in the cool forest shade, heard it all. The argument always came and always shattered the idyllic tenderness of the scene and caused the silent, unseen

old man in the forest much grief, for he was a gentle man despite the fact that his cheerful, ruddy face stared from the walls of almost every post office in the land.

This one sunny afternoon he heard them even before they appeared around the cove. He heard the little girl's voice crying, "You said you would! You promised!" and the man's harsh voice, in anger, telling her to be still.

The canoe came around the cove, carving softly at the waveless waters. The man had ceased to paddle and was shouting obscenely at the little girl, the canoe drifting idly. The little girl, with a sweet voice gone asunder with shrillness, was reminding him of some promise.

Fitzhugh watched through the trees. The man had brought the paddle into the canoe and was now moving menacingly toward the girl, sliding forward in a sitting position, holding to the gunwales.

The old man in the forest frowned, leaning forward.

The man reached the little girl in the prow and there was a tense, uneven little struggle. Her screams came faintly across the water, fading in the forest. The canoe rocked on the water. The man had her partially over the side and with a sudden twisting movement slipped her into the water. He then grabbed the paddle, reversed the canoe's direction and began paddling furiously, throwing back swift plumes of water.

Fitzhugh sat in stricken disbelief for a moment, his eyebrows fixed in a startled arch. The lake waters had closed over the place through which the little girl had been sent. The fleeing water circles widened into nothingness, coming vaguely toward the shore. The canoe was disappearing around the cove.

"I can't believe it," Fitzhugh uttered.

And then there was a little splash from the lake and a tiny blonde head popped from the water like some ragged flower, shaking itself. The little girl was swimming toward the shore.

Fitzhugh exclaimed a laugh and jumped up and went rushing through the trees toward the lake in his old man's bumpy gait.

"Here, child! Here!" he called as he ran.

He burst through the lakeside shrubbery and arrived at the small pebbly beach, swinging his arm, calling to her.

She saw him and began swimming toward where he was, her small arms chopping at the water.

"Here you come!" Fitzhugh called encouragingly as she neared.

She reached the shallow water and rose, dripping. Her small white dress was ruined, her blonde locks hanging in scraggly strings. She came wading in toward him, her face in a dazed, frightened expression.

Fitzhugh opened his arms to the sopping little waif and her eyes rolled shut and she would have collapsed back into the slight, purring wavelets had he not scooped her up.

Before she could speak, exhaustion and the comfort of his arms lulled her into sleep.

He carried her through the brush, up the slight incline and through the trees to his cabin, all the while admiring the beautiful child-face, so naïve in its repose.

"What a beastly thing to do to a child," he murmured. "And such a child."

He carried her into his cabin and gently lowered her onto the bed. He drew back for a moment and gazed upon her. She was no more than ten, he supposed. Her face was gone in sleep, with a child's deep, serene trust in the dark of sleep. She had about her a warm, wise charm; there was something about the small red mouth that suggested much thoughtful puckering.

"What a fine little lady," he mused.

Without disturbing her, he took her out of her wet clothes and put one of his long flannel shirts on her and drew back the covers and slipped her under, redrawing them to her chin and tucking her in. Then he boiled some milk, admonishing himself for checking it with his finger, and brought it to her. He hesitated for a moment and then gently woke her. Her eyes opened wide and blue, the fright still apparent in them. Fitzhugh chuckled reassuringly.

"There you are," he said.

She seemed afraid to move.

"Here," he said. "Have this."

She watched his face, the fright beginning to melt in her blue eyes, changing to uncertainty.

"It's all right," he said in a low, gentle voice.

"Who are you?"

"I'm your friend. Now drink this down."

Something about him, something in his aged, ruddy face and small, lively blue eyes, reassured her. One small white hand appeared from beneath the cover. She sat up, taking the milk, and dutifully drank it, her blue eyes fixed upon him over the rim of the glass.

"That's the girl," he said, taking the glass from her when she had finished.

She slid back down beneath the covers, staring at him with a doe's soft innocent eyes.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said in a small, timid voice.

"Did you swallow much water?"

"I don't think so."

"Who was that man?"

"Mr. Grove, my stepfather. He's a horrid person."

"Yes, so my neighbors say. I wonder what artful tale he's going to tell your mother."

"Do you know my mother?"

"No, not personally. But the stories of the wealthy fly from the tips of every tongue. I know that you're Shirley, home for your summer vacation. I know that your stepfather takes you canoeing every clear day and that either his endurance or his patience begins to ebb at about this point."

"I beg him to take me down the river; they say it's so beautiful," the little girl said. "But he never does. He's spiteful."

"He does seem a most disagreeable person."

"He slaps me when my mother isn't there."

"Do you tell her?"

"Yes, but she only says that I must have provoked him. She thinks he's such a wonderful person. She sends me away to school so I won't conflict with him."

Fitzhugh smiled a private little smile at the little girl's serious and precocious sophistication.

"Tell me," he said. "What happened out there?"

"He became angry when I insisted upon seeing the river and he said that he would show it to me first hand."

"And so he did. I thought you were surely at the bottom of the lake."

"He didn't know," Shirley said with a proud, childish satisfaction, "that I learned to swim at school. I was saving it for them as a surprise."

"It will be quite a surprise I imagine," Fitzhugh said. "But underwater. . . ."

"That was a completely new experience."

"You'd never swam underwater?"

"Not until today."

"Remarkable!"

"He thinks he's drowned me."

"Such optimism."

They both laughed, the little girl giggling beneath the cover. Then she stopped and looked at him in a quiet, curious way.

"Who are you?" she asked ingenuously.

"Albert Fitzhugh."

"Do you live here?"

"Yes."

"Have you always lived here?"

"For the last few years."

"I've never seen you before."

"Yes, you have—from the window of your big, rushing car."

"Oh, I hate that car."

He chuckled.

"Do you live by yourself?" she asked.

"All by myself."

"Why?"

"Old people often live by themselves."

"How old are you?"

"Sixty-seven."

She nodded gravely.

"Do you enjoy living here?" she asked.

"I try to make a home of it."

"Do you have no one, in the whole world?"

"Not a soul."

"How sinful. Are you lonely?"

"Sometimes. But I daresay that everyone is at one time or another. Even you in your big house."

"Oh, that house! I hate it, Mr. Fitzhugh. So many, many empty rooms."

Fitzhugh's cabin was a place of certain rustic charms. There was a rugged homeliness to it and, like its placid old occupant, it had curious, humble traits. The furniture, rough and sturdy-seeming, appeared to have been culled from various places. The plank floor was clean swept. The pine walls were unpainted and bare except for the calendar of a local merchant. A broom stood against the brick fireplace.

Fitzhugh was staring at her thoughtfully.

"You don't like your big house, eh?" he said.

"I hate it."

"But you're going to have to go back now."

The little girl became sullenly quiet, holding her little finger to her lips. After awhile she said, "Mr. Fitzhugh, I don't want to go back there. I'm afraid."

"Of Mr. Grove? Well, don't you worry about him. What I saw today will settle his account for a long time. When the police hear . . ." He stopped, his mind catching on the words. The police, he repeated to himself thoughtfully. No, that wouldn't do. Not at all.

"I hate that house, Mr. Fitzhugh," Shirley said. "I hate it!"

"But it's your home, Shirley."

"It's not my home," she said tearfully. "I have no home."

"But your mother . . ."

"My mother won't miss me in the least."

"Shirley," Fitzhugh said reproachfully. "How can you say something like that?"

"Because I know my mother. She'll take a sedative tonight and tomorrow she'll arrange it in her mind that I'm off at school. She's very good at doing those things. She did it when my daddy died."

"Oh?"

"Yes."

"And don't you feel the least bit sorry for her?"

"No. Soon she'll be making a game of it, trying to reach my spirit in the other world."

"What do you mean?"

"She did the same thing when my daddy died. My mother is a very superstitious person—stupidstitious, I used to call her. She let some terrible dreamy people come to the house and they tried to contact my father in the other world."

"How interesting," Fitzhugh said thoughtfully, arching his eyebrows. "Did it work?"

"Oh, Mr. Fitzhugh, you don't believe in that, do you?"

"A man my age cannot be too dubious about anything."

"Well, it never worked."

"And you anticipate she'll be trying the same thing with your little water-logged spirit?"

"Eventually."

Fitzhugh withdrew his thoughts, deeply, his fingers drumming on his knee. He had heard of that spiritualism bit being tried once, a long time ago. Who had it been? Oh yes, Mike the Rat, in Boston. They had tried to conjure the spirit of some wealthy grandfather or someone like that and had almost gotten away with it, until something had gone wrong. Something always went wrong in those schemes because it was of course impossible to bring someone back from the . . .

He looked at the little girl, thought of the huge Grove mansion on the lake, all the money . . .

"You don't want to go home?" he asked.

"No," she said, pouting.

"But what will you do?"

"I don't know. I'll—I'll live in the woods."

"That's not very pleasant."

Her face brightened.

"Mr. Fitzhugh!" she exclaimed. "Why can't I stay here with you?"

"Stay here?"

"Yes. You said you had no one in the whole world."

"But what will you do here?"

"I'll be your maid. I'll cook for you and mend and sweep—"

"But you can't stay here forever, Shirley," he said.

"For just a little while, please, nice Mr. Fitzhugh," she said in soft, sweet entreaty.

"And then?"

"And then I shall go home and put Mr. Grove into jail."

"You have to promise to go home in a little while."

"Of course."

"You've nothing to wear, you know."

"I shall fashion a dress from your woolly old shirt."

He laughed. "What a trick to play!" he said genially.

She laughed with him, sitting up in the bed and hugging her knees.

"Mr. Fitzhugh," she said endearingly. "I love you."

He smiled and his smile lingered as he walked to the doorway, stood there gazing through the tree-filtered sunlight. What a gimmick, he thought, almost with disbelief. Lord, it was foolproof.

Every morning, after the light had reached high across the dome of the sky, Fitzhugh left his cabin. He walked through the forest in mellowed serenity, charmed rather than intrigued by the manifold mysteries and dramas around him. He respected the ways of the forest, never touching a wildflower or disturbing the leaves of the swooping boughs.

It was a short walk through the forest to the road. He walked down the shady stretch of black road every morning to purchase provisions at Mrs. Jennifer's small general store. The forest strength waned here. It had been beaten back and in many places axed, and then it came to a complete halt and a few large, neat houses with porches and proud green lawns appeared. Mrs. Jennifer's little shack of a store stood right on the road, forward of her house.

Fitzhugh, coming along in his slightly hitched gait, whistling, with his rounded shoulders and pink, almost hairless head, was a familiar sight on the road at that hour. Everyone waved to him; he, back to them. Farther up the road, about a mile, was Shirley's home, the Grove mansion, a stately, formidable place on the lake. He had walked up

that far a few times to admire it, having always been fascinated by wealth, its appearances.

Today, as was his custom, he went into Mrs. Jennifer's little store. Mrs. Jennifer, a gray, wiry, birdlike woman, was sitting behind the counter with a newspaper spread in her lap. She raised a pair of the saddest eyes he had ever seen.

"Did you know her, Mr. Fitzhugh?" she asked mournfully.

"Did I know whom, Mrs. Jennifer?"

"Little Shirley Grove."

He almost smiled, but caught himself.

"Why, I think I have seen her a few times. Why do you ask?"

Mrs. Jennifer stared at him with wide, lachrymose eyes.

"She's gone," she said.

"Gone?"

She nodded dumbly.

"What happened?" Fitzhugh asked, faking quiet concern.

"She fell into the lake yesterday and drowned."

"How awful."

Mrs. Jennifer handed him the paper. He saw a headline telling of tragedy at Big Doe Lake. He shook his head dolefully, making sad sounds with his tongue.

"Everyone feels so terrible," Mrs. Jennifer said.

"Naturally," Fitzhugh said.

"So terrible."

"Such a pity."

"She was such a lively little thing," Mrs. Jennifer went on sadly. "Always so full of sparkle. I can't believe that she's gone."

"It does seem rather unbelievable."

"She was lost near your part of the lake."

"Really?"

"It's the saddest thing."

"Mr. Grove was canoeing with her, it says," Fitzhugh said, squinting at the paper.

"They say the poor man can't talk for grief," Mrs. Jennifer said.

"The paper says he is a nonswimmer."

"That's the tragedy," Mrs. Jennifer said.

"How lamentable."

"I said it was the Lord's will," Mrs. Jennifer said. "It was just that little girl's time. We have nothing to say about those things."

"How true, Mrs. Jennifer."

"We can comfort ourselves in that."

"Amen," Fitzhugh said.

Along with his provisions Fitzhugh bought a paper and went strolling back down the road, careful not to begin his whistling until he was well away from the little store. He went through the forest and back to the cabin.

Shirley was laughing when he returned.

"A canoe went by," she said, "and I thought what a trick it would be if I swam out to them and just suddenly popped my head through the water."

"You're quite a little pixie, aren't you? Just remember, Shirley, if anyone sees you, back you go."

"I know that, Mr. Fitzhugh. But I would love to haunt the lake."

"See what I have here," he said, spreading the paper upon the table.

With ingenuous excitement, she read the story, thrilled at seeing her picture in the paper. The paper carried Harry Grove's version of the tragedy. He told how the little girl had been reaching over the side to pick a water lily, despite his having warned her not to, and had fallen right over the side and into the water.

"How can they believe such an awful lie?" Shirley asked.

"It says that Mr. Grove is grief-stricken at his being a nonswimmer," Fitzhugh read. "They say he wept when he said it."

"He can be a very emotional person," Shirley said seriously.

Harry Grove had gone on to tell how he saw the little girl's drowned body, through the clear water, moving with the undertides toward the river.

"What a frightful imagination!" she said.

That afternoon they watched the police drag the lake.

Shirley, watching from behind the lakeside bushes, was very proud.

In place of shoes, Fitzhugh made her wear two pairs of his heavy woolen socks to protect her feet from the forest floor. Since it was rare that anyone came to his cabin, he felt it was safe for her to venture. Shirley particularly enjoyed the lakeside. She would watch her aged host who, despite his advanced years was still a strong swimmer, swim from one side of the lake to the other and then back —which usually left him puffing for the rest of the morning.

A few days after he had taken Shirley out of the lake, they saw one of her shoes floating among the lily pads. Delighted, Shirley waded out and retrieved it and they brought it back to the cabin. That night, after she had gone to sleep, Fitzhugh sat up quite late, puffing on his pipe, holding the shoe in his hand, turning it over and over, staring at it profoundly. "Little wet shoe," he said softly. "How much are you going to be worth? Shall we say—ten thousand?"

He had thus far parried all of the little girl's attempts to question him about his past. But the following morning, he began to tell her some of his experiences, his brushes with the law. She listened with a child's intent, serious manner, hearing new things and pondering them with gravity, enthralled.

"I would never have suspected you of being a dishonest person, Mr. Fitzhugh," she said.

"It wasn't dishonesty, Shirley," he said. "I was merely being an opportunist."

"But wasn't that dishonest, what you did—selling things that had no value?"

"No. It was opportunism."

"And switching diamonds on that nice little old lady."

"A moment of weakness," he said.

"But nevertheless," she said, laughing at him, "I still love you, and I wish I could be dishonest too. Were you ever sent to jail, Mr. Fitzhugh?"

"Now and then, yes."

She laughed, looking up at him from where she was sprawled on the floor.

"You have such innocence about you," she said.

"A basic requirement," he said, smiling mischievously around the stem of his pipe.

"What did you call your profession?"

"It was called many things by many people."

"Were you a swindler?"

"Shirley, if you were aware of the skill and imagination and sophistication that goes into the making of my profession, you would never use so crude a term."

"I'm sorry," she said.

He watched her with warm amusement.

"It sounds so exciting," she said.

"What does?"

"Being dishonest."

"Perhaps some day we'll do a job together," he said.

"Would you trust me, Mr. Fitzhugh?"

"Absolutely," he said.

He thought about it that night. It was practically infallible. He had Harry Grove's sworn word that the little girl was dead. Harry Grove had claimed to have seen the body under the water. The mother (wealthy) believed in things coming back from the other world. These kind of people were known to pay great sums of money to fetch back the dead. Mike the Rat had told him a lot of things about conducting a seance. The important thing to remember, Mike had told him, was to be sure to act "creepy" enough.

The following morning, he announced that he was going to the Grove mansion.

"Whatever for, Mr. Fitzhugh?" the little girl asked.

"I want to test the temperature there."

"You won't give me away, will you?"

"No. But we do have to prepare your mother for your return. Now don't look so crestfallen; we may have some fun doing it."

Taking the little shoe that they had retrieved from the lake, Fitzhugh left. He went serenely through the forest, whistling softly. He turned out onto the road and walked the quiet, pleasant mile or so to the Grove mansion.

It was with the utmost veneration that he approached

the Grove mansion. He had a highly educated appreciation for such places. He went up the long gravel roadway that curved in from the road, staring at the house with thoughtful, observant eyes. The house stood on the lakeside, a sprawling, two-storied affair, covered with ivy, with two sun porches, a columned portico. He walked up the roadway, around a broad, immaculate lawn that was set with a small white fountain. He tapped gently at the front door and in a moment it was drawn back by a maid. He asked for Mrs. Grove, in a soft, deferential tone, saying that it was of utmost importance. The maid cast a disapproving eye on him, and half-closed the door before she went back into the house.

A woman came. She was blonde, in her thirties, dressed severely in black. Her eyes were sad, staring reproachfully, bruised from crying.

"Yes?" she said.

"Pardon me, Mrs. Grove," he said, lifting his hand in a little half salute. "My name is Albert Fitzhugh. I've a cabin in the forest near the lake. Perhaps it has something to do with living so close to nature, but I have found myself being susceptible to the strangest, most inexplicable, phenomena —particularly from the other world."

Mrs. Grove stared at him, a slight yearning and anxiety coming into her eyes.

"Are you a medium, Mr. Fitzhugh?" she asked.

"If at all, it is by birth and not choice."

"I believe in mediums," she said, her voice dropping. "I trust and believe in the unknown, despite certain unfortunate experiences, some of which were quite costly."

"I realize there are many unscrupulous people. But I wouldn't have come here unless I thought I could help you."

"Help me?"

"Last night I thought I heard the little girl's voice in the trees. I couldn't be sure because the wind often sounds like that. But then this morning I found this on my table . . ." and he produced the shoe.

Mrs. Grove glared at it, catching her breath.

"It's Shirley's!" she exclaimed. She took the shoe from

him and held it tenderly, as though there were a warm breathing in it.

"A sign," he said.

"Mr. Fitzhugh," she whispered, holding the shoe tightly, "did you try to make contact?"

"No," he said. "I thought I should speak to you first."

"About what?"

"Attempting to make contact is a great strain. Perhaps if there were . . ."

"Some financial arrangement?"

"Only if I succeed, Mrs. Grove," he said, lifting a finger.

"If you succeed, Mr. Fitzhugh, no reward will be too great."

Arrangements were made for a seance to be held the following evening. Fitzhugh at first planned to draw it out for a week or so, but decided that, with Harry Grove lurking about, it would be best to get it over with as fast as possible. His only stipulation was that the house be completely empty except for himself and Mrs. Grove (who would have $5,000 in cash for him as well as a check for the same amount, to be given to him the moment he produced the little girl).

Returning to the cabin he told Shirley that she was going to be a partner in an enterprise with him. The little girl was very excited.

"We're going to play a game with your mother," he said. "If you do exactly as I tell you, we can all have a lot of fun."

He explained to her what she was to do. He improvised a coming-back gown for her out of a bedsheet which fell from her shoulders to her toes and which endowed her with a rather saintly aspect.

"Tomorrow night, Shirley," he said, "you're going to come back from the dead."

The little girl was thrilled.

"Do you think she'll really believe it?" she asked.

"Why not? There you'll be," he said, shrugging logically.

"Do you think my stepfather will attempt to interfere?"

"He really has no reason to. He thinks you're dead,

remember. In any event, I've seen to it that he'll not be present during the crisis."

"I shall always be afraid of him."

"Perhaps we'll think of something for him, too."

"Mr. Fitzhugh."

"Yes?"

"You must think my mother awfully infantile."

"Quite the contrary. I think she's a very intelligent woman."

The little girl began to dance around the cabin, clapping her hands.

"Tomorrow I come back from the dead!" she sang.

"And you'll be establishing quite a precedent," Fitzhugh said, smiling at her.

It was a clear, starry night. The crescent moon lay amid a galaxy of bright stars which bristled upon the treetops. Fitzhugh led the little girl along the lakeside, preferring to go that way instead of along the road. She was in her white gown, her yellow hair neatly combed. Fitzhugh carried the lone prop, a long, thin white candle.

"Now remember, Shirley," Fitzhugh said as they walked along the murmurous lake, "this is no piddling matter. The slightest tinkle of laughter or wisp of smile can lose the whole game. So be a sweet, silent little ghost, won't you?"

"Yes, Mr. Fitzhugh," she said.

They stole up to the house. Following the plan, Shirley let herself in through a side door and disappeared upstairs to await Fitzhugh's signal, which was three raps on the table, at which time she would light the candle and come down the stairs with it.

Now that the little girl was standing in the wings of the living world, Fitzhugh rang the bell. He was admitted by Mrs. Grove, who had assumed a rapt, mysterious air, perfect for the occasion.

"Are we alone?" Fitzhugh asked.

"Yes," Mrs. Grove breathed.

They went into the living room. They took places at opposite ends of a long, smooth mahogany table. Fitzhugh noticed the box of money at Mrs. Grove's elbow. A lamp

was extinguished and a deep, tense darkness hushed the room.

Fitzhugh began his ritual, which was spontaneous for the most part.

Everything was attuned for the great moment—the dark, the quiet, the moon glinting on the edge of the table, the wind soughing through the trees. With an acute sense of the dramatic, Fitzhugh brought the occult proceeding toward its climax. He had Mrs. Grove in a perfect, dreamy state. He lifted his fist and gave the table three solid raps and the whole nefarious scheme began to flow forward. He lifted a furtive eye toward the staircase. There was a moment of tense silence and then he saw the ghostly, flickering light of the descending candle. It cast an eerie, moving yellowness along the wall. Fitzhugh watched it.

"Turn around, Mrs. Grove," he whispered.

Breathlessly, the woman moved in her chair.

And there was Shirley, coming slowly, solemnly, pure and angelic in her white gown, holding the tall, flame-topped white candle in steady hands, the flame lighting her fresh, dreamy face.

Mrs. Grove began to utter a cry and then stifled it. The child came slowly down the stairs, one soft, sure step at a time. Mrs. Grove rose, herself trancelike and serene, watching the little girl. Fitzhugh got up, too, moving toward the money. He scooped it up and was out the door just as Mrs. Grove was tearfully embracing her little girl at the foot of the stairs.

He went down the gravel roadway and hurried down the road back to his shack, the money under his arm. Coming through the forest, he saw something moving about in the moonlight near his cabin. He stopped, peering. There was someone there. He put the box of money into the leaves and then went on, casually.

He recognized Harry Grove, a thin, nervous man with a small mustache. Harry Grove came toward him in the moonlight.

"Are you Fitzhugh?" he asked in a curt, superior way.

"Yes," Fitzhugh said.

"Well, my name is Grove. I'm Mrs. Grove's husband."

"How do you do."

"Never mind that. I don't know what your gimmick is, pop, but I do know that she gave you ten thousand dollars tonight, a considerable amount of it in cash."

Fitzhugh stared at him coolly, nodding.

"She gave it to me this afternoon, not this evening," he said.

"All right," Harry Grove said with some annoyance. "I don't care when, all I know is that you have it. Now I don't know what you've done up there, but you certainly aren't going to get away with ten thousand dollars. My wife is an irrational woman. You can go to jail for taking advantage of her, especially in her present state."

Fitzhugh nodded.

"I suppose you're right," he said.

"Now where is it?"

"We'll go fifty-fifty," Fitzhugh said.

"All right." Harry Grove smiled wryly. "I'll take the cash and you can have the check."

"Fine," Fitzhugh said. "Can you row a canoe?"

"A canoe?"

"The money is in the lake."

"In the lake?"

"In a shallow place of course. I dropped it there this afternoon, for the very reasons you just mentioned."

"Do you know the place?"

"Of course," Fitzhugh said.

They got into an old canoe that had been abandoned some years before near Fitzhugh's cabin and rowed out toward the middle of the lake.

The old gentleman, looking very dapper and respectable, sat on the outspeeding train, a pleasant half smile on his lips. He watched the scenery speed by, thinking: "Well, we solved one thing anyway. That old canoe did have a rotted bottom, which I always suspected. And another thing, too. Harry Grove did tell at least one truth in the whole business. He really didn't know how to swim."

THE ONLY BAD POLICEMAN

By Paul Eiden

Fresh from the witless Western movie, the two small, blond boys were happy in thoughtless enjoyment of the summer night, and of being up after their bedtime, walking with their hands held in their father's big, dry palms.

A big patrolman emerged from the corner bar and grill as they crossed the first street. Rumpled and slack-bellied, he moved with a stiff-backed, heels-down-first, controlled strut that was a surer giveaway than if he had staggered.

Nunnamaker watched him angle to the curb and stand there gazing truculently at the people strolling along on the other side of the street, his big hands heavy at his sides. Unbidden, the phrase came to Nunnamaker's mind, 'fighting drunk.' The big cop made him uneasy. There was a charge of smoldering violence about him, as palpable as the smell of whiskey.

When they were directly opposite him, the bigger boy said aloud and clearly, "Cops stink!"

From the corner of his eye, Nunnamaker saw the policeman look up, as though startled, unsure of what he had heard. Nunnamaker ignored him, holding his breath. When they were safely beyond him, Nunnamaker demanded of his son, unbelievingly, "What?" Because he was angry, the word sounded more like *'Was?'* "What did you say about the policeman?"

The boy's name was Johnny. He was eight and a half. "Cops stink," he repeated.

Nunnamaker shook Johnny's arm sternly. "Don't ever let me hear you say that again," he warned, his ingrained German docility toward the law outraged. He could still feel the policeman's eyes on his back. "Policemen are good.

Are necessary. They must have respect from people, because they are authority."

Johnny stared up at Nunnamaker dumbly, the soft child mouth solemn. "Remember that," Nunnamaker said, and took his hand again.

There was a brief scuffle to see who would hold the door open as they entered the drugstore on the next corner. Freddy, the younger boy, lost, as he generally did. Nunnamaker hoisted him onto a stool. After a considerable conference, he was able to place their order. They had both decided on banana splits.

He left them alone and wandered down to a display of tools at the far end of the store. Johnny had long been able to handle an ice-cream spoon competently. Freddy became furious if he was helped in front of his brother.

Johnny and Freddy, Nunnamaker thought, picking up a packet of graduated high-speed-drill bits. In the old country, they would be called Hans and Fritz. But Lisa had stopped that. Here those were the names of two unspeakable boys in a comic strip.

Nunnamaker ran his fingertip over the points of the bits, held them up to the light, put them disdainfully aside. He moved his eyes over the rest of the tools, touching nothing more.

Nunnamaker had used tools all his life. He loved them. At thirty-five, he was an almost fantastically skilled model maker, whose very presence in this drugstore, and whose family's new American citizenship were in a very real sense rewards of his skill. He had been brought to the United States at the suggestion of several transplanted German scientists who themselves had been eagerly gathered into the American defense establishment at the end of the war. He spent his days now at an innocuous-appearing, highly secret plant on Long Island.

Nunnamaker brushed the thing Johnny had said about policemen from his mind. He would have them out of this crowded, ugly neighborhood by the end of the month. In the new house in Levittown they would soon forget the things they were learning from the too-wise, frightening slum children around them. Nunnamaker could not believe

any of his sons' present playmates would elude the electric chair.

He had no worries about his sons' adaptability. Already their table chatter was full of names like Mantle and Floyd Patterson. Lisa, too, was already more American than German. Nunnamaker blessed his bright, gay wife who laughed at her own mistakes with her new friends and seldom made them twice. It was he, the head of the family, who was stiff and slow in this new country.

But, Nunnamaker thought, not all of the old things were bad. What would his sons become, if he didn't teach them to respect authority?

A brief squeal of tires and the anguished rending of metal jerked him out of his reverie. At the front of the store, heads turned for a view of the street outside the door. Feeling no alarm, Nunnamaker went to gather up his sons. He caught Freddy sliding off the stool. "Where's Johnny?" he asked.

The boy's bright blue eyes were round with excitement. "Outside! Let's go see the crash!"

Nunnamaker held him firmly, and, hiding his grin, dropped silver on the counter.

Two cars had slammed into each other on the diagonally opposite corner, crumpling their fenders like tinfoil. Nunnamaker saw the two rueful drivers fishing out their licenses, Johnny's small figure darting through the casually gathering bypassers. Nunnamaker did not cut across the empty intersection. He caught Freddy's hand in his and methodically crossed first one street and then another.

"Git out of here!" a big voice up ahead growled irritably, and Nunnamaker heard a few snickers in the crowd. Hurrying now, he saw Johnny on the bumper of one car, leaning far over its hood to inspect the fractured headlights. The policeman they had passed earlier wrapped a big hand around the tiny stem of Johnny's neck. He also caught the boy by his belt buckle and snatched him roughly off the car.

Nunnamaker broke through the ring of onlookers, anger flooding him. Johnny's face was white, his eyes round and frightened.

"Keep your hands from off the boy!" Nunnamaker ordered.

Johnny rushed to his father, clutching for his hand.

The big cop turned; he was a head taller than Nunnamaker. Years ago, his face had hardened into a glowering mold. "You ought to have your kids home in bed," he said in arrogant dismissal.

Nunnamaker sensed a murmur of assent run through the crowd. *But it's hardly nine o'clock,* he thought.

"You should keep your hands from off other people's children," Nunnamaker said hotly, taking his sons' hands, unwilling to move off too readily. He hoped the boys wouldn't start crying.

The policeman's hands held his complaint book and a long yellow pencil. His eyes were tiny, porcine, spiteful. "Don't tell me what to do, refugee," he said, and Nunnamaker heard giggles in the crowd. The cop also heard the laughter and played up to it. He bent forward and tipped Freddy's nose with the rubber end of the pencil. "What's a boy this age doing out at this hour?"

"Shtop that!" Nunnamaker said furiously. The thick accent always fell on his tongue in moments of stress. He dropped his sons' hands, felt them clutch at his pants legs. "Dese are *my* shildren!"

He knew more people were stopping to watch, caught by the sight of a slim, angry man arguing with a towering cop.

A nasty grin twisted the cop's mouth. He put a hand on Nunnamaker's chest, shoving slightly, trying for a tone of disgust. "Get out of here! Go home!" His breath was rich with whiskey.

Nunnamaker's hand snapped up involuntarily against the inside of the cop's wrist, flicking the hand away from his chest. "You are drunk!" he said, outraged. "You are drunk!"

The cop glared murderously at him. He shoved his complaint book in a hip pocket, then caught Nunnamaker's sport shirt with both hands. "Are you going to get out of here, you refugee punk, or am I going to run you in?"

Nunnamaker looked small in the man's grasp, but he

was a trim, medium-sized man who kept his body hard at the *Turnvereind.* His were the coordination and lightning reflexes of a lifetime gymnast.

Nunnamaker stared up into the slitted eyes, distantly hearing his sons begin to whimper, trying to stop himself from what he was going to do next. His orderly nature told him that he was behaving idiotically, but he was helpless in his anger. He clasped his hands together between his legs and snapped his arms upward. His forearms struck the policeman's like a flying wedge and the hold on his shirt was broken.

The cop was also thrown a step back. His huge chest swelled, and he fumbled for the nightstick hanging from his shield by its rawhide loop. "By God, you're a prisoner!"

Nunnamaker felt anger run through the crowd, never doubting it was aimed at him. Who would take care of Johnny and Freddy if he was dragged off to jail? "No!" he wanted to yell. "Please! I'm sorry!" It was so unfair.

But a big hand was clutching for him again. Nunnamaker saw the night stick rise ponderously, go far back behind the uniformed shoulder. It was a nightmare. This madman was going to club him, right here, with his sons looking on.

Nunnamaker slid forward, smoothly, quickly, drove his fist straight into the big, uncovered blue expanse of the policeman's waist. An animal grunt of pain and the policeman fell heavily to the pavement. The night stick clattered, loud and ominous, on the macadam.

Nunnamaker grasped the tip of the stick, pulled the leather thong over the policeman's knuckles and the stick out of his hand. "Now you stop it, you fool," he said, and the night stick was held as though to back up his command.

The policeman rolled, got one knee under him. His eyes were afire. He went for the gun in his holster.

God in heaven, Nunnamaker thought, *he's going to shoot me!*

He drove his fist at the rising face. And he did it, not so much to protect himself, but his family—Freddy, Johnny, Lisa.

In spite of the blow, the cop was on his feet, coming at him, as relentlessly as a tank.

Nunnamaker slapped viciously with his open left hand. He drove the big cop against a parked automobile, flailing him with strong, big-knuckled fists. But still the man's strong arms managed to catch him. The two men strained, pitting strength against strength and then their feet tangled and they crashed heavily to the ground. The cop's gun was out of its holster now. *He'll kill me,* Nunnamaker sobbed, stumbling erect, bringing his heel down on the man's wrist, catching the gun barrel and twisting it free of the grasp holding it.

His madness sickened Nunnamaker. He had been forced into this, step by step. But what now? He couldn't shoot this man. He couldn't hand back the gun; if he did, he would be shot himself. The big cop rolled to get his hands under him. Blood trickled from his nose. He was cursing steadily, in a murderous rage.

Reflexively, Nunnamaker swung the gun and it landed at the base of the policeman's skull. The big man went down, but he was not unconscious. He rolled groggily onto his back, began trying to regain his feet.

Nunnamaker let the pistol fall limply to his side, aghast at what he had done. He could not possibly hit him again. Prison stretched ahead of him now, and the ruination of his family. He looked blankly about him, searching—suddenly, vaguely—for another policeman, a sober, sane one who would stop this kill-or-be-killed fool.

He saw a mass of faces watching him. It showed excitement, eagerness, but not compassion. He wondered what had become of Johnny and Freddy.

A hand shook his elbow violently. "You better beat it, guy!" Nunnamaker turned, saw a husky youth in loose plaid shirt. Two boys of the same age stood behind him. Their eyes showed concern. One said, "Cut out, man!"

Then someone with a broad, excited grin and a black chauffeur's cap darted up. "Come on!" He held Johnny and Freddy by the hand and before Nunnamaker could answer he turned and fled with them.

Nunnamaker looked down numbly at the pistol in his hand. The big cop was on one knee, eyes glazed, his hand grasping the bumper of a parked car in order to hoist him-

self up. Nunnamaker's stolidly honest mind rejected any thought of running away with the gun. But he could not leave it behind, for this murderous man to pick up and use. His eyes went to the building behind the cop. It was low, one-storied. He brought his arm back, flung the gun onto its roof. Then he dashed after his sons.

The man with the chauffeur's cap was stuffing the boys into the back seat of a taxi. He turned, saw Nunnamaker, and slid hurriedly behind the wheel. Nunnamaker stumbled into the car, and the driver screeched around a corner before he could snap the door shut.

Still breathing hard, Nunnamaker shut his eyes and let his head fall back against the leatherette seat covers. His sons were chattering excitedly. Vaguely, Nunnamaker remembered he had expected them to be frightened. As he panted his address to the man in the front seat, he knew what he was doing was useless.

Visions of the retribution that might be taking shape behind him came irresistibly to his mind. Outraged citizens trailing the cab to his home. Someone in the huge crowd having recognized him was hurrying even now to a phone booth. Pencils must be avidly scribbling down the number of the car in which he had fled.

The cab curbed on Freddy's side. He blocked his brother with his back and worked the door open, needing both small hands to force the stiff handle down. Nunnamaker crawled out after Johnny. He turned to the driver, feeling for his wallet.

The driver had an ugly, but happy face. He waved Nunnamaker away. "This is on me, Mac."

Nunnamaker said, "But I should pay you," as Johnny tore the door out of Freddy's grasp and slammed it violently shut.

The driver put a cigarette in his mouth. "Forget it. That big slob had it coming to him. It done my heart good."

Freddy was at the door handle, struggling to reopen the door so he could slam it. Nunnamaker caught his wrist, pulled him back from the cab. "Well," Nunnamaker said with embarrassment, "thank you."

The driver had his cigarette burning now. He put the cab in gear. "Don't mention it."

Was the whole world insane tonight? "So long," Nunnamaker said. "So long," his sons chorused.

The driver smiled again. "Sure. See you."

Nunnamaker watched the cab's taillights diminish down the street. He saw them pass a green and white police car coming slowly in the opposite direction. Nunnamaker had known all along they would come for him this way, inching down his block, searching for his house number.

Nunnamaker took his sons' hands, aware that both boys were staring adoringly up at him. What kind of a father was he, to have done this thing with his sons looking on? He should have collected the boys and left without a word to the policeman.

"Daddy's braver'n Burt Lancaster," Johnny said, and his brother seconded him with a happy laugh.

An American baseball player, Nunnamaker thought. He crouched until his head was on a level with the heads of his sons. "You must remember that policemen are good," he told them, looking intently into their faces. "They must have respect. That was a bad policeman. The only bad policeman in the world. That's why the other people helped us." *I guess,* he almost added.

Nunnamaker saw they believed him. Behind him, he heard the slam of the cruiser's doors, solid footsteps coming toward him. "Now you go on upstairs. Tell your mother Daddy will be up later." He slapped them tenderly on the buttocks and stood watching as they scrambled up the staircase and through the vestibule door.

Nunnamaker turned to face the policemen. The young one, tall, angry-looking, rested his hand on the butt of his holstered gun. His partner asked heavily, "Your name Carl Nunnamaker?"

"Yes, yes," Nunnamaker said, sighing involuntarily. He tried to summon up some hope to meet these cold, official faces. After all, what could they do to a man for protecting himself and his children against a drunken policeman? A law-abiding, hardworking man with a spotless record?

"You're a prisoner," the older cop said. "You shouldn't have tried to run away."

"I had my boys—" Nunnamaker started to say, and then gave it up. "That policeman was drunk." He looked away from the hard, implacable face of the young cop. "Will I be able to arrange bail tonight?"

"Not unless you're a millionaire," the young cop said. His voice was bitter. "They set high bail on murder, mister, and you killed that police officer."

THE WITNESS WAS A LADY

By Fletcher Flora

"Out of a bottle?"

"Is there another place to get it?"

"I had mine out of a skillet. You go ahead."

I poured a double shot of bourbon and swallowed it fast. Then I went back and threw his hat on the floor and took its place. The double helped me feel as relaxed as he looked.

"Go on," I said. "Convince me."

"Don't rush me. I'm trying to think of the best approach."

"The best is the simplest. You want a favor. Tell me what it is."

"Let me ask you a question first. You seen Nora lately?"

"No. It's been forever. Why?"

"I thought you might have looked her up when Jack Kirby was murdered."

"I didn't."

"That's strange. Old friends and all, I mean. The least an old friend can do when an old friend's boy friend is killed is to offer sympathy and condolences and all that."

"My personal opinion is that congratulations were in order. I didn't think it would be in good taste to offer them."

He looked across at me, shaking his burr head and grinning. The grin got vocal and became a loud laugh.

"You see, Mark? All you've got are a few kinks. A real twenty-four-carat heel like Jack Kirby offends your sensibilities."

"Go to hell."

"Sure, sure. Anything to oblige. What I'm leading up to

is, this favor isn't really for me at all. Oh, incidentally it is, maybe, but mostly it's a favor for Nora."

"You sound like a man about to be devious, Corey."

"Not me, Mark. Whatever I may be that makes me different from you, I'm not devious. I haven't got the brains for it."

"Okay. Tell me the favor for Nora that's one for you incidentally."

"I'll tell you, but let's get the circumstances in focus. Did you read the news stories about Jack Kirby's murder?"

"Once over lightly."

"In that case, you'll remember what the evidence indicated. He had an appointment with someone in his apartment. At least someone came to see him there, and this someone, whoever it was, killed him. Cracked his skull with a heavy cut-glass decanter, to be exact. This was all in the news stories, and it's all true. What wasn't in the stories, because we put the lid on it, is that someone pretty definitely knew who it was in the apartment with Kirby that night. That someone is Nora."

"How do you know?"

"Never mind how. We know."

"That won't do, Corey. You can't expect to clam up on the guy you're asking for a favor."

"All right. I'll tell you this much. The day of Kirby's murder, Nora told a friend that she was going to Kirby's apartment that night, but she couldn't go until late because Kirby was expecting someone earlier that she didn't want to meet. This friend is a woman whose testimony can be relied on. We're convinced of that."

"Didn't Nora mention the name of Kirby's expected guest?"

"No. No name. Just that it was someone she didn't want to meet there."

"Did you ask Nora?"

Corey looked down at his hands in his lap. He folded and unfolded the blunt fingers. On his face for a few seconds there was a sour expression as he recalled an experience that he hadn't liked and couldn't forget.

"We did. We hauled her in and asked her over and over

for a long while. She wouldn't say. She denied ever having told her friend that she knew."

"I wonder why. You'd think she'd want to help."

"Come off it, Mark. You know why as well as I do. Jack Kirby was a guy who associated with dangerous characters. One of these characters killed him, and he wouldn't think twice about killing a material witness. Either to keep her from talking or in revenge if she did. If he couldn't do it personally, he'd have it done for him. Today or tomorrow or next year. Nora's been associating with some dangerous characters herself, including Kirby. She knows how they operate, Mark. She won't talk because she's afraid."

"Well, Nora's not exactly a strong personality. She'll break eventually. Why don't you ask her again?"

"I wish I could."

"Why can't you? Like you said, she's a material witness. You can arrest her and hold her."

"I could if I could get hold of her." He looked down at his hands again, at the flexing fingers. His face was smooth and hard now, the sour expression dissolved. "I should have held her when I had her, but that was my mistake. A man makes lots of mistakes for old time's sake."

"Asking and giving favors, you mean. That sort of thing."

"Maybe. We'll see."

"Speaking of favors, where do I come in? If you think I know where Nora is, you're wrong."

"That's not the problem. I already know where she is."

"In that case, why don't you pick her up?"

"Because she's across the state line. You may know that we don't have any extradition agreement with our neighbor covering material witnesses."

"I didn't know, as a matter of fact. Thanks for telling me. It may come in handy. I don't seem to remember reading any of this about Nora in the papers."

"I told you. It wasn't there. We've kept the lid on it. The point is, we can't keep the lid on any longer. The story's going to break in the evening editions, and that's what worries me."

"I can see why. You won't look so good, letting a material witness slip away from you. Tough. You expect me to bleed, Corey?"

"It's not that. I'll survive a little criticism all right. It's Nora I'm worried about."

"Old time's sake again?"

"Call it what you like, but you can see her position. She's a constant and deadly threat to Jack Kirby's killer, whoever he is, and the moment the story breaks, the killer is going to know it. He'll also know where to find her."

"I see what you mean. The threat works two ways."

"That's it. And that's where you come in."

"Don't tell me. You want me to go and talk to her and convince her that she's got to come back and turn herself in for her own good."

"You're a smart guy, Mark. You always were."

"Sure. With kinks. To tell you the truth, I'm not quite convinced that this mysterious visitor of Kirby's is going to be so desperate as you imagine."

"You think he won't? Why?"

"Well, Nora knows he was supposed to be at Kirby's at a certain time. At the time Kirby was killed. So she knows. That's not absolute proof that he was actually there. Even if he was there, it's not proof that he did the killing. It's a lead, Corey, not a conviction."

"A lead's all we need. The visitor killed Kirby. We're certain of it. Once we know who he was, we'll find more evidence fast enough. We'll know what to look for, and how and where to find it."

"You haven't told me yet where Nora is."

"About a hundred miles from here. The first place I thought to check. The natural place for a woman to run when she's scared and in trouble."

"Home?"

"What used to be. Down on the farm."

"Regression, as the psychs say. You were sharp to think of that right off the bat, Corey. You're quite a psych yourself."

He got up suddenly and walked over to a pair of matched windows overlooking a small court in which,

below, there was some green stuff growing. He stood there looking out for a minute or more, and then he turned and walked back but did not sit down again.

"You and Nora were always close, Mark, back there when we were kids. Closer than ever Nora and I were. I used to hate you for that, but it doesn't matter any longer. It's one of the things I've gotten over. The point is, she'll be in danger. I believe that or I wouldn't be here. She wouldn't listen to me, but she might to you. Will you go talk to her?"

"Why should I?"

"Do you have to have the reasons spelled out?"

"I can't think of any."

"As a favor for me?"

"I don't want to obligate you."

"For Nora, then?"

"Nora wants me to leave her alone. She told me so."

"Not even to save her life?"

"Nora's a big girl now. She associates with dangerous characters and makes up her own mind."

He stood looking down at me, his face as bleak and empty as a department-store floorwalker's. Turning away, he picked his hat off the floor and held it by the brim in his hands.

"I guess those kinks are bigger than I thought," he said.

He went over to the door and let himself out, and I kept on sitting in the chair, thinking about a time that he'd recalled. She used to ride into town to high school on the school bus, Nora did. Corey and I were town boys. We were snobbish with the country kids until we met Nora, who was a country kid, and then weren't snobbish any more. She was slim and lovely and seemed to move with incredible grace in a kind of golden haze. She was so lovely, in fact, that she intimidated me for almost a full year before we finally got together on a picnic one Sunday afternoon. After that, I began to know Nora as she was —as a touchable and lusty little manipulator, almost amoral, who already had, even then, certain carefully conceived and directed ideas about what Nora wanted out of life. I didn't love her any the less, maybe more, but I resigned myself to the obvious truth that I was no more at

most than a kind of privileged expedient.

After high school, Nora and Corey and I drifted at different times across the hundred miles to the city. At first we saw each other now and then, but later hardly at all. Corey became a cop. Thanks to luck and cards and certain contacts, I learned to live well without excessive effort. As for Nora—well, I had just refused to do her a favor at Corey's request, but there had been plenty of others to do her favors, as there always are with girls like her, and some of the favors came to five figures. Jack Kirby had not been the first. Maybe he would be the last.

I stood up and walked over to the windows and looked down into the court, down at the green stuff growing. I wasn't used to the radiance of day, and the light seemed intensely bright, and it hurt my eyes. My head ached, and I wondered if I could stand another double shot, or even a single, but I decided that I couldn't. Turning away from the windows, I walked back across the living room and into the soft and seductive dusk of the bedroom. I lay down on the unmade bed and tried to think with some kind of orderliness, and the thinking must have been therapeutic, for after awhile I lost the headache, or became unaware of it.

Granted, I thought, that Nora knew the identity of Jack Kirby's visitor, who was also Jack Kirby's killer. Corey was convinced that she did, and Corey was a bright guy. Being a bright guy, it was funny how he could go so far wrong from a good start. It was funny, a real scream, but I didn't feel like laughing. Because she'd refused to talk, because she'd run and hid to escape the pressure that would certainly have broken her down, Corey assumed that she was afraid of the consequences of pointing a finger, the vengeance of a killer or a killer's hired hand, but it wasn't true. It couldn't be. She had run from the pressure, true, but she had kept her silence simply because she did not want Jack Kirby's visitor to be known. For old time's sake. It was touching, really, and I appreciated it.

I went over in my mind again with odd detachment, as if I were reviewing an experience of someone else, the way it had happened that I had killed Jack Kirby. I hadn't intended to, although it was a pleasure when I did, and all

I'd actually intended when I went up to his apartment that night was to pay an overdue debt of a couple of grand.

I had lost the two grand to Kirby in a stud game that proved to be the beginning of a streak of bad luck. In the first place, to show how bad my luck was beginning to be, I lost the pot on three of a kind, which is pretty difficult to do in straight stud. In the second place, to show how fast bad luck can get worse in a streak, I didn't have the two grand. All I had to offer was an IOU with a twenty-four-hour deadline. The deadline passed, and I still didn't have the two grand. My intentions were good, but my luck kept on being bad. I got three extensions on the deadline, and then I had a couple of visitors. They came to my apartment about the middle of the afternoon, a few minutes after I'd gotten out of bed. I'd seen both of them around, and I knew the name of one of them, but the names didn't matter. It was a business call, not social. They were very polite in a businesslike way. Only one of them talked.

"Mr. Sanders," he said, "we're representing Mr. Jack Kirby in a little business matter."

"Times have been tough," I said.

"Mr. Kirby appreciates that, but he feels that he's been more than liberal."

"Thank Mr. Kirby for me."

"I'm afraid Mr. Kirby wants more than thanks. He wants to know if you're prepared to settle your obligation."

"How about a payment on account? Ten percent, say."

"Sorry. Mr. Kirby feels that the obligation should be settled in full. He's prepared to extend your time until eight o'clock tomorrow night. He expects you to call at his apartment at that hour with the full amount due and payable."

"Tell Mr. Kirby I'll give the matter my careful attention."

"Mr. Kirby wants us particularly to remind you of the urgency."

"Fine. Consider me reminded."

"Mr. Kirby wants us to remind you in a manner that you will remember."

This was the clue to go to work, apparently, for that's what they did. I wasn't very alert yet, it being several hours

until dark, and I put up what might be called a sorry defense. In fact, I didn't put up any defense at all. The mute suddenly had me from behind in a combination hammerlock and strangle hold, and the talker, looking apologetic, belted me three times in the belly. At the door, leaving me doubled up on the floor, the talker stopped and looked back, an expression of compassion spreading among the pocks on his flat face.

"Sorry, Mr. Sanders," he said. "Nothing personal, you understand."

I wasn't able to acknowledge the apology with the good grace it deserved. After they were gone, I began to breathe again, and a little later I successfully stood up. The beating had been painful, but not crippling.

It was a break in a way, the beating was. It was the nadir of the streak, the worst of the bad luck, and now that things had got about as bad as they could get, they began immediately to get better. What I mean is, I took the ten percent I'd offered Kirby's hired goons and ran it through another game of stud and brought it out multiplied by twenty. A little better than four grand in paper with not an IOU in the bundle. By midnight I had in my possession, as the talking goon had said, the full amount due and payable.

The next night at eight, I was at Kirby's door. I rang the bell, and Kirby let me in. He was wearing most of a tux, the exception being a maroon smoking jacket with a black satin sash. I happen to have an aversion to satin sashes, on smoking jackets or anything else, and this put me in a bad humor. It made it more difficult than ever to be reasonable about the beating he had bought for me. Apparently I was wearing nothing to which he had a comparable aversion. His long, sallow face, divided under a long nose by a long, thin mustache, was perfectly amiable.

"Hello, Mark," he said. "Glad to see you."

"Even broke?" I said.

"Sorry." His face lost its amiability in an instant. "Poverty depresses me."

"Never mind. I'm not one of your huddled masses. I come loaded."

"Good." The amiability was back. "I was sure you could manage if you really tried."

I took the ready bundle from a pocket, two grand exactly, and handed it to him. He transferred it to a pocket of his offending jacket with hardly more than a glance, and this put me in a worse humor than I was already in, which was bad enough. I knew he would count the money the moment I was gone, and it would have been less annoying if he had counted it honestly in front of me.

"Now I'll have the IOU, if you don't mind," I said.

"Certainly, Mark." He took the paper out of the same pocket the money had gone into. "I hope you don't resent the little reminder I was forced to send you."

"Not at all. It was very courteous and regretful, and it only hit me where it doesn't show."

"I'm glad you understand. Will you have a drink before you leave?"

"Bourbon and water."

"Good. I'll have one with you." He turned and walked over to a liquor cabinet and worked for a minute with a bottle and glasses. "I'm sorry I can't ask you to stay for more than one, but I'm expecting company."

"Company's nice if it's nice company."

"This is nice. Someone you once knew, I believe. Nora Erskine? Charming girl. Beautiful. She has a very warm nature. Very generous."

He came toward me with a glass in each hand, and I hit him in the mouth. Don't ask me why. Maybe a disciple of Freud could tell you, but I can't. He fell backward in a shower of bourbon and came up with a little gun in his hand, which seemed to indicate that he hadn't been quite so amiable and trusting as he'd appeared. The cut-glass decanter was there on a table beside me, and I picked it up and smashed it over his head, and he fell down dying and was dead in less than a minute.

Stripped to the bone, that was how I killed him. I tried to remember if I had touched anything besides the decanter and the outside of the door, and there seemed to be nothing, and so I wiped the neck of the decanter with my handkerchief and retrieved the two grand, which was no good to

him, and left. I went home and thought about it, wondering if I should leave town incognito, but I decided that there was no need. The goons knew that I was supposed to be at Kirby's, of course, but the goons were old pros. They'd done a job and were through with it. They couldn't care less that Jack Kirby had got himself killed. As a matter of fact, if they made the logical deduction, I would probably go up immeasurably in their regard. The result of my thinking was the decision that it was unnecessary to take any precipitate action. I only needed to proceed with caution, as the signs beside the highways say, in the direction I was going.

But that was then, and now was different. Now I knew that Nora knew, and Nora was not an old pro, and Nora would surely someday tell. Maybe not now or soon, but someday, the day she couldn't stand the pressure any longer, and the passage of time would not help or save me, for there is no statute of limitations on murder, not even murder which might turn out to be, with luck and a good lawyer, of lesser degree than first. And there was always the solid possibility, of course, of that grim first.

I could see that I had come to the time of decision now, and I didn't want to face it. Like many another in the same predicament, I found a way to avoid it temporarily, if not permanently. In any case it was simple. I simply went to sleep.

When I woke again, it was evening, but the hour of the day was the only thing that had changed, not me or the problem or anything that had to be considered and done or not done. I got up and washed my face in cold water and put on a tie and jacket and went downstairs onto the street. There was a newsstand on the corner, half a block away, and I went down there and bought an evening edition and carried it back to the apartment without looking at it. In the apartment, I poured another double shot and drank half of it and sat down and opened the newspaper, and there was the story on page one: "Material Witness in Kirby Slaying Flees State." I read the story slowly, finishing the second shot of the double as I read, and it was reported about the way Corey had told it to me in the morning, how

Nora was believed to know the identity of Kirby's visitor at the time of the murder, and how she had refused to talk, and how, finally, she had escaped into the next state, from which she could not be extradited. It was also reported in the story exactly where she had gone and now was, the home of her childhood not more than a hundred miles away, and this was what I needed in order to make the decision I had to make, and you can see why. Now that her location was no longer a secret shared by me and the police, Nora was in greater danger and, as a consequence, so was I. There was therefore no longer any reason for indecision or delay, although there was probably no reason for hurry either.

I sat there for quite a long while, and it began to get dark outside in the city streets, and the incandescents and fluorescents and neons came on to drive the darkness back. I finally became aware, via my stomach, that I hadn't eaten all day, and that I had better eat something before I took another drink, which I wanted, and so I went out and had a steak in a restaurant down the street a few blocks. After eating, I walked back and had a couple more drinks in the apartment, and then I went down and got my car out of the garage in the basement and drove across town to a place where they were having a stud game. I won five hundred skins in the game, the good streak still running in the wake of the bad streak, and at some point in the time it took to win that much money, my mind made itself up and I knew what I was going to do. I dropped out of the game about three o'clock in the morning, a little after, and it was almost four when I got home.

In the bedroom of the apartment, I changed into slacks, sport shirt and jacket, heavier shoes. From a shelf in the closet I got a leather case that contained a .30-30 rifle. I had been very good with a rifle when I was younger. There was no reason to believe that I wasn't still almost as good. I assembled the rifle and checked it and took it apart again. I put the parts back into the case and half a dozen cartridges into my jacket pocket. I don't know why I took so many, for chances were long that a dozen would not be enough if one wasn't. Carrying the case, I went back

downstairs to my car and drove out of town.

It took me about three hours, driving slowly, to reach the town where I had grown up a hundred years or so ago, and I did not drive into it after reaching it. Instead, I drove around it on roads I remembered, and beyond it on another road until I saw ahead of me, quite a distance and on the left, the white house of the Erskine's. It sat rather far back from the road at the end of a tree-lined drive, though not so far as memory had it, and it had once been considered the finest farm home in the county, if not the state. Now it did not seem one-half so grand, a different house than I had known before, as if the first had been razed and a second built in its place in an identical design, with identical detail, but on a reduced scale.

I turned off before I reached the house, along the side of a country square. The road descended slowly for a quarter of a mile to a steel and timber bridge across a shallow ravine. There had been water in the ravine in the spring, and there would be water again when the fall rains came, but now the bed was dry except for intermittent shallow pools caught in rock. After crossing the bridge, I pulled off the road on a narrow turning into high weeds and brush. Getting out of the car, carrying the rifle case, I climbed a barbed-wire fence and followed the course of the ravine through a stand of timber, mostly oaks and maples and elms, and across a wide expanse of pasture in which a herd of Holsteins were having breakfast. Pretty soon I left the ravine and cut across two fields at an angle and up a long rise into a grove of walnut trees on the crest. I stopped among the trees and assembled and loaded the rifle, and then I lay down and looked down the slope on the other side of the crest to the house where Nora was supposed to be. There was a stone terrace on this side of the house at the rear. On the terrace was a round table and several brightly striped canvas chairs. Wide glass doors lead off the terrace into the house. No one was visible from where I lay under the walnut trees about fifty yards away.

After half an hour, I rolled over onto my back and lay looking up into the branches of the trees where the green walnuts hung, and I began to remember all the times I'd

come here to gather the nuts when I was a kid, sometimes with Nora in the later years. We gathered them in burlap bags—gunny sacks, they were called—and later knocked the blackened husks off with a hammer. For a long time afterward, if we didn't wear gloves, our hands were stained with the juice of the husks, a stain like the stain of nicotine, and there was no way to get this stain off except to wear it off, and you could always tell the ones who had gathered walnuts late in the fall by the stain on their hands that wore on toward winter.

I could hear a cow bell jangling back in the pasture. I could hear a dog barking. I could hear the cawing of a crow above the fields, and I thought I could hear, closing my eyes, the slow beating of his black wings against the still air. Opening my eyes, I rolled over and looked down the slope again to the terrace, and there was Nora standing beside the table and looking up toward the walnut grove as if she could see me lying in its shadow. She was wearing a white blouse and brown shorts, and her face and arms and legs were golden in the morning light. Drawing the rifle up along my side into firing position, I had her heart in my sights in a second, and I had a notion that it was a golden heart pumping golden blood.

She must have stood there for a full minute without moving, maybe longer, and then she turned and walked across the terrace and through the glass doors into the house, and I lowered my face slowly into the sweet green grass. I could still hear the bell and the dog and the crow, and I could hear the voice of Corey McDown saying that Mark Sanders was just a guy with kinks.

After awhile I stood up and went back across the fields to the ravine and along the ravine through the pasture and the woods to the car. Driving to the city, I thought about what I had better do, and where I had better go, and how long it would take to learn to live comfortably with a constant threat, and I decided, although there was probably no hurry, that I might as well get my affairs in order and go somewhere a long way off as soon as possible.

THE EPISODE OF THE TELEPHONE NUMBER

By Charles Einstein

Nelson Hollister, known as The Brain, crossed his legs and relaxed in his chair. "I take it," he said, "that my visit is unwelcome."

"Not at all," said Inspector Wapsand of the Homicide Squad. "It's always good to see an old friend. Isn't it, Sergeant?"

Sergeant Bates, his assistant, smiled wanly. The three of them were seated in Inspector Wapsand's office.

The Brain said, "The two of you realize I am smarter than you are. You police use the science of deduction. I use the science of comprehension. That is why I am so unusual a private detective."

"I grant you the final premise," Wapsand said to him, "though I must say it escapes me what the difference might be between deduction and comprehension."

"Suppose," The Brain said, "you saw a lot of numbers written on a blackboard in a college classroom. What course would you suppose was being taught in that classroom?"

Wapsand shrugged. "I don't know. Mathematics."

"You deduce mathematics. Good. Do you comprehend mathematics?"

"No."

"There's the difference," The Brain said. "I recently was of considerable help to one of our small Central American neighbor countries—speaking of the difference between deduction and comprehension. The vice-president of the country had been assassinated during a celebration in his honor. They arrested the wrong man—someone who had been there at the time of the killing—because they deduced it was impossible for the slayer to escape."

"And?" Wapsand said.

"I merely pointed out," The Brain said, "that the dead official had been a circus performer in his youth. A tightrope walker."

"So the corpse got away on a tightrope?"

"Don't be silly," The Brain said. "One of his sworn enemies from that circus era had been a human cannonball. He was the murderer."

"But I don't understand," Inspector Wapsand said. "Suppose a human cannonball *did* murder the vice-president. How'd he make his escape if there was no means of escape?"

"Through a cannon," The Brain said, and yawned. "The celebration in the vice-president's honor included a twenty-one-gun salute."

Sergeant Bates said to The Brain, "Please go away."

"Not at all," The Brain said pleasantly. "I understand you're having difficulty with a case. I came to help."

Inspector Wapsand said, "What case would that be?"

"The Phillips murder."

"No difficulty there," Wapsand said. "As you may know, the dead man was found with a torn piece of paper clutched in his hand. The paper disclosed the scribbled telephone number of Phillips' nephew—the one who stood to benefit from the old man's will. Nothing complicated about it. That one clue—"

The Brain put up a hand. "You see?" he said. "You deduce, but you do not comprehend."

"What do you mean?"

"If the dying man wanted to put the finger on his nephew," The Brain said, "why would he write down his telephone number? *Why not his name?*"

Inspector Wapsand reached clumsily for his pipe. "Suppose we grant you the point?" he said. "What difference does it make?"

"I am only suggesting," The Brain said, "that Phillips had a *reason* for putting down a phone number."

"But it's the same as if he *had* written the nephew's name," Wapsand objected. "It was the nephew's phone number. What difference—"

"Did it ever occur to you," The Brain continued, "that it

may have been a wrong number?"

Sergeant Bates said, "I am taking a course in accountancy by mail, and within a year I will be out of this business. It hardly seems possible."

"You see," The Brain said easily, "you are trying to deduce. I am trying to comprehend."

Wapsand said in a low voice, "And what do you comprehend?"

"That there's no reason why a dead man, or a dying man, can't get a wrong number once in awhile. People who are alive get them all the time."

Wapsand's voice was the merest whisper. "And therefore?"

"Therefore," The Brain said, "the killer was a man with a very common name. Look for someone who has a telephone number similar to the nephew's, but a very ordinary name—like John Jones or Bob Smith—and you have your man."

"Why do you say this?" Inspector Wapsand said. With shaking hand, he tried to relight his pipe.

"Because," The Brain said, "that's *why* the dead man wrote down a phone number. If he'd written *Jones* or *Smith* what sort of clue would that have given? There are hundreds of thousands of Joneses and Smiths. The dying man knew that there must be some definite way to link the murder to the murderer, and just writing *Jones* on a piece of paper wouldn't do it. So he chose the *sure* way." The Brain smiled indulgently. "Unfortunately, he got the wrong number."

"Shall I get him out of here, boss?" Sergeant Bates inquired. "Shall I . . . ?"

"No," Inspector Wapsand said wearily. "I hate to tell you this," he said to The Brain, "but the nephew has already confessed."

The Brain rose stiffly to his feet. "In that case," he said, "I have the honor to retire from the case. You obviously refuse to look further—for somebody, perhaps, whom the nephew wants to protect. Somebody named Jones, let us say."

"The nephew is named Jones," Inspector Wapsand said.

COME BACK, COME BACK

By Donald E. Westlake

Detective Abraham Levine of Brooklyn's Forty-third Precinct was a worried and a frightened man. He sat moodily at his desk in the small office he shared with his partner, Jack Crawley, and pensively drew lopsided circles on the back of a blank accident-report form. In the approximate center of each circle he placed a dot, drew two lines out from the dot to make a clock face, reading three o'clock. An eight-and-a-half-by-eleven sheet of white paper, covered with clock faces, all reading three o'clock.

"That the time you see the doctor?"

Levine looked up, startled, called back from years away. Crawley was standing beside the desk, looking down at him, and Levine blinked, not having heard the question.

Crawley reached down and tapped the paper with a horny fingernail. "Three o'clock," he explained. "That the time you see the doctor?"

"Oh," said Levine. "Yes. Three o'clock."

Crawley said, "Take it easy, Abe."

"Sure," said Levine. He managed a weak smile. "No sense worrying beforehand, huh?"

"My brother," said Crawley, "he had one of those cardiograph things just a couple months ago. He's just around your age, and man, he was worried. And the doctor tells him, 'You'll live to be a hundred.' "

"And then you'll die," said Levine.

"What the hell, Abe, we all got to go *sometime.*"

"Sure."

Abraham Levine was fifty-three years alive, twenty-four years a cop. A short and chunky man, he wore plain brown suits and dark solid-color ties, brown or black plain shoes.

His hair was pepper-and-salt gray, trimmed all around in a stiff pseudo-military crew cut. The crew cut didn't go with the face, roundish, soft-eyed, sensitive-lipped, lined with fifty-three years' accumulation of small worries.

"Listen, Abe, you want to go on home? It's a dull day, nothing doing, I can—"

"Don't say that," Levine warned him. "The phone will ring." The phone rang as he was talking and he grinned, shrugging with palms up. "See?"

"Let me see what it is," said Crawley, reaching for the phone. "Probably nothing important. You can go on home and take it easy till three o'clock. It's only ten now and—Hello?" The last word spoken into the phone mouthpiece. "Yeah, this is Crawley."

Levine watched Crawley's face, trying to read in it the nature of the call. Crawley had been his partner for seven years, since old Jake Moshby had retired, and in that time they had become good friends, as close as two such different men could get to one another.

Crawley was a big man, somewhat overweight, somewhere in his middle forties. His clothes hung awkwardly on him, not as though they were too large or too small but as though they had been planned for a man of completely different proportions. His face was rugged, squarish, heavy-jowled. He looked like a tough cop, and he played the role very well.

Crawley had once described the quality of their partnership with reasonable accuracy. "With your brains and my beauty, Abe, we've got it made."

Now, Levine watched Crawley's face as the big man listened impassively to the phone, finally nodding and saying, "Okay, I'll go right on up there. Yeah, I know, that's what I figure, too." And he hung up.

"What is it, Jack?" Levine asked, getting up from the desk.

"A phony," said Crowley. "I can handle it, Abe. You go on home."

"I'd rather have some work to do. What is it?"

Crawley was striding for the door, Levine after him. "Man on a ledge," he said. "A phony. They're all phonies.

The ones that really mean to jump do it right away, get it over with. Guys like this one, all they want is a little attention, somebody to tell them it's all okay, come on back in, everything's forgiven."

The two of them walked down the long green hall toward the front of the precinct. *Man on a ledge,* Levine thought. *Don't jump. Don't die. For God's sake, don't die.*

The address was an office building on Flatbush Avenue, a few blocks down from the bridge, near A&S and the major Brooklyn movie houses. A small crowd had gathered on the sidewalk across the street, looking up, but most of the pedestrians stopped only for a second or two, only long enough to see what the small crowd was gaping at, and then hurried on wherever they were going. They were still involved in life, they had things to do, they didn't have time to watch a man die.

Traffic on this side was being rerouted away from this block of Flatbush, around via Fulton or Willoughby or DeKalb. It was a little after ten o'clock on a sunny day in late June, warm without the humidity that would hit the city a week or two farther into the summer, but the uniformed cop who waved at them to make the turn was sweating, his blue shirt stained a darker blue, his forehead creased with strain above the sunglasses.

Crawley was driving their car, an unmarked black '56 Chevvy, no siren, and he braked to a stop in front of the patrolman. He stuck his head and arm out the window, dangling his wallet open so the badge showed. "Precinct," he called.

"Oh," said the cop. He stepped aside to let them pass. "You didn't have any siren or light or anything," he explained.

"We don't want to make our friend nervous," Crawley told him.

The cop glanced up, then looked back at Crawley. "He's making *me* nervous," he said.

Crawley laughed. "A phony," he told the cop. "Wait and see."

On his side of the car, Levine had leaned his head out the

window, was looking up, studying the man on the ledge.

It was an office building, eight stories high. Not a very tall building, particularly for New York, but plenty tall enough for the purposes of the man standing on the ledge that girdled the building at the sixth-floor level. The first floor of the building was mainly a bank and partially a luncheonette. The second floor, according to the lettering strung along the front windows, was entirely given over to a loan company, and Levine could understand the advantage of the location. A man had his loan request turned down by the bank, all he had to do was go up one flight of stairs—or one flight in the elevator, more likely—and there was the loan company.

And if the loan company failed him too, there was a nice ledge on the sixth floor.

Levine wondered if this particular case had anything to do with money. Almost everything had something to do with money. Things that he became aware of because he was a cop, almost all of them had something to do with money. The psychoanalysts are wrong, he thought. It isn't sex that's at the center of all the pain in the world, it's money. Even when a cop answers a call from neighbors complaining about a couple screaming and fighting and throwing things at one another, nine times out of ten it's the same old thing they're arguing about. Money.

Levine's eyes traveled up the facade of the building, beyond the loan company's windows. None of the windows higher up bore the lettering of firm names. On the sixth floor, most of the windows were open, heads were sticking out into the air. And in the middle of it all, just out of reach of the windows on either side of him, was the man on the ledge.

Levine squinted, trying to see the man better against the brightness of the day. He wore a suit—it looked gray, but might be black—and white shirt and a dark tie, and the open suit coat and the tie were both whipping in the breeze up there. The man was standing as though crucified, back flat against the wall of the building, legs spread maybe two feet apart, arms out straight to either side of him, hands pressed palm-in against the stone surface of the wall.

The man was terrified. Levine was much too far away to see his face or read the expression there, but he didn't need any more than the posture of the body on the ledge. Taut, pasted to the wall, wide-spread. The man was terrified.

Crawley was right, of course. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, the man on the ledge *is* a phony. He doesn't really expect to have to kill himself, though he will do it if pressed too hard. But he's out there on the ledge for one purpose and one purpose only: to be seen. He wants to be seen, he wants to be noticed. Whatever his unfulfilled demands on life, whatever his frustrations or problems, he wants other people to be forced to be aware of them, and to agree to help him overcome them.

If he gets satisfaction, he will allow himself, after a decent interval, to be brought back in. If he gets the raise, or the girl, or forgiveness from the boss for his embezzling, or forgiveness from his wife for his philandering, or whatever his one urgent demand is, once the demand is met, he will come in from the ledge.

But there is one danger he doesn't stop to think about, not until it's too late and he's already out there on the ledge, and the drama has already begun. The police know of this danger, and they know it is by far the greatest danger of the man on the ledge, much greater than any danger of deliberate self-destruction.

He can fall.

This one had learned that danger by now, as every inch of his straining taut body testified. He had learned it, and he was frightened out of his wits.

Levine grimaced. The man on the ledge didn't know—or if he knew, the knowledge was useless to him—that a terrified man can have an accident much more readily and much more quickly than a calm man. And so the man on the ledge always compounded his danger.

Crawley braked the Chevvy to a stop at the curb, two doors beyond the address. The rest of the curb space was already used by official vehicles. An ambulance, white and gleaming. A smallish fire engine, red and full-packed with hose and ladders. A prowl car, most likely the one on this

beat. The Crash & Rescue truck, dark blue, a first-aid station on wheels.

As he was getting out of the car, Levine noticed the firemen, standing around, leaning against the plate-glass windows of the bank, an eight-foot net lying closed on the sidewalk near them. Levine took the scene in, and knew what had happened. The firemen had started to open the net. The man on the ledge had threatened to jump at once if they didn't take the net away. He could always jump to one side, miss the net. A net was no good unless the person to be caught *wanted* to be caught. So the firemen had closed up their net again, and now they were waiting, leaning against the bank windows, far enough away to the right.

Other men stood here and there on the sidewalk, some uniformed and some in plainclothes, most of them looking up at the man on the ledge. None of them stood inside a large white circle drawn in chalk on the pavement. It was a wide sidewalk here, in front of the bank, and the circle was almost the full width of it.

No one stood inside that circle because it marked the probable area where the man would land, if and when he fell or jumped from the ledge. And no one wanted to be underneath.

Crawley came around the Chevvy, patting the fenders with a large calloused hand. He stopped next to Levine and looked up. "The phony," he growled, and Levine heard outrage in the tone. Crawley was an honest man, in simple terms of black and white. He hated dishonesty, in all its forms, from grand larceny to raucous television commercials. And a faked suicide attempt was dishonesty.

The two of them walked toward the building entrance. Crawley walked disdainfully through the precise center of the large chalked circle, not even bothering to look up. Levine walked around the outer edge.

Then the two of them went inside and took the elevator to the sixth floor.

The letters on the frosted-glass door read: "Anderson & Cartwright, Industrial Research Associates, Inc."

Crawley tapped on the glass. "Which one do you bet?" he asked. "Anderson or Cartwright?"

"It might be an employee."

Crawley shook his head. "Odds are against it. I take Anderson."

"Go in," said Levine gently. "Go on in."

Crawley pushed the door open and strode in, Levine behind him. It was the receptionist's office, cream-green walls and carpet, modernistic metal desk, modernistic metal and leather sofa and armchairs, modernistic saucer-shaped light fixtures hanging from bronzed chains attached to the ceiling.

Three women sat nervously, wide-eyed, off to the right, on the metal and leather armchairs. Above their heads were framed photographs of factory buildings, most of them in color, a few in black and white.

A uniformed patrolman was leaning against the receptionist's desk, arms folded across his chest, a relaxed expression on his face. He straightened up immediately when he saw Crawley and Levine. Levine recognized him as McCann, a patrolman working out of the same precinct.

"Am I glad to see you guys," said McCann. "Gundy's in talking to the guy now."

"Which one is it," Crawley asked, "Anderson or Cartwright?"

"Cartwright. Jason Cartwright. He's one of the bosses here."

Crawley turned a sour grin on Levine. "You win," he said, and led the way across the receptionist's office to the door marked: "Jason Cartwright PRIVATE."

There were two men in the room. One was sitting on the window ledge, looking out and to his left, talking in a soft voice. The other, standing a pace or two away from the window, was the patrolman, Gundy. He and McCann would be the two from the prowl car, the first ones on the scene.

At their entrance, Gundy looked around and then came over to talk with them. He and McCann were cut from the same mold. Both young, tall, slender, thin-cheeked, ready to grin at a second's notice. The older a man gets, Levine

thought, the longer it takes him to get a grin organized.

Gundy wasn't grinning now. He looked very solemn, and a little scared. Levine realized with shock that this might be Gundy's first brush with death. He didn't look as though he could have been out of the Academy very long.

I have news for you, Gundy, he thought. *You don't get used to it.*

Crawley said, "What's the story?"

"I'm not sure," said Gundy. "He went out there about twenty minutes ago. That's his son talking to him. Son's a lawyer, got an office right in this building."

"What's the guy out there want?"

Gundy shook his head. "He won't say. He just stands out there. He won't say a word, except to shout that he's going to jump whenever anybody tries to get too close to him."

"A coy one," said Crawley, disgusted.

The phone shrilled, and Gundy stepped quickly over to the desk, picking up the receiver before the second ring. He spoke softly into the instrument, then looked over at the man by the window. "Your mother again," he said.

The man at the window spoke a few more words to the man on the ledge, then came over and took the phone from Gundy. Gundy immediately took his place at the window, and Levine could hear his first words plainly. "Just take it easy, now. Relax. But maybe you shouldn't close your eyes."

Levine looked at the son, now talking on the phone. A young man, not more than twenty-five or -six. Blond crew cut, horn-rim glasses, good mouth, strong jawline. Dressed in Madison Avenue conservative. Just barely out of law school, from the look of him.

Levine studied the office. It was a large room, eighteen to twenty feet square, as traditional as the outer office was contemporary. The desk was a massive piece of furniture, a dark warm wood, the legs and drawer faces carefully and intricately carved. Glass-faced bookshelves lined one complete wall. The carpet was a neutral gray, wall-to-wall. There were two sofas, brown leather, long and deep and

comfortable-looking. Bronze ashtray stands. More framed photographs of plant buildings.

The son was saying, "Yes, Mother. I've been talking to him, Mother. I don't know, Mother."

Levine walked over, said to the son, "May I speak to her for a minute, please?"

"Of course. Mother, there's a policeman here who wants to talk to you."

Levine accepted the phone, said, "Mrs. Cartwright?"

The voice that answered was high-pitched, and Levine could readily imagine it becoming shrill. The voice said, "Why is he out there? Why is he doing that?"

"We don't know yet," Levine told her. "We were hoping you might be able to—"

"Me?" The voice was suddenly a bit closer to being shrill. "I still can't really believe this. I don't know why he'd—I have no idea. What does he say?"

"He hasn't told us why yet," said Levine. "Where are you now, Mrs. Cartwright?"

"At home, of course."

"That's where?"

"New Brunswick."

"Do you have a car there? Could you drive here now?"

"There? To New York?"

"It might help, Mrs. Cartwright, if he could see you, if you could talk to him."

"But—it would take *hours* to get there! Surely, it would be—that is, before I got there, you'd have him safe already, wouldn't you?"

She hopes he jumps, thought Levine, with sudden certainty. *By God, she hopes he jumps!*

"Well, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," he said wearily. "I suppose you're right. Here's your son again."

He extended the receiver to the son, who took it, cupped the mouthpiece with one hand, said worriedly, "Don't misunderstand her. Please, she isn't as cold as she might sound. She loves my father, she really does."

"All right," said Levine. He turned away from the plead-

ing in the son's eyes, said to Crawley, "Let's talk with him a bit."

"Right," said Crawley.

There were two windows in the office, about ten feet apart, and Jason Cartwright was standing directly between them on the ledge. Crawley went to the left-hand window and Levine to the right-hand window, where the patrolman Gundy was still trying to chat with the man on the ledge, trying to keep him distracted from the height and his desire to jump. "We'll take over," Levine said softly, and Gundy nodded gratefully and backed away from the window.

Levine twisted around, sat on the windowsill, hooked one arm under the open window, leaned out slightly so that the breeze touched his face. He looked down.

Six stories. God, who would have thought six stories was so high from the ground? This is the height when you really get the feeling of height. On top of the Empire State Building, or flying in a plane, it's just too damn high, it isn't real any more. But six stories—that's a fine height to be at, to really understand the terror of falling.

Place ten Levines, one standing on another's shoulders, forming a human tower or a totem pole, and the Levine in the window wouldn't be able to reach the cropped gray hair on the head of the top Levine in the totem pole.

Down there, he could make out faces, distinguish eyes and open mouths, see the blue jeans and high boots and black slickers of the firemen, the red domes atop the police cars. Across the street, he could see the red of a girl's sweater.

He looked down at the street, sixty-six feet below him. It was a funny thing about heights, a strange and funny and terrifying thing. Stand by the rail of a bridge, looking down at the water. Stand by a window on the sixth floor, looking down at the street. And from miles down inside the brain, a filthy little voice snickers and leers and croons, "Jump. Go on and jump. Wouldn't you like to know how it would feel, to fall free through space? Go on, go on, jump."

From his left, Crawley's voice suddenly boomed out. "Aren't you a little old, Cartwright, for this kind of nonsense?"

The reassuring, well-known reality of Crawley's voice tore Levine away from the snickering little voice. He suddenly realized he'd been leaning too far out from the window, and pulled himself hastily back.

And he felt his heart pounding within his chest. Three o'clock, he had to go see that doctor. He had to be calm; his heart had to be calm for the doctor's inspection.

At night—he didn't get enough sleep at night any more, that was part of the problem. But it was impossible to sleep and listen to one's heart at the same time, and of the two it was more important to listen to the heart. Listen to it plodding along, laboring, like an old man climbing a hill with a heavy pack. And then, all at once, the silence. The skipped beat. And the sluggish heart gathering its forces, building its strength, plodding on again. It had never yet skipped two beats in a row.

It could only do that once.

"What is it you want, Cartwright?" called Crawley's voice.

Levine, for the first time, looked to the left and saw Jason Cartwright.

A big man, probably an athlete in his younger days, still muscular but now padded with the flesh of years. Black hair with a natural wave in it, now mussed by the breeze. A heavy face, the chin sagging a bit but the jawline still strong, the nose large and straight, the forehead wide, the brows outthrust, the eyes deep and now wide and wild. A good-looking man, probably in his late forties.

Levine knew a lot about him already. From the look of the son in there, this man had married young, probably while still in his teens. From the sound of the wife, the marriage had soured. From the look of the office and the apparent education of the son, his career had blossomed where his marriage hadn't. So this time, one of the exceptions, the trouble wouldn't be money. This time it was connected most likely with his marriage.

Another woman?

It wouldn't be a good idea to ask him. Sooner or later, he would state his terms, he would tell them what had driven him out here. Force the issue, and he might jump. A man

on a ledge goes out there not wanting to jump, but accepting the fact that he may have to.

Cartwright had been looking at Crawley, and now he turned his head, stared at Levine. "Oh, no you don't!" he cried. His voice would normally be baritone, probably a pleasant speaking voice, but emotion had driven it up the scale, making it raucous, tinged with hysteria. "One distracts me while the other sneaks up on me, is that it?" the man cried. "You won't get away with it. Come near me and I'll jump, I swear I'll jump!"

"I'll stay right here," Levine promised. Leaning far out, he would be almost able to reach Cartwright's outstretched hand. But if he were to touch it, Cartwright would surely jump. And if he were to grip it, Cartwright would most likely drag him along too, all the way down to the sidewalk sixty-six feet below.

"What is it, Cartwright?" demanded Crawley again. "What do you want?"

Way back at the beginning of their partnership, Levine and Crawley had discovered the arrangement that worked best for them. Crawley asked the questions, and Levine listened to the answers. While a man paid attention to Crawley, erected his facade between himself and Crawley, Levine, silent and unnoticed, could come in on the flank, peek behind the facade and see the man who was really there.

"I want you to leave me alone!" cried Cartwright. "Everybody, everybody! Just leave me alone!"

"Look up at the sky, Mister Cartwright," said Levine softly, just loud enough for the man on the ledge to hear him. "Look how blue it is. Look down across the street. Do you see the red of that girl's sweater? Breathe in, Mister Cartwright. Do you smell the city? Hark! Listen! Did you hear that car horn? That was over on Fulton Street, wasn't it?"

"Shut up!" screamed Cartwright, turning swiftly, precariously, to glare again at Levine. "Shut up, shut up, shut up! Leave me alone!"

Levine knew all he needed. "Do you want to talk to your son?" he asked.

"Allan?" The man's face softened all at once. "Allan?"

"He's right here," said Levine. He came back in from the window, signaled to the son, who was no longer talking on the phone. "He wants to talk to you."

The son rushed to the window. "Dad?"

Crawley came over, glowering. "Well?" he said.

Levine shook his head. "He doesn't want to die."

"I know that. What now?"

"I think it's the wife." Levine motioned to Gundy, who came over, and he said, "Is the partner here? Anderson?"

"Sure," said Gundy. "He's in his office. He tried to talk to Cartwright once, but Cartwright got too excited. We thought it would be a good idea if Anderson kept out of sight."

"Who thought? Anderson?"

"Well, yes. All of us. Anderson and McCann and me."

"Okay," said Levine. "You and the boy—what's his name, Allan?—stay here. Let me know what's happening, if anything at all does happen. We'll go talk with Mister Anderson now."

Anderson was short, slender, very brisk, very bald. His wire-framed spectacles reflected light, and his round little face was troubled. "No warning at all," he said. "Not a word. All of a sudden, Joan—she's our receptionist—got a call from someone across the street, saying there was a man on the ledge. And it was Jason. Just like that! No warning at all."

"The sign on your door," said Crawley, "says Industrial Research. What's that, efficiency-expert stuff?"

Anderson smiled, a quick nervous flutter. "Not exactly," he said. He was devoting all his attention to Crawley, who was standing directly in front of him and who was asking the questions. Levine stood to one side, watching the movements of Anderson's lips and eyes and hands as he spoke.

"We are efficiency experts, in a way," Anderson was saying, "but not in the usual sense of the term. We don't work with time charts, or how many people should work in the steno pool, things like that. Our major concern is the

physical plant itself, the structure and design of the plant buildings and work areas."

Crawley nodded. "Architects," he said.

Anderson's brief smile fluttered on his face again, and he shook his head. "No, we work in conjunction with the architect, if it's a new building. But most of our work is concerned with the modernization of old facilities. In a way, we're a central clearing agency for new ideas in industrial plant procedures." It was, thought Levine, an explanation Anderson was used to making, so used to making that it sounded almost like a memorized patter.

"You and Cartwright equal partners?" asked Crawley. It was clear he hadn't understood a word of Anderson's explanation and was impatient to move on to other things.

Anderson nodded. "Yes, we are. We've been partners for twenty-one years."

"You know him well, then."

"I should think so, yes."

"Then maybe you know why he suddenly decided to go crawl out on the ledge."

Eyes widening, Anderson shook his head again. "Not a thing," he said. "I had no idea, nothing, I—there just wasn't any warning at all."

Levine stood off to one side, watching, his lips pursed in concentration. Was Anderson telling the truth? It seemed likely; it *felt* likely. The marriage again. It kept going back to the marriage.

"Has he acted at all funny lately?" Crawley was still pursuing the same thought, that there had to be some previous build-up, and that the build-up should show. "Has he been moody, anything like that?"

"Jason—" Anderson stopped, shook his head briefly, started again. "Jason is a quiet man, by nature. He—he rarely says much, rarely, uh, *forces* his personality, if you know what I mean. If he's been thinking about this, whatever it is, it—it wouldn't show. I don't *think* it would show."

"Would he have any business worries at all?" Crawley undoubtedly realized by now this was a blind alley, but he

would go through the normal questions anyway. You never could tell.

Anderson, as was to be expected, said, "No, none. We've —well, we've been doing very well. The last five years, we've been expanding steadily, we've even added to our staff, just six months ago."

Levine now spoke for the first time. "What about Mrs. Cartwright?" he asked.

Anderson looked blank, as he turned to face Levine. "Mrs. Cartwright? I—I don't understand what you mean."

Crawley immediately picked up the new ball, took over the questioning again. "Do you know her well, Mister Anderson? What kind of woman would you say she was?"

Anderson turned back to Crawley, once again opening his flank to Levine. "She's, well, actually I haven't seen very much of her the last few years. Jason moved out of Manhattan five, six years ago, over to Jersey, and I live out on the Island, so we don't, uh, we don't *socialize* very much, as much as we used to. As you get older"—he turned to face Levine, as though instinctively understanding that Levine would more readily know what he meant—"you don't go out so much any more, in the evening. You don't, uh, keep up friendships as much as you used to."

"You must know *something* about Mrs. Cartwright," said Crawley.

Anderson gave his attention to Crawley again. "She's, well, I suppose the best way to describe her is *determined.* I know for a fact she was the one who talked Jason into coming into partnership with me, twenty-one years ago. A forceful woman. Not a nag, mind you, I don't mean that at all. A very pleasant woman, really. A good hostess. A good mother, from the look of Allan. But forceful."

The wife, thought Levine. *She's the root of it. She knows, too, what drove him out there.*

And she wants him to jump.

Back in Cartwright's office, the son Allan was once again at the phone. The patrolman Gundy was at the left-hand window, and a new man, in clerical garb, at the right-hand window.

Gundy noticed Levine and Crawley come in, and immediately left the window. "A priest," he said softly. "Anderson said he was Catholic, so we got in touch with St. Marks, over on Willoughby."

Levine nodded. He was listening to the son. "I don't know, Mother. Of course, Mother, we're doing everything we can. No, Mother, no reporters up here, maybe it won't have to be in the papers at all."

Levine went over to the window Gundy had vacated, took up a position where he could see Cartwright, carefully refrained from looking down at the ground. The priest was saying, "God has his time for you, Mister Cartwright. This is God's prerogative, to choose the time and the means of your death."

Cartwright shook his head, not looking at the priest, glaring instead directly across Flatbush Avenue at the building across the way. "There is no God," he said.

"I don't believe you mean that, Mister Cartwright," said the priest. "I believe you've lost faith in yourself, but I don't believe you've lost faith in God."

"Take that away!" screamed Cartwright all at once. "Take that away, or I jump right now!"

He was staring down toward the street, and Levine followed the direction of his gaze. Poles had been extended from windows on the floor below, and a safety net, similar to that used by circus performers, was being unrolled along them.

"Take that away!" screamed Cartwright again. He was leaning precariously forward, his face mottled red with fury and terror.

"Roll that back in!" shouted Levine. "Get it out of there, he can jump over it! Roll it back in!"

A face jutted out of one of the fifth-floor windows, turning inquiringly upward, saying, "Who are you?"

"Levine. Precinct. Get that thing away from there."

"Right you are," said the face, making it clear he accepted no responsibility either way. And the net and poles were withdrawn.

The priest, on the other side, was saying, "It's all right. Relax, Mr. Cartwright; it's all right. These people only

want to help you; it's all right." The priest's voice was shaky. Like Gundy, he was a rookie at this. He'd never been asked to talk in a suicide before.

Levine twisted around, looking up. Two stories up, and the roof. More men were up there, with another safety net. If this were the top floor, they would probably take a chance with that net, try flipping it over him and pasting him like a butterfly to the wall. But not here, three stories down.

Cartwright had turned his face away from the still-talking priest, was studying Levine intently. Levine returned his gaze, and Cartwright said, "Where's Laura? She should be here by now, shouldn't she? Where is she?"

"Laura? You mean your wife?"

"Of course," he said. He stared at Levine, trying to read something in Levine's face. "Where is she?"

Tell him the truth? No. Tell him his wife wasn't coming, and he would jump right away. "She's on the way," he said. "She should be here pretty soon."

Cartwright turned his face forward again, stared off across the street. The priest was still talking, softly, insistently.

Levine came back into the office. To Crawley, he said, "It's the wife. He's waiting for her."

"They've always got a wife," said Crawley sourly. "And there's always just the one person they'll tell it to. Well, how long before she gets here?"

"She isn't coming."

"What?"

"She's at home, over in Jersey. She said she wouldn't come." Levine shrugged and added, "I'll try her again."

The son was still on the phone, but he handed it over as soon as Levine spoke to him. Levine said, "This is Detective Levine again, Mrs. Cartwright. We'd like you to come down here after all, please. Your husband asked to talk to you."

There was hesitation from the woman for a few seconds, and then she burst out, "Why can't you bring him in? Can't you even *stop* him?"

"He's out of reach, Mrs. Cartwright. If we tried to get him, I'm afraid he'd jump."

"This is ridiculous! No, no, definitely not, I'm not going to be a party to it. I'm not going to talk to him until he comes in from there. You tell him that."

"Mrs. Cartwright—"

"I'm not going to have any more to do with it!"

The click was loud in Levine's ear as she slammed the receiver onto the hook. Crawley was looking at him, and now said, "Well?"

"She hung up."

"She isn't coming?" It was plain that Crawley was having trouble believing it.

Levine glanced at the son, who could hear every word he was saying, and then shrugged. "She wants him to jump," he said.

The son's reaction was much smaller than Levine had expected. He simply shook his head definitely and said, "No."

Levine waited, looking at him.

The son shook his head again. "That isn't true," he said. "She just doesn't understand—she doesn't really think he means it."

"All right," said Levine. He turned away from the son, trying to think. The wife, the marriage—A man in his late forties, married young, son grown and set up in his own vocation. A quiet man, who doesn't force his personality on others, and a forceful wife. A practical wife, who pushed him into a successful business.

Levine made his decision. He nodded, and went back through the receptionist's office, where the other patrolman, McCann, was chatting with the three woman employees. Levine went into Anderson's office, said, "Excuse me. Could I have the use of your office for a little while?"

"Certainly." Anderson got up from his desk, came around, saying, "Anything at all, anything at all."

"Thank you."

Levine followed Anderson back to the receptionist's office, looked over the three women sitting against the left-hand wall. Two were fortyish, plumpish, wearing wedding bands. The third looked to be in her early thirties, was

tall and slender, good-looking in a solid, level-eyed way, not glamorous. She wore no rings at all.

Levine went over to the third woman, said, "Could I speak to you for a minute, please?"

She looked up, startled, a bit frightened. "What? Oh. Oh, yes, of course."

She followed him back into Anderson's office. He motioned her to the chair facing Anderson's desk, himself sat behind the desk. "My name is Levine," he said. "Detective Abraham Levine. And you are—?"

"Janice Shapleigh," she said. Her voice was low, pleasantly melodious. She was wearing normal office clothing, a gray plain skirt and white plain blouse.

"You've worked here how long?"

"Three years." She was answering readily enough, with no hesitations, but deep in her eyes he could see she was frightened, and wary.

"Mister Cartwright won't tell us why he wants to kill himself," he began. "He's asked to speak to his wife, but she refuses to leave home—" He detected a tightening of her lips when he said that. Disapproval of Mrs. Cartwright? He went on. "—which we haven't told him yet. He doesn't really want to jump, Miss Shapleigh. He's a frustrated, thwarted man. There's something he wants or needs that he can't get, and he's chosen this way to try to force the issue." He paused, studying her face, said, "Would that something be you?"

Color started in her cheeks, and she opened her mouth for what he knew would be an immediate denial. But the denial didn't come. Instead, Janice Shapleigh sagged in the chair, defeated and miserable, not meeting Levine's eyes. In a small voice, barely audible, she said, "I didn't think he'd do anything like this. I never thought he'd do anything like this."

"He wants to marry you, is that it? And he can't get a divorce."

The girl nodded, and all at once she began to cry. She wept with one closed hand pressed to her mouth, muffling the sound, her head bowed as though she were ashamed of this weakness, ashamed to be seen crying.

Levine waited, watching her with the dulled helplessness of a man whose job by its very nature kept him exposed to the misery and frustrations of others. He would always want to help, and he would always be unable to help, to really help.

Janice Shapleigh controlled herself, slowly and painfully. When she looked up again, Levine knew she was finished weeping, no matter what happened. "What do you want me to do?" she said.

"Talk to him. His wife won't come—she knows what he wants to say to her, I suppose—so you're the only one."

"What can I say to him?"

Levine felt weary, heavy. Breathing, working the heart, pushing the sluggish blood through veins and arteries, was wearing, hopeless, exhausting labor. "I don't know," he said. "He wants to die because of you. Tell him why he should live."

Levine stood by the right-hand window, just out of sight of the man on the ledge. The son and the priest and Crawley and Gundy were all across the room, watching and waiting, the son looking bewildered, the priest relieved, Crawley sour, Gundy excited.

Janice Shapleigh was at the left-hand window, tense and frightened. She leaned out, looking down, and Levine saw her body go rigid, saw her hands tighten on the window frame. She closed her eyes, swaying, inhaling, and Levine stood ready to move. If she were to faint from that position, she could fall out the window.

But she didn't faint. She raised her head and opened her eyes, and carefully avoided looking down at the street again. She looked, instead, to her right, toward the man on the ledge. "Jay," she said. "Jay, please."

"Jan!" Cartwright sounded surprised. "What are you doing? Jan, go back in there, stay away from this. Go back in there."

Levine stood by the window, listening. What would she say to him? What *could* she say to him?

"Jay," she said, slowly, hesitantly, "Jay, please. It isn't worth it. Nothing is worth—dying for."

"Where's Laura?"

Levine waited, unbreathing, and at last the girl spoke the lie he had placed in her mouth. "She's on the way. She'll be here soon. But what does it matter, Jay? She still won't agree, you know that. She won't believe you."

"I'll wait for Laura," he said.

The son was suddenly striding across the room, shouting, "What is this? What's going on here?"

Levine spun around, motioning angrily for the boy to be quiet.

"Who is that woman?" demanded the son. "What's she doing here?"

Levine intercepted him before he could get to Janice Shapleigh, pressed both palms flat against the boy's shirt front. "Get back over there," he whispered fiercely. "Get back over there."

"Get away from me! Who is she? What's going on here?"

"Allan?" It was Cartwright's voice, shouting the question. "Allan?"

Crawley now had the boy's arms from behind, and he and Levine propelled him toward the door. "Let me *go!*" cried the boy. "I've got a right to—"

Crawley's large hand clamped across his mouth, and the three of them barreled through to the receptionist's office. As the door closed behind them, Levine heard Janice Shapleigh repeating, "Jay? Listen to me, Jay, please. Please, Jay."

The door safely shut behind them, the two detectives let the boy go. He turned immediately, trying to push past them and get back inside, crying, "You can't do this! Let me go! What do you think you are? Who is that woman?"

"Shut up," said Levine. He spoke softly, but the boy quieted at once. In his voice had been all his own miseries, all his own frustrations, and his utter weariness with the misery and frustration of others.

"I'll tell you who that woman is," Levine said. "She's the woman your father wants to marry. He wants to divorce your mother and marry her."

"No," said the boy, as sure and positive as he had been

earlier in denying that his mother would want to see his father dead.

"Don't say no," said Levine coldly. "I'm telling you facts. That's what sent him out there on that ledge. Your mother won't agree to the divorce."

"My mother—"

"Your mother," Levine pushed coldly on, "planned your father's life. Now, all at once, he's reached the age where he should have accomplished whatever he set out to do. His son is grown, he's making good money, now's the time for him to look around and say, 'This is the world I made for myself, and it's a good one.' But he can't. Because he doesn't like his life, it isn't *his* life, it's the life your mother planned for him."

"You're wrong," said the boy. "You're wrong."

"So he went looking," said Levine, ignoring the boy's interruptions, "and he found Janice Shapleigh. She wouldn't push him, she wouldn't plan for him, she'd let *him* be the strong one."

The boy just stood here, shaking his head, repeating over and over, "You're wrong. You're wrong."

Levine grimaced, in irritation and defeat. *You never break through,* he thought. *You never break through.* Aloud he said, "In twenty years you'll believe me." He looked over at the patrolman, McCann. "Keep this young man out here with you," he said.

"Right," said McCann.

"Why?" cried the son. "He's my father! Why can't I go in there?"

"Shame," Levine told him. "If he saw his son and this woman at the same time, he'd jump."

The boy's eyes widened. He started to shake his head, then just stood there, staring.

Levine and Crawley went back into the other room.

Janice Shapleigh was coming away from the window, her face ashen. "Somebody down on the sidewalk started taking pictures," she said. "Jay shouted at them to stop. He told me to get in out of sight, or he'd jump right now."

"Respectability," said Levine, as though the word were obscene. "We're all fools."

Crawley said, "Think we ought to send someone for the wife?"

"No. She'd only make it worse. She'd say no, and he'd go over."

"Oh God!" Janice Shapleigh swayed suddenly and Crawley grabbed her arm, led her across to one of the leather sofas.

Levine went back to the right-hand window. He looked out. A block away, on the other side of the street, there was a large clock in front of a bank building. It was almost eleven-thirty. They'd been here almost an hour and a half.

Three o'clock, he thought suddenly. This thing had to be over before three o'clock, that was the time of his appointment with the doctor.

He looked out at Cartwright. The man was getting tired. His face was drawn with strain and emotion, and his fingertips were clutching tight to the rough face of the wall. Levine said, "Cartwright."

The man turned his head, slowly, afraid now of rapid movement. He looked at Levine without speaking.

"Cartwright," said Levine. "Have you thought about it now? Have you thought about death?"

"I want to talk to my wife."

"You could fall before she got here," Levine told him. "She has a long way to drive, and you're getting tired. Come in, come in here. You can talk to her in here when she arrives. You've proved your point, man, you can come in. Do you want to get too tired, do you want to lose your balance, lose your footing, slip and fall?"

"I want to talk to my wife," he said, doggedly.

"Cartwright, you're *alive.*" Levine stared helplessly at the man, searching for the way to tell him how precious that was, the fact of being alive. "You're breathing," he said. "You can see and hear and smell and taste and touch. You can laugh at jokes, you can love a woman—for God's sake, man, you're *alive!*"

Cartwright's eyes didn't waver; his expression didn't change. "I want to talk to my wife," he repeated.

"Listen," said Levine. "You've been out here two hours now. You've had time to think about death, about nonbeing. Cartwright, listen. Look at me, Cartwright, I'm going to the doctor at three o'clock this afternoon. He's going to tell me about my heart, Cartwright. He's going to tell me if my heart is getting too tired. He's going to tell me if I'm going to stop being alive."

Levine strained with the need to tell this fool what he was throwing away, and knew it was hopeless.

The priest was back, all at once, at the other window. "Can we help you?" he asked. "Is there anything any of us can do to help you?"

Cartwright's head swiveled slowly. He studied the priest. "I want to talk to my wife," he said.

Levine gripped the windowsill. There had to be a way to bring him in, there had to be a way to trick him or force him or convince him to come in. He had to be brought in, he couldn't throw his life away, that's the only thing a man really has.

Levine wished desperately that *he* had the choice.

He leaned out again suddenly, glaring at the back of Cartwright's head. "Jump!" he shouted.

Cartwright's head swiveled around, the face open, the eyes shocked, staring at Levine in disbelief.

"Jump!" roared Levine. "Jump, you damn fool, end it, stop being alive, *die! Jump!* Throw yourself away, you imbecile, JUMP!"

Wide-eyed, Cartwright stared at Levine's flushed face, looked out and down at the crowd, the fire truck, the ambulance, the uniformed men, the chalked circle on the pavement.

And all at once he began to cry. His hands came up to his face, he swayed, and the crowd down below sighed, like a breeze rustling. "God help me!" Cartwright screamed.

Crawley came swarming out the other window, his legs held by Gundy. He grabbed for Cartwright's arm, growling, "All right, now, take it easy. Take it easy. This way, this

way, just slide your feet along, don't try to bring the other foot around, just slide over, easy, easy—"

And the man came stumbling in from the ledge.

"You took a chance," said Crawley. "You took one hell of a chance." It was two-thirty, and Crawley was driving him to the doctor's office.

"I know," said Levine. His hands were still shaking; he could still feel the ragged pounding of his heart within his chest.

"But you called his bluff," said Crawley. "That kind, it's just a bluff. They don't really want to dive, they're bluffing."

"I know," said Levine.

"But you still took a hell of a chance."

"It—" Levine swallowed. It felt as though there were something hard caught in his throat. "It was the only way to get him in," he said. "The wife wasn't coming, and nothing else would bring him in. When the girlfriend failed—"

"It took guts, Abe. For a second there, I almost thought he was going to take you up on it."

"So did I."

Crawley pulled in at the curb in front of the doctor's office. "I'll pick you up around quarter to four," he said.

"I can take a cab," said Levine.

"Why? Why, for the love of Mike? The city's paying for the gas."

Levine smiled at his partner. "All right," he said. He got out of the car, went up the walk, up the stoop, onto the front porch. He looked back, watched the Chevvy turn the corner. He whispered, "I *wanted* him to jump." And he thought, "It's crazy. How would that have kept my number from being up?"

Then he went in to find out if he was going to stay alive.

ADVENTURES OF THE SUSSEX ARCHERS

By August Derleth

One summer evening late in the 1920's I returned to our Praed Street quarters to find my friend Solar Pons slouched in his armchair contemplating an unfolded piece of ruled paper.

"Ah, Parker," he said, without looking up, "you're just in time for what promises to be an entertaining diversion."

So saying, he handed to me the paper he had just been studying.

It was cheap tablet paper, of a kind readily obtainable in any stationer's shop. On it had been pasted, in letters cut from a newspaper yellowed by weather: "PREPARE FOR YOUR PUNISHMENT!" In addition, a printed drawing of an arrow had been pasted to the paper.

"It was directed to Joshua Colvin of Lurgashall, Sussex," said Pons, "and reached me by messenger from Claridge's late this afternoon. This letter came with it."

He fished the letter out of the pocket of his dressing gown.

> Dear Mr. Pons:
>
> If it is convenient for you, I hope to call on you at eight this evening in regard to a problem about which my father will do nothing in spite of the fact that one such warning has already been followed by death. I enclose the warning he received. Since I believe you are fully aware of current crimes and mysteries in England, may I call your attention to the death of Andrew Jefferds of Petworth, ten days ago? Should it be inconvenient for me to call, a wire to me

at Claridge's will put me off. I am, sir, respectfully, yours.

HEWITT COLVIN

"I see by the newspapers beside your chair you've looked up Jefferd's death," I said.

"Indeed I have. Jefferds, a man with no known enemies —we read nothing of those unknown—was done to death at twilight ten days ago in his garden at the edge of the village by means of an arrow in his back."

"Surely that is an unusual weapon!" I cried.

"Is it not! But a profoundly significant one, for it also appears on the warning, and would then no doubt have some significance to Mr. Colvin." He raised his head and listened. "That is a motor slowing outside, and I suspect it is our client."

In a few moments Mrs. Johnson showed Hewitt Colvin into our quarters. He was a ruddy-faced man in his thirties, with keen gray eyes. He wore moustache and sideburns, and looked the picture of the country squire.

"Mr. Pons," he said without preamble, "I hope you'll forgive the abruptness of my letter. Six men have received a copy of the warning I dispatched to you—one is already dead."

"Ah," said Pons, "the significance of the arrow!" He waved our client to a seat, but Colvin was too agitated to take it, for he strode back and forth. "What have these six men in common?"

"All belonged to the Sussex Archers."

"Active?"

"No, sir. That is the background of my problem. They've been disbanded ever since Henry Pope's death twenty years ago. Pope was the seventh member of the Archers. He died like Mr. Jefferds—with an arrow in his back, an arrow belonging to the Sussex Archers. The inquest brought about a verdict of death by accident, and I've always understood that this was a true verdict."

"Let us begin at the beginning, Mr. Colvin," suggested Pons.

"It may be that is the beginning—back in 1907. As for

now, well, sir, I suppose it begins with the return of Trevor Pope—brother of that Henry Pope who died two decades ago. He had been in Canada, came back to England, opened the old Pope house near Lurgashall, and went into a reclusive existence there.

"I'm not likely to forget my first sight of him! The country around Blackdown is great hiking country, as you may know. I was out one evening when I heard someone running toward me. I concealed myself in some undergrowth just in time to see burst out of the woods across a little opening from where I was hidden a short, dark, burly man surrounded by six great mastiffs, all running in absolute silence save for the sound of his footfalls. He looked inconceivably menacing!

"That was in May. Two weeks later I saw him again. This time I didn't hear him; he burst suddenly upon me, pedaling furiously on a bicycle, with his mastiffs running alongside —three on each side of him, and though he saw me, he said not a word—simply went past as fast as he could. Nor did the dogs bark. Mr. Pons, it was uncanny. In the interval I had learned his identity, but at the time it meant nothing to me—I was only twelve when Henry Pope died, and was off to school at the time.

"Then, late in June, the messages arrived."

"Sent to all surviving members of the Sussex Archers?" interrupted Pons.

"Yes, Mr. Pons."

"All six still live in the vicinity of Lurgashall? Petworth, I believe, is but three miles or so away."

"All but one. George Trewethen moved to Arundel ten years ago."

"What was your father's response to the warning?"

"He dismissed it as the work of a crank—until Jefferds' death. Then he wrote or telephoned to the other members and learned for the first time that all had received identical warnings. It put the wind up him for a bit, but not for long. He's very obstinate. When he goes out now he carries his gun—but a gun's poor defense against an arrow in the back; so my brother and I take turns following him and keeping him in sight whenever he goes out."

"You're here with his consent?"

"Yes, Mr. Pons. He isn't averse to a private inquiry, but seems determined to keep the police out of it."

"But are the police not already in it?" asked Pons.

"Yes, but they don't know about the warning Jefferds received. My father knew only because Jefferds had mentioned destroying it when he visited him a few days before his death—Mr. Pons, I'm driving back to Lurgashall tomorrow morning. Dare I hope you and Dr. Parker will accompany me?"

"What precisely do you expect of us, Mr. Colvin?"

"I hope you can devise some way in which to trap Trevor Pope before an attempt is made on father's life."

"That will surely not be readily accomplished. Six mastiffs, I think you said? And the man either runs or pedals as fast as possible. What do you say, Parker?"

"Let us go by all means. I am curious to see this man and his dogs."

"Thank heaven, Mr. Pons. It is little more than an hour from London. I will call for you tomorrow morning at seven."

After our client's departure, Pons sat for a few moments staring thoughtfully into the dark fireplace. Presently he turned in my direction and asked, "What do you make of it, Parker?"

"Well, it's plain as a pikestaff that Colvin senior doesn't want the police nosing about that twenty-year-old accident," I said. "And that suggests it may have been more than accident. From that conclusion it's but a step to the theory that Trevor Pope has returned from Canada to avenge his brother's murder."

"That is surely exemplary deduction," said Pons. "I am troubled by only one or two little aspects of the matter which no doubt you'll be able to clear up when the time comes. Thus far, we have no evidence to connect Trevor Pope with the warnings."

"It's surely not just coincidence that Pope's appearance in the neighborhood is followed by the warning letters. Their very wording points to him!"

"Does it not!" agreed Pons. "The intended victims are

not told to prepare for death, but for 'punishment.' That is surely ambiguous! 'Punishment' for what?"

"Why, for the murder of Henry Pope, what else?"

"The coroner's inquest determined that Pope came to an accidental death."

"Inquests are not infallible, Pons; no one knows this better than you."

"True, but I incline a little to distrust of the obvious. Why warn these gentlemen at all if vengeance is the motive?"

"It is elementary psychology that avengers have a pathological wish to let their victims know *why* they are being punished. These warnings seem to have achieved their purpose, now that the first of the surviving Archers has been slain."

"But not yet to the extent of sending any one of them for the police. What coy reluctance to act!"

"If any proof were needed that Pope's death was not all it seems, that is certainly it."

"Is it? I wonder. These waters, I fear, are darker than we may at this moment believe. We shall see."

Thereafter Pons retreated for the evening behind a Guide to Sussex.

An hour after our client stopped for us next morning, we were driving through the quaint Wealden village which is Lurgashall, and then climbing the height of Blackdown, the highest hill in Sussex. Not far up the slope stood our client's home, a rambling stone house set behind stone gate piers and a yew hedge, with outbuildings down slope from it at one side.

Our client had wired his father of our impending arrival; as a result, Joshua Colvin awaited us in the breakfast room. He was a sturdy, middle-aged man wearing a fierce, straggly moustache, and a dogged look in his dark eyes.

He acknowledged his son's introductions in a gruff, self-confident manner. "You'll join me at breakfast?" he asked.

"A cup of tea, sir," said Pons. "I like to keep my mind clear for these little problems."

Colvin favored him with an even, measuring glance.

"Sit down, gentlemen," he said. "You'll not mind my eating? I waited on your coming."

"By no means, Mr. Colvin."

We sat at the breakfast table, and would have been readily at ease had it not been for an almost immediate interruption. A young man, obviously just out of bed, burst into the room, his sensitive face flushed and upset.

"Father—I saw Pearson about again last night . . . ," he said, and, catching sight of us, stopped. "I beg your pardon."

"Come in—you're late again," said Colvin. Turning to us, he added, "My son, Alasdair—Mr. Solar Pons, Dr. Parker. Now, then—Pearson. You're quite sure?"

"Certain, sir. Skulking outside the gateposts. I got in at midnight."

"Pearson," put in our client, "is a beater my father discharged over two months ago. Been hanging around ever since."

"May I ask why he was discharged?" inquired Pons.

"He was party to a poaching ring," growled Colvin. "Sort of thing I won't tolerate."

Alasdair Colvin, meanwhile, had swallowed only a cup of coffee. Then he got to his feet again, made his excuses, and left the room.

"Boy has an editorial position," said Colvin shortly. "Softening job. Lets him sleep late. Disgraceful, I call it."

Our host had now devoured a hearty breakfast. He pushed back from the table and sat, arms akimbo, hands gripping the arms of his chair.

"Well, sir," he said to Pons, "now you're here at my son's invitation, we may as well get on with it."

"Tell me something about the Sussex Archers, Mr. Colvin," said Pons.

"Little to tell, sir. Organized 1901. Disbanded 1907. Accidental killing of one of our members, Henry Pope. Never had more than seven members. Pope, Jefferds, myself. George Trewethen, Abel Howard, Will Ockley, and David Wise. That's the lot of us. All devoted to archery. We got together to practice it. That's the long and the short of it. All congenial chaps, very. Liked a nip or two

now and then. No harm in that. Had our own special arrows. That sort of thing. Competed now and then in contests with other clubs. Henry's death took the stuffing out of us and put an end to the Sussex Archers."

"The death of Mr. Pope would seem to warrant a few questions," said Pons.

"Twenty years ago, Mr. Pons," said Colvin with a mounting air of defense. "He's all dust and bone by this time. The coroner's inquest said accident."

"You insist on that, Mr. Colvin?" pressed Pons.

Beads of perspiration appeared suddenly on our host's temples. He gripped his chair arms harder. "Damn it, sir! That was the decision of the jury."

"Not yours, Mr. Colvin."

"Not mine!"

"I submit, sir, you accepted it with reservations."

"Since you're not the police, Mr. Pons, I may say that I did."

"Not an accident, then, Mr. Colvin."

"Murder!" Our host almost spat out the word. Once having said it, he relaxed; his hands slipped back along the arms of the chair. He took a deep breath; the words came out in a rush. "I don't see how he could have been killed by accident, Mr. Pons. Nor do I know why he should have been murdered. We were all experienced archers, sir—*experienced!* We were not given to accidents. We were all close friends. There never was an uncongenial word among us. Besides, none of us had anything to gain by Henry's death. We had much to lose. We lost the one thing we prized among us—our archery. I've not touched my bow since the day."

"How was he killed, Mr. Colvin?"

"We were on the Weald, Mr. Pons. Woods all around us. We were separated, taking positions for distance in loosing our arrows. After we had discharged arrows we pushed forward to mark our distances and see who had shot his arrow farthest. We found Henry with an arrow in his back, dying. It was one of our special arrows—but unmarked."

"Unmarked?"

"Since we were trying for distance that day, we had marked our arrows individually. When we found our arrows later, we learned that Henry had discharged his." He paused, licked his lips, and went on. "All our arrows were marked that day, Mr. Pons—but the arrow that killed Henry wasn't marked. This wasn't brought out at the inquest, I need hardly say. Whoever killed Henry had brought along an unmarked arrow for that purpose."

"Was the Archers' schedule widely known?"

"Set up annually, sir," replied our host. "Anybody could have known it, if he were interested. Not many were."

"Is Mr. Pope's family still in the vicinity?"

"Henry was unmarried. A quiet man, retired early in life. Quite wealthy, too. His younger brother, Trevor, was his only heir. I remember what a time we had trying to reach Trevor—we didn't, in fact, get in touch with him until after Henry was buried. He was on a walking tour of the Scottish Highlands. He came back only long enough to take care of Henry's affairs, closed the Pope house on the far side of Lurgashall, and went to Canada. He returned only last May."

"And this, Mr. Colvin?"

Pons spread the warning our host had received on the table before him.

"Monstrous!" Colvin gave Pons a hard look. "I could be punished for many things, sir—but the death of Henry Pope isn't one of them."

"Was the arrow that killed Jefferds one belonging to the Sussex Archers?"

"It was. No question about it. Fair put the wind up me."

"I should not be surprised," said Pons. "Now, then, about Pearson. How long had he been with you?"

"Ten years."

"You, too, have seen him skulking around?"

"Not I. Alasdair chiefly. Hewitt saw him on two occasions."

"Only recently, Mr. Pons," put in our client. "He seemed to be waiting for Father to come outside."

"Man knows my habits," growled Colvin senior. "He could find me outside anytime he wanted to."

"I take it you've been married more than once, Mr. Colvin."

"Ah, you saw that Alasdair's no whit like him," our host said, jerking his head toward our client. "True. Married twice. Twice a widower. Alasdair was my second wife's son; I adopted him. A good, quiet boy, a little scatterbrained. Perhaps that goes with publishing."

"And Mr. Jefferds' murder," said Pons then—"does it occur to you that the same man who killed Henry Pope might have killed Jefferds? It's a possibility."

"Wouldn't it occur to you? But I tell you, sir, I'm at a complete loss as to who might have done it, and why."

"You've not been to the police," said Pons.

"Damn it, sir!—we've suppressed evidence. We don't want it to come out now. What good would it do? An arrow used by the Archers is the only thing that ties the two murders together. The *only* thing. Mr. Pons, I know! Henry Pope was an inoffensive man; so was Andy Jefferds. Who stood to gain by their deaths? Trevor Pope, who was miles away when his brother died! Ailing Mrs. Jefferds, who needed her husband alive far more than anything she might inherit! Such crimes are senseless, sir.—But this is your game, not mine," finished our host, pushing back his chair and rising. "I leave you to my son."

So saying, he stalked out of the room.

Pons, too, rose. He turned to our client. "About Pearson, Mr. Colvin—when was the first time you saw him skulking around?"

"Why, I believe it was the night after Mr. Jefferds' death."

"But he *had* been about before?"

"Alasdair saw him before that—though he didn't mention it until I told Father I'd seen him. Then he came out with it—said he hadn't wanted to say it before and upset Father."

Pons stood for a moment deep in thought. Then a little smile touched his lips, and I knew he was off on a new line which pleased him. "Now, then," he said to our client. "We shall want to move about. Can you spare a pony cart?"

"Come with me, Mr. Pons."

Late that afternoon we drew up at a pub on the Lurgashall side of Petworth. We had spent the day calling on the other three resident members of the disbanded Sussex Archers—Will Ockley, a semi-invalid—David Wise, who was now a clergyman—and Abel Howard, a taciturn man of late middle age, who was still engaged in stock-farming experiments—from all of whom I could not determine that Pons had elicited any more information than he already had.

In the pub we made our way to the bar and sat down. Pons ordered a gin and bitters, and I my customary ale. Since it was still early evening, there was little patronage in the pub, and the proprietor, a chubby fellow with sparkling eyes and a thatch of white hair, was not loath to talk.

"Strangers hereabout?" he asked.

"On our way to see Joshua Colvin on business," said Pons. "Know him?"

"Aye. Know him well."

"What sort is he?"

The proprietor shrugged. "There's some that likes him, some that don't. Has a gruff manner and a sharp way of telling the truth. Makes one uncomfortable."

"And his sons?"

The proprietor brightened. "Cut from different cloth altogether. Alasdair, now—he's a real sport. Comes in for the darts." He shook his head. "A bit of a loser, though—he's no hand for it. Still owes me five quid." He chuckled. "But Hewitt—well, sir, in business he's all business, and he don't come here much. But don't ye be fooled by that—he's an uncommon eye for the ladies. There's them could tell ye a tale or two about Hewitt and the ladies! But I ain't one to gossip, never was. Live and let live, I say."

"Does not a Mr. Pope live nearby?" asked Pons then.

The proprietor sobered at once. "The likes of him don't come here," he said darkly. "He don't talk to no one. There's them say they know why."

"And Mr. David Wise?"

"Aye—as close to a saint as ye can find these days." But abruptly he stopped talking; his eyes narrowed. He

flattened his hands on the bar and leaned closer to Pons, staring searchingly at him. "Ye're asking about the Archers. Aye! I know ye, sir, damme if I don't. We've met."

"I don't recall it," said Pons.

"Ye're Solar Pons, the detective," he said, flinging himself away from us.

Thereafter he would say no more.

We took our leave soon thereafter, Pons not at all displeased by the proprietor's refusal to speak. "We have one more stop to make," he said. "Let us have a look at Trevor Pope."

Following the directions our client had given us, we drove down a lane into a Wealden hollow and came to a semi-Tudor house behind a low, vine-grown wall. It wore a deserted appearance.

Pons halted the trap at the gate, got out, and walked to the door, where he plied the knocker. There was a long wait before the door opened. An old servant stood there.

"Mr. Trevor Pope?" asked Pons.

"Mr. Pope doesn't wish to see anyone," said the servant. "He's going out."

Pons came back to the trap, got in, and drove up the lane to the road, where he turned off into a coppice, got out once more, beckoning me to follow, and tied our steed to a sapling. We circled toward the rear of the house, taking advantage of every tree, and had scarcely come into good view of it before there burst from the direction of the kennels half a dozen great mastiffs, and in their midst, running at dead heat, a short, dark man wearing a turtleneck sweater, tight-fitting trousers, and rubber-soled canvas shoes. They bore toward a woodland path which would take them around Lurgashall in the direction of Blackdown. The dogs made scarcely a sound; all that fell to the ear was Pope's footfalls, and all that held to the mind's eye was the tense, strained expression on his dark face, and the clenched fists at his sides.

"What madness drives him to this?" I whispered, as they vanished.

"What, indeed! There must be an easier exercise. You cannot deny, however, that it is an impressive performance.

Small wonder it startled our client." Pons smiled. "It is now sundown. Surely he won't be gone long. Let us just go to meet him."

The course Trevor Pope had taken led in an arc away from the house; we were soon out of sight of it on a Wealden path that he and the dogs had followed. Pons paused suddenly at the edge of an open glade, where the path led down a slope toward Lurgashall. There he paused to look around.

"I fancy this will do as well as any place," he said. "Let us wait here."

The sun was gone, the afterglow began to fade, half an hour passed. Then came the sound of running footsteps.

"Ah, he is coming," said Pons.

Almost instantly the mastiffs and their master swept around a grove of young trees and bushes at the bottom of the slope within sight of Pons.

"Mr. Trevor Pope!" Pons called out in a loud voice and began to advance.

Pope came to a stop and heeled his dogs with a savage cry. He turned a furious face toward us, flung up his arm to point at Pons, and shouted, "Stand where you are! What in hell do you want?"

"To ask you some questions."

"I answer no questions."

"One, then, Mr. Pope!" Pons' voice echoed in the glade.

"Who are you?"

"Only a curious Londoner. You may have heard my name. It is Solar Pons."

There was an audible gasp from Pope. Then, "So they've sent for you!"

"One question, Mr. Pope!"

"Go to hell, sir!"

"Can you furnish me with an itinerary of your walking tour in the Scottish Highlands in 1907?"

There was a moment of pregnant silence. Then a fierce cry of rage, a curse, and Pope's furious words, "Get out—get out!—before I turn the dogs on you. You meddling nosy parker!"

"You may not have seen the last of me, Mr. Pope."

"You've seen the last of me, sir!"

Pons turned, and we went back the way we had come. There was no immediate movement behind us. When last I saw him, glancing over my shoulder as we were descending the slope toward the house and the cart beyond, Pope was standing motionless among his mastiffs, literally bursting with rage and hatred.

Once back in the trap, I could not help observing, "A violent man, Pons."

"Indeed," agreed Pons.

We rode in thoughtful silence until, just before reaching the stone gate piers of our client's home, Pons caught sight of someone slipping behind a cedar tree at the roadside.

He halted the trap at once, flung the reins to me, and leapt to the road. He darted around the cedar.

I heard his voice. "Mr. Pearson, I presume?"

"That's my name," answered a rough voice gruffly.

"What's your game, Pearson?"

"I got m' rights. I'm doin' no harm. This here's a public road."

"Quite right. Over two months ago you came to see Mr. Colvin."

"No, sir. Two weeks is more like it."

"You carry a gun, Mr. Pearson?"

"I ain't got a bow an' arrer!"

His inference was unmistakable. Pons abruptly bade him good-evening and came back to the cart. He said not a word as we drove on in the deepening dusk.

Our client waited for us in the hall. He was too correct to inquire how Pons had been engaged, though he must have drawn some conclusions.

"Can I get you anything to eat, gentlemen?" he asked.

"Perhaps a sandwich of cold beef and some dry wine," said Pons. "Just take it to our room, will you? I should like now to talk to your father once more."

"Very well, Mr. Pons. He's in his study. We just got back from his usual walk. It was my turn to guard him tonight." He sighed. "Father makes it very difficult; it angers him to catch sight of us behind him. Just in there, sir."

The senior Colvin sat before his stamp collection. His glance was more calculating than friendly.

"I'm sorry to trouble you, Mr. Colvin—but may I see your bow and arrow?"

Colvin leaned back, a baffled expression on his face. "Ha!" he exclaimed. "I wish I knew where they were. Put them away when Henry died, and then later put them somewhere else. Hanged if I know where they are now. That was twenty years ago, sir. Why d'you want to see 'em?"

"I have a fancy to see the kind of weapon that killed Mr. Pope and Mr. Jefferds—and may some day kill you unless I am able to prevent it."

"You speak bluntly, sir," said Colvin, flushing. "The bow I can't show you—but you'll find one of the arrows up there." He pointed to the wall above the fireplace and got up. "I'll get it down for you."

"No need, sir," said Pons. "I'll use this hassock to look at it."

He stood for a while before the arrow, which I thought an uncommonly long one, with a very sharp tip.

"I observe this arrow is sharp and lethal, Mr. Colvin. Is this usual?"

"Not at all, Mr. Pons. Average archery club wouldn't think of using tipped arrows. That was what made the Sussex Archers unique. Ours were all tipped. I told you, sir—we were experienced archers. Took pride in that. Took pride in the use of tipped arrows.—Until Henry died."

Pons retired from the hassock, restored it to its position, and bade our host good-night. Our client waited at the threshold to conduct us to our room, where our brief repast was ready for us.

"Is there anything more, Mr. Pons?" asked our client at our door.

"One thing. Does your father take his walk every evening?"

"At about sundown regularly, rain or shine. Only a severe storm keeps him in. He's rugged, Mr. Pons—very rugged."

"He usually follows the same route?"

"Roughly, yes."

"Is this route generally known in the neighborhood?"

"I should imagine so."

"Can you take time to show me tomorrow morning where he walked tonight?"

"Certainly. My office in Petworth can easily spare me."

"Thank you. Good-night, sir."

Pons ate in contemplative silence, sat for a while cradling his Moselle, then got up and began to pace the floor in that attitude I knew so well—head sunk on his chest, hands clasped behind him. I knew better than to interrupt his train of thought.

After almost two hours of this, he paused before me. "Now, Parker, what have you to say of it all?"

"Little more than I said before. Trevor Pope flees through the dusk like a man trying to escape his guilt."

"Indeed he does!" said Pons agreeably. "I do not doubt but that Mr. Pope is the agent upon whose actions the entire puzzle turns."

"As I pointed out before we left Praed Street," I could not help saying.

"I recall it," continued Pons. "It does not seem to you significant that Pearson, who has been trying to see Joshua Colvin, has not yet been able to do so, though he knows Colvin's routine and could find him outside any time he wishes?"

"The fellow is clearly playing some game intended to put the wind up his former employer."

"That is surely one way of looking at it. Did it suggest nothing to you that each of the onetime Sussex Archers we questioned today held exactly the same views as our host? None would speak a word against each other, yet each was convinced that Henry Pope's death was not an accident."

"Theirs seems to be the only tenable view, the inquest notwithstanding."

"I submit it is an interesting coincidence, moreover, that Jefferds should be killed at twilight, the precise hour Trevor Pope is about with his pack of trained mastiffs."

"Would you have it otherwise?" I cried. "That was the

hour for him to commit the crime! I suppose," I went on, "you've constructed a perfect case about Pearson."

"Pearson is certainly in the matter—up to his eyes, shall we say?—or I am dead wrong. Let me see," he went on, looking at his watch, "it is now after eleven. Inspector Jamison will certainly be at home by this time. Now if I can manage to reach the telephone without arousing the household, I will just have a little talk with him."

So saying, he slipped out of our room to place a trunk call.

When he came back, he vouchsafed no information.

Next morning Pons deliberately dawdled about the house until the trunk call he expected came at ten o'clock. He took it, listened, said less than ten words, thanked Inspector Jamison, and rang off. All this time our client had been standing by, waiting to be of service to us.

"Now I am ready, Mr. Colvin," said Pons, "to follow the course your father customarily takes on his evening walks."

"Come along, sir," said our client.

He led the way out of the house and struck off into the surrounding woods. Our course led down the slope of Blackdown toward the Weald, away from Lurgashall. Pons' eyes darted here and there. Occasionally he commented on the view to be had, and once he asked about the proximity of Trevor Pope's course.

"The two paths intersected at that copse just ahead, Mr. Pons," said Colvin. "That's where I saw Pope and his mastiffs."

We passed through the copse, which consisted of one very large old chestnut, surrounded by fifty or more younger trees. We had not gone far beyond it when Pons excused himself and ran back into it, bidding us wait for him.

When he rejoined us, his eyes were dancing. "I believe we have seen enough, Mr. Colvin," he said. "I wanted especially to make sure that there *was* a point of intersection between your father's course and Trevor Pope's. It seems to serve the purpose for which it is intended."

"I am glad you think so, Mr. Pons."

Pons looked at his watch. "And now, if you will forgive me, we seem to have accomplished for the time being everything we can, and if you will drive us into Petworth, we can catch the 12:45 to London. Pray pay my respects to your father, and say to him I have every hope of laying hands upon the murderer of Mr. Jefferds within forty-eight hours."

"You've laid a trap for Pope then!" cried our client.

"We shall have to take the murderer in the act," answered Pons. "Pope is desperate. I rattled him severely last evening. Tell your brother to take exceptional care when he follows your father tonight."

We walked back to the house, and within a few minutes we were in our client's car on our way to Petworth, where we were deposited at the station.

No sooner had our client driven away than Pons sprang into action. "Now, then," he said, "let us check our bags and spend a little time wandering about Petworth. We might take a bit of luncheon."

"We'll miss our train, Pons!"

Pons favored me with an amused smile. "We're not taking the train, Parker. We have an engagement this evening with a murderer. I expect to keep it."

Just before sundown we made our way into that copse of trees where Joshua Colvin's course crossed that of Trevor Pope. Pons had an objective in view—it was the old chestnut tree with a hollow at shoulder height and down one side of the tree—a low-branched tree dominating the copse.

"This is our rendezvous," said Pons. "If I am not in error, this is Joshua Colvin's night of peril. I hope to prevent his death and take his would-be murderer in the net. Now, then, up into the tree—well up."

Within a few moments we were out of sight up along the trunk of the old chestnut, Pons taking care to be along the far side, away from the direction from which Pope might come.

"But the dogs, Pons," I cried. "What of them? They're dangerous."

"We shall deal with them if the need arises," he answered. "Now, then, the sun is setting—we may expect Colvin to set out soon on his round. It will take him half an hour to reach here."

"And Pope as long," I mused. "How it all works out!"

"How indeed! Now let us be silent and wait upon events. Whatever you see, Parker—make no sound!"

The sun went down and the sky paled to the evensong of birds. Bats began to flitter noiselessly about. Then, promptly on schedule, Joshua Colvin entered the wood, his gun held carelessly in the crook of one arm, and passed within sight of the tree.

He had hardly gone before Alasdair Colvin sauntered into sight. The younger Colvin came straight to the chestnut tree and set his gun down against the old bole. He took from his pockets a pair of skin-tight gloves, into which he hastily slipped his hands. Then he reached into the opening in the chestnut tree and drew forth a bow and arrow!

At this moment Pons hurtled down upon him.

Startled at last from my almost paralyzed shock, I scrambled down the trunk and dropped after Pons.

Alasdair Colvin fought like a beast, with a burst of strength surprising in one so slight of body, but Pons and I managed to subdue him just as the elder Colvin came running back upon the scene, drawn by the sound of the struggle. Seeing the bow and arrow lying nearby, Joshua Colvin understood the meaning of the scene at once. He raised his gun and fired twice to bring help.

"Serpent!" he grated. "Ungrateful serpent!" Then, spurning the prostrate young man, he turned to Pons. "But why? *Why?*"

"Alasdair was heavily in debt, Mr. Colvin. I suspect also that he was being blackmailed by Pearson. Your son killed Andrew Jefferds and planned your death in an attempt to recreate an old crime and pin it upon an old murderer."

"An old crime?"

"Henry Pope's murder. It was almost certainly his

brother who slew him. Your paths crossed here, within minutes, though tonight, unaccountably, Pope is not coming—which would have served Alasdair grievously had he succeeded in his diabolical plan."

From the direction of the house came the sound of running footsteps.

On the train bound for London, Pons yielded to my inquiries.

"It seemed to me at the outset that, while not impossible, it was highly improbable that anyone would exact vengeance twenty years after the event to be avenged," he began. "And it would certainly have been the greatest folly to announce 'punishment' to those suspected of having committed the murder of Henry Pope, for this would surely focus attention upon Trevor Pope, the one man who might conceivably want to avenge his brother's death. It seemed therefore elementary that these messages were intended explicitly to do just that.

"Proceeding from this conclusion, I had only to look around for motive. Who would benefit at Joshua Colvin's death but his sons? Hewitt Colvin would hardly have enlisted my help had he been involved. That left only Alasdair. But what motive could he have? Curiously enough, it was the proprietor of the pub in Petworth who furnished a motive when he mentioned that Alasdair still owed him so trifling a sum as five quid—a motive strengthened when Jamison informed me this morning, in response to my request for an inquiry, that Alasdair was deeply in debt at the track and in various gaming houses—five thousand pounds.

"The plan was conceived with wonderful cleverness. A pity Jefferds had to die—a sacrifice to Alasdair's vanity. Everyone knew the elder Colvin's routine—and Alasdair knew that Trevor Pope would not be able to supply himself with an alibi at that hour. Moreover, the arrows and the bow Alasdair had taken from his father's storage and hidden in the tree could as readily have belonged to the late Henry Pope. Trevor alone knew there was no reason for vengeance against the Sussex Archers—for he un-

questionably killed his brother; he alone had motive and opportunity—that vague walking tour of the Highlands enabled him to slip back, commit the crime—the Archers' schedule was set up annually, according to Colvin senior—and return to the Highlands to be 'located' after planned difficulties.

"Unhappily for Alasdair, two little events he had not counted upon took place. Pearson came upon him the night of Jefferds' murder—which also occurred at the hour Trevor Pope was out with his mastiffs—and very probably saw him with the bow in hand before he could conceal it. Though Pearson may have come originally to see the elder Colvin, he came thereafter to see Alasdair for the purpose of blackmailing him. You will recall the discrepancy between Alasdair's statement about seeing Pearson months ago, and Pearson's own claim, corroborated by Hewitt's failure to see him previously, that it was 'more like two weeks.' So Pearson suspected, and was thus in it up to his eyes!

"The other event, of course, was Hewitt's application at 7B. A neat little problem, Parker. Tomorrow, I fancy, I shall have a go at Trevor Pope's Highlands itinerary—difficult as that will be at this time.

But the solution of the secondary mystery was not to be Pons', for the morning papers announced the suicide by hanging of Trevor Pope, who, though he left no message behind, evidently saw in Pons' presence on the scene of his own dastardly crime the working of a belated nemesis.

FAT JOW

By Robert Alan Blair

Fat Jow looked up, annoyed, from sweeping when the bells on the shop door jangled rudely. His annoyance turned to distaste, mingled with fear, upon recognition of Lucky Leo Lindner.

"Where's the boss?" demanded Lindner, a busy man, never civil. The nature of his various enterprises did not require civility.

With an impatient toss of his head the old clerk indicated the loft stairs at the rear of the shop, and resumed sweeping. He employed his faultless English rarely because its harshness insulted his Oriental ear, attuned to singing tongues.

He transferred his sweeping nearer the stairs to improve his listening. In his forty-two years with Moon Kai, little had escaped the old clerk.

Soon Lindner's voice rose angrily. "It took me seven years to line all you guys up, and now no small-time operator like you is gonna queer the organization."

Moon Kai's reply was monosyllabic and unintelligible.

Lindner said, "Why not get smart, Pop? It's not only me. You know they'll put the clamps on your lottery the minute you go yellin' to the cops."

Moon Kai lifted his thin voice. "I shall do what I must, Mr. Lindner, and I do not ask your advice."

"Okay! So you know where I stand. Think about it, that's all. I won't ask again."

Lindner thumped down the stairs and out the door, followed by the crash of bells.

Moon Kai appeared on the stairs, buttoning his coat. "I must go out for a time," he told his clerk. He was calm, but his eyes were bright with anger.

"Do you go to the police?" asked Fat Jow. He did not wish his master to come to harm, nor the lottery to suffer because of him. But one in Fat Jow's position is not entitled to express an opinion.

Moon Kai paused at the door. "If but one merchant has the courage to go to the police," he said slowly, "the time of affliction will end." He sighed. "Is it not better to allow the lottery to be closed down than to submit meekly to Lindner?"

"I cannot say," murmured Fat Jow sympathetically.

"The closing will not be permanent," argued Moon Kai. "The police are as birds in a rice field. They attack with gusto, but soon have their fill and turn away."

"Will you go to the police alone?"

Moon Kai give him a faint smile. "Have no fear. . . . I shall not act alone. I go now to speak with Lee Keung of the noodle factory and Gim Wong of the sewing shop. They, too, weary of Lindner's 'protection.' "

With misgivings, Fat Jow watched his master depart. He foresaw impending change in the well-ordered existence he so treasured. For these forty-two years he had worked long days for Moon Kai, resided alone in a one-room basement apartment nearby, shopped for his meager supplies at the neighborhood markets, held leisurely conversation with his friends. Truly a well-ordered existence, wanting neither initiative nor invention.

Because the quiet of the herb shop was more conducive to earnest talk than either noodle factory or sewing shop, Moon Kai brought both merchants back with him. Over tea in the loft they conferred long and solemnly, but when Moon Kai descended briefly to dismiss Fat Jow, they were no nearer agreement than before.

A burden lifted from his heart, Fat Jow went home. Moon Kai had promised not to act alone.

In the morning Fat Jow padded early down the street to unlock the shop for the day. Beneath the weathered "Herbalist" sign he stopped and stiffened in alarm. The door, off the latch, swung open at his touch into the dim interior. Never did Moon Kai fail to lock the door upon leaving at night.

Fat Jow looked up and down the street, but at this early hour he was alone. On tiptoe he attempted to peer over the curtain of unbleached muslin in the bare shop window, but it served too well its purpose of preventing passers from seeing inside.

Because he loved his master, Fat Jow suppressed his fear and entered. The shop appeared normal, dusty shelves stocked with jars, foil and pasteboard boxes, heaps of twigs and twisted roots. Then he saw that the light in the loft was burning. How unlike Moon Kai to pay for an unused night of the electricity!

Fear slowing his steps, Fat Jow climbed the dark, steep stairway. As his eyes came level with the loft floor, he saw Moon Kai fallen face down between the rolltop desk and the swivel chair. A dull stain with a black hole at its center discolored the gray satin at the back of his vest.

Fat Jow was terrified. After forty-two years of an existence dictated by his master, decision was thrust upon him.

Now was the time for the police. A telephone was near upon the desk, but he could not bring himself near the body to reach it. He stumbled downstairs to the wall telephone, stopped before it. The police would but hasten the collapse of his tottering world. He compelled himself to think. Unless he called someone, Moon Kai might lie there indefinitely. No wife to come seeking her husband, for Moon Kai was a widower. The landlord would not come for the rent until the end of the month.

Ah . . . Moon Kai had a son at the city college. Only twenty-four, but *he* was the one to relieve Fat Jow of this responsibility.

The number of the fraternity house was penciled on the wall by the telephone. Fat Jow called, and was assured by a sleepy young man that the son would be located.

Fat Jow dropped limply into a cane-bottomed chair beneath the telephone. His apprehensive eyes flickered toward the loft stairs.

Now came rage, slowly swelling. Fat Jow half-closed his eyes and folded his hands in his lap. Perhaps the survival of serenity *was* his to insure.

Moon Kai's only son, hopefully named First Son, arrived by taxicab. A brash, Americanized Chinese, he came now haggard with worry. He seized the clerk by the shoulders. "What is it, old man? My father . . . they could not tell me. Is he ill?"

Fat Jow pointed toward the loft. "You will want to go alone," he said gently.

First Son dashed away and up the stairs two at a time.

A cry, a single agonized cry . . . and silence.

His eyes were red with weeping when he returned, but in them anger had joined sorrow. "Who has done this?" he asked grimly.

Fat Jow studied him. Had he thought to ask this youth for help? He said, "It was Leo Lindner."

A qualm tempered First Son's anger. "Are you sure?" he whispered.

"Either Lindner or someone he hired. He is aroused because your father planned to complain to the police. He made vague threats, but Moon Kai ignored them."

First Son said with rueful pride, "My father was not easily turned aside." He stepped out to look down the street. "Where are the police? Why do they not come?"

Fat Jow bowed his head against the tirade to come. "I have not called the police."

Wrathfully First Son confronted him. "Where is your mind, old man? My father has said correctly, others must do your slightest thinking for you." He reached for the telephone.

"Wait!" said Fat Jow sharply, clutching First Son's wrist. Ordinarily he would not have presumed to touch his person. He went on, "Listen to a man who loved your father no less than you, and would see him avenged."

First Son asked more calmly, "Then why have you not called the police?"

"I must have your permission to tell them what is in my mind," said Fat Jow.

First Son lifted hands and eyes to call upon the ceiling to witness his forbearance. "What may you tell them but the truth?"

Fat Jow shook his head. "It is not so simple. If Lindner

is responsible, be sure that he can account for his every move last night. We have no proof."

"But the merchants . . . will they not be eager to testify?"

"Not so. They are afraid, and this will make them more afraid. Here is assurance that Lindner deals swiftly with those who oppose him. In their eyes he is a devil who may not be opposed. In truth, his money and his lawyers work a wicked magic to keep the law from him. They create an aura of fear."

The fear grew in First Son's eyes. "Then I must go to Lindner myself," he said with resignation. His shell of Americanization was thin; the philosophies of a thousand years stirred close beneath its surface.

Fat Jow rose and laid a fond hand upon the younger man's shoulder. "Lindner is far more skillful than you in violence, my son. Do not destroy yourself for a moment of personal vengeance."

"But what am I to do?" cried First Son.

"Allow me to call the police, and to meet them when they come. Why seek Lindner upon his own ground, when we may bring him to ours?"

First Son saw Fat Jow with new respect. "Call," he said.

Fat Jow prepared for the police by providing them with an uncomplicated motive for the killing. He emptied the cash register and left the drawer standing open.

Wearing Moon Kai's coat, Fat Jow received the police, ushered them to the loft, there told them with unfeigned sorrow, "This was my trusted clerk, Fat Jow."

They did not challenge his identification. To them, all Chinese, particularly elderly Chinese, looked alike. They questioned the neighborhood merchants, but the Oriental mind, conditioned by centuries of oppression, resents all officialdom. Unwittingly everyone abetted Fat Jow's imposture with the universal response, No See.

It was an imposture soon and easily pierced, but not before the afternoon newspaper appeared with a brief item on page one under the heading "Clerk Slain in Chinatown Robbery."

Fat Jow sat late at the rolltop desk, finishing the bookwork begun the night before by Moon Kai. His newfound

confidence was melting with the advancing hours, and his head ached from unaccustomed thought. Frequently he glanced into the small mirror which he had placed to reflect the stairs behind him. Because the shop was dark except for the naked bulb above him, he saw only an edge of blackness where the stairs descended. He felt uncomfortably conspicuous in Moon Kai's coat.

Silence below . . . interminable silence. How had an intruder come upon Moon Kai without being heard? One had, else Moon Kai had not been found by his desk. Surely the bells had not jangled. Stealth suggested someone other than Lindner.

Fat Jow started at the angry crash of bells. This was no furtive approach, but one arrogant and sure. Heavy feet echoed on the stairs. Fat Jow forced himself to see the papers before him, but his eyes strayed to the mirror.

Out of the darkness materialized the dim form of a man. Fat Jow caught his breath. Leo Lindner, come to complete the assignment he thought bungled by his hireling.

"Hey, Pop!" barked Lindner, "I wanna talk to you. I'm real sorry about what happened. It wasn't what I meant at all. But it oughta be a warnin'. . . ." He paused, said suspiciously, "You ain't Moon Kai!"

Fat Jow turned. "Of course you knew about Moon Kai, Mr. Lindner?"

The lights below flashed on, and Lindner whirled to see the stairs blocked by merchants. He leaped up the remaining steps to the loft, but there was met by others emerging from hiding. First Son, at the sudden plunge of Lindner's hand toward a coat lapel, sprang forward and shouldered him off balance. The rest moved in and held him while First Son secured the gun.

"I'll use it if I must," he said, leveling it at Lindner's eyes. Convinced of his sincerity by cold fury in face and voice, Lindner stopped struggling and glared about in frustration. No fear . . . yet.

Fat Jow vacated the swivel chair. "Please sit down, Mr. Lindner," he invited.

Lindner had no choice; they herded him into the chair.

Fat Jow asked, "Why was I not Moon Kai waiting here?

Why must you content yourself that Moon Kai is dead?"

Lindner faced him with sullen defiance. "I don't talk without I see my lawyer," he growled.

"The time for talking is past," said Fat Jow. "Your lawyer is not here. No one is here but the accused and his accusers."

Lindner's bluster was not entirely assured. "Look . . . what kind of gag is this? Call in your cops, and let's get this cheap comedy over with."

"Hardly comedy," corrected Fat Jow. "One has died, and one must atone. Unfortunately, you have ways of thwarting the Western law . . . so we shall not rely upon that law. An ancient law demands an eye for an eye. As you may know, our tradition offers many effective means of punishment." He signaled the others. "Tie him."

Lindner shied at sight of the ropes. "Oh now . . . wait!" he protested disbelievingly, trying to rise. But they pushed him down and lashed him firmly to the chair. When they whipped a blindfold across his eyes, Lindner complained, "Oh, stop the games. You know this is just a bluff. Well, I don't scare easy."

"We shall see whether it is a bluff," said Fat Jow. "You now sit where Moon Kai died."

Lindner licked dry lips. "Whaddaya want, guys!" he cried. "I'll get off ya backs. I'll even put it in writin'."

"It is rather late for that," said Fat Jow. "Nothing will restore Moon Kai." His tone took an edge. "Moon Kai, who harmed no one . . . who will not be avenged by the Western law."

First Son said, "You talk much, old man. Let us begin."

"I am willing," replied Fat Jow with grave courtesy. "Who has the knife?"

Lindner strained against the ropes. "You can't *do* this!" he wailed. "It's the twentieth century. It's the United States. I . . . it's against the law!"

"What was done to Moon Kai is also against the law," said Fat Jow. "First Son, you may have the honor of first blood. Begin with the face. There are no vital organs to be endangered."

Lindner's voice roughened to a croak. "This is cold-blooded heathen torture! You can't get away with it!"

"Gently," directed Fat Jow. "We do not wish to draw much blood too soon."

First Son stepped forward and slashed lightly down Lindner's left cheek. Mounting shrieks bespoke unbearable agony, and Lindner sagged forward sobbing.

But no mark had appeared on his face save a stripe of moisture. First Son learned more than the engineering at school; a fraternity initiation device upon occasion proved useful. The weapon in his hand was no more than a piece of ice.

"Once again," said Fat Jow.

"No, no, no!" screamed Lindner. "It was an accident, I swear! I only meant for Moon Kai to get mussed up a little. How was I to know that lousy little hood would get trigger-happy?"

Fat Jow stepped back to scan the intent faces of the merchants. "Observe, my friends. This is Mr. Leo Lindner, who has so intimidated you. If you continue to remain silent and tolerate the 'protection' of this crumbling person, will you ever again live at peace with yourselves?"

Shamefaced and angry, Gim Wong said, "I shall testify . . . alone, if need be."

Lindner, returning from the verge of hysteria, whispered weakly, "I'll get you . . . every last one of you."

First Son stuffed a handkerchief into the open mouth, and the threats deteriorated into sputterings.

Much frowning and gesticulating argument among the merchants followed.

"Is there one of you," asked Fat Jow, "who will *not* testify?"

The merchants became silent. Fat Jow looked from one to another, but no answer came.

"I shall now call the police," he said.

Each merchant appeared in court in his best suit and told what he knew about Leo Lindner. Lindner's attorneys were not sufficiently clever to set aside the murder charge, and although they saved their client from the gas chamber,

they heard a sentence pronounced which embraced much of Lucky Leo's future.

Official attention attracted by the trial inevitably suspended activities of the lottery. But rigid enforcement against a tradition rooted so deeply in the heart of a people cannot continue indefinitely.

The weathered "Herbalist" sign swings unchanged above the shop door, but the serene merchant presiding at the rolltop desk is Fat Jow. The gratitude of First Son, who does not aspire to the trade of his father, has elevated clerk to proprietor. Through lazy afternoons Fat Jow chats over tea with the other merchants, who, deeming him a valued friend, visit him often and seek his advice.

Again the existence of Fat Jow is well-ordered, but on a different plane. He indulges occasional nostalgia for a life without decisions.

VACATION

By Mike Brett

The motel was a luxurious U-shaped structure of redwood, aluminum and glass, two stories tall, the second floor having a continuous balcony which overlooked an enormous swimming pool. Charles and Lisa Hannaford arrived at one P.M., by taxi from the airport. In the warmth of the January sun the guests romped around the pool and relaxed on tubular beach chairs. They wore shorts and halters and swimsuits. Laughter and gay conversation drifted toward the Hannafords.

It was a Florida playground, and already Charles was beginning to feel some of his business tensions lift. The pool looked inviting. He wanted to change into his swimsuit, take a dip, then spend the rest of the day taking the sun.

They were going to stay a week. Perhaps tomorrow he would try his hand at a little golf, or perhaps Lisa would like to go out on a boat with him for some deep sea fishing.

Lisa caught his arm. "It's beautiful, Charles, isn't it?" she said, smiling.

"Yes, it's lovely." He never ceased to be amazed at her beauty. She was thirty-two now, and they had been married eight years. It was ten years since his first wife had died, and he had raised his two sons by himself until he had married Lisa. Twenty years older than Lisa, he was aware of her freshness and her enthusiasm, and the never-ending delight of looking at her.

In their room, they changed to swimsuits, and he kissed her. "You're right again," he said. "I'm glad we came down here."

Taking the vacation had been her idea. He owned a real-estate firm, a big one, and he worked hard. But lately the

big deals had fallen through, and some of the smaller ones, too, had gone sour. He'd come home tired and irritable. Competition had sprung up all round him over the years, and every day had been a battle.

It hadn't affected his love for Lisa, however. The wonder and the magic were still there for him. At night, alone in their bedroom, he had watched her brushing her long, black hair, and he knew she was the richness in his life.

But the strain of business had begun to take its toll from him. There were too many nights when he hadn't left the office until midnight. He smoked too much, he drank too many martinis, and he had put on too much weight.

The odds had been stacked heavily against their marriage from the beginning. Some of his best friends had warned him against marrying her. Of course, they had all been tactful. "You don't marry a girl with her background, Charlie," they had said. None of them had actually come right out and labeled her.

While driving over a bridge on his way home one rainy evening, he had seen her climb to the rail, poised to leap into the dark waters. She was twenty-four years old then, already so filled with her own feelings of futility that she no longer wanted to live.

But Charles Hannaford had seen something in the girl, had painstakingly gone about the business of convincing her she was a valuable human being, and had asked her to marry him. After much persuasion, he had convinced her that he was a very lonely man, and that she would indeed brighten his home.

A nice home, a small circle of friends (some hadn't accepted her) and the warm security of being truly loved by Charles Hannaford, had made her a functioning human being. They'd had eight good years, and he thought she was lovelier than when he had married her.

Lisa had seen the pressure on him these last few months, and had insisted upon the vacation. The strain was there with good cause. He was fifty-two years old. The ugly specter of failure loomed before him. It didn't make sense to leave a business that was going bad, for pleasure. But now he was happy they had taken the vacation. Somehow,

Lisa's optimism was contagious.

The trouble really started when they left their room for the pool. From the narrow balcony skirting the second floor of the motel, a blond giant of heroic dimensions called, "Lisa, honey!" then dove toward the pool. In those few seconds, Charles had seen a look of fear come over Lisa's face.

"Is there anything wrong?" he asked. "You're as white as a sheet."

"No. I'm all right. I knew him, Charles. I spent some time in Florida, ten years ago. We can leave if you like," she added meaningfully. "I think it would be better if we did."

"No. We're staying. We don't run from anything, Lisa," he said gently.

The man in the pool climbed out, dripping water. He was tall and his muscles bulged, a weight lifter, a physical-fitness man. With his long, blond hair and his deeply tanned body, he might have been a Viking god.

He stepped up to Lisa as though he had seen her only yesterday, and placed his hand on her arm. "Lisa, honey! Where you been? I recognized you the minute I set eyes on you." He spoke to her, but his eyes measured Hannaford speculatively.

"This is my husband," she said quickly, and Charles detected the nervousness. "My husband, Charles Hannaford," emphasizing it. "I don't seem to remember your name," she said weakly.

Charles felt an empathetic reaction. He felt his wife's discomfort. This was the first time anything like this had occurred since they were married. Her past had come up out of nowhere. There was no running away now. The blond giant, standing before her, blocked the sunlight from her. His shadow covered her like an evil embrace.

The light-haired man stood with his feet spread apart and his hands on his hips, confidently. "It's natural, your forgetting my name, Lisa," he said and smiled. "I'm Bill Rennie. It's been a long time, and you knew a lot of people when you were down here. Got a cigarette?" he said casually.

Charles handed one to him and lit it for him.

Rennie stared at Lisa boldly. Then the thin lips smiled knowingly. "It's been a long time, but it sure is nice seeing you again. You look terrific, just terrific." His eyes swept over her body. He chuckled. "Put on a couple of pounds since I saw you last. I remember you as a real thin kid." He extended his hand to Charles. "You're a lucky man," he said. "Real lucky."

Charles could sense the mockery in his tone. "Thank you, I feel that way too."

Bill turned to Lisa. "Guess you were kind of surprised to see me flying through the air like that. I get all the guests shook up every time they see it. They don't expect to see anybody flying down from up there." He winked at her. "Remember me, baby? I was always the high flier in the crowd."

"Yes," she said. "I remember you."

He pounded a large hand against his stomach. "Still in great shape." He pointed up to the balcony. "I got it made. I live up there, in room fifteen. I get up in the morning and I take off like a bird. Never have used the stairs to get down to the pool. That's strictly for tourists. We natives know better. How long you folks going to stick around?"

"A week," Charles said.

Lisa said quickly, "Perhaps a day."

"No," Bill said. "You'll stay longer than that. This is a terrific place. It'll take a week just to get comfortable." He glanced at Lisa again and said, "Mr. Hannaford, you sure picked yourself a winner."

"Yes, I think so," Charles agreed amiably.

Bill flicked the ash off the end of his cigarette. "Why don't you folks drop up to my place tonight? I'm having a party. Some of the locals and some of the tourists. We have a ball. You can come any way you like. Shorts, bathing suits, cocktail dresses, or evening dresses, anything you like, as long as you're comfortable. Me, I wear swim trunks."

"I don't know," she said lamely. "I don't think we'll be able to make it. We've just come down and the long trip—"

"Oh, come on," Bill said cheerfully. "It'll be like old times, Lisa. We've got plenty to talk over, and you'll have a good time too, sir," he said to Charles.

"I'm sure I will," Hannaford replied. "We'll be there. Thank you, we'd like to come." Rennie's *sir* had made him feel older.

"Swell," said Bill. "We start around twelve o'clock. Don't do much sleeping around here, you know."

Charles watched Rennie's shoulders as he walked away, the deeply tanned body, the long blond hair, and the swaggering walk.

"I don't want to go," Lisa said very softly.

"We don't have to," he replied gently. "But I think we should."

Her face was flushed. "You saw him, you saw the way he looked at me."

He nodded his head slowly. "He's wrong. He's looking at something in the past."

"That's the way he remembers it." She touched his elbow. "We don't have to stay here, Charles. There are so many places where we can stay, with more privacy."

"One place isn't any different than the rest. The only important thing is you."

"Then let's get out of here, Charles. Honestly, I want to leave. Staying here is unfair to you." She turned her head away and her voice was very quiet. "I was dirt when I knew him. You heard him, and you saw the way he looked at me. He makes me feel dirty."

He shook his head. "We're staying." The knowing innuendos in the man's tone still rankled.

"What are you trying to prove?" she asked angrily.

"Nothing, nothing at all. That's just the point. We don't have to prove anything."

"Thank you," she said, and he felt a pang of sympathy as she forced a smile. "He won't let up, Charles."

He shook his head soberly, a stocky, solid man. "He doesn't know with whom he's dealing. I do."

"I love you, Charles," she said simply. Then she ran from him, and he saw her body knife through the air as she dove into the pool. She was an excellent swimmer. He barely managed to stay afloat.

He went in after a while, for a few minutes, then came out and dried in the sun. He listened to the roar of conver-

sation and laughter around the pool, the squealing horseplay of children, the exclamations of cardplayers.

He stretched out on a beach chair and shut his eyes against the strong rays of the sun. A running child, dripping pool water, made him sit up. On the other side of the pool, he could see Lisa and Bill Rennie, side by side, dangling their legs in the water. The man was laughing, and even from this distance, across the pool, Charles could see a pained expression on Lisa's face.

Real brave man, Charles told himself, *a hero. You're fifty-two years old, and you throw her right into the path of a guy who can put pressure on her.*

He watched Lisa smile at Bill.

How smart are you, Hannaford? he asked himself. *You've married her and you've already beaten the odds. What more do you want?* But to turn and run now would be an admission of his lack of faith in her. It would destroy what they had built up between them.

Later, they dined at the motel's restaurant, overlooking the pool, and she was quiet and thoughtful. The pool had been emptied of guests and a handyman was cleaning an oily film from the side of the pool with a big brush.

They strolled for a while after dinner, then went back to their room. They were both very tired, and she suggested they take a nap. He went to bed. He heard her moving about in the room, then he heard the soft murmuring of the shower. A little while later, he heard her come out of the shower, and she sat down and brushed her hair.

Charles fell asleep. He awakened to darkness and the steady hum of the air conditioner. He was alone. Lisa was gone. He could feel the acceleration of his heartbeat. He lay there in an agony of torment.

Then he heard the key in the lock. Without knowing why, he shut his eyes and pretended he was asleep. She came into the room stealthily, taking one slow step after another. He felt the bed give as she lay down beside him, and then he heard her quick breathing. In the darkness of the room, he felt sick.

After a while she got up and dressed. He must have dozed off again, he realized, when she shook him and

awakened him. It was a quarter to twelve.

She was wearing a shimmering, white evening dress. Her hair was beautifully combed. Her neck was white and strong, and her lips were full and red.

"Come on," she said and smiled. "We're going to a party. You'll probably want to put on a sport jacket."

The party was already in full swing when they arrived. Hollywood's version of the lover, Bill Rennie, greeted them. Charles could see the quick glint of amusement in Rennie's eyes. The guests had come as he had said. There were perhaps fifteen people in the room, and their dress ranged from cocktail dresses to slacks and swimsuits. There were lovely women here, Charles saw. But none was lovelier than his wife. He felt an inexplicable sense of sadness.

The guests danced to the music of an ancient record player, set off in a corner. Bill danced with an assortment of happy, smiling women. And then he was dancing with Lisa, holding her tight. He kept whispering into her ear.

By three A.M., a good percentage of the guests were drunk. One intense, dark-haired girl had a crying jag. She loved her boss; alas, he loved his wife.

Charles watched his wife dancing with Rennie. He saw her nod to something Rennie had said. She left Rennie quickly and walked over to him. Her blue eyes were enormous in her curiously pale face.

"I'm going back to our room for a while," she said softly. "I have to get something, and I want to put on fresh lipstick."

"Sure," he said. "Sure."

He made himself another drink, but he knew that all the whiskey here wasn't going to rid him of the bitter taste in his mouth.

Out in the center of the room, Bill Rennie suddenly pretended to be very drunk. He had been cold sober up to this point. He staggered a bit and made a drunken announcement. "Good-bye, cruel world," he said, then climbed up on the open window and stood poised, ready to dive.

Cries of panic burst from those who had never seen him jump into the pool from his room, and wild laughter from

those who had.

Charles caught a glimpse of Bill's face, saw the mockery in it. It was all there before him now. Lisa was already gone; now Bill Rennie was going to join her. He was going to jump into the pool, and guests were going to scream and expect to see his crushed body down below.

Bill Rennie was going to meet his wife somewhere. Charles had gambled and he had lost. Never had he felt so old, so tired.

Bill Rennie dove out over the balcony toward the pool, his grandstand trick. Some of the guests scrambled to the window. A woman screamed, but it was mock screaming. There were too many guests around her who were calm. It was a gag of some kind.

Suddenly, from below, near the pool, another woman began to scream. It split the night, and lights began to go on all over the place.

Men began to run from all directions. They pulled Bill Rennie out of the pool and stretched him out while they waited for an ambulance to arrive.

He was alive. Both arms were broken, and there was a severe cut over his head. His face would never be the same.

One of the men who had pulled him out of the pool said, "He's lucky. There's still about three feet of water in the deep part of the pool. That's all that saved his life."

The police arrived with sirens blasting the night. They investigated and found that some joker had opened both drain cocks and had almost emptied the pool.

"It must have happened early in the evening," the hotel manager volunteered. "It would take several hours for the level to drop this much."

Charles Hannaford walked slowly back to his hotel room. Several hours for the pool's level to drop; that was about the time he had fallen asleep that night, right after dinner.

Charles entered his room very quietly. A small lamp was lit, and he could see his lovely wife, sleeping. Did he imagine it, or was there a tiny smile around her mouth?

Charles bent over her and kissed her, and felt a heady sense of triumph. You have to fight to keep what you have.

DEATH CAN BE BEAUTIFUL

when it's dealt out by the expert hands that Alfred Hitchcock has gathered together in his never-ending quest for the ultimate in chilling mystery, nerve-tingling suspense and macabre wit. So take a good grip on your easy chair, try to keep your heart out of your throat, and prepare to enjoy the finest stories ever by such brilliant writers as:

Donald E. Westlake • Henry Slesar
Helen Nielsen • Robert Bloch
August Derleth • Charles Einstein
Donald Honig • Paul Eiden
C. B. Gilford • Talmage Powell
Robert Alan Blair • Michael Brett
Jack Webb • Fletcher Flora

All personally selected by the Master,

ALFRED HITCHCOCK

PRINTED IN U.S.A.