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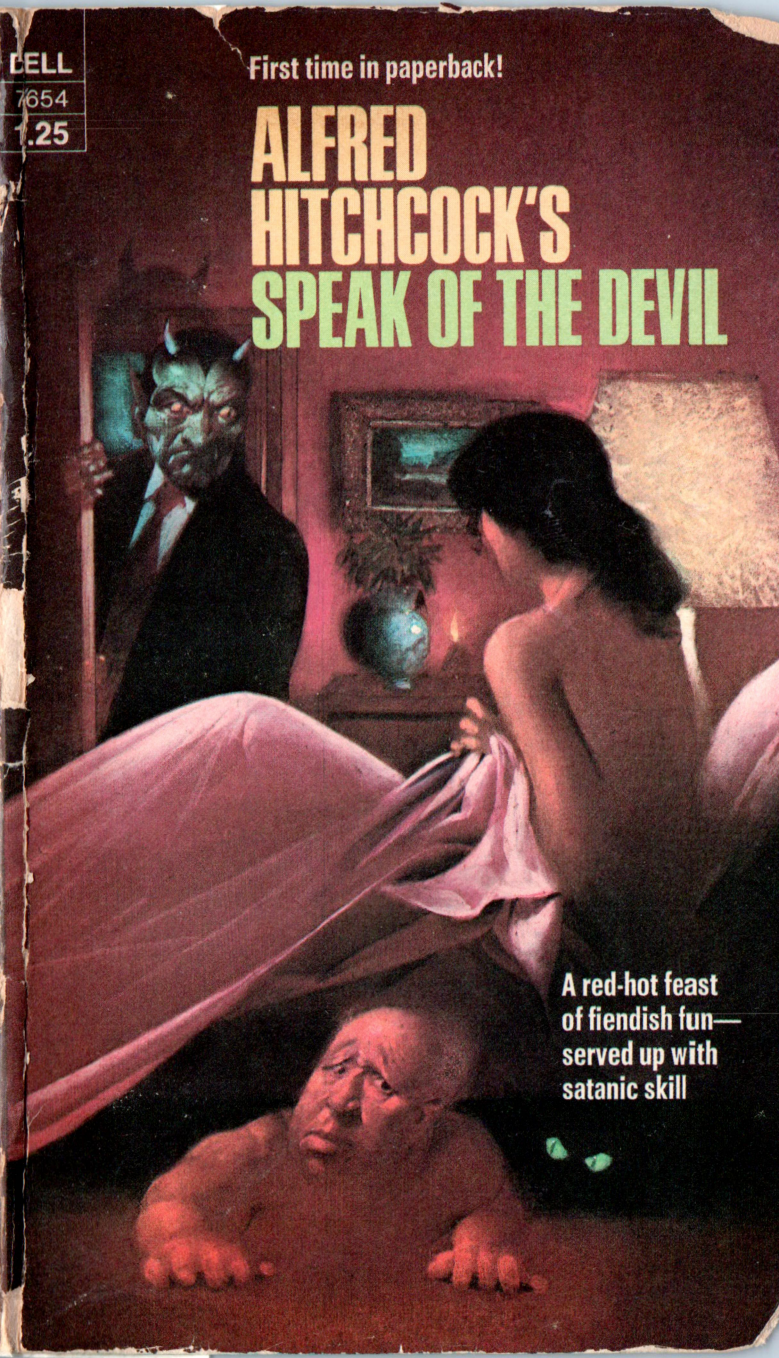

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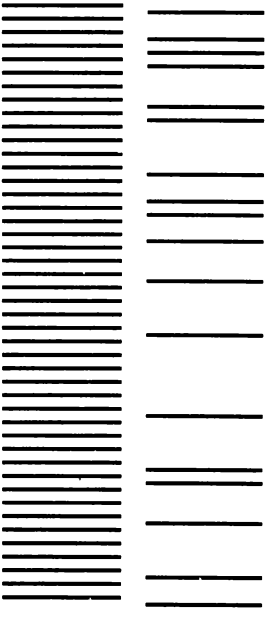

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Speak of the Devil

Alfred Hitchcock

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INTRODUCTION

Alfred Hitchcock

I had a spare few moments a few days ago, so I put my mind to solving the nation's most pressing problems. The answers came to me so quickly and so easily that it makes me wonder if the politicians, who have been struggling with the problems for years, have really been trying. Instead, I suspect, they've been devoting the major share of their time and energy to their own personal most pressing problem, getting re-elected.

As for the problems:

First off, there's transportation. People drive cars instead of riding trains, with the result that the highways are packed and the air is polluted. The explanation is, of course, that cars are so much more convenient than trains. The family vehicle is as close as the carport, while the train station is always on the other side of town. Too, trains arrive and depart by their own schedule, which is seldom the same as the potential rider's.

The answer, clearly, is not to make public transportation better, as has been proposed, but to make private transportation worse; that is, to force people to use the trains out of sheer desperation. Let the auto manufacturers produce a car that is guaranteed to break down on the highway midway between San

Jose and San Luis Obispo and a giant step will have been taken. From that point it will be no task at all to turn out an automobile that features an unfillable backseat driver. Then watch the railroad business pick up.

The littering problem, I've decided, is essentially a matter of attitude. We've been conditioned from childhood to believe that "picking up" is "good," while littering is "bad." It was the Puritan ethic at work, as is so often the case. But, come now, didn't we once brand sex as "bad"? Today, of course, we realize that it is one of the most healthy—that is, "good"—activities that can be indulged in. It's being taught in school, I understand, along with math, history and how to steal second base.

With a little promotion, I'm sure, littering could become equally well thought of. Let's begin with television commercials. Add a tag-line at the end of the underarm deodorant advertisements, saying: When the can runs dry, litter a little bit for your country, throw it out the bathroom window. The can, of course, not the country. There might be some shock at first. Someone might even write a letter of protest. But once a good campaign really gets rolling the obstructionists are soon put to rout.

The advantages of littering are so numerous as to be almost uncountable. Tin cans, for example, do not have to be mowed, as grass does. Candy wrappers are colorful and have brief but fascinating little messages printed on them ("Imitation Flavoring"). Grass and most other forms of flora, on the other hand, are almost invariably a monotonous green. And what has anyone ever learned, by reading, from a clump of pachysandra? I could go on and on and on if I could think of any other examples.

Third, there is poverty. The solution, it seems to me, is not to redistribute the wealth, taking from the rich and giving to the poor. The rich would be terribly hurt, and let's try to be kind if nothing else. The answer is to redistribute the poor, taking them

out of the slums and putting them in with the wealthy. Automatically, they become members of the family. And the family always manages somehow to provide for its poor relations.

I see no difficulty at all in persuading the rich to take in the less fortunate, for, as my program is set up, each poor person adopted into the wealthy family will constitute a tax loophole. Loopholes are as popular among the rich today as diamond stickpins and private railroad cars were in an earlier era. I predict that once the poor come to represent a tax break the demand for them will produce a severe shortage. They will have to be imported. The world supply though, I'm confident, is large enough to keep the program in operation for years to come.

Last, and very possibly least, the problem of nudity in films. Keen observer that I am, I have noticed that the young ladies who appear in these movies in the buff are invariably attractive. The answer, of course, is to replace them with women who are grossly overweight, totally bald and have blemished complexions. We'll soon discover, I wager, that we're a far more "moral" nation than we realized, wholly indifferent to nudity on the screen.

And now that all the problems are solved we can happily get back to what we were put on earth to do—that is, curl up in a comfortable chair in a dimly-lighted room with a corking good mystery story. I've provided the means for that, too, as you'll find as you read on.

YESTERDAY'S EVIL

Jonathan Craig

Earl Brennan came back to Hegner on an afternoon in late September when the shadows had already stretched their purpled length halfway across the valley floor and the sun, weak and remote, had begun its descent behind the hazy peaks of the ridge beyond.

That was where it had happened, up there on the ridge, more than fifty years ago.

Hegner was not on any map. It was only a place name for four decaying frame buildings on the four corners of a mountain crossroad.

Brennan parked his dusty sedan in front of the general store and sat drumming his fingers on the wheel, staring up at the ridge that loomed so bleakly against the slate-gray of the sky. A man of seventy who looked nearer fifty, with carefully barbered hair as white as the collar of his expensive shirt, he shivered a little, remembering . . .

I shouldn't have come, he thought. *I must be getting senile.*

Yet he'd had to come. The sudden compulsion that had made him turn off the main highway and drive forty tortuous miles to this forgotten pocket in the mountains had been stronger than his will to resist. It was something that came to every man, he knew. If the man lived long enough, the time came when he

felt compelled to pay a last visit to the place where he had spent his youth, even if it was a place like Hegner; even if half a century had passed; even if something unspeakable had happened there.

He tried to take his eyes from the ridge, but he could not. Across the years he could hear Flossie Tyner's cries and the drunken, animal-like sounds of the other four boys and himself. He could feel the terror he'd felt after it was done and they had run away from the battered corpse of the young girl there by the narrow trail.

He hadn't meant it to end in murder. He hadn't wanted the other part of it to happen, either; but the other boys had, and there had been too much moonshine, and a kind of madness that he had never known existed. It had sickened and shamed him, and he had never again raised his hand in violence of any kind.

Where were they today, he wondered, those four young men who had shared that midnight madness so many years ago? Jody Simms and Lute Munson and Billy Stritt and Buck Danley. They'd all been a few years older than he when it happened; they'd all be in their seventies now.

They had gotten away with it; no one had even suspected them. Flossie Tyner's older sister, Sue Ellen, had discovered the body the next morning, and all five boys had stood in the crowd that had gathered around Flossie's father in front of this same general store and heard him swear on the graves of his long-dead wife and newly-dead daughter that Flossie's name and death would be avenged.

Earl shivered again, remembering the chilled flesh that old Caleb Tyner's words had brought to him that long-ago morning. It had been no idle vow that Caleb had made. Here in the mountains, where blood feuds and violence were a way of life, and where a man's redemption of the honor and death of a kinsman was taken for granted, the fury of an outraged

father was terrible to see, and his sworn vengeance was certain, even if it took a lifetime to exact.

Caleb Tyner had been in his fifties at the time, Earl reflected. Caleb would be long gone now, buried back there on the hill with his wife and Flossie.

Stop thinking about it, Earl told himself as he got out of his car and walked up the dirt path to the store. He'd buy a cigar, and if there were any old-timers there he might ask about Jody and Billy and Lute and Buck, and maybe a few of the others he had known. Afterward, he might drive around a bit, perhaps look at the old home place, and go to Blind Fish Cave and some of the other places where he'd played as a boy; then back to the main highway to resume the pleasure trip he had interrupted because of an old man's yearning to visit the past.

It would be a short visit, he assured himself. He had only just arrived, but he was already anxious to be gone. He was becoming depressed, and at the dark edge of the depression there was something else—some nameless anxiety, an uneasiness of mind that would not go away.

He stepped into the store, closed the door behind him, and paused, stunned by how little the big room had changed.

There was a middle-aged man behind the rough-plank counter, and another middle-aged man and a very old man sitting on wooden boxes by the big potbellied stove. All three men wore frayed work clothes and stained, shapeless hats.

"Come right on in, mister," the man behind the counter said. "What can I do for you?"

Earl crossed to the counter. "You carry cigars?" he asked.

"I got some factory seconds is all. Three for a dime," the proprietor said. "Better than nothing, I guess."

"They'll do fine," Earl said. He put a dime on the counter, took three cigars from the box the propri-

etor held out to him, and put them in his breast pocket.

"Bit snappish out," the proprietor said. "Wouldn't surprise me none if we got a little snow."

"Yes," Earl said. "Excuse me, but you bear a resemblance to a man I used to know. Tom Bradley."

The proprietor laughed. "I reckon I better look like him," he said. "He was my daddy." He paused. "You from around here, are you?"

"Yes. A long time ago, though. Before you were born."

"Well now, is that a fact? And you knew my daddy?"

"We were good friends. I used to spend a lot of time in this store."

"Ain't no place else to spend it, I guess. Isn't now, and wasn't then. You mind me asking your name?"

"Earl Brennan."

The proprietor frowned thoughtfully. "Well now, I got me a pretty fair memory, folks say. But I just don't recollect—"

"I recollect him," the very old man by the stove said. "But I'd've sure never known his voice. He talks like a city man now. No offense."

Earl turned to look at the old man, and now he saw the clouded pupils of the rheumy eyes and realized suddenly that he was blind.

"You might've knowed old man Walker would recollect," the proprietor said. "Things stick to his mind like flies to flypaper. Always did."

"Are you Jed Walker?" Earl asked.

"Sure am," the old man said. "Been that for ninety-four years. Aim to be it for a fair spell longer, too."

"I remember you," Earl said.

"You been gone a long time, son," Jed Walker said. "Last time I seen you, you was about twenty, as I recollect. Left these parts real sudden, it seems like."

"And did mighty well for yourself, too," the pro-

prietor said. "Judging from your clothes and car and all. Yes, sir."

"Real estate," Earl said. "I was lucky."

"You was a real fire-eater in them days," the old man said. "Be you still?"

"No," Earl said. "I'm seventy years old now, Mr. Walker."

"And them boys you run with," the old man said. "Good boys, but hell-raisers, every one." He paused. "Let's see, there was Buck Danley and Jody Simms and Lute Munson and—let's see, now—and Billy Stritt." He laughed. "You five was sure wild ones, and that's the truth."

"Are any of them still around?" Earl said.

"No, they ain't," the old man said. "And they ain't been for nigh as long as you been gone."

"What happened to them?" Earl asked.

The old man shifted his cud of tobacco to the other cheek and spat at the stove. "They just disappeared," he said. "All four of them at once. Ain't nobody knows where they went or why they went there. They was just here one day, and the next day they wasn't."

"Disappeared?" Earl said. "All four of them?"

"All four," the old man said. "Happened two, three months after you left. Disappeared complete."

The middle-aged man sitting by the stove spoke for the first time. "I heard my pa talking once when I was just a youngun," he said. "Him and some other men. They was saying the devil must've took those boys, they was so mean."

The old man snorted. "Shoot! It wasn't no devil. And it wasn't no fiend, neither. They was some put stock in that talk about a fiend, I reckon. But I didn't."

"Fiend?" Earl said.

"Well, they disappeared about the time that little Tyner girl got killed up on the ridge. Flossie, her name was. You recollect her?"

Earl wet his lips. "Yes," he said.

"Well, there was them that figured there must be a fiend on the loose around here. He killed Flossie, they figured, and then later on killed them four boys and hid their bodies somewheres. But it was just talk. Like I said, I never put no stock in it."

"It's just a pure mystery, is all," the proprietor said. "Ain't nobody ever going to know what happened to them."

Earl started to speak, then changed his mind. *Let it go,* he decided. *Why pursue it? We were all together that night, those four and I, in that drunken horror on the ridge, but . . . Something unexplained happened to them after I left, yes, but whatever it was it couldn't have had anything to do with what happened on the ridge.*

Couldn't have? But what if it had?

"I think I'll have a look around," Earl said, turning toward the door. "It's been a pleasure talking with you, gentlemen."

"Well, you take your look around, and then you come back and talk some more," the proprietor said.

"Thank you," Earl said. "Maybe I will."

Back in the car again, he followed the twisting mountain road for two miles to the cabin where he had been born. He didn't even bother to get out of the car. There was nothing left of the cabin but a jumble of fire-blackened planks overgrown with foliage, and a pile of stones that had once been a chimney.

It'll be getting dark before long, he thought. *I might as well go back.*

Still, he wanted to see Blind Fish Cave.

No, he thought as he started the engine again. *It's not the cave you want to see. It's the cabin just beneath the cave. The old Tyner cabin. Where Flossie Tyner lived until the night you . . . And why should you want to see it? Why, Earl? To torture yourself? A little salt in the wound of your guilt?*

He drove another mile and a half and parked at the foot of the steep path that led up the hill to the old Tyner place and the cave above it.

A long way up there, he reflected as he got out of the car. *Too far, and too steep a path for a man my age.* But he started up.

When he came to the path that branched off to the Tyner cabin, he paused to rest. The cabin, fifty yards away, was shrouded by brush and scrub oak. There was no smoke from the chimney. Probably it had been deserted long ago, he reflected. He was a little surprised to find it was still there. It had been an old cabin, even fifty years ago.

Flossie . . .

He shook his head as if to clear it, and started up the path again. No point in thinking about that night on the ridge, he reminded himself. No point at all.

"Stop right there, mister!" a woman's voice said behind him. "And turn around. But slow. Real slow."

The woman who stood with an ancient rifle aimed at his chest was small and old and bent, with a toothless mouth and the most grotesquely wrinkled face Earl Brennan had ever seen.

"What're you sneaking around on my property for?" she said in a grating whine. "Speak up, damn you!"

"My name's Brennan," Earl said. "I'm from around here. I was just—"

"In them city clothes? You're lying, mister. You're a county inspector or something. I'll ask you one more time. You lie to me again, and I'll—"

"Point that thing the other way, ma'am," Earl said. "I was born and raised here. I left a long time ago. I was just visiting. I mean, I was just looking at some of the places I used to—"

"Like what places?"

"Well, like Blind Fish Cave up there. And my old home place, over by Indian Knob. And Bradley's

store, down at the crossroads."

"Name some of them you know around here. Besides Bradley."

"There aren't too many left. Old Jed Walker, for one. The boys I grew up with are all gone."

"Name 'em, anyhow."

"Well, there was Jody Simms and Lute Munson and Billy Stritt and Buck Danley."

"Must have been a little before my time," the old woman said. "Don't remember you, either. What'd you say your name is?"

"Earl Brennan."

The old woman stood completely still, studying his face carefully. "You talk pretty fancy for somebody brought up around here. But your voice has got a mountain tone beneath it, that's sure."

"I've been away a long time," Earl said. "Fifty years."

The faded eyes in their pockets of wrinkles appraised him for another long moment. Then the woman slowly lowered the old rifle. "You're too old to be a county man, anyhow," she said. "In fact, I s'pect you're too old for anything but what you say you are." She paused. "But you was sure doing some awful hard looking at my cabin."

"I used to know the family there. The Tyners. I wondered if—"

"They was before my time, too. Two, three families have lived there between them and me." She motioned toward the path Earl had climbed. "A man your age ain't got no business on a path like that. If you want, you can come in and rest a spell."

Earl hesitated; but the urge to see the inside of the old Tyner place again was strong.

"Well . . ." he said.

"Suit yourself," she said. "It makes me no never mind."

"All right," Earl said, and followed her down the side path to the cabin.

"Set down on that cane chair, if you want," she said as she closed the door. "It ain't comfortable, but there ain't any others."

"Thank you," Earl said, and sat down.

"I hope you got some pipe tobacco on you. I ain't had a smoke for a week."

"I'm sorry," Earl said. "I smoke cigars."

"That'll do fine. I'll just mash it up good and tuck it in my pipe."

He handed her a cigar and began to remove the wrapper from another for himself.

"Left my pipe over there on the sink," the old woman said, moving past him toward the rear of the room.

Earl spun the wheel of his lighter and brushed the flame across the end of his cigar.

He did not feel the impact of the heavy iron skillet that thudded dully against the back of his head and sent him sprawling senseless to the floor.

When he came to, he thought for a moment that he was having a bad dream. He was lying on cold, damp stone in what seemed to be a small cave, while above him, grinning horribly in the wavering light of the kerosene lantern in her hand, stood the old woman.

But this was no bad dream, he realized. The cave and the old woman and the rending pain in his head were real. He groaned, and tried to move, and found that his hands and feet were tied.

"You give me a scare," the old woman said. "I was about ready to think I killed you—and that would have been a pure shame." She laughed soundlessly, her gums black in the lantern light. "Oh, I mean for you to do some dying, never fear. But not fast. I aim to stretch it out for you."

Earl's mouth was so dry he could hardly form the word. "Why?" he asked.

"Why? Why are you going to do your dying so slow? Well, Mr. Earl Brennan, it'll be for the same reason

your friends did their dying that way—that Jody and Lute and Billy and Buck. They did theirs fifty years ago, and now you're going to do yours."

Earl swallowed hard. "Flossie," he said. "Flossie Tyner."

"Yes," the old woman said. "Poor little Flossie Tyner. Dead fifty years. Savaged and murdered by you and them others."

She moved a few feet to her left and held the lantern high above her head. "Look at them," she said. "See what your fine friends look like now, Mr. Earl Brennan."

Slowly, painfully, Earl turned his head to look.

Propped against the cave wall in a sitting position were four skeletons, the skulls grinning at him in the yellow wash of the lantern light.

"There's an empty space there at the end, you can see," the old woman said. "That's for you. I been saving it for you all these years."

Earl jerked his gaze away.

"This here's a cave the cabin was built against," the old woman said. "I can step out here and look at you any time I want." She laughed that soundless laugh again. "I aim to please myself that way many a time, Mr. Earl Brennan."

"Who are you?" Earl asked.

"I'm the one that lured your fine friends to their justice fifty years ago," the old woman said. "And I'm the one that's waited so long for you, Mr. Earl Brennan. I knowed you'd come back someday. I knowed you'd have to."

"You knew," Earl said. "You knew about me and Jody and the other boys." He paused for breath. "But how? How could you know?"

"Because Flossie told me," the old woman said. "You boys left her for dead. But she wasn't. She didn't live long after I found her that morning, but it was long enough."

"But it was Flossie's sister that found her that

morning," Earl said. "Not you. It was her sister—Sue Ellen."

"I ain't surprised you didn't know me," the old woman said. "I sure don't look like the nineteen-year-old lass I was fifty years ago, do I?"

Earl lay staring up at her, unable to speak.

"My daddy wasn't the only one to swear that whoever killed Flossie would have to pay," the old woman said. "I swore it, too. But I never told Daddy what Flossie said before she died. I knowed Daddy would only have took a gun and killed you boys one by one."

She put the lantern down and bent over him to make sure the bonds on his wrists and ankles were tight by giving each a tug.

"And that weren't the way I wanted it," she said. "Dying quick and easy like that would've been too good for you. I wanted you to die slow and die hard."

"Listen," Earl said. "Sue Ellen, please listen to me. I—"

"Of course, doing it my way weren't easy," the old woman said. "If Daddy hadn't died sudden, right after you killed Flossie, I couldn't never done it. But then I was the only one living in the cabin, and I saw how I could."

"Sue Ellen—"

"Stop your whining. What I did was, I waited till I come across all four of them boys together. It took a long time. I'd come across two of them, and sometimes three, but never all four together. And then one night I did. And I was ready. I lured them over here. I made them think we were all going to have us a party. I was as shameless about it as any hussy you ever see."

"Sue Ellen," Earl said, "if you'll only let me—"

"I even had some whiskey waiting for them. I told them we'd have to have our party back here in the cave, so no lights would show. I told them the kind of party we was going to have, we didn't want no-

body seeing us through the window." She paused. "That's a double-thick oak door there, and it's got a big iron bar and hasps on the other side to keep it tight shut with. I put them there myself, Mr. Earl Brennan. It was part of my plan."

"But I never meant it to happen to Flossie," Earl said. "I swear it, Sue Ellen. I never—"

"And just when the party was going good," the old woman said, "I made my move. I was out of here and had that door barred before them boys knew what was happening." She paused. "They died hard, Mr. Earl Brennan. They had plenty of whiskey in here, but they didn't have no food and they didn't have no water. It took them a long time. You should've seen how they'd wore their fingers all bloody, clawing at the door."

"In the name of mercy, Sue Ellen," Earl said, "don't—"

"Mercy?" she said. "What mercy? You're going to do a heap of hurting, Mr. Earl Brennan." She nodded slowly. "And don't think I'm worried about somebody seeing that big car down there at the foot of the hill, either. In a little while I'm going to tear a piece or two off your clothes and take them up to Blind Fish Cave.

"I'll hook them on some of the sharp rocks right on the edge of that underground river. Where folks always said there was blind fish, but where they ain't no such thing. And when somebody gets to wondering about that fine big car and asks about you, I'll say yes, I saw you, you was going up to the cave where you used to come when you was only a youngun.

"They'll go up there, and they'll see pieces of your clothes where they got tore off on the rocks when you slipped and fell and slid off in the river. I'll put your hat on the edge too, and gouge up the bank a little so it'll look like you clawed it when you was trying to keep yourself from sliding in."

"Please," Earl said. "Please, Sue Ellen. You can't do this."

"And you ain't going to just starve and thirst to death, either," the old woman said. "You're going to do a powerful lot of hurting along with it. You're going to have more things done to you than you ever even had nightmares about."

She laughed her soundless laugh and turned to leave.

"After all, I've had fifty years to think of things to do to you, Mr. Earl Brennan," she said. "Thinking of them kind of helped me to keep from thinking about what you done to Flossie."

SUSPICION, SUSPICION

Richard O. Lewis

A great many people in Banesville believed that pretty Cora Spindler was a murderess—that she had, cold-heartedly and with malice aforethought, murdered her husband Fred.

There had been no proof, of course. In fact, no charges concerning the suspected crime had ever been brought against her, and neither had anyone accused her openly. There wasn't even a definite motive in evidence.

True, the late Fred Spindler had carried a $10,000 life insurance policy. Yet almost everyone carries life insurance, don't they? Even Cora, herself, carried a policy of a like amount. Also, everyone dies sooner or later, don't they? From one cause or another?

Anyway, old Fred, working at a steady job and moonlighting on another one, was bringing in about ten thousand annually, so why get rid of him? Why kill a goose for a single golden egg and thereby bring to a sudden end the entire potential? It really wouldn't be very practical, would it?

Supposedly, Fred had died of an overdose of sleeping pills. Working at two jobs as he did, he generally had difficulty getting to sleep nights and had been helping nature along for quite a while by taking the pills. He was always tired, run-down, worn to a fraz-

zle. Even a normal dosage, catching him in a moment of utter exhaustion, might have been enough to do the trick, you see.

Cora had worked part time for two or three years at the Simm Bentley Pharmacy. During that time, of course, she had become acquainted with the various pharmacopoeia on the shelves and with their therapeutic properties, good and bad. Whenever Fred needed pills, she always brought them home for him. It was only natural, with her working in the drugstore and it being the only one in town and all.

"But," as Ben Roberts, the town marshal, put it when rumors continued to float around, "you just can't go around performing autopsies and arresting people for suspected murder every time a spouse dies. That would be casting a damning cloud on everybody who happened to lose a loved one! An intolerable situation! Anyway, in this case, what was the motive?"

However, in a small town like Banesville, there are almost as many suspicious minds as there are people. I don't know why it is, but some folk seem to enjoy having something morbid to talk about, and seem to get some strange pleasure in pulling other folk down a peg or two whenever they can. So the belief persisted: Cora was a murderess. She had done in her husband, one way or another, motive or no motive.

Then, a little more than a year after Fred's demise, when Cora had suddenly up and married her boss, Simm Bentley, owner of the pharmacy and one of the leading businessmen in town, the suspicion had solidified. There was the motive, just as plain as your nose!

"Now, look," argued Marshal Roberts, getting slightly riled, "it was only natural for them two to get married. They had known each other for quite a spell, Cora working in the store and all. Simm had lost his first wife two or three years ago, hadn't he, and was living all alone, wasn't he? If anyone needed a wife, he did, didn't he? Well, there you are!"

Yes, Simm had lost his wife, all right. She had died

of some strange malady that Doc Bronson had failed to diagnose in time. Oh, Doc Bronson had tried hard enough to save her, there was no doubt about that. He tried several different prescriptions, getting them filled at the drugstore by Simm Bentley, himself, a licensed and registered pharmacist. Still, none of his efforts had brought about the desired results, and there was nothing left to do but write in the final certificate: "Death due to natural causes."

Immediately after her marriage to Simm, Cora quit working in the store and busied herself setting up a happy home for her new husband. Things seemed to be going along quite well for them, and Simm hired a new part-time helper for the store—a pretty young thing in her early twenties.

People were fairly well pleased about the way things had turned out for Simm, after his earlier tragedy and all. Living alone as he had for the past few years, he was entitled to companionship and a comfortable home life, wasn't he?

There were some, however, who were still a bit skeptical concerning Cora. A cloud still hung over her. As I said before, in a small town like Banesville, there are almost as many suspicious minds as there are people. No one said anything out in the open, of course, but you could sort of feel it in the air. Would Cora, sooner or later, do for Simm what she had done for her first husband, Fred? Yes, you could sort of feel it floating around.

I don't know if Cora felt it or not, but if she did, she didn't let on none. She just kept right on keeping a good house for Simm and doing everything she could to make him happy, until she suddenly took sick.

Doc Bronson was called in immediately, and he finally made the diagnosis that Cora was suffering from a malady similar to that which had finished off Simm's first wife. Naturally, everyone felt sorry for Simm, and pitched in and did everything they could to help. Doc Bronson wrote out several new prescrip-

tions for Simm to fill, but—well, I guess that's the way things go at times. There wasn't anything else for Doc Bronson to do but state in the certificate that Cora's death had been due to natural causes.

Simm took it pretty hard, of course, and was all broken up for quite a while. True, Simm had collected insurance from his first wife and from Cora, along with the $10,000 Cora had collected from Fred, plus a few other fringes here and there, but that was certainly small enough compensation for all the tragedy that had touched his life, wasn't it?

Now maybe things have taken a turn for the better for Simm—at least everybody hopes so. His third wife, the pretty young thing that had taken Cora's part-time job in the store, seems to be doing her level best to make him happy and to give him a comfortable home life, and Simm has finally found another part-time helper for the store, a little redhead just out of high school. Yes, things seem to be going along quite well for him.

Everybody is still talking about Cora, though. Well, you know how it is when suspicion gets started in a small town like Banesville . . .

PEP TALK

Syd Hoff

Little Norman Munshin entered the house without wiping his feet, went into the kitchen and plopped down on a chair. His mother turned around at the stove, looked at him adoringly.

"Did your club have a good practice, dear?" she asked.

"Yes, I suppose so."

"You don't sound happy about it."

"I'm happy."

"Why don't you get out of that dirty uniform and tell me about it? You can have some nice cold pork after your shower. Would you like that?"

Little Norman didn't answer. He trudged up the stairs to his room, took off his football uniform and put on regular clothes. Then he went back down the stairs to the kitchen, sat down rather heavily again.

"You didn't shower, dear," said his mother, putting the finishing touches to a sandwich.

She watched him start eating, reached her hand forward several times to brush the hair back from his face.

"This isn't pork, it's chicken," said little Norman, shoving the plate away.

"The pork seemed tainted, dear. I didn't want to

take a chance on giving you ptomaine poisoning. But tell me about the team. You know, your father and I can't wait to watch every game this season, so we can cheer whenever you throw a pass or score a touchdown. It'll be a real thrill for your father, especially, having an athlete in the family."

"There won't be any touchdowns or passes, not by me, anyway," said little Norman, ignoring the chicken sandwich. "Jeffrey Tillstrom is our new quarterback. Mr. Hemsley, the coach, says he's faster than I am, has a better arm. Mr. Hemsley says he'll keep Jeffrey in the lineup every minute except when he wants the opposition to walk all over us."

His mother clucked her tongue. "There, there, dear, I'm sure Mr. Hemsley only made such a statement to make you try harder. I'm sure he really thinks you're capable of running as fast as Jeffrey Tillstrom and can throw just as well also."

"Mr. Hemsley doesn't think anything of the kind! He told me I'm too fat and lazy for football, that I don't have any aptitude for the game at all. He says if he has his way, he'll keep me on the bench permanently!"

Little Norman lowered his head and sobbed. His mother tried to brush the hair back from his face once more, but he pulled away angrily.

"Please, dear, try to remember that Mr. Hemsley is a coach. It's his job to think of the team as a whole, not merely of an individual. And it's our job to think the same. We must do whatever we can to help our side win, to help the *team*."

Her son continued sobbing.

"After all, isn't that the real purpose of sports, dear? To make us appreciate when someone else excels, to teach us to work harmoniously with others, to learn the essence of fair play and sportsmanship?"

"I don't care if it is," said little Norman, looking up. "I wish Jeffrey Tillstrom was dead! Dead! Dead!"

"Why, Norman Munshin, I'm ashamed of you. If

your father heard you talk like that, he'd be ashamed too, much as your success as a player means to him. To think that you are such a poor sport, that all the high hopes we had for you have been in vain, utterly in vain."

Little Norman turned away.

"Now, let me hear you say this instant that you're sorry for what you said about Jeffrey Tillstrom. He's a fine boy. He'd never say such a thing about you."

"I won't say it! I won't say it!"

His mother lifted her apron to her face. When she lowered it, her son saw tears in her eyes—real tears.

"All right, I'm sorry," he said slowly.

"You didn't mean what you said about Jeffrey?"

"No, I didn't mean it."

"And you promise never to say anything like that again? You promise from now on to stop being selfish and unsportsmanlike, to think of the team first, last, and always, ahead of yourself?"

"Yes, Mother, I promise."

"Good. Then go call up Jeffrey Tillstrom right away and tell him."

"Tell him what?"

"That you wish him good luck as the new quarterback, that you'll be rooting for him all season and hope he leads the team to victory in every game."

"Okay, Mother, if you insist."

"I insist, dear. Then you can come back here and finish your chicken sandwich. Believe me, dear, your father will be prouder of you for this than for anything you could ever accomplish on the playing field. It will make him realize that our son has learned the most important lesson in life—how to be a good loser."

Little Norman slid off the chair and went out to the phone in the hallway.

"Oh, by the way, dear, Jeffrey might be hungry too," his mother called to him. "While you're at it,

why don't you invite him over here right now to join you in having a bite?"

Before her son finished dialing, she had the pork out of the garbage can and was preparing a second sandwich.

THE TOOL

Fletcher Flora

From his country home, half-hidden in a grove of maples some five hundred yards away, Gavin Brander came across the intervening fields to visit his neighbors, the Singers. To be exact, it was Stella Singer and her daughter, Nettie, that he came to see, although he was prepared to tolerate Cory Singer also, if he happened to be around. Brander was a tall, slender man with the graceful carriage of an excellent tennis player, which he was. It was just after three o'clock when he left for the Singer home, and he hoped that he was not so early that he would be kept waiting for a cocktail.

He approached the house through an old orchard of cherry and apple trees that still bore blossoms in the spring, and fruit in the fall. Under one of the apple trees, a few feet from the fence he had just vaulted, he came upon Nettie. She was sitting on the ground with her back against the tree trunk, and she was eating a green apple on which, before taking each bite, she sprinkled salt from a cellar that she held in her right hand. Her brown hair was so rich and thick that it seemed almost too heavy for her small head and the delicate neck that supported it, and she had a serene golden face that was, apparently, forever

brooding pleasantly over some inner cache of warm secrets. She did not speak as he approached, and he stopped and looked down at her with an expression of indulgent affection. Sunlight filtered through the leaves overhead to dapple her white shirt and soiled jeans.

"You know," he said, "you are going to have the most awful bellyache. Better throw that away."

"Nonsense," she said. "Green apples never make me sick."

"That's rather incredible. It makes me feel squeamish just to watch you."

"It's just a foolish notion people have about them. In my opinion, green apples are good for you. In moderation, of course."

"Perhaps it's the salt. Do you think so?"

"I doubt it. The salt makes them taste better, that's all. Would you care to try one? I'll loan you my salt if you would."

"No, thank you. I don't believe I'll risk it. Why are you sitting out here in the orchard?"

"I was waiting for you."

"For me? That's very flattering, I must say. I should think, however, that you could have waited at the house."

"Mother's at the house, and I wanted to see you alone."

This was in precise conformity with his own wishes. Although he had come to see both mother and daughter, he preferred, for his own reasons, to see them separately. Now, balanced on his toes, he sat down easily on his heels.

"What did you want to see me about?"

She salted the green apple and took a bite. Her heavy hair fell forward, shadowing her eyes, and he was a little startled by the glint of malice that darted out of the shadows.

"Thanks to you," she said, "things have become very difficult in our family."

"Is that so? I'm sorry. In what way?"

"Cory doesn't like me. He's afraid of me, I think. He wants to send me away to school in September."

"It's absurd for a grown man to be afraid of a young girl. What makes you think he is?"

"Because I hate him, and he knows it. I wish he were dead."

"How do you know he wants to send you away to school? Has he discussed it with you?"

"No. He's only discussed it with Mother, but I overheard them talking."

"That was lucky for you, wasn't it? Now you know what to expect."

Her eyes, in the shadow of her hair, were bright for an instant with an expression of sly amusement.

"It isn't difficult to hear and see things if you know how to go about it. I've listened to Mother and Cory talking lots of times."

"Oh?" He stared at her hard with a sudden feeling of uneasiness that he disguised with the lightness of his voice. "I suppose you've also heard your mother and me talking lots of times?"

"Whenever I felt like it. Sometimes I listened and watched both."

"You've acquired some atrocious habits, my dear. Hasn't anyone ever told you that spying is bad manners?"

"It's often useful. You learn things."

"I dare say. What have you learned about your mother and me, for example?"

"Oh, that's plain enough. You're in love with each other, of course. You always kiss when Cory isn't there."

"That's nothing. Nowadays, kissing is a casual form of greeting between good friends."

"Not the way you and Mother do it."

"You're quite a clever girl, aren't you?"

"I'm extremely intelligent. Cory wants to send me to a school for gifted students."

"Would you like that?"

"No, I'll refuse to go."

"How does your mother feel about it?"

"She thinks I ought to wait another year. She and Cory had an argument about it. She said he just wants to get rid of me."

"Does Cory suspect your mother and me? Is that what you meant by saying I've made things difficult? I certainly didn't mean to."

"No, no. Cory's very dull about such things. He doesn't see what's under his own nose."

"Perhaps he's not as good at spying as you are."

"He's not as good at anything as I am. Things are difficult because of the tension, and you have caused it by the advice you have given me."

"I've only tried to help. It would be much nicer for everyone wouldn't it, if Cory would simply give up and go away? Divorces are quite easily obtained these days."

"Well, I've tried my best to make him go, but all it has done is create bad feeling between him and Mother. They are always at odds about me."

"What have you done? I may be able to suggest something more."

"I've taken every opportunity to express my hostility, that's all. I even threatened to kill him."

"Such threats from young girls are not to be taken seriously. I imagine he simply discounted it."

"Do you? I don't. He was quite disturbed about it. Later, I heard him asking Mother if she didn't think I should see a psychiatrist, but Mother wouldn't hear of it."

"Good for your mother. You can always depend on her to defend you. Nevertheless, however disturbed Cory was, I'll bet the threat would have been more effective if you had done something to support it."

"Done what? I don't want to get myself into serious trouble, you know."

"Of course not. I was just thinking of a kind of

trick. A clever girl like you should be able to devise something."

"It shouldn't be difficult. It really doesn't take much to upset Cory. He's a worrier."

"Not without cause, I can see. I happen to know a few tricks myself, in case you're interested. I don't think I'd better engage in a conspiracy with you, however."

"Why not? It would be our secret."

"Well, I'll think about it, but I'm sure that you will think of something better yourself."

She finished her apple, and now she threw away the core and balanced the salt cellar on one knee, which she had drawn up in front of her. Her eyes were bright with excitement, but at the same time they seemed to retain an analytical detachment that survived excitement or anger or any emotion whatever.

"You want me to make Cory leave Mother, don't you? That will make it possible for Mother to get an enormous settlement that will make everything much better when you marry her later. You *are* planning to marry Mother, aren't you?"

"How would you feel about it?" He suddenly felt something himself that was very close to fear. "If you hate Cory for marrying your mother, wouldn't you hate me as much?"

"Not at all." She laughed and snatched the salt cellar from her knee and shook her hair back from her eyes. "You're different from Cory. It might be quite entertaining to have you in the family."

"I'm glad you think so." He arose from his heels and settled his feet flat on the soft earth. "Keep me posted on developments, will you?"

"Yes, I shall." She laughed again with a kind of childish delight, anticipating a trick on Cory. "And now you had better go up to the house and see Mother. Cory isn't home, so you don't have to worry. No one will see you kiss her. Not even me."

He found Stella at the rear of the house, in a sunny

room with sliding glass doors that opened onto a wide terrace of colored flagstones. She was standing at the doors looking out across the terrace. She turned, hearing him behind her, and started toward him. She was wearing a white sheath and white sandals, and her skin had been exposed to the sun in controlled baths that had given it the shade and sheen of butterscotch candy. She was holding a cigarette in one hand and in the other, he was happy to see, a thin-stemmed glass with an olive in it. No one saw him kiss her. Not even Nettie.

"Darling," she said, "I've been waiting for you."

"My ego is greatly stimulated, I must say. You are the second beautiful woman who has told me that within the last half hour."

"I'm jealous of the other one."

"You needn't be. I've been talking with your precocious daughter in the orchard."

"Nettie? The girl's becoming quite impossible. What on earth was she doing in the orchard?"

"As I said, waiting for me. Also eating a green apple."

"Nettie likes you, I think, and it's rarely that she likes anyone at all. It must be your irresistible charm. I'm having an early martini. Will you have one?"

"I thought you'd never ask."

"They're in the pitcher on the table there. I remembered the ratio exactly. Four to one."

"Good. Will you have another one with me?"

"Later, darling. Four-to-one martinis shouldn't be rushed, especially when they get an early start."

"You're right. They are good for you, like green apples, in moderation. If you doubt me, ask Nettie. She's my authority."

She sat down on a white leather sofa, drawing her legs up under her, while he went to the table and poured a martini from the pitcher. After adding an olive, he went and sat beside her on the sofa, half-turned to face her directly.

"What did Nettie want, exactly?" she asked.

"I got the impression that she wanted to accuse me of making things difficult in your little family."

"That's absurd. Cory doesn't suspect a thing. You're just a good neighbor, darling."

"Oh, it apparently has nothing to do with you and me. It's strictly between Cory and Nettie. She hates him, you know."

"I know. But how are you involved?"

"I'm not really. Nettie only thinks I am. She has a wild notion that I have somehow contributed to the hostility."

"I've sometimes felt myself that you incite Nettie to be a little more untractable than she might otherwise be."

"Not intentionally, I assure you. If I'm an innocent but unfortunate catalyst of some kind, perhaps the solution would be for me to stay away. Is that what you want?"

"No. I couldn't bear that. The truth is, I should never have married Cory."

"Of course you shouldn't have. You should have waited and married me."

"Darling, I hope you don't mind being next."

"Not I. I'm planning on it. First, however, there's the small matter of a divorce. Preferably obtained by you on favorable grounds."

She leaned over and kissed him, and he patted one of her exposed butterscotch knees and continued to cup it intimately in his hand after the kiss was finished.

"I don't think that will be a prolonged problem," she said. "Nettie's taking care of it."

"Is the feeling between Nettie and Cory actually so strong?"

"Stronger. She hates him intensely, and he, for his part, is afraid of her."

"Afraid of a child? You must be exaggerating."

"I'm not. She threatened to kill him the other night."

"When I was a kid, as I recall, I threatened to kill several people at various times. It's merely a manner of expression."

"Nettie is no ordinary child. If she made her threats in a fit of hysterical anger, you could discount them. But she doesn't. She is perfectly calm and deadly. It's quite frightening, really, and I can't say that I blame Cory for being impressed. He wants to send her off to school."

"Will you permit it?"

"No. Cory and I have had an ugly scene about it."

"I still say that there's something ludicrous about a man being afraid of a young girl."

"Nevertheless, the relationship between them has become almost intolerable. Be patient a little longer, darling. Nettie will solve our problem for us in good time."

"You think she'll force a separation?"

"Yes. And a divorce will follow. No one can blame a mother for refusing to desert her child."

"Where is Cory now?"

"He drove into the village. He should be back any moment."

"Too bad. I was hoping for a little more free time. Oh, well, everything in its own time and place, I suppose. How about another martini now?"

She held out her glass, and he carried it and his over to the table. Bending slightly over the pitcher as he poured, his eyes had a speculative expression, as if he were considering an idea hitherto neglected.

There was a knock on the door of her room, and Stella, without turning away from her reflection in the mirror of her dressing table, called out an invitation to enter. In the glass, she watched the door open and Cory come in. He closed the door and leaned against it, both hands clutching the knob behind him. He was a small man with fine blond hair brushed neatly from the side across a thin spot on

the crown. In her year of marriage to him, Stella had learned that he was, although generous and kind, a man of precarious disposition, subject to a kind of irrational and free-floating anxiety. In his eyes now, as he looked across the room to intercept in glass her reflected observation of him, there were shadows of worry.

"Come in, darling," she said, still not turning. "I've been having a nap. Is it getting quite late?"

"Not late." He left the door and came over to sit on the edge of the bed, her eyes following him in the mirror. "About five."

"That's all right, then. Dinner's early tonight, but we'll have plenty of time for cocktails."

She began again to brush her hair, interrupted by his entrance, and she picked up the count immediately where she had left it, forming the sounds of the numbers with her lips in a rather absurb little ritual, as though a few strokes more or less made any difference. But it created diversion.

"Have you had the .22?" he asked abruptly.

"The what?"

"The .22 caliber rifle. It was in the rack in the library."

"Of course not. You know that I never touch your firearms."

"It's gone."

"Are you sure you didn't take it out and leave it lying somewhere? You must admit, Cory, that you're rather forgetful."

"I haven't touched it in weeks. I thought you might have loaned it to Gavin or someone."

"Well, I didn't. I wouldn't loan your rifle to Gavin or anyone else."

"Someone has taken it. I wonder who."

"Nonsense." She laid her brush on the dressing table and spun half around, back to the glass, to look at him directly. "Be reasonable, Cory. Who on earth would take your rifle?"

"Someone." His voice had suddenly a petulant, fearful quality. "Where's Nettie?"

"She's in her room, I think. Why? Surely you don't suspect Nettie of taking your rifle."

"It would do no harm to ask her."

"On the contrary, it might do a great deal of harm. The constant tension between you and Nettie is becoming unendurable."

"Am I to blame? I've done everything possible to make myself acceptable to her."

"She resented our marriage. You will simply have to be patient with her."

"My patience is rather strained these days. Nettie should go away to school. It would give her a chance to adjust."

"We've been over that. It would simply be evading the problem, and Nettie is, besides, too young to leave home."

"Nettie's not really young at all. She's ageless."

"I don't believe that I like that remark. What do you mean by it?"

"You know what I mean. She's deliberately trying to destroy our marriage. There's nothing she wouldn't do to accomplish it. Perhaps she already has."

"Stop it, Cory. I won't listen to you say such things. It's obscene for a grown man to feel such hatred for a child."

"I don't hate *her*. She hates *me*. Frankly, I'm afraid of her."

"Oh, don't be such a coward."

"Call me what you like, but there's something abnormal about the girl. She's completely enclosed. Nothing reaches her."

"She's extraordinarily bright. You can hardly expect her to have the same interests as mediocre children."

"It's more than that." He stood up and jammed his hands into his jacket pockets. "I want to speak with her, if you don't mind."

"About the missing rifle?"

"Yes."

"Then I do mind."

"Nevertheless, I insist. If you won't bring her here, I'll go look for her."

"Very well. Have your own way. I'll get her."

She left the room and walked down the hall to Nettie's door. Trying the knob, she found the door locked, and there was, after she knocked, such a long interval of silence that she began to think that Nettie was asleep inside or had gone out somewhere, locking the door after her and carrying away the key. Then, when she was about to leave, Nettie's voice sounded suddenly on the other side of the door.

"Who is it?"

"It's Mother. I want you to come with me to my room. There's something we need to settle at once."

A key turned, and the door opened. Nettie was wearing, as she had been yesterday, a white blouse and jeans. Behind her, an open book lay in a swath of sunlight on the floor.

"I was lying on the floor reading," she said. "What needs to be settled? Something new about me?"

"You'll see. It's nothing to worry about. Come along, dear."

Together, they returned to Stella's room. Cory, waiting, was still standing by the bed with his hands jammed into his jacket pockets. Stella had a feeling that the hands were clenched, and she was momentarily aware, with the slightest sense of compassion, of the depth of his desperation. She turned to Nettie, who was looking steadily at Cory with eyes that had acquired instantly the peculiar gloss of blindness.

"Cory wants to ask you something," she said. "Please answer him truthfully."

Nettie didn't acknowledge the directive, and Cory, after waiting until it was apparent that she would not, spoke with a kind of rush, his words trailing away as if he barely had breath to utter them.

"My .22 rifle is gone, Nettie. Did you take it?"

From his voice she gauged the measure of his concern, and her own voice, when she answered, was bright with mockery.

"Yes," she said. "I took it."

Her candor was clearly a shock. Stella, who had expected denials, and Cory, who had expected a more trying inquisition, stared at her with slack faces that were almost comic and incomprehensible.

"What on earth for?" Stella asked. "You know you're not allowed to use the rifle without supervision."

"I'm not sure," Nettie said. "Perhaps I intended to kill Cory."

Stella sank down upon the bench in front of her dressing table. Cory did not move.

"You mustn't say such dreadful things." Stella's inflection suggested that she was protesting the innocent use of obscenity that had been spoken without understanding. "Where is the rifle now?"

"In my room. I put it in the closet."

"Go and get it and bring it here."

Without a word, Nettie turned and went out. When she was gone, Stella sat staring at the floor, ignoring Cory, and Cory, hands in pockets, remained unmoving by the bed. There was nothing to be said that either was prepared to say, and they waited in silence for Nettie's return. She came, in a minute or two, with the rifle under her arm. Stella, watching her walk toward Cory, was suddenly aware that the rifle was pointing straight at Cory's chest. Half-rising, she extended one arm in a gesture of alarm or supplication.

"Perhaps," Nettie said, "I'll kill Cory now."

Thereafter, action followed action in an odd and deliberate sequence, as if every sound and movement were carefully modified and measured. The report of the rifle was hardly more, it seemed, than the popping of a cork. Stella, arm outstretched, sank down again upon the bench. Cory, dying with his hands in

his pockets, looked down with a kind of wonder, just before falling, at the small hole opened above his heart. Nettie turned to Stella, as children in need have always turned to mothers.

"But it was a blank," she said. *"Gavin told me it was a blank!"*

Martin Underhill, a detective on the sheriff's staff, after descending the stairs, crossed the hall and entered the library. The room was darkening, and it was several seconds before his eyes, adjusting to the shadows, found Stella sitting in a high-backed chair turned away from a window. She did not rise to meet him, did not move at all. He walked across the room and sat down in another chair facing her. In his manner there was a reassuring touch of deference which she assumed to be an offering to her position in the county, but in fact, it was detectable in his contacts with people of all stations.

"How are you feeling, Mrs. Singer?" he asked.

"I'm quite all right, thank you," she said.

"I'm afraid there are a number of points to clarify. Are you up to it?"

"I'm prepared to tell you anything you need to know."

"Good. Suppose you begin by telling me again just what happened."

"As I've said, Cory's rifle was missing. The .22 that you saw upstairs. It had been taken from the rack over there, and he was very disturbed about it. He suspected Nettie of taking it and, as it developed, he was right. Nettie admitted it. I sent her to get it and bring it back. She returned in a minute or two, carrying the rifle under her arm, and I saw that it was pointing directly at Cory. She said something about killing him, merely an expression of childish hostility, but then the rifle went off, and Cory fell. And that's how it was."

"In spite of her remark about killing him, you're

convinced that it was an accident?" he asked.

"Of course it was an accident. I have told you that the threat was just an expression of childish hostility."

"What caused the hostility?"

"Nothing specifically. I mean, no particular incident. Nettie didn't approve of my marriage to Cory. She resented him as an intruder."

"I see. But the rifle *was* loaded, Mrs. Singer. That bothers me. Do you think it was already loaded when Nettie took it from the rack?"

"I doubt it very much. Cory never left his firearms loaded."

"Well, then. You can surely see that Nettie must have loaded it herself. Were bullets available?"

"There were bullets for all the firearms somewhere. I'm not sure just where Cory kept them."

"Do you think that Nettie could have found the bullets?"

"It's entirely possible, but I'm sure that she didn't."

"Oh? What makes you say that?"

Again Stella was silent, again remembering. Now she was hearing Nettie's words, almost lost in the echo of a shot and the trauma of horror.

"Something she said just after she shot Cory."

"What did she say?"

"She said, 'Gavin told me it was a blank.' "

He stared at her through the shadows, trying to read the expression on her face. There was no expression to read. He began to appreciate the terrible exercise of control behind her apparent quietude.

"Who," he asked, "is Gavin?"

"Gavin Brander. A neighbor. He lives half a mile or so up the road."

"What did Nettie mean?"

"I'm not sure. I've been thinking and thinking about it, but I'm just not sure."

"Have you asked Nettie?"

"No. She had a terrible experience, you understand. She's resting in her room. I don't know if she's capable of answering questions."

"We had better try. I'll be as considerate as possible. Will you fetch her?"

"If you insist."

"I'm afraid I must. I'm sorry."

Alone, he listened to the diminishing sound of her footsteps crossing the hall and ascending the stairs. There was an old-fashioned grandfather's clock in the shadows behind him, and he listened to the mechanical measurement of time. Time passed, measure by measure, and pretty soon he was aware of footsteps in the hall again. Nettie entered, followed by Stella. Nettie made an odd little bow to Underhill, who had risen, and sat down in the high-backed chair that Stella had left. She seemed completely composed. Serene was the word that occurred to Underhill. If she had suffered a trauma, she had recovered with remarkable rapidity.

"Nettie," Stella said, "this is Mr. Underhill. He wants to ask you some questions. You must do your best to answer them."

Nettie nodded, staring with grave composure at Underhill, who resumed his seat and leaned forward, hands on knees.

"Nettie," he said, "why did you take your stepfather's rifle?"

"I wanted to play a trick on him."

"Oh? What kind of trick?"

"I was going to pretend to shoot him."

Her confession of malice had somehow an air of innocence, as if she had admitted to soaping windows on Halloween. Paying silent tribute to her composure, he took a moment to recover his own.

"Why did you want to do that?"

"Because I hated him. I wanted him to go away, and to stay away."

"Was the rifle loaded when you took it?"

"No."

"Where did you get the bullet?"

"Gavin gave it to me. He said it was a blank."

"Don't you know the difference between a live bullet and a blank?"

"Of course. A live bullet will kill you. A blank won't."

"I mean in appearance. Can't you tell the difference by looking at them?"

"I suppose I could if I really thought about it. But I didn't. I hardly looked at it. The bullet Gavin gave me, that is. I put it right into my pocket and later I put it right into the rifle."

Underhill leaned a little farther forward, his grip tightening on his knees. His words were as precisely spaced as the ticks of the clock.

"Listen to me, Nettie. I want you to be very careful how you answer. Do you think that Gavin Brander purposely gave you a live bullet in the hope that you would kill your stepfather with it?"

"He must have, mustn't he? How else can you explain what happened?"

"Oh!" Underhill stood up, struck a fist in a palm, and sat slowly down again. "But why? Why would he want Cory Singer dead?"

Nettie seemed to draw a little farther away into the shadows. Her voice was suddenly small and cold.

"I wouldn't want to say."

"Why not?"

"Because it's not my place to do so."

Stella, standing behind Nettie's chair, released her breath in a long sigh, and Underwood lifted his eyes. Her face was drained of color and stiff as wood. Nothing in it moved except her lips.

"She means that it's *my* place, and I suppose it is. Gavin Brander is in love with me. And I, God help me, was in love with him."

"*Was,* Mrs. Singer?"

"You can't go on loving a man who is capable of

using a child to commit a murder."

"It would be difficult, to say the least." Underhill's voice was light and dry, but his heart was turgid with restrained rage. "I think, if you will excuse me, that I'd better go see Mr. Brander at once."

Gavin Brander opened the door. Underhill, standing outside, introduced himself, and Brander's eyebrows expressed surprise. He stepped back and gestured Underhill in. They went from the hall into the living room, Underhill preceding.

"I've just had my dinner," Brander said. "May I offer you a drink? I'm about to have one."

"No, thanks." Underhill, in a chair, held his hat in his lap. "I'm on duty."

"Oh? Well, I suppose you fellows must work all hours." Brander, postponing his own drink, claimed another chair. "What, precisely, is the nature of your business?"

"I'm investigating a death. A neighbor of yours. Cory Singer."

He was watching Brander intently, and he had to give him credits for acting, if acting Brander was. His face betrayed just the right amount of neighborly shock.

"Old Cory dead? That's bad news. Since you are concerned, I take it that something in the matter is amiss?"

"There is. Cory Singer was shot and killed by his stepdaughter."

"The hell you say!" More acting? If so, more credits. "So Nettie actually did it! She did it after all!"

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, you were not acquainted with the family, and can't be expected to know. But there was a lot of hostility between Nettie and Cory. On Nettie's part, that is. She made his life difficult. Recently she threatened to kill him, but I'm afraid that I put that down to no more than childish extravagance. My mistake, it seems."

"His, I'd say."

"Quite so. Which prompts me to wonder why you have come to see me. Why have you?"

"Because the girl says that you gave her the bullet that killed her stepfather. She says that you told her it was a blank."

Brander stared for a few seconds at Underhill with an almost witless expression, as if the latter had unexpectedly spoken in an unknown tongue. Comprehension was followed by a bark of incredulous laughter.

"Surely you're not serious!"

"It's a serious accusation. I didn't come here to be amusing."

"You must realize that Nettie is addicted to fantasy. I was about to say that she is an incorrigible liar, but let's be charitable."

"Do you deny the accusation?"

"Categorically. Why in the devil should I commit such a fantastic idiocy? Think a moment. If I had given her a live bullet with which to kill Cory, saying it was a blank, I should have certainly anticipated her spilling the beans when Cory was dead. One can't sustain a deception like that."

"One can't, indeed. But one can deny it."

"I see. It then becomes simply my word against hers. I've always known that Nettie was a clever little devil, but I seem to have underestimated the depth of her malice. I believe I'd better have a drink." He stood up and went to a liquor cabinet, where he splashed whiskey into glass, drinking it neat before turning. "Excuse me. I confess that I'm a bit disturbed. However, the accusation won't wash. Why should I want to kill Cory Singer, by contrivance or directly or any way whatever?"

"Because he happened to be Stella Singer's husband."

Brander turned again to the liquor cabinet. This time he added water to his whiskey and carried the glass back to his chair. Underhill, watching him,

thought that his assurance had slipped a little. That was no indication of anything, however. Innocence, falsely charged, is apt to be more nervous than guilt charged truly.

"So that's the way of it," Brander said. "Well, I won't deny that I'm in love with Stella. I've told her so, and I suppose that she has told you. Nettie's also in on the secret, I believe. She's an accomplished spy, you know, as well as a liar, and I've been indiscreet a time or two."

"Are you confirming a motive?"

"No, no. Nothing of the sort. There was no motive. Frankly, the marriage of Stella and Cory wasn't working out. He would have been eliminated in a short while without the drastic expedient of murder. I'm quite certain of that."

"Is Nettie Singer familiar with firearms?"

"I believe she's done some shooting under supervision." Brander's eyes widened, narrowing again as he looked intently at Underhill. "Enough, I'm sure, to know the difference between a blank and a live bullet."

"It's a point. She claims, however, that she hardly looked at it. She merely slipped it into her pocket, and from her pocket into the rifle. It's possible. It's even possible that she noticed the difference without its actually registering."

"Do you seriously believe such an absurdity? Anyhow, it's irrelevant. I gave her no bullet, blank or live. Her story is a lie. Incredibly ingenious, too, I concede. I seem to be highly qualified on several points as a victim."

"Is that your position? Your word against hers?"

"What other position is there? Did you expect me to collaborate in my own destruction?"

"No." Underhill stood up abruptly and slapped his hat against his thigh. "There will be a hearing, of course. We will see then whose story is believed." Turning, he walked to the door, where he stopped

and turned back. "Let me warn you against over-confidence, Mr. Brander. I have a notion that Nettie will be a rather convincing witness."

But Brander seemed to have recovered his assurance completely. Without answering, he lifted his glass and smiled.

The door was unlocked, and Stella, opening it silently, slipped inside and stood listening intently in the darkness. There was no sound, no sound at all, but the room itself, holding its breath, seemed to throb with a giant cadenced pulse. Moonlight slanted through an eastern window and sliced on the bias across the floor. Beyond the bright path, in the farther shadows, Nettie was lying and listening too, waiting, Stella knew, for Stella to speak.

"Nettie," Stella said.

"Yes, Mother?"

"I must talk with you. Are you sleepy?"

"No, Mother. Come sit on my bed. I've been waiting for you."

Stella walked to the bed across the moonlit path. She sat down, one hand clasping the other in her lap, but a third hand, small and warm as sundrenched earth, crept in between them and lay still.

"Nettie, where did you get the bullet?"

"I told you, Mother. Gavin gave it to me."

"Are you sure? You must be very sure, Nettie. If the police believe that, Gavin will be arrested for murder."

"If they don't, will I be arrested? Will they take me away from you?"

"I don't know. I would try to protect you."

"Don't worry, Mother. They'll believe me, because it's the truth. Gavin gave me the bullet. He said it was a blank, but it wasn't. He said he wanted to help me frighten Cory, but he really wanted me to kill him. Will you miss Gavin, Mother, when he is gone?"

"Never mind," she said. "He is gone already."

She lifted her eyes to the moonlit pane. Between her cold hands, the warm hand stirred. She was silent. Having come to terms with an intimate and terrible world for two, she had nothing left to say.

WHO'S INNOCENT?

Lawrence Treat

To begin with, two things should be clearly stated, for they were important in what happened. That Doc Selby had the gun, and that Carlie usually got what she wanted—and preferably by means that were devious.

She was fair to behold. She spoke softly, liked to flout convention, and wound her hair in a circlet of tight, pearly braids. She had other assets, too, notably a sixteen-year-old daughter, a suitor, and an absentee husband, whom she refused to divorce for fear of inflicting a hurt.

"Poor Jeff," she used to say, gently. "He has no one except me." Which was not strictly true, but, since the statement was accompanied by the soft dazzle of a smile, it was not questioned.

Doc Selby was the suitor and he lived next door to Carlie, about a mile out of town, in a big, rambling house as befitted a country doctor. He was a widower in his forties, with children who were not around at the time of the murder. But Carlie's daughter was.

Doc Selby had heard a good deal about Carlie, even before she arrived. He knew that her husband was Jeff Bedrick, a TV actor, that she was moving to the country for reasons of economy, and that her daugh-

ter Myra would be a senior in high school. But Doc did not know what Carlie looked like. It so happened, however, that he took a moment off from a proctoscopic examination of old Mrs. Dunning and glanced through the window just as Carlie and Myra were driving up to their new home. To say the least, the momentary break was decidedly pleasing.

In the evening, Doc went to pay his respects. He was not a polished man, but he was well-constructed—both inwardly and outwardly—and he was much occupied with kindness. He took the short-cut through the patch of woods that separated the two houses, and he came around the corner of the porch and stepped wide to avoid the broken drain pipe. Then he saw her, framed in the antique tracery between the porch columns. Her hair was prematurely gray, but she looked ridiculously young to be the mother of a teen-ager.

"I'm your neighbor, Dr. Arthur Selby," he said. "I was wondering whether there was anything I could do."

She smiled softly, thereby creating a complication. For Carlie drew love the way an astringent draws pain. "Thank you," she said, in her quiet drawl that always had a suggestion of teasing. "You could do a lot. You could find me a gardener. Someone a little old and feeble, I think, to go with the house."

The doctor laughed. "Old Neeko isn't feeble, but he does go with the house, and he loves flowers. He's Hungarian, and I'd better warn you—he has a violent prejudice against actors. In fact, with Neeko's temperament, there could be serious trouble."

Carlie frowned without even wrinkling the perfection of her clear, ivory skin. "My husband won't be with me," she said.

But he was. In the months that followed, during the long, slow, hot summer days, Jeff Bedrick was like a thunderhead on the horizon.

Doc Selby, being a man who knew his mind, closed

his office two afternoons a week and dedicated them to the pursuit of Carlie. They used to go on picnics. Myra and old Neeko would lead the way. Myra skipped and Neeko plodded, but they shared a delight in nature and in finding new ferns and berries, which Neeko always discovered with a grunt and Myra with a shriek of excitement.

Doc carried the heavy picnic basket that Carlie loaded with delicacies, and they followed slowly, up the long hill that rose from the pond and flattened out on wooded uplands. There, Doc would set the basket down under the shade of the apple tree, and Carlie would unpack while Doc rested from the climb. Then Myra would dash off in search of wild flowers.

That was before she met Bob Roberts. Afterwards, she would sit quietly and gaze into space, while Neeko squatted next to her in silent communion.

Bob Roberts was a clean-cut, honest boy who came from a good family and worked hard. At twenty-one, he had his sights set on a small store, and expected to have his own TV repair shop in the fall.

"I hate him," Carlie said vehemently.

Doc studied her face, as he often did, and found nothing but pleasure in the occupation. "Why?" he asked. "What have you got against him?"

"Everything."

Doc sought to interpret the remark. "You mean you don't like Myra falling for him?"

"She's too young. Arthur, I married Jeff when I was seventeen, and I won't let Myra make the same mistake. I won't." She spoke so firmly and looked so innocent that Doc refrained from further probing.

"Well," he said mildly. "I'm sure Myra will be sensible."

He was wrong, for no sensible girl would have gone out with Buddy Aston. Buddy was blond and careless and spoilt. He had the twisted brain of a psychopath, but he came along in a red sports car which made snatching up Myra a lot easier. Moreover, since

his father owned the bank and the local paper and most of the real estate in town, including the store that Bob Roberts had his eye on, Buddy was in a position to exert considerable leverage.

Meantime, Jeff Bedrick returned from the West Coast, where he'd failed to get the TV work he'd counted on. He settled in New York and Myra visited him every two weeks, and on at least one occasion Buddy went with her.

Carlie took the news hard. "I wonder how much he asked Buddy to lend him," she said. "Or whether he merely gave Buddy a bad check."

"Forget about Jeff," Doc said harshly. "He's not your responsibility. Divorce him, Carlie, so that we can get married. You're wasting your life over him."

She gazed up, and her eyebrows arched ever so slightly, giving her an added whimsical allure.

"I'm sorry," Doc said. "I shouldn't have said that."

Carlie's smile was tender. "But you're perfectly right. It is unfair of me, but I can't help it. There are things way, way back and deep, deep down, and I just can't give Jeff up."

"You don't have him at all. He's gone. He's out of your life."

"But I'm not out of his. Arthur, *I* can't throw him over, he has to do it to me."

"He never will."

Carlie leaned back and half-closed her eyes. "He will, someday. When he has a great triumph and feels important. When he gets a movie contract or a glamorous part on Broadway. But now he needs the thought of a wife who is waiting for him, ever faithful. Do you see?"

"That," said the doctor, "is a sweet thought and would make a nice, Victorian story, and often has. But how about us?"

"Arthur, be patient with me. Something will happen."

Doc Selby clamped his lips tight and went home.

Around two in the morning, he heard voices raised in anger, and he saw the lights go on in Carlie's house. Then Buddy's red sports car raced out of the driveway and turned into the highway with a roar. Doc got dressed and rushed over.

Carlie was doing her best to quiet Myra down, but Myra was in a state bordering on shock. She had a bruise on her face, and she kept moaning that all she'd done was to ask Buddy to let Bob Roberts have the Oak Street store; it was a perfect location and exactly what Bob needed. And now Bob wouldn't get the lease. She'd promised to help him and she'd tried and she'd failed—just everything had gone wrong.

Doc questioned her and obtained a disjointed account of what had happened. Myra had asked Buddy to help Bob Roberts, and Buddy had reacted by calling Bob a low-down bum who'd never amount to anything, which last item he would see to, personally. In the course of the quarrel that followed, Buddy had gotten violent and hit her. Then, in a rage, he'd driven Myra home and dumped her out of the car. He'd almost run her over in the process of racing off.

Doc examined Myra. After he'd given her a sedative and put her to bed, he returned to the living room. Neeko was standing there and cursing in Hungarian, and occasionally turning to Carlie and shouting in a fierce voice, "I keel him, I keel him!" Carlie was trying to talk him out of it, but Neeko wasn't even listening.

Doc grabbed him roughly and shook him. "None of that," he snapped. "Stop that kind of talk."

Neeko answered laconically. "I fix my gun now, I keel him tomorrow." And he swung around and left the room.

Carlie said helplessly, "Arthur, he really means it."

Doc put his arm around her. "Just leave it to me," he said. "I'll handle him."

She gave Doc a look of worship, and he would have braved a goon squad, let alone an elderly Hungarian

with a gun which might or might not be loaded. Thus, feeling like a hero, Doc strode outside and marched upon the cabin at the rear of the house where Neeko lived in bachelorhood. When Doc burst in, he found Neeko oiling the gun.

"Give me that," Doc said immediately, forcefully.

Neeko grunted, and Doc grabbed at the gun. Neeko hung onto it with a sullen stubbornness, and although Doc, who was stronger and younger and heavier, tore and yanked, Neeko remained permanently attached to the trigger guard. In desperation, Doc gave a sudden, jiu-jitsu twist, while his foot hooked Neeko's and spilled him neatly. Neeko slipped and went crashing to the floor. And broke his leg.

It was a nasty break, and Doc took him to the hospital that same night. Thus Neeko, with his leg in a cast and suspended from a traction frame which was in a room with two other patients and supervised by a floor nurse, had an adequate alibi and can be counted out of the story. His gun, however, remained behind and entered into the events that were yet to come.

The following day was cloudy, and the barometer went down to twenty-nine point ninety, and was falling. Myra's spirits were even lower, although she ate three scrambled eggs for breakfast and phoned Bob Roberts. She told him she wasn't going to the party at Cora's that evening because everything had turned out worse than anybody could imagine. Under Bob's prodding, she consented to see him in the afternoon, but only for five minutes and he had to behave himself.

Carlie, who overheard part of the conversation, told Myra she had to go to the party.

"But I can't," Myra wailed. "I'm too ashamed."

"Nobody has the faintest idea of what happened," Carlie said firmly. "And if you don't go, they may very well wonder why."

"Buddy will be there and I can't face him. I'd rather really die!"

"He will not be there," Carlie said. "I promise it."

As fate would have it, she met Buddy on the street that afternoon and slapped his face and said how dared he, and told him he ought to be put in jail. Buddy laughed and called her Mother Dear, and Carlie remembered what she'd promised Myra, so she turned sweet and made a date with him.

That, then, was the situation. It was as transparent as scotch tape, and far stickier.

In the afternoon, Doc Selby had an emergency call that took him up to the hills. It was late when he returned, and he was dead tired. From work, from the sultry heat, from worry. He made himself an egg-nog, tumbled into bed and fell almost at once into a heavy, dreamless sleep.

The thunder woke him. There was a resounding burst that nearly split his ear drums, and he opened his eyes to see a sheet of blue light sweep out of the floorboards and crackle at the chandelier. He smelt the sharp odor of burnt oxygen, and for a moment he was afraid he'd been struck. He was surprised to find that he could still move. He got out of bed and pulled on a pair of trousers and a shirt.

The thunder smashed again, a great, rumbling peal that rocked the house. In the next sheet of lightning, Doc saw the white shingles and the dark green roof of Carlie's house.

There was no sleeping after that. Doc was excited, and some atavistic instinct was roused in him and he stayed there at the window, fascinated by the celestial fury.

He could see a light burning in Carlie's living room, and he supposed she was scared and had gotten up. He felt an overpowering loneliness, and a bitterness so intense that he had to clamp his jaws tight. For minutes afterward, they ached from the pressure.

He belonged over there, with Carlie, and in his mind's eye he saw her clearly, tall and long-limbed and moving with charm and with grace. Then a stab of lightning split the darkness, and he noticed the

sports car blocking Carlie's driveway. Not far from it, a long convertible was creeping slowly out to the road. Doc wondered who was in that car and why it was leaving now, when in ten or fifteen minutes the storm would probably let up.

Puzzled by the presence of the two cars, but not liking the idea of spying on Carlie's house, Doc turned away, crossed the room, lit a cigarette, sat down. But after about a minute, his curiosity was too much for him, and he returned to the window and waited for the next flash of lightning. What he saw made him wish he had stayed right in the chair.

Buddy Aston was leaving Carlie's house and he was angry. His head was turned, and he was shouting at Carlie as he stamped across the porch. And Carlie stood in the doorway, grasping the jamb with one hand, while her other arm was concealed and yet in the middle of a threatening motion. Then darkness obliterated the scene.

Doc swung around. He thought of phoning Carlie, but he had no right to interfere. He supposed she'd demanded that Buddy apologize and promise not to see Myra again. Buddy must have defied Carlie, and probably insulted her, besides.

But at least, Doc told himself, they'd parted. He returned to the window again, telling himself he wanted to see if Carlie's light was still on.

It was. And Buddy's car, dark and motionless, was still blocking the driveway. The next flash of lightning showed Doc why Buddy hadn't gone, and perhaps never would.

Slowly, Doc put on a slicker and an old hat. Slowly, hoping his eyes had deceived him, that Buddy had merely slipped in the mud, sprained his ankle, stunned himself for a moment or two and would get up, climb into his car, leave. Slowly, with a dull foreboding and the sense of imminent catastrophe, Doc trudged out.

It was still raining, and thunder rumbled in the

distance. Doc noted that the ditch was cascading with water, which had swept down Carlie's driveway and washed out whatever marks there might have been. He approached the car and bent down.

Buddy Aston was dead, and a gun lay a few feet away from him. Doc picked it up, and in a brief glare of lightning he thought he recognized Neeko's gun.

Doc groaned, glanced at Carlie's house. Then he put the gun in his pocket and went home. He wiped the mud from his rubbers, hung up his slicker where it would dry by morning, and broke open the revolver. It was definitely Neeko's, and one bullet was missing. Doc placed the gun in the bottom drawer of his desk, next to his spare stethoscope, and went to bed. He did not sleep.

Early next morning Mert Tagle, the town cop, knocked on Doc Selby's door. The doctor, in pajamas and bathrobe, came downstairs.

"Morning, Doc," Mert said. "Turned out pretty nice, after all that rain. Lightning struck the Dexter barn and split that apple tree up the hill. The storm wake you?"

"Sure it woke me."

"What did you do, Doc?"

"What in blazes could I do? I couldn't stop the blasted storm, so I rode it out under my pillow. What's the trouble, Mert?"

"Buddy Aston got shot."

Doc showed surprise, but not sadness. "Shot?" he said.

"Murdered," Tagle said somberly.

Doc said, "Where did it happen?"

And Mert said, "In the Bedrick driveway. And an interesting thing, Myra stayed in the village last night. On account of the storm."

"Come in and have a cup of coffee," Doc said. "Nobody's going to cry over Buddy except his old man. But he's certainly going to want action."

Mert nodded. "I called in the state cops because

this is too much for me. But privately, I'm wondering why Mrs. Bedrick slapped Buddy's face good and hard yesterday afternoon."

"I hadn't heard about that," said Doc. "Why not ask her?"

Mert asked, as did many others, and Carlie's explanation was that a few nights ago Buddy had had a date with Myra and kept her out late, despite a specific promise to the contrary.

Under heavy pressure, Carlie insisted that she had no gun, and no way in the world of getting one, and that she didn't kill teen-agers for keeping her daughter out after midnight. She said that, although she'd lost her temper and slapped Buddy on the street, she'd been thoroughly ashamed of herself and had asked Buddy to come see her, under a flag of truce, and that he'd done so. She said that their talk had been friendly, they'd sat in the living room munching potato chips and sipping a very weak vodka drink, because she wouldn't waste good liquor on him. She said Buddy had left before the worst of the downpour. The autopsy bore out the weak drink and potato chips version, and she stuck to it doggedly.

Local opinion was divided. Half the town thought Carlie was concealing something and should have been arrested, and the other half thought that her motive for doing away with Buddy was mighty slim and that the police should look elsewhere.

But the police were stymied. The storm had washed away all tire marks and other clues, and they were at a complete loss as to what weapon had been used and what had become of it. Naturally, nobody thought of looking in Doc's desk drawer.

Doc saw Carlie as little as possible, for fear of blurting out what he'd seen. But he kept thinking of her and yearning for her, until one afternoon the need to see her rose up like a lump in his throat. He closed his office and told his nurse that he couldn't be reached. He went next door.

Myra let him in and announced that her mother had a new hat, and Carlie floated in and exhibited it.

"Do you like it?" she asked. "It cost me a fortune, but it gives me poise and confidence, so why not?"

"Carlie," Doc exclaimed, "you've got to divorce Jeff and announce our engagement."

"Why?" said Carlie.

Myra giggled and sat down to study her elders.

Doc looked embarrassed. "It would stop some of the gossip," he said. He laughed, a forced little laugh. "It would give them a chance to say, 'At their age—just imagine!' "

Myra admired the way her mother moved towards Doc and placed both hands on his shoulders. It gave her dignity, she thought, and yet made her available for the first pass.

"Arthur," Carlie said, "what is your real reason?"

Myra felt quite certain that, under similar circumstances, Bob Roberts would have kissed her passionately. But Doc made a speech.

"I belong with you," he said with a tortured emphasis. "I want to be on your side, helping out in every way and by every means I can find. It burns me up to live next door and be just a good neighbor. I've been trying to stay away from you, but it won't work. Carlie, I'm going half crazy."

Carlie touched Doc's cheek lightly, in a tender, familiar gesture that Myra noted carefully. Then Carlie backed away. "Why, Arthur," she said in a low, teasing voice. "You'd think I was really involved in the murder."

It was the wrong thing to say, for Doc seemed shocked and repelled by her words, and he turned and walked over to the window. Myra expected her mother to follow, but instead, Carlie spoke. And in a hard, crisp voice.

"I have an appointment with the district attorney this afternoon," she said. "He's no fool, and he

knows perfectly well that I'm hiding things. But he doesn't know what, and he can't *make* me talk, can he?"

"I hope not," Doc said earnestly.

"Well, he hasn't managed, yet, but I'll admit I'm a little nervous. Arthur, will you drive me there?"

"Why, of course," Doc said.

Myra's eyes widened. All that, and her mother settled for a chauffeur.

Myra always regretted not being a witness to the drive. She would, however, have been disappointed, for Carlie sat in the corner of the car's front seat and never so much as touched Doc's sleeve.

"Arthur," she said, "they've found out all the facts they can, and this afternoon they have to charge me or else clear me." She leaned back, and she glowed softly. "If I'm arrested, I want you to go away on a long vacation. Will you promise to?"

Doc supposed she was being practical, because his testimony would of course clinch the case against her. But didn't she realize that he'd perjure himself before he'd do that.

He answered obliquely. "Carlie, I'm not the kind that runs away."

"Neither am I," she said. "And I have no reason to be afraid. They know nothing about the gun, and juries don't convict attractive mothers who act in defense of their daughters. I've no worries, Arthur. I *know* I'm safe."

She was in the D.A.'s office for two full hours. Doc waited outside and thought of how he used to laugh at expectant fathers pacing the floor, and how wrong he'd been.

At the end of the two hours Carlie emerged, tired but gay and jaunty in her new hat. She was free.

On the way back they spoke of small, inconsequential things and laughed without reason. When they reached her house, she said, "Arthur, come in and have a drink. I'd like to celebrate."

"Celebrate what?" he asked dourly.

"My luck. It's surprising, isn't it? A person like me, alone and inexperienced, not too good a liar, pitted against the police and the district attorney and all their resources. And I won. I got away with it, and I'm happy."

For a moment, Doc didn't answer. This was more than a confession, it was an admission of callous disregard for the sanctity of human life. He could have understood a Carlie who had acted on emotion, with no thought but of her daughter, and whose penance had been the deep sufferings of conscience. But a Carlie who bragged about committing murder—he neither understood her, nor cared to.

He cleared his throat, and he spoke stiffly. "I'm not exactly in the mood to celebrate. My heart wouldn't be in it."

"Oh," she said. "I hadn't thought about how you'd feel."

"Well, think about it now."

"I prefer not to," she said, and got out of the car.

As a result of the quarrel, Doc went through a bad time, but when she called him a couple of days later and he caught the worry in her voice, he went to her house immediately.

The convertible in the driveway warned him that someone else was there, but Doc was not prepared for Jefferson Bedrick.

Doc recognized him from a photograph Carlie had once shown him. Jeff's face was gaunt. He was older and thinner, but his smile was confident and he had the strong, dominant personality of an experienced actor.

"Doc," he said in his deep, rich voice that was replete with the tones of a full orchestra, "Carlie has told me about you, and I wanted to meet you and give you my blessings before I leave."

Doc frowned, and Carlie said, "Jeff is divorcing me. He—I—" She appeared to choke up, and her eyes lifted in pleading.

Jeff rescued her with a gesture of magnanimity.

"Carlie's trying to say that I can tell you the truth because you're in this up to your neck. And besides—" Jeff paused in order to build up his effect. "And besides, I'm sure Carlie would tell you anyhow."

"What are you driving at?" Doc asked.

Jeff glanced at Carlie to make sure that he had her undivided attention. Then mindful of his audience, his lips curled in the wry, repressed smile of an actor deliberately underplaying his role. "Doc," he said, "I haven't been an ideal husband, but when Carlie needed me, I came through. I took care of things, in my own way."

"What do you mean by that?" Doc asked.

"Exactly what I said. *I took care of things.*"

For a moment, Doc was stunned. Then, with the realization that this meant Carlie was innocent, he exclaimed, "You—you killed him! That second car was yours!"

Jeff inflated his chest, and his voice vibrated with a low, confidential quality. "I had a strange feeling that night. I still can't explain it. But I kept thinking of Myra; she seemed to be calling me. Storm—distance—money—they meant nothing to me. I hired a car and drove out here, as fast as I could. I found Carlie weeping, and she told me what had happened. She said Buddy Aston was due in a little while, and she asked me what to do.

" 'Do?' I said. 'Give him a drink and some potato chips, and look lovely. I'll handle him.' And I left."

Doc sat down glumly. So Carlie had protected Jeff from the police because she still loved him. Even a divorce wouldn't change the way she felt about him.

"You waited for Buddy?" Doc asked.

"That's right," Jeff said. "I stayed out of sight, but I saw him come and I saw him go, and when he stepped from this house, I was there. I called him a rat, and I shot him. Just like that." And Jeff snapped his fingers.

"And the gun?" Doc asked, in a flat voice. "How—"

"Perhaps, in my way, I loved my family too much," Jeff said, interrupting, "but I cannot ask Carlie to be tied to me any longer. Doc, I'm setting her free. Look after her well; I cannot." And, biting his lips, holding back the deep flow of his emotion, Jeff turned and stalked out.

Doc stood there, tired, dull, beaten. He was not even aware that Carlie had approached him until she touched his arm and spoke. "Arthur, didn't he do wonderfully?"

Doc spun around. "What are you talking about?"

"It was his finest role; he actually convinced himself. He forgot that Myra had phoned him. He even forgot what he said to me when he got here. He'll be so proud, Arthur. For the rest of his life, he'll believe he committed murder to save the honor of his daughter."

"Didn't he?"

"Of course not. You surely know he didn't."

"I guess I do," Doc said. He had to clear his throat before he spoke further. "Carlie, isn't it about time for us to be honest with each other? Because I know you killed Buddy. I saw you."

"*Saw* me?" she said, in a shocked voice. "Arthur, *I* saw *you*. In that flash of lightning. You were standing there with the gun."

"Sure. I took it because it was Neeko's and would be traced to you. I still have it. Oh, Carlie—you mean you went through these last two weeks thinking you were protecting me?"

"Of course I did. Why else would—"

Doc laughed in relief. "Then Jeff did kill him. You said once that you'd be free of him when he had some great triumph, some glamorous part to play. He did this crazy thing and thinks he's a hero, but it turns out that he wasn't playing a role at all."

"But how could he have gotten the gun? It was in the cabin, wasn't it? He didn't even know there was a cabin, and nobody went near it except Myra

when—" Carlie stopped short. She shook her head. And then she started to cry.

Doc put his arm around her. "Carlie, don't think that. Listen, we'll go there; we'll turn the place upside down. Maybe we can find some evidence."

"After two weeks?" she said shakily. But she went nevertheless.

As they approached the shack they heard sounds from inside it, and they walked apprehensively, afraid of what they'd find. When they were a few feet away, the door shot open and Myra, in levis and an old shirt, stepped out.

"Myra!" Carlie exclaimed. "What are you doing?"

Myra sneezed and wiped at a smudge on her cheek. "Cleaning up for Neeko's return, and I never saw such filth. Mouse droppings, cobwebs, old beer bottles." She started to giggle, and broke off. "Why're you both looking at me that way?"

"Nothing," Doc said. "Nothing." He elbowed past her and entered the tiny room. He kept thinking of a teen-age party with everybody coming and going, stepping outside for a drink or else to neck in a parked car. How easy to sneak away for a half hour, and no one the wiser . . .

"The gun was here," he said, dropping his hand wearily on the table.

Myra looked perplexed.

Doc didn't dare look at her. "It was my fault," he snapped. "I started it, hitting an old man. What came over me?"

"Nobody's blaming you," Carlie said.

Doc moved restlessly, with no fixed purpose. He thumbed a magazine, tapped at the table, flipped on the radio. There was a humming sound and the smell of something burning. Doc spun around.

"That's funny," Myra said. "I thought Bob fixed it. He promised he would."

"When?" Doc asked.

"The afternoon Buddy was killed. I told Bob about

it. I'm sure he came here. And he's so good at fixing radios."

Doc took a deep breath and exchanged a look with Carlie. Then, half-closing his eyes, he switched off the radio.

"Myra," he said slowly. "Did Bob Roberts stay at that party all evening? You must have been with him. Did he stay there all the time, or did he go out somewhere, for a little while?"

"Why—" Myra thought about it for a moment. "Now that you mention it, he *did* slip out for—oh!" Her eyes widened and she flung herself into her mother's arms. "Oh, *no!*"

Carlie's troubled look over Myra's head as she comforted her daughter asked Doc what he was going to do about it.

Doc sighed. He wasn't sure what he was going to do about it, but a thought was beginning to shape itself in his mind: *I've already meddled too much in matters that don't rightfully concern me, and after all, I'm not God, am I?*

HEIR TO MURDER

Ed Lacy

It was difficult to peg his age, but I guessed forty-five. He was already bald, but his face was handsome, in a fleshy way, and the custom-tailored suit showed off a good build—from something more strenuous than golf; say tennis. His blue eyes were on the jolly side as he said, "Mr. Columbia, you may not remember me. I'm Williams Sanford. I was the lawyer for Moorepark Appliance, which is why I thought of you when I decided I need a private investigator." The deep voice went with his build.

"After that mess, I'm surprised you'd want me for anything, Mr. Sanford," I said politely. Actually it hadn't been my fault. I'd been hired to get information on a rival outfit's new models and prices. However, they must have expected their offices to be bugged, for they'd had a whole false information deal set up.

"That's all in the past, Mr. Columbia. For the present I need to find a man—that's the job."

"Have you tried the police?"

"This isn't a police matter." The blue eyes actually twinkled. "Aren't you seeking business, Mr. Columbia?"

"Like crazy, but I'm the wrong type of investigator

for you. My field is electronics, electrical snooping, bugging. For the run-of-the-mill detective work, I have a friend, Al Peters, a retired cop who—"

"I'd like to hire you."

I shrugged. "Okay. But my fee is $150 per day."

"That's rather steep. This won't require any of your electrical gadgets, Mr. Columbia—Fred."

"That's why I suggested Al Peters, Mr. Sanford. He'll only cost you $50 a day and he's an expert at shadowing, that sort of work. You'd be taking me from other possible cases, so I have to charge for my time."

Sanford nodded his polished head. "I appreciate your frankness and agree to your fee. I'm looking for a Steven Massini. About fifteen months ago Mr. Massini's uncle died, leaving an estate worth over $800,000. Mr. Massini—that is Steven Massini—was willed $18,000. As executor, I've been looking for Steven so the will could be probated. A few months ago I finally located him in Nice, France. I gather young Steven is an artist, a kind of beatnik character. I immediately airmailed him a letter explaining that he had to be here before the will could be probated, although his share is the smallest one of the estate. He wrote back, via ordinary mail, asking why the money couldn't be sent to him. Well, after an exchange of letters, he finally flew to the States two weeks ago. I imagine you read about the jet that crashed and burned at Kennedy?"

I nodded. "Was he on it?"

"Yes. According to the papers, Steven was one of the three survivors. He happened to be seated in the tail section, which broke off on impact. Steven was thrown clear and escaped the flames and death that ninety-two others met. He was rushed to nearby Brook Hospital for a check-up. He wasn't injured but was merely in a mild state of shock. On reading about this, I called the hospital the next morning to speak to Steven. I was told he had made a phone call an

hour after he had entered, that a young lady had come for him and he had gone with her. That's the last I know of Steven, although I've been running ads in the public notices columns of the papers, urging him to contact my office." Mr. Sanford smiled, waved his hands as if to smooth the air in front of him.

"Has this Steven been in touch with any of the other heirs, his relatives?"

"No. He was adopted and not on speaking terms with the rest of his family. As I told you, Steven's a sort of wild type, a nonconformist. His adopted parents died seven years ago in a car crash, and Steven's been abroad ever since. As you can understand, the other heirs are most impatient to have the estate settled."

"Sure. And eighteen grand should interest a struggling artist, too. Is he married?"

"Not as far as I know. I've never seen Steven, haven't even a photo of the lad. The last time any other members of the family saw Steven was many years ago, when he was about four years old. His father was on the wild side, too, had married an Indian girl. Frankly, I was astonished to find Steven had even been mentioned in the will. This lack of knowledge has been the reason it had taken me so long to find him."

"How did you locate him, Mr. Sanford?"

Sanford smiled. "One of his cousins happened to read a news item about a Steven Massini being arrested for picketing the U.S. Consulate in Nice, some kind of peace protest. As Massini is hardly a common name, I wrote him, established that he was the missing heir. The only hard fact I know about Steven is that he's twenty-six years old."

"You've hardly given me anything to work on, Mr. Sanford. I want $300 now, as a binder, for two days' work, including today. All I can tell you is, I'll give it the old college try."

"Fine. Let me know the moment you locate him,"

Sanford said, getting to his feet, taking six $50 bills from a fancy wallet, and his card, and dropping them all on my desk. "Of course, all this is strictly confidential, Fred."

"Sure, Mr. Sanford."

It was two-twenty p.m. when he left. I phoned a guy who works for a top credit rating house, asked for a rundown on Sanford and on Steven Massini, of Nice, France. I do this with all my clients; credit houses have better files than the FBI.

Then I phoned a newspaper friend and was told the jet had crashed at six-ten p.m., meaning Massini couldn't have reached the hospital before seven p.m. This gave me time to attend to some other things.

After supper I was at Brook Hospital at seven p.m. Flashing my fancy gold badge, something I hadn't done in a long time, I explained to a stout man in the office I was looking for Steven Massini, and about the inheritance, and asked if I could speak to the nurses and doctors who had treated him when he was admitted.

Two nurses gave me a description of Steven: six feet tall, rangy, about 175 pounds, dark hair, no distinguishing marks, ordinary face. They thought he was about thirty years old. Part of his suit had been burned, but a doctor told me Steven himself hadn't suffered any known injuries. He was dazed and in shock, yet had refused a sedative, saying he didn't believe in allowing anything but organic foods in his body. Within an hour after he was examined, he had made a phone call. About twenty minutes later an excited blonde woman, about twenty-five years old, had called for him. Against the doctor's advice, Steven had insisted upon leaving the hospital.

"When he made this call, was he in bed?" I asked, hopefully.

"Yes."

"Good. Then there should be a record of the call in your switchboard records. May I have the number?"

Five minutes later I called a fellow working for the phone company, who told me the number was that of a Mr. Phil Wells, and gave me his Queens address. I drove out there; it was one of these small houses with a tiny lawn and a one car garage in the back, a carbon copy of every other house in the area.

It was now nine-thirty p.m. Phoning Al Peters from a corner booth, I told him to stake out the Wells house from five a.m. on. Then I drove back to the steno's apartment to get the transcript of the tape I'd left and to spend the night with her. This wasn't quite as romantic as it may sound, since she's my ex-wife. One of these days we'll remarry, I hope.

I was at my office by eight the next morning, and did some work on an industrial spying job. At ten a.m. I phoned my buddy in the credit office.

He told me, "We've nothing on Steven Massini, meaning he's probably broke and hasn't any employment record. Williams Sanford is a credit risk. He took a bath in Moorepark Appliance stock a year ago. His law income is in the $20,000 per year bracket but he lives above it—house in the suburbs, two cars, expensive wife, his third, by the way, membership in a couple of swank clubs. He's deeply in debt, although he made a small killing in the market a few months ago, started paying off some of his IOUs. But he still owes plenty. He comes from a once wealthy family and will step into a fat bundle when his uncle dies. The said uncle is seventy-nine and still plays eighteen holes of golf every week. That's it, Fred."

I thanked him, asked for a rundown on a Phil Wells, and hung up. From my old safe I took a tiny transmitter, so small it fits into the mouthpiece of a telephone receiver. I also took out another of my receiving tape recorders. These gadgets were the reason my marriage went on the rocks, since I have to plow everything I make back into the business. Putting my phone repairman's outfit on over my suit, I drove out to the Wells' house and found Al Peters sitting in his

old sedan down the street, sipping a container of orange juice. As I slipped onto the front seat beside his bulk, he said, "Nothing, so far, Fred. The milkman left a bottle at seven a.m., and at eight-thirty a blonde took it in. Nice looking babe, even with her hair in rollers."

"Mr. Wells didn't leave for work?"

"Nobody has left or come in." Al yawned. "You want some orange juice, Fred?" When I shook my head, he finished the container, asked, "You want me planted here all day?"

"I don't know, yet."

I was studying the house. I could wait until the Wellses went out, then break in, but that was risky for the other houses were very close, and in the snooping business you have to be careful. You're always on the brink of breaking a dozen laws.

Back in my car, I put on a cap, pulling it down over my face, added a wispy gray mustache and two hairy warts to my fat face. Strapping on my tool belt, I carefully put the transmitter in my pocket and set up the receiving recorder on the back floor of Al's car. Handing him a listening plug and a pad, I said, "You know the routine, Al; write down anything you hear. I should be back in an hour. Oh, pull up, you're more than three hundred feet from the house."

When I rang the door chimes, there was a rush of slippered feet and the door opened on a blonde in a standard pink housecoat. She had a nice figure only because it's hard for a twenty-five-year-old *not* to have one. Her average face was on the nervous side, and the dark circles under her eyes said she hadn't been sleeping much. Glancing at my notebook, I asked, "Mrs. Phil Wells?"

"Yes, I'm Mrs. Wells."

"There's been a buzz in the code area phone lines. I'd like to check your phone for a possible short." I was careful *not* to say I was from the phone company.

"My phone's all right."

"Yes, but if there is a short, it could affect the other circuits. It will only take a second, Mrs. Wells."

"All right."

The living room was in cheap contemporary. I went through the routine of pretending to check with the operator. I took the receiver apart and, even though she was watching me, I attached my tiny microcircuit transmitter, certain she didn't know what it was. These are so small I once installed one in a plastic olive in a martini glass and listened in on a bar conversation while I was two hundred feet away. A moment later, when I was finished, I checked the dial tone and told Mrs. Wells, "I put in new parts to be on the safe side. Your phone checks out okay. Thank you, ma'am."

I drove a few blocks away, took off the disguise and coveralls, and went into a stool joint for a bite to eat. It was forty-five minutes later when I dialed her number. When she answered I said, "Mrs. Wells, I'm a friend of Steven Massini's. Can you—"

"You have the wrong number!" She hung up, hard.

I dialed again, and she let the phone ring five times before asking, "Yes?"

"Mrs. Wells, don't hang up until you hear what I have to say. I know you picked up Steven Massini at the hospital after the plane crash. I have a large sum of money for him, an inheritance. If you'll—"

"I told you before, you have a wrong number! I never heard of any Steven . . . whatever-his-name is. Leave me alone!" She banged the receiver down again, but there had been a trace of hysteria in her voice.

I drove back to Al Peters. He nodded and followed my car around the corner, where we both parked. As I sat beside him he said, "An easy one, Fred. She called a Mr. Stevens, room 121, Devenport Hotel, a few seconds after your second call. She—"

"A Mr. Stevens? Not a Steven Massini?"

"Nope, a Mr. Stevens. She told him about your call,

sounding unglued." Al squinted at the pad. "He said, 'Take it easy, Rose. If he calls again just say you don't know what the hell he's talking about. Rose, how about going over to your mother's, in Newark, for a few days? I'll send for you later.'

" 'I can't put on the act there. No. Oh, honey, I'm worried! Worried sick!'

" 'Relax, darling. Tell you what, don't answer the phone again or . . . I've a better idea, come over here.'

" 'But if mama calls and doesn't get any answer, she'll get upset and . . . I'm going to pieces!'

" 'Rose, baby, take it slow. Things are breaking fine for us. Listen to me: call your folks and say you're going away for a few days, the house spooks you and all that jazz. Then come here. I'll expect you around two. Now calm down, baby.' "

"Nice, Al, real nice work. I'll set the recorder on automatic receiving and you drive back, park within two hundred feet of the Wells' house. I'll wait here for you."

When Al drove off, I went into a drugstore and found the Devenport Hotel in the phone book; it was near the airport. Al returned on foot and I dropped him at the subway, told him to wait in his room for my call.

The hotel was modest and new. I told the elderly desk clerk, "I'm going up to room 121 to pull a surprise gag on Mr. Stevens. Don't call him on the house phone." I left a ten-dollar bill on the desk and went up the one flight of steel steps. The hallway was empty.

The guy opening the door of 121 wore slacks and an open white shirt, and fitted the hospital description. When he asked, "Yeah? What you selling?" there was a faint whiskey aura around the words.

Flashing my gold badge, I said, "I have to talk to you, Mr. Massini."

He grabbed my wrist and studied the badge. Then

he let go of my hand. "A store cop. Take a walk before I call the real fuzz."

"Go ahead, call them, Mr. Massini. But you misunderstand the nature of my visit. I'm here to put $18,000 in your hands." I got my foot in the doorway and tried to smile. Massini had at least three inches on me, and I'm not much of a battler. "No harm in our talking about it, is there?"

"Okay, talk." He was studying my shoe in the door.

"In the hall?"

"That's right. I have some . . . company, very shy. You know. You from the lawyer, Sanford?"

"Correct. Why haven't you been in touch with him? He only wants to settle the estate."

"Just tell him to leave me alone. When I get ready to see him, I'll do it. Also tell him I don't like his putting a private eye on me." He smoothed his hair with his right hand, and I saw the lumpy knuckles of a puncher.

"Aren't you interested in your inheritance, the $18,000?"

"I don't know. The dough puts me in a high tax bracket, and it may cost me more in the long run. I may go back to Nice."

"Why haven't you called Sanford and told him this?"

"Because I don't feel like it. Now get your foot out of the door before I take your fat face apart, snooper."

"Okay." I got my shoe out before he slammed the door.

In the lobby I phoned Sanford, told him where Massini was, and added, "He doesn't seem interested in collecting his inheritance—said something about returning to France. I suggest you get out here quickly, if you want to see him."

"Thank you, Mr. Columbia, your service is fast and excellent. You've put in one day's work. You owe me $150. I advanced $300."

"I haven't figured the expenses yet. Listen—"

"You said nothing about expenses."

"Sanford, we'll argue about my bill later. If you want to see him, get out here quickly. He'll probably change hotels now."

"I'll handle things from here. A fine *day's* work, Mr. Columbia." He hung up.

I drove back to the Wells' house and parked down the block. I had to get my transmitter back. Aside from the fact it had cost me $180, at some future time the phone company would find it and might be able to trace it to me. Then I'd be in a real jam.

The telephone repair act was out. Breaking into the house would be simple, except there were far too many people around now. I decided to return at night to see if I could get in. I put a note on Al's windshield that the car was out of order and waiting for a mechanic. Then I drove to my office, called Al, and told him we'd pick up his car in the evening.

I phoned my credit buddy, who told me, "The Wellses have a joint income of $9,400. Their house cost $20,000 and carries a $15,000 mortgage. They furnished it, when they were married four years ago, on installment buying; very prompt on their payments. She's a typist for a local real estate company. He was employed as a reservations clerk at Trans-European Airlines."

"Isn't that the company whose plane crashed recently?"

"Right. Phil Wells was killed in the crash. Okay, Fred?"

I said, "Thanks," very slowly.

I was going to phone Sanford but decided to wait, just in case I didn't recover my transmitter and he started beefing about expenses.

I did some work around the office, then later in the afternoon I stopped at a newspaper office and read up on the crash. Phil Wells was among those burned to a crisp. As an airline employee he had been riding free,

had spent the weekend in Paris. Identification was based on a cigarette lighter with his name on it, a Christmas gift from the company, found among the remains of one of the charred bodies. There was even a human interest sidelight:

"Mrs. Rose Wells, the deceased's young wife, stated she was supposed to have gone with her husband on the weekend flight. 'Phil had just finished five years with Trans-European, so I could go free, too. It would have been our first trip together, but on Friday my boss took sick and I couldn't get Saturday off.' "

I had supper with my ex-wife. She wanted to take in a movie, but I said I had to work, and we got into another of those arguments about my crazy hours. She told me to get out.

I phoned Al and picked him up at the 59th Street Bridge at nine p.m. As we drove out to the Wells' house and I mentioned I was going to break in, Al shook his big head. "Fred, I've told you this before, I don't break the law, openly, anyway."

"Cut it out, Al, I've had my share of being told off for the night."

"Okay. I'll pick up my car, and what you do is your business. Just give me time to get out of the neighborhood."

"Sure. By now things should be quiet around there. I'll call the Wells house first, to make sure there's nobody home."

When I stopped at the corner of their block to let Al off to pick up his heap, things weren't exactly quiet: four police cars were parked in front of the Wells' house and a small crowd was hanging around.

Al glanced at me and groaned. I said, "Go on, get your car. You were driving by this morning and the motor stalled. Raise the hood and fool around. And find out what's happened."

A half hour later Al honked his horn as he passed me and I followed him a few blocks before we parked. Al was wiping his sweaty face. "That was too close!

A lot of stuff has hit a big fan. It seems this Wells blonde knocked off your Massini guy! They found her in some rundown hotel, with his corpse and the murder gun, this afternoon."

"She's confessed to the killing?"

"Way I heard it, she hasn't talked one way or the other. Hasn't even asked for a lawyer. I'm sure glad we're off the case, that's for sure."

I was about to remind Al that my transmitter was still in the Wells' telephone, but he was upset enough as it was. I took the tape recorder from his car, drove to my office, and played the tape back. There was a call from Mrs. Wells' mother, full of trite gas as she told her daughter to bear up and be brave in "your hour of sorrow." Then a call from Steven Massini who asked impatiently, "Who were you talking to? Line's been busy for the last ten minutes."

"Mama. Oh, I forgot to tell her I'm going away for a few days."

"You can call her back later. Pack a bag but wait for my call, hon. Some fat private eye working for Sanford visited me here, so I have to move."

"How could anybody have found you? I wish we'd never got into this mess, Phil."

"Relax, there's nothing to worry about. I told him I wasn't interested in the inheritance and threw him out. I'll call you as soon as I get moved. Take it easy, baby, we're going to be rich."

My recorder was automatic, and worked only when the transmitter was in action—when the Wells' phone was in use. I heard another call and the same man's voice said, "Hon, I've moved. A small and crummy, but clean hotel in Long Island City, called the Monroe. It's two-forty now, best you don't take the car. You can be here within—"

There was the bark of a shot and then Rose Wells shouting, "Phil! Phil! What's . . . ?" Somebody hung up, cutting her off.

I replayed the tape, doing some furious thinking,

and the only thing I ended up with was a cold sweat and a headache. I got Al on the phone. "This is important, Al. Can you find out the exact time of death for Steven Massini?"

"Yeah, I can ask around but, Fred, it will look . . . bad. I mean, my calling some old pals now, at night. It sort of connects me—us—with this mess. Maybe tomorrow, during the day I can—"

"Al, I have to find the time of death now."

"Fred, as an experienced police officer, let me give you some straight advice—don't make any waves. I haven't forgotten that your transmitter is still in the phone, but there's little chance of the police bothering to take the phone apart *now*. But once I start asking around . . . it's hardly a secret I do some work for you and then they'll—"

"Al, do you think the police would go for a deal? Forget us and the transmitter, give it back to me, in exchange for the real killer?"

"I could . . . *Blondie didn't do it?* Hell, Fred, what are we getting into?"

"Al, I'm trying to get *out* of this mess. I know Mrs. Wells didn't do it, but I haven't the kind of stand-up evidence the police would need for court. However, I think I can get a good confession for them, if they'll deal with us. Will they?"

"Fred, I guess if we could deliver a confession all neatly wrapped up, a deal could be worked. But I don't like the way this is shaping up. I don't like it at all, that's a fact. Why do we have to get in any deeper?"

"First, there's Mrs. Wells being framed and . . . Al, use your head; even if the cops don't find the transmitter now, the phone company will, in time, and then we'll really be up the creek. The phone company will recall the murder, be sure to report finding the transmitter to the police, even if it's months or a year from now. Okay, the chances are slim that they can trace it to me, but it's *still* a chance and the

kind of a long shot I don't want to win. Al, I'm at my office. Find out the time of death and exactly what happened at this Monroe Hotel this afternoon. Then come to my office."

At a little past two a.m. I phoned Sanford at his house. He asked, "Mr. Columbia, what's the meaning of this late call? Don't you—"

"I have to see you, right now. I guess you know Steven Massini was killed?"

"The police have notified me. They found my letter on his body. But I still don't understand why you're—"

"Sanford, I'll pick you up in front of your house in a half hour. Be waiting!" I hung up.

I was talking from a street booth, less than a mile from Sanford's house and had time to kill. I phoned my ex-wife and she wasn't happy about my getting her out of bed, but I had to hear her voice again, maybe for the last time. I told her, "Baby, we've had enough of this crazy stalling. We're getting married again tomorrow. I'll try to be at your place before daybreak—I hope."

"Fred, are you drunk? I . . . Fred, are you on a rough case, a real bad one?"

"It's sort of rough."

"Oh, Fred, I told you I can't take this!" she wailed.

"I know what you've told me. Baby, I love you, that's the only thing that has to be said now. Tomorrow, we'll talk about the rest. Maybe I'll take one of those steady jobs in an electronics factory, like you want me to. See you, hon."

Sanford's house was set back from the street by a wide lawn. He was waiting for me on the dark curb, wearing a snappy and loud hat, a light spring coat, and gloves. The sight of the pigskin gloves made me feel better. Sliding onto the front seat beside me, he asked the routine question, "Did you tell anybody you were coming to see me, Mr. Columbia?"

"No." I drove on, wondering how soon he'd pull

the gun. I drove to the outskirts of the suburban area and turned into what seemed a deserted dirt side-road and stopped. My life depended upon stopping.

Sanford asked, "Why are we parking, Mr. Columbia?" The gloved hands still rested on his lap.

He was playing it too cool. If I was wrong about things, I'd end up doing time for sure. I said, "We have to talk. You hired me to find a missing heir, which I did. But now it's become a murder."

"Is that what you got me out of bed for, Columbia? That this Wells woman was carrying on some sort of affair with Mr. Massini and killed him doesn't concern me. Or you."

"It sure involves me. Sanford, when you first came to me, I told you to hire an ordinary investigator, not an electronics snooper. But you insisted upon hiring me. I don't know what you had in mind then, perhaps to frame me, get even for that mess with the appliance company. The point is, I never would have taken the job if I thought it involved murder."

"I don't know what you're talking about. That the wretched young lady shot Steven is hardly any of my business."

"Sanford, she didn't do it. I had her phone bugged, that's how I operate. I have a tape of her phone conversations for yesterday afternoon, on the back seat. I'll play it for you, if you like. The medical examiner has fixed the time of Massini's death at about three p.m. At two-forty she was talking to him, from her house, with the sound of the murder shot on tape, giving Rose Wells a perfect alibi. You waited for her to come to the room at the Monroe Hotel, where you'd already slugged the rummy desk clerk and killed Massini. When she entered the room, you hit her and left the gun and the corpse in the hotel room, with Mrs. Wells, for the police to find."

Sanford still hadn't moved his hands from his lap as he stared at me, saying softly, "A fantastic yarn. Is this some kind of a shakedown, Columbia?"

"Have I asked you for any money? But I can't stand still and watch Mrs. Wells framed for a stupid murder. As I said, you shouldn't have hired me, Sanford. I do a lot of routine checking on my cases, far more than the usual investigator does. I know you're broke, and have been dipping into that $800,000 estate, stalling the heirs with an excuse that you couldn't find Steven. You were hoping your uncle would die and solve your money matters. One of the heirs found Steven, so you had to write him, and he was on his way here when the plane crashed. I suppose you always meant to kill him to delay settling the will. Could be you hoped to work out a deal with Steven, have him contest the will, anything to stall until your old uncle died. Steven's mysterious disappearance from the hospital suited you fine, but you had to find him, silence him one way or another, knowing he would show up sooner or later. So you hired me."

"Columbia, you're spouting pure nonsense. I hired you to find a missing heir, a legitimate job. You found him. That he was later killed is no affair of mine." His mouth was a hard line.

I was still puzzled as to why he didn't try to gun me. "This death will delay probating the will and you're praying uncle will die in the meantime. But Sanford, I *didn't* find Steven Massini."

"I'm getting bored with this silly talk. Drive me—"

"Steven Massini died in the plane crash. Phil Wells was also on the jet, one of the few survivors. You shot and killed Phil Wells. He had a sharpie mind, and when he saw all those burning bodies around him, he picked up a wallet from near a charred body—Massini's wallet—and threw his own lighter near the burned corpse. Phil then passed as Steven Massini. He left the hospital after phoning his wife, Mrs. Rose Wells. It isn't hard to guess Phil's angle: his wife would collect his $10,000 G.I. policy and of course she'd sue the airline. Later they would go away to-

gether. Due to the flames, any positive identification was impossible, so Phil had a—"

"As impossible as your story," Sanford cut in, eyes like blue marbles.

"Phil must have been tempted to collect the $18,000 from the estate. Your letter was in Massini's wallet, but Phil was afraid he'd be recognized as an impostor. Poor Phil had no way of knowing either you or any of the heirs, and hadn't the smallest idea of what Steven looked like. Sanford, like all amateurs, you were stupid. Aside from my having Mrs. Wells' alibi on tape, *you were the only person besides Mrs. Wells who knew where 'Massini' was holed up.* After I phoned you that he was at the Devenport Hotel, you rushed out there, perhaps was told he was leaving, managed to follow him to the other hotel. You killed him after overhearing him phone Mrs. Wells to come over. He must have phoned the second he was in his new room and you were out in the hallway."

Sanford's heavy face was sweating. He pulled off his hat and that's where he had the gun, a two shot derringer. He said, "I don't understand this rock move on your part, Columbia. You realize that you've forced me to kill you now?"

Despite the gun pressing into my side I was dizzy with relief that he had finally gone for his gun, confessing to murder by the action. Maybe I was also dizzy with fear. I said quickly, "See, I'm keeping my hands on the steering wheel, in the open, so don't get trigger-happy, Sanford. Before you do anything, open the glove compartment. Everything we've said has been broadcast to police cars. We're on the air. *Open the glove compartment, Sanford!*"

Keeping his hard, blue eyes on me, he opened the compartment with his gloved hand, saw the transmitter. I said, "That's a powerful one, Sanford, has a range of two thousand yards, and the police—"

"Your bluff won't save you, Columbia. A transmitter needs tubes and I don't see any."

"This uses the new—"

The dirt road turned bright with flashlights, and the police captain standing next to Al Peters shouted, "You're surrounded, Sanford, drop your gun!"

Two uniformed cops holding rifles stepped out of the bushes ahead of us. Sanford jabbed my side with his derringer and shrilled, "Get out of the car, Columbia! I'm using you as a shield—"

I grabbed his gun hand. We wrestled on the cramped front seat. As the cops yanked the door open, Sanford fired. I felt the slug wallop my gut. I tried hard to keep from fainting.

I was wearing a bulletproof vest, but I never did have a strong stomach.

BEGINNER'S LUCK

Richard Hardwick

John Crowley and I could hardly have been considered more than acquaintances. We had been classmates at the University, we both worked for the Graves Manufacturing Company, where we saw each other daily at the plant, but that was about the extent of our relationship. Crowley had risen a good deal more rapidly with the company than I had. I marked that down to company politics, and went half-heartedly on with my own job. If I drank a little more each year, that was hardly my fault. I considered I had reasons.

The letter from Crowley arrived in my mail on Wednesday. I wasn't aware it was from him until I opened it. There was no return address on the outer envelope. It was a bulky brown one, and contained a typed letter and another envelope. I laid this inner sealed envelope on my desk and began to read the letter.

"Dear Ted," it began, "I must tell you that my life may depend on whether or not you follow my instructions. First off, do not open the enclosed envelope. I say this for your own good as well as mine." I looked at the brown envelope that lay on my desk. I raised my eyes to see if anyone was watching me. The other

clerks and stenographers were going about their routine business. I slipped the envelope into my desk drawer and continued with the letter. "If you have not heard from me *personally* by 6:00 P.M. on Thursday the 21st, forward this envelope, unopened, to the Courier-Sentinel, attention of Welborn Trawick."

That was all. It was signed, "John Crowley." I knew the signature was authentic. It had appeared on a good many company bulletins and letters.

Puzzled would be a weak word to describe my feelings as I laid the letter down. Crowley was evidently in fear of his life, and the reason for this fear was in that brown envelope in my desk drawer. Suddenly, it occurred to me that whatever the envelope contained that made it worth killing Crowley for, would certainly warrant doing the same for me. Now let me say at the start, I am a mild person. No one has ever considered me brave. I invariably go out of my way to avoid trouble. And now a casual acquaintance, for what reason I did not know, had placed me in the same jeopardy that threatened him!

The first thing that entered my mind was that I would mail the damned thing straight back to him. Then I glanced at the letter again and read the hour and the day he had mentioned. Six P.M. on Thursday the 21st. It was now Wednesday morning. I picked up my desk phone and asked the switchboard operator to connect me with John Crowley's office.

"Good morning. Mr. Crowley's office."

"Is Mr. Crowley in?" I asked.

"Mr. Crowley is out of the city, sir," the secretary answered mechanically.

Out of the city. I looked at the outer envelope. It had been mailed from in the city and was postmarked June 19th at 7:00 P.M.

"This is—" I halted. "This is a friend of John's. How long has he been gone and when do you expect him back, or don't you know?"

"He left the city last Friday, sir, and he is due back

day after tomorrow," the girl said. "Is there some message?"

"No. No, thank you," I said. Thoughtfully I placed the phone back in the cradle. So he had been out of the city for five days. Yet, the letter was postmarked here in the city only yesterday. With that—and the letter itself—all I could come up with was blackmail. Crowley was blackmailing someone and something was about to go wrong. Why he had chosen me to carry on, I didn't have the slightest idea.

Sitting there, surrounded by a dozen other desks, I began to feel as though I had a bomb in my desk drawer. The engineer's library was directly across the hall from the office I worked in. I slipped the envelope out of the drawer, took a few more papers from my desk, and went across the hall to the library. I found a table behind some bookcases and sat down. Thoughts of John Crowley began to filter through my mind as I sat staring at the envelope. A lot about him that had puzzled me began to line up now. He always had a new car and he lived in a swanky apartment that I knew must have set him back at least three hundred a month.

It sank in on me that this little bundle here had done all that for Crowley—and more. The little brown bundle of papers had done what hard work and education could never have done for him—or *me!* A feeling of excitement swept through me. My future lay right there on the desk before me! I looked about the library. There was no one there. I tore the end off the envelope and pulled the contents out. I didn't read them immediately. The little stack of papers was worth a man's life. In my possession, my life would be the stake for a slip-up. I decided that if Crowley called me before the designated time, I would simply tell him that he had a partner. If he didn't call, it would all be mine. I felt certain that Crowley would show. The thing that continued to puzzle me, though, was the reason for his sending the

papers to me—or anyone. It could only have been a measure of desperation.

I put those thoughts aside and opened the folded papers. The first one was a letter to Welborn Trawick, editor of the Courier-Sentinel. Written in Crowley's handwriting the letter was an admission of blackmail. I stared at it in disbelief. The name of the man he was blackmailing was Benjamin Graves, head of Graves Manufacturing Company! Benjamin Graves! Great White Father to a thousand workers, pillar of society, epitome of business success, civic leader—in short, everything that is associated with tremendous success in life!

Crowley was concise in his outline. The documents were numbered and the letter closed with Crowley's only display of emotion, if it could be called that. He had written, "If there is anything lower in the scheme of things than a blackmailer, it is a murderer." His signature was below.

I shuffled through the other papers. There was painstakingly detailed evidence connecting Graves with a number of rackets. There was enough evidence of income tax evasion to send him up for quite a few years. Whoever had gotten this up must have been a trusted associate of Graves'. I was certain that Crowley was not the original blackmailer.

The last document was a short one. It was written in a handwriting that was unfamiliar to me and had evidently been written by someone with some sort of affliction as the course taken by the pen was a shaky one. I soon discovered what the affliction had been. The author of the letter had been dying when he wrote it and the letter itself was a deathbed accusation of Benjamin Graves, who was named as the author's murderer. It was signed by Evan Saul.

That name was not unfamiliar to me. Evan Saul had been a lifelong friend of Benjamin Graves. The two of them had been the founders of the Graves Manufacturing Company. I thought back to the de-

tails concerning Saul's death. It had occurred shortly after I began work for Graves. I remembered there had been something about a shooting. It was finally determined that it had been accidental. The letter was witnessed by John Crowley. That explained everything. How Crowley had come into possession of the papers and how the murder of Evan Saul had been written off as an accident. Crowley had probably arrived immediately after Graves had shot Saul. Graves was frightened and ran and Crowley got the dying statement from Saul. He must have already known about the other papers and might even have been an accomplice of Saul in the previous blackmail scheme.

All that was pure conjecture. Both Saul and Crowley were out of the way, one for certain and the other in all probability. By the time I put the papers back in the envelope, it was noon. I needed time to think. I had to go about this the right way or I would end the way Saul had ended.

Crowds of office workers were streaming down the halls outside the library. I stuffed the envelope into my inside coat pocket and walked out into the hall. Outside, the guard at the gate nodded in recognition as I passed and I hailed a cab at the street. I was not in the habit of taking a cab to go to lunch. I wasn't even in the habit of leaving the plant on my lunch hour, but this day was an exception to a lot of things. What I did today would change my entire future.

I told the cabbie to drive out to the beach, and eased back in the leather seat as we pulled away from the curb.

What had precipitated the sudden crisis that had led Crowley to send the envelope to me? It must have been sudden. Why else would Crowley send this information—which had literally been his livelihood for so long—to me and run the risk of sharing it with me or of having me go to Graves with it?

Of course, going to Graves would solve nothing—un-

less I were going to him with a proposition. I had never anticipated anything like this happening to me and I was not prepared emotionally to become a blackmailer overnight. Yet, here was an opportunity that would never arise again. Here was something to hold over the head of a wealthy and prominent man. And—an intelligent man. I knew I mustn't overlook that. Benjamin Graves was a brilliant man; shrewd and facile in business and likeable as an individual. It was hard to believe that the whitehaired gentleman, who called nearly all the thousand employees in his plant by their first names, was a murderer.

The cab had reached the beach area. Motels lined the street, interspersed by bars and night clubs and restaurants. I suddenly felt a great need for a drink. My mouth fairly watered for alcohol.

"Pull over here, driver," I said. There were several bars along the street at that particular point. I recognized all of them. The cabbie stopped, I paid him and got out. Stepping out of the midday sun into the bar was like coming off the parched desert into an oasis. I slipped onto a stool and ordered a martini. This was earlier than I usually drank martinis—or anything else stronger than beer. But, this not being an ordinary day, I didn't order my ordinary drink. I tossed the first one off and ordered another. As I sipped on the second one, everything came calmly into focus. As I finished the drink, I smiled and walked to the phone booth. I dialed my office.

"Hello, Sue? Ted Wallace. Listen, I won't be back this afternoon. Yes, that's right. What'll you tell Osgood?" He was the office manager. "Tell him I said to go to hell!" I hung up laughing. I knew she wouldn't tell him that, but I knew that Osgood would blow his top when she told him I had phoned in and said I wasn't coming back.

But when Osgood saw me next, I would be wielding the ax. I was now in the blackmail business and the mighty Benjamin Graves was my victim.

* * *

When you first go into the blackmail business, you don't just casually walk up to your intended victim and tell him to fork over, that you've got the goods on him. *You* might—but *I* didn't. First, I loaded up on martinis. Martinis have always been a weakness of mine and that first day of my new career had to be properly inaugurated. I got back to my apartment somehow in the wee hours of the morning. The next thing I remember was the ringing of the telephone beside my bed. I glanced at the clock on the dresser. Ten o'clock. The stripes of light streaming through the venetian blinds told me that it was ten in the morning. I finally got the phone in my hand and leaned back on the pillow.

"Hello," my voice sounded as though it came from the bottom of a well.

"Wallace? Osgood here." The voice was not ideally suited for waking people. "Are you coming in this morning or should we plan to get along without you?"

There was more than a trace of sarcasm in the voice. The residue of several martinis was still coursing through me and I answered, "Do any damn thing you please, but quit calling me at this hour of the morning." I slammed the phone down.

Sitting there, half-drunk, on the edge of my bed, what I had told Osgood suddenly struck me as a joke. I thought of a few other things I could have said, hilarious things, and I almost called him back. Then the upright position brought with it the after-effects of the night of drinking. I began to sober up and the hangover began to set in. I never was quite as funny when I was sober and had a hangover.

It was Thursday. Thursday, June 21st, and I bathed and dressed and prepared to wait until six o'clock in the afternoon. As the liquor wore off, I began to have serious qualms about the whole business. I paced the small room. Thoughts floated in and out of my brain. One in particular persisted in coming back. That

business of Crowley's having mailed the papers to me. I felt certain that he was the only person who knew where the papers were, with the exception of myself. Then I began to wonder what would happen if someone began to put pressure on him—plenty of pressure—to tell just *where* the papers were. As soon as they found out, they would come straight for me.

Suddenly, I was soaking wet. I was sweating in every pore. I was hot and cold all at the same time. What was I doing, involved in a thing like this? If Graves had had Crowley killed, he wouldn't hesitate doing as much for me. I could imagine what a man might do after being blackmailed for years when someone else takes over. Simple murder might not satisfy him. After reading the documents concerning Graves' underworld ties, it seemed even more probable that I was trying to grab a tiger by the tail.

It was not yet noon when I stuffed the papers in my pocket and hurried down the stairs to my car. The metal garage in back of the apartment was almost empty. My car was the only one there. As I walked across the cinder drive toward the garage, the hairs at the back of my neck began to prick up. Each empty stall was a possible place of seclusion for Graves' men. One of the doors farther down the line banged shut as the wind caught it and I jumped. I was like a kid afraid to go into a dark room; every muscle in my body was tense. Then I was in the car and the engine had miraculously started and I was out in the street driving south. I drove aimlessly, with a warmth of anonymity that brought back a small degree of my self-assurance.

I stopped out near the bay at a drive-in and had a beer. I turned the radio on and listened to music for a while. The noon news came on while I was drinking my second beer and eating a hamburger. The usual stuff drifted in and out of my consciousness—politics, world news, ball scores—things that normally would have held my interest. When the announcer

first began itemizing the local news, the name didn't register at first—the first mention of John Crowley's name. I caught the closing sentences.

"—Crowley's car was totally destroyed as it left the pavement, apparently at low speed, and plummetted down the almost sheer drop of five hundred feet into the gorge. According to information received from his employers, Graves Manufacturing Company, Crowley was returning from a routine business trip. His death marks the thirty-first fatality of . . ." I clicked the radio off.

Crowley was dead. I knew it had been no accident. I ordered another beer and tried to think of the day before yesterday when I was plodding along on a job that would never lead to success—but which would never lead to trouble.

I had to do something. I wasn't worried at the moment about getting the blackmail business started. I was concerned with doing something to prolong my existence until I could get the thing squared away. I was positive that Graves now knew who had the papers. I was equally certain that he was looking for me. I had to do something with the envelope. His men were probably at my apartment at the very moment.

Panic—pure panic—gripped me. I had never before experienced such immediate fear for my life.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw the red, white, and blue mailbox across the street. The name of the editor Crowley had mentioned in his letter swam up before me and an idea solidified. I pulled open the glove compartment and pawed through the road maps and broken sunglasses. Beneath two beer openers was a little packet of postage stamps. I put them all on it, then I wrote across the face of the envelope: To: Mr. Bill Johns, c/o General Delivery, East Side Branch, City.

In the upper left hand corner I wrote: *If not claimed in five days, return to: W. Trawick, Editor, Courier-Sentinel, City.*

I risked my neck three times crossing the street to that mailbox. When the letter went through the slot, I felt as though I had just been given a reprieve from the gas chamber.

The dossier was safe. For a fellow coming into the business cold, I felt that I wasn't doing badly.

My next step was to see Graves. I turned my car back toward the apartment. Perhaps it was just the bleak look of the building, but when I pulled into the garage behind the apartment I got the same feeling I had had earlier. My feet made unnaturally loud sounds crunching over the cinders and the rear door of the apartment building slammed too loud when I entered. My apartment was on the third floor and, as usual, I was a little out of breath from the climb as I slipped the key into the lock. *As soon as I get squared away with Graves I'll move into something with an elevator,* I thought.

I pushed the door open, walked in, and a big hand grabbed my shirtfront. The arm jerked me forward and, off-balance, I sailed across the small room and crashed into the bare wall opposite the door. I turned and slumped to the floor, not knowing what to expect but knowing it wouldn't be good news whatever it was.

There were two of them. Big. Impersonal. Crowley must have been forced to talk before they sent him over the cliff. It occurred to me that Graves must be fed up with the whole thing to take such a chance on the papers being made public. What assurance did he have that I wouldn't follow Crowley's instructions and mail the stuff on? Surely they got that much information out of Crowley if they got the name of the person who had the papers. The papers could be in the hands of the newspaperman—but no! It wasn't yet six o'clock on Thursday! If I had followed Crowley's instructions and kept my nose out of the envelope, the chances were that these goons would have surprised me *with* the stuff and Graves would be off

the hook once and for all. It looked like I was in it up to my neck and there was no backing out.

"On your feet," the man nearest me said. His voice was unusually high for a man of his proportions. I got up shakily and he shoved me toward the sofa.

"You want to save us some trouble?" he said. The second man stood behind him gently rubbing the knuckles of his left hand against the palm of his right. Every couple of seconds he smacked the fist with a sound like a small thunderstorm. It was all very suggestive.

If they were trying to scare the hell out of me, it worked. I was shaking and my mouth was suddenly dry. I realized that here were two professional men to whom the word *reason* was foreign. They operated strictly on instructions and I felt sure their instructions depended on what answers I gave to their questions.

"What do you want?" I said. It sounded silly even to me.

"What do we want?" The one with the high voice looked at the other one and smiled. He looked back at me, the smile gone. "John Crowley said you had something for us. An envelope. Those were his last words."

"May he rest in peace," the other man said in mock sympathy.

I didn't know what to do. "I want to see Graves. I've got no business with you. I want to see Graves!" That was all that came to my mind.

"Crowley said you might not understand. He said you were a lot like him—" A big fist came around and caught the side of my head. A piercing pain shot through my ear as I crumpled into the sofa pillows. I felt the warm blood running down under my collar.

"*Wait!* I haven't got it! Call Graves! Tell him I've got to see him—"

My voice chopped off as the fist went into my stomach. I knew I was on the floor. My breath wouldn't come. The room went black.

* * *

Distantly, I heard the sound of a telephone dial. I opened my eyes painfully just as the sound stopped. One of the men stood holding my phone.

"He hasn't got it. We searched the joint and the car. He hasn't got it. Says he wants to see Graves." He stood slowly nodding for several seconds, then hung the receiver up. I wondered how long I had been out. At least long enough for one of them to go down to the garage and search my car.

I tried to prepare myself but, to my amazement, the two men simply walked out of the apartment. I couldn't understand why they would kill Crowley and leave me with only a couple of bruises. The blackmail business was becoming more complicated than ever and I hadn't talked to Graves yet.

I bathed and patched up the split ear as best I could and went out to my car. The inside of the car was a wreck. The cushions lay on the dirt floor of the garage. The floor mats were out, the trunk was emptied. They had made a thorough search. I put everything back and started downtown. The Graves Manufacturing Company was to be my first stop, but my nerves started jangling before I was halfway there.

When I saw the sign BAR ahead, I felt that not only was stopping there a good idea; it was a necessity.

That drink was one of the best I ever had. I thought it might be a good idea to call and make an appointment with Graves. There was a booth next to the juke box and I went in and called the plant. I got Graves' secretary on the line.

You don't just call Benjamin Graves' office and say "I want to speak to Ben" and get through to him. The girl said if I would state my business she would make an appointment for me.

"The name is Ted Wallace and the business is personal," I said.

"Just a moment, sir. I'll see if Mr. Graves is in."

I held on. In a few seconds she was back. "I'm

sorry, sir. Mr. Graves is tied up in conference today. Would you like to come in next Thursday at two o'clock?"

"Thursday, hell!" I said abruptly, "Look, you take a pencil and write my name on a piece of paper. T-e-d W-a-l-l-a-c-e. Now take it in there and put it on his desk. Tell him I'll be there in a half hour!"

This must not have happened often. She was stumped. Then she muttered something about trying and the phone went dead again. I used the interval to lean out of the phone booth and order another drink. The bartender brought it over just as the girl came back to the phone.

"Mr. Wallace? Mr. Graves will see you in half an hour," she said. And by the inflection of her voice I felt certain that she was more than a little surprised at the appointment being granted.

"I'll be there." I almost laughed. I'd like to have seen the old man when she gave him the note.

I went back to the bar and finished my drink. I looked at the gleaming rows of bottles behind the bar and decided that one more wouldn't hurt. It might do a lot of good.

I ordered a double.

Even as well fortified for the meeting as I was, there was a twinge of nervousness as I went down the marble corridor toward Graves' office. I felt like an idiot for being nervous. After all, it was Graves who was on the spot—not me. But then I thought of Crowley and my smashed ear, and I wondered.

The secretary showed me in immediately and I suddenly found myself standing before the great man himself. Looking at him I had the feeling that the papers waiting for the non-existent Bill Johns at the Eastside Post Office could only be a giant hoax—something fiendishly designed to discredit this kind, white-haired, bright-eyed old gentleman who stood behind his huge desk and smiled at me as though I were a favorite son.

"Sit down, Ted." He indicated the chair at the

side of his desk. "Cigar?" He slid a handsomely carved box across the desk and I took one. I don't smoke, but I took one. Benjamin Graves leaned back in his chair and lit his cigar. From beneath a cloud of smoke he said, "You and John Crowley were friends, weren't you? Horrible accident, horrible. It seems such a waste for a thing like that to happen to a young man, particularly a bright young man on his way up."

He spoke mildly, but there was something in his eyes, a touch of humor, as though he might end his little eulogy with a punch line.

"I knew Crowley—slightly," I said. My voice didn't sound at all familiar to me. I wasn't even certain what I was going to say next.

The cloud of smoke poured up from behind the desk, the bright eyes twinkled, and a little smile made so bold as to flit across his firm lips. Suddenly, the face hardened. He looked beyond me toward the door.

"I left instructions that no one was to be let in!"

I turned. The woman standing in the doorway was beautiful. Black hair tumbled about her shoulders and her black eyes were calm, yet defiant, as she looked at Graves. There was intelligence there, too.

The voice matched her. "Is that the way to speak to your wife?" She was speaking to him, but her eyes were on me.

It had its effect. He rose and went across the room to her. "I'm sorry, darling, but business is business. Now you go on down to the club. I'll meet you there for lunch."

She was still looking at me. "Aren't you going to introduce us, Benjamin?" she said.

Momentarily, my thoughts left the business at hand. I didn't expect him to do what he did. He grabbed her arm and forcibly propelled her through the door.

"I'll talk to you later!" he said, as he slammed the door after her.

When he resumed his seat, it was as though noth-

ing had interrupted our talk. "Now, what was this urgent business you wanted to see me about, Ted?"

There was such a benevolent smile on his face that I felt I must be making a stupid mistake. This *couldn't* possibly be the man whose life was in the manila folder. But the thought of Crowley and the two thugs at my apartment bolstered me.

"I think you know, Mr. Graves. John Crowley—*bequeath*ed me something." I was pleased with my choice of words. "An item I believe has been of interest to you for some time."

The old man dropped the act as easily as he had taken it on. "I wondered who'd be taking over," he said softly. "I hadn't expected a sparrow like you." Then he looked me squarely in the eye and said, "Well?"

He had tossed the ball to me and I sat there and juggled it. "First off, Mr. Graves—" I started to call him "Graves," but it came out with a "Mister" in front of it. "First off, the papers are in a safe place. If anything happens to me, my threat to expose you will not be left to someone with a decision to make. It will be cut and dried. Secondly—"

Benjamin Graves held up a hand that, when it demanded silence, got it. "Let me tell *you* something. You've read the stuff so you know as well as I do what the consequences to me would be if the papers were made public. And I wouldn't spend the rest of my life in jail. I'd kill myself first. Now let me tell you what the consequences to *you* will be. I have made arrangements that a certain person—whose name I will now have to change—be taken care of if anything happens to me. You've read the contents of the folder Crowley left you so you know this is no idle threat." Then he smiled. "You know, you're beginning to turn up in *everybody's* will." He chuckled, but I didn't see the humor in it.

"You're an amateur at this, Wallace," he continued. "You've had surprising luck so far, but you shouldn't

push it. You're trying to put the squeeze on someone a little too big for you."

I had come to give him an ultimatum and Graves had switched the thing around as neat as a pin. It burned me, that smiling old man sitting there telling me what to do while I held his reputation—even his life—in the palm of my hand.

"Mr. Graves, that doesn't impress me. I know where I've got you and you know it. I want fifty thousand cash and five thousand a month—starting right now."

My mouth went dry just saying the words.

He laughed. "The cost of living must be rising. Crowley was a more moderate man to deal with. My offer is ten thousand cash and you go back to your job at double the salary. Think it over, Wallace." He took a deep drag on his cigar, letting the smoke out in a cloud that almost obliterated him. Then his face jutted through the cloud. "Don't overlook what I said. If you try to prolong this we're both in hot water. I don't mind telling you, Wallace, I'm damned fed up with this game!" It was obvious he meant it.

But it irked me, his watching me so calmly. I got to my feet. "Those are my terms. Take it or leave it!"

"Don't mistake frustration for bravery, Wallace," he said. It was uncanny the way he could see through my motives. "You think this thing out the rest of the day and meet me at—" he looked at his watch "—say, six o'clock at the Fernandia Yacht Club. My boat's anchored down there and we can talk in peace."

I got up to leave. He stopped me as I was walking out.

"Peace of mind is a fragile thing," he said. "Don't sacrifice it for money."

There was a paternal smile on his lips as I closed the door.

* * *

It was fascinating the way he had taken the initiative. Fascinating—and deadly. If it hadn't been for the martinis before coming to see him I would probably have taken his offer and gotten out. On the other hand, if it hadn't been for the martinis, I wouldn't have gotten to his office at all.

What the hell had gone wrong? I couldn't think straight as I hurried down the corridor toward the street. Just what the hell *had* happened? I had gone in to give him his instructions and had come out practically living on borrowed time. Benjamin Graves hadn't gotten to where he was by being stupid—but maybe I had.

I walked past the garage where I had parked my car and went into a cocktail lounge to do a little thinking. I eased onto a stool, not noticing anyone or anything, and ordered a drink.

"Drinking alone is a bad sign—particularly during office hours."

I looked around and there she was—Mrs. Benjamin Graves. I would have been less amazed if Santa Claus had flown in and ordered two rounds for the reindeers. She took the empty stool next to me.

"You *do* work for my husband, don't you?" she asked. The voice had the same mellow tone I had heard in Graves' office, but the mockery was gone from it. Not only did she look good, she smelled good. Good—and very expensive. I figured her for a model or a movie starlet who had lucked onto a rich old man who had sense enough to know something good when he saw it and money enough to buy it.

"That's right, Mrs. Graves. I work for your husband. He gave me the afternoon off." It was the first thing that came to mind, so I said it.

She laughed. It wasn't a polite laugh, but a real laugh as if she thought what I said was really funny.

"How about buying a lady a drink?" she said. "Particularly since the lady's husband was good enough to give you the afternoon off." Then she looked at me

out of the corner of her eye. "Or was he firing you for drinking on the job?"

"As a matter of fact," I said, "Mr. Graves was asking me if I'd like a raise. I told him I'd think it over." I took a sip of my drink. "Taxes, you know. You can't just take every raise that comes along."

She laughed again. "What's your job with the company?"

"Let's not talk shop. How about that drink? What'll it be?"

She ordered something fancy and while the bartender shook it with fervor I took a good look at Mrs. Graves. She was a really beautiful woman—not one put together with lipstick and mascara and fingernail polish. She was the real thing.

I wondered. The way she had spoken to me first—even asked me to buy her a drink. It was a pickup in any language. Why shouldn't I take a flyer? I had her husband over a barrel, so to speak. Of course, for the moment it seemed that the barrel was a little crowded, what with *both* of us over it. But why not play with the old man's toys while we argued it out?

"Tell me about yourself," I said. "How did a good looking woman like you marry a man old enough to be your grandfather?"

She wasn't offended. On the contrary, she was amused. "I've never had that question asked me so bluntly. What would you say if I told you I loved Ben? No?"

I shook my head.

"Well, what if I said I loved what Ben can *do* for me?"

I nodded, a little puzzled at her frankness with a stranger. From what I had seen of Graves he didn't care for people who tried to make a fool of him.

I had heard stories of the young Mrs. Graves. Stories about things that went on behind the old man's back. I had never seen her before that day and I had discounted the talk as simply being idle gossip. Now I

began to wonder if the stories I had heard weren't true after all—or even understatements. She seemed to be the kind of woman who needs more attention than a sixty-five-year-old man can give her.

We became pretty chummy before the afternoon was over. It was "Ted" and "Carla" after the second drink. After the fourth I had an invitation to come out the next day to what she called her "hideaway." "If Ben will let you off."

I was feeling better and better. "You may not believe this," I said, "but Ben will let me have just about anything I want."

She laughed. "How very mysterious," she said.

Of course I realize—when I'm sober, at any rate—that a few drinks do funny things to one's thinking. What would have seemed peculiar in the sober light of day only appeared to be good fortune in the darkness of a cocktail lounge. Carla gave me a slip of paper with a telephone number on it and told me to call her the next morning. She got up, gave my hand a squeeze, and walked away.

I watched her. The rear view was as good as the rest.

It was five-thirty when I got in my car and headed for the swank Fernandia Yacht Club. The only substitute for blue blood as a membership requirement was a bank account with six or seven big figures in front of the decimal point. As I parked the car and walked to the gate leading into the boat slips, a little fellow in a sailor suit came up to me without hesitation.

"Are you Mr. Wallace, sir?" he said.

"That's right."

"Mr. Graves is expecting you. Right this way."

I followed him down a flight of wooden stairs to a float where a small launch was tied.

"Get aboard, sir, and I'll take you right out," he said.

We boarded the launch. The sailor touched the

starter, backed away from the dock, and we slipped smoothly out over the harbor toward Graves' yacht. Right at that moment I began to have misgivings. Watching the shore recede I decided I had made a mistake in accepting Graves' suggestion to meet him here. It was like letting the enemy pick the battlefield. The little sailor volunteered no conversation during the short ride. He maneuvered the launch neatly alongside the yacht and I was helped aboard by a man who appeared to be the captain.

"Mr. Graves is waiting for you in the salon, sir. Follow me."

We went down a long companionway, past several closed doors, and into a large, well-lighted room. Graves was sitting at the far end in a huge chair, an open book in one hand and a cigar in the other. As the captain and I entered, he looked up.

"Good evening, Wallace," he said. He did not rise. "Thank you, Captain Pedersen."

Graves said nothing for several moments after the captain nodded and went out. He just sat there and stared at me, the little smile that I had seen earlier in the day spreading across his lips. I began to feel like the world's biggest fool. He said nothing about my being seated but I felt it would be less awkward so I took a chair opposite him.

"So you're going into business, Wallace?" He chuckled. "I wonder if you have any idea what you're doing." He didn't appear to be *asking* me, it was simply conjecture on his part.

I don't like being made a fool of any more than the next fellow. The way he looked at me, as though I were some sort of curiosity, and the way he talked around me—well, it got the better of what good judgment I may have had.

"Look, Graves," I blurted out, "let's not drag this thing out any longer than necessary. Let's get the business straightened out and I'll leave you to yourself." I looked around the salon. The room and its fur-

nishings must have cost Graves a small fortune. What would the amount I asked mean to a man in his bracket?

As if reading my thoughts, he said, "No, it's not so much what you want, Wallace. It's simply the thing hanging over my head all the time. My offer still stands. It's up to you."

There was nothing forced about his smile or the ease with which he spoke. I was the one who must have looked like he was walking on a bed of hot coals. It was Graves' attitude that forced me to take my stand. I was determined I wouldn't back down.

"It's just what I said this morning, Graves,"—I had also determined to drop the 'mister'—"$50,000 now, $5,000 a month. That's not much for a man like you."

"No. You're right, Wallace. It wouldn't break me. However, as you realize, we're in this thing together, so to speak. You realize that I intend to keep my word just as certainly as you do? I am leaving instructions in my will—unofficially, of course—that you are to be killed as soon as this business is made public."

"Threatening me won't do any good," I said.

"There's more to it. I am not a John Crowley." His smile broadened and, at a signal, the door at the opposite end of the salon opened. Through it stepped a man in a sailor's uniform. It wasn't the little man who had met me at the dock. This one was a giant, at least six and a half feet tall. His body was pure muscle and his face and brow were brutish, almost animal.

"Here's the part you didn't anticipate, *Mr.* Wallace. When you're ready for more bargaining, please do return."

He nodded at the sailor. The man's beady eyes immediately fastened on me as though they had been searching for me forever. There was nothing detached about it. He looked at me as if I had murdered his mother. I only remember the first four or

five blows. It was like standing beneath the Empire State Building in a dream and watching helplessly as it crumbles and falls on you—tons and tons of steel and concrete. And all through it ran Graves' chuckle.

I awoke, my hands clawing wet sand. Above, the sky full of stars twinkled. I tried to move and every muscle in my body screamed out. It was minutes before I was able to struggle into a sitting position. Somewhere in the far distance a whistle blew. I looked about. Off to my right were vague lights that became clearer as the dizziness left me. It was the Fernandia Yacht Club, and I was sitting on the beach alongside the club. Out in the harbor I could see the riding lights of Graves' yacht. As I felt for broken bones I wondered at Graves' logic in doing this to me. I could find no fault with it. He could do anything to me he wanted—short of killing me. And there wasn't one damned thing I could do about it without signing my own death warrant.

When I was finally able to get to my feet, I began to wonder how often this would happen. Up until the point where I blacked out, there was no mention of the payoff. The bruises that covered my body were a good bargaining point for his side. The sensible thing to do, of course, would be to agree to his offer. To hell with the job, take the ten thousand and clear out. With the ten thousand I could travel. At least for a while.

I made my way slowly up from the beach to the street. I found my car and started back to the apartment. The clock on the dashboard said 3:30.

Three-thirty in the morning. I figured I'd go home, bathe, take a nap, and call Carla Graves. The way she had talked before, I wondered if there might not be some way yet to salvage the whole deal.

After the nap I was so sore I could hardly get out of bed. The sailor had given me a professional job. There wasn't a muscle or bone in my body that

wasn't killing me. And there was just enough whiskey in the apartment to take the edge off my aches and pains. I went through my pants pockets and found the piece of paper with Carla Graves' phone number. I wondered what would have happened if Graves had found it on me the night before. Maybe he wouldn't have recognized the number. Maybe it was only available to Mrs. Graves' friends—not her husband.

Carla answered after three rings.

"Hello, Carla. This is Ted. Ted Wallace. Is that invitation still good?"

"Not only is it still good," the voice came over the wire, "I'd be insulted if you stood me up."

"I've got your phone number, but no address," I said. "Where is this little hideaway?"

"You'd never find it. I'll tell you what. Meet me in the drive-in restaurant at the corner of Palm and La-Vista—you know where that is?"

I said I did.

"Be there in thirty minutes," she said.

I powdered the visible bruises as best I could and put a fresh bandage on the split ear. As I stood there looking in the bathroom mirror it occurred to me that I resembled a punchy boxer more than a beginner in the fine art of blackmail.

Five minutes after I pulled into the drive-in, a little foreign convertible came alongside. Carla was at the wheel.

"Hi!" she said. "Lock your car and get in with me."

"Why not take both cars? I'll follow you."

"I'd rather you didn't," she said. "I want to show you my new car."

I didn't feel that it would be a good idea to insist, so I got out and locked the car. I climbed into the convertible beside Carla. The smile vanished from her face as she looked at me. "*What* hit you!"

"I'll tell you about it later. Where is this place of yours? I could use a drink. There's something else I want to talk to you about, too."

She looked puzzled. "I thought we were going to have a pleasant, uncomplicated friendship. Now you sound serious."

Carla drove fast. Faster than I like to ride. And I think she must have noticed that I was a little tense on the curves because she laughed and put the accelerator to the floor. Then she slowed to below fifty for the first time and banked into a side road. After a couple of minutes of sliding, skidding, and dust, she pulled to a stop before a house that stood on a bluff overlooking the ocean.

"Nice?" she smiled.

Nice was an understatement. It was magnificent. A modern split-level mansion set among palms and exotic shrubs and trees, most of which I had never before seen.

"Let's take a swim before you get into this serious conversation," she said.

Carla led the way into a cool hallway, down a wide corridor, and ushered me into a bedroom.

"The bath is there." She pointed toward a door. "Take your pick of the bathing suits. I'll meet you on the beach. It's that way." She pointed again and smiled. Then she was gone.

I went into the bathroom and took a South Seas-looking suit from those on the shelf. On the way out I spent a few minutes looking around the house. There appeared to be no one there but Carla and me. There was a fortune in furniture and another fortune in paintings. Everything was in expensive good taste.

Stone steps led from the house to the beach. From the top I could see that Carla was already there. Watching her as she stood below on the sparkling sands, my thoughts left blackmail for the first time since Crowley's letter.

When I reached the bottom of the stairs, Carla picked up an earthen jug and held it out to me.

"Here. Have some," she said. "It'll make those bruises feel better."

I put the jug to my lips. It was a jugful of very good martinis. The party had started.

We swam for a while and then sat on the sand at the foot of the stairs. It was a beautiful afternoon. The sky was as clean and smooth as a porcelain dish and the sea was deep blue. We drank from the jug and Carla began to tell me about herself.

"You wonder about Ben and me, don't you?" she said.

I didn't answer, but she was right. I did wonder.

"You can guess. It's strictly for money. It's as simple as that. He offered me money and I offered him—" She shrugged and ran her hands down over her body.

"He got the better part of the deal," I said.

"Money can't substitute for everything," Carla said.

I didn't have to be hit by a freight train. I reached out and took her arm. It seemed that Carla had been getting along on money alone for some time.

After a while I reached over and picked up the jug and took a long drag on it. Carla lay quietly looking up at the sky. It was a very pleasant afternoon indeed.

I should have done some serious thinking then and there, but who stops to think when he's got a beautiful woman and plenty of liquor? After the treatment accorded me on Graves' yacht, I felt that this was, in a way, revenge. I didn't flatter myself that I was the first—or the last—but it did accomplish its purpose.

The martinis that Carla made were good. I had the feeling that I was on my way. Of course, I had been on binges before, but I was always able to pull myself out of it when I wanted to. I simply stopped when I thought it was time. The letter had three more days of lying in a Post Office pigeonhole before it would go to Trawick. All I had to do was get to the Post Office before that, remail it, and sit back for another five days. I'd think of some other way to

cache the papers after the ice was broken, in the form of Graves' initial payment. Maybe I'd find that Carla would make a good partner. With a club like that over him, she could come and go as she pleased without fear.

I decided to bring it up—later.

Toward evening, she suggested a party. "I know lots of fun people," she said. "Unless you're worried about getting back to work."

"I'm not worried about a thing," I told her. Full to the gills with booze, it was the truth. "I'm my own man for three days."

"Three days? And then what?"

I winked at her. "Gotta see a man about a letter."

"You *are* a man of mystery," she laughed.

We went back to the house, and I mixed more drinks while she used the phone. Soon, laughing happy people began to arrive, and there followed a vague succession of people, drinking, and dancing. The binge had taken on all the aspects of an orgy. Sometimes there was sunlight and we were on the beach, and sometimes it was dark out and we went back to the beach house and the party would pick up where it had left off. Time was lost in the shuffle. I don't know how long it would have gone on if it hadn't been for *them.*

It was after the party began to break up one morning. People were still milling around the bar. I was stretched out on the sofa, talking to a wild-eyed young man about God-knows-what. It was the voice that attracted my attention first. I couldn't hear what was being said, but the voice—it was familiar. It was familiar in a way that caught my attention. It came through the open door to the library and I leaned up on the sofa. At first I thought I must be mistaken—that the gin had gotten the best of me. That couldn't be Carla talking to him.

The impact hit me full force when it got through to me. Even in my gin-soaked condition it was a

shock. The voice—the man talking to Carla in the library—it was the hood who had thrown me around my apartment that first morning! What was *he* doing here? What connection could Carla have with him?

When it hit me, it was far from pleasant. Everything began to line up—began to fit into place suddenly like a jigsaw puzzle drawing together of its own volition. The phone call from the apartment. It was *Carla* he had called—not Benjamin Graves! The two days of playing and drinking . . .

That was when the second thought crashed into my mind with the force of a ten-inch gun. *Was it two days?* Or was it three . . . or four! The letter! The return address of the newspaper editor and the impersonal phrase written in the upper left hand corner—"If not claimed in five days return to . . ."

I had to find out what day it was. There was no newspaper in the house. At least, if there were, there was no way of telling whether it was today's or yesterday's or when. I asked two or three of the people around the bar and I got as many different answers. It was a big joke—someone asking them what day it was.

I hadn't seen Carla since hearing her in the library. I went outside. The shock of what was happening had a strong sobering effect on me. Carla's car stood in the garage and I got in and started it. My stomach knotted as I thought of Graves' final words to me. *I'm leaving instructions in my will that you are to be killed as soon as this business is made public.* I could still see the smile on his face.

Since that night on Graves' yacht time had run together. Nights and days were lost and intermingled. I had to find out what day it was!

I sent the car careening over the dimly-remembered roads. The drive-in where I had parked my own car was open and I stopped. I went into the counter and ordered a cup of coffee. I was about to ask the

counterman what day it was when I noticed the newspaper lying on the counter. I picked it up just as he brought my coffee.

"Is this today's paper?" I asked.

He looked at it casually, "Yesterday's. Late edition."

He walked away and I looked at the masthead. *Tuesday, June 25, 1956* it said. It was too late. The letter was on its way to Trawick. Graves was on his way to suicide. I was on my way to the bottom of the river. And Carla—she was just on her way. She was exactly where she had wanted to be all along. Rid of Graves for good, but not rid of his money, as she would have been had he caught her playing around.

More pieces began to fit in. Why Crowley had sent the papers to me. Carla—or one of her goons—must have made an unsuccessful first attempt to kill Crowley, reasoning that, like most blackmailers, Crowley would have set up a method for exposing Graves in case of his, Crowley's, death. Crowley had mistakenly thought it was Graves who was trying to kill him, so he'd mailed his evidence to me and had tried desperately to contact Graves, to make some new bargain. But Carla's beef trust hadn't missed the second time.

Why hadn't she killed me? Why hadn't she used the same method with me? I had talked too much, had let her know I was Crowley's successor, had even let her know the time limit involved. But why simply delay me, why not kill me as she killed Crowley?

Because Graves thought *I* killed Crowley!

Of course! Things he'd said—now I understood. If I had been found killed, Graves would have realized someone else was doing the killing, and it wouldn't have taken him long to think of Carla.

She was free and clear. Crowley and Graves, and now me. She had used us all, destroyed us all, and she was free and clear.

I wished I had the strength, the courage, to stop

her. To kill her, as she had killed me. But I was weak. I'd always been weak, and I would remain true to myself to the end.

I drank the steaming hot coffee and went outside. My car was at the far end of the lot. I walked to it and climbed behind the wheel. There was a bottle at home, in the dresser drawer. If I drank fast enough, I would never have to know when they came for me.

TWO DAYS IN ORGANVILLE

Edward D. Hoch

"Organville," Brewster said quietly, shuffling through the papers on his desk without looking at me. "I want you to finish Herb Quick's assignment."

"It's my home town," I told him, standing uneasily before the desk like a schoolboy. "I haven't been back there in nine years."

He looked up, puzzled. "I know it's your home town, Bob. That's why I thought of you after Herb's accident. You know Organville, you know the people. And I think you're ready to try a feature story."

I knew I couldn't refuse the assignment, even though the thought of returning to Organville hardly filled me with pleasure. Feature writers for *Everyweek* went where they were told, and wrote what they were expected to write. "Thank you, Mr. Brewster," I managed to say. "I appreciate the opportunity."

"Good. You know the background pretty well. Herb Quick went down there last week to interview this minister, Fancreek—the one who claims he's found a hymn written by Thomas Aquinas. Somehow or other, Herb walked in front of a train and got himself killed. So the job is yours now. You can put your home town on the map."

So it was back to Organville, which would never be

on any map except maybe one of unimproved roads and uninspired places. I'd have two days there to complete my interviews with Fancreek, and then it would be back to New York in time for *Everyweek*'s Saturday noon deadline.

A train was the only way to get there, because the nearest airport was a little field fifty miles away that couldn't handle anything bigger than a Piper Cub anyway. There were buses, but they stopped at every cow crossing and sometimes in between. The train was fairly direct, and stopped in the exact center of Organville, halfway between the drab, paint-peeled town hall and the three-story brick hotel that was still the best-looking building in town. I stood there for a while taking it all in, just thinking it had been a hell of a long time but not nearly long enough.

Then I walked across the dusty main street to the hotel lobby. The desk clerk, a dried-up little man left over from another era, gazed long and hard at my signature. "Robert Pine. I know that name from somewhere."

"Yeah?"

"You're from New York, huh?"

"That's right."

"I know that name from somewhere."

"Which room?"

"Huh? Seventeen. One flight up."

"Thanks."

"How long you be staying?" the man called after me.

"Two nights. I'll leave Saturday morning."

I went upstairs to the dingy hallway I still remembered, and found the room without difficulty. I'd known rooms like it before, in this very same hotel, when I'd slept off a hangover rather than go home to face the family. The wallpaper hung loose in spots, and there was a hole in the plaster above the bed. The place was falling apart, just like the town; not

with a roar but with a crumbling, ever-present whimper.

I changed into a clean shirt and went downstairs for something to eat. There was a lunch counter down the block that had been a bar in my time, and I asked the guy behind the counter, "Whatever happened to Tiny?"

"Who?"

"Tiny. Used to have a bar here."

"That was seven, eight years ago. Where you been, mister?"

"Away."

"Tiny's got a gas station now, over on Summit Street. The cops closed him up."

"How come?"

"Crown and that newspaper of his. He kept yelling about Tiny serving minors, until finally the cops had to do something."

"How is Crown, anyway? I used to know him."

The counterman shrugged and wiped away a greasy spot. "He's married now. Married Nancy Wegman."

"So I heard." I decided I didn't want to talk about Nancy Wegman, not even after nine years. I ate my sandwich and drank my coffee and didn't ask any more questions.

I found the town's lone taxi parked across the street, and gave the sleepy driver a dollar to take me the four short blocks to Dr. Fancreek's home. It was a nice house, typically country parsonage, complete with a sagging porch overhung with vined gingerbread and that musty odor one associated with churches. I stood on the porch trying to remember if I'd ever met Fancreek in the days of my youth.

"Yes?" The door opened to reveal a chubby little man in clerical grays. With a beard he would have passed for Santa Claus, but he didn't have a beard and this was the wrong season anyway.

"Robert Pine from *Everyweek,* sir. I believe my editor phoned that I'd be coming."

"Certainly, certainly! You came for an interview, like the other one. Tragic accident! But I hadn't really expected you so soon." He opened the screen door for me and then went bustling about, picking up scattered magazines and newspapers. "Marie, that New York reporter is here!"

This information brought forth a handsome woman not yet forty. She was a good ten years younger than her husband, and I wondered if, like army officers, ministers tended to marry later in life, after the first wave of travel and transfer had subsided. "Pleased to meet you," she said, sounding as if she meant it. "Would you like some coffee?"

"That would be very nice. Thank you."

Dr. Fancreek had seated himself beneath a garish lithograph of Christ preaching, and he faced me with folded hands and an expression of divine judgment. Maybe he thought I was going to take his photograph.

"We have some pictures of you," I said, hoping to relax him. "I just want the facts about this manuscript you discovered."

Dr. Fancreek smiled. "A composition for the organ in the handwriting of Thomas Aquinas. Or so I believe."

"You're an organologist?" I asked, getting out my notebook and hoping that was the right word.

Marie Fancreek served the coffee and then vanished on some mission of her own, perhaps to dust the maze of vases and plain junk that seemed to clutter every visible corner of the house. Fancreek watched her go and then repeated, "Organologist? I suppose so. That's the reason I moved to Organville, you know. The only place in the country where the main occupation is still the manufacture of organs. I came here a few years ago from Florida. I hate your Northern winters, but the Southern temper is ill-conducive to the practice of religion these days."

My pencil was busy making marks across the bleak-

ness of the notebook, and I was already sorry I hadn't brought the tape recorder along. It was back at the hotel, in my suitcase, and I'd have to remember it tomorrow. For more than an hour I listened to the story of Fancreek's days as a struggling divinity student, when he watched his father play the organ in a crumbling Southern church that was finally torn down for a new highway. I heard of his early struggles, and of his journeys to Europe in quest of long-lost organ compositions. There were searches in musty monasteries, countless dead-end failures, and only a few successes to keep him going.

Finally, he led me upstairs, to a den that might once have served as a spare bedroom. Papers, documents, and manuscripts were laid before me, disgorged from an antique safe that might have been nearly as ancient as some of its contents. For the next ten minutes I heard a detailed discourse on the Gregorian chant, followed by a maze of information on organs.

"The pipes of Pan himself were probably its beginning," Fancreek said, gesturing with his hands as if giving a sermon. "There was actually a hydraulus or water organ in use some two hundred years before Christ."

"Interesting," I admitted. "I always thought the organ was an invention of the Renaissance period."

"Hardly. Jerusalem had an organ in 400 A.D. that could be heard a mile away and needed several people to play it. For a time, organs were banned from the churches, but by the tenth century there was one with four hundred pipes in Winchester, England, believe it or not," he said.

"What about this composition by Thomas Aquinas?" I asked, trying finally to get down to the point.

"Here." He brought forth the final treasure, carefully framed in glass. It was a sheet of brown and crumbling parchment, covered with unfamiliar Latin

and strange musical notations. "I located this almost a year ago in Italy," he announced proudly, "but it wasn't until recently that I was able to prove its authenticity."

"And just how did you do that?"

"This Latin. It reads: *Put down this fourth day after the Feast of the Holy Trinity in the year of Our Lord 1265 by Thomas son of Landolfo student of Albert.*"

"That would be Thomas Aquinas?"

Dr. Fancreek nodded. "Without doubt. His father was Count Landolfo of Aquino, and in Paris he studied under Albert the Great. Even the year seems a logical one. In 1265 he'd just completed his *Summa Contra Gentiles,* but hadn't yet started the *Summa Theologica.* He chose that time to turn to the relative lightness of an organ composition."

"What does it sound like?"

"Actually, it's a beautiful hymn, a bit like *Silent Night.* It would be a lovely piece of music even without Thomas' signature."

"And it's really very valuable?"

"Priceless! Like finding a new play by Shakespeare! The organ company here has already offered me one hundred thousand dollars for it."

"And you've accepted?"

"I haven't yet decided. It's not clear what they'd use it for. This treasure deserves a better fate than to end up illustrating an advertising campaign."

"Is it wise to keep it here, in that old safe?"

The minister stroked the glass with loving care. "I hated to part with it. But now, with all the publicity, I will need to store it in a safe-deposit box, I suppose."

"It would be best. A lot of men would commit murder for something like that." Then, for some reason, a startling, unwanted thought crossed my mind. "Did Herb Quick see it? Before he died?"

Fancreek seemed to think about his answer for a

moment. "Yes. In fact, he was on his way from my house the other night, when the train hit him."

"How could that have happened? People don't walk in front of trains."

Fancreek cleared his throat. "I'd rather not talk about it. Do you have any further questions?" He asked the question over his shoulder, as he went about the task of storing his treasures back in the ancient safe.

"Not today. But perhaps I could return tomorrow with my tape recorder. Maybe we could even go over to your church and make a recording of this hymn."

Fancreek nodded, the simple smile returning to his face. "Certainly. I would be pleased to play it for you."

We went downstairs and I said good-bye to Marie Fancreek. It wasn't far back to the hotel, so I walked, perhaps along the route Herb Quick had taken less than a week before. I should have been pleased with the way things were going, but I wasn't. Something was bothering me. I couldn't quite decide whether it was just being back in Organville after so many years, or something more—something to do with Herb Quick's death.

Back at the hotel the desk clerk told me, "You got a visitor. She's waiting in the bar."

I went cold the moment I heard the words. The past was dead, damn it, and she didn't have the right to try and awaken it. I lit a cigarette to steady my nerves and went through the palm-draped archway to the dim little bar. On Saturday nights it had always been the best pickup spot in the county.

"Hello, Nancy," I said quietly, taking the stool next to hers.

Nancy Crown—Nancy Wegman the last time I'd seen her—turned and looked full at me. The sight of her again after nine years chilled my stomach and weakened my legs. I wasn't over her, and maybe I never would be. "Hello, Bob. How are you?"

"Fine. Older, I guess. How'd you hear I was in town?"

"My husband owns the newspaper, remember? We hear things."

"I heard you were married. Belated congratulations and such." I signaled the bartender for a drink, deciding I was going to need one. "I see you're still drinking whiskey sours."

"I haven't changed much, Bob." Then her eyes closed to mere slits against the cigarette smoke. "Why did you come back?"

"I'm a writer for *Everyweek,* finishing Herb Quick's assignment."

"What do you think of the town?"

"Tiny's place is gone. I was sorry to see that; it was always the best bar around."

"There are still a few roadhouses. Are you married, Bob?"

"No."

She avoided my eyes. "I got tired of waiting for you to send for me."

"So I gathered."

"I got tired of a lot of things, Bob. Being poor, for one."

She was wearing a dress that must have cost a couple of hundred bucks back in New York. I wondered if anybody but her husband even noticed it in Organville. Avoiding her eyes, I concentrated on the damp rings scattered across the bar top. "I've been lonely for nine years, Nancy," I told her.

"I was lonely, too."

"Until John Crown came along."

She downed her drink quickly. "Forget it. I should never have come here."

"Why did you come?" I asked. "Just to see me again?"

"To see what you were up to. We're all very proud of Dr. Fancreek's work. It's important to us, just as the organ company is important."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

She took a deep breath. "Are you investigating Quick's death?"

I lit another cigarette to cover the whirl of my brain. "I'm interested in how he died," I answered carefully.

"Don't be, Bob." She seemed sorry as soon as she'd spoken.

I laid down some money for two more drinks. "I'd like to talk with you and John before I go back. Could I come over tomorrow night? I'm leaving Saturday."

"I suppose so," she said; and then, "Forget what I said about Quick."

"Sure."

"We'll be looking for you around eight."

We finished our drinks and I walked her to the street. It was easy to leave her there, to watch her walking off in the twilight like a stranger. After nine years, maybe she was a stranger.

The library was still open, and I dug out the issue of John Crown's newspaper that told about the accidental death of Herb Quick. He'd been walking, apparently on his way back to the hotel from Fancreek's house. He'd stopped at a gas station near the railroad tracks to make a long-distance call, and then gone outside to his death. Nobody had seen it happen. There was a picture of the gas station owner in the paper, pointing toward the railroad tracks. It was my old friend Tiny.

I walked through the cool evening air to Summit Street, where a glowing orange oval beckoned me to Tiny's gas station. Darkness had come quickly to the town, as it always did in my youth, and I was reminded of the many times I'd run down this very street, hurrying to be home before the line of glowing street lights was turned on by some invisible hand.

"Hello, Tiny."

The big man turned from his half-hearted polishing of the chrome gasoline pump and eyed me suspiciously. He still had that eternal look of a bartender sizing up a college kid's age, and perhaps he thought I was one of the cops who'd run him out of business. "I remember you," he said finally, but the tone of voice told me he really didn't.

"Bob Pine. I used to come into your bar."

"Pine. Long time ago." He scratched his balding dome.

"A long time."

He frowned at me across a rack of shiny oil cans. "You used to go with the Wegman girl, and then you went off to New York to be a writer. I remember now." The orange light from the overhead sign was doing odd things to the flabby flesh of his face. "What you doing back here?"

"I worked with Herb Quick, the fellow who was killed."

The face seemed to be remembering something else now. "I don't know anything about that."

"The paper said he stopped here just before he was killed. You told the police he made a long-distance call."

"You trying to get me closed up? Trying to get the police after me here, too?" He was a frightened man.

"How did you know he was calling long distance?"

"He asked me for a flock of quarters."

"Where did he call?"

"I don't know. New York someplace, I guess."

I reached a quick decision. "Can I use your phone?"

"If you got a dime."

"I got a dime."

I went into the brightly lit office that smelled of gasoline and grease, and called the office of *Everyweek*. It was after seven, but I knew Brewster often worked late on Thursday and Friday nights.

"How are you doing out there, Bob?" His voice greeted me almost immediately, as if I'd been calling at ten in the morning.

I glanced around at Tiny hovering in the doorway. "Fine, I guess."

"Did you see the Aquinas thing?"

"Yeah. It seems authentic, but look, I think I'm onto something else."

"What's that?"

"Did Herb phone you last week, just before he was killed?"

"No. I didn't hear a word from him after he left New York."

"Well, he phoned somebody."

"Probably his wife or his girlfriend."

"From a gas station? Whoever he called, I don't think he wanted to phone from the hotel."

"What are you getting at, Bob?"

"He was killed by the train right after he made the call."

"So?"

I stared right at Tiny. "Maybe somebody gave him a push."

Brewster crackled on the other end. "What in hell have you been drinking, huh?"

"I'll see you Saturday noon," I told him, and hung up.

On the way out I passed a silent Tiny who was just dropping a dime into the soft-drink machine. He didn't ask me to join him.

I spent Friday morning with Dr. Fancreek and his wife, taking more notes, asking questions, and occasionally turning on the tape recorder to preserve some special bit of dialogue.

"Will you play the Aquinas thing for me?" I asked him.

"I'll be at the church this afternoon between four and five. We could do it then if you want to tape it," he said.

"Fine."

Marie Fancreek hovered at my elbow. "Will you be staying for lunch?"

"Thanks, but I don't think so." Somehow the

crowded corners of the place did not seem conducive to a pleasant meal. "The story's fairly complete. I just want to get a recording of the hymn itself and then I'll be on my way back to New York."

Fancreek smiled slightly. "Even with the recording, how will you ever convey the joy of this music to your readers? There are limitations to the printed page, you know."

"That's not my problem," I told him. "I'm just doing the background article. We have a music editor who'll listen to the tape and make his own comments on the composition."

"He should have come with you."

"Aarons? He never leaves Manhattan. Besides, he's not really on the staff of *Everyweek*. He's a professor at Columbia . . ." I stopped speaking as a sudden thought hit me. Herb Quick had phoned someone in New York before he died. Why not Aarons?

"What's the matter?" Fancreek asked.

"Nothing. I just remembered something I have to do. I must be going now, really."

"You'll be at the church at four?"

"I'll be there," I told him.

I left them, with a nod to Marie Fancreek, and walked slowly down the sunny street with the briefcase and tape recorder bobbing against my leg as I pondered Herb's call.

Aarons. The more I thought about it, the more certain I became that Herb Quick had phoned Professor Aarons from Tiny's gas station. He phoned him from the gas station rather than the hotel, and . . . And what?

I put through a call to Columbia and asked to speak to Aarons, but he was in class, and would be until later that afternoon. I was at a dead end for the moment, so I decided to visit John Crown at his office a little in advance of our scheduled talk.

John Craw Crown liked to think of himself as one of the nation's youngest newspaper publishers, and he

probably was. *The Organville Herald,* only recently promoted to a daily status, would never win any awards or make much money, but in a town this size its word was law and its publisher was God. I'd known him slightly in the old days, when his father was still alive and running things. I hadn't liked him then and I didn't like him any better now.

"I thought Nancy said you were coming to the house this evening," he said by way of greeting.

I stared into the pale-blue eyes and took in the square jaw and youngish face of Nancy's husband. "I wanted to talk to you before that," I said.

"About Nancy?"

"About Dr. Fancreek. And Herb Quick."

"Quick? The reporter who died?"

"That's right."

"I was sorry about that."

"What's your opinion of Fancreek?"

"My opinion? He's going to put Organville on the map, that's my opinion."

"Is that so important to you?"

"It's important to the town. The organ company is still our largest employer."

"And you own part of it."

"That's no secret." He looked at me distastefully. "A few years in New York and you think you're pretty good, don't you?"

"No."

"Why did you come back?"

"I'll give you the sort of answer you want: to seduce Nancy. Now are you happy?"

The pale eyes were like ice. "You'd better go."

I got up and started for the door. "Am I still invited tonight? Or don't you trust me in her company?"

He turned away. "You're still invited," he mumbled. "I'm sure she has no further interest in someone of your—"

I closed the door on his last word and went down

in the little elevator to the street. I felt good, and for the first time I wasn't sorry to be back in Organville—not in the slightest.

I spent twenty minutes on the phone with Professor Aarons, and it was well worth it. Yes, his deep, familiar voice assured me, Herb Quick had phoned him one evening last week. He hadn't heard about Herb's death for a couple of days, and he'd never connected the two events in his mind. There had been no reason to tell Brewster about the call, because he naturally assumed that Herb had lived long enough to tell him.

I went over the conversation with Herb Quick, as he remembered it, and then read him my own notes, just to make sure we were correct. Finally, I thanked him and hung up. On the way through the lobby, I stopped at the desk and told the clerk, "I was speaking to Professor Aarons at Columbia, in case you're reporting it to Crown."

He gave me a dirty look and didn't answer.

I reached Dr. Fancreek's church just a few minutes after four. It was dim and dreary without the overhead lights or candles, but the sounds of the great organ boomed out from above, warming the place with a cresting wave of melodic vibration. In the hands of Dr. Fancreek, the organ became almost a thing alive, a creature of substance that we mortals could never hope to duplicate. I strode over to him.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Pine," he said, his face lit by a single small reading bulb behind the wide keyboard. "I'm playing the Aquinas composition. How does it sound?"

"I don't know. I suppose I wasn't really listening."

"What?"

"Could you stop playing now?"

"You didn't even bring your tape recorder."

"No. Could you stop playing?" I was almost shouting above the roar.

He lifted his hands from the keyboard and adjusted the valves and switches. "Now, what is it?"

"I have some bad news."

"What bad news, Mr. Pine?"

"I've been talking to an expert. It's most improbable that Thomas Aquinas ever wrote that music."

"Oh?" His face was dim in the light, and I couldn't really make out his reaction.

"The inscription—the basis of your evidence—says it was written on the fourth day after the Feast of the Holy Trinity; the fourth day after Trinity Sunday. In the Catholic Church's year, that Thursday was until recently the Feast of Corpus Christi."

"Oh?" Again, only that single sound.

"Of all the people in the world, Thomas Aquinas was most likely to have remembered that feast in the year 1265. Because just a year earlier, in 1264, Pope Urban IV extended the feast to the general calendar of the church, and invited Thomas Aquinas to supply the texts for it. Certainly Thomas would have remembered such an occasion just a year later. Certainly Thomas, of all people, would have called that day the Feast of Corpus Christi."

If I'd expected the news to startle or crush him, it did neither. He sat very still and thoughtful, and then turning toward me, asked, "Will you write the story anyway? It's such a beautiful hymn."

In that moment I knew. The information wasn't a surprise to him. He'd known all along that the thing wasn't authentic. He'd known all along, and then Herb Quick had found out too.

A few hours later, in the Crown living room, I sat sipping my drink and feeling very sure of myself. Nancy was there, brash and beautiful as ever, wearing a sleek lounging gown designed more for Sutton Place than for the wilds of Organville. She stood tall and magnificent next to her husband's chair, with her reassuring hand resting lightly on his shoulder. I was the enemy now, but I didn't particularly care.

"The thing's a fake," I told them, pleased with the effect of my words.

"Say that again," Crown said, the frown deepening across his brow.

"I said the Aquinas thing's a fake, and you know it. So does Fancreek. I talked to him this afternoon."

John Crown stood up. "You believe Dr. Fancreek would perpetrate a hoax?"

"Sometimes, when a man has devoted most of his life to something, he's unwilling to admit the obvious. Fancreek chose to believe what he wanted to believe. Call it a hoax if you want, but the perpetrator was probably some fourteenth century monk."

"Then you won't write your story for *Everyweek?*" Nancy asked.

"I'll write my story," I said, "but it'll be about Herb Quick, who found out about the hoax and died with the knowledge. People don't walk in front of trains these days, not people like Herb. I think he was pushed."

"By whom?" John Crown asked quietly.

"Well, Herb and I both figured out that the hotel desk clerk reports to you. That's why Herb used the phone at Tiny's gas station to check on the authenticity of the hymn. I suppose Tiny reports to you too. He tipped you off, and you were waiting for Herb. When you found you couldn't bribe him, you pushed him in front of that train."

"You're mad!" Crown said, his voice barely a whisper. "I suspected it this afternoon, but I'm sure of it now. Print that story in your magazine and I'll sue you for a million dollars."

There was nothing to be gained by talking to them, nothing but a sort of sadistic pleasure at their alarm. Did I really hate Crown that much? Did I hate him because of what he was or only because of Nancy?

"Bob . . ." She came to me now, her arm outstretched in pleading.

"You suspected it all along, didn't you, Nancy? That's why you came to the hotel yesterday to see me."

"You went to his hotel?" Crown said, hardly believing the words as he spoke them.

"I went. But only to talk to him."

"Do you think I killed that reporter?"

She turned to him with uncertain eyes. "I . . . don't know, John."

I downed the rest of my drink and decided it was time to go; time to leave Organville forever.

The lights of the main street reflected off the walls of my darkened hotel room, bringing back fleeting memories of days and dreams long gone; a parent dead, a home left behind, a life opening before me. Organville had been only a phase, an incubation, and I'd been wrong to think of it as more than that. My story was written—the story of Fancreek and Crown and Nancy, and Herb Quick—but it was a story I could never publish.

I'd had my moment of glory, my moment of accusation, but now in the cold neon of nighttime I already knew what the light of day would show me. My so-called evidence against John Crown was based on nothing but a guess that Tiny had warned Crown about Herb Quick's phone call to New York. But of all the people in Organville, Tiny was perhaps the least likely to be in Crown's pay. He would certainly do no favors for the man whose newspaper had closed down his bar and forced him into the gasoline business.

I was as false as my accusation, and my story could never be published.

The bedside phone gave a jingle, and I heard the desk clerk's familiar voice. "Lady down here to see you." There was just a bit of a leer to the words. It was almost midnight.

"Send her up."

Nancy Crown had come to pay one last visit, perhaps to bargain her body for her husband's honor. I could tell her it was all a lie, that there would be no story for *Everyweek,* that Herb Quick's death had been an accident after all. But I knew I would keep silent at the beginning, because I still loved her and wanted her and needed her—Nancy.

Not Organville, only Nancy; and that was why I'd come back.

I opened the door to her knock, but it was not Nancy. It was another woman, from another life. It was Marie Fancreek.

She smoked cigarettes and stood by the window and talked. She talked without pausing for nearly an hour, with the neon from the movie marquee finally going dark on her face.

"I knew all about it," she said at last, "but when you've lived with a man, when a man and his work are your whole life, you can see his dream. I came to believe in the Aquinas manuscript just as he did, even though we both knew we were living a lie. I followed Herb Quick out of the house that night, and watched him make his phone call. I was waiting when he came out of the gas station, and he saw me and told me what he'd do. He told me he'd ruin my husband, expose him as a shabby fraud. He didn't understand how it was, how it could be after all those years of patient labor."

"So you pushed him in front of the train."

"The train came, and perhaps I pushed him. It's hard to remember now."

I thought about what I'd tell Brewster, waiting back in New York. I thought about a lot of things, but mostly I only thought about leaving Organville in the morning, and never coming back.

THE SONIC BOOMER

William Brittain

"Deception, Hager. That's our sole purpose here in Special Effects. We leave all the usual spying jobs—obtaining secret enemy documents, checking troop and materiel movements, occasional bits of discreet sabotage—to the CIA boys. Naturally, we work rather closely with the CIA at times. But Special Effects Branch is in business only to make the enemy believe things that aren't true. And, of course, to prevent the enemy from doing the same to us."

Sherman Rhime tilted back his swivel chair and looked up at the young man standing on the far side of the polished expanse of desk. Why was it, he wondered, that the newly trained agents coming in for their first assignments always reminded him of schoolboys who'd been sent to the principal for being naughty? Well, Hager, like all the rest, would mature quickly in Special Effects.

"In our hands," Rhime went on, "things are seldom what they seem. A few life rafts covered with metal foil become, in the enemy's electronic eyes, a huge armada of ships; lengths of drainage pipe are transformed into missile launching sites; a plastic souvenir purchased in a Hong Kong shop is suddenly the key to our expenditures to obtain it."

"I believe I understand, sir," Hager said. "Special Effects not only keeps enemy agents busy tracking down false leads, but also confuses them as to what our real capabilities are."

"Exactly," said Rhime. "Now, let's see how much good your training did. Go over to the door there. You'll find a small peephole. Look through it for exactly five seconds."

As Hager applied his eye to the small hole, Rhime looked at his watch. "Time!" he called, when five seconds had ticked off. Hager returned to the desk and stood ramrod straight. "Describe what you saw," commanded Rhime.

"Your outer office, sir," Hager replied. "One man there, pacing the floor. The walls of the office are painted yel—"

"Never mind the office," Rhime said. "Describe the man."

"Height about five-feet-ten," Hager recited. "His weight well over two hundred pounds; that belly of his hangs out over his belt like bread dough rising out of a baking pan. Rounded shoulders, almost no neck. His face has thick jowls, and he's got kind of a scrub growth of mustache. His expression is tired and sad—a bit like a basset hound. I'll bet his feet hurt. I couldn't see the top of his head because he was wearing a hat. But the hair at the sides was black with a lot of gray in it."

"Very good," commented Rhime. "What about his clothing?"

"The hat I mentioned is pretty beat up. The band is frayed in several places. His suit's a blue pinstripe, badly in need of pressing. The knot of his tie is about two inches off-center. Black shoes, run-down at the heels. Anything else, sir?"

"Yes. How about taking a stab at his age and occupation."

"Oh, he'd be about fifty years old, and he looks like a small businessman after a hard day. Maybe a baker

who enjoys his own cooking. No, his hands aren't clean enough. Hardware, that's it. You've brought him here to see about changing some locks. Right?" Hager leaned forward eagerly.

"Ask him to come in, will you?" Rhime said. "He answers to the name of Pennyman."

At Hager's invitation, Pennyman shuffled tiredly into the room and stood at the desk, ponderously shifting his weight from one foot to the other and emitting a sigh that would have done credit to a water buffalo.

"Hager," Rhime said softly, "have you considered the possibility that Mr. Pennyman might be a spy himself? Perhaps sent here to kill me?"

"Oh, come now, sir. This man a spy? Why . . . why, look at him. Flabby, overweight, that hangdog expression. He'd never—"

"Best search him anyway," Rhime said. "See if he has any weapons."

Starting at the shoulders, Hager expertly patted the jacket of Pennyman's wrinkled suit. As his hands reached the ample waist, Hager suddenly stopped, his eyes widening. Reaching gingerly beneath the jacket, he drew from its spring holster a .357 Magnum revolver with a stubby two-inch barrel.

With a good deal more respect and care, Hager finished patting Pennyman's clothing, giving special attention to the sleeves and trouser legs. Finally he turned about to face Rhime. "He's clean, sir. No other weapons. Would you like me to look through his pock—"

Hager's voice was suddenly cut off as a thick arm encircled his neck and a knife with a strangely curved blade pressed at the flesh under his chin. "One wiggle and you're a dead man, youngster," rumbled a voice in his ear.

Rhime savored the moment, lighting a cigarette while the two men across from him remained frozen in position. "Oh, let him go, Pennyman," he said fi-

nally. "With a little luck and some expert guidance he may survive in the field for as long as a week."

Pennyman spread his arms wide, and Hager sprawled into a chair, gasping for breath. "The knife," he wheezed. "Where—"

"In my hatband," Pennyman said. "It's specially curved to fit. Looks funny, but I could throw it in your ear at twenty paces."

"Show him what other goodies you have," commanded Rhime.

From a small pocket behind his necktie, Pennyman removed a length of thin wire with a ring at each end. "Strangling cord," he said simply. "And my wristwatch can be set to blow your hand off the moment you touch it. That's about all right now, sir."

"Mr. Hager," Rhime said in clipped, precise tones, "you've made an error—a bad one. A careless search is worse than none at all. Pennyman could have killed you with that knife, and I assure you that in spite of his rather ineffectual appearance, he would have done so with no compunction whatsoever."

"Does this mean I'm through here?" Hager asked in a whisper.

"Not as long as you realize that your training has only begun. Pennyman, I have a job for you. And you'll need help."

Pennyman groaned, and his face assumed an even sadder expression than his customary gloomy aspect.

The meaning of Rhime's last sentence suddenly penetrated Hager's mind, and he sat bolt upright. "Sir, you don't mean—"

"But I do, Hager. I'm assigning you to Pennyman."

"You're too kind, sir," Pennyman said dryly. "How do I get all the lucky breaks?"

"All right," Rhime said, ignoring the jibe. "Let's get on with it. Take seats, please."

From a roller on the wall behind the desk, Rhime pulled down a map of eastern Canada. With a pointer he indicated a spot near the center of Que-

bec Province. "Nichicum Lake," he said. "You'll have to be flown in by seaplane. There are no roads in the area. There are, however, a couple of cabins on the south shore. That's where you'll contact Dr. Vrioti."

"Dr. Vrioti?" Pennyman repeated.

"Yes. Albanian chap. Top-notch physicist. Smuggled himself out of his country and made his way to Canada. Nobody heard from him for months—but just recently he secretly contacted our government. Seems he has something to sell."

"What it it?" asked Hager.

"He calls it a 'sonic boomer,'" Rhime replied. "Supposedly this thing—it's about the size of a large hunting rifle—can emit an ultrasonic beam in a thin line, like a laser. The beam, so Vrioti claims, is capable of disrupting the atomic structure of whatever it's aimed at. The target explodes, much the same as if it were blasted with dynamite."

"Sounds fishy to me," Pennyman growled.

"Our scientists said the same thing," Rhime acknowledged. "However, they didn't completely rule out the possibility that such a weapon could be made. The CIA was contacted to conduct an investigation. But because they felt that an element of trickery might be involved, they turned the problem over to Special Effects."

"Let me get this straight." Pennyman shifted his bulk in the chair, which creaked alarmingly. "You want me to take this . . . this kid with me into the wilds of Canada to contact a man I've never seen and check out a weapon I don't even understand."

"It's not all that bad," Rhime said. "Just see whether or not the sonic boomer really works. If it does, make Vrioti an offer. You're authorized to go as high as two hundred thousand dollars for the prototype, plus any plans. If the bargaining goes higher than that, contact me by radio for further instructions. Oh, and one more thing, Pennyman . . ."

"Yeah?" Pennyman said tersely.

"Before you leave, why not get your suit cleaned and pressed. And that shirt could use a laundering. New shoes, maybe? As for the tie, well . . ."

Rhime was still going on as the door clicked shut behind the retreating bulk of Pennyman, who was pushing Hager urgently in front of him.

Thirty-six hours later, Hager found himself seated next to Gregg, the pilot who was winging them across the Canadian wilderness. Behind them was Pennyman, alternately cursing the tiny seat into which he was forced to shoehorn his huge body, and demanding that Gregg fly higher above the tall spruce trees that seemed to glide by too close to the seaplane's pontoons. Hager marveled at the manner in which Pennyman had been able to reduce his plaid hunting shirt and khaki pants, bought new only the previous day, to a state of studied sloppiness.

Gregg pointed downward with an index finger and banked the plane, bringing a loud groan from Pennyman. "That's the end of Nichicum Lake," the pilot shouted over the roar of the engine. "The cabins are only a couple of miles down the south shore."

Setting the plane down on the placid surface of the lake, Gregg taxied to within a hundred yards of the shore, where he switched off the engine. "Don't dare get any closer," he said. "Too many submerged rocks and logs in there."

A canoe shot out from shore, a single man paddling it with long, sure strokes. Moments later Pennyman felt it bump against the starboard pontoon. Looking through the plane's small side window, he noted the swarthy complexion of the paddler.

Reaching past Hager, Pennyman opened the door in the side of the plane. "Are you from Dr. Vrioti, Injun?" he called.

"That's right. Name's Joe Crow. And you'd be Pennyman. Rhime was sure right about you."

"Why, what did he say?"

"Told me you was a fat slob. I dunno but what I'll

have to make two trips just to get you to shore."

When Pennyman climbed into the canoe after Hager and the gear, the craft's gunwales sank to within a few inches of the water's surface. Gingerly the Indian began paddling toward shore. Behind them the plane's engine roared as Gregg prepared for takeoff.

Vrioti met them at the crude dock which stuck out from the shore. "I am so glad you came, Mr. Pennyman," he said in a thickly accented voice. "Joe will take you up to the cabins and make you comfortable."

"Fine," Pennyman said. "Then we can get right down to business. About this gun of yours, I mean."

"The sonic boomer can wait," replied Vrioti. "Get to know the beauties of Canada in the summer. Perhaps a bit of fishing."

"Doc, I'm a city boy," rumbled Pennyman. "The sooner I get away from these trees and rocks, the better I'll like it."

"You should try spending your life locked up in a laboratory performing experiments, the only purpose of which is to improve a dictator's weaponry." Vrioti smiled. "You would soon learn to appreciate the out-of-doors.

"The fact is," he went on, "there is a part of my weapon which has ceased to function properly. Until it is replaced, there can be no test."

"Just name it," Pennyman said. "I'll radio a request back to Rhime and he'll have whatever you need up here in a matter of hours."

Vrioti shook his head. "You don't understand, Mr. Pennyman. My sonic boomer is not made with conventional parts. Each one must be constructed by hand. Naturally, should your government decide to purchase it, I will work very closely with your electronics firms in showing them how the parts can be mass-produced."

"Yeah, sure. About how long will it take you to make this gimmick you need, Doc?"

"Two days . . . perhaps three. Forgive me, Mr.

Pennyman, but time means so little here in the wilderness."

The larger of the two cabins set among the spruce trees was used by Vrioti as a laboratory. Joe Crow took Hager and Pennyman to the other and showed them the bunks where they would sleep.

"Tell me," Pennyman said to the Indian after his gear had been stowed, "is Vrioti ever . . . er . . . disturbed up here?"

"I don't get you," said Joe Crow.

"What I mean is, Vrioti used to be a big scientific type in Albania. I doubt the Albanian government took too kindly to his escape. Isn't there just a possibility they'd send somebody looking for him?"

"Nobody knows where he is."

"Don't count on that," Pennyman said.

Joe Crow stepped to the door of the cabin, taking a holstered .38 pistol from its place on the wall. "Let 'em come. I think I can handle any trouble. Look." He pointed to a downed tree nearly a foot in diameter on the far side of the clearing. Then he strapped the gun belt carefully about his hips. "See that little knot about a foot from the thick end?" he said.

Even as Pennyman was focusing on the knot, there was a blur of movement, and the revolver seemed to jump into Joe Crow's hand. Two quick shots rang out.

"If either of them shots is more'n an inch from that knot, I'll eat this gun, holster and all," Joe Crow boasted.

"You're handy with that gun, all right," Pennyman said. "Now let me try."

Drawing the Magnum from its spring holster, Pennyman wrapped one huge hand about it, steadying the wrist with the other hand. In the little room the tremendous roar of the exploding cartridge made both men wince involuntarily. "Now let's look at that tree," Pennyman said, ignoring the ringing in his ears.

A silver dollar could have covered both the knot and the dimples where Joe Crow's shots had entered

the wood. The entrance hole made by Pennyman's bullet was fractionally farther away. "You might take a look at the other side of the log while you're at it," Pennyman suggested.

As he stepped over the log, Joe Crow's eyes widened. His own bullets, he knew, were still in the wood. The exit hole made by Pennyman's hollow-pointed slug was nearly the size of his open hand.

The next two days were perfect. The sun hung in a cloudless sky, while a gentle breeze rippled the waters of the lake. Joe Crow and Hager fished; Dr. Vrioti worked in his laboratory; and Pennyman lay in a crude hammock, brushing away the blackflies which seemed to consider him an endlessly bountiful banquet.

On the third day, a chilling wind sprang up from the north which shook the huge trees, and there was a hint of rain in the air. It was on this day that Dr. Vrioti announced his sonic boomer was ready to be tested.

Before the test, however, Vrioti sent Joe Crow to the smaller cabin with a message: Vrioti would like a private meeting with Pennyman in the laboratory.

As he plodded across the clearing, Pennyman pulled the collar of his jacket tight and grumbled at the chill wind which seemed to have no trouble in penetrating his thick clothing. "What kind of idiot weather is this to be having in the middle of summer?" he mumbled angrily.

Vrioti's laboratory was as neat and immaculate as the man himself. To the right of the door Pennyman entered was the two-way radio, the only contact with the outside world; on the left, Vrioti's cot. A potbellied stove was in the center of the single room, and beyond that, against the far wall, was the workbench. The object on the bench immediately caught Pennyman's attention.

"My sonic boomer, Mr. Pennyman," Vrioti said proudly.

The gun was equipped with a regulation stock from

a hunting rifle; but here all similarity to ordinary weapons ended. The barrel was almost two inches in diameter, and near its end was a parabolic reflector with a groove cut from it to make sighting possible. Below the stock was mounted a clear plastic box containing printed circuit boards, crudely-made electronic components, and what seemed like miles of thin copper wire.

"You will note there is no trigger," Vrioti said. "There is, of course, no need for one. A press on this button on the stock completes the necessary electrical circuit.

"Perhaps," he went on, "you would be interested in the principle on which this weapon operates. I'm sure you know that the proper musical note, given sufficient amplification, will shatter glass. I've found this same effect can be produced in any substance by ultrasonic vibrations which—"

"Hang on, Doc." Pennyman held up a meaty hand. "You're talking to the wrong guy. I'm no scientist—just a messenger boy who's gonna try and buy this gadget. If it works, that is."

"It will work, Mr. Pennyman. Get your young friend, and we'll be off for a little target practice."

Pennyman returned to his cabin and told Hager to dress warmly. "Where's Joe Crow?" he asked.

"He went out for some moss to plug the cracks in the cabin walls," Hager replied.

"I hope he finds something. No telling what kind of animals could sneak in here during the night."

The hike to Vrioti's "target range" was nearly a mile, all of it uphill, away from the lake. Pennyman, sweating in spite of the cold wind, was thankful that the wind was at his back.

"We're here, Mr. Pennyman," Vrioti said finally.

"I hope so, Doc. Because I don't care what you're selling. I'm not climbing down there." At his feet the ground dropped away sharply, forming a deep gorge. On the far side of the gorge, which Pennyman estimated to be about two hundred yards across, an

avalanche had cut out a wide swath through the underbrush from the rim to the bottom. Huge rocks and downed trees were mixed with the rubble.

"There are some of the effects of my weapon," Vrioti said.

Pennyman shook his head. "Not good enough, Doc. That landslide could just as easily have been started with a pick and shovel. I want to see that boomer thing of yours in action."

"And so you shall. Do you see that tree about a quarter of the way down the slope over there? The one with its top broken off?"

Pennyman nodded.

"Now watch."

Vrioti cuddled the gun to his shoulder. Twisting his right elbow upward, he pressed the small red button. A soft humming came from the box underneath the stock.

There was a dull "whump" from across the valley. Both Pennyman and Hager stared wide-eyed at the shattered remains of what had once been the solid trunk of a tree. A small cloud of smoke was quickly wiped away by the wind.

"Perhaps, Mr. Hager, you would care to try it," Vrioti said with a smile. "The boulder there—the big one with the flat side. Here, try your luck."

He passed the gun to Hager, who took it uneasily. He aimed and touched the button. As the humming began, Vrioti nervously ran a hand across his brow. The explosion was sharper this time, and the huge rock shattered into four unequal pieces.

"And finally you, Mr. Pennyman. I can well understand your government's skepticism concerning my weapon. But surely you can't deny the evidence of your own eyes. How's your marksmanship? Think you can hit the downed log at the top of the cliff?"

"I generally hit what I aim at," growled Pennyman. He steadied the sonic boomer while Vrioti clutched his hat against the rising wind. A hum, a roar, and the log was reduced to a shower of sticks

floating through the air in languid arcs.

"There you have it, gentlemen," Vrioti said. "And now, as it looks as if rain is imminent, I suggest we get back to the cabins. We'll have to get our own supper; Joe Crow has gone to visit some friends up the lake."

Gently, he took the sonic boomer from Pennyman. "There is just one order of business before we return," he went on. Quickly he walked to the edge of the gorge and stepped onto an outcropping of rock. Gripping the sonic boomer by the end of the stock like a club, he brought it high over his head. Then, before either Pennyman or Hager could stop him, he pounded the weapon down onto the sharp edge of the stone. The plastic box shattered, and transistors, capacitors, and other electronic parts spewed out, dribbling down into the gorge.

Again and again Vrioti beat the gun against the rock until it was nothing but a twisted mass of wood and metal. Finally he flung it out over the gorge. It seemed to float in space for a moment and then plunged downward.

Pennyman heard it strike something hard far below. "What in hell was that all about?" he asked in exasperation. "There's nobody that'll buy your gadget in the condition it's in now, Doc."

"I'll explain when we return," Vrioti said softly. "Now, let us go. As it is, we'll be wet before we reach the cabins."

Thirty minutes later, Pennyman was jamming his thick legs into dry pants and cursing loudly. "It's all Rhime's fault!" he bellowed at Hager, who was watching the beating rain sluice down across the windows. "He should have figured this Vrioti was a screwball. First he wants to sell us a gun, and then he pounds it to pieces. Dammit, I oughta—"

There was a rapping at the cabin door. Pennyman and Hager exchanged worried glances. "C'mon in," Pennyman said finally.

Vrioti entered, rain streaming from his yellow oil-

skins. "Now we will bargain," he said quietly.

"Bargain? What bargain?" snarled Pennyman. "Your bargaining power is lying up there in the gorge, all busted into junk."

"But you agree the sonic boomer worked just the way I said it would?"

"Yeah, yeah, I guess so. Only—"

"I build one such weapon," Vrioti went on. "I can build another."

"You mean you're willing to give us the plans?" asked Pennyman, brightening.

"There is only one set of plans." Vrioti gently tapped his head with an index finger. "They are here."

"Oh." Pennyman shrugged. "Great. We'll cut off your head and send it to Rhime."

"That," Vrioti said, "was almost what I had in mind. I am aware, Mr. Pennyman, that you were authorized to offer a great deal of money for my weapon. But whatever amount you offer, I reject it. I want something else."

"Yeah? What?"

"I ask asylum in your great country. I ask protection from those who will one day find me, no matter where I hide. In return, I am prepared to supervise the construction of another sonic boomer. It would make me most happy to present it to your military leaders in return for their great gift of a life of freedom."

"Ah," breathed Pennyman. "Now I've got it. You figured if you busted that gun, we'd have to take you back with us."

"Exactly. It's a wonderful bargain for your country. In return for caring for me, you receive a weapon of almost limitless potential. All you have to do is take me on the plane with you, and great honor is yours for bringing off this coup. Any sane man would leap at the opportunity at once."

"I'll give it some thought," Pennyman said. "Let me sleep on it."

The following morning dawned bright and clear. A

nervous Hager was up at dawn. Pennyman snored and snorted in a heavy sleep until almost noon.

"I'm dying," Pennyman finally groaned, opening his eyes. "Every muscle in my body aches." Gingerly he reached a sitting position, shaking his head like a groggy prizefighter.

"Get Gregg on the radio," he told Hager in a fuzzy voice. "Tell him to fly up here and take us out of this godforsaken place."

"With Vrioti?" asked Hager.

"Sure. We might as well have something to show for the trip."

Two days later, Hager and Pennyman were ushered into Sherman Rhime's office. "Tuck in your shirttail, Pennyman," Rhime said without preamble. "If it's possible, you look worse than you did when you left here. Where have you left Vrioti?"

"Over at the Immigration Office. They'll keep him thrashing around in red tape until it's time to pick him up again."

"Very well, let's get to your report. As the new man, Mr. Hager, you get to go first."

"The whole thing went off almost exactly as planned," Hager said crisply. "Of course we couldn't bring back the sonic boomer itself, but with Dr. Vrioti's know-how, I'm sure another can be constructed and—"

Both Pennyman and Rhime emitted similar groans of anguish. In surprise, Hager looked from one to the other.

"You had a whole week, Pennyman," said Rhime, shaking his head. "Couldn't you manage to teach him something in that time?"

"Hager," Pennyman said, as if he were talking to a child, "you're in Special Effects. Our job is to trick the enemy and to keep them from tricking us. If the government had been in any way convinced that the sonic boomer was genuine, we'd never have been called in."

"You mean the gun really doesn't work? But I saw—"

"You saw a toy that buzzed and a few rocks and trees exploding. But didn't it occur to you that Vrioti was picking our targets for us? It was an illusion, Hager. A magic trick."

"How can you be so blasted sure of that?"

"Because, Hager, I didn't play Vrioti's little game the way he wanted me to. When it was my turn to shoot, I aimed a good thirty feet to the right of that log he pointed out. It didn't seem to make any difference. The log exploded just the same."

Hager stared at the older man, his mouth opening and closing silently. "But . . . but why?" he asked finally.

"You might have asked yourself that while you were in Canada," Rhime said. "You've still got a lot to learn, Hager."

"Vrioti is a top physicist," added Pennyman. "I'm really a little insulted that he thought we'd fall for his little game. He'd been out of his country for several months, and yet there's no evidence that his government was even looking for him. Therefore, it's possible they wanted him on the loose. Why? Do you remember what Vrioti said just after we arrived? About the parts for the sonic boomer?"

"I-I think so," Hager said, frowning. "He said all the parts were handmade. He'd have to be put in contact with electronics firms in this country to have them manufactured."

"In other words, Hager, he'd pretty much have the run of any electronics firm in the country. These firms have government contracts, Hager. They do top-secret work—work that Vrioti could comprehend and that his government would give their eyeteeth to get information about."

"You mean they'd really show him . . . everything?" Hager asked in surprise.

"A superscientist who'd proved his loyalty by defect-

ing? I don't think he'd have had any trouble at all. And by the time we found out his weapon didn't work, he'd be out of the country, on his way home."

"But how did he bring off that business with the test of the sonic boomer?" Hager's face was a study in confusion. "I mean those targets exploded as if . . . as if . . ." Suddenly a great light seemed to go on in Hager's mind. "As if they were loaded with dynamite!"

"At last," sighed Pennyman. "The little wheels in that brain of yours are beginning to go around in the right way. That's exactly the way it was rigged. On a clear day the smoke of the explosion might have drifted back to us. One whiff would have given the whole scheme away. That's why Vrioti waited until a day when there was a good stiff wind that would be at our backs when we fired, so that the smoke would be blown away from us. He even lucked out on the weather. The rain was a good excuse to bring us back to the cabin without a close examination of the targets, even if we'd wanted to risk our necks by climbing down into that gorge. Then, of course, after the test he broke his little toy so we couldn't examine it either."

"But this is just supposition on your part, isn't it?" Hager asked. "I mean you really don't have any proof."

"Yeah," said Pennyman. "I do. That last night, while you were pounding your ear and having sweet dreams about getting a medal for bringing back the sonic boomer, I hiked back up the mountain and across the gorge. I was scared stiff climbing down in the dark. It took almost two hours, but I finally made it. When I got there, I picked up some samples from those targets we shot at. I was real beat when I got back, and it was almost dawn. That's why I wasn't as anxious as you were to get up that morning."

Reaching into his pocket, Pennyman brought out some bits of wood and rock. "I had our lab look at all

the pieces I brought back," he said. "These are just a few of them. In bits of all three—the tree, the boulder, and the log—they found traces of fuller's earth and waxed paper forced into them by the blast."

"I still don't get—"

"Hager, one form of dynamite is made of three parts of nitroglycerin to one part of fuller's earth. The mixture is packed into tubes of waxed paper to keep it from crumbling. The lab boys are willing to swear that all three targets were blasted by dynamite, not by the sonic boomer."

"And those chunks of rock and wood are going to help send Vrioti to prison," Rhime said. "I'll bet his government won't be too happy about that. There is just one more thing, Pennyman. How were the blasts timed so perfectly? How could Vrioti have set them off without your noticing anything?"

"Easy. Vrioti didn't set them off. He just gave the signal. When *he* fired, he raised his elbow. For Hager, he wiped his brow. He adjusted his hat when my turn came. On the other side of the gorge was Joe Crow, who'd been missing all day, with three detonators and a pair of field glasses. When he got the signal he just set off the proper charge."

"Do you know this, or are you guessing?" Hager asked.

"I know. I found him camped there that night when I went back for a look at the targets."

"You're lucky he didn't kill you," Hager said. "He's pretty swift with that gun of his."

"Oh, he was good," Pennyman said softly. "Real good."

He drew back his jacket and took the .357 Magnum from its holster. Flipping out the cylinder, he poured the six cartridges into his hand. Three of them had been fired.

"Almost as good as I was."

NO ESCAPE

C. B. Gilford

Patrolman Pete Krebs had an easy job on a day like this. He was alone on duty in the County Park, but then he was alone most days. Today, however, he would really be alone. People never came out to the park in bad weather. There was a complete overcast, dull gray and threatening rain, and a chilly wind gusting now and then across the open spaces and even seeping into the wooded areas. Pete Krebs sampled this wind several times as he dutifully checked restroom buildings, then gladly retreated to the shelter of the comfortably warm patrol car.

At noon he ate his sack lunch and reported in by radio. The park was empty, he said. Pete Krebs had to stay on nevertheless. Both park gates would remain open till dark. The taxpayers of the county expected their park to be available for use whatever the weather.

A car did enter, as a matter of fact, shortly before one o'clock. Krebs spotted it from a distant hilltop, trained his binoculars on it. The car came only a hundred yards or so inside the park, stopped, and disgorged its occupants, a man and a woman. Who else? Krebs watched them for a while. Hand in hand they hiked across the still lush green autumn grass. Nutty.

Pete Krebs would have preferred a cozy warm little bar.

He continued on his rounds. There was plenty of park to patrol, over seven thousand acres. On a summer weekend, there were usually about that many people, and at least three cops on duty. Today, however, his job was just to drive around the maze of roads, show his uniform and his marked car, and let people know they were being protected, even though one cop couldn't be everywhere at once.

That was why the second car was able to sneak up on him. He found it parked and empty in one of the graveled areas just off the road, at one end of the Walking Trail.

Again Pete Krebs shook his head in mystification. Another pair of romancers, no doubt, only this pair wanted to hike on the trail that went off through the woods. There were three winding miles of that trail, plenty of privacy on a day like this.

He noted the car. It was a thing he did automatically. In-state, in-county license. The car itself wasn't worth much more than the license plate. A beat-up, rusted-out old Chevy, the kind of car that on a busy weekend would be crammed full of the kind of kids who were potential troublemakers. Today, however, there was probably just one pair, a boy and a girl, hiking on the trail for no good purpose, but it wasn't up to Pete Krebs to shadow them. He wasn't paid to snoop, nor was it his job to walk the trail and be a chaperone. He made a mental note of the car, and drove on.

It was nearly an hour later before he returned to the spot. He had stopped and chatted with that first couple whom he had watched with the binoculars. They were a middle-aged pair, actually—married, lovers of the outdoors, but they'd had enough of the chilly wind. They'd talked about the new trees and shrubs which had been planted.

The old red Chevy was still in the little parking

area at the far end of the Walking Trail, but it was no longer alone. Nearby was a shiny little yellow Mustang. No sign of the drivers or passengers from either of the cars, however.

Pete Krebs was just slightly disturbed, but also somewhat amused at the coincidence of the only two cars in the park here, together. Maybe there'd been only one person in each car, and the trail was their planned meeting place. That didn't seem likely, though. The two cars didn't match. No, the people in the Mustang were strangers to the people in the Chevy. The question was, would the Mustang people interrupt the privacy of the Chevy people? Might be an interesting scene, Krebs thought, but not really his business either.

They'd meet in there, though, he was sure of that. He grinned a little as he drove on. Such a dull, lonely day, he had to find something to grin about.

Beryl wanted to be alone. She wanted to think. So when she'd seen the old red Chevy parked there near the entrance to the Walking Trail, she had hesitated. Apparently there was somebody else already hiking on the trail. Perhaps she should try another area in the park, but she was partial to the trail. It was one of her favorite places. So she'd decided that even if she should meet that other person, or those persons, they would pass quickly, and she could be alone once more.

In the beginning she had kept an eye out for the interlopers, but when she didn't see anyone for the first several hundred yards she forgot that she might not have the trail completely to herself. The woods and their quiet closed around her, like salve over a wound. She relaxed, slowed her walk, began to look at the foliage rather than to search through it for signs of other human presence. Some of the leaves had begun to turn. On this very autumn-like, almost wintry day, the trees, surprised in their summer finery,

seemed to be trying to catch up with the rest of nature. Their colors appeared to be changing almost as she gazed on them.

See, she told herself, the trees are adjusting to the new season. Why can't you adjust, Beryl?

Why not indeed? There were seasons in human lives, ebbing and flowing. That morning she had wanted to kill herself. She had been confronted with a truth which she had previously tried to ignore, but which she could ignore no longer. He didn't love her. Perhaps he never had. He loved instead another girl, a beautiful girl, and Beryl was not beautiful. It was as simple as that. Simple but painful. She had wanted to flee from the pain into oblivion.

Instead, she had fled here, to be alone with a place she loved, and which, she hoped, loved her in return. And surely it did. The colors, the silence, caressed her senses. Even that first faint smell of onrushing autumn decay, she liked that too.

She became so engrossed in the sensual impressions close about her that she did not at first notice the foreign movement and sounds farther up the trail, beyond several twists and turns, flashes of gaudy red and blue amid the natural greens and yellows and browns; snapping of twigs crushed under feet heavier than those of a squirrel or a rabbit or a bird.

She was totally startled, therefore, when at one particularly sharp bend in the path she nearly walked straight into them; the strangers, two men, or boys, one in a red wool shirt, the other in a phosphorescent blue jacket; above the bright garments, pimply faces and shaggy hair.

In that first moment of the encounter, it was her first reaction, being so startled that her initial impulse was toward fear, toward panic, like a timid woodland creature suddenly coming face-to-face with some fierce predator, which perhaps set in motion all that followed.

The trail was narrow, but it was well-trod, and

there was ample room to pass a hiker coming from the opposite direction. Yet she shrank to one side, into the undergrowth, off the beaten path, as if the trail belonged entirely to the strangers and not at all to herself, and hurried past them, almost running.

Her curious behavior was indeed fear. Not fear of the strangers themselves. They were only that—strangers. But it was the fear she felt of all humankind at that moment. Humanity had rejected her. She was not loved. Nobody could ever love her again. So she fled foolishly from these two men, these two boys, whose names she did not even know.

She walked as fast as she could, now and then breaking stride and running for a few steps, hoping to find solitude again. Finally she slowed, and had courage to glance back over her shoulder.

What she saw startled her even more than the first encounter. They were there, the red wool shirt and the phosphorescent blue jacket, with the pimply faces and shaggy hair above them. The pimply faces were both grinning, not more than fifty feet behind her on the trail.

She walked on, not daring to run now, the pounding of her pulse signaling a different kind of fear, a more immediate, particular, primitive kind; not in her psyche, but in her blood, in the prickling of her skin.

They had been returning to their car, but had reversed directions and were following her. Following *her* on this chilly day when the park was practically empty, in the depths of these woods, out of sight of all other humanity and almost surely out of hearing too.

What could she do? Turn back and try to pass by them again? Walk right into them? Would they let her go by? Or try to run, farther and deeper into the woods? Or try to be calm, just keep on walking, ignore their teasing? Teasing! That's what it was, of course. They'd seen she was frightened of them, and

were amusing themselves. They could have caught up with her by this time, but they'd chosen just to follow her. Teasing. Enjoying her fear.

She walked on. She didn't have to glance back. Her anxiously straining ears told her the pursuit continued. They hadn't tired of the game yet. The other end of the trail was far distant, more than two miles. Surely they would tire. Or even if they followed her to the end of the trail, she wouldn't be frightened any longer once they broke out of the woods.

What did they want? To tease her, she assured herself again. Two boys finding a female alone here . . . it was just an irresistible temptation to throw a scare into her. If she chose to report the incident later to a park patrolman, they could say, quite truthfully, that they hadn't done a thing.

Yet it was only through a great effort of will that she restrained the impulse to run. She could feel their eyes upon her, upon her legs, her hips. She had dressed for this walk, in slacks and a short jacket. The slacks were tight. She tried not to think of how they might be watching. Perhaps they might be looking at the purse hanging at her side from its shoulder strap. She would gladly surrender it right now if they would stop following her.

She was thinking of that, considering whether to drop the purse there on the trail and start to run again. She quickened her steps. The fear and panic rose in her. She made the mistake of glancing backward, not watching the path. She fell.

Her foot caught on a protruding root, and she sprawled on her back in the middle of the trail. The pursuers stopped too, automatically, but they had already narrowed the gap between her and them. They stood frozen, staring at her. Their grins were frozen on their faces. An open-mouthed look of terror was frozen on hers.

Seconds passed. She could not tear her gaze from those grinning faces, but her mind raced, suggesting a

new alternative. They had gained on her. They had dared to come closer. She could not possibly outrun them on the trail, and she dared not scream, even if she could manage one. A scream would not be heard, not from here, in the very middle of the woods, and it might frighten them into action. No, she must remain calm—and brave.

She picked herself slowly off the ground, then spoke to them. "What do you want?"

They didn't stop grinning, nor did they answer. They looked at each other and shrugged.

"You're following me." A little more courageous.

One of them, the one in the blue jacket, emitted a sound. It was a kind of laugh. A giggle. Mindless.

She saw their faces better now. They were eighteen or twenty, neither in school nor employed, or they wouldn't be out here today. Why were they here? Looking for someone as alone and defenseless as she was? She was correct in feeling afraid of them. They were punks. Hoodlums. Idlers, not very bright, and dangerous.

"Please stop following me," she said, halfway between a request and a demand, but firmly spoken.

The giggle came again from the one in the blue jacket. The one in the red shirt said, "It's a public park, lady."

So they would continue to follow her. The alternative clamored for attention in her mind again. Run! Not down the trail—they can catch you too easily there—but straight into the woods! Drop your purse right here, and take to the woods! They might not bother to follow and risk snagging and tearing their clothes.

The red wool shirt took one step toward her. Just one.

In a single motion, instinctive and automatic, she dropped the purse and plunged headlong into the undergrowth beside the trail.

Instantly the woods, which once had been her

soothing companion, her friend, became a vicious enemy. Branches and twigs grabbed at her long hair, now flying loose. Wrenching free was painful, but more important, cost time. The branches whipped and stung her face too. They snared her jacket and slacks, sought to entwine her body and hold her fast. They didn't succeed, for she staggered and stumbled on, but her pace was slow, as in a dream, wherein the dreamer knows he must run fast, but is somehow held back, his legs and feet made of lead, only grudgingly obeying his mind's command.

Over the sound of her own sobbing, she heard another sound—heavy bodies crashing through the woods behind her.

She ran on, terrified, both her strength and her courage dwindling, the clutching branches more fiendish, malevolent. But she had to run. The instinct of the flesh for survival drove her on, reeling, half falling, being grasped and tearing loose, and the sounds of pursuit ever closer.

Downhill suddenly, and there, just below her, the weave of green branches ceased. Beyond them, a flat, dark glaze somberly reflected the gray sky. The pond!

She had forgotten the pond was here. In the summer, with the trees in full foliage, it was invisible from the trail. In winter, though, with the trees bare, the cold glint of the water beckoned one to leave the path and walk the muddy banks. She had once spied a family of muskrats here, had watched the winter birds come for a drink, and the rim ice form around the edges. And here it was now . . . her special pond . . . her special friend!

Never before, of course, had she more than dabbled her fingers in this cold spring water. Park rules had forbidden swimming, and one doesn't swim in a woodland pond unless one is prepared to share it with the other creatures, including snakes. Yet she didn't hesitate now.

Beryl was a very good swimmer, so the water held

no terrors for her. Even if she hadn't been a swimmer, with the pond more than a hundred feet across and of unknown depth, any terror of it would have been infinitely less than her terror of those grinning pursuers close behind her.

She leaped in, like a water animal returning to its proper habitat. Her face submerged, she struck out strongly with both arms and legs. She never felt the muddy bottom at all, but swam straight to the very middle.

She'd had no plan beyond this. Perhaps the red shirt and the blue jacket were as good swimmers as she. She'd acted from instinct and desperation, nothing more, but now she turned to look back.

They'd halted at the muddy bank. They were staring at her with grins of amusement. She shook moisture from her face, moved her legs lazily, and waited for some sign of their new intentions.

They glanced away from her and at each other. Their lips moved, but they spoke softly and she couldn't hear any words. Cautiously and slowly she propelled herself a bit farther away from them. She hoped they would climb back up to the trail, and then she would exit from the pond at the opposite shore and try to cut through the woods toward the nearest road. Or perhaps even hide in the woods, maybe till dark, not taking any chances of their finding her on the road. The sudden cold bath had cleared her brain. The familiar feel of water gave her a new feeling of security and hope. With gentle kicks and hand movements she edged still farther from them.

Oh no! The red shirt had separated from his companion, and was trotting around to the other side of the pond. She hadn't escaped at all. She was trapped!

For the first time, then, she screamed. It was a loud burst of terror and despair, but the woods, her beautiful friendly woods, wall upon wall of trees, bounced her scream back to her, kept the sound

echoing and reechoing within the little cup-like depression containing the pond. She screamed until her lungs were emptied of every atom of air. Her body sank, the water closed over her mouth, and she had to paddle back to the surface to breathe again. She didn't waste energy trying to scream again.

Her problem was to stay afloat. It didn't appear that her tormentors had any notions of entering the water. They didn't seem the swimmer-athlete sort. The day was cold, and the water even colder. Since there were two of them, they could easily imprison her there in the pond until she became exhausted and willing to surrender. There was really no need for them to get wet.

But how long could she remain afloat? Under the best conditions, in a warm pool or lake, she could tread water almost indefinitely. Now, however, she could already feel this frigid bath sucking the energy out of her body. Would she be any better off if she could find a place where her feet could touch bottom? Not much, probably. She would still be immersed in cold water.

Pivoting slowly, she tried to keep track of the two men. They were standing directly opposite each other, hands thrust into their pockets, their shoulders hunched against the chill. They both were still grinning. How easy it was for them to keep her prisoner here. All they had to do was to stand there and wait. They hadn't even touched her, or said a threatening word. They'd only followed her and grinned, but she was completely in their power.

Nothing seemed to change for a long time. One on either side of the pond, they watched her placidly, in no hurry. Overhead the sky was gray, flecked with black scud. There was a chance of rain. Would rain make the two men uncomfortable enough that they might go away? Possibly. But the sky only threatened, and down here in the hollow overhung with trees, there wasn't even any wind to discourage girl-

swimmer-watching. Beryl was freezing in her icy bath. Her body shook and trembled in the grasp of the cold. She had to keep moving her arms and legs as much to maintain circulation as to stay afloat.

"Hey." It was the red shirt speaking. She looked at his grinning face, and noticed his eyes for the first time. They were the same color as the water, alive but without human expression. "Come out," he said.

She made no reply.

"You gotta come out sometime," he went on.

Her mind refused to concede that argument.

He stooped, dipped one finger into the water. "Kinda cold, ain't it?" he asked.

She wouldn't admit it.

"What are we going to do?" the red shirt called across the pond.

"Wait," said the blue jacket.

Wait, yes. If they had nothing more interesting to do, they could wait here at least until dark. The park closed at dark. A park patrolman would look for cars. If he saw two cars parked at the end of the Walking Trail, he would investigate. But it was hours yet until dark. Long before then she would freeze or drown, or both.

The red shirt, the impatient one, squatted down on his heels on the muddy bank and stared at her. He was still grinning, but she knew that his grin meant nothing, neither friendliness nor mirth. He was merely curious, as a cruel boy might be toward a bug he has impaled on a pin. Did he mean her harm? No more than the boy means harm to the bug. He is only amused by its futile struggles. Yet if the bug should escape briefly, would the boy squash it?

The red wool shirt, impatient, restless, dabbed with his fingers in the soft black mud of the bank. Then, however, the mindless occupation appeared to give him an idea. He dug into the mud purposefully. In a moment he had what he wanted, rolled it between his palms, a small mud ball. In another mo-

ment he had drawn back his right arm and thrown it.

She was too startled even to consider dodging. The projectile fell short by a yard or so, but its impact splashed a drop of water into her face, and she blinked. The red wool shirt laughed, a coarse, braying laugh.

He stood up and called across to his companion. "Hey, target practice."

Both of them, boys with a new game, went into action then, gouging out clumps of mud from the bank, rolling them round, throwing them at her head. They giggled while they played, shouting challenges across the pond, and slurs at each other's marksmanship. They weren't very good at the game. They weren't the sort of boys who had spent their street time playing softball. Usually they missed by wide margins. By giving them her profile, she could watch both of them at the same time, and thus be ready to dodge. They countered his strategy by synchronizing their throws, forcing her to watch out for two missiles at once. Finally, to avoid one, she had to duck underwater. When she surfaced again, both boys were roaring with laughter.

"One point for me," the blue shirt kept insisting.

Now the game began to be played in greater earnest. Boys don't try merely to hit paper boats or bottles in the water, they try to *sink* them. More care was taken in the rolling of the mud balls now, and the balls grew progressively larger. Throws became less frequent but more accurate. Then, inevitably—the law of averages decreed it—one of those more carefully engineered projectiles found its mark.

Soft black mud splattered into her face, into both her eyes. She was blinded, and her nose and mouth were filled with the gooey stink of the stuff. She plunged underwater and washed it off with both hands. When she came up, they were howling with glee.

She didn't have to scream, she thought, they were making more noise than she could. The thought was small comfort. Those same trees which sheltered the pond area from the stiff wind, also threw back sounds, insulating this spot from the rest of the park.

She was exhausted now, but knowing it rather than feeling it. Her body had grown numb. Her legs, she sensed faintly, still pedaled, her hands still pawed the water, but these were automatic, instinctive movements. Whenever the final ounce of energy drained away, the movements would just as automatically cease.

For the first time her mind was forced to consider what she would do if any warning came of that cessation. Would she use her last mite of strength to paddle toward shore, choose surrender before death? She wanted to cry out against the injustice. Either surrender or death, so needless, at the hands of these punks, these animals, either choice was unthinkable.

The game was escalating. Perhaps those two moronic brains had short attention spans, required constant novelty for their entertainment. Or perhaps their success with the mud balls urged them on to playing games for higher stakes.

"Hey, got rocks here!" the blue jacket yelled.

He was digging into a rock ledge imbedded in the steep hillside. Several big pieces crumbled into his hands. He chose one, hefted it, considered its aerodynamic properties, then let fly. He missed by two yards, but was far from discouraged. He had plenty of ammunition, and he fired it as quickly as he mined it from the ground.

Beryl's numb body was galvanized into frantic movement. This new threat was lethal. She could not judge the trajectory of the rocks, or did not trust her judgment. Some flew straight. Others sailed. From a range of not much more than fifty feet, there was no time to make decisions when one's head was the target. Each time that the blue jacket threw,

she ducked for cover underwater.

Blue jacket adjusted his tactics accordingly. Now he picked up two rocks at once. When Beryl surfaced from trying to escape the first, the second was already flying toward her face. She panicked, swallowed water, felt even the last desperate strength ebbing out of her body.

It had to happen. The law of averages again. The second of a pair of rocks, not larger than a silver dollar, slammed against her right temple just as her face emerged. The blow was like the cut of a hatchet. Multicolored sparks exploded inside her head. Stunned, she lifted a hand to the place, and it came away with a splotch of blood.

Demonic laughter echoed and reechoed inside the cup-like depression containing the pond. "I'm the champ!" the blue jacket shouted again and again. He had drawn blood. He was pleased.

Beryl knew now . . . if she hadn't known before . . . if she had tried to pretend she didn't know . . . that unless she surrendered . . . unless she came out of the water . . . she would die . . .

"Stop . . . please . . ." It was a scarcely audible gasp. "I'm . . ."

She started to swim toward where the blue jacket waited for her. She dog-paddled. Her movements were slow and laborious. She had difficulty keeping her mouth and nose above water. Dimly, on the periphery of her vision, she saw the red shirt running around the pond to join the blue jacket. Then they stood together at the water's edge.

Her feet touched bottom. She commenced to walk, even more slowly than she swam. She would have fallen had not the water held her up. Finally, when the water was only waist-high, she did fall. She floundered, crawled on her knees, then on her hands and knees in the mud. The blood from the cut on her forehead dripped into her right eye. She tried to wipe it away with a muddy hand.

At the water's edge, they stopped and lifted her, the red shirt and the blue jacket each putting a hand in one of her armpits and hauling her upward.

"She ain't very pretty," one of them said.

Patrolman Pete Krebs drove by the parking area at one end of the Walking Trail once again, and saw that the red Chevy and the yellow Mustang were still there. His wristwatch said four-thirty. Those two cars had been there for a while—but then the trail was three miles long. If the owners of the cars had by any chance hiked to the other end of the trail, then had to return to their cars, the round trip would take a couple of hours. He wondered if the two parties had met.

He was aware of feeling vaguely disturbed. He stopped his own car, climbed out, and walked around the two parked vehicles. They were both unoccupied. Nothing unusual about the visible contents of either. Why was he disturbed? He didn't know. He glanced again at the license plates. Both local. Coincidence or a planned meeting? Lousy day for lovers to go hiking. Lousy day for anybody to go hiking. Krebs lighted a cigarette, leaned against the Mustang and smoked. All around him the park was silent. The woods which swallowed the trail were silent, except for the sigh of the wind through the leafy branches. He hoped those people knew the park closed at dusk. He didn't want to have to yell for them to come out, or go in after them.

He ground his cigarette butt into the gravel, climbed back into his own car, and drove on.

"Hey, Duke, what's the matter with her?"

Duke took a while to answer. He wasn't grinning any more. Without the grin his face looked younger, soft, the color and texture of lumpy oatmeal. Out of it his eyes stared in a curiously lifeless way, like two pieces of gray-green glass. "I think she's dead," he said at last. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Dead! What do you mean?"

"You know what dead means. She ain't breathing."

They stood facing each other across the inert body that lay between them in the mud. They were a bit wet and muddy themselves.

"How come she's dead, Duke?"

" 'Cause she stopped breathing."

"I mean why. Why did she stop breathing?"

" 'Cause she was killed."

"What killed her?"

There was a silence. They looked down at the body. There was no movement in it, no rise and fall of breasts. The eyes were closed, the lips slightly parted. On the forehead the bright red gash had stopped bleeding.

"You don't think the rock killed her?" The question came in an awed whisper.

Another silence.

"That little old rock couldn't kill her!" He went down on his knees in the mud, grabbed the body by the shoulders, and shook it. "Wake up . . . wake up . . . you're faking . . . you ain't dead."

"Shut up, Rollo. She's dead."

Rollo stayed down on his knees, letting his hips sink back on his heels, wiping his muddy hands on his bright blue jacket. "What else could have killed her?" he asked softly. "I mean . . . what else did we do to her . . . that could kill her, I mean?"

"Nothing. It was an accident." Duke hunkered down on the other side of the body. His gray oatmeal face twitched. His lifeless green eyes gave no indication that he was thinking, but he was thinking. "Who knows? Maybe she had heart failure."

"Or maybe it was the cold water." Rollo's deeply pitted face suddenly grinned again, a narrow, lopsided grin. "She was in the water a long time . . ."

Duke grinned back. "Sure," he said. "She died from pneumonia."

"Don't make jokes."

"I ain't making jokes. What difference does it

make why she's dead? She's dead."

Rollo's grin faded. "It was your idea to come to this place . . ."

"So I happen to like fresh air. I like to stretch my legs. Get out of our crummy neighborhood once in a while. What's wrong with that? And I said we might find something wandering around. Well, we did find something, didn't we?"

"Not much."

"Complain, complain. You want your money back?"

Rollo stood up and glanced around nervously. "Let's get out of here," he said.

"What about her?" Duke reminded him.

Rollo fidgeted. "What do you mean?"

"Just going to leave her here?"

"What else are we supposed to do?"

"Somebody'll find her, stupid."

"So what?"

"You know what cops do when they find a dead body. They start looking for who did it."

"So what? Who's going to look down here in this weather? Maybe they won't find her till next spring. We'll be gone. Who's going to pin it on us?"

It was a fairly convincing argument. Duke stood up too, and seemed about to accept the argument and follow his companion back up to the trail. But he didn't. "Suppose they do find her?" he asked.

Rollo grinned. "We'll take her car and leave it someplace. So maybe the sun shines tomorrow, or over the weekend. They find her. We'll be gone."

"There's always cops in these parks," Duke said.

"So what?"

"Maybe a cop saw our car parked back there. Her car, too. Cops have good memories. They're always looking at cars. You know the way it is with hot cars. Cops are always looking for certain cars. And they memorize license numbers. It's the only thing cops are smart about, don't you know that?"

Rollo nudged the body with his toe, hoping it would wake up, but it didn't. He was left with the

problem. "Okay, what do we do?" he asked.

"We don't want 'em to find her," Duke said. "We gotta hide her."

"Where?" The gray oatmeal face, glistening with sweat, was contorted into a questioning frown. Then the frown became a grin. "In the pond maybe, huh?"

Duke nodded. "That's the general idea."

They discussed the details. Cops maybe have photographic memories for things like license numbers and car descriptions, but those memories don't hang on forever. There are always new and different numbers and descriptions to think about. The old ones get forgotten eventually. So they had to hide the body until the park cop, in case he'd noticed their car, would forget about it.

Maybe a week. Better a month or a year. But a body on the bottom of this pond, if nobody thinks there might be one there, might *never* be found. So you have to see to it that the body goes to the bottom and stays there. Maybe there are fish or turtles in the pond. Maybe the body gets eaten, *so there isn't any body.* You can't prove murder without a body even if you do remember a license number.

"Murder?" Rollo echoed the word in a low voice.

"That's what they'd call it," Duke assured him.

There were rocks available from the same ledge in the hillside where Rollo had dug for missiles. It took time. They needed big rocks, or lots of small ones. Weight. Enough weight to make sure, absolutely sure, that the body would stay under instead of getting bloated and floating to the top.

They dug with a certain haste and urgency, for the day was growing darker. Dirt congealed under their fingernails and their hands were rubbed raw before they had mined enough of the rocks.

Then they stuffed them into the girl's pockets, and inside her clothes, until she bulged and became fat. Rollo, sweating in the chilly air, asked if it was enough.

"It's all she'll hold," Duke said.

Next came the problem of placing the corpse in the water. "She's got to go deep," Duke pointed out.

"How deep?"

"Five or six feet, don't you figure?"

Neither of them could swim. Both were afraid of the water. They realized that just by standing on the bank and throwing the body into the pond, they wouldn't be able to get it out far enough. So they would have to carry it in, which meant that they had to take off their clothes. In wet clothes they might freeze to death, and wet, muddy clothes would be suspicious. So they stripped. Naked just in the air they shivered. The cold of the water set their teeth chattering.

Rollo gripped the body under the armpits and Duke had the legs. Beneath their feet the pond bottom was muddy, soft, slimy, slippery, horribly and unexpectedly steep. Under the burden of the rock-stuffed corpse they staggered and stumbled.

"She's going to drown both of us," Rollo gasped.

"A little farther out," Duke insisted.

They weren't more than ten feet from the bank, but they'd already sunk to their knees in slime and the water was chest high. The corpse was already immersed. The water was supporting some of its weight, but the rocks were pulling it down. They had no choice. They let go, then scrambled in near terror back to the bank.

They tried to dry a bit then, but the chill air offered little help. They dragged clothes over their wet skin. Underwear and socks blotted up moisture and became soggy, but trousers, jackets, and shoes provided some insulation from the frosty bite of the air. They continued to quiver and tremble nevertheless.

There were other problems too. Footprints were some. They debated whether to try to rub them all out.

"Hell," Duke said finally, "footprints don't mean

nothing. Some of 'em ain't even ours. It's going to rain any minute. That'll wash 'em out."

Then there was the girl's purse. They found it up on the trail where she had dropped it hoping to discourage pursuit. It was a big thing that yawned wide when they undid the catch. They found the car keys, which they needed. Inside a wallet was sixteen dollars, which they decided ought not go to waste. The rest was junk, nothing useful, stuff to be gotten rid of, like combs, cosmetics, eyebrow things, pencils and brushes, lipsticks.

"She wasn't very good-looking, but she sure tried," Rollo said. He was back to giggling, now that the worst of the job was over.

There was a gold compact that he wanted to give to somebody. "Forget it," Duke said.

They crammed it all back inside, the wallet included, minus its sixteen dollars, of course. Duke took charge. Down on the bank again, he grasped the purse by its long leather handle and heaved it toward the center of the pond.

At the top of the arc the catch gave way, and some of the contents tumbled out, like sparks out of a Roman candle, but it all landed together in the middle of the pond, and sank like a hail of stones. Except for a yellow facial tissue that floated . . . like a daisy on a grave.

Duke and Rollo watched it for a moment. Then they hustled up to the trail again and jogged toward the cars.

It was almost six, winter closing-time, and fast darkening. Pete Krebs lounged against his cruiser, scowling at the old Chevy and the bright little Mustang, and wondering whether he'd have to go into the woods and haul those people out.

So he was relieved when he heard footsteps on the trail and saw bright splashes of color flitting closer through the foliage; two colors, red and blue. He

waited impatiently till the colors emerged.

A couple of young punks just as he'd guessed earlier. The kind of guys who'd drive that old Chevy. Troublemakers. Unusual for guys like these to come out to the park on a day like this. Looking for privacy very likely. His mind avoided trying to guess what they wanted the privacy for. At least they accounted for half his problem, the Chevy.

They seemed to hesitate when they saw him, but it wasn't surprising. Cops—any kind of cops—are enemies to punks, and vice versa. What did surprise him, however, was their separating. Only one of them, the guy in the red shirt, went toward the Chevy. The blue jacket went straight to the Mustang. He started to open the door on the driver's side, couldn't, poked a key into the lock.

Something in Pete Krebs' mind rebelled. It just wasn't the combination he had expected. Two guys like these in the Chevy, yes, but not two guys like these meeting at the park, arriving in separate cars—and not a guy like the blue jacket driving an almost new car.

The blue jacket was slow in making the key work in the lock. Krebs sidled over. "Enjoy your hike?" he asked, for lack of a more direct question.

The kid spun around. His eyes were blank, but there was a grin on his face. "Huh?"

"I asked you if you enjoyed your hike."

"Oh . . . sure . . . yeah." Little words. Monosyllables, but they came out in a curious stutter.

The kid was shaking. Scared? Scared of being questioned by a cop? Guilty conscience? Maybe yes. But something else besides. Krebs glanced at the hand maneuvering the key. Red with cold. But it wasn't that cold. The hand was wet. Sweat? Not if the kid was shaking like this. Wet with water? Water from the pond maybe? In weather like this?

The kid was damp all over, in fact. Faint stains of moisture showed on his trousers. His socks, a couple of

inches of them visible between trousers and shoe tops, were almost soggy.

Krebs hesitated. A wild idea skidded through his brain. Arrest him! No swimming was allowed in any body of water, lake or pond, inside this park. This kid must have been swimming in the pond.

Krebs made no move, however. He had no proof. It would be a lot of trouble besides. Yet the wild idea continued to ricochet inside his head.

The kid had the door of the Mustang open now, and was easing down behind the wheel. His left hand searched for the adjusting lever under the seat, found it, pushed the seat back to give himself more room. He glanced up, still grinning, and shut the door.

Krebs' brain was in turmoil. Nothing fitted! What had these punks been doing in the pond? Punks! That's all they were! What kind of a job did this one have to make enough to buy this Mustang? Why wasn't he at that job now?

The Chevy, engine roaring, had already backed out. The Mustang's engine came alive, barely audible beneath the louder noise. The Chevy started off. Not too fast though, not with a cop standing watching. The Mustang backed too, then followed the Chevy. Krebs continued to stand and watch. The two cars disappeared. The sound of the Chevy engine trailed off toward the main gate.

It was only then that Krebs realized what he had seen a moment before. *The punk had pushed the car seat back.*

Like what was occurring in the blackening sky overhead, dark things were coming together inside Krebs' mind now. Why did the punk push the seat back? Wasn't the Mustang his car? Hadn't he arrived in it? Who had? Was somebody still in the woods? Somebody with shorter legs than the punk's? A girl?

Krebs started for his own car, then stopped. Adjusting a car seat wasn't proof of anything, any more than wet socks were proof of swimming . . .

But what if there was somebody . . . some girl . . . back there in the woods? Tied up, maybe knocked unconscious, or bleeding to death. He couldn't leave the park, lock up for the night, with the possibility that there was somebody!

Pete Krebs started down the trail, running. Fifty yards later, he stopped and yelled, "Anybody here?" No answer came. The woods mocked him with silence.

He ran on. Several more times he halted and shouted his question. Still no response. He went on. Krebs wasn't a young man, and he was too stout for this sort of thing, but he couldn't stop.

The pond! Very suddenly he remembered the wet socks. He left the trail, crashed down the slope through the trees and brush. The pond was somewhere right around here. He changed directions, then reversed again, and finally he blundered upon it.

Pete Krebs couldn't help seeing what certainly looked like fresh footprints in the muddy bank. Those two punks had been here, all right. Who else?

The footprints were all over the place, prints of shoes in men's sizes, but no women's. Then, mingled with the rest, prints of big bare feet. Those two *had* been swimming—or wading. Crazy, on a day like this. Swimming or wading in icy water made no sense at all.

Trembling himself, from his exertions and from the strange excitement seething inside him, Krebs with some difficulty lit a cigarette, tried to think calmly. There was no evidence of a girl's having been here. Just two crazy punks. Maybe they'd dared each other to a swim. Kids will do anything. But what about the car seat?

Puffing at his cigarette, Krebs gazed across the unrippled surface of the pond. There was something there, now that he looked more closely. It seemed to be wet facial tissue, or paper towel. Nothing unusual or suspicious about that. People always threw junk around.

Then, squinting in the deepening twilight, he saw something else. A tiny, dark thing was floating on the water. A twig? Probably.

Pete Krebs had run a long way for a man his age. He was tired, but his mind wasn't satisfied. He was the crazy one now. He flipped his cigarette into the water, started searching through the nearby brush. In a moment he'd found what he needed, a severed tree branch about fifteen feet long. With it he probed for the twig, unsuccessfully. The branch wasn't long enough.

He was really crazy. He was only a park cop, but a cop nevertheless, with a good cop's wary suspicion of the human race in general, and especially of young punks, troublemakers. He hated punks. So Pete Krebs took off his shoes and socks, rolled up his trousers, and waded into the water.

He had to go in to his waist before he could reach the twig with the branch, but at last he coaxed his prize toward the shore. When he got it in his hand he saw what it really was: an eyebrow pencil.

He stood there, his legs in the water, for a long moment. An eyebrow pencil floating in the middle of a lonely pond. Such an item could belong to a boy, of course, but those two didn't appear to be that kind. So this pencil must have belonged to a girl. It was wooden, it floated—and it hadn't been floating there very long.

Back in his own car, talking with the sheriff's deputy on the radio, Pete Krebs didn't know exactly how to say it. How could he explain? He wasn't doing too well.

"Maybe you'd first better check the Mustang," he suggested. "License JO-15788. I'd be interested to see who it belongs to. Then there's this beat-up, rusty red Chevy, fifty-nine. License WY-203354—"

"Pete," the deputy interrupted, "what's the crime?"

"Swimming in the park."

"Swimming?"

"That's the charge!" Pete roared. "Pick those guys up, will you, before they get too nervous. Hold 'em for swimming, till I drag the pond."

THE CHESS PARTNER

Theodore Mathieson

Sweating with apprehension, for he was gun-shy, Martin Chronister cocked the trigger of the Colt .38 and sighted down the barrel for the last time.

The gun, held between the jaws of a vise clamped to the top of a bookcase in his bedroom, was aimed—through a small hole he had cut through the plywood wall—at a chair drawn up to a chess table in the adjacent living room.

After examining, without touching, the dark twine that was tied to the trigger and which passed through a staple to the floor, Chronister followed the line through the door and into the living room, making sure it lay free along the wainscoting, to where it ended at his own chair at the chess table, opposite the first chair.

For a moment he thought he heard Banning's car, but decided that it was the evening wind beginning to sough among the pines. He added a log to the fire, then turned to look at the painting of his deceased father in the heavy, gilt frame, beneath which the lethal hole in the wall was concealed in shadow.

"I'm using your old Army gun, too." Chronister smiled up at the portrait which he'd lugged down from the attic that afternoon. In the gloomy oils,

the medals on the uniform of the disabled old soldier shone dully, like golden poppies through the smoke of battle, and the grim lips seemed to be forming a question.

Why pull a string to do it?

Sure, the Old Man knew what it was to kill an enemy, and might even understand doing it across a chessboard instead of on a battlefield, but he'd always had contempt for his son's fear of guns.

"It isn't just gun-shyness, Martin," he'd said once. "You shrink from every bit of reality and involvement in life!"

No matter, Chronister knew that if he faced Banning with a live gun, he'd botch the job. Doing it his way made the act less personal and more—mechanical.

A crunch of footsteps on the path outside the cabin alerted Chronister to the fact that, having missed the sound of Banning's motor, the zero hour was almost upon him. Flinging open the front door, he greeted his enemy with a false smile of friendship . . .

If Banning were actually to die that night, it was because he'd made three mistakes, one of which he couldn't help.

First, he'd barged into Chronister's relationship with Mary Robbins. Not that the relationship was much to speak of at the beginning. For two years Chronister had met Mary at the store in town every week when he went to buy his groceries, but the contact had become a cherished event. Always a loner—he had worked for years as a bookkeeper in small-town businesses before he'd retired, unmarried, at forty-nine—Chronister had always been afraid of women. But Mary was different.

She, too, lived in the woods, tending an invalid father, in a house at the foot of Chronister's hill, but he'd always been too shy to pay them a visit. Al-

though she might be, as the storekeeper said, rather long in the tooth, she had a gentle voice and nice hands and eyes, and above all she seemed maternal, which perhaps was her greatest attraction for him.

Then came the Saturday when he'd met Mary in the canned goods section, and they'd struck up a conversation that seemed even livelier than usual, over the quality of different brands of tuna fish. Suddenly Banning happened along, looking remarkably distinguished in his tan raincoat, with his prematurely graying hair.

"I couldn't help overhearing," he'd said in his knowing way. "Fresh *anything* is better than canned, unless you're afraid that building up your red corpuscles will make you wayward."

Mary had looked uncomfortable, and murmuring something about finding it difficult to buy fresh fish in a mountain community, moved away. Chronister was outraged, but he waited until they were outside the store and he had put his groceries in his pickup before he spoke.

"When I'm talking with my friends, I'd appreciate your waiting until you're introduced before you volunteer your opinions."

"I hate to hear phony talk, that's all," Banning said. "She isn't really interested in tuna fish, Martin. What she really wants is a man in bed with her. You'll never make the grade with that kind of talk!"

Chronister felt a sudden rush of blood to his head. "What gives you the right to interfere in my business?" he shouted. "Just because you come out once a week and play chess with me doesn't make you my adviser. And your winning lately doesn't make you my mental superior!"

"You must feel it does, or you wouldn't mention it," Banning said.

Chronister nearly struck out at him then. Until a few months ago, Banning and he had been pretty evenly matched upon the board. Then his chess part-

ner had started winning relentlessly, which seemed to Chronister to give his partner a psychological ascendency over him. No matter how hard Chronister worked to improve his game, he had continued to lose, and Banning seemed to grow more sure of his domination.

After what had happened in the store, Chronister was beside himself. "Well, Miss Robbins and I are not chessmen," he said, "so keep your damned fingers off us!"

"Sure," Banning said.

He walked away abruptly, crossing the highway to the hotel where he lived alone on a modest disability pension.

"I always wanted to be an intellectual bum," he'd told Chronister once, "and the Army helped me do it."

Banning had lost his left arm in Korea . . .

For the next two weeks Chronister lived without having a single visitor at his cabin. Twice he saw Mary at the store and the last time she asked him to come to visit her and her father.

Chronister kept putting off the visit, largely out of a lifetime habit of avoiding entanglements, but Mary was often in his thoughts.

Meanwhile he worked hard at his chess books, playing games against the masters. He had a hunch that Banning would be back, and sure enough, one Friday around the end of April his chess partner appeared, full of conciliatory smiles.

"No use holding a grudge, I figure," Banning said. "Besides, I miss our games."

"So do I," Chronister agreed. "I've been boning up on the books, and I think I can take you now."

"Let's find out."

The struggle this time was more even, and up to the end game Chronister felt he had a fair chance of winning. But in the final moves, Banning brought his hopes down crashing, and then checkmated him.

Once again came Banning's smile of superiority, his

almost physical levitation—which was Banning's second mistake.

"By the way," he said from his height, "I paid a couple of visits to Mary and the old man. You're quite right in giving her the eye. In a housecoat she's not bad at all. Although her pa is a dreary lump. Every time he looks at my arm, he fights the Battle of the Marne all over again!"

If Chronister had had his gun handy, he might have used it personally then. Instead, he played another game and lost, and invited Banning back the following week.

The very next day he dressed up and went down to visit Mary and her father.

"I wondered why you hadn't been down before," Mary said, standing beside the wheelchair in which sat a withered old man with sly eyes. For some reason, she seemed more amiable here than at the store, and Chronister remembered what Banning had said about the housecoat. Now she was wearing a kind of muu-muu which concealed all but her head and hands.

Aware of his scrutiny, she colored and excused herself, and the old man began talking about the First World War.

"If I hadn't got shrapnel in my spine," he whined, "I'd have taken up the Army as a profession. You been in the service yet, sonny?"

Chronister winced. "No, sir. My father was a colonel in the First World War, and he wanted me to go into the Army, too, but I guess I wasn't cut out for it."

"Good life for a red-blooded man!"

"My father thought so, too."

Mary returned shortly wearing jeans and a tight-fitting sweater, and Chronister saw what Banning had meant.

"My chess partner said he enjoyed a visit with you," Chronister said, following the line of least resistance.

"Oh, Mr. Banning, yes. He's quite delightful."

Chronister felt a stab of jealousy. "I guess he talks a little more easily than I do," he admitted. "Social situations have always been pretty hard going for me."

"It mustn't be that you're antisocial; you just don't like crowds. Well, neither do we. That's why Papa and I live in the woods. I see your light up there sometimes."

"And I see yours."

It went like that for perhaps an hour. Mary served tea and some cookies she'd made, and he departed, not sure what kind of impression he'd created. But he knew that Mary attracted him, and that he felt the need of her, because when he returned to his cabin that night he was aware for the first time of its emptiness.

Through the rest of the week he continued playing over the master games, but no matter how hard he tried to concentrate, thoughts of Mary interfered. Finally, on a Thursday, in the middle of a game, he threw the chess book aside in disgust, put on his hiking boots, and went walking in the sunny woods.

As he sat resting under a yellow pine, he heard voices, a man's and a woman's, which presently he recognized as Banning's—and Mary's.

He wanted to run, but he felt paralyzed, and as he sat they came close enough for him to hear what they were saying.

". . . spring is the time for a walk," Banning was saying. "I don't get out half enough."

"Nor do I," Mary replied. "It's so lovely."

The two had stopped a few yards off, and Chronister prayed that the chaparral concealed him sufficiently.

"Look," Mary said, "you can see a roof from here. It must be Mr. Chronister's."

"Does he ever take you for a walk?"

"Mr. Chronister? Oh, never. He's been to see me only once in two years! Besides, I don't get out much."

"You should. Your father can do a little for himself, can't he?"

"Not much, and he's getting worse every day, so I like to be around when he calls."

"If you ever need help, Mary—I mean, with your father . . ."

"Thank you."

A silence followed, and Chronister, straining his ears, thought he heard them kiss. Then there was a sudden movement and quick footsteps sounded down the leafy trail.

"Mary!" Banning called, and then he, too, was gone.

Chronister continued to sit, his fear giving way to anger, then to rage. Finally he rose and pounded through the brush, not caring whether he was seen or heard, and by the time he reached his cabin his mind was made up. Mary was going to be his. He was going to kill Banning—tomorrow night . . .

The zero hour had come.

Banning, sure of himself tonight as ever, sat down in his usual chair, took out his tobacco pouch and loaded his pipe.

"Been doing some changing around, eh?" he asked, looking up to where Chronister had hung his father's portrait to hide the hole in the wall.

"I like a change every once in a while," Chronister said. He sat down opposite Banning, casually leaned over and picked up the twine, laying the loose end across his lap. Banning was staring at the picture.

"Would that be your father? He was an Army man, wasn't he?"

"Yes."

"You know, he looked familiar. I see he lost his left arm, too."

"In the Argonne. He led his own battalion."

"Must have been quite a man." Banning's eyes seemed to hold a taunt. "Well, it's your turn, Martin, I think with the white."

Chronister played pawn to King's fourth, and as the opening game developed in a conventional pattern, his hands upon the twine began to sweat.

In fifteen minutes, however, the game took an unexpected turn, and Chronister concentrated on the problems so avidly that he forgot the string, the gun, even his intent to murder. At the back of his mind he knew he was playing superbly well, with a freedom and dash that he had never before achieved. His moves seemed to flow, to dovetail, shaping themselves into a pattern that was a sheer work of art. Time and again he heard exasperated sighs from his chess companion that ignited his ingenuity further until finally, in the end game, he played simple cat and mouse, certain of victory.

"I concede the game," Banning said at last, leaning back in his chair. Chronister, looking up like one coming out of a dream, was surprised to see a new Banning, one divested of pride, humble and human.

In the objectivity of the moment he saw, too, that Banning had never deliberately meant to make him feel inferior. The guy had just been elated by winning a *game.*

"You played better tonight than I ever could," Banning said, smiling warmly. "But I guess it's just your lucky night." He put his hand into his coat pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. "I met Mary in town this morning, and she gave me this to give to you. I won't say I didn't read it, so I happen to know she prefers you to me."

Chronister took the note in a daze, letting the twine fall lightly to the floor.

Dear Mr. Chronister:

Papa had a bad spell last evening, and since we are without a telephone, and you are the closest person to me, I wonder if you'd mind my coming up to see you if I have need of your help?

I'd rather call on you than anyone.

Mary

When Chronister looked up, Banning was staring at the portrait again.

"Now I know who your father looks like," he said. "He looks like *me*—even if his arm weren't missing!"

Chronister's mouth felt dry as he rose. "Let's go into the kitchen and have a beer," he said through stiff lips. He took a step forward then, and felt the tug upon his hiking boot where the twine had caught in a lace hook. Before he knew what happened, the explosion filled the room, making the lamps wink in their sockets.

The echoes seemed a long time dying away, and the blood upon the floor grew into a pool beside the dead man.

There came a timid tapping at the cabin door.

Knowing at last the meaning of utter involvement, Martin Chronister went to answer it.

DR. ZINNKOPF'S DEVILISH DEVICE

Edwin P. Hicks

"Did you ever stop to consider," Chief Endicott said to Larry Congour, FBI agent, "what would happen to a country if everyone's eyeglasses suddenly were shattered?"

"No, sir," said Congour, "I haven't. But it sounds interesting, I'll have to admit."

Division Chief Roger Endicott was a man in his early sixties. He had been considerably leaner and much happier in the old days with the FBI when he had been in on the kill of big-name gangsters. Now he sat behind a polished desk on which lay a single sheet of paper bearing a coded message, and his big left hand rubbed repeatedly over the thick gray hair at the back of his head.

That hair-rubbing, Congour knew, was the tip-off. Chief Endicott had a major assignment for him.

"Something near sixty million pairs of eyeglasses are sold to customers in the United States alone every year," said Endicott, "and remember, not many of us buy a new pair every year. And did you ever consider how many windshields there are in the country—on automobiles, trucks, jeeps—even airplanes. Then, too, there are plate glass windows, and ordinary windowpanes in residences, and electric light

bulbs; glass bottles for soda pop, beer, and liquor; lenses for cameras, microscopes, and telescopes; test tubes and instruments of all kinds. I tell you, Larry, the number of different uses for glass is amazing. I forgot to mention drinking glasses, wine glasses, glass dishes—even good quality chinaware."

"Yes, sir. It must be terrific, but I never thought of it that way before."

"Who runs the army?" Endicott asked.

"Sergeants," Congour said, thinking of his tour of duty as a second lieutenant in World War II.

"Nonsense!" said Endicott. "I mean top officers. They usually are men with a little gray in their hair—all right, even some of your old buck sergeants are pretty grizzled. The fact is, a majority of the older officers, field grade and up, wear glasses. Map readers, plotters, your military brains can't function without the assistance of spectacles."

"That's true, of course, but I never really thought about it."

"Well, here's where you're going to change your thinking habits. By the way, you wear glasses, don't you, Larry?"

"Only for reading fine print," Congour said. *What was the old devil leading up to? Another physical checkup?* Larry was forty-five, and there were plenty of active FBI men much older than that on the job every day. Some of them were dyeing their hair, most of them were either going on a diet or getting off one, trying to keep their poundage down, trying to keep in physical trim. No FBI agent with a wife and college-age kids could afford to get old.

"I've been doing some research on your college background," Endicott said. "You studied hard in the sciences—chemistry, physics, mathematics—why did you suddenly swing over to law?"

"Science came easy to me, but after I got my degree and served in the war and came home again—way back then—there didn't seem to be a happy future

for young scientists. Too, I decided that test tube work was too confining. I wanted to get out more, go where the action was. Somebody told me about the FBI and the legal requirements, so I took a crash course in law, passed the bar exams, applied for an FBI job, and got it."

Chief Endicott nodded. "You were good in science, one of the honor students in your class, and then you threw it all away to become a flatfoot!"

Endicott growled like a bear in disgust, but Congour knew he was pleased.

"Remember," the chief said, "a few years back—oh, ten years or more—that series of broken windshields out west, around Oregon or Washington?"

"Yes, sir, I recall something like that."

"The matter quickly disappeared from the news. For a time we put a muzzle on Dr. Bernard Zinnkopf. Then the government built him a laboratory and kept him and it under wraps. You've heard of Dr. Zinnkopf, Larry?"

"No, sir, I'm afraid not."

"One of Uncle Sam's Einsteins—a silent genius, one of the leading physicists of our time. He may be ahead of our time. I'll give you a file on him and his experiments. Read it, memorize it, and return it to me. Dr. Zinnkopf has the scientific brain of a Marconi or an Edison. He deals in laser beams, blacklight, sound waves, and atom smashing. He's so far out in science that other leading scientists of the world have difficulty understanding him, but in practical matters he wouldn't know how to drive a nail through a piece of tar paper. He's a genius, and it is vital to protect his discoveries from espionage."

Congour moaned inwardly. So he was to become a bodyguard for this old crackpot. "Where is this old Professor What's-His-Name?" Larry asked without enthusiasm.

Endicott grinned. "Don't take it so hard. One of these days you'll be sitting behind this desk, and

then you'll really know what being hamstrung is. Dr. Zinnkopf is the name—Dr. Albert Mendelssohn Zinnkopf. But when his mind is a million light years away creating, you could yell 'Hey-you!' all day and he wouldn't even know it. The esteemed professor only recently has been installed in a brand new laboratory halfway between Winslow and Devil's Den—ever hear of either before?"

Congour shook his head, stifling a groan.

"It's not as bad as it sounds. A fifty-million-dollar atomic reactor is being built there, with power companies from a half dozen midwestern states as well as the federal government backing it. A number of top-rated scientists will staff the setup when it's completed, but Dr. Zinnkopf is the only one there at present. By the way, Devil's Den is a state park, and gets its name from a hole in the ground. Dr. Zinnkopf is there with a half dozen minor assistants working on his glass-smasher."

Congour whistled. "What are you afraid of, that he will try to use it, stir up some trouble with it?"

"He already has," said Endicott. "All this is graveyard—on your oath—top drawer. This is what they told me in Washington, day before yesterday. He demonstrated his toy on an island in the South Pacific a month ago. There were a couple of uninvited trawlers offshore, as usual when we're trying out something. When that thing was triggered, the trawlers went blind. Our own ship went blind—all glass instruments on it shattered as if they were hit with a hammer. Three of our spotting planes fell like dead ducks into the sea. Young ensigns served as our ship's eyes, made repairs, plotted the course, searched out the damage done to the ship's equipment. They told me in Washington that the captain and all the senior officers on board, together with a delegation of Congressmen, aged ten years. They got down and kissed the dock when the ship finally reached a repair port. How the trawlers got home, nobody knows."

"Good lord!" said Congour.

"So the government hurried Professor Zinnkopf off to the shiny new laboratory just completed in the Devil's Den country and would gladly have buried the apparatus at the bottom of the cave, but they were aware certain powers now knew the score and might dig it up again. As powerful as the test was, Dr. Zinnkopf wasn't satisfied. So, although they've taken the trigger of the machine from him, he's there in the laboratory making checks and tests and having a generally good time with his devilish device."

"I guess all this makes sense if you know the score," Congour said.

"Sorry, Larry, I can't fill you in on everything. Not now, anyway. You're better off not knowing the real score."

"Okay, but can you tell me how Zinnkopf's machine works?"

"I can tell the principle only. You've heard of glass or fine crystal being broken by a shrill note. You also know that when you blow a dog whistle, it makes no sound, yet your dog hears it. This Zinnkopf apparatus works on the same principle. It produces a powerful, all-shattering tone, so high-pitched no human can hear it. Yet it will smash lenses, beer bottles, windshields—everything made of glass within its range."

"What is its range?"

"They haven't told me that yet—but that's none of my business or yours."

"Okay, so I go there and keep a day and night watch over this super dog whistle for how long?"

"One of the scientists assigned to the atomic reactor is in the pay of—shall we say—an unfriendly power. The reactor itself is an experimental project but of no military importance. We are certain that this man is after the Zinnkopf machine, and we are giving him plenty of rope."

"How will he hang himself?"

"You'll tighten the noose."

"Okay," Congour said, "but so far I don't even know where the rope is hanging."

"This tainted scientist," said Endicott, "goes by the name of Dr. Hans Kaempfert. We expect him on the scene next month. You are now Dr. Robert Fitzpatrick, with appropriate credentials from the University of Chicago. You are assigned to Dr. Zinnkopf's laboratory as an observer on leave from Chicago. Actually all you have to do is keep out of Dr. Zinnkopf's way. You are, appropriately enough, nothing but a cipher in the good doctor's mind. But don't let it hurt your feelings—the real profs working at Zinnkopf's side are hardly any closer to him.

"When Dr. Kaempfert arrives, you will lose little time in confiding your annoyance about Dr. Zinnkopf. You are irritated because Dr. Zinnkopf refuses to let you work on the machine as an equal. As a matter of fact, you feel you really deserve most of the credit for creating it, but he grabbed all the credit and now goes around with his head in the clouds. Who does he think he is anyway—Isaac Newton? Then, when you have established your relationship with Kaempfert . . ."

"Yes?"

"Then get closer to him. Let Kaempfert know you still have access to the laboratory at all times—to Zinnkopf's files, papers, everything. Let Kaempfert get the idea you can deliver the goods—the plans to the machine—and then ease off. Play hard to get. He'll make you a money offer in time. Ask him three times what he offers and stick to it. When you make your final deal, get in touch with me before making delivery. Don't let him have a thing until you get your instructions from me."

Congour, as Dr. Fitzpatrick, found Dr. Zinnkopf to be as advertised—a very strange cookie. The good doctor tolerated his presence, and that was all. He was working, continually working, on improvements

to the accursed glass-smasher. It was a large, double-barrel device with the steel housing at its base shaped something like a great pot-bellied stove. The overall height of the machine was about fifteen feet. A half dozen assistants kept busy working on parts, assembling, polishing, making laboratory tests on the strength of the metal. At times hideous sounds emitted from the laboratory, and these sent the half dozen Doberman pinscher watchdogs, on duty outside, into a frenzy. There was a high cyclone fence around the laboratory, and the dogs roamed free inside, controlled by special dog handlers.

A quarter of a mile away, construction crews were beginning work on the foundation for the atomic reactor. There were no dog guards around the site of this construction because it was of no military importance. The dogs around Dr. Zinnkopf's laboratory, Congour believed, were a mistake. You don't bait a trap and stand over it with a loaded shotgun. Or, do you?

Dr. Kaempfert, woolly-haired, with yellow eyebrows and round blue eyes, made his appearance right on schedule. He was assigned to the reactor plant, he said, and had arrived early to be in on the ground floor as construction began. He applied for permission to visit the laboratory and was put off by Dr. Zinnkopf. After the third rejection, Dr. Kaempfert complained that Dr. Zinnkopf was not extending him the courtesy one recognized scientist should give to another without question.

If Dr. Zinnkopf heard any of Kaempfert's blasts, he showed no sign of it. Zinnkopf put in twelve hours a day at the laboratory, most of the time at his desk, fingering his straggly goatee, his gray eyes glazed—his great mind a trillion light years away in space, or perhaps down at the bottom of Devil's Den. He hardly knew that Dr. Kaempfert existed, and he apparently didn't give a scholarly damn about any courtesy one member of his profession might owe another.

By the second week, the indignant Dr. Kaempfert was confiding in Dr. Fitzpatrick, who had instant access to the laboratory—the men in charge of the Doberman pinschers permitting. Once when Fitzpatrick tried to take Kaempfert inside the enclosure, they were turned back, just as Dr. Fitzpatrick knew they would be. Kaempfert stormed and raged. It did no good. Dr. Fitzpatrick could get in, the guards said, but not Dr. Kaempfert.

There followed a week in which Kaempfert cursed government red tape while Fitzpatrick loaned a sympathetic ear, and then the newcomer got down to making propositions. He was in a position to make it interesting to Dr. Fitzpatrick if he would photograph Dr. Zinnkopf's machine. He wanted to have a look at it—if for no other reason than to spite childish Dr. Zinnkopf. That would show the crazy old goat that he, a man of importance in the scientific world, was not to be denied. The offer was made in jest, after the two of them had downed a couple of bottles of lager in a tavern across the Oklahoma state line, some thirty miles from Winslow. Dr. Fitzpatrick laughed, Dr. Kaempfert laughed, and two black-eyed Cherokee Indians, in a booth next to theirs, laughed.

A week later, over another bottle of beer, Dr. Kaempfert renewed the offer. He'd give two thousand dollars just for a picture of Dr. Zinnkopf's machine. Dr. Fitzpatrick pretended to be drunk, very drunk, and Kaempfert knew he was pretending. Suddenly he was out with it—he would give ten thousand dollars for the plans of the Zinnkopf weapon. Fitzpatrick asked thirty thousand. For the next hour Dr. Kaempfert blustered and kept on ordering beer. Finally he agreed.

Fitzpatrick stipulated the payoff must be cash and all in five and ten dollar bills. Dr. Kaempfert said he would need three days to get the cash. They parted, both in extremely good humor.

The next morning Kaempfert left in a plane from

the Fayetteville airport, heading east. That afternoon "Dr. Fitzpatrick" was in conference with Chief Endicott in a Fayetteville motel.

"Now what do I do?" Congour asked.

"Take the money and make delivery as you promised."

"You have a set of plans?"

"Yes. Give him not only the plans but also a working model of the machine."

"What!"

"You hire a truck, take him to the red barn a mile south of the government property. An exact working model of the Zinnkopf machine, except for what is called the trigger, will be hidden in the east side of a haystack to the right of the barn. Explain to him that the machine was kept triggerless as a precaution and you could not get it, but that once they have the thing out of the country the plans will permit them to make a trigger very easily."

"What if he balks?"

"He'll not balk. Besides, here are a set of photographs showing Dr. Zinnkopf working on his big machine in the laboratory. Dr. Kaempfert will recognize at a glance that he has the real thing—a working model of the great glass-smasher."

"But *will* it work?"

"It will work."

Dr. Kaempfert nearly danced a jig when he saw the photographs and the plans, and he was speechless when Dr. Fitzpatrick took him to the haystack by the red barn and dug out the small model of Dr. Zinnkopf's machine. He handed an attaché case to Dr. Fitzpatrick. Inside was the cash in five and ten dollar bills.

"The model is yours," said Dr. Fitzpatrick. "I took it from a back room in the laboratory. Dr. Zinnkopf will never miss it. The conceited ass has forgotten there was such a model. In fact, he wants to forget it because it was I who made the first working model.

It was supposed to have been destroyed some time ago. Take the model, only don't let it be seen around here. Leave the truck at the Rooney farm on Winslow Road before tomorrow."

Dr. Fitzpatrick helped load the model, which was of highly polished metal and resembled faintly a double-barrel bazooka, into the truck. It was six feet long overall, and with the shining gadgets on the side and in the steel drum which formed the base, weighed about two hundred pounds. They covered the machine with canvas, which Fitzpatrick provided, and Dr. Kaempfert drove the truck away.

Later that day, Fitzpatrick was informed, the scientist paid cash for a new station wagon in Fayetteville, and two men helped him load the machine into it. He gave instructions for the return of the truck to the Rooney farm and headed north over U.S. 71, with the model of the machine in the new station wagon.

That night Dr. Fitzpatrick was no more, and Agent Larry Congour was reporting to Chief Endicott.

"First the thirty thousand bucks," said Endicott.

"Heck," Congour kidded, "does a cop have to be honest all his life? I thought you and I would split it. Didn't think you'd want to hog it all."

"Cut me in on it!" another voice rang out.

Congour turned to see Dr. Zinnkopf, clad only in a gaudy pair of shorts, standing in the doorway to the adjoining room. He had an electric shaver in his hand and was about to rid himself of the famous Zinnkopf goatee!

"Meet Joe White," Endicott said. "He says he thinks you conned your science profs into any good grades you got in school. Says you don't know any more about science than he does. White is one of the instructors at the FBI Police Academy in Washington."

The two of them had a big laugh at Congour's confusion.

"But," Congour said, "I obeyed orders. Kaempfert actually drove away with that model. Where do we pick him up?"

"We don't!" said Endicott. "We let him take the little old machine out of the country. *It is the real McCoy.* It's the same machine that blew out all the glass on our ship in the South Pacific—as well as every piece of glass on the uninvited trawlers."

Congour's mouth opened wide.

"You see, Larry old man, we don't want that damn machine around. You pull the trigger and every piece of glass for a thousand miles around goes *smash.* We had a governor on it when we tested it in the Pacific, but there is no governor on the machine Kaempfert is getting away with. And the plans for the trigger that went with the machine don't show any governor."

Congour's eyes got bigger.

"It's a dirty trick we're playing on our *friends,* I'll admit," said Endicott. "But they wanted it so badly, and this is one machine they are welcome to. The moment they spark that machine, *zingo,* their spectacles go bang, their light bulbs shatter, their picture tubes explode, their test tubes crumble, their million dollar telescopes go boom, they'll lose control over any spy-in-the-sky satellites they may have, and they'll all be eating out of paper plates."

"But what about the big machine in the laboratory?"

"Dummy. Made to scale, several times larger than the real thing—but just a shell, nothing at all inside."

"Okay, you wise guys," Congour said, "but what's to keep them from bringing that machine back over here someday—smuggle it in and turn it on for vengeance?"

"Dr. Zinnkopf," said Agent White. "He's in a hid-

den laboratory in Alabama. He's developed another sound wave device attuned to a certain Achilles heel which he thoughtfully built into his first machine. As soon as those people turn on their stolen machine once and break every piece of glass in a thousand mile radius, Zinnkopf will press the button on his machine and the glass-smasher will vibrate into a million pieces. It's not complicated at all—you know how the space control boys have the power to turn on cameras on space ships in orbit and even on the moon. Very, very simple, Larry, I assure you."

"But the copy of the plans?" Congour persisted.

"Those plans are for the empty dummy—except for the trigger. The plans for the trigger which Dr. Kaempfert has are very, very real. Those people will discover there's something missing, of course, but they'll just simply have to try out the working model—and boy, will it work!"

FAT JOW AND THE DRAGON PARADE

Robert Alan Blair

Fat Jow stretched as tall as his limited stature allowed, to watch for the dragon through the crowding ranks of spectators lining Grant Avenue. Silently he cursed a Fate which permits so many occidentals to attain a height of six feet, and each year there are more of them.

Now he saw the long paper dragon, its great ornate papier-mâché head jetting smoke from flaring nostrils, snaking its dancing way toward him upon multiple pairs of human feet.

The Dragon Parade is the climax of the week of the Lunar New Year, celebrated in Chinatown with a more festive excitement than the earlier, more conventional January 1. The New Year greeting "gung hay fat choy" appears in Chinese and English on posters and banners, or sings out between passersby, or is the standard salutation of merchant to customer. Grant Avenue is hung with bunting and garlands. Strings of firecrackers explode at unexpected moments and places, frightening away any evil spirits who might endanger the propitious beginning of the New Year.

Theoretically, the import and sale of fireworks are illegal, but so many are the hands engaged in the

traffic, and so cherished the tradition, that the authorities attempt only token enforcement. The mildest persuasion from a would-be purchaser, whether Chinese or occidental, suffices to bring out from beneath a shop counter the gay foil-and-tissue packets.

"Uncle Jow!"

Since persons of all ages in Chinatown know the old storyteller of St. Mary's Square as Uncle Jow, he turned. Down the cleared street hurried a young uniformed patrolman, pulling a small boy by the hand.

"Well, Sammy," sighed Fat Jow, pushing forward to take his grandnephew into custody, "what has he done now?"

Sammy Kan resettled his cap and squinted toward the approaching dragon. "Possession of firecrackers I can wink at. But tossing them in open car windows is something else."

"They are but what you call the ladyfingers," said Fat Jow. "They are harmless."

"Not if they rattle the driver. All I need, in this jam, is an accident."

"I shall restrain him."

"Okay, thanks." Sammy dashed away to herd some girls back from the path of the dragon.

Fat Jow said sternly to Hsiang Yuen, "Must you always mimic the behavior of others?"

The boy blew on the glowing punk in his hand. "I was alone," he said proudly. "It was my idea."

Fat Jow snapped off the end of the punk, ground out the spark on the pavement. "Now you will remain with me and watch the parade." He could not be angry with Hsiang Yuen, sole living descendant of his beloved elder sister, his only family.

When the parade had passed and the street was reopened to automotive traffic, the pedestrian crush dwindled. Celebrants in costume began to vanish. Reluctant to return to his herb shop, Fat Jow dawdled along the shop windows of Grant Avenue, savoring

the aromas of ginger and jasmine and incense and sandalwood, the visual pleasures of silks and brocades and ivory figurines and lacquered furniture.

Hsiang Yuen, his relighted punk returned, kept pace with him, pausing now and again to touch off a small chain of firecrackers in the gutter. Fat Jow kept a wary eye upon him, and noticing his intent interest in a nearing car, he was about to utter a warning when a sudden grimace of hatred distorting the small features startled him into silence. As by reflex motion, Hsiang Yuen hurled a handful of firecrackers, fuse sputtering, into the driver's window. Fat Jow caught a confused glimpse of the alarmed faces of the man and his wife turned toward him as the erratic chattering erupted deafeningly in the closed space.

The car veered into the curb, bumped one wheel upon the sidewalk, scattering pedestrians, and stopped against a pagoda-capped light standard. The driver clawed open the door and fell to the pavement, his body arching in violent convulsions. His wife cowered back in the corner of the seat.

People gathered around, none speaking, none offering to help. No one really liked Chung Min, wealthy dealer in illegally imported cheap labor. His merchandise, exclusively young and female, was distributed mostly to the many family sewing shops tucked into odd corners about Chinatown. The more attractive items were selected for other purposes.

Sammy Kan materialized at Fat Jow's side, as two late firecrackers popped inside the car. "Did it again, huh?" he said flatly, without heat.

"I fear so," admitted Fat Jow.

Sammy knelt beside Chung Min, to loosen his collar. "Air!" gasped Chung Min, grappling with him. "I must have air!"

"I think he's having a heart attack," observed Sammy, rising to face Fat Jow. "I suppose I'll have to call an ambulance. You take the kid to your shop, and I'll be along to talk to you later." He leaned nearer and lowered his voice. "Don't feel too bad. He

couldn't have picked a better target." He hurried off to the nearest call-box.

Fat Jow led a thoroughly subdued Hsiang Yuen up the steep cross-street to the weathered swinging "Herbalist" sign and into the familiar sanctuary of the dim, dusty shop. He left the door unlocked, but did not raise the "closed" shade. They waited in the loft at the rear, Fat Jow at his great rolltop desk, and Hsiang Yuen at the octagonal teakwood table by the loft rail.

"I must have an explanation, small one," said Fat Jow. "You had seen Chung Min before."

Hsiang Yuen nodded. "He came to the camp where the people all waited, and always took girls away with him. Then he took Sin Mei-Li, and he made her cry as they went, and I hated him for that, and I wanted to run after them and knock him down, but they would not let me. I wanted to hit him, and hurt him, and kill him. It was all I thought of, when I saw him this afternoon."

Hsiang Yuen was himself an illegal immigrant, released to Fat Jow by the Chinese Reds as reward for an inadvertent favor performed for their former San Francisco agent.

"And who is Sin Mei-Li?" asked Fat Jow.

Hsiang Yuen smiled dreamily. "The most beautiful person I ever knew. She was my only friend in the camp, where they put me after my mother died. She was kind, and she understood many things. Where do you think she is, Uncle?"

"Who can say? If she lives, it is more than probable that she is somewhere in San Francisco."

"Then I shall find her," said the boy positively.

"Among forty thousand, half of whom guard their identity because they came illegally? Do not hope, child."

"I must find her," insisted Hsiang Yuen. "She was my friend, and now I must be her friend. Will you help, Uncle?"

Fat Jow looked fondly at the earnest little face.

He could not deny Hsiang Yuen. "How old is this girl?"

"She would be eighteen now."

"Can you describe her?"

"The most beautiful . . ."

"You said that. Try again."

The boy groped for words, gestured vaguely. "A girl, Uncle."

"Heavy, slight, tall, short?" pursued Fat Jow.

"Thin, very thin. In the camp, we never had enough to eat. She is as tall as you."

"Which is not very tall. Well, Gim Wong of the sewing shop may be of use. Tomorrow, I shall ask him." He would not divulge his disquieting notion that Mei-Li, if she were as beautiful as Hsiang Yuen said, would not have been buried in the dull anonymity of a sewing shop.

Instead of Sammy Kan, the policeman who came in with wisps of the late afternoon fog was Fat Jow's friend, Detective-Lieutenant Cogswell. While the pendant bells at the top of the door still jangled, he made unerringly for the loft stairs.

Fat Jow revolved his swivel chair to meet him. "Where is Sammy?" he asked.

"He had to turn it over to headquarters." Cogswell lowered himself into the creaky cane-bottomed chair beside the desk. "It's homicide now."

Aghast, Fat Jow whispered, "Chung Min died?"

"Ten minutes ago." As Hsiang Yuen began a soft whimpering, Cogswell added, "Don't be scared, youngster. You had nothing to do with it. Directly, that is."

"Ah?" said Fat Jow, astonished and relieved. "Then who?"

"Person or persons unknown." Cogswell slid his hat to the back of his head, rubbed a hand over his weary face. "So I get assigned to a killing in Chinatown; so is it something nice and clean and simple, like a knife or a gun? Oh no, it has to be oriental and offbeat,

like everything else around here. I ask you: how many people do *you* know who own a Malay blowgun?"

Fat Jow clucked a mild reproof. "I presume that you are, as the Americans say, kidding."

Cogswell lifted his right hand in the swearing position. "It's on the record. Chung Min was shot, high on the back of the right shoulder, by a poisoned palmwood dart. Malay . . . I looked it up. The ambulance attendant found it under him when they moved him. Where does one begin to look?"

"Any importer or dealer in curios. I have seen blowguns in the shops. But they are soon sold. The American curiosity for exotic weapons is insatiable. But a blowgun is as long as a tall man. How may a weapon like that be concealed?"

"At that short range, it wouldn't have to be that long. Look at all the fussy headdresses and flowing costumes on the street today. It could have been disguised as a baton, or a musical instrument. We figure that someone was stalking him along Grant Avenue, and your boy's firecrackers gave him just the diversion he needed."

"And now you come to see me. Why?"

"You know things we don't, or have a way of finding out."

Fat Jow slapped his hands to the arms of his chair, pushed himself up. "Chung Min was an undesirable. Chinatown is better without him."

"Sit down, I'm not going yet." Cogswell stretched his legs indolently. "I can't dispute your argument, but it's no good for a court of law. I think you'll give us a hand." He looked aside at Hsiang Yuen. "How do you like San Francisco, youngster?"

Hsiang Yuen looked to his great-uncle, who gave him a faint nod. "Very well, sir." His voice was weak and uncertain.

"Better than China?"

More strongly: "Yes, sir!"

"You wouldn't want to go back."

A frightened, drawn-out: "No . . . sir."

Cogswell cocked his head at Fat Jow.

Fat Jow sat down again, said icily, "A citizen may be responsible for a minor who is his nearest living kin. I did not know that blackmail was among your duties."

"A cop has all kinds of tools. He may not like some of them."

Fat Jow partially closed his eyes, clasped his hands across his belly, and said with deceptive mildness, "You overestimate me. I knew Chung Min only slightly, as I did not approve his activities."

Cogswell hunched his shoulders in a small shudder. "He had a nasty business. I don't blame you. Did you see something in the crowd?"

"No. It happened very fast. My eyes were on Chung Min. Have you established a motive?"

"Any one of a dozen," sniffed Cogswell. "He wasn't the best-loved figure in Chinatown, was he? The boys at Immigration think the Red Chinese may have decided to put him out of business."

"It is unlikely," said Fat Jow. "The Peking treasury derives a substantial portion of its funds through traders like Chung Min. Would the Reds impede the flow?"

"Maybe he was crossing them, taking more than his cut. Or, he could have been 'hit' by the Syndicate. He was getting big enough, in about every illicit operation you can name, for the State Crime Commission to be interested in him. He had a hand in narcotics, prostitution, abortion, bookmaking, numbers, and maybe a few others we don't know about."

"The nature of the killing is more subtle than the usual untidy methods employed by organized crime, however," said Fat Jow.

"What's more logical than hiring a Chinatown local to do the job? Then there's the possibility of a tong flareup. Didn't Chung Min come from a powerful family?"

"The tongs," intoned Fat Jow with infinite patience, "have settled down into innocuous family associations, with quiet halls where the old men gather to read the papers and play mah-jongg."

"That's what you'd like to have us believe," said Cogswell suspiciously. "Even when you're with me, I get the feeling you're heading somewhere else. Do *you* have a theory?"

"It would be extremely difficult to find in Chinatown someone who did not wish Chung Min dead. Even his clients despised him, while availing themselves of his services and merchandise."

"What do you know of his wife?"

"You will find her of little value, if indeed she will let you into the apartment. I daresay she has not held more than a few moments' conversation with an occidental in her life. You must know her background, to understand her. She is a self-effacing product of an older generation. Instead of helping Sammy Kan with her husband, she sat frozen with fear. She was born in the old country, and reared strictly in the ancient manner, to be submissive and subservient, to have no ideas of her own, to speak only when addressed, and to be a model of proper deportment at all times. If you wish, I can accompany you to see her. She will speak to me."

Cogswell grinned. "I was hoping you'd say that. I know what it is, trying to ask questions in this part of town. But we won't bother her till after the funeral. This is a bad time for her."

"You are most thoughtful," commented Fat Jow.

"She went right along with the ambulance to the hospital, and hung around the door of his room like a lost dog. She may be there yet." He scratched his head. "A woman could actually love a guy like that?"

"The traditional Chinese wife marries a man, not his occupation. She knows very little of his life outside the home. But inside, she creates for him a refuge, his haven of flowers and softness and music and

food, secure from the pressures of his world outside, which he does not bring across the threshold with him."

Cogswell stood up, asked wistfully, "Isn't there someplace around here I can send my wife to take lessons?"

The day following the sparsely attended funeral of Chung Min, Fat Jow and Lieutenant Cogswell visited the apartment of the widow, on an upper floor of one of the many boxlike structures overflowing from Chinatown westward through the saddle between Nob and Russian Hills. Fat Jow had obtained her permission by telephone, so she was expecting them.

In her own surroundings, tasteful but quiet Chinese-modern, Mrs. Chung moved like a queen, with a slim dark dignity accentuated by hair still black, drawn back severely into a knot, and by a formfitting slit-skirt gown of black silk. Her transparent skin had never known the touch of cosmetics. She bowed them inside, gestured them gracefully to chairs, chose for herself a place of honor on a low leather sofa. In the musical cadences of the Toi Shan dialect she said, "I am honored by your visit, gentlemen. Will you have tea?"

Although her English was as good as his own, Fat Jow knew that she was to make no concession to this foreigner by deigning to use his barbaric language. Gladly he honored her choice; if Cogswell had not been present, Fat Jow would have dispensed with English altogether. An unshakeable ignorance of English is a common and useful practice of the oriental, instinctively secretive through a thousand and more years of oppression and exploitation. Police who speak only English know the pangs of frustration in Chinatown.

"Your kind hospitality is welcome," said Fat Jow, and translated for Cogswell while Mrs. Chung tinkled a little bell on the end table beside her.

From a door at the rear, shuffling noiselessly in

cloth slippers, appeared a fragile girl not yet twenty, no less exquisite for the shapeless blue cotton pajamas masking her small frame, nor for the bobbed hair encircling her flawless face.

Mrs. Chung said with a gentle smile, "Will you bring the tea, please?"

The girl bowed slightly, and withdrew as silently as she had come. Fat Jow looked after her.

"Who's that?" asked Cogswell. "I thought you had only the two grown sons." He looked puzzled.

Mrs. Chung kept her eyes upon Cogswell's face, but she had the patience to listen until Fat Jow had finished translating. "My niece from China," she said, "has been living with me for almost a year. She is a dutiful and helpful girl, and has become as a daughter to me."

Instead of translating, Fat Jow asked her, "May I change 'China' to 'Hong Kong'? It is not discreet to emphasize the traffic with Red China."

Thus it became a double conversation: Cogswell putting his questions, and Fat Jow discussing with Mrs. Chung the advisable answers. He served more as editor than interpreter.

They were interrupted by the arrival of the tea service, on a small wheeled cart of finely-carved mahogany, inlaid top protected by a framed glass panel. The girl left the cart and hurried away again, without allowing her downcast eyes to wander toward the strangers. Again Fat Jow watched her. Her name?

Cogswell, still uncomfortable in the unaccustomed setting, returned to his subject: "Mrs. Chung, I'd like you to tell me as much as you can about your husband and his business. The smallest detail may be important."

She busied herself pouring. "I shall help if I can, but I know nothing of my husband's affairs, nor of his associates. He would not discuss his work within these walls, which is as it should be."

"There had been no threats against his life? No letters?"

"None. He received no mail here, but at a post-office box downtown."

"Did you see anything unusual on the street that morning? Anyone making a move toward you, or pointing anything at you?"

"Until the firecrackers, no. I have nothing to add to the statement I gave the uniformed officer who helped me."

"Do you have any idea *why* this was done?"

While Fat Jow translated, she glanced toward the door where the girl had gone, then spoke in a lowered voice: "There were many whom he hurt. One who loved him may still say this. He was an excellent husband, he provided well for me, he gave me two fine sons. But he was capable of hurt. It was part of his work."

The exchange was little more than a tea-sipping social interlude. Cogswell learned only that Mrs. Chung had left the house that morning with her husband for one of their rare excursions together, to share the New Year excitement on Grant Avenue. They had joined the spectators along the parade route, and had returned later to their car, planning to have dinner at the Kuo Wah, near the upper end of the street. The rest he knew.

Cogswell mastered his dissatisfaction, and after an hour he took his leave.

Fat Jow remained seated, making no move to join him. "If the lady will allow me," he said, "I have matters of personal interest to discuss."

Cogswell hesitated in the doorway, said, "I'll be talking to you tomorrow."

Mrs. Chung bowed him out, closed the door with barely a click of the latch, stood with her back to the polished redwood panel, her calm eyes studying Fat Jow. "There is no more that I may tell you."

"It is for neither the police nor myself," he reas-

sured her, "that I wish to engage your assistance, but for my small grandnephew Hsiang Yuen, who came to me last year. In the refugee camp, he was befriended by a girl called Sin Mei-Li, who was later taken away by your husband."

She reacted only by returning to her place on the sofa. "Yes?" she said guardedly. "What is this to me?"

"Your 'niece' . . . is she perhaps Mei-Li? Hsiang Yuen's description fits her very well, Mrs. Chung."

"And if she were?"

Fat Jow smiled disarmingly. "You are in no danger from me, Mrs. Chung. Hsiang Yuen is an unofficial resident of San Francisco, as are so many. He lost his parents, and apparently much of the love in him was transferred to this girl. He dreams only of seeing her again, and I have promised him to help him find her. Also, she might profit from regaining a friend in this strange land."

Mrs. Chung sat without speaking. She smoothed her skirt, rested her hands placidly in her lap. "Your grandnephew sounds like an unusual boy. Will you bring him, tonight, to share my table?"

"I shall be delighted," beamed Fat Jow.

He told Hsiang Yuen only that Mrs. Chung had kindly extended them a supper invitation.

The boy squirmed. "But Uncle," he protested, "I cannot face her, after what has happened."

"You must. It is most gracious of her to include you. Neither she nor I can forgive the incident of the firecrackers, until you make personal amends. Do you lack courage to acknowledge your fault?"

Hsiang Yuen expelled a long breath of forbearance. "No, Uncle. If it is the only way . . ."

"It is," said Fat Jow.

For the first half-hour following their arrival at the Chung apartment, they exchanged semiformal amenities with their hostess, while preparations for the meal proceeded in the kitchen at the rear, audible but unseen behind the closed door. Mrs. Chung

seemed genuinely interested in Hsiang Yuen, encouraging him to talk of himself, which he did.

Then the 'niece' came to announce supper. Eyes averted, she had barely begun to speak when an ecstatic Hsiang Yuen jumped up and ran to her with arms wide. "Mei-Li!" he cried.

She gave a glad little cry and bent to embrace him, but at once looked nervously toward Mrs. Chung. "Forgive me, madam, I did not think . . ."

"Please renew your acquaintance, my dear." Mrs. Chung was smiling, and tears stood in her eyes. "It was to have been your surprise."

"Thank you," said Mei-Li, tightening her hold upon Hsiang Yuen. "Thank you."

It was a simple supper of pork buns, bean curds, rice, and tea. Mrs. Chung broke precedent by inviting Mei-Li to sit at table with them. At first the girl was ill at ease, but could not remain so before Hsiang Yuen's animated conversation. Soon they were chatting breathlessly, lost now within themselves.

"I trust," Fat Jow asked his hostess, "that you will permit Mei-Li to visit us?"

"By all means," replied Mrs. Chung readily. "I have been at a loss to revive her spirits, because she is so alone and frightened. But you will have to escort her. The city terrifies her; she has hardly been out of the house since she came."

Fat Jow turned to Mei-Li. "San Francisco is not a city to inspire terror. We shall have to dispel that illusion. You are welcome in my house at any time."

While Hsiang Yuen helped Mei-Li with the dishes, the two adults returned to the living room. Mrs. Chung said, "They are charming together. I can be happy for them, in this time that is so difficult for everyone."

"She is an enchanting creature, and everything that Hsiang Yuen said she was. Is it not singular that so attractive a girl should not have been marketed for a good price to one of Chung Min's clientele? One

would expect to see her installed as a concubine in the home of some wealthy local citizen of advancing years."

Concubinage is but another of the many revered practices which the Western law has been unable to eradicate from Chinatown. The Chinese are pragmatic, above all. The Number One wife realistically accepts the presence of the younger woman, both as help and as a means of keeping her husband at home nights.

Mrs. Chung's face betrayed nothing. "She was so installed," she said evenly, "here. He selected her for himself."

Fat Jow bowed his head. "I see. Please forget my thoughtless remark. But I must add that your husband had the connoisseur's eye for the priceless. Both you and Mei-Li are living proof of his taste."

She acknowledged the sly compliment with a thin smile. "You flatter me by including me in the same breath with Mei-Li. But thank you."

"I have heard it said that in the years of his travels, Chung Min gathered a collection of Asiatic artifacts. May I see it?"

"It is not here. The De Young Museum has placed it on permanent display."

"Ah?" Fat Jow concealed his disappointment. "When?"

"Since his last voyage, before Christmas."

Fat Jow was puzzled. A vaguely-forming idea now dissolved back into the mists of his mind.

When he padded down the hill in the morning to open the herb shop for the day's business, Lieutenant Cogswell was waiting before the locked door. "Okay," he asked lazily, "what was that personal matter?"

Fat Jow unlocked the door, raised the "closed" shade, began the many small tasks which had in half a century become automatic and instinctive. "It pertains not to your investigation, but to my grandneph-

ew, who made apology to Mrs. Chung for throwing the firecrackers."

Cogswell perched on a corner of the counter. "Learn anything new?"

"I was not there to quiz my hostess. We spent an enjoyable evening in the esteemed company of Mrs. Chung."

"She's so calm," complained Cogswell. "Didn't this get *to* her?"

Fat Jow shrugged. "I assure you, she is deeply affected by the loss of her husband. We Chinese are taught from infancy that display of strong emotion in the presence of strangers is unseemly. This does not mean that the strong emotion is not there."

"Did they get along?"

"Since I had no direct knowledge of their domestic life, I cannot say. You can see by simple observation that she maintains a well-ordered household, which is expected of any conscientious wife."

Cogswell nodded. "You're probably right, as usual. She wasn't too valuable. I'll stick with my original hunch, to bet the Red Chinese were behind this."

"If gambling were not against the law," said Fat Jow without a flicker of expression, "I should accept the challenge of a wager."

Cogswell rubbed his chin with the back of his hand. "Could there be some reason you don't *want* me to implicate the Reds? You're not working with them, are you?"

Now Fat Jow smiled with unfeigned amusement, interrupted himself, and looked around. "My dear Lieutenant . . . would I tell you, if I were? You know that we merchants, almost without exception, are unrepentant capitalists."

"I know that you're all very careful to display the Six-Companies' anti-communist posters in your shop windows. I know that the Pcking government still finds a lot of Chinatown doors open to it. Even your own; that kid of yours came through it."

Fat Jow resumed his work. "Hsiang Yuen and I are direct descendants of the same two American citizens: my parents. You would have a problem proving otherwise."

"I know I would," grumbled Cogswell. "That's why I'd rather not go into it. Exactly why *are* you helping me? Can I believe it's my charming, irresistible personality?"

"Let us say," said Fat Jow, coming around the counter and heading for the loft stairs, "that there are times when I feel sorry for you."

"I guess that'll have to do." Cogswell pulled open the door, setting the bells a-jangle. "I'll keep in touch."

Once Hsiang Yuen had called for her and shown her the route across the crest to the Baxter mansion on the near slope off Van Ness, Mei-Li came often. Soon she lost her timidity, in the breathtaking views of city and bay which opened to her only a few steps from the Chung apartment. Within a few weeks she was as eagerly interested in the future as a girl of her age should be.

Fat Jow judged her ready to question when she appeared one afternoon before Hsiang Yuen came home. She was red-cheeked and smiling self-consciously, proud of her pert new blue-and-white dress, with a ridiculous little hat, and bag and shoes to match. "Mrs. Chung took me shopping!" she sparkled. "What do you think, Uncle?"

"I should not have known you," approved Fat Jow. "Suddenly you have blossomed into a young lady."

It was exactly what she wanted to hear, and she flushed with quiet pleasure. "Do you notice something else?"

"I am no expert in the foreign fashions," he said impatiently. "What is it?"

Her smile was secret and strangely mature. "You do not recognize the maternity style?"

"Maternity," whispered Fat Jow, not as a ques-

tion, but as a statement of abrupt understanding. "Of course. And I need not ask; you are pleased."

"Oh yes, Uncle." She danced tiptoe in a circle beneath the crystal chandelier which graced the former ballroom of the mansion, and in the multiple mirrored panels her image accompanied her, filling the room with a whirling host. "It will mean at last that I belong here, when my child is born an American citizen. In the refugee camp, there was much talk of this among the girls. It helped take away the fear."

"And Mrs. Chung, she is pleased?"

"But yes. Already she speaks of it as her grandchild. She helps me plan, and dream." She sank into the worn leather rocker which was Fat Jow's favorite. "I am most fortunate to be with Mrs. Chung."

Fat Jow offered his next question softly, almost reluctantly. "Was Chung Min also pleased?"

Mei-Li's radiance vanished, and she turned her head away. "No," she said in a voice barely heard.

He crossed the room to the front window, looked through the curtains to the street. "You need not tell me, if it pains you. But it may help to talk of him, of the time you first saw him."

She was silent for a while, but then began to talk, hesitantly at first, but soon the words came more easily. Her unconcealed loathing and fear of Chung Min came to light, born of the tales told by other refugees about this flesh-broker from the eternally vilified land of the Yankee imperialist enemy. Although they were in supposedly free territory, the People's Republic maintained iron control over them, through a network of agents on both sides of the camp gate. That the Reds would stoop to doing business with such as Chung Min was a constant source of wonder and controversy, but the people were quite accustomed to the regime's saying one thing while doing another. Were they not in the camp as false refugees, placed there as in a holding-area for merchandise consigned to a buyer?

From the first, Chung Min had set Mei-Li apart from the rest. Ordinarily he departed the camp with two girls, or three, or four. When he came for her, he took her only, and he attempted to console her as they went away, placing an arm about her and drawing her close. She knew then, and she cried, and he was angry, and that was the first time he struck her.

"I did not wish him ill," she said, "but it is well that he is gone. When he learned about the child, he began making the arrangement for me to have an operation. I did not want it, and Mrs. Chung did not want it for me, but we did not dare oppose him. It was not our place. So we wept much, until our eyes were red. And Chung Min beat me, even more than before. Sometimes I thought he wanted to hurt me, so the child would come before time."

Fat Jow turned from the window, saw her watching him. "You hated him," he said, his manner heavy with sadness.

"I should be lying if I said I did not. I am not a liar, Uncle."

"Did Mrs. Chung hate him?"

The girl seemed shocked by the question. "But she was his wife. She must love him, and serve him. She was unhappy for me, but she must love him."

"Did you happen to see the Dragon Parade?"

"No, Uncle."

"But it is the event of the year! Surely you yearned to see it. Everyone in Chinatown participates in the New Year, Mei-Li."

"I was not permitted out of the house," she said simply. "Chung Min forbade me to go out, ever. He said if the police saw me, they would make trouble for him."

"Would you have cared?"

"If I disobeyed, or angered him in any way, he beat me. For the child, I could not risk his anger."

"Then you feared Chung Min more than the strange city?"

"Yes, Uncle."

Fat Jow had learned much, perhaps more than he wished, and he was not happy with his knowledge.

As the police exhausted one available clue after another, their murder investigation lost momentum. Cogswell visited the herb shop less often, for Fat Jow had no information to impart. Time-honored codes of his people dictated removal of an undesirable person, and also protection of the remover, who in Fat Jow's eyes was not necessarily a continuing threat to society, but instead its benefactor. In many small ways the Chinese-American transgresses the presumptuous and irreverent American laws that dare to legislate against sacred traditions. He gambles, he deals in fireworks, he aids the immigration of a people whose only sin is the lifelong dream of living in America, he harbors these illegal immigrants, he employs them at wages illegally low. If he does not resist officialdom overtly, neither does he ease its path.

Fat Jow must, however, know whom to protect. Uncertainty annoyed him.

On a bright Sunday, while Hsiang Yuen and Mei-Li went off to the zoo, Fat Jow boarded a bus for Golden Gate Park and the De Young Museum.

The Chung Min collection had been assigned to a small room in the north wing. It included pottery, clothing, tools, weapons, art work, implements, and articles of many materials, many uses, many cultures, from the land-mass of Asia. Fat Jow stood long before a ladder-like rack of weapons: spear, bow, kris, club, ceremonial staff, axe . . . and a blowgun, a slender wooden tube about seven feet long, tapering from an inch at one end to a quarter less at the other, with a bore smaller than a half-inch. On a cord beneath it hung one of its darts, a pointed palmwood splinter thrust into a core of pith shaped to fit the tube. The workmanship was basic but thorough, the effect smoothly functional. A second cord

supported a plugged joint of bamboo, the container for the poison.

Fat Jow approached the attendant stationed at the doorway. "Is this the entire collection?" he asked.

"No, sir. We had just this one room vacant, so we picked out one of everything interesting, to avoid duplication."

"And you have the balance in a storeroom?"

"We may have some day, if Mrs. Chung ever agrees to sell. We made the original deal with him, and we took these things only on loan. She still has the rest of the stuff at home."

"Have any of these pieces been removed since you assembled the exhibit?"

The attendant frowned. "Removed?"

"Perhaps taken away by stealth, and later replaced."

"Not a chance," chuckled the attendant. "What with paintings and antiques, there's a small fortune in this building. Once we close to the public at night, the electronic alarm system is turned on, to beef up the night crew."

"It is not surprising," said Fat Jow, and he thanked the attendant and made his way back to the Sunday sunlight. Smuggling a seven-foot weapon out of this building among the daytime visitors was no less impossible than using it unseen in a throng of parade spectators.

Mrs. Chung, startled to see him alone, asked with concern, "Where is Mei-Li? Did she not come to your house?"

"She is occupied," said Fat Jow, "with elephants and tigers, and will be so, for most of the day." He accepted the offered chair. "Hsiang Yuen took her to the zoo. You and I now have an opportunity to speak frankly, at our leisure."

She settled into her customary place on the sofa, and said rapidly, almost gaily, "I am so glad that she

has found Hsiang Yuen. He has been good for her."

He regarded her intently. "Something distresses you. Are you ill?"

She did not answer immediately, and then her tone was hushed, tense: "Does it matter that much?"

"I count you as a friend, if I may. What touches my friend, also touches me."

"It has been long since a man called me friend," she said with the tiniest suggestion of a smile. "No, I am not ill, but my mind is burdened. I have received a more than generous offer for Mei-Li, from one who knows she is here."

"Surely you are not considering it?"

"You know the child is as dear to me as my own. But such an offer implies that her remaining in the house of Chung is unhealthy and unwise. You and Hsiang Yuen are far better for her than I."

"I disagree. Now, especially, Mei-Li needs a woman to stand by her. If she is so dear to you, why do you seek to shift your responsibility to me?" When she neither moved nor spoke, Fat Jow continued, "Let me tell you why, and please accept my words as those of a friend. You want her welfare assured, because you are giving serious thought to suicide."

Her eyelids closed, and she leaned her head back.

Fat Jow watched for a while, rose, moved silently to the apartment door. "If you are weary, perhaps we may talk later."

"No," she said, as from a great distance. Now she was looking at him. "Do not go. Do not leave me alone with my thoughts."

"Burdensome thoughts are often better shared."

She clenched her hands so tightly that the knuckles drained white. "Why are you doing this to me?" she asked emptily.

"I do nothing that you have not done to yourself."

She nodded. "Will you stay?"

"Why?"

"Because I ask. Is it not enough?"

Fat Jow resumed his seat, facing her. "Are you prepared to hear what I have to say? It will be painful."

"I am no stranger to pain," said Mrs. Chung in a low croon.

Fat Jow began with gentle deliberation: "Mei-Li's coming child is her greatest happiness, and yours with her. But Chung Min did not want the child, and he was ready to destroy it. Your long heritage would not permit you to oppose him personally. By alerting the authorities to the pending abortion, you would only draw their attention to Mei-Li's illegal status, and cause her to face deportation. You were obliged to stop Chung Min in the only manner possible, trading his life for the lives of Mei-Li and her child."

She said raptly, "You are an understanding man."

"I have just come from the De Young Museum, where I had the pleasure of examining the Chung Min collection. It appears that you misled me. They took only part of the collection for display, so I must conclude that among what remained here, there was something you did not want me to see."

"I shall not deny it."

"Obviously, what you would least want me to see are extra darts, perhaps an extra bamboo vial. The police are hunting vigorously for an unknown who aimed a blowgun at Chung Min from the crowd. Your window was open, and his wound was high on the shoulder, an admirable target for one taking aim at close range. A projectile, reason the police from their training, requires a weapon to fire it. A bullet is designed for use with a pistol; a dart, with a blowgun. But a dart can be quite as effective, simply pricked by hand. And one wearing gloves, as you were that day, leaves no fingerprints. How many darts, altogether?"

"Three," she said, unmoving.

"One in the museum, one in the hands of the police, and the third is . . . ?"

"I have kept it." From a pocket of her gown she took a small object wrapped in a silken handkerchief. When she had unfolded the corners of the cloth, in the nest thus fashioned lay a palmwood splinter in a core of pith, its point sheathed in a ball of cotton.

Fat Jow came to her. "For yourself?"

"Would it not be justice?" She pulled the cotton free, disclosing a dark substance smeared on the point.

"Rather cowardice," said Fat Jow calmly; but his mouth was dry, his heart pounding. "Previously, you acted for Mei-Li; would you now take yourself off, when she needs you more each day?"

"I am lost to her, whether I go with the police, or go . . . like this." With her free hand she plucked up the dart from the silk, nestled its core within her cupped palm, with its darkened point protruding beyond the tips of her gathering fingers. "And if I am to go, then I prefer to save face by going as a remorseful widow."

"And walk the easy way of forgetfulness. If it is justice you desire, you must think only of living on, hiding a secret which you cannot share with anyone."

Disbelief came into her eyes. "*You* know."

"Unless an innocent person comes to trial for the killing of Chung Min, I shall not speak."

Her lips formed a soundless, "Why?"

"You are of far more value to society as mother to Mei-Li than as ward of the state in the prison for women. Or as a statistic in the burial ground." He held out his hand. "Give me the dart."

She stared at him, then at the dart. For an instant its point was toward his reaching hand. The same thought crossed both minds, their eyes met, and with a little sigh she dropped the dart into his hand.

Through the waning lazy afternoon Fat Jow strolled home down the western slope, basking in the warmth of his own well-being. He was really a kindly

person, and could never disillusion Lieutenant Cogswell by obliging him to descend from the heady realms of tongs, Communists, and organized crime to the mundane level of an unhappy wife who sought merely to remove her husband.

CALCULATED ALIBI

Richard Deming

As usual, cocktails were served exactly at five-thirty and they sat down to dinner exactly at six. As usual, Amos Crowder signaled the end of the meal by rising from his chair exactly at six forty-five. At the Crowder home every act was timed to the split second.

As his host and employer led the way from the dining room into the huge front room, Peter Abbott could understand how the set routine was gradually driving the retired industrialist's young wife to distraction. Abbott was merely the older man's secretary and, ordinarily, had to submit to the unvarying schedule of Amos Crowder's life only forty hours a week, plus each Wednesday evening, when he was expected to be the Crowders' dinner guest. Vivian was sentenced to conform to the schedule twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

Vivian took her accustomed chair in the front room and Abbott, as usual, sat on the sofa. Sometimes he had the impulse to choose a different seat just to mar the metered rhythm of his employer's existence, but he never did. Even so minor a change as a different after-dinner seating arrangement would have disturbed Amos.

As he always did immediately after dinner, Amos Crowder momentarily held his hands to the heat of

the burning log in the fireplace, his back to his wife and secretary. At sixty-five he was still muscular and erect and not unhandsome in an austere sort of way. His complexion was still smoothly unwrinkled and his hair, although nearly white, was thick and crisply wavy, well groomed.

Vivian took advantage of her husband's back by forming her lips into a silent kiss to Peter Abbott. The handsome secretary gave his head a warning shake.

After a precise thirty seconds of warming his hands, Crowder turned around and said, "I'll get the coffee."

This was another ritual. Although the Crowders employed both a housekeeper-cook and a maid, drinks were always personally mixed and served by Amos. Before dinner he had mixed martinis at the bar dominating a corner of the living room. Now he would repair to the kitchen and return with a tray bearing three mugs of Irish coffee. Plain coffee was never served with dinner at the Crowder home. It was always Irish coffee served, following dinner, in the living room.

As Amos disappeared in the direction of the kitchen, Peter Abbott gave Vivian an intimate smile. She was a slim, shapely blonde of thirty, with a lovely but unsmiling face. She had been Amos Crowder's private secretary for five years before his retirement as president of Crowder Enterprises, and had married him the day he retired a year ago. It was her first marriage and the industrialist's second. Abbott had never known the first wife, but gathered she had been a mousy little woman who had endured the rigid routine of marriage to Crowder for forty years before dying about two years previously. There had been no children during the forty years.

Vivian said in a soft voice, "Still love me?"

"Of course," he said in an equally low tone. "But this is no time to discuss it."

The inevitable had happened. During the six

months since he had been engaged as Amos Crowder's personal secretary, Peter had often wondered how such an obviously intelligent man as Amos could deliberately throw his young wife into nearly constant contact with a virile and unattached man her own age without anticipating what would develop. Peter's duties were not exhausting. Aside from handling Amos' rather limited correspondence, his prime duty was to transcribe the retired industrialist's memoirs from the tape recorder into which Crowder dictated. Since for a good part of each day Amos was locked in his study dictating into the machine, Peter had much idle time. With two servants, Vivian's time was equally idle.

The result could have been foreordained. In the beginning Peter had merely been a welcome companion to relieve Vivian's loneliness. Then, gradually, without either being fully aware of just when it started, an intimacy developed which began to express itself in minor but telltale ways. At an accidental touching of hands, both would jerk back as though the contact had been electric. Sometimes they would find themselves staring at each other for long, silent moments, before simultaneously looking guiltily aside. Then had come the day when, alone in the front room, they hadn't looked aside. Instead, Peter had taken her into his arms and she had clung to him in passion.

After that there had been clandestine meetings outside the home after Amos was asleep. These had not been difficult to arrange, because Amos' sleeping routine was as rigidly patterned as the rest of his life. An insomniac, he took a sleeping pill exactly at ten each night and retired at ten-thirty. By a quarter to eleven he was invariably in a drugged sleep which lasted until seven in the morning. Neither servant lived in and, as Vivian and her husband had separate rooms, it was easy for her to sneak from the house without detection.

"We have to discuss it," Vivian said. "He can't hear

us in the kitchen. I don't think I can stand it much longer, darling. It's like being in jail."

"Leave him," he urged. "When I said I loved you, I meant all the word involves. Divorce him and marry me."

"And live on what?" she inquired.

He flushed. At thirty, Peter Abbott was not an outstanding financial success. Over the years he had held a series of minor clerical jobs with various companies, none with any particular future. His present employment as Amos Crowder's secretary paid a fair salary, but naturally would terminate if he ran off with the man's wife. He didn't have much security to offer.

"We can't keep on meeting in back streets forever," he growled. "We have to do something."

"I know," she said. "I've been thinking of something we can do. We'll discuss it when we're alone. Can we meet tomorrow night?"

"Why not tonight?" he inquired.

She made a face. "It's Wednesday."

He felt his face redden. Damn Amos Crowder and his inflexible routine. Wednesday was the night he deigned to let his wife share his bed.

They heard Amos coming from the kitchen and lapsed into silence. The older man entered the room carrying three coffee mugs on a tray. Thick whipped cream floated on the top of each cup.

Irish coffee is nothing but black coffee with a slug of Irish whiskey in it and a blob of whipped cream floating on top. Peter didn't particularly care for it, but when you dined with Amos Crowder, you submitted to his tastes. Because Amos had decided that Irish coffee was the perfect after-dinner drink, his guests were never offered any other choice.

Wednesday-evening conversation was always the same. Amos and Peter discussed the progress of Amos' memoirs while Vivian listened in silence. From Peter's point of view the book, now about a third fin-

ished, was incredibly dull, but Amos obviously regarded it as a literary masterpiece. In the interest of keeping his job, Peter naturally did nothing to discourage his employer's opinion.

Amos had a letter from a New York literary agent to show to his secretary. Amos had answered an ad of the agent, who offered to evaluate and criticize book manuscripts for a reading fee, and market those he judged marketable. Amos had submitted three chapters and an outline of his memoirs to the agent, along with a check.

According to the letter, the book had great literary possibilities and, for additional reading fees, the agent was willing to furnish editorial advice and criticism of each chapter as it was completed. The whole matter could be accomplished by mail, but if it were possible for the author to get to New York, a personal conference would be of value.

"I don't want to go up there," Amos said. "It would throw my schedule all out of kilter. You know as much about the book as I do, so I want you to go talk to the fellow. You can fly up Sunday night, talk to him Monday, and fly back that night."

"All right," Peter agreed. "It's only about two hours by jet."

Exactly at seven twenty-five the maid came in to collect the empty coffee mugs. Five minutes later she and the housekeeper-cook departed for the night. At eight Amos rose and lifted the tape recorder which lay on a corner of the bar.

"You transcribed everything I recorded this morning, didn't you?" he said to the secretary.

"Yes, of course," Peter said. "The manuscript is on your desk."

"I feel in the mood for starting a new chapter. I think I'll dictate for an hour. Will you excuse me?"

"Certainly," Peter said, rising. "I'll run along early then, if Vivian doesn't mind."

He was a trifle surprised, for this was a departure

from routine. Usually when Peter came to dinner each Wednesday, he and Amos discussed the book until nine, then Amos retired to his study to proof the day's output or dictate until bedtime, and Peter took this as a signal to go home. Amos had never previously broken up the evening so early.

Vivian escorted Peter to the door as her husband carried the tape recorder to his study. She gave his hand a tight squeeze.

"Tomorrow night?" she whispered.

"If you think it's safe."

"It's always safe except for Wednesdays," she said. "Thanks to sleeping pills. Same place, same time?"

"Uh-huh," he said. "Thanks for dinner."

The next morning Peter phoned the airport and discovered there was a jet flight to New York at six p.m. on Sunday. He made a reservation, and also one for an eight p.m. flight back from New York on Monday.

He didn't see much of Vivian that day, because she was gone on a shopping tour all afternoon.

At midnight Peter parked on the curve near the elephant house in Forest Park. Moments later a convertible with the top up parked behind him. Leaving his car and buttoning his topcoat against the outdoor chill, he walked back to the convertible, and got in the front seat. The car was equipped with a gas heater which made it comfortably warm despite its thin canvas roof.

Vivian moved into his arms and kissed him passionately.

After a time he said, "Motel?"

"Not tonight," she said. "We have things to discuss."

"Like what?"

"What we're going to do. As you said after dinner last night, we can't go on forever like this. But if I simply leave Amos, we'll be penniless. He'll fight any sort of financial settlement. I know him."

"I can get another job," he said without much conviction.

"Oh sure. At peanuts. After a taste of luxury, I have no intention of ever pinching pennies again, Peter. I want you *and* Amos' money."

"That would be nice, but how do you plan to swing it?"

Dropping her head to his shoulder, she whispered against his chest, "Would you be averse to marrying a rich widow?"

He stiffened. "You're not serious?"

She raised her head to look into his face in the dimness. "I've never been more serious. Do you really love me? Enough to prove it now?"

"Of course I do. But murder!"

"Is it your conscience or the thought of getting caught that bothers you?"

After a moment of contemplation he said reluctantly, "Probably the thought of getting caught. I really don't particularly like Amos. But I'd hate to spend our honeymoon in the gas chamber."

"We won't get caught," she said. "I have a foolproof plan."

"I'll bet. A lot of residents of death row thought they had foolproof plans."

"This one is," she assured him. "With those sleeping pills he takes, he sleeps like a rock. He would never hear a prowler break into the house. Suppose he was murdered by a prowler at a time when we both had perfect alibis?"

"What kind of alibis?"

"Yours is ready-made. The prowler will break in around midnight Sunday, while you're registered at a hotel in New York City."

He frowned. "You're going to pull the killing?"

She shook her head. "You are. I said you'd be registered at a New York hotel. I didn't say you'd actually be there, but no one will ever be able to prove you weren't."

"Maybe you'd better fill me in," he said. "I don't follow you."

"I visited the airport today," she said. "Your flight arrives in New York at 8:01 p.m. There is a jet flight back to here at 9:35 p.m. That gives you an hour and thirty-four minutes to get to a hotel, register, go to your room long enough to make the bellboy think you're in for the night, duck out the back way, and taxi back to the airport. You'll fly back here under an assumed name, getting in at 11:28. There is a jet flight back to New York at 2:00 a.m., getting you there at 3:58. You could be back in your hotel room before dawn, and no one would ever know you had been out of it."

He did some silent calculation. "That leaves two and a half hours, approximately, for me to get from the airport to your house, do the job, and get back to the airport again. Enough time, I suppose, providing all three of the planes I have to take are on schedule. But suppose one runs late?"

"It won't matter if the last one does, only if your first flight or the one back here is too late for you to make connections. If either is, you simply forget it and we wait for another opportunity. What have we lost except the price of a couple of plane fares?"

He thought some more. "I would have to have reservations on the two extra flights."

"They can be made by phone. In order to confuse your trail, they should be made under two different fake names. Suppose I make them for you tomorrow and pick up the tickets?"

"Don't rush me," Peter said. "How do I kill him? I don't own a gun."

"I do." She straightened in her seat, opened her bag and took out a hammerless .32 revolver. "I bought it in a pawnshop today, under an assumed name. It can't be traced, because it's never going to be found. After you use it, you can take it back to

New York and drop it in the Hudson River, or wherever you decide."

"You were certainly confident I'd go along," he growled.

He opened the glove compartment, groped for the flashlight in it, and examined the gun by its beam. It was a five-shot Smith and Wesson, probably fifty years old, but it seemed to be in good condition. Breaking it, he discovered it was fully loaded.

When he glanced at her inquiringly, Vivian said, "I bought cartridges in a sporting goods store. You won't need more than are in the gun, so I threw the rest away."

He switched off the flashlight, returned it to the glove compartment, and thrust the gun into his topcoat pocket.

"Okay," he said. "Now how about your alibi?"

"I plan to be in the hospital that night."

When he stared at her, she said, "Amos is always sound asleep by a quarter to eleven. Saint John's Hospital is only six blocks from us. I'll check in, complaining of severe abdominal pains, shortly after eleven. Naturally they'll keep me overnight for observation. You won't arrive at the house much before twelve-thirty, so I'll be covered."

He said dubiously, "Providing they fix time of death when it actually happens. There won't be any witnesses to just when he dies."

"Neighbors are bound to hear the shots."

He frowned at that. "Yeah," he said slowly. "And suppose one comes to investigate?"

"People don't break into dark houses to investigate shots," she said patiently. "They'll just wonder what the noise was, then forget it. But somebody will remember the time when police later question neighbors. Just to make sure, you can put a bullet through the alarm clock on Amos' bedside table. That will fix the time."

"All right," he agreed. "I think they can fix time of

death pretty closely by autopsy anyway. You should be in the clear."

"Here's what I want you to do," she said. "We want this to look like a burglary, so I won't give you a key. Break one of the panes in the French doors leading into the front room in order to get in. You won't have to worry about Amos hearing you, because an earthquake wouldn't rouse him after he's had one of his sleeping pills. You know where the first-floor linen closet is?"

"Uh-huh."

"Get a couple of pillowcases from there and fill one with my sterling silver from the dining-room buffet. Leave it near the door you came in and carry the other case upstairs. After you shoot Amos, drop it next to the bed. It will look as though the burglar took it upstairs, intending to pack it with whatever valuables he found there, then dropped it in panic and ran, after shooting Amos. It will also look as though he were in too much of a hurry to stop for the filled case on the way out."

After thinking this over, he nodded. "It should work. I'll go along."

She moved back into his arms. "Kiss me," she said.

Sunday evening Peter Abbot's jet landed at Kennedy Airport exactly on time. He was carrying only an overnight bag, so he didn't have to wait for luggage to be unloaded. At twenty minutes to nine he was registering at a hotel. Fifteen minutes later he emerged into the alley from a fire exit. He was lucky enough to find a cab immediately, and by offering a ten-dollar bonus, got the driver to break most of New York's traffic laws on the way back to the airport. He made his flight thirty seconds before the jet's passenger door closed.

"Mr. Arthur Reynolds?" the stewardess asked, her pencil hovering over the only unchecked name on her passenger list.

"Eh?" Peter said, then remembered that Arthur

Reynolds was the name Vivian had used when making the reservation for this flight. "Yes, that's right."

This flight arrived on time too. Peter had left his car at the airport parking lot, so there was no need for a taxi.

It was a quarter after midnight when he arrived at the Crowder home. He parked a half block away and walked the rest of the distance. The house, and those on each side of it, were dark, but he advanced cautiously.

Quietly he made his way across the lawn to the front porch. Before the French doors he shined the small flashlight he had brought on the panes in order to locate the one next to the inside latch. When he found it, he broke the pane with the butt of his gun, then switched off the flashlight and listened. When several seconds had passed with no sound from inside, he reached through with a gloved hand and unlatched the door.

Using only the flashlight for illumination, he located the first-floor linen closet and removed two pillowcases. In the dining room he loaded one with silver, then carried it to the front room and laid it in the center of the floor.

Carrying the other pillowcase, he climbed the stairs as silently as he could. He eased open the door of Vivian's bedroom and flashed the light around to make sure she was gone. When he found the room empty, he crossed the hall to open the door to Amos' room.

Amos Crowder always slept with the windows open, and the room was quite cold. The figure in bed was completely covered by a quilt, head and all.

Peter stepped into the room, tossed the empty pillowcase on the floor before the bed, and directed the flashlight beam at the sleeping figure. Raising his gun, he squeezed off four shots. At the first shot the figure beneath the quilt jerked and emitted a muffled gasp, but the other slugs merely riffled the quilt.

Moving closer, Peter focused the beam on the alarm clock on a night table the other side of the bed. Aiming carefully, he put a bullet in the center of the dial.

A lamp sprang on in a corner of the room. Jerking his gaze that way, Peter was horrified to see Amos Crowder, bundled in an overcoat, seated in a chair next to the lamp. A forty-five automatic was leveled at Peter.

"Drop it," the older man ordered crisply. "I imagine it's empty, but drop it anyway."

Peter dropped both the gun and the flashlight.

"Wha—wha—" he stammered.

"I suppose you'd like an explanation," Amos said pleasantly. "I've been suspecting you and Vivian of—ah—intimacy for quite some time. You had a way of looking at each other which was more revealing than you apparently realized. So I've been leaving the tape recorder around here and there, running. It was running Wednesday night as it lay on the bar, and recorded your whole conversation. Since you made a date with Vivian for the following night, I decided to eavesdrop on it. Just before I went to bed Thursday, I carried the tape recorder out to the garage and put it in the trunk of Vivian's car, with the speaker pushed through under the back seat. I had it loaded with a two-hour tape, so it was good until twelve-thirty. It ran out before your conversation was finished, but there was enough on it to get the gist."

Peter's gaze strayed to the figure beneath the quilt. Amos chuckled without humor.

"Go ahead and look," he said. "Vivian never got to the hospital. I dropped a few of my sleeping pills into her Irish coffee after dinner this evening."

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