

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

29 stories by
Patricia Highsmith
Robert Bloch
Jack Ritchie
Bill Pronzini
Henry Slesar
Borden Deal
Wenzell Brown
Donald E. Westlake
Edward D. Hoch
Lawrence Block
James Holding
and others



TALES TO SEND CHILLS DOWN YOUR SPINE

Do you like to be agitated? Shocked? Jarred? Do you like your reading disquieting, turbulent, icy? Do you like it to shake you up? To pack a wallop? To fill you with fear and trembling? This fifth anthology of stories from *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* provides the kind of chill-causing excitement you've come to expect from the Master of Suspense.

Here are stories from Patricia Highsmith (who wrote *Strangers on a Train*), Robert Bloch (who wrote *Psycho*), and 27 others whose spine-tingling fiction has earned them the warm support of Alfred Hitchcock fans for years.

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HITCHCOCK'S



TALES TO SEND
CHILLS
DOWN YOUR SPINE

Edited by ELEANOR SULLIVAN



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Introduction

Do you like to be agitated? Shocked? Jarred? Do you like your reading disquieting, turbulent, icy? Do you like it to shake you up? To pack a wallop? To fill you with fear and trembling? This fifth anthology in the new series of stories from *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*—with each of the first eighteen years of the magazine (1956-1973) represented by at least one story—provides the kind of chill-causing excitement you've come to expect from the Master of Suspense.

Here are stories from Patricia Highsmith (who wrote *Strangers on a Train*), Robert Bloch (who wrote *Psycho*), and 27 others whose spine-tingling fiction has earned them the warm support of Alfred Hitchcock fans for years.

A handwritten signature of Alfred Hitchcock in black ink, written in a cursive style and underlined.

1956

by Borden Deal

The Judge sat in a chair where he could see the door entering into the hall from outside. He was waiting. His wife had phoned fifteen minutes ago and he knew that in any minute up to the next ten he would see her again. He sat stiffly, rigidly, as though he were sitting behind his bench downtown, and his mind was as frozen and hard as his face.

The Judge was a big man. His heavy frame gave majesty to his grave demeanor and his craggy, lined face forbade human approach. His hair was white, not full-white but grizzled with the crow's-wing black it had once been. It was not whiter than it had been the day he had married the woman he was waiting for now.

The house was silent around him. It was a two-story, white clap-board, set back from the street in old trees. It was comfortable and worn, like the chair he was sitting in, the upholstery faded, the cloth fringing over the round of wood at the sides. It was a house that had been here in this land for a long time for it had been built and furnished by his father, the old judge.

He heard the sound of a motor. He did not move, but there was a hardening in him. His mind followed the motor to a stop beside the house, listened to the click of heels on the porch, felt the unhesitating turn of the doorknob. I knew she would come back, he thought. I knew I would see her one more time. Just once.

The door was open, then, and she was looking at him. "Hello, Judge," she said.

He listened to her voice carefully. It was not strained. It was not her bright, careless voice either. It was just a carrier for the noncommittal words.

"Hello, Grace," he said, wondering how his own voice sounded. He couldn't tell. He watched for its effect in her face but he could see none. It wore the bright, varnished look she took to bridge parties and wives'

committees, as though her features, her expression, her eyes, had been sprayed with the fixing preparation she used on her hair.

Now at last, he thought, I know for a truth that you are a bitch. I've suspected it almost all the years of our marriage. But now I know. And a vain one, too . . . she couldn't go away forever without all the expensive clothing in the closets upstairs. Vain and practical, torturing a man for a few bright rags of shaped cloth.

"I came to get my clothes," she said, the voice still as neutral as sunshine. "I hope you don't mind."

"Then you're going," he said. "You're really going, after all."

She moved toward him, put a foot on the first riser of the stair. "Of course," she said. "You've known. You've known for a week now." She stopped, watching him. Then she went on. "I'll get them. It won't take me long and then . . ."

"Your friend," he said. "Where is he? Waiting in a motel somewhere?"

She did not stop this time. She dropped the neutral, emotionless words down the stairs almost carelessly. "He's waiting in the car. I needed someone to help with the luggage."

He was alone again now. I didn't think she'd do that, he told himself painfully. He stood up, lifting the tail of the light linen coat he wore even in the summer heat, and took the .38 pistol from his hip pocket. He looked at it thoughtfully for a moment. Then he put it back into his hip pocket and walked to the door.

When he opened it the outside heat blasted at him, slapping him in the face like a hand. Even the big trees did not stop it. He thought of the sun baking on the concrete streets downtown and felt the sweat start on his forehead in tiny beads.

He went to the end of the porch and looked at the young man sitting in the car. The man's face turned toward him in sudden startlement and The Judge saw clinically that he was very good-looking and probably younger than Grace.

He walked down the steps and leaned on the window-rim of the car, looking in.

"I'm Grace's husband," he said unnecessarily. "You must be Wallace."

He studied the wariness in the young, smooth face, waited patiently until it went away, until Wallace decided there was no danger of vio-

lence or harsh words. It must have taken some doing, The Judge thought, for him to come out here in the first place.

"Come on in the house and wait," he said. "This heat will kill you, sitting out here in the car."

The young man hesitated, then opened the door on his side and got out. He was rangy and tanned and beside The Judge's harsh grayness he looked very young. Grace picked well, The Judge thought ungrudgingly. I wonder if he has money, too. Yes, he must have money.

Wallace came around the front of the car toward The Judge, his eyes studying The Judge's face. "I'm sorry, sir," he said. "I didn't want to come . . ."

"But Grace must have someone to help with the luggage," The Judge said gently. "You can't expect a lady to wrestle luggage in this heat. And I'm an old man . . ."

He took Wallace's arm and urged him toward the house, talking about the thick walls that insulated against the sun, how pleasant the house always was in the summertime even though it was hard to heat in winter. He mentioned how thin the walls of modern homes are now, as thin as cracker boxes, and how it takes airconditioning to make them livable this far south.

"But they keep on building them that way," he said thoughtfully. "Sometimes I think there's nothing as bullheaded and grasping as the building industry. Nothing at all."

They were in the living room now, without the young man having to talk under the casual flow of The Judge's words, and it was cooler here. The Judge could feel the momentary sweat evaporating, aerating his shirt under the linen coat, and for a moment he chilled until his body adjusted to the changed condition. "Sit down," he said. "I'll be back in a moment."

He went into the kitchen, leaving Wallace alone. He stood at the back stairs before going down into the cellar, listening, but he could hear nothing of her movements. The cellar was cool, too, and dark, and he had to grope for the light cord dangling somewhere in the middle of the space. He found it, then he went unerringly to the shelf he sought, feeling far back for the bottle in the wicker basket.

He looked at it, the tactile touch of dust and cobwebs on his hands. For ten years it had lain here, gathering dust, waiting in just the way The Judge had waited previously, upstairs. Except that this bottle could not wait long enough. Not now.

He turned out the light and groped blindly toward the steps, finding them at last with his seeking feet and then letting them lift him toward light again. He paused in the kitchen for full-bellied glasses and a corkscrew and put his shoulder against the door into the living room. He turned and let the door slide shut behind him, seeing Wallace again, still standing uncertainly in the middle of the room. Like a deer, The Judge thought, feeling the wind for danger. Young and rangy and quick to run away and very beautiful in the youngness.

"Sit down, man," he said. He smiled. "I know Grace. It'll be a while before she's ready to use you." He motioned with the bottle. "I thought we'd have a little sherry while we waited."

The young man did not move but The Judge ignored him while his old, wrinkled hands deftly set and twisted the corkscrew, lifting the rotten cork with one easy movement as he grasped the bottle between his knees.

He eased into his comfortable leather chair and looked up to see that the young man had not yet relaxed. "Wallace," he said. "This is a small town. I've lived here all my life, and my father and grandfather before me. I've been a lawyer here, and a judge. I've been The Judge for a long time." He stopped, looking down at the sherry bottle for a moment.

"I know this town," he said thoughtfully. "I know the South. I could shoot you and get off scot-free. You made yourself fair game the first time you put your arms around my wife. You may not have known that, since you're not local. But you couldn't find twelve men among our ten thousand who'd convict a husband for shooting his wife's lover. That's not the law, you understand—that's just the way it is."

Wallace did not move, but The Judge could feel the tightening against danger in him. He was afraid now, very afraid. I'm a terrifying old man, he thought with a touch of sadness. I never knew I'd live to a terrifying old age.

"For a long time I believed I would kill you," he said, "if I ever laid eyes on you for one instant. I love my wife. I'm an old man with a young wife and I love her with the foolishness that the young never know. They know delirium, they know passion, they know desire. But they never know the wondrous foolishness of an old man in love for the first time." He shook his head.

"No, the young never know. They never understand."

He lifted his head. "So I was sure I'd shoot you." He stopped, brood-

ing for a moment. He sighed, as though the remembering were a burden, too. "But I'm a law man, a lawyer and a judge. I've never believed in violence, seeing how it breeds hate and more violence, judging the results of violence every day in my court."

He leaned and carefully lifted the old bottle with both hands. He tilted it and poured lightly into his own glass, just a splash to give himself the floating bits of cork, then poured the young man's glass full. He finished filling his own.

"Sit down," he said mildly. "This is very good wine. You'll never taste the like again."

Wallace moved then, jerkily as a marionette, and sat. He lifted the glass and The Judge knew he wanted to gulp courage and assurance from the glass. He filled his mouth and then he stopped, tasting the old smooth richness of the wine, and a look of surprise crossed his face.

"Yes," The Judge said. "It is good. It's very old. We were saving it for our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary."

Wallace stopped in the act of lifting the glass to his lips again. There was shock on his face.

"Go ahead," The Judge said. "Drink it." His lips twisted. "There'll be no better time than now."

He leaned back in his chair, cradling the full-bellied coldness of the glass in both his palms. He swirled the liquid thoughtfully, looking down into the hypnotic topaz swirl.

"When Grace and I were married," he said, "we went to France for our honeymoon. It was . . . one of her conditions. She had never traveled, and she wanted to. We crossed over into Spain, and when we returned, we brought this bottle of rare old *amontillado* with us. Grace smuggled it through customs with the bottle taped to her body. We felt that a touch of illicitness was necessary and desirable. We planned to open it on our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. We had saved it until now. Saved it for ten years."

Wallace lifted his glass again. He gulped this time, then he involuntarily sipped, tasting the autumn smoothness of the wine, savoring the last few drops in his glass.

The Judge leaned to pour again. "Drink it slowly," he said. "It deserves to be appreciated. I have waited ten years to taste our illicit wine, and expected to wait for fifteen more. But it is right that we should drink it now, waiting for Grace. Don't you feel that it's right?"

"Sir," Wallace said. "I shouldn't have come. I know that now and I'm . . ."

The Judge moved a hand. "I'm glad you did, Wally. I needed someone to talk to . . . and who better than the man she loves now? Who in the wide South would listen with more attention? And talk is a necessity of age . . . for talk is all that is left."

He stopped again, and there was silence in the room. He looked at the bottle and it was half-empty. Half-gone. The wine was bright and warm in him and he felt comfortable, sitting in his accustomed leather chair. There was still silence upstairs. It would take her a long time to pack with care, he thought. And Grace would pack that way—efficient as she was. We have time for a bottle of wine, he thought. Plenty of time.

"I was fifty years old when I met Grace," he said. "And, incredibly enough, I had never been in love, I don't know why. I had dated and danced and even kissed, though that was not as prevalent in my time as now. But—I had never loved."

He stopped, frowning into his glass. He looked at Wallace, saw his glass was still supplied, and went on. His voice rolled soft and slow in the still, cool air, Wallace sitting forward in his chair listening, and The Judge knew that he was no longer afraid.

"Grace was my secretary," he said. "She was young and very efficient and as beautiful as dawn and old brandy. I didn't know her folks, for she was new-people in town. But within a week I had fallen in love with her. Before Grace I would have said that such a thing was impossible.

"But Grace was very smart, as well as beautiful. She knew the usual relationship between a confirmed old bachelor and his secretary. She wasn't having any of that." He paused, adding the new words carefully. "I didn't know at the time that she was sleeping with a young clerk who worked down the hall. Of course, even if I had known, I don't think it would have mattered to me then."

He saw the shock in Wallace's face, saw him start to rise. "I don't want to listen to . . ." Wallace said stiffly.

He waved him down. "She's not like that any more," The Judge said. "She's changed and learned in ten years. God, *how* she's changed and learned. And she was never a slut."

There was silence again while he thought, remembered. Wallace sat back in his chair now, his momentary anger quelled, waiting for The

Judge to continue. The Judge drank thoughtfully, tastefully, from his glass of old wine.

"It was pretty bad for me," he said. "I loved her. I lusted after her. I was old and incredible and crazy. I wanted her any way I could take her. And she was bright and efficient in fending me off. I groveled, almost, in her tracks for one willing smile from her lips. I gave her raises in pay and paid vacations." He paused, sighing. "It went on for a year that way. A full year—an interminably long time, to me."

He took the bottle again and lifted it to the light and watched the amber liquid sparkle. Then he poured the glasses full again and listened up the stairs. This time he heard a thump and a rustle.

"It won't be too long now," he said, "before she's ready. You see, she knew what she wanted. Marriage. To me . . . fifty years old. But there was money, not much money but enough, and the good name. She was new in town, and I never knew where her family came from. She'll never tell you. I doubt if she even knows herself any longer. Women can forget at will things like origins and birthdays.

"Age? It didn't matter. I doubt if she ever saw me as a man, with passion in my body. I was The Judge, I was Carter, I was Cartersville. She loved me, not for me but for the freedom from her past. And I loved her though she had no pity for my love."

He frowned. "I didn't know this then, understand. I learned it slowly and painfully over the years and she will still deny every word of it. I won't tell you how we agreed to marry . . . it was an afternoon in my office that I still don't like to remember and certainly not discuss. She waited a full year, moving her womanhood before me every day, and then she ruthlessly closed her bargain."

He saw Wallace watching him. "You find it hard to believe, don't you?"

The young man's voice was uncertain. "It's different . . ."

"Yes," The Judge cut in. "She is different now. She was desperate then, you understand. She was twenty-five, and that clerk is still a clerk. She knew then he would always be a clerk. She's not desperate any more. She hasn't been desperate for a long time."

"But you had ten years," Wallace said, his voice brave in the silence. "You think of her now with bitterness and anger but you had ten years."

"Bitterness?" The Judge said. He smiled. "Anger? She made her bargain and she fulfilled it. She was mine, all mine and all the time, and I

did not share her with anybody, not for years. She gave me the love my old heart and body wanted, in full measure and running over. She even gave me a son . . .”

Wallace moved in surprise. It was apparent that this fact was something Grace hadn't told him.

“You didn't know she had a son? Yes. His name is Bobby. He's away in school now. I wanted a son and we had one, though she insisted on a Caesarean. Just one. And now I am sixty, and she is going away.”

“I do love her,” Wallace said. “You may not be able to understand it or believe it, but I love her like I—”

“Of course,” The Judge said. “Grace is all woman, and she can use all of it. I knew that you loved her. And you're not the first.” He stopped again and looked at the bottle. This time Wallace handed him his glass without waiting for an invitation.

“There's just enough for one more,” The Judge said. “She should be through by then. Drink it slowly, for there's no other wine like this. No other wine at all.”

He poured gracefully, ceremoniously, his dark, craggy face stooped over the glasses. They were both leaning forward watching the topaz richness flow in a live stream, then pool into beauty again in the glasses.

The Judge sat back and lifted his glass. “She began to drift about two years ago,” he said. “I was fifty-eight then. I saw it coming and there was no way of stopping it. I knew it would come to this when she found the right one. I have been waiting for you, Wally.” He looked at him over the rim of his glass. “I wonder what it is you have that she wants, Wally. I wonder.”

Wallace was watching him, holding his glass still. His handsome face was as still as his hands, watching the old Judge, not knowing exactly what to say. And so he said nothing, waiting for The Judge to go on.

“And I believe I know,” The Judge said. He laughed, a startling sound in the hushed, cool room. “It's youth, Wally. She wants the youngness of you, just as I wanted her youngness a long time ago. How old are you, Wally? She's thirty-five.”

Wally moved. The Judge knew his words had touched him, stirred him. “I love her, sir. You know that. I love her. Whatever I've got, I'll give her. Youth or money or . . .”

“Yes,” The Judge said softly. “Yes, I know you do. I know you will.”

Wally straightened his young body. "I'm glad I came now," he said. "I'm glad I talked to you. I was afraid. Any man would be, in a situation like this. Not physically, but of a scene. Now that I've seen your reasonableness, your intelligent approach . . ."

The Judge listened critically to the young, fumbling words. The fast-drunk wine was strong in Wallace. The Judge did not feel it at all. "You don't have to say it," he said. "I know what you mean. You're trying to say that we needed to drink a bottle of old wine between us." He lifted his glass and swallowed. "Drink up. There's just a taste of it left. Just a taste of illicit wine, after ten years."

Wallace lifted the glass and drank. While he did it, The Judge shifted his weight off the .38 in his hip pocket. He shot Wallace in the head as he put his glass down, empty. There was a momentary surprise on Wallace's face at the impact of the bullet, a shocked surprise as he looked at The Judge, and saw, and slumped forward on the old, worn rug between the two friendly chairs.

The Judge was surprised, too. He hadn't believed he was going to do it until the last moment, until he saw the last drop of old wine disappear down the young man's throat.

The single shot echoed wildly, reverberatingly, in the old house. The sound filled the house like the cry of a baby, and he knew that Grace had heard. He rose and picked up the wine bottle in his left hand, still holding the gun with the other.

He moved toward the stairs, hearing the sudden hysterical flurry of her footsteps in the hall. He looked up into her downward-peering face, white and stricken. Even in the dimness of the stairwell he could see the harsh stricken lines there. *Yes, he thought. Now you're thirty-five.*

"Judge!" she cried, her voice almost a scream. The polish was gone now, the hard sleekness in which she wrapped herself. "Judge! What did you do!"

"Grace," he said. "We killed the bottle of old wine we were saving. We killed it between us."

He dropped the warm pistol, then, from his right hand. It thudded on the floor. He watched her eyes for a moment. Then he turned away toward the telephone in the hall.

As he made the call, he still held the bottle in his other hand. It was empty now, and ordinary; just old glass, without the magic of old wine within it.

by Robert Arthur

We were discussing unsolved murders, the Baron de Hirsch, Lieutenant Oliver Baynes of the State Police, and I. At least, de Hirsch was discussing them. Baynes and I were allowed only to listen while the tall, hawk-nosed Hungarian, with scintillating deduction and impeccable logic, solved half a dozen famous cases which remain in the files of various police departments, still marked "Open."

De Hirsch can be a very irritating companion. His self assurance is colossal, and his appreciation of his own cleverness is unconcealed. I am always tempted to ask him why, if he's so smart, his shoes always need repairing and his clothes mending. But I never do.

I could see Oliver Baynes getting restless. Baynes is short and dumpy, red-faced, slow-spoken and unimpressive. But he's a good cop—one of the best.

He drained his glass of beer—it was a hot August afternoon—and, as he reached for another can, looked across at me.

"Get your friend to solve the case of the blonde blackmailer for us," he said, the sarcasm in the remark hidden behind a completely blank countenance.

De Hirsch paused. His deep-set black eyes glinted; his large, beaked nose flared.

"The case of the blonde blackmailer?" he asked, softly, politely.

"Her name was Marianne Montrose." Baynes used the can opener and got foam on his sleeve. "Last February 13th, between three and four in the afternoon, she walked up twenty-three snow-covered steps to a house on a hilltop about thirty miles from here. She went into that house and never came out again."

Baynes poured the beer, slurped the head off his glass.

"Later we searched the house and she wasn't there. There was snow two feet deep all around the house. There wasn't a mark in it to show

she had been taken away in any manner. Besides, the owner and only resident is a man with a heart condition, who could be killed by any exertion. So he didn't carry her away or dig a hole and bury her or anything like that. But she wasn't there, and she was seen to enter, and her footsteps went up in the snow on the steps. Went up and never came down again. You tell us what happened to her."

De Hirsch's eyes held steady on Baynes.

"Give me the facts," he said, "and I will."

He didn't say he'd try, he said he would.

"I'll get my dope sheets," I told him, nettled. "It'll be nice to know the truth. Besides, I'll get another article out of it."

Baynes sipped his beer and said nothing, merely looked sleepy. De Hirsch poured himself another generous helping of brandy—my brandy, for we had gathered at my summer cottage. I went to my files and brought back the folder on Marianne Montrose. It was pretty complete. As a true-crime writer for the popular magazines, I kept detailed notes on every case I used. I had already written this one up, giving it the Big Question Mark or "What Happened to Lovely Marianne?" treatment.

"Where do you want to start?" I asked. "Here's the statement of young Danny Gresham, the last person who spoke to Marianne before she went into the house and vanished."

De Hirsch waved away the typescript.

"Read it to me," he said, his manner gracious.

Oliver Baynes made a noise through his nose. He might have been laughing. I glared at him and began to read:

Morgan's Gap, Feb. 3. From statement by Daniel Gresham, 19.

I was in the office of the *Morgan's Gap Weekly Sentinel*, reading proof. It was half past three. The temperature outside was about eight above zero, I guess, maybe six. It was a nice brisk day. I was thinking of calling up my girl, Dolly Hansome, and making a date to go skiing. The snow was nice and deep, with a good crust on it, and some fresh snow on top. While I was thinking about Dolly, a snappy blue coupe pulled to a stop outside.

There was a girl driving. She looked a little like Dolly Hansome, but taller and better developed—more womanly, that is. She had blonde hair, long and curly under a red cap, and was wearing a red ski suit. She got out and stood looking across the valley and up the slope toward Mr. Mark Hillyer the mystery writer's house. The Eyrie, Mr. Hillyer calls it;

that means nest. It's a very good name for it, the way it perches all by itself up on top of the ridge.

You might think it was a funny place for a man with a bad heart to live all by himself. In the summer you can drive right around and up to the back of the house where the terrace is, but in the winter the town only cleans the road up to the steps out in front.

That means that Mr. Hillyer never leaves the house after the first big snow, but he doesn't seem to care. In the fall he puts in three thousand gallons of fuel oil and a big stock of canned goods and he's all set. Every day Mrs. Hoff goes up to cook and clean. She doesn't mind the steps and neither does her brother-in-law, Sam. He keeps the steps swept, and clears off the north terrace.

Mr. Hillyer likes to be alone. He doesn't care for people. He's a tall, thin man with a long, disappointed face and a sharp way of saying things. He's written twelve mystery books and has a lot of clippings and reviews. He's especially proud of the ones that mention how clever his plots are. He hasn't written any new books for five years, though. I guess he's discouraged because the ones he did before never sold very well.

Oh, sure, about the girl.

She stood looking up at the house, then turned and came in the office. I jumped up to help her. She smiled and said hello. Her voice was low and husky and sort of gave you a tingly feeling, if you know what I mean. She asked if I was the editor. I said I was the assistant. Then she asked if she could use the phone. I said sure, of course, certainly, and handed it to her. She asked for Mark Hillyer's number. I couldn't help hearing what she said. Sure, I remember the words, just about.

"Hello, Mark," she said, and her voice was different now. "This is Marianne. I'm phoning from the village. I trust you're expecting me and, Mark, darling—just in case you might have been getting any funny ideas in that clever brain of yours—they know here at the newspaper office I'm coming up to see you. I'll be up in ten minutes." She hung up and smiled at me, and her voice was back again the way it had been.

"Mark Hillyer doesn't like me," she said. "And he's a very, very clever man. I do think he would kill me if he could get away with it. But he can't. Just the same, if I'm not back here in an hour, you'll send the police up to look for me, won't you? I'll stop on my way back, just to let you know I'm all right."

And she smiled at me again and naturally I said sure, of course, I'd get Constable Redman to come up and look for her. I was pretty thrilled; it was sort of like a scene out of one of Mr. Hillyer's books. Of course, I didn't think she really meant what she'd said. But when she drove off, I went to the window to watch her.

She drove away, and a minute later I saw her car starting up the road that winds around to get to Mr. Hillyer's Eyrie. A lot of kids were out on the lower slope with skis and sleds and these new aluminum bowls having a swell time sliding all over the place. I thought of calling Dolly again, but somehow I didn't feel as interested as I had just a couple of minutes earlier.

I saw the convertible reach the turnaround at the foot of the steps up to Hillyer's house—the snow plows clear it out. The girl parked the car and got out. She started up that flight of steps. I saw her reach Mr. Hillyer's little front porch. The door opened. She went in and the door closed.

I kept an eye on Mr. Hillyer's house all the rest of the afternoon as I worked, until it got dark. But the girl never came out again.

End of statement by Daniel Gresham.

I paused and glanced at de Hirsch.

He sat back, his head cradled on the back of the chair, staring upward at my ceiling.

"A most interesting opening for a murder case," he said tolerantly, looking at me. "Naturally, any theory I have at this point must be completely tentative. Please continue."

I read:

Morgan's Gap, Feb. 14. From statement by Constable Harvey Redman.

At about five-thirty yesterday young Danny Gresham came busting into my office, saying a pretty girl had gone up to see Mr. Mark Hillyer and might be in danger. At first I thought it was more of his imagination, but he gave me all the facts and I figured maybe we'd better go see. Anybody who writes books like Hillyer does might just as easy kill someone for real.

I got flashlights and we went in my old car. We got to Hillyer's place just about six. Sure enough, there was Miss Montrose's convertible still

parked in the turnaround. And Danny showed me a woman's prints in the drifted snow on the steps.

There was one set of prints going up.

None coming down.

So he was right about her still being there, anyway.

We climbed up, stepping wide of the prints, and knocked. Mr. Hillyer let us in, looking surprised. I told him what the woman had told Danny, and asked where Miss Montrose was. Mr. Hillyer laughed.

"I'm afraid Miss Montrose is having a joke on you and Danny," he said. "She left here an hour ago, just about dark."

"Mr. Hillyer," I told him, "there's a woman's footprints coming up your steps and none going down. Besides, her car is still there."

"By George, that's odd!" Mr. Hillyer said, but he said it as if he was laughing.

"That's what I think," I told him. "That's why I'm asking where the lady is."

"But I don't know where she is," he said, looking me in the eye. "Constable, I'll be frank with you. That girl is a blackmailer. She came here today to collect a thousand dollars from me. I paid it. Then she left. And that's absolutely all I know. I insist that you search this house to see if you find any trace of her or evidence that I did anything to her. All I want is to be in the clear."

Danny and I searched the house. Mr. Hillyer sat in his chair by the fireplace in his writing den, smoking and waiting.

The house was easy to search, being only six rooms on one floor. No cellar, no attic. Oil burner's in a little closet. Floors are cement. Walls are double cinder block with insulation in between.

The girl wasn't in the house. No trace she'd ever been there, either. No signs of a struggle, no bloodstains.

Danny and I went outside. There weren't any marks in the snow around the house. The north terrace had been shoveled off, but the snow had drifted right up to it and there was a light sprinkle of snow on the tiles. No marks in it at all. That didn't mean an awful lot, though, because the drifts went all the way down the slope to Harrison's Gully, a quarter mile away almost. There's usually a breeze coming up from the gully and it would lay more snow on the terrace pretty quick.

Danny tried the crust, though, and broke right through, after only a step. Nobody could have gone over that snow without leaving marks. Besides, Mr. Hillyer's heart would have killed him if he'd tried.

So, after we looked in the garage and searched the car and especially the trunk without finding her, we told Mr. Hillyer it looked like Miss Montrose had left all right.

"I'm glad you're satisfied I'm not hiding her, constable," he chuckled. "In spite of the story she gave Danny, and in spite of her footprints coming only toward the house and her car still being there, it's perfectly obvious I couldn't have killed her and hidden her body—unless of course I carried it away over a glass bridge."

I told him I didn't follow that.

"Why, constable," he said, "I guess you don't know your mystery fiction. One of the most famous stories is about a man who's killed by a glass knife. Then the murderer drops the weapon in a pitcher of water and it becomes invisible and nobody can find it. So maybe I killed Miss Montrose and carried her away over a glass bridge—one that's invisible now. Or I have another theory for you. Maybe a flying saucer came down and whisked her away. In fact, the more I think about it the more I imagine that's what must have happened."

"I don't guess you're taking this very serious, Mr. Hillyer," I told him. "But I am and I'm going to call in the State Police."

So I did. Let them decide where that girl went. I got other things to bother about right now.

End of statement by Constable Harvey Redman.

I stopped reading. My throat was dry. I poured myself some beer. De Hirsch opened his eyes.

"Admirably complete," he said kindly. "You're a good researcher even if you haven't much imagination." He turned to Baynes. "I suppose you took over the case then, Lieutenant?"

"Yeah," Baynes grunted, eyeing him. "But not until Troopers Reynolds and Rivkin had answered the constable's call. They made a search. Same results. Then the case got dumped in my lap. I get all the screwy cases. I went out the next day. But questioning Hillyer was like asking the cat what happened to the canary. He talked about the blackmail angle, though. Said he'd made a slip years ago, and Montrose knew about it. Since then he'd been paying her off a thousand dollars a year. Every year, when she happened to be near, she'd let him know she was coming over in a day or two and he'd get the thousand ready in cash for her.

"I checked with New York. She was in the racket, all right. So his

story was probably true. I checked the local bank, too. They'd mailed him ten hundreds, just three days before.

"I looked around the house. Just like the constable and my troopers said. Crusty snow but not strong enough to hold up a man. Even skis left marks. Maybe a toboggan wouldn't.

"Trouble was, he'd never had anything like a toboggan, or even skis or a sled, in the house. Mrs. Hoff had cleaned that morning and even gone into the garage to get her cleaning things. She'd have seen anything as big as a toboggan, and she swore the whole idea was just a pipe dream. And he couldn't have ordered one special by phone because it would have to be delivered and nobody had delivered anything but food or mail there for weeks. I checked.

"I didn't have anything to take its place, though. The girl had to go somewhere! I got four troopers who could ski, and set them to covering all the region around the house. They covered everything within a quarter of a mile, including a couple of small dips and gullies, and didn't find a trace of her or of any tracks in the snow. Then it started snowing again and I had to call the search off. But I'd made sure she wasn't any place where she could be found.

"Hillyer enjoyed every minute of it. He enjoyed giving interviews and he posed for pictures. He passed out autographed copies of his books to the feature writers. He looked ten years younger all of a sudden; he was having so much fun.

"He passed out plenty of double talk about the mystery of it all. He quoted this guy Charles Fort, who wrote about mysterious disappearances. He talked about spontaneous vanishment, and warps in the space-time continuum, and abduction by little green men in flying saucers. He had the time of his life.

"So, finally, we had to table the case. Absolutely all we really knew was what we knew to begin with. A girl walked up those steps into his house and just vanished. So we sat back to wait for new developments. Then came June."

Oliver Baynes paused to finish his beer.

De Hirsch nodded his great Roman head. "And in June," he said, "the body was found."

Baynes looked at him in some surprise.

"Yes," he agreed. "In June, Marianne Montrose stopped being one kind of mystery and became another kind of mystery. You see—"

But de Hirsch had raised a restraining hand.

"Let Bob read it," he suggested. "I know he has it written out, in a fine, dramatic style. And sometimes I find a certain pleasure in his prose."

So I read:

Morgan's Gap, June 3. Based upon statements by Willy Johnson, 11, and Ferdie Pulver, 10.

The two boys stopped beside the deeply blue pool, no more than thirty yards across. They were in a long, narrow depression with almost sheer sides fifty feet high. It ran for three hundred yards to a rocky ledge where a small waterfall emptied into the natural trap and flowed down to make the pool at their feet. The pool in turn emptied out through a narrow throat in the rock, just wide enough for a small boy to negotiate, too narrow to admit an adult.

Willows and alders, green with new leaves, stretched upward toward the sunlight. Redwing blackbirds darted in and out, and high overhead crows soared on black pinions. A chipmunk, unafraid, chattered at the boys from a branch.

They were barefoot, their shoes in their hands, and the water was icy cold. But, entranced by the secret little world of the gully, they hardly noticed the water's temperature.

"Geel" Ferdie said. "This is swell. Let's bring a gang and play pirates, huh?"

"Pirates!" Willy sniffed. "Fishin' is more fun. C'mon, throw in your hook."

He thrust a reluctant worm onto the hook of a handline and tossed it into the pool. It rippled in the green water and sank from sight. He waited all of thirty seconds, then impatiently jerked it.

"Gosh!" he shouted. "I caught something . . . aw, heck, it's snagged."

He pulled hard. The line came in, slowly, with an almost unyielding dead weight. Ferdie wasn't paying any attention. He was staring up the gully to where a small fragment of something white dangled from a silver green willow.

"What's that?" he asked nervously. "You thinking it's a ghost, huh, Willy?"

"Heck, no." Willy didn't even look. He was gasping as he tugged in his line. "Gee, I got a big branch or somethin' . . ."

Something dark and red surged upward to the surface, and broke the

water with a slow swirling motion. Then the awkward mass turned over and a pale, oval face appeared, surrounded by a halo of golden hair that rippled in the water with a life of its own.

"Jeez!" Willy shrilled. "It's a deader! C'mon, Ferdie, let's get out of here!"

Behind them, as their yells died out in the distance, the pale face and golden hair seemed to hesitate for a moment, as if waiting. Then they sank slowly back into the dark, quiet depths from which they had come.

"Well," Oliver Baynes took up the narration, as de Hirsch helped himself to more of my brandy—finishing the bottle, incidentally, "Willy's parents called the constable and the constable called me. A couple of hours later half a dozen of us got out up at Mark Hillyer's house. The only decent way to reach the gully without doing mountain climbing was to go down through Hillyer's property. He was perfectly agreeable, and when we told him what we were up to he only seemed interested.

"'If you find her,' he said, 'look in the pocket of her ski suit. She had a thousand dollars of mine when she left and I shall put in a claim for it.'

"We reached the gully, over some very rough ground, and lowered in on ropes. Then we started grappling for the body. We found it inside of twenty minutes. As it came up, Danny Gresham—who was with us—gave a yell.

"'That's her! But how'd she get here so far from the house? She might have flown!'

"She looked well preserved—that water was almost ice cold. She had ten hundred-dollar bills in her ski-suit pocket, too. We grappled some more and finally came up with her ski cap and one mitten. I left the men grappling, and made a search of the gully myself. Outside of a few old beer bottles and some tin cans, there wasn't a thing that shouldn't have been there.

"We grappled in that pool all day. I was still hoping to find a toboggan or something, but we never did. Nothing. There was the body, a quarter mile from the house, and no clue as to how it got there.

"We lifted the body out and had an autopsy. She'd died of cold and exposure. Stomach was empty—no telling how long after her last meal she'd died. No trace of poison in tissues."

Oliver Baynes looked challengingly at de Hirsch.

"Well," he said, "there's your case of the blonde blackmailer. Now let's hear you explain it without any double-talk about spontaneous vanishment, warps in the space-time continuum, glass bridges, and flying saucers."

My Hungarian friend put his fingertips together, making a steeple of his hands.

"I can't," he said blandly. And as a look of guarded triumph appeared on Baynes' red features, de Hirsch added, "without mentioning the glass bridge, the flying saucer, and above all the winding sheet."

"Oh, sure!" Lieutenant Baynes looked disgusted. "Give us some more jabberwocky and admit you don't know what happened to that girl!"

"But I can't do that," de Hirsch objected, giving Baynes a pleasant look. "Because, you see, I know what happened to her. At least, I will know when you add the one item you have left out of your narration."

"Left out?" Baynes blinked.

"The white object Ferdie Pulver thought was a ghost," de Hirsch said.

"Oh, that!" Baynes shrugged. "That was just an old, tattered bedsheet tangled in the branches of the willow trees. Had Hillyer's laundry-mark. He said it must have blown off the clothes line during a windy spell in the spring. It didn't mean a thing. We had experts go over it, practically thread by thread. Just an old bedsheet."

"Not a bedsheet," de Hirsch murmured in gentle correction. "A winding sheet. Thus it is as I said—a glass bridge, a flying saucer, and a winding sheet. Don't you see, in the arrogance of his pride in his own intellect, Hillyer told you the truth! He gave you all the clues. At least, he gave them to Constable Redman and they were in the constable's statement. He killed Marianne Montrose, and whisked her away in a flying saucer over a glass bridge to nowhere—which is to say, eternity."

Baynes chewed his underlip. He stared at de Hirsch, puzzled. So did I. It was exactly the situation de Hirsch enjoyed most—when he could dispense bafflement in the guise of enlightenment.

Slowly Baynes reached into his pocket. He took out a wallet. From the wallet he took a twenty-dollar bill. "Twenty dollars say you're just double-talking like Hillyer," he stated flatly.

De Hirsch's eye brightened. Then he sighed and shook his head.

"No," he murmured. "We are both guests of an old and valued

friend. It would not be the act of a gentleman to take money from another guest on such a simple matter."

Now Baynes gritted his teeth. He took two more bills from the wallet.

"Fifty dollars say you don't know any more than we do," he snapped.

De Hirsch turned deep, black eyes on me. I hastily computed what I would receive for a true detective article I'd recently finished, and took out my checkbook.

"I'll say a hundred you can't give us the solution," I announced, looking him fixedly in the eye. I knew my Hungarian friend did not have a hundred, did not have fifty, and I doubted if he had five.

The Baron de Hirsch straightened. "You make it impossible for me, as a gentleman, to refuse," he said. "But I'll need some help . . . I'll need a clothespin."

Baynes' open mouth closed. My closed mouth opened.

"In the left-hand drawer beside the kitchen sink," I said. "Should be some there. Mrs. Ruggles, the cleaning woman. . ."

Rising with a single lithe motion, de Hirsch had already left the room, taking out a large, immaculate linen handkerchief as he went. And a fountain pen.

I looked at Baynes. He looked at me. Neither of us spoke. De Hirsch was gone about five minutes. I heard a drawer open. I heard a muffled sound that might have been the icebox opening, or the deep freeze. Presently he came back and sat down. He opened the fresh bottle of brandy I silently brought after he had picked up the empty and stared at it in a speculative manner.

"It will take a few minutes," he said amiably. "Meanwhile, we can talk. What do you think of the political situation?"

"The hell with the political situation," Baynes growled. "What about Hillyer and the girl? How did he kill her?"

De Hirsch struck his palm against his head.

"I forgot to ask!" he exclaimed. "Does Hillyer suffer from insomnia?"

Baynes wrinkled his brows.

"Yeah," he said. "He does. That was part of the report I got from his doc. But what—"

"Naturally, I assumed it," de Hirsch broke in. "But of course, one must never assume anything. Why, Lieutenant, Hillyer killed her by putting sleeping tablets in a drink. When she was unconscious, he

whisked her away and buried her in the deep snow of Harrison's Gully. There, in due time, her body absorbed the sleeping potion. She awoke, nearly frozen. For a brief, mercifully brief time she struggled against the iron bonds that held her. Then the soft sleep that comes to those who freeze took her and in merciful arms carried her down the long dark steps that led to death."

"Very fancy prose," Baynes grunted. "But you haven't said anything. There weren't any bonds of any kind. Not a mark on her. Nothing. Maybe he did knock her out with sleeping tablets. That I figured. But then what?"

The Baron de Hirsch took his time about answering.

"Tell me, Bob—" he turned to me—"would you say Mark Hillyer has achieved a minor form of immortality from this case? The fame that he always sought, and never found?"

"He certainly has," I agreed. "Already there's a big argument among crime fans as to whether he did or didn't kill her. The mystery of how she got into the gully is as tantalizing as the mystery of what happened to the famous Dorothy Arnold. A hundred years from now, Hillyer's name will still be popping up in books as the double-domes of the next century argue about his guilt or innocence. As Baynes said, he's riding high. He has a new book due out, and all his old ones have been reprinted. He's famous, all right, and he'll stay famous as long as the case goes unsolved. In fact, the longer it goes unsolved, the more famous he'll be. Like Jack the Ripper."

"Ah," de Hirsch said. "And as soon as it is solved, he is merely infamous—a sordid murderer. A shock to an ego—especially to one such as his. But now I think we can discuss the mystery of the glass bridge, the flying saucer, and the winding sheet—all of them invisible."

He rose and went to the kitchen. Again I heard the icebox, or the deep freeze, open and shut. He came back carrying something balanced on his hand. It was covered with a napkin so we could not see what it was. He set the object on the polished top of the coffee table.

"Now," he said, his voice suddenly crisp and authoritative, "let us go back to last February. It is a bitterly cold afternoon. Mark Hillyer, bleakly furious, stands at the window, waiting to see a blackmailer's car drive up. We know what else he saw—children at play. Watching them, an idea exploded in his mind, complete and exquisite, like Minerva springing from Jove's forehead. He could be rid of his blackmailer quite safely, needing only a minimum of luck. If he failed—well, he was a sick

man and could plead provocation. If he succeeded—what a pleasure to watch the stupid world puzzle over the mystery he had created!

"He acted at once. He got an old bedsheet, the largest he owned, and spread it flat on the flagstones of the north terrace. He did certain things to it, and went back inside. A few minutes later Montrose arrived. He talked with her, gave her a drink heavy with sleeping potion. In twenty minutes or so she collapsed, unconscious.

"He tumbled her from her chair to the floor. He nudged her onto a small rug. No exertion, you see, nothing to strain his bad heart.

"He slid the rug across the floor and out onto the north terrace. There he rolled the unconscious woman onto the spread-out bedsheet. He arranged her so that she was curled up in the center of it. . ."

With a theatrical gesture, de Hirsch whipped the napkin off of the object on the table. We saw that it was his linen handkerchief. Something lay in the center of the handkerchief—a clothespin, with little eyes and a mouth inked on it, as if it were a woman reduced to scale, and the handkerchief a bedsheet.

To see the clothespin doll, I had to pry up one corner of the handkerchief. For each of the four corners had been folded into the center, completely covering the thing, as if in an envelope. And the handkerchief itself was stiff and hard.

Then we saw what de Hirsch had done. He had sprinkled water on the handkerchief and put it into the deep freeze. Like laundry on a wash line on a winter day, the handkerchief had become stiff, unbending. Inside it, imprisoned in it, was the clothespin representing a woman. The whole thing made a neat package several inches square. If it had been a real bedsheet and a real woman curled up in the center of it, it would have been no more than three feet square.

And at last Baynes and I understood all that Mark Hillyer had done. He had sprinkled a large bedsheet with water on a bitterly cold day. He had put an unconscious woman in the center of it, curled up, and then folded the corners over her. The cold had frozen the wet bedsheet into a sort of box as stiff, as hard as board. In a matter of minutes Marianne Montrose, unconscious, was a prisoner inside a frozen shroud that was as formidable as iron bonds. Then he had thrust the broad, flat object off the terrace onto the hard-surfaced snow. Because of the dispersal of weight, it had left no mark. Instead it had slipped away smoothly down the slope, picking up speed, whisking over rough spots, until at last it

shot off the edge of the crusty snow and tumbled deep into the clinging drifts of windblown snow within the shadowed depths of the gully.

As if in example, de Hirsch flicked the frozen handkerchief with his finger. It spun across the table and off the edge, dropping into a wastebasket.

There, among white sheets of discarded typewriter paper, it suddenly vanished.

"A flying saucer," de Hirsch boomed. "In Danny Gresham's statement, he specifically mentioned the new aluminum bowls some of the children were playing with in the snow. These are metal saucers in which a child sits and whisks down a slope at truly terrifying speed. They ride the surface, scarcely sinking into a crust at all. It was these that Hillyer saw, these from which he gained his idea.

"The glass bridge was already there—a slick, thin coating of ice which covered the drifts from his house to Harrison's Gully. The flying saucer he made from a sheet sprayed with water in the icy air. And it became the girl's winding sheet when he laid her upon it and folded the edges over her and froze them down.

"Off it went, spinning, sliding, skidding. It could not stop. Over the edge, into the gully. A white object in white snow. Invisible to the searching eyes. A little windblown snow over it, and it had vanished. To find it one would have had to step on it. Little chance of that.

"*Lássd!* Or to put it in French, *voilà!* A baffling, an impenetrable mystery has been created by the use of an old bedsheet and the natural forces of winter. A woman has been transported a quarter of a mile by means of a seemingly miraculous agency. A sick man has committed the seemingly perfect murder!"

"The rat!" Baynes burst out. "Telling me to my face how he did it, and making me think he was double-talking me! Why, that girl and that sheet probably hung in the branches of that tree until spring. Then when the thaw came, the sheet unfroze, she fell out and was carried along by the brook down into the pool, leaving nothing—no trace, no clue, just an old bedsheet!"

"But if one with imagination sees the bedsheet as a winding sheet—" de Hirsch reached for the money and my check, on the table—"and if one takes the remarks of a clever man at face value, a mystery may become quite commonplace."

"We'll never be able to prove it," Baynes growled.

"*Talán!*" de Hirsch commented. "Perhaps not. But we can let him

know that his mystery is a mystery no longer, and that he will be the subject of no so-clever studies of homicide in the year 2000. I will write him a letter."

He went off to my study and typed for half an hour. He mailed the letter that same afternoon. The next morning Mark Hillyer received it. I don't know what it said, but Oliver Baynes, via the housekeeper, described its reception.

Mrs. Hoff was dusting in the study when the mailman came. She took the letter to Hillyer on the terrace, and he interrupted his writing to open it. He had hardly more than glanced at it when he became deathly pale—so pale Mrs. Hoff turned back in alarm. As he read further, an ugly, mottled flush spread over his features. He scarcely looked at the second page before ripping the letter up and flinging the pieces into a big brass ash tray. He lit a match with hands that shook so violently he could hardly bring the match head to striking surface, and burned the torn pieces.

As if still unable to relieve his rage, he seized the ash tray and flung it furiously down on the tiles. For an instant, he stood looking north toward Harrison's Gully, his hands clenching and unclenching.

Then his breath began to come with difficulty. He turned, reaching for support, but collapsed before he could reach his chair. Clawing at his chest and throat, he gasped, "Medicine—my medicine . . ."

His heart stimulant was not in the medicine cabinet, but on his bedside table. It took Mrs. Hoff two or three minutes to find it. When she hurried back with it, Hillyer was dead.

I admit I was somehow shocked. But de Hirsch accepted Hillyer's death with composure.

"*Utovegre!*" he commented. "Which is to say, it is as good as a confession."



1957

by Robert Bloch

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

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

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

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

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

"Luck!" chuckled the old Professor guy. "Sheer luck, operating all around us, governing every move of our lives. If Lincoln had stooped to tie his shoe-lace at the moment Booth fired his shot—if the bird had not appeared when Columbus faced the mutineers—if! But we're all victims of Tyche."

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

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

"Never met the dame."

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

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

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

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

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

"Nuts!" said Frankie.

"There speaks the scientific mind," said the old Professor guy. "But I'm not so sure. If I could only learn the secret of what attracts Fortune, I'd ask for nothing else. Perhaps it's just a matter of real belief, or of worship. Fortune is a goddess and goddesses demand adoration. Being female, she requires constancy. Could it be that the so-called fortunate ones are merely those who have learned this secret and swear fealty to Fortune in return for her favors?"

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

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

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

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

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

The dame in red—there was a real item!

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

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

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

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

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

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

Why?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sure, he'd play the black. Frankie started to put his chip down, but

his hand wasn't steady and the chip got away from him. It rolled and landed smack on number 33.

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

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

His number!

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

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

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

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

"What's that, buddy?"

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

"What dame?" asked the eye.

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

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

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

She didn't take the money.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Neither is this plant, buddy. Come on in, fill out an application. Got

a rush order, the boss's crying for help, and this town's murder when it comes to getting experienced—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was plenty of excitement for the next half-hour. When the cops got through talking to Frankie, there were reporters. When the reporters got through, there was Chesley again, and Frankie never did have to fill out that form.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Rye on the rocks," he said.

It tasted good.

"Do it again," Frankie told the guy.

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

"The same," Frankie said to the bartender.

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

Or *because* of the dame.

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

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

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

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

"One more," Frankie said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

He kept feeling better and better. Easy to talk, now. Her name was Margot. Not Margaret, but Margot. Only you said it "Margo." The "t"

was silent. Silent like the dame in red, waiting upstairs. Maybe he ought to get back to her. But what for? She didn't eat; you don't have to feed luck. Luck was free, everything was free and easy now.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Never mind," said Frankie.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

With his luck.

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

They must have thought Frankie was insane, when he ran back to the Ardmoor and yelled to the manager about a dame in red. The manager

hadn't seen her, of course. Nobody had seen her. Nobody but Frankie.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So he knew just what to do.

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

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

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

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

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

Then he looked at her.

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

Frankie bent over and started to feel her forehead. But her head fell forward at his touch and Frankie could see right away that she was dead.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

open for someone to go ahead of him into the back room and to its games of chance.

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

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

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

"Here's luck," said Frankie.

And then the cops walked in.



by Evans Harrington

Smoking his pipe, Sergeant Bryan stood in the door of his office in the corner of the wide concrete lobby and watched the lines of ring-striped prisoners file into the cages, chanting their numbers in hollow sing-song, shuffling their feet listlessly in single-file. From the mess hall where they emerged, they formed a curving, endlessly advancing V to the cage doors on either side of the lobby. In his detached, slightly disturbed state of mind, Sergeant Bryan had a momentary image of disconsolate, ring-striped robots pursuing each other across the concrete. But then he saw Mike Dunham, and he shook all such fancies from his mind.

"Dunham," he called and, motioning toward the office with his head, turned and entered it.

He sat down behind his desk and hunched his swivel chair forward until he could lean both plump elbows comfortably on the desk top. He was a heavy-set, middle-aged man, with a ruddy round face and mild blue eyes. His blond hair was very thin on top and graying. He cradled his pipe in both plump hands, savoring it with small movements of his lips, and watched the handsome black-haired boy come through the door.

"Sit down, Dunham," he said.

"Thanks," the boy said. "I'd rather stand."

Sergeant Bryan tasted his pipe more vigorously; two thin wands of smoke drifted over his lips and short fine nose. Mike Dunham disturbed him unusually. During the fifteen years he had been in charge of Camp Eleven, Warren Penitentiary, he didn't know when he had gotten so emotionally involved so soon with one of the inmates. Now the boy had had his third fight in the less than three weeks he had been there, and Sergeant Bryan was struggling with an uncharacteristic vindictiveness.

"All right," he said, "I'll make it short. I guess you know what it will be anyway."

"I guess so," the boy said. "But you'd better say it, just for the record."

Bryan felt his face swelling, heating. He lowered his mild blue eyes. Always it was this way. He had a hard time even talking to the boy. And he thought again of James Hall, the man this kid had murdered. Sergeant Bryan, like everyone else in the state, he supposed, had followed the Hall-Dunham case in the papers, which was part of the reason for his irritating feeling of guilt, in connection with his difficulty in handling the boy. For at the very outset, he had felt himself disliking the dark handsome face which stared at him from the tabloid photographs. He had read every detail of how this young tough, this overgrown kid who in ten professional fights had made himself something of a boxing celebrity, had defied all the pleas, and finally orders, of James Hall to leave Hall's daughter alone, and had at last actually gone to Hall's house ("invaded his home," one reporter had put it, and Sergeant Bryan had thought it an apt phrase) and when Hall ordered him away, knocked him down and killed him. Outrageous audacity, Sergeant Bryan felt more than thought; he was not given to large adjectives, but his mind, his very glands knew the substance of those words. Sergeant Bryan had a daughter only two years younger than James Hall's daughter Nona, and already she was beginning to bring home strange, hulking youths whom Sergeant Bryan had never seen and did not like.

"Dunham," he said now, "I can like most people one way or another."

"That's nice," the boy said, before Bryan had even finished.

Bryan drew hard on his pipe, took it from his mouth and inhaled deeply, leaning back in the swivel chair. "All right," he said, "I can't help you. I don't think I even want to help you. The Front Bunk then, and be fool enough to try to get off it." The Front Bunk was the farm-prison's equivalent of solitary. The first bunk on each side of a cage was reserved for incorrigibles. When not working in the fields, trouble-makers were confined there except to eat and use the bathroom. Sergeant Bryan used the method as sparingly as he could. The prisoners had a hard enough time as it was, he felt; and, given half a chance, he was always on their side. But he felt this boy, with his aloofness, his seeming eagerness to use those expert fists, his quick hostility, hadn't given him even the beginning of a chance.

"Thanks a lot," the boy said. "Can I go now?"

Bryan fought to keep the burning out of his face and mild eyes.

"Yes," he said. "You'd better." And he watched the lithe-shouldered figure stride across the lobby to the cage.

He can get along with most people one way or another, Mike Dunham was thinking, because most people brown-nose him one way or another and let him keep thinking he's God. They were all alike, all the sleek-faced, comfortable, suspicious, self-righteous old men. Mr. Hall, Nona's father, had been that way. In fact, Mike sometimes realized that Sergeant Bryan reminded him very much of Mr. Hall; even their hair was colored alike, blond and graying, and Mr. Hall's had also been receding and very thin on top. At times, when Sergeant Bryan looked at him with a certain mild, reluctant hostility, Mike saw the waxen, staring dead face of James Hall lying propped against the concrete porch column which it had struck when Mike hit him, and something like panic seized Mike so that he couldn't have responded to the Sergeant if he had wanted to. But he hadn't wanted to. They were all alike, he had long since decided: the cop who had picked him up, the district attorney, the judge at his trial, and the twelve complacent, staring jurors, even at times his own lawyer. The world was run by fat-faced, self-righteous old men, and he had been convicted from the start. Assault With Intent. Life. And lucky he didn't get the chair, they'd told him. All because one sleek-faced, suspicious old man refused to even hear him, or his own daughter, maybe even his own wife; because Mrs. Hall had trusted Mike, at least until the accident.

Keg Wilson, the cage boss, was sitting on Mike's bunk. In each cage there were fifty-odd prisoners, and it was too dangerous to have an armed trusty or civilian guard inside with them, especially after lights-out. So one of the prisoners was given the job and called the cage boss, and naturally it helped if he was more gorilla than human. Keg Wilson, an ex-bouncer and strong-arm for a Gulf Coast gambling ring, was a natural for the spot, Mike thought. And Keg, like everyone else in the cage, it seemed, was obviously eager for a chance to take Mike's ring reputation away from him. Three of them had tried it already, and Mike was getting sick of it.

"Did you get the word?" Keg Wilson asked as Mike approached the bunk. He didn't rise but stretched out instead.

"I got it," Mike said. "Get off my bunk."

Wilson was leaning back, one huge elbow sunk in Mike's pillow. He grinned broadly, not moving. "I don't believe you did," he said. "It don't sound like it."

"I got it," Mike said, "but you can give it to me again if it'll make you happy. First, though, get off my bunk."

Keg Wilson still smiled broadly. He would have been handsome except that everything was too big: his high cheeks, straight nose, huge sculpted lips, each perfectly designed but on the scale of a statue. "I don't think you got it straight," he said. "You're through, pal, tamed. That old stuff is out." He still didn't move.

Mike walked closer to him. "I'm begging," he said. "I'm scared silly. The whole cage can hear me. Now get up."

Keg still didn't move. "Or?" he said.

"I'm too scared for 'ors'," Mike said. "You're Herr Bryan's shock troops. Just get up."

"You don't sound like you mean it," Keg said, still smiling. "I'd rather hear the 'or'."

Mike really wanted to avoid it, just as he had wanted to avoid the fight earlier that afternoon. There was no point in them, he knew. Yet the exhilaration—the good clean tingling in his hands and arms and chest, the relief even, at having something to do with his anger—was so heady that he almost made the mistake of slapping the huge face. Which would have been a bad mistake, he saw by the faint, alert widening of Keg's light-tawny eyes. This one wouldn't be just a fight, he knew; this wasn't one you started unless you could finish it. He had seen Keg in action. He had seen Arnold Foley talk once too often and have to be taken to the hospital with teeth gone, a cheek smashed, and three ribs cracked. Keg was fast and he liked fighting. And even if he didn't have Mike's ring experience, he had more than thirty pounds over Mike's hundred-and-ninety. Moreover, since he liked fighting, Mike would have to give him enough, really hurt him. And the question was, could he really do it?

He was standing over the bunk now, and Keg was poised lightly on his elbows, still smiling, waiting for Mike's move—either the slap or the blow. It wouldn't matter which one it was, Mike realized, for those huge long-fingered hands would have his arm, have him thrown, the arm maybe broken, before the slap or blow could land. Flexing his shoulders, partly from ring habit, partly to fake the big man off, Mike suddenly kicked Keg's right shin, kicked it savagely. When Keg's big face came forward, Mike brought his knee up into it, at the same time hacking his linked hands down on the back of the man's neck. Keg slumped forward, his face hanging over his knees, and Mike repeated the proc-

ess. Again Keg slumped, and again Mike scissored and hacked, but Keg was pushing himself up and forward, head down, blood streaming from it, blood on Mike's striped trouser leg too, Keg's long arms groping out toward Mike, trying to find him.

Mike was tempted to let up then. This was always his weakest point. Even in the ring, he had once or twice missed a kill because of it. Chicken-livered, Muzzy, his manager, had called him, and said it would give him trouble some day. But Muzzy was wrong; Mike could always do it when he had to. And he had to now, backing away from the groping arms, punching until Keg finally reeled back to the bed and went over it, landing on his head, then windmilling until he fell on his stomach. Then he was still, and Mike went to lie on his bunk and take deep breaths until the threatening nausea went away.

Nobody moved Keg. They all came to look at him, but none of them touched him or spoke; in the cage, he had never been voted most popular. Sergeant Bryan had gone across the road to his house, and the trusty on duty in the lobby treated quiet cages like sleeping dogs. And for a long time that cage was very quiet.

When the nausea had passed, Mike got up and went to the showers. Keg was rising when he came back. He heaved himself erect and went toward the showers without looking at Mike. Mike gathered his gear and took it to the front bunk on the right side of the aisle. That was where he was, lying with his arm heavily across his eyes, trying to chase out every image, even the red diminishing whorls, when Taylor Mann's lazy voice said, "Admirable, but not very bright."

Mike took his arm from his eyes briefly. Taylor Mann was slender, small-boned, neat. Mike didn't know him except for having heard his name at roll-calls. "Shove off," he said and put his arm back on his eyes.

"I had hoped we could talk," Taylor Mann said, "be friends." His voice was a clear, delicate tenor, carefully enunciated. Like his fastidious face, it seemed to be laughing secretly.

"Shove off," Mike said. "I'm not having any."

He felt his bunk sag slightly and the delicate voice, much closer, said, "How does it feel?"

Mike moved quickly, sitting up to shove him from the bunk, but Taylor Mann moved even more quickly. His hand was out of his pocket, push-buttoning the slender switchblade glittering toward Mike before Mike could come erect. He had large green eyes and they were

moist and compacted meeting Mike's. "Oh no," he said softly, and his voice was no longer so clear. "You're not dealing with Neanderthals now."

And watching his fastidious, taut face, pallid under the parchment-layer of tan, Mike believed him. "What do you want?" he said, sitting propped on his hands.

Taylor Mann shifted the knife to his left hand, dropped it down on the sheet between them. "How does it feel?" he said.

"How does what feel?"

Mann was leaning toward him, his large green eyes not compacted now, relaxed and cloudily dreaming. "To beat a man to a pulp? To complete your estate as a member of *Homo sapiens*?"

"Get lost," Mike said. "I'll take that knife away from you if you're not careful."

Taylor Mann smiled lazily. "I believe you," he said. "I know you'd try it, even when you're sure I'd cut your throat. But please don't make any rash moves. I think I understand you."

"Thanks just the same," Mike said. "I don't need it."

"Oh yes, you do," Taylor Mann said. "You need understanding from everybody: our good Sergeant Bryan, your little ex-fiancée, Nona Hall, even her poor departed father James; even dead, he should understand that you didn't mean to kill him, that you weren't the typical trite figure of a pug, the fast-spending, trashy threat to his daughter his middle-class imagination conjured up . . ."

And there was the image again, on the Halls' front porch that night. They had been going to ask him then. But he had come out, must have heard them walk up on the porch. And Mike had been kissing Nona—her lips soft! soft! But her father had grabbed Mike from behind, looking so much like Sergeant Bryan, like all of them; his fingernails had hurt and startled Mike, digging into his neck, and Mike had hit him, not even hard, pulling it even as he threw it, remembering, *Nona's father! Mr. Hall!* He had even cried out, "No! Watch it!" as the thin-haired graying head had sailed toward the corner of the concrete column. But it was too late . . .

"And the men here don't understand you either," Taylor Mann was saying. "They think you're proud of it. You even look proud of it. But that's because you're so young and pretty. You see, you're a challenge to every one of us."

The laughing was in his voice and cloudy green eyes again, and Mike

moved toward him, but he raised the knife quickly. "I talk too much, though, don't I?" he said. "When what you're interested in, what we're both interested in, is our departure."

"Departure?" Mike said.

"Certainly," Mann said. "I hope you see there's no future for you here, the way you antagonize the good Sergeant and everyone else. Your sentence was for life, I believe, and it should be clear that the Sergeant doesn't envision parole after ten years for you. You don't want to stay here and give away free ring performances every week until somebody kills you, especially when I can offer you Mexico, South America, the whole well-known tropic paradise."

"You mean a break, escape?" Mike said.

"See? I knew you had brains," Mann said. "You're the crown of our race, the perfect culmination of a feudal society industrialized: brawn, courage, and a quick, canny intelligence. That's why you fascinate me. Your friend Sergeant Bryan fascinates me too. He's such a *good* man, so sure that he knows what's right."

Mike lay back down. "Look, I told you to shove off," he said. "Now do it. You don't even make sense. Besides, escapes are stupid. They never work out."

"They work out all the time," Mann said. "Not two months ago a boy from Camp Eight, a boy very much like you, made one work single-handed."

"Another thing," Mike said. "Why me? Aside from my brawn, brains, and fascinating guts."

"You laugh," Taylor Mann said, "but you've stated the whole case. Unfortunately, a break requires guts and, more unfortunately, all of mine seem to be in my stomach." He tried to smile as he said it, but his eyes wouldn't hold.

"What's your plan?" Mike said.

Mann didn't give him the details, just roughed it in for him. Because, at the time, Mike wasn't ready to go along with it. In the first place, there was his reluctance actually to commit a really criminal act. As Mann had seen, he wasn't just a thug. He had learned to box in schools and in the service, rather than on the streets and in city gyms, and he had always planned to drop out of boxing and go to college. That was what he and Nona had been planning. And in the second place, there was his general distrust of escapes. Weren't escapees always caught, or weren't they miserably hounded if they evaded capture? Even with

Mann's apparently surefire plan and his promise that help and a boat to South America would be waiting in New Orleans, Mike was skeptical. Then, too, there was Taylor Mann himself, his oddness, the disturbing detached quality in him sometimes, which made Mike feel that he wasn't really there, was in a way withdrawn and laughing at everything, even himself. And, of course, his sudden viciousness with the knife. Mike didn't like the idea of teaming up with him.

But during the next week his situation didn't improve. It got worse, in fact, when Sergeant Bryan heard about the Keg Wilson fight. The sergeant put a guard just outside the cage with orders to shoot Mike if he got off the front bunk without permission. So on a Monday, in the fields, Mike signaled to Mann, who dropped back beside him on the cotton row he was hoeing.

They chose a Saturday because that was the only morning Mann didn't work in the fields. Mann was the camp's inventory clerk, a job which required only half a day each week. With the job went the position of Leg, or half-trusty, by which he was allowed to come and go to the fields on these mornings as he pleased. He was also an expert forger. On that Saturday morning, he waited until Bryan had started his daily inspection of the building, then went out to the main gate of the enclosure, showed the guard a note he was carrying, and came on with it to the field. Mike, hoeing in the Long Line with the others, watched under his cap brim as Hunter, the civilian driver, looked at the note. Mike knew what he would be reading: "They want Dunham at the Front. Send him back with Mann under gun." Then, "W. Bryan," in a neat illegible scrawl.

It went off perfectly. Hunter motioned to Gibbs, the extra gun man, and bellowed, "Dunham!" across the flat already-steaming field. Carrying his hoe, Mike trotted up to the cotton house at the end of the turn row.

"They want you at the Front," Hunter growled reluctantly. "Gibbs will take you in."

Mike shrugged and leaned the hoe against the cotton house, falling in beside Mann who had already started up the turn row. It was then, when he got a close look at Mann's pallid face and jumping, compacted green eyes, that he began to worry.

"What's the matter?" he murmured from the corner of his mouth.

"Nothing," Mann said. "Shut up." He made this order, though ac-

cording to plan they were supposed to talk several times before they reached the road and started the fight.

They walked the official five paces ahead of Gibbs, Mann's face deadly white under the parchment tan. Then, when they were hidden from the field by a small neck of woods, about ten yards from the road Sergeant Bryan would take to get the mail, Mann turned to Mike shouting, "You're a liar!" and swung on him.

Mike blocked the blow and they clinched and fell, Mike on the bottom by design. Then Mann windmilled blows on Mike's arms and shoulders, and Gibbs rushed toward them, gun poised, yelling, "Knock it off, y'all! Come on now!"

Mike waited until Gibbs was close enough, then hurled Mann off him and leaped to his feet, turning so that his back was to Gibbs, but backing quickly until he was almost touching Gibbs' .30-.30. Then he swung his hand backward, knocking the gun aside, and wheeled swinging to catch Gibbs not on the chin as he had planned, but under it, on the throat. Gibbs gagged and toppled backward, and Mike, holding to the gun, toppled with him, rolling over him, somersaulting to his feet facing away from him. Then as he whirled frantically, half-expecting to hear the .30-.30 explode, to feel the steel-jacket slug ripping into him, he heard instead a small thud and rip and the odd, rasping sound of Gibbs' breath. Then he saw Mann's rapt, parchment face above Gibbs and his hand wrenching above the trusty's chest, twisting at something which glittered mutely in the morning sun and came free at last, rising, the blood light and thin on it, to descend again with the small thudding rip again before Mike could reach him, jerk him away, crying, "No! No! God! What are you doing?"

For this wasn't in the plan at all. He himself was supposed to have knocked the guard out; they were to tie him and gag him with belts and handkerchiefs.

Mann didn't struggle. His hand brought the knife with it as Mike wrenched him away, but then he dropped it and gave up completely as Mike pinned him on his back, his delicate wrists limp under Mike's hands. His thin face was serene as though dreaming; and Mike, crouched above it, felt that he was dreaming too, was himself unreal, a phantom in a grotesque nightmare, as he heard the clear lazy voice say, "I did it. I did it after all."

"My God," Mike said. "Snap out of it. What will we do now?"

A moment longer, Mann's eyes remained closed; then they opened

and smiled cloudily at Mike. "Ah, the healthy animal. You aren't so tough, after all, are you? Death scares the animal, doesn't it? Those are your glands, my fine young beast, the old unreasoning ancestral echoes. That's where we sports are finally stronger. Our glands are weaker, but that leaves our reason clearer. Reason doesn't shriek 'Horror!' at every corpse."

Mike slapped him. "Stop it," he said. "What'll we do? We can't go back now, and Bryan'll be along any minute. Snap out of it!"

Mann's face continued to smile lazily, but his eyes cleared. "Get off me," he said, "and get the corpse's hat and pants. You disgust me."

They were walking on the left side of the road, about a mile above the camp. Sergeant Bryan, in the pickup on his way to get the mail, thought the big one with the gun was Gibbs; he wore Gibbs' hat and a trusty's perpendicular stripes. Bryan didn't recognize the small one walking five paces ahead, and he pulled up beside them to find out what the trouble was. Dunham, his high-cheeked handsome face white and protesting under Gibbs' wide straw hat, whirled and covered him with the .30-.30. The small one, Mann, skirted the front of the car quickly and slipped into the seat beside Bryan, needling a knife painfully against the thick flesh over his ribs. He didn't speak; his large green eyes were cloudy, almost smiling. Bryan didn't speak either; there was no need.

Dunham was climbing in beside Mann then, his face still white, still protesting. It was as though wherever he looked he couldn't believe what he saw. "Turn around," he said, "and take us to the river."

"The riv—?" Bryan began, but the knife gouged into his side and he had to catch his breath before he finished.

"The river," Mann said. "You heard him."

Moving carefully to keep the knife point from pressing harder, Bryan turned the pickup. "Put it on forty," Dunham said. His dark eyes kept going to Mann beside him. Mann was slumped far down in the seat, his face serene, eyes cloudy.

"Dunham," Bryan began, but again the knife point's pain stopped him; tears came to his eyes.

"Don't talk," Mann said. "Just drive."

"Stop it," Dunham told him. "My God." His voice wasn't sullen as Bryan had always heard it. Mann didn't even look at him; he might have been dozing with his eyes slightly open.

They rode in silence. The constant pressure of the knife began to inflame Bryan's whole side. He tried not to breathe deeply. He tried to think, but there was nothing to think. Maybe he should hope, for some sort of chance, miracle. They might meet someone who would want to talk to him; they might have a flat. That sort of slim hope. He never armed himself. With twenty-two special gun men at his camp alone, each appointed to prevent just such things as this, it seemed futile for him to arm except in emergencies. No, they could get away unless they had bad luck. Of course they'd be caught again almost surely, but they could get away. The thing was that he felt there was something wrong, something between Mann and Dunham. He wondered what had happened to Gibbs, how they had gotten his gun and clothes. He was tempted to ask, but thought of the knife dissuaded him. Also, he had the sickening feeling that he knew what had happened.

It was only eight miles to the river. They crossed its old broken-planked bridge with the rusty metal scaffolding. "Turn in here," Dunham said as they came alongside a field bordering a corn patch. Bryan backed up and swung the pickup in slowly. Mann held the knife tight against him, smiling at him. The tears came in Bryan's eyes again.

"I said stop it. Stop it!" Dunham said. "What are you, a creep?"

Mann continued to slump, smiling, not looking at him. He seemed completely at ease.

Out of sight of the road, Dunham said, "Stop here."

Bryan stopped the truck. Dunham got out and came around to his door. His face was still white. "Get out," he said, "and undress."

Bryan started to speak, then looked back at Mann. He was still slumped as before. Bryan got out quickly. He hoped Mann would stay inside, until they were ready to leave him anyway. He thought they must be planning to leave him if they were going to strip him. Then he was sure of it when, after he had stripped to his shorts, Dunham began to strap his feet and hands with pieces of his belt.

As he was finishing with the feet, though, Taylor Mann slid out of the cab slowly and came up behind him. Dunham glanced at him and Mann smiled. Then Dunham turned back to Bryan's feet and Mann lifted the rifle from the fender where Dunham had laid it. He stepped back one step when Dunham heard him and turned. Then he said, "Move over there, Mike," indicating the corn field with his knife. He still smiled vaguely, but his eyes were clear and hard.

Dunham knelt, staring at him for a moment, then moved off the road.

"What is it, Taylor?" he said.

Mann made a single chuckling sound and moved to Bryan. "Sergeant," he said, "the kid is scared. The kid isn't so tough, after all. He thinks I'm going to kill you, and he's scared. Are you scared, Sergeant?"

Bryan fought to keep his voice steady. "I might be," he said, "if I thought you were going to kill me, were fool enough."

Mann smiled. "I am fool enough, Sergeant. I am going to kill you."

"No!" Dunham said. "Taylor, don't. We haven't got time. We don't need—"

"And I might kill you, too, bad boy," Mann told him clearly, his voice rising to drown out Dunham's. "You see, the bad boy's superstitious, Sergeant; he's afraid of death. He's already seen it once today and it's shaken him. Are you superstitious, Sergeant? You're always so right and so certain. I wonder if you're certain about death."

"Taylor," Dunham said. "Stop—"

"I'll shoot you if you shout at me again, if you open your mouth," Taylor Mann said. He watched Dunham mildly for a moment; then he turned and smiled at Bryan. "Have you ever killed a man, Sergeant?" he said. "Do you know how it feels? I killed one today, and it feels good, clean and strong and good. I've never felt that way before." He chuckled suddenly, involuntarily. "I never thought I could do it, Sergeant. I've always been afraid, you see." Again he chuckled. "Are you afraid, Sergeant? I believe you are." Now the chuckle seemed to force itself from his thin nose. "I always thought I was the only coward," he said, "or at least one of the few. But it turns out we're all cowards, big or little. And the toughest ones are the biggest of all. Tell me, Sergeant, what do you feel?" He was moving closer to Bryan now, setting the gun against the fender. "You've always interested me. You're so sure about everything. I'm going to kill you, Sergeant. Are you sure now? Isn't there just a little panic, a little chaos?" Now he was kneeling above Bryan, the knife dark stained, swaying above Bryan's large body. "I've always wondered about you, Sergeant," he said, "your kind. Do you really have all those answers? If you do, tell them now." The chuckle, cut off so fast that it hardly sounded, came again. "If you answer correctly, I might even leave your belly whole."

Bryan watched him, trying to keep his face composed, to control his breathing, even the batting of his eyes. The knife was only inches from

his throat now, and he sensed that one movement could undo that tenuous momentary composure which the madman still maintained.

"Taylor," Dunham said from the roadside, his voice resigned, fatalistic. "Look up the road, Taylor." Then everything happened at once. Taylor turned quickly, half-rising; Bryan felt an instant's wild hope, then a sudden recognition of the truth as out of the corner of his eye he saw Dunham leaping. Then Mann was dodging aside, slashing with the knife, the slender, wicked blade snarling in Dunham's T-shirt, trailing a thin angry line after it. And Dunham had lurched against the fender and Mann was darting in on him, slashing him again, this time just above the belt and deeper, the T-shirt opening on a shorter, bluer gash as Dunham swung and missed the retreating thin face. Then Dunham was following, stalking him, Mann backing and feinting and slashing, and Bryan was wrenching at the thick, loosely tied pieces of belt around his wrists, feeling it give.

Then Dunham was slowing, his ripped T-shirt red-soaked at his right side, his arms and hands lacerated from parrying the knife like a gloved fist. Then Bryan's hand came free and he had the gun, just as Mann fainted and charged again. Dunham's guard was slow, and the knife found his chest. But his right hand landed solidly and Mann reeled. He didn't fall, though. Seeming to sense the kill, he caught his balance and started back in. That was when Bryan shot him with the .30-.30. He had meant only to wound him; he had aimed for the legs, but his aim was off and Mann was crouching low and weaving.

Dunham watched the bullet whirl Mann and slam him down, and turned to look vaguely at Bryan. Then he turned back toward Mann and crumpled.

Bryan unstrapped his feet and reached Dunham before he passed out. The boy's wounds weren't critical, if he could get him back quickly enough. "You'll be all right," he said, lifting him toward the truck.

Dunham was looking at him and trying to talk, though Bryan wasn't sure he recognized him. "Mr. Hall?" he said finally. "Mr. Hall?"

"You'll be all right," Bryan said. "We'll fix you up." And after he had put him in the cab, though the eyes of the white handsome face were closed, he added, "Like I say, one way or another I can like most people."

An Interlude for Murder

1958

by Paul Tabori

The loudspeaker cleared its throat and a genteel feminine voice said, "Leddies an' gentlemen, we rhegrhet to inforhm you that Flight One-Siss-Sevain to Montrheal will be delayed ninety minootes . . ."

Through the plate-glass windows of the upstairs lounge I stared at the tarmac. The lady was an optimist, I thought. I could see the mechanics swarming on the wings of the Super-Constellation. It looked as if we were stuck at Orly for the rest of the night. One engine was completely dismantled and they were just starting on the second. Unless they put in a relief plane . . .

I glanced at my watch. It was twenty minutes past five. Autumn dusk was beginning to sweep over the airfield. Half-a-dozen spotlights had been switched on around the stricken plane.

For a brief moment, I wondered whether I should take a taxi to Paris—no more than thirty minutes away. I might be lucky and find Martine at home. But then again, I might not. It was very bad manners to drop in unannounced on a girl friend you hadn't seen for six months. Besides, I'd been on the way since six o'clock in the morning and I was in no shape for a night of gladness. So I sighed and pushed temptation aside. If I was lucky, I'd be through with the job I was to do in Canada in less than a week—and Paris was a reasonably permanent fixture in the world even if Martine wasn't.

I turned towards the newsstand at the back of the lounge when the first champagne bottle popped off behind the screen. Some of my friends swear that I'm psychic about Moët-Chandon and Veuve Cliquot, not to mention Roederer or Sillery. They say that I can tell the vintage merely by ear. This, I must admit, is a slight exaggeration.

That first plop was followed by others. After the sixth, I stopped counting.

I sidled closer to the screen, casual-like. This sounded like a party.

With time on my hands, the idea of crashing it was intriguing; so I ducked behind that screen.

My hunch had been right. There was a long heavily laden table in front of the windows with six waiters behind it. I'd landed at Orly or started from it forty or fifty times, so I knew that this room was normally part of the lounge, with armchairs and a TV set. Now it had been transformed into something different. It was L-shaped, with the short leg of the L ending in a staircase that led into the main lobby on the ground floor. At the back, someone had set up a tape recorder on a small table; there were also a couple of microphones and a good many portable spotlights about. All this spelled V.I.P. I wondered whether the current Premier—I had lost count of them, as usual—was flying somewhere. But there were no Sûreté men about—at least not any I could recognize, and I'd developed quite a knack for identifying officers of the law.

There were only three early arrivals in the room; and now one of them, a tall thin character in a loud suit, turned away from the table with a glass of champagne in his hand. His deep-set eyes lit up and he addressed me in a mixed tone of surprise and well-simulated pleasure:

"Why, if it isn't Adam Venture himself!"

"Hi, Burt," I said. Burt Bachelor was the Paris correspondent of the *London Globe*. "Going some place?"

"No. Just slumming." He drained his glass. "Where you been these last ten years?"

"Hasn't been ten years," I said, "only six months. I've been looking into oil."

He shuddered, not too delicately.

"You would," he said. "Found anything? Stole a few leases?"

I signalled to the nearest waiter and he handed me a glass. It was Veuve Cliquot—a good year, too. I drank and felt a whole lot better.

"Staying at the usual place?" Burt wanted to know.

"No—I'm just in transit. Off to Montreal as soon as they finish tinkering with our plane."

He stared at me, his eyes narrowed.

"I got it!" he hooted. "His Majesty's hired you as a bodyguard! How could ya, Adam? I know you'd stoop low—but *this* low . . ." I hadn't any idea what he was talking about and told him so. But when Burt, otherwise a most reasonable man, had a hunch, he stuck to it, however wrong. "Come on, Adam," he said. "Give."

I held out my glass to be refilled.

For a moment, I toyed with the idea of letting Burt hang himself with the rope of his own cleverness. I didn't know who His Majesty was, or why he should need a bodyguard. If I kept quiet, Burt would eventually provide this information. But it would take too long. So I said, "You tell me."

He looked around stealthily, but before he could speak, a whole crowd of people surged into the room. You know how it is with parties—one moment there are only a couple of people, the next it's jam-packed. A woman with a hawk's nose and piercing eyes pounced on Burt, carried him off. I recognized her—Ginette Latour, who wrote a wicked and brilliant gossip column for the *Miroir*. This must be quite an important party for Ginette didn't turn up at anything but top-drawer occasions.

I nursed my drink, wedged between the table and one of the portable spotlights. I spotted André Daumon, the theatre critic, with his sharp little nose and flashing pince-nez. There was M. Grosbeck, the fat UNESCO department head; he stood next to one of the top models of Balmain, a tall, spectacular girl with an air of aristocratic disdain, entirely due to myopia; several ladies whose proud lineage gave them the right to be outrageously unfashionable; Granard, the young film director, trailing a Central European starlet whose picture appeared more often on magazine covers than it did on screens. A large party, I thought, and a peculiar list of guests. What was the director of the *Comédie* doing here, and the Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Fine Arts? I didn't know either by sight, but Granard, standing close to me, was explaining who was who to his lady friend in a more than penetrating whisper.

I felt quite safe as a gate-crasher; there must be others. There always were. Having reassured myself, I had my glass filled a fourth time. Yes, it was a grand party, I decided; only the best champagne.

Someone poked me in the side. A gangling youth in a pullover and blue jeans. He took up a position directly behind the spotlight.

A tall man in a dark suit was clearing a space opposite and setting up the microphone. Still another was maneuvering a camera on wheels. The curtain would go up any minute, I thought. And I wondered who was topping the bill.

Then there was a sudden burst of applause, and the crowd parted. A stocky old man wearing a Basque beret and a velvet jacket entered. He

was carrying a stick with a heavy, solid gold knob; clean-shaven, his thin lips barely parted in a cold smile, the broad black ribbon of his eyeglass giving him an oddly piratical look, he made a real entrance. And now I understood what Burt had been talking about. No one could mistake this square jaw, these beringed fingers, this royal presence. A king who ruled far more than a country. In Paris there was only one man nicknamed His Majesty. *Sa Majesté*, as the French called him. The fashion had started with the initials of his name—Serge Maillot. S.M. The initials appeared on the titles of every film he produced, directed, wrote and starred in, surmounted by a stylized crown; the same trademark was printed on the posters and the program of his own theatre that had stood for thirty years on the Boulevard Haussmann; there were few of his possessions that did not bear them. Malicious rumor included his underpants among these.

But a moment after the royal entrance, I had stopped to think about monogrammed undergarments, His Majesty, or the occasion of the champagne party. Escorted by two young men, a girl had followed Serge Maillot. Her honey-colored hair held a glint of red; she was wearing a mink coat over a severely cut travelling suit. A gold charm bracelet was jingling on her left wrist. I knew her a good deal better than Burt or M. Grosbeck or anybody else at the party. Her name was Martine and, only seven months ago, I had wanted to marry her.

When I met Martine she was dancing at the Boul' Blanche. Even among the nightclub's hand-picked beauties, Martine stood out. In short, she was a peach, a lulu, a beaut.

I'm only thirty-five, but Martine—being a beaut, and all that—made me feel about twenty which is a good thing to happen to any man. When I thought of her, I used the language of a sophomore. She only drank champagne. And at dawn, when the show ended, she went straight home to her small hotel in the Rue Lhomond. She liked men but, as she explained to me, she couldn't afford them—not until she had become the star of the Casino or the Tabarin. For some reason, she didn't think much of the Folies Bergères.

And she, apparently, didn't think too much of me. She allowed me to hold her hand. Once, after I had offered to pay for her lessons in acrobatic dancing, she kissed me. I wasn't permitted to kiss her back. A month before I was called to the Middle East, I became so exasperated that I proposed to her. She was very sweet about it, but said that she

wasn't ready for marriage yet. And, in any case, could I afford her? I assured her that I could, and she then wanted to know for how long. The most I could get out of her was a promise to "review the matter" when I got back from Bahrein. She didn't even promise to write to me.

And now here she was, looking just as lovely as usual, standing near to His Majesty, Serge Maillot, the uncrowned king of French show business who was seventy if he was a day and who had been married four times, always to women a decade or two younger than himself. I felt a tingling premonition. I didn't have to wait long before the premonition turned into certainty.

Maillot stood, facing the crowd which had become an audience. His strong face showed few lines of age. Then the Under-Secretary stepped forward. The tall man in the dark suit adjusted the microphone to the requisite height. The lamps flared up. The camera was trained on central figures. Curtain up.

"Cher Maître," the Under-Secretary began, hooking his thumbs behind his lapels in the classic pose of modern orators, "and my dear Madame Maillot . . ."

He was looking at Martine and Martine smiled—faintly and modestly as befitted a young bride. I wondered how long they had been married. I couldn't remember what had been His Majesty's marital status when I left. Had he been divorced or about to be? But such things can be arranged easily and quickly if one is Serge Maillot.

". . . this is a great day for France," the Under-Secretary continued, well launched and good for at least fifteen minutes. "A day of pride and of a little sadness. You are taking our immortal Molière to the New World. Molière and his direct successor, his spiritual heir—namely, yourself . . ."

There was applause. Maillot bent his head graciously. Martine smiled. The smile had become a trifle mechanical; in a minute or two, if she kept it up, it would turn into a grimace.

"We are proud that the Serge Maillot company is crossing the ocean to present the flower of the French theatre to our kinsmen in Canada. Even the great United States, during this three-month tour, will have the opportunity of encountering the epitome of French culture . . ."

The Under-Secretary droned on. I took the opportunity of edging closer to the front of the audience. I'm a big man, but I can move softly. Soon I was within a couple of yards of Serge Maillot and not very much farther from Martine. Her smile had frozen and was going to

crack any moment. I hoped not before all the pictures had been taken. This was the full works—newsreel, television, still photographers. And from where I was standing, I could also see into the shorter leg of the L where two young men were tending a tape recorder.

At last the Under-Secretary finished; now it was the turn of the director of the *Comédie* who spoke briefly and quite well, assuring His Majesty that the good wishes of the entire French theatre accompanied him on his journey which was bound to be, like he was himself, fabulous.

"You have said once, my dear Serge," he wound up, "that all comedies had to end with marriage because that was the beginning of all tragedies. I'm sure that you would revoke this *mot* of yours since your marriage to Madame Martine who is the brightest jewel in your distinguished company of artists."

There was applause again and Martine's smile was refreshed. Maybe she blushed, too; I couldn't be certain what was makeup and what natural coloring. In any case, Serge put a possessive arm around her shoulder and she tilted her head to give him a look of utter adoration.

And now it was the star's turn. Maillot removed his arm from Martine's mink, shifted his cane to his left hand and grasped the microphone with his right. The monocle glinted brightly in the spotlights.

"Your Excellencies," he said, and the famous voice, with its occasional and deliberate little squeaks, commanded instant silence, "my friends. I . . ."

The face, the great face that had appeared in a hundred disguises yet always recognizable, on a thousand screens, twisted suddenly. For a moment it was as if every muscle had become independent, as if every nerve was twitching to break loose. And then Maillot fell forward with a resounding crash, dragging the microphone with him. From where I stood, I could see the bare calf of his right leg because his trousers had slipped up with the fall. The muscles at the back of his calf were twitching violently; then the leg straightened and was completely, horribly still.

It looked real ugly for a minute or two. Women screamed; two of them fainted. Not Martine; she was standing, close to the wall, a yard or two from the crumpled, huddled figure, staring at it with eyes opened so wide that her face seemed nothing but eyes. The camera went on grinding, the flashbulbs popped off. Then there was a surge forward. That was when I moved. I knew if I didn't, we'd have a first-class panic on our hands. Crowds, whether of academicians or plumbers, react the

same way to an accident or sudden death. They want to see as much of it as they can, as close as they can.

I pushed and shoved and got through. I raised my arms and roared out in my best French to keep calm, not to move. That helped a little. Then Inspector Jeannot, whom I knew, joined me and I felt relieved. He was in charge of the airport police and he called for a doctor.

Soon an elderly man, with the red ribbon of the Legion in his button-hole, struggled into the small empty space around the fallen microphone. He knelt down, made his brief examination, and then looked up at Jeannot.

"He's dead," he said.

In the sudden and breathless silence that followed the confirmation of what was pretty obvious, a wild sound arose—laughter, loud and hysterical. I swung around. It was Martine, her body pressed against the wall, gasping out the mad laughs as if they were cries of agony. As I swiftly moved to her, she began to slide floorward. I caught her halfway. She did not seem to be surprised to see me. She was still laughing as she struggled to say something.

"You know . . . you know what he said?"

"Martinel"

"The others . . ." she clung to me, her slim fingers digging into my arm, "the others . . . he told me . . . they were my wives. B-but you . . . you will be my widow . . ."

Suddenly she went limp in my arms, and I was glad she'd finally fainted.

In the meantime, half-a-dozen of Jeannot's men had materialized. They were herding the crowd out of the room; I heard the Inspector offering apologies and saying that it would be necessary to detain everybody for a little instant. The policemen guided the notables and the hangers-on across the main lounge into the restaurant at the far end which, luckily, wasn't open for business yet. I deposited Martine in a chair and scooped up a handful of ice from a bucket on the long table. But as I was about to apply it to the back of her neck, Jeannot caught my hand.

"That can wait," he said. "It is best if we dispose of M. Maillot's remains first."

Already the room was empty—except for two policemen, Jeannot, the doctor, the unconscious Martine and myself. And of course the rigid, sprawled figure on the floor. Someone had righted the microphone. The

spotlights still cast their glare upon the scene. Outside—I just became conscious of it—a plane was taxiing to the take-off.

The two policemen lifted the body and carried it to the sofa near the head of the stairs. As they deposited it with reverent care something fell soundlessly to the carpeted floor. Jeannot and the doctor were near the window, talking softly; I bent down, as soon as the policemen had turned away, and picked up the object. It was about five inches square, flat and shaped like a cigarette case. But it wasn't a cigarette case. For one thing, a thin silvery wire was attached to one end. It was, I realized almost immediately, the battery of a hearing aid.

The fall had undoubtedly broken the wire. I stepped up to the sofa. At first glance I couldn't see the rest of the wire. Then something glinted faintly. Under the curious glance of the policemen, I lifted the broad black ribbon of the monocle. The vanity of actors, I thought. The wire of the hearing aid was fastened inside the ribbon; its final few inches were still entangled in Maillot's thick white hair and curled down to his ear. He must have needed the thing very badly, to have worn it even in such a camouflaged form. As I followed the trail of the wire with a hesitant finger, I stopped suddenly, having just touched Maillot's left ear. I hesitated. Though it was a ghoulish business, I had to make sure. For a few moments, I rested my fingertips on the cheek of the dead man just under the cheekbone. The flesh was cold and smooth to the touch.

"And what are *you* doing here, M. Venture?" Jeannot's voice said, so suddenly and so close behind that I almost jumped.

"Waiting for a plane," I said. "I just drifted into the party—just happened to."

But you couldn't fool Jeannot. We'd been on the same side in that business of the Boston heiress who'd disappeared from the George V without a trace; I was known to him as a reasonably upright citizen. But that didn't give me any privileges.

"You know I didn't mean that," he said, gentle reproof in his soft voice. "I mean—just now. You aren't supposed to touch bodies, however famous."

I showed him the battery. He took it into his blunt, nicotine-stained fingers. His glance followed the wire as mine had.

"*Tiens*, the doctor didn't tell me . . ." He raised his voice. "Dr. Var-nel, if you please—"

The elderly, dignified doctor joined us.

"Was Serge Maillot deaf?" demanded the Inspector.

"No, of course not," the doctor said, a little testily. "Hard of hearing, certainly, but only in the left ear. I don't see what this . . ."

"You established the cause of death?" I interrupted, rudely, but I had to justify my presence.

"Yes. It is beyond doubt heart failure. After all, the *maitre* was sixty-nine, and though he was remarkably fit . . ."

Jeannot interrupted this time.

"What's on your mind, M. Venture?" he demanded.

I hesitated. What *was* on my mind?

"I've sent for the ambulance," the Inspector added, casually. "The body is to be returned to the Hôtel Maillot."

"No autopsy?" I asked.

"Do you see any reason for it, M. Venture?"

I took a deep breath. I was sticking my neck out, but after all that plane to Montreal hadn't been announced yet. I might be around the whole night.

"Yes," I said.

Jeannot did a characteristic thing then. He nodded to the two policemen who had listened to our conversation with puzzled interest.

"Take Madame Maillot to one of the V.I.P. waiting rooms," he said. "Ask one of the stewardesses to look after her. And keep your mouths shut."

For a moment, I had forgotten about Martine. I glanced over to where she was. She had just opened her eyes and was looking around, dazed. I resisted the urge to go to her. To charge a woman with fickleness just after she had become a widow seemed in rather poor taste.

"Are you going to keep that crowd here?" I asked Jeannot. There was a displeased murmur from the restaurant which very well might grow into something stronger emotionally. Burt and a few other journalists had already made a couple of attempts to invade the L-shaped room, repulsed firmly but only temporarily by the policeman on guard near the screen.

"That depends," Jeannot said.

"Depends on what?"

"Whatever you are going to say, M. Venture. And you'd better say it quickly. There are half a dozen people over there who could be very unpleasant if they were detained without good reason."

"There's no reason to keep them," I said. "Except for the technicians who handled the TV and radio equipment."

He gave me a long, level look. Then he walked away and I was left alone with the doctor and the mortal remains of His Majesty. I remembered Burt's remark about Serge Maillot and a bodyguard. Why would he need one? And why would Burt presume that I had been picked for the job? I wanted some answers to these questions.

The doctor cleared his throat.

"This is very unseemly," he said, shaking his head. "I have been Maillot's physician for thirty years. I can tell you . . ."

Before I could say something, Jeannot came back. His face was set; I recognized the symptoms. Someone had reprimanded him and he hadn't liked it.

"And now, if you please, M. Venture," he snapped. "What's on your mind?"

"Have you ever seen a man being electrocuted?" I asked.

His eyes narrowed. "No. Why?"

"I happened to be watching Maillot when he died . . ."

"This is absurd," the doctor said.

"Yes," I agreed. "Just as absurd as the fact that when I accidentally touched Serge Maillot's left ear it was hot."

Dr. Varnel stared at me; then he hurried to the still figure on the sofa. He straightened, looking puzzled.

"There is a slight difference in temperature," he announced. "But nothing remarkable. There is certainly no heat . . ."

"There wouldn't be," I pointed out. "More than ten minutes have passed since I touched him."

"So we have to take your word for all this?" Jeannot asked, a little maliciously.

"No. Not at all. An autopsy'd show the physiological changes both in the ear and the brain . . ."

"Would they, Dr. Varnel?" the Inspector asked.

The old doctor shrugged impatiently.

"Perhaps," he said. "But, of course, the effect of a strong electric shock is not dissimilar to that of a brain hemorrhage . . ."

"But you said it was heart failure," I reminded him.

"The symptoms were certainly consistent with cardiac paralysis," he said. "But one cannot be sure . . ."

". . . without an autopsy," I finished his sentence.

Jeannot looked at me, then at the doctor. "If there is any reasonable doubt . . ." he said, then stopped abruptly, thoughtfully. "But how could such a shock occur? I was told the microphone and all the apparatus were tested."

"Yes," I said, a hunch I had suddenly becoming clear and loud. "But after all, Maillot brought along some apparatus himself—on his person."

Jeannot reached into his pocket and took out the battery of the hearing aid. He turned it over in his hand. He found the small hinge of the opening. While Dr. Varnel stepped back, disassociating himself from the proceedings, I bent over the small oblong box.

Inside, there was a delicate arrangement of wires and pencil-thin cylinders. They were all blackened, and the center was a mass of shapeless metal, melted and fused by what must have been tremendous heat.

Jeannot and I exchanged a glance; then we both moved to the sofa. The Inspector extracted the dead man's hearing aid. He then took a nail file from his pocket and pried it open. Inside there was a mass of charred carbon and shapeless metal. He said nothing, but placed the hearing aid, together with the battery, on the table next to the tape recorder. Then he turned to Dr. Varnel.

"I must ask for an autopsy," he said quietly. "Of course, it'll have to be performed at the police morgue. You're entitled to be present . . ."

The doctor was still nursing his hurt professional pride.

"But why?" he demanded. "What possible reason—"

"I'm afraid," Jeannot explained gently, "that there is a strong possibility of murder."

Dr. Varnel and the body had departed; Jeannot and I were alone. I wandered over to the long table and poured myself another glass of champagne. It was lukewarm and flat, just like my mood. It had started as a hunch, a flash of observation, followed by a brief elation over being right. But the elation had all gone. And I knew that I should've kept my nose out of the whole thing. And there was the charming widow. I didn't want to see her—not now. No doubt she had a perfectly good explanation why she hadn't waited for me. But I didn't want to hear it.

"Now, Venture," Jeannot said, "what do you know about all this?"

"Nothing—except what I told you. And I still don't see why you call it murder. It may have been an accident."

"A very strange accident. If all this installation was dangerous, why

hadn't it caused trouble during the testing? Or during the Under-Secretary's speech?"

I shrugged. "I'm no electronics expert . . ."

"But, apparently, you can tell a man who's being electrocuted—when you see one." Jeannot's grin was friendly, but that didn't mean he was friendly. "All right—you tell me how and why."

This was grossly unfair and he knew it. "There's only one person who can answer you," I said hotly. "And that's the murderer."

He touched my shoulder briefly. "I apologize," he said.

"We know a little," I said, somewhat pacified. "The hearing aid and the battery—they've been subjected to an electric current of very high voltage. This must have been transmitted somehow by the microphone or its stand. . ."

"Let's have a look at the equipment."

We examined the microphone and drew a complete blank. There was nothing wrong with it—no trace of heat, no fused wires or melted metal parts. I traced its wire to the tape recorder. That, too, seemed perfectly okay. When I rewound the few dozen yards of tape on which the Under-Secretary's speech and the oration of the Comédie's director had been recorded, it worked perfectly.

"So it wasn't the microphone," Jeannot said, disappointedly.

"I don't know," I said. "Perhaps we ought to ask the experts. You've kept them, haven't you?"

"But they're the last people I want to ask."

"Why?"

"If you're right," he explained, "then I think they're all suspect."

"The more reason to question them."

"No." He shook his head. "I don't want to do that. Not until I have a reasonable explanation of how Serge Maillot died. Because if any of them knows, *he* is certainly not going to oblige with the information."

Jeannot thought for a moment, chewing his lower lip. Then he stepped to the telephone which stood in the corner on a small white-painted stand.

"Is Camp there?" he asked. "Inspector Jeannot wants him . . . Yes, urgently." He waited. "Camp? Could you come over to the upstairs departure lounge? . . . No, at once . . . We need your help badly. . . Yes, of course, it's a police matter . . . Thanks. Thank you."

He put down the receiver and turned to me. "That's André Camp,

head of the radio-communications section of Orly. He's a wizard, but he doesn't like to be disturbed."

"Nobody likes murder," I said, making conversation. I added, for the same purpose, "I didn't know Serge Maillot had any enemies."

Jeannot threw up his hands at that. "Any successful man, any celebrity has enemies," he said. "You ought to know that. And Maillot had a talent for making them. Hundreds of actors whom he sacked, aspiring playwrights whose manuscripts he rejected, film technicians and stage hands to whom he was rude—and he could be very rude. He had four wives and think of all the women he'd discarded and the husbands he'd enraged."

"It's a miracle," I said, "that he lived as long as he did."

"He thrived on his enemies," Jeannot said. "And there was his war record . . . You know, he kept his theatre open right through the Nazi occupation. He made three films, too. He said he did it to keep French culture alive. Others had an uglier name for it. Soon after the Liberation he was kidnapped one night by some young resistance fighters. They took him to a cemetery where a hundred of their comrades were buried—all executed by the Germans. He had to pay homage to them on his knees. It shook him badly and for a year or two he retired. Enemies! I wouldn't know where to begin if I wanted to round them all up!"

There were quick, nervous steps on the stairs and a tall, thin man burst into the room.

"Now look here, Jeannot," he began, "I'm responsible for the safety of my airport! You can't just drag me away . . ."

"If you could just tell us what you think of these . . ." Jeannot said, unruffled. He held out the hearing aid and the battery.

Camp stared at them, his bony Adam's apple working. "Any fool can tell you," he said. "What kind of a game do you . . ."

Jeannot cut him short. "Serge Maillot," he said, "died in this room less than an hour ago, we think it's murder. This, by the way, is M. Venture, a friend of mine. He has been . . . helpful."

I didn't like the little pause before the last word, but Camp took no notice of it.

"Well, I'm not a policeman," he said impatiently.

"No, but you're a genius," Jeannot stated, quite matter-of-factly. "So if you'd bend your great mind to our little problem . . ."

Camp snorted irritably. "These things here," he poked at the pencil-

shaped tiny objects in the battery, "are transistors. And I haven't the faintest idea what they're doing in a hearing-aid battery . . ."

"What about this?" and Jeannot handed him the hearing aid itself.

Camp inspected it briefly. He looked sour. "Same thing," he said, "but they've been badly damaged. A short circuit, maybe."

"What would cause a short circuit in a hearing aid?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Nothing, in theory. The voltage is so low—it has to be, for safety—that a short is most unlikely. Of course, I'm not an expert on these contraptions. But somehow, quite obviously, both battery and ear-piece have been subjected to very high voltage current."

"We've thought of that," I said. "But all the equipment's been tested—the microphone, the tape recorder, the spotlights—and it all appears to be in perfect working order."

Camp scratched his head. He looked a little less angry and a good deal more interested. Then, without a word, he went to work. He took the microphone to pieces, examined the cables of the portable spotlights, even peered into the camera itself. His face became brighter and brighter. Jeannot and I watched him, in respectful silence, until he came back to us. His original impatience was gone.

"This is quite interesting," he said. "You're right. None of that equipment could've caused anybody's death." He beamed as if he were tremendously pleased by the totally negative result.

"That's delightful," Jeannot said. "Maybe Maillot was killed by someone from Outer Space. Or by a death ray. Or—or he just died of indigestion."

"Don't be frivolous, Jeannot," Camp said, pointing a long, bony forefinger at him. "You should always be serious in the presence of intellect. Maybe a great intellect. Do you not agree, Jeannot?"

"You haven't looked at the tape recorder," I said.

Camp gave me a quick, searching look. "No," he agreed. "I haven't. Maybe I'm like a man who looks everywhere for an important key except in his watch pocket—because he's afraid to. If the key isn't there, he's lost it, you see." He chuckled. "But then again I may have other reasons."

He continued to chuckle. He was a changed man, because he was interested and stimulated. He was a picture of a scientist in the presence of a riddle.

"Do you know anything about transistors, M. Venture?" he asked as he moved to the tape recorder and set it at replay.

"Not much," I said.

"They're devilishly clever things. They can be used both for sending and receiving electrical impulses—sound waves, light waves, electrical waves. Their possibilities haven't been exhausted yet by any means. Just now they're using them, for instance, to record the incubation cycle of a king penguin's egg—to discover how humans can be adapted to intense cold. Then again, transistors are the most important part of space missiles and . . ."

"Really, Camp," Jeannot interrupted. "Serge Maillot was neither a penguin nor a spaceman. I fail to see . . ."

The fruity voice of the Under-Secretary came through the tape recorder's built-in loudspeaker. Camp turned it down until it became a faint mutter.

"You'll see, all in good time," he said, with dignity. "And of course, I might be quite wrong . . ." he added, maddeningly.

We waited and watched.

We were sitting in a circle: the cameraman, his assistant, the four young electricians who had handled the spotlights, the tall fellow in the dark suit who turned out to be a TV director, the sound engineers in charge of the tape recorder, Martine and myself.

It was characteristic of Camp that as soon as he had proved his theory right, he had departed. He wasn't interested in the outcome, the practical application. He left the test to Jeannot and myself.

Martine was subdued, but she had gotten over her hysteria. She sat next to me, but hadn't spoken a word. I preferred it that way.

Jeannot stood in the middle of the circle, his hands in his pockets, and rocked on his heels.

"I am sorry to have kept you," he said. "But there are certain questions we have to clarify about M. Maillot's death."

"What is there to clarify about a heart attack?" the director, whose name was Riret, asked.

"It wasn't a heart attack," Jeannot said softly. "It was murder."

Martine's eyes opened wide and I thought she would scream or faint again. But they must have pumped her full of sedatives; she just stiffened a little and leaned forward, her heart-shaped face white under the makeup. The others reacted with incredulity, startled interest, or low exclamations of surprise.

"But," the cameraman said, "we've a record of it on film. If you let us process it, and run it . . ."

"The film wouldn't show the murderer," the Inspector said. "Only the victim."

One of the sound engineers giggled—sheer nerves. The other gave him a reproachful look.

"May we know how M. Maillot was killed?" the director asked. "That is, if we are to accept this remote possibility."

"I think we can show you," Jeannot said. He took the hearing aid and the battery from his pocket and held them dangling from his fingers.

That was my cue. I got up and moved to the tape recorder. I felt their eyes following me every step of the way. I looked at Jeannot. He nodded and I switched on the recorder.

". . . I'm sure that you would revoke this *mot* of yours since your marriage to Madame Martine," the director of the *Comédie* was saying, his disembodied voice with the over-precise diction sounding eerie in the silence, "who is the brightest jewel in your distinguished company of artists . . ."

Martine gave a slight, choking sound. The tape ran on. Applause. A hubbub of voices, dying down.

"Your Excellencies," Serge Maillot began, "my friends. I . . ."

And then—silence. Silence for several yards of tape, followed suddenly by a veritable cataract of sound—screams, shouts—ending with Dr. Varnel's barely audible announcement: "He's dead."

There was silence, too, as I switched off the recorder and went back to Jeannot's side.

"But what is this?" the cameraman asked. "You said you were going to show us how Serge Maillot was killed. All we heard was—"

"We can play it again," the Inspector said. "But perhaps you'll take my word for it. It's all there on that tape. The end of the Director General's speech, the applause, and then the few words Maillot spoke . . ."

"After that—there was silence," the TV director said, his face puzzled.

"Yes," Jeannot nodded. "Silence. Yet the tape recorder was switched on. Why didn't we hear the thud of Maillot's body hitting the floor? Why the sudden gap?"

"Don't ask us," said one of the young technicians. "We wouldn't know."

"I'm not asking you. But we can try running the tape again. This time we'll demonstrate more fully."

He looked around as if seeking someone, making a choice. He stopped in front of one of the young sound engineers, a stocky, dark-haired fellow. The other was fair, with a nervous, sensitive face. "If you wouldn't mind," Jeannot said, and offered the battery and hearing aid to the dark-haired young man. "Just slip it into your ear . . . That's right . . . It's quite safe, I assure you."

The young man hesitated, then obeyed. I was at the tape recorder again, waiting for Jeannot's signal. It was a long time coming. I glanced back. Martine was staring at the Inspector. The others looked as if they were waiting for some unusual parlor trick to be performed. I couldn't see the fair-haired young fellow because Jeannot's body blocked the view.

At last the Inspector nodded. Once again the fulsome sentences of the *Comédie's* director echoed. Once again there was applause, the hubbub, and then Maillot's speech. But this time he didn't get past the first three words. A chair went over with a crash. I jumped forward. The fair-haired young man had just torn the hearing aid from his colleague's ear. His other hand held a gun. His thin, sensitive face was twisted in a mad grimace—very much like the last expression of Serge Maillot before he had collapsed.

"So," he said, his voice a little hoarse, "so you've found out. Such clever people! I did it! The dog—he deserved to die a hundred times over. He kicked out my father from his company—and the Boche sent him to a camp—and there he died!"

"Put that gun down," Jeannot said calmly.

"She helped me!" the youngster cried, and the gun pointed now at Martine's breast. "It was she who changed the battery. I wanted to kill him, but she helped me. She wanted him dead, too!"

Martine's head was shaking in denial—her face pale, white.

Jeannot moved fast, very fast. But it wasn't fast enough. The gun exploded and then the young man turned tail—his footsteps clattering down the staircase. I was only a few yards behind him, but at the bottom I bumped into a fat woman who was just crossing from the perfume counter. I caught sight of the blond head; the young fellow was sprinting across the downstairs hall, past a group of passengers in one of the small departure bays. He tore open the glass door and went flying across the tarmac. By the time I was outside, a couple of policemen had

joined me. I had a confused impression of a bus swinging out, people shouting and wheels screeching; somewhere in the distance, swallowing it all, the roar of engines being tuned up. As I dodged the bus, I could see the young engineer running across the tarmac. He had a good hundred yards' start. I put on a spurt, but I didn't gain much. Neither did the policemen. There were dazzling lights at the edge of the field where they were still working on the Super-Constellation. And then, as I got within fifty yards of him, I was dazed by the lights and had to slow down. As a consequence, I didn't see him rushing into that cluster of lights. I only heard the scream, high-pitched and long-drawn, as he ran into the flaying propellers. He must have been killed instantaneously, sucked into the whirling blades by the air-stream.

"Yes, we know all about him," Burt was saying as we sat—it seemed a year later, though it was only an hour or so—sipping champagne in the lounge. "His name was Demaine. It was quite true about his father, though Maillot couldn't have known what would happen to him when he dismissed him in 1942. Old Demaine was a drunkard. But of course the son would overlook that, so he could go on living with this obsession to get even . . ."

"Poor devil," I said. I felt empty and exhausted. I saw Martine's lovely face dissolving into fear and panic as she was taken away. Whether Demaine's accusation would prove true or not, it did not seem to matter. Most likely it was true. Finding out was Jeannot's job. I had the feeling that she'd married the old boy for his money and wanted him out of the way as soon as possible.

"But how did he do it?" Burt asked. "Jeannot wouldn't say. And if you could put it into plain language, for a poor dumb layman like myself . . ."

"I'm no expert," I said wearily. "It was Camp who figured it out. What Demaine did was simple enough. He replaced the battery with three transistors—or possibly, if Martine were mixed up in this thing, had her do it. The transistors acted as receiver. In the tape recorder, he had built another set—which was the sender. All he then had to do was to switch off the tape and switch on his sender. The transistors in the hearing-aid battery and the recorder were naturally tuned to each other . . ."

"For Pete's sake," Burt protested, "I said in simple language. What I want to know is, what did he kill Maillot with?"

"Sound," I said. "High-frequency sound. You know that the human ear can only pick up certain frequencies. You get below them and you hear nothing. You can go above them—with the mechanical gimmick Demaine fixed up—and if they're strong enough, they can kill. That was why there was a dead spot on the tape. The high-frequency sound had been transformed into heat when it passed through the hearing-aid battery. It wasn't electricity but heat that melted part of the battery and the hearing aid itself. And if I hadn't happened to touch Maillot's ear . . ."

Burt opened his mouth to ask, at a guess, another fifty questions. But the loudspeaker above us cleared its throat and a male voice said, "Passengers for Montreal, Flight 167, are asked to proceed to the aircraft. Passengers for Montreal, Flight 167—"

I picked up my overnight bag, walked downstairs, through the glass door, and into the darkness outside.



1959**by Henry Slesar**

Nelson Latch was a difficult man to pick out of a crowd. He was of average height and weight, neither homely nor handsome, dull of hair and eye, and inconspicuous of dress. However, his nondescript manner and appearance made him ideal for his occupation. He was a store detective at Bramson's Store for Women in New York.

For eleven years, Nelson had performed his job quietly and competently on the seven floors of Bramson's. Hundreds of shoplifters had suffered the penalties of their crime because of Nelson's sad and watchful eyes. Dozens of dishonest clerks had come to grief because of Nelson's diligence. Vandals, kleptomaniacs, and even hold-up men had been taught respect for the innocent, grey-suited man who prowled the aisles of Bramson's and guarded its right to receive lawful payment for its merchandise.

Bramson's was a good-sized establishment, catering to many classes of women—from the budget dress racks in the basement, to the Paris originals in the Gold Salon on the Sixth Floor. It employed a cadre of store detectives of which Nelson Latch was senior member. Naturally, when a delicate and disturbing situation arose, Nelson Latch was the first name mentioned in the executive suite on the Seventh Floor.

He received his summons to Mr. Bramson's office on a slow morning in early January. Mr. Bramson, the son of the founder, was a nervous, fussy little man, who had been installed in the President's chair only three years ago, and hadn't yet found it comfortable. He squirmed around for a full minute before getting to the subject of the interview.

"This business can drive you crazy," he said finally. "If it isn't one thing, it's another. Crooks you can expect in the basement, maybe, but who would think in the Gold Salon?"

Nelson cleared his throat and looked surprised. "Crooks, Mr. Bramson? I hadn't heard about it."

"For two weeks it's been going on, only I didn't get you fellas mixed in. You know how it is, our biggest customers come to the Gold Salon. We gotta be careful."

"Thefts, Mr. Bramson?"

"Big thefts. Not in volume, in quantity. But hundred-dollar dresses, good belts, suits. We don't even know what's gone until inventory time."

Nelson whistled. "Sales clerk, maybe?"

"No, it's a customer all right. But maybe a salesgirl is helping. But what can we do about it?"

"Do you know how she operates?"

"Sure. You know how the Gold Salon is laid out. In the back of the main showroom, there are four dressing booths. The women go in there, change their clothes, try on dresses. That's where she does her stuff. Puts on a Bramson dress *under* her own dress and walks off like nothing happened."

Nelson frowned. "Must be something we can do."

"Other stores have such problems, too. Some of them make sure the salesgirls stay with the customers. We can't afford to do that. We'd have to double our sales force! Some stores hand out tickets with every dress, so they can keep tabs on 'em. But how would that kind of cheap stuff go in the Gold Salon? Our customers would be insulted!" Then he stopped fidgeting and leaned forward with his hands folded. "But I think maybe I got the answer," he said shrewdly. "You know what one-way glass is?"

"Yes. That's the glass mirrored on one side and clear on the other."

"Right." He chuckled. "And you know those mirrors that hang in the dressing booths? Well, I changed all those mirrors, Nelson."

The detective blinked. "Why, that's very clever of you, Mr. Bramson."

"Thank you! Now we're gonna catch our little thief in action. We're gonna see her work her fancy tricks. That'll put a stop to it!"

"I guess it will."

"Now there's just one more thing we need, Nelson. Somebody reliable. Somebody who can really spot our little friend when she goes to work."

Nelson's normally pale face reddened.

"You don't mean *me*, Mr. Bramson? Don't you think a *woman* should—"

"Ideally, yes. But like I said, it could be that the thief has a confederate, right in the store, one of our own girls. Who could I trust? And I don't want to go outside for help—this is too confidential. And I look at it this way, Nelson. A detective is like a doctor, a physician. There's nothing personal; it's a job. Am I right or wrong?"

"Well, I really don't know—"

"Of course you know. You're an experienced man, Nelson. You can spot our thief like *that*." He snapped his fingers. "So you'll have to see some women taking their clothes off. What is that? On a beach, on any beach, you can see a lot more. And you're a married man, no?"

"No, sir," Nelson said.

"No difference. The big thing is that you can do the job, Nelson. If it's okay with you, you can start tomorrow."

Mr. Bramson rose quickly from his chair and stuck out his hand. Nelson Latch had no choice but to shake it limply, in grudging agreement.

The next morning, for the first time in years, Nelson slept through the insistent ring of his alarm clock. He had read enough about psychology to recognize that his dereliction was due to his unwillingness to face this particular morning. His new assignment was completely repellent to him. It wasn't detective work at all, but a form of snooping which Nelson associated with bedroom spies and other low orders of the profession. Even worse, the idea of being a spectator to a series of strip acts was terrifying. Nelson was forty-four, and an unadventurous bachelor.

He reported to Miss Dewey, the long-nosed manager of the Gold Salon, at eight-thirty.

"Come with me," she said disdainfully. She led him to the dressing room. There were four booths in a row, generous-sized, comfortable booths, with red-velvet drapes forming the doors. Each was large enough to contain a small, bowlegged plush chair, a metal rack with wooden hangers, a narrow shelf, and an antique-framed mirror. It all seemed perfectly innocent, but when Miss Dewey led Nelson through a side door that exposed the rear of the booths, he saw the four squares of glass that admitted a clear view of the interiors.

"I don't mind telling you," Miss Dewey sniffed, "that I'm against this. Our clientele is *very* respectable."

"At least one of them isn't," he said gently.

"That may be true. But if word of this—this snooping ever got out—"

"It won't," Nelson said. "Not if we're *all* discreet."

When she left him alone, Nelson sat wearily on the chair that had been provided him, and hoped that traffic would be light in the Bramson dressing room that morning.

At nine-thirty, he heard the sound of women's voices. He groaned, and got up to make a canvass of the four booths. A stout matron, carrying a girlishly cut dress over her arm, entered Booth One. He watched her as she pulled a tight-fitting dress over her head. He gulped hard when she stood revealed in a complicated foundation garment that enclosed her frame like a suit of pink armor. He was relieved when she slipped the Bramson garment over it and stepped out of the booth, to the cooing approval of the salesgirl who said: "Mrs. Busch, that dress is *you*."

There were six more women in the booths that morning, all roughly cast in the same plump, matronly role. In the afternoon, a thin one appeared, a sharp-featured woman who looked like every sour-faced schoolteacher Nelson had ever known. He was startled when he saw that her underthings were designed to look like leopard skin.

By the end of the day, Nelson was hardened to the sight of women undressing. The next morning, he was on time.

The first visitor to the Bramson dressing booth was an attractive woman in her early forties. He watched her strip with a little less detachment than he had shown the day before. He was disillusioned when she began to scratch. She scratched furiously, and she scratched everywhere. Then she put on a Bramson gown and walked out coolly.

By Friday, the job seemed routine. Then *she* arrived.

She was a blonde. Her hair was a shining gold frame for her full-mouthed, wide-eyed face. She was slim, but her suit was generously cut. When her white fingers began delicately peeling off her clothes, Nelson Latch knew that he was witnessing, in the flesh, the kind of girl that racy magazines featured on their covers. He backed away from the one-way glass when he saw that his breath had frosted it over, and watched her precise movements with more than professional interest.

There were no concealing garments beneath the suit: just a frosty-white brassiere and startlingly brief panties. She posed like a calendar girl, holding up one of the two dresses she had brought into the booth and examining it. She wriggled her way into it, and tugged it around her neat hips until satisfied with its fit. Then she left the booth, walking straight and poised.

He waited anxiously for her return. When it came, he pressed his face

against the glass. He was rewarded by a closeup of the girl's face, a lovely, vaguely Egyptian face, with sloe eyes and a blazingly red mouth. She was looking into the mirror and smiling at her own image. To Nelson, it seemed as if she were smiling directly at him.

Then she pulled the dress over her head, and picked up the second garment. She put it on, looked in the mirror once more, and seemed pleased.

But instead of leaving the booth, she picked up the skirt of her tweed suit and slipped it on over the dress. She did the same with the jacket. The full-cut suit fitted her better now, and Nelson knew why it hadn't fit her terrific figure snugly before.

She was his thief.

He moaned as if he were in pain. Such a lovely girl! And *he* had to be the one to end her freedom. How could he do it?

Nelson found that he couldn't. He stood stupidly behind the booth that had been the scene of the crime, and allowed the blonde criminal to walk off nonchalantly with Bramson's merchandise. He heard her talking to the salesgirl, expressing indecision about the purchase, and making promises of returning the following week.

Then she was gone.

Nelson sat down weakly in his chair and put his hands to his face. Eleven years of honest service seemed to have vanished under the influence of this one dishonest act. He felt like a criminal himself, yet the feeling wasn't strong enough to combat the other emotion that was rising strongly within his inconspicuous body.

Nelson Latch was in love.

The blonde didn't return for two days, and Nelson didn't know if he was glad or sorry. He wanted to see her again; there wasn't any question of that. Yet if he were forced to witness another crime—could his conscience withstand it?

On Wednesday, she walked into Booth Two.

She was wearing a loose-fitting grey dress this time, and when he saw its exaggerated size, Nelson was despondent. She peeled it off quickly, and tried on a blue Princess-line dress of comparatively modest price. When she walked outside, he heard her make the purchase.

At first, the detective thought she had turned honest. A moment later, he knew that she was only exercising wisdom by making an occasional purchase to allay suspicion. When the salesgirl bustled off to find her

order book, the blonde reentered the booth with a Paris original under her arm. With the aplomb of a professional, she slipped it over her head, and covered it up with her loose-fitting grey dress.

Just before she left, the blonde looked into the mirror.

Nelson put his face close to the glass.

"Don't do it," he whispered. "Please don't do it."

She cocked her head, almost as if she could hear him.

"You're too pretty to be a thief. They'll catch you one of these days. Please give it up. Please!"

She had her mouth open, and was inspecting her upper teeth for traces of lipstick.

Then she winked.

Nelson was taken aback, until he realized that the wink was intended for herself alone, a congratulatory wink on her criminal success.

Then she went out.

Nelson Latch had never been a moody man before, but his present difficulties changed him. His few friends became quickly aware of it, and he had to content himself more and more with solitude. He found himself taking long walks in the park, reading the sort of romantic literature he had never broached before, noticing the size of the moon over the city skyscrapers, listening to the love lyrics of popular songs as if they had taken on new meaning. Each workday found him tormented by conflicting emotions: a passionate desire to see the blonde thief again, a passionate hope that she would no longer give Bramson's her dubious business.

But at least twice a week, normally on Wednesdays and Fridays, the sly-eyed criminal would show up. On some days she was honest, but Nelson was no longer deceived by what was obviously a criminal tactic. Other days, she would rob the Gold Salon of its most expensive garments, under the very eyes of Bramson's most reliable detective.

He talked to her always now, safely inaudible behind the thick, one-way glass.

"You're so beautiful," he would whisper. "You're like an angel. Why do you have to steal? Why?"

Once, he confided his secret to her.

"I love you," he said. "I'll take care of you. You won't have to steal any more, my darling . . ."

Then, on a Thursday afternoon in late February, more than five weeks after his vigil began, the worst happened.

He was summoned to Mr. Bramson's office.

"I know what you're going to say," Nelson mumbled, shuffling his feet. "But I just haven't been able to spot our thief yet, Mr. Bramson."

The little man mopped at his brow.

"It's going on too long, I'm getting worried, Nelson. I don't mind telling you."

"Just give me a little more time, Mr. Bramson—"

"Time? We haven't got the time! Over a thousand dollars' worth of merchandise stolen! And what's even worse—they're starting to talk about it."

"Talk about what?"

"I don't know how it got out," the President said. "I guess you can't hide such things from the salespeople. They're spreading a lot of filthy rumors around town, about how we got a *man* peeking in on the dressing rooms. That kind of thing can cost us more than a few stolen dresses, Nelson. You see what I mean?"

Nelson couldn't speak.

"It's nothing against you, personal. I'm sure you're doing your best, Nelson. Only you gotta understand the situation. If people ever found out you were watching 'em, they'd stop coming to Bramson's. Thieves, customers, everybody!"

"But Mr. Bramson—"

"Can't be helped, Nelson. I'm putting Marjorie on the peepholes tomorrow morning."

"Please, give me a little more time. Just one more day! There's somebody I suspect, but I need a little more evidence. It's Friday tomorrow; she's usually here on Friday."

The President looked doubtful. "I dunno—"

"What can it hurt? I've been up there for almost two months. What can one more day hurt?"

"All right," Mr. Bramson said. "One more day, and that's all. I'll bet you'll be relieved, huh, Nelson?"

But Nelson Latch didn't look relieved. He looked miserable.

He spent the entire morning of the following day praying that his blonde thief would show up.

There was a letter in his pocket, a letter carefully prepared the night before.

It read:

Dear Lady,

I am a store detective at Bramson's, and I know that you have been taking merchandise from the Gold Salon. The store plans to catch you in the act next week. I urge you to stay away. I love you.

Yours truly,

A Friend

By four o'clock, Nelson was unable to sit still. He paced the floor up and down behind the dressing booths, wringing his hands and muttering to himself.

Then, at four-thirty, he saw a flash of light in Booth Three, and hurried over.

It was the blonde.

She was carrying two dresses, both priced at over a hundred and fifty dollars. She examined them both, and seemed to be deciding on which was least desirable. That was the one she hung on the hanger. The other, she slipped over her head.

When she left the booth with the purloined dress beneath her own, Nelson knew the time for action had come. He deserted his post, told Miss Dewey, the Gold Salon manager, that he would be back shortly, and followed the blonde out of the department.

She was already on the Down escalator by the time he caught sight of her. He followed at a respectable distance, one hand toying with the white envelope jutting out of his pocket.

The week-end crowds were heavy. He had trouble keeping her in sight as she disappeared into the revolving doors leading to the street. For one dreadful moment on the sidewalk, he thought he had lost her. Then he saw her shining golden head bending into the rear of a taxi.

Nelson slapped his thigh in vexation, and waved his hand frantically at another cruising taxi. It stopped and he jumped in with the traditional order.

"Follow that cab!"

He leaned forward in his seat throughout the trip, keeping his eye on the blonde head in the rear window of the vehicle they were trailing. It was a long ride uptown, almost into the Bronx.

Finally, he saw her cab slow down before a brownstone house in the middle of a quiet street. He waited until she had ascended the stoop before getting out and paying the driver.

He went up the stone stairs and looked at the row of nameplates by the door. There were four of them. Which one belonged to her?

He went into the building, moving quietly, not wanting to be seen. All Nelson Latch wanted to do was warn her; he expected no gratitude.

There was a door on the first floor. He put his head against it and listened to the strident sounds of a television commercial. A child's voice complained about dinner, and a gruff masculine voice told it to shut up.

He went to the second floor.

The door was slightly ajar, and a razor-thin crack of light slanted over the stairs. He put his fingertips on the wood and pushed gently. The door gave, and he was looking into a cozy living room. Standing in the center, yanking her dress over her head to reveal the stolen garment beneath, was the blonde.

Nelson slipped the letter out of his pocket and bent down to push it under the door. It made a slight hissing noise as it touched the carpet, and the blonde's head jerked towards the door. Before he could dodge aside, she had seen him. She started to scream immediately.

"Please!" Nelson said. "Don't be scared. I'm a friend!"

The word didn't convince her; she went right on shrieking.

"I have something for you—a letter—"

He advanced towards her timorously, holding out the white envelope in his hand as if it would protect him against her hysteria. She backed away as if the paper were contaminated, and he dropped it on a table.

"Read it, please! It'll explain everything. I'm just trying to help you—"

The more he protested, the more the blonde screamed. From below, Nelson heard the babble of voices in the hallway, and the girl looked wildly at the door. He gestured at her helplessly, and then grew panicky. He turned and went out the door, then began a gallop down the stairs. He ended up in the arms of a patrolman, summoned to the scene by the girl's alarmed neighbors. He didn't struggle much.

It wasn't the first time Nelson Latch had been in a police station, but never in the role of the accused.

The desk sergeant said: "What's the charge, Murphy?"

The cop said: "Peeping Tom."

At first, Nelson Latch opened his mouth to protest. Then he decided that even an unrequited love was better than none at all. He held his head up, with a martyr's pride, and said nothing.



1959

by Eleanor Daly Boylan

"A library would make a good setting for a murder," said Allan Gifford pleasantly as Mrs. De Ware stamped his books and accepted a four-cent fine. "You know—corpse found in the D-to-F section, dead hand clutching page torn from book, librarian identifies murderer by tracing book with torn page—"

"I'm glad I'm to be the detective. For a minute I was afraid I was the murderer."

"You're lucky I didn't make you the victim."

Mrs. De Ware laughed, a surprisingly hearty laugh to emanate from a ninety-pound frame, thought Gifford with amusement and affection. She was sixty-five and pretty as a pansy, with snow-white hair and lively brown eyes. Mrs. De Ware had been the librarian in the town of Stockton since her husband's death ten years before. "I intend to see that you get an anniversary dinner while I'm here this summer," Gifford had told her on his arrival several weeks before. A journalist and occasional writer of detective fiction, he'd taken a cottage in Stockton every July for the past seven years.

"Well, I'd say you have your summer's work cut out. What will you call it—*The Body in the Stacks*?" Mrs. De Ware began removing crayon marks from a copy of *The Wizard of Oz*.

"More likely *Gifford's Swan Song*. I'm through with the clue type."

He leaned against her counter, reluctant to go out into the heat again. He was the only person in the library and they were great friends. The good-natured little librarian had been endlessly obliging, reserving books for him, checking on facts, even sending the sixty miles south to Boston for references and information that her limited stock could not supply.

"Swan song? You're just feeling sorry for yourself. Typical writer's slump. Probably Martha's away."

"She is. Took the kids to visit her mother. No, if I write any more fiction it will be straight stuff. A pox on mysteries. Most sweltering work on earth."

Mrs. De Ware started to say something, then stopped and smiled at two girls who bounced into the library, brown and barelegged. They waved to her and headed for the magazine racks. She said, in a lowered voice:

"Speaking of mysteries, a rather interesting thing happened just before you came up this year. At least, I thought it was interesting and sort of detective story-ish. I was running our annual 'No Fine Week.' You know, you leave a basket out front and put a notice in the paper inviting people to return books that are long overdue without having to pay any fine. It's a way of corralling a lot of books that you'd probably never see again otherwise. Well, one morning when I emptied the basket, there was a book dated October 18, 1944. Sort of odd and creepy, don't you think?"

"Why creepy?"

She looked disappointed. "Oh, dear, I forgot you aren't a native. The date wouldn't mean anything to you. That was the day of the Paxton murder. A girl by the name of Dorothy Paxton was—"

"Wait a minute—that name rings a bell . . ." Gifford rearranged his long frame on the counter. "See if I remember: she was drowned—no, strangled—found by some lake or other, and there was a fellow she was going to marry. I think they even brought him back from overseas for questioning. But why do I remember her? She was somebody in Stockton—somebody's daughter or sister or—"

"Daughter. The mayor's."

"Of course. Mayor Paxton's daughter. And he raised a hell of a rumpus but there was no conviction, as I recall, was there?"

Mrs. De Ware shook her head, beaming at him. "Now, that is rather interesting and dramatic, don't you think? Especially since that 'some lake or other' where the body was found is Willow Pool just down the road from here."

"Really?" Gifford laughed. "Too bad the borrower didn't bring the book back on the day it was due instead of fifteen years later. He might have seen the murderer!"

"But that's the delicious part: Miss Gill, the librarian then, used a different system of stamping. She stamped the day that the book was taken out. So the person could have seen the murderer after all."

Mrs. De Ware winked at him triumphantly as her telephone rang; she answered, made a note, disappeared into the stacks and returned to say yes, *How to Raise African Violets* was in and she would reserve it.

Gifford looked into space and told himself not to be a fool. This sort of luck didn't happen to him—or to anybody. Million to one stuff. Billion.

"What was the name of the book? Can I see it?"

The librarian stooped and opened a bottom drawer. She produced a discolored volume. "*Civil Defense: Its Importance in Your Community*. Published in 1942. Completely outdated, of course. I didn't even bother to catalogue it again."

"No record, I suppose, of who took it out."

She shook her head. "Not that far back."

Gifford took the book from her and opened the cover. He stared at the faded red ink in which the date was stamped, thinking fondly what a lovely dust jacket it would make . . . a skeleton hand holding the date stamp, the red ink running down the page and turning into blood, the title on a library catalogue card, *Death Overdue*. Then his journalist's mind jostled the fiction writer impatiently. He said:

"Don't I remember a principal suspect, somebody they almost convicted?"

"Yes. A man named Ralph Addison. He died just last year."

"Has he any relatives? Anyone I can see?"

Mrs. De Ware looked alarmed, then severe. "Now, Mr. Gifford, I didn't tell you all this so you could go poking around town asking questions. You were in the dumps and I told you about the book to try and give you a lift. I'll be very cross if you embarrass me by—"

"May I just keep the book for a few days?"

"You may not." She plucked it from him and dropped it back into the drawer.

"Well, at least tell me some more about the Paxton murder."

"No, sir."

"You're a fine one. Get me all interested and curious and then clam up. I won't hurt your precious reputation. I won't even mention your name. Please let me take the book for—"

She shook her snowy head vigorously and turned to her card file. Gifford smiled and strolled to the door.

"If I find out anything interesting, I'll take you to dinner and tell you about it."

Mrs. De Ware did not deign a reply. She had walked over to where the girls were reading magazines and was chatting with them, her back to him.

The library, which occupied a low frame building together with the post office, was at the very end of a side street off Stockton's main thoroughfare. Beyond it were fields, a small pond called Willow Pool and the beginning of farmland.

Gifford stood on the library steps, deliciously envisioning someone else standing there fifteen years before, holding a book on civil defense and idly noticing a passerby, the color of a dress, the movement of a passing car. Was there a hazy or disregarded fragment of memory in the mind of someone in Stockton that could just mean . . .

"You're punchy from the heat," he chided himself. Well, this was his vacation, his family was away and if he wanted to squander a few days, it was cheaper anyway than golf.

From alternate baking sun to harboring shade, Gifford walked to the corner of Main Street and waved to Captain Nichols through the window of the barber shop. Stockton's elderly fire chief was just getting out of the chair and Gifford waited till he came out onto the street.

"Hello, Nick. Say, tell me something. I'm writing a story set around the time of World War II, and I want some information on how civil defense might have been run in a small town. Know anybody who could help me?"

The hale, leathery-faced fire chief grinned. "Bernie Waterfield would be your man. He was in charge of the whole thing for Stockton. Little Caesar, we used to call him."

"Took it pretty seriously?"

"Oh, Lordy. All over town with the helmet and the arm band and the rest of the gear. Lecturing people on how to detonate a bomb and all that. I remember back during the Paxton trial, Bernie was screaming that there shouldn't be so many 'important officials under one roof.' Drove you crazy. But I suppose somebody had to do what he did."

Gifford seized his break. "That Paxton trial must have been something."

"Yeah, we were really on the map that year. Lot of the big names are gone now. Mayor Paxton's dead and Ralph Addison—"

"What sort of fellow was he?"

"Ralph? Not a bad guy, really. Kinda silly. Thirty-five and still a girl-

crazy bachelor. He was chasing Dotty Paxton while her boy friend was in the service. Ralph was the last person seen with her the morning of the murder; they found her body late that afternoon. But then, a lot of fellows were after Dotty. She was the prettiest thing in town. I'm heading over to the diner. Come along?"

"Thanks, Nick, but I think I'll get right over and see Waterfield. Owns the drug store, doesn't he?"

Nichols nodded and Gifford strolled the half block to the pharmacy, debating his approach. He longed to ask Waterfield point blank if he had taken the book out of the library on that fateful day. But this would almost certainly mean a discussion of its delayed return which could embarrass Waterfield and involve Mrs. De Ware. No, he had promised her he would be circumspect.

Next best, then, was the "I'm writing a story" tactic he had used with Nichols. How those words covered a multitude of snoopings, grinned Gifford to himself as he turned into the welcome coolness of the drug store. He would edge as close to the subject as he could, and hope that Waterfield was a talker.

The soda fountain was crowded, but there was no one at the prescription counter. Gifford was greeted by Bernie Waterfield himself, a big, fleshy man in his sixties.

"My name's Allan Gifford. Could you fill out a prescription for a murder story?" Then he laughed at the other's astonished face. Waterfield began to smile doubtfully.

He said: "I hear *you're* the fellow who fills those out. Can't say I've read any of your stories. I'm not much on detective stuff."

"Tell you my problem if you have a minute." Gifford rested his palms against the counter edge. "I'm working on a fictional account of the Paxton murder. That is, I'm using the basic facts of the crime, but dressing it up with imaginary characters and events. One of my ideas is to make a principal witness out of the man who runs civil defense in the town, as I know you did. Now, on the day of the murder, this fellow goes to the post office to put on some air raid signs. I have him go to the post office because it's right down there by the library, you know, not far from Willow Pool where—"

The telephone in his work room rang and Waterfield, whose face had grown increasingly disapproving, excused himself. Minutes passed and he did not return. Then a boy appeared to say that Mr. Waterfield was very busy and could not talk to Mr. Gifford any more that day.

Disappointed, Gifford ordered a strawberry soda and pondered his change of luck. Had he been too flip? Small town citizens are inclined to be proud of their local color and the Paxton case had been big stuff and no joking matter. If Waterfield were the humorless, officious character he'd been described as, Gifford could practically hear him telling the town that that "writer fellow" was going to rig up a story about the Paxton murder, adding a lot of trimmings and foolishness. Or perhaps Waterfield did not relish himself in the role of a chief witness, even in an imaginary capacity. Or had Gifford appeared to make light of the glorious trappings of civil defense?

Gifford walked home, determined now to play it straight. He needn't involve Mrs. De Ware; after all, the Paxton facts would be a matter of public record. At his cottage, he made a list of acquaintances, tradespeople and officials of Stockton old enough to have reliable memories of the event. Then he telephoned the drug store and Waterfield answered.

Gifford identified himself. "I'm afraid I gave the wrong impression just now, Mr. Waterfield. The fact is, I'm very seriously interested in the Paxton case and as far as I'm able, I intend to try and reopen it. Some rather interesting new evidence has come to light (heaven forgive him, but he had to capture the interest of these people if he expected to get anything from them) and I have before me a list of persons that I intend to call and ask for interviews. I wonder if you could give me twenty minutes tomorrow morning. I promise it won't be any longer."

There was a pause, then Waterfield said heavily: "Any time tomorrow," and hung up.

Gifford made a half dozen more calls and lined up four appointments for the next day, appointments he was never to keep.

For the next morning's *Stockton Eagle* carried screaming headlines of the suicide of Bernard Waterfield. He had shot himself, leaving a written confession to the murder of Dorothy Paxton. As he read, stunned, Gifford's eye caught and fixed on one phrase in the account, and deep pity welled in him for little Mrs. De Ware.

That evening, still glowing from the praise of his editor, Gifford sat with Mrs. De Ware at a quiet table of the Lord Jeffrey Inn at Amherst. Her eyes were red from weeping and Gifford occasionally patted her hand and told her to eat up like a good girl.

"After all," he smiled, "this is a celebration for both of us. But I do wish you'd told me Ralph Addison was your brother."

"Poor darling. To have his name exonerated at last. You don't know what it means."

"Admit that you deliberately baited me with that book, knowing I'd react like a bloodhound."

She nodded, giggled, and sipped her coffee. Then her eyes grew sombre. "For fifteen years I've felt sure that Ralph was innocent. And he knew that I believed in him, but it didn't help very much. Even though they couldn't convict him, the cloud never lifted. You can imagine what it was like, right up to the day he died."

"I can. It must've been tough. Did you ever suspect Waterfield?"

"Yes. From the beginning."

"Why?"

She fixed her eyes on her plate. "Bernie courted me when we were both young. I knew the sort of man he was . . ."

After a moment, Gifford said: "Then, of course, the book coming back with that date on it must have cinched it for you. But why on earth wouldn't you let me *take* the book? You were driving me out to do your dirty work, why deprive me of an important piece of evidence?"

A waiter handed them dessert menus and withdrew. Mrs. De Ware studied hers intently. "Apple pie, fudge sundae, honeydew melon . . . Because there wasn't any evidence. There wasn't any book returned with the murder date on it . . ."

"But you told me—"

Mrs. De Ware smiled at Gifford's perplexity. "That book on civil defense was in a crate that we received from an estate last spring. When I saw the title, it reminded me of Bernie; he'd made such a nuisance of himself over the whole program. I began to think of how I might use it to expose him if he was guilty. I had the idea to rig the date. You should have seen me trying to make it look old and faded. The next step was to pick the right moment for putting you on the scent. Oh, good, here's my favorite: lemon meringue pie."



The Best-Friend Murder

1959

by Donald E. Westlake

Detective Abraham Levine of Brooklyn's Forty-Third Precinct chewed on his pencil and glowered at the report he'd just written. He didn't like it, he didn't like it at all. It just didn't feel right, and the more he thought about it the stronger the feeling became.

Levine was a short and stocky man, baggily dressed from plain pipe racks. His face was sensitive, topped by salt-and-pepper gray hair chopped short in a military crewcut. At fifty-three, he had twenty-four years of duty on the police force, and was halfway through the heart-attack age range, a fact that had been bothering him for some time now. Every time he was reminded of death, he thought worriedly about the aging heart pumping away inside his chest.

And in his job, the reminders of death came often. Natural death, accidental death, and violent death.

This one was a violent death, and to Levine it felt wrong somewhere. He and his partner, Jack Crawley, had taken the call just after lunch. It was from one of the patrolmen in Prospect Park, a patrolman named Tanner. A man giving his name as Larry Perkins had walked up to Tanner in the park and announced that he had just poisoned his best friend. Tanner went with him, found a dead body in the apartment Perkins had led him to, and called in. Levine and Crawley, having just walked into the station after lunch, were given the call. They turned around and walked back out again.

Crawley drove their car, an unmarked '56 Chevy, while Levine sat beside him and worried about death. At least this would be one of the neat ones. No knives or bombs or broken beer bottles. Just poison, that was all. The victim would look as though he were sleeping, unless it had been one of those poisons causing muscle spasms before death. But it would still be neater than a knife or a bomb or a broken beer bottle, and the victim wouldn't look quite so completely dead.

Crawley drove leisurely, without the siren. He was a big man in his forties, somewhat overweight, square-faced and heavy-jowled, and he looked meaner than he actually was. The Chevy tooled up Eighth Avenue, the late Spring sun shining on its hood. They were headed for an address on Garfield Place, the block between Eighth Avenue and Prospect Park West. They had to circle the block, because Garfield was a one-way street. That particular block on Garfield Place is a double row of chipped brownstones, the street running down between two rows of high stone stoops, the buildings cut and chopped inside into thousands of apartments, crannies and cubbyholes, niches and box-like caves, where the subway riders sleep at night. The subway to Manhattan is six blocks away, up at Grand Army Plaza, across the way from the main library.

At one P.M. on this Wednesday in late May, the sidewalks were deserted, the buildings had the look of long abandoned dwellings. Only the cars parked along the left side of the street indicated present occupancy.

The number they wanted was in the middle of the block, on the right-hand side. There was no parking allowed on that side, so there was room directly in front of the address for Crawley to stop the Chevy. He flipped the sun visor down, with the official business card showing through the windshield, and followed Levine across the sidewalk and down the two steps to the basement door, under the stoop. The door was propped open with a battered garbage can. Levine and Crawley walked inside. It was dim in there, after the bright sunlight, and it took Levine's eyes a few seconds to get used to the change. Then he made out the figures of two men standing at the other end of the hallway, in front of a closed door. One was the patrolman, Tanner, young, just over six foot, with a square and impersonal face. The other was Larry Perkins.

Levine and Crawley moved down the hallway to the two men waiting for them. In the seven years they had been partners, they had established a division of labor that satisfied them both. Crawley asked the questions, and Levine listened to the answers. Now, Crawley introduced himself to Tanner, who said, "This is Larry Perkins of 294 Fourth Street."

"Body in there?" asked Crawley, pointing at the closed door.

"Yes, sir," said Tanner.

"Let's go inside," said Crawley. "You keep an eye on the pigeon. See he doesn't fly away."

"I've got some stuff to go to the library," said Perkins suddenly. His voice was young and soft.

They stared at him. Crawley said, "It'll keep."

Levine looked at Perkins, trying to get to know him. It was a technique he used, most of it unconsciously. First, he tried to fit Perkins into a type or category, some sort of general stereotype. Then he would look for small and individual ways in which Perkins differed from the general type, and he would probably wind up with a surprisingly complete mental picture, which would also be surprisingly accurate.

The general stereotype was easy. Perkins, in his black wool sweater and belt-in-the-back khakis and scuffed brown loafers without socks, was 'arty'. What were they calling them this year? They were 'hip' last year, but this year they were—'beat.' That was it. For a general stereotype, Larry Perkins was a beatnik. The individual differences would show up soon, in Perkins' talk and mannerisms and attitudes.

Crawley said again, "Let's go inside," and the four of them trooped into the room where the corpse lay.

The apartment was one large room, plus a closet-size kitchenette and an even smaller bathroom. A Murphy bed stood open, covered with zebra-striped material. The rest of the furniture consisted of a battered dresser, a couple of armchairs and lamps, and a record player sitting on a table beside a huge stack of long-playing records. Everything except the record player looked faded and worn and secondhand, including the thin maroon rug on the floor and the soiled flower-pattern wallpaper. Two windows looked out on a narrow cement enclosure and the back of another brownstone. It was a sunny day outside, but no sun managed to get down into this room.

In the middle of the room stood a card table, with a typewriter and two stacks of paper on it. Before the card table was a folding chair, and in the chair sat the dead man. He was slumped forward, his arms flung out and crumpling the stacks of paper, his head resting on the typewriter. His face was turned toward the door, and his eyes were closed, his facial muscles relaxed. It had been a peaceful death, at least, and Levine was grateful for that.

Crawley looked at the body, grunted, and turned to Perkins. "Okay," he said. "Tell us about it."

"I put the poison in his beer," said Perkins simply. He didn't talk like

a beatnik at any rate. "He asked me to open a can of beer for him. When I poured it into a glass, I put the poison in, too. When he was dead, I went and talked to the patrolman here."

"And that's all there was to it?"

"That's all."

Levine asked, "Why did you kill him?"

Perkins looked over at Levine. "Because he was a pompous ass."

"Look at me," Crawley told him.

Perkins immediately looked away from Levine, but before he did so, Levine caught a flicker of emotion in the boy's eyes, what emotion he couldn't tell. Levine glanced around the room, at the faded furniture and the card table and the body, and at young Perkins, dressed like a beatnik but talking like the politest of polite young men, outwardly calm but hiding some strong emotion deep inside his eyes. What was it Levine had seen there? Terror? Rage? Or pleading?

"Tell us about this guy," said Crawley, motioning at the body. "His name, where you knew him from, the whole thing."

"His name is Al Gruber. He got out of the Army about eight months ago. He's living on his savings and the GI Bill. I mean, he was."

"He was a college student?"

"More or less. He was taking a few courses at Columbia, nights. He wasn't a full-time student."

Crawley said, "What was he full-time?"

"Not much of anything. A writer. An undiscovered writer. Like me."

Levine asked, "Did he make much money from his writing?"

"None," said Perkins. This time he didn't turn to look at Levine, but kept watching Crawley while he answered. "He got something accepted by one of the quarterlies once," he said, "but I don't think they ever published it. And they don't pay anything anyway."

"So he was broke?" asked Crawley.

"Very broke. I know the feeling well."

"You in the same boat?"

"Same life story completely," said Perkins. He glanced at the body of Al Gruber and said, "Well, almost. I write, too. And I don't get any money for it. And I'm living on the GI Bill and savings and a few home-typing jobs, and going to Columbia nights."

People came into the room then, the medical examiner and the boys from the lab, and Levine and Crawley, bracketing Perkins between them, waited and watched for a while. When they could see that the

M.E. had completed his first examination, they left Perkins in Tanner's charge and went over to talk to him.

Crawley, as usual, asked the questions. "Hi, Doc," he said. "What's it look like to you?"

"Pretty straightforward case," said the M.E. "On the surface, anyway. Our man here was poisoned, felt the effects coming on, went to the typewriter to tell us who'd done it to him, and died. A used glass and a small medicine bottle were on the dresser. We'll check them out, but they almost certainly did the job."

"Did he manage to do any typing before he died?" asked Crawley.

The M.E. shook his head. "Not a word. The paper was in the machine kind of crooked, as though he'd been in a hurry, but he just wasn't fast enough."

"He wasted his time," said Crawley. "The guy confessed right away."

"The one over there with the patrolman?"

"Uh huh."

"Seems odd, doesn't it?" said the M.E. "Take the trouble to poison someone, and then run out and confess to the first cop you see."

Crawley shrugged. "You can never figure," he said.

"I'll get the report to you soon's I can," said the M.E.

"Thanks, Doc. Come on, Abe, let's take our pigeon to his nest."

"Okay," said Levine, abstractedly. Already it felt wrong. It had been feeling wrong, vaguely, ever since he'd caught that glimpse of something in Perkins' eyes.

And the feeling of wrongness was getting stronger by the minute, without getting any clearer.

They walked back to Tanner and Perkins, and Crawley said, "Okay, Perkins, let's go for a ride."

"You're going to book me?" asked Perkins. He sounded oddly eager.

"Just come along," said Crawley. He didn't believe in answering extraneous questions.

"All right," said Perkins. He turned to Tanner. "Would you mind taking my books and records back to the library? They're due today. They're the ones on that chair. And there's a couple more over in the stack of Al's records."

"Sure," said Tanner. He was gazing at Perkins with a troubled look on his face, and Levine wondered if Tanner felt the same wrongness that was plaguing him.

"Let's go," said Crawley impatiently, and Perkins moved toward the door.

"I'll be right along," said Levine. As Crawley and Perkins left the apartment, Levine glanced at the titles of the books and record albums Perkins had wanted returned to the library. Two of the books were collections of Elizabethan plays, one was the New Arts Writing Annual, and the other two were books on criminology. The records were mainly folk songs, of the bloodier type.

Levine frowned and went over to Tanner. He asked, "What were you and Perkins talking about before we got here?"

Tanner's face was still creased in a puzzled frown. "The stupidity of the criminal mind," he said. "There's something goofy here, Lieutenant."

"You may be right," Levine told him. He walked on down the hall and joined the other two at the door.

All three got into the front seat of the Chevy, Crawley driving again and Perkins sitting in the middle. They rode in silence, Crawley busy driving, Perkins studying the complex array of the dashboard, with its extra knobs and switches and the mike hooked beneath the radio, and Levine trying to figure out what was wrong.

At the station, after booking, they brought him to a small office, one of the interrogation rooms. There was a bare and battered desk, plus four chairs. Crawley sat behind the desk, Perkins sat across the desk and facing him, Levine took the chair in a corner behind and to the left of Perkins, and a male stenographer, notebook in hand, filled the fourth chair, behind Crawley.

Crawley's first questions covered the same ground already covered at Gruber's apartment, this time for the record. "Okay," said Crawley, when he'd brought them up to date. "You and Gruber were both doing the same kind of thing, living the same kind of life. You were both unpublished writers, both taking night courses at Columbia, both living on very little money."

"That's right," said Perkins.

"How long you known each other?"

"About six months. We met at Columbia, and we took the same subway home after class. We got to talking, found out we were both dreaming the same kind of dream, and became friends. You know. Misery loves company."

"Take the same classes at Columbia?"

"Only one. Creative Writing, from Professor Stonegell."

"Where'd you buy the poison?"

"I didn't. Al did. He bought it a while back and just kept it around. He kept saying if he didn't make a good sale soon he'd kill himself. But he didn't mean it. It was just a kind of gag."

Crawley pulled at his right earlobe. Levine knew, from his long experience with his partner, that that gesture meant that Crawley was confused. **"You went there today to kill him?"**

"That's right."

Levine shook his head. That wasn't right. Softly, he said, **"Why did you bring the library books along?"**

"I was on my way up to the library," said Perkins, twisting around in his seat to look at Levine.

"Look this way," snapped Crawley.

Perkins looked around at Crawley again, but not before Levine had seen that same burning deep in Perkins' eyes. Stronger, this time, and more like pleading. Pleading? What was Perkins pleading for?

"I was on my way to the library," Perkins said again. **"Al had a couple of records out on my card, so I went over to get them. On the way, I decided to kill him."**

"Why?" asked Crawley.

"Because he was a pompous ass," said Perkins, the same answer he'd given before.

"Because he got a story accepted by one of the literary magazines and you didn't?" suggested Crawley.

"Maybe. Partially. His whole attitude. He was smug. He knew more than anybody else in the world."

"Why did you kill him today? Why not last week or next week?"

"I felt like it today."

"Why did you give yourself up?"

"You would have gotten me anyway."

Levine asked, **"Did you know that before you killed him?"**

"I don't know," said Perkins, without looking around at Levine. **"I didn't think about it till afterward. Then I knew the police would get me anyway—they'd talk to Professor Stonegell and the other people who knew us both and I didn't want to have to wait it out. So I went and confessed."**

"You told the patrolman," said Levine, "that you'd killed your best friend."

"That's right."

"Why did you use that phrase, best friend, if you hated him so much you wanted to kill him?"

"He was my best friend. At least, in New York. I didn't really know anyone else, except Professor Stonegell. Al was my best friend because he was just about my only friend."

"Are you sorry you killed him?" asked Levine.

This time, Perkins twisted around in the chair again, ignoring Crawley. "No, sir," he said, and his eyes now were blank.

There was silence in the room, and Crawley and Levine looked at one another. Crawley questioned with his eyes, and Levine shrugged, shaking his head. Something was wrong, but he didn't know what. And Perkins was being so helpful that he wound up being no help at all.

Crawley turned to the stenographer. "Type it up formal," he said. "And have somebody come take the pigeon to his nest."

After the stenographer had left, Levine said, "Anything you want to say off the record, Perkins?"

Perkins grinned. His face was half-turned away from Crawley, and he was looking at the floor, as though he was amused by something he saw there. "Off the record?" he murmured. "As long as there are two of you in here, it's *on* the record."

"Do you want one of us to leave?"

Perkins looked up at Levine again, and stopped smiling. He seemed to think it over for a minute, and then he shook his head. "No," he said. "Thanks, anyway. But I don't think I have anything more to say. Not right now anyway."

Levine frowned and sat back in his chair, studying Perkins. The boy didn't ring true; he was constructed of too many contradictions. Levine reached out for a mental image of Perkins, but all he touched was air.

After Perkins was led out of the room by two uniformed cops, Crawley got to his feet, stretched, sighed, scratched, pulled his earlobe, and said, "What do you make of it, Abe?"

"I don't like it."

"I know that. I saw it in your face. But he confessed, so what else is there?"

"The phony confession is not exactly unheard of, you know."

"Not this time," said Crawley. "A guy confesses to a crime he didn't

commit for one of two reasons. Either he's a crackpot who wants the publicity or to be punished or something like that, or he's protecting somebody else. Perkins doesn't read like a crackpot to me, and there's nobody else involved for him to be protecting."

"In a capital punishment state," suggested Levine, "a guy might confess to a murder he didn't commit so the state would do his suicide for him."

Crawley shook his head. "That still doesn't look like Perkins," he said.

"Nothing looks like Perkins. He's given us a blank wall to stare at. A couple of times it started to slip, and there was something else inside."

"Don't build a big thing, Abe. The kid confessed. He's the killer; let it go at that."

"The job's finished, I know that. But it still bothers me."

"Okay," said Crawley. He sat down behind the desk again and put his feet up on the scarred desk top. "Let's straighten it out. Where does it bother you?"

"All over. Number one, motivation. You don't kill a man for being a pompous ass. Not when you turn around a minute later and say he was your best friend."

"People do funny things when they're pushed far enough. Even to friends."

"Sure. Okay, number two. The murder method. It doesn't sound right. When a man kills impulsively, he grabs something and starts swinging. When he calms down, he goes and turns himself in. But when you *poison* somebody, you're using a pretty sneaky method. It doesn't make sense for you to run out and call a cop right after using poison. It isn't the same kind of mentality."

"He used the poison," said Crawley, "because it was handy. Gruber bought it, probably had it sitting on his dresser or something, and Perkins just picked it up on impulse and poured it into the beer."

"That's another thing," said Levine. "Do you drink much beer out of cans?"

Crawley grinned. "You know I do."

"I saw some empty beer cans sitting around the apartment, so that's where Gruber got his last beer from."

"Yeah. So what?"

"When you drink a can of beer, do you pour the beer out of the can into a glass, or do you just drink it straight from the can?"

"I drink it out of the can. But not everybody does."

"I know, I know. Okay, what about the library books? If you're going to go kill somebody, are you going to bring library books along?"

"It was an impulse killing. He didn't know he was going to do it until he got there."

Levine got to his feet. **"That's the hell of it,"** he said. **"You can explain away every single question in this business. But it's such a simple case. Why should there be so many questions that need explaining away?"**

Crawley shrugged. **"Beats me,"** he said. **"All I know is, we've got a confession, and that's enough to satisfy me."**

"Not me," said Levine. **"I think I'll go poke around and see what happens. Want to come along?"**

"Somebody's going to have to hand the pen to Perkins when he signs his confession," said Crawley.

"Mind if I take off for a while?"

"Go ahead. Have a big time," said Crawley, grinning at him. **"Play detective."**

Levine's first stop was back at Gruber's address. Gruber's apartment was empty now, having been sifted completely through normal routine procedure. Levine went down to the basement door under the stoop, but he didn't go back to Gruber's door. He stopped at the front apartment instead, where a ragged-edged strip of paper attached with peeling scotch tape to the door read, in awkward and childish lettering, **SUPERINTENDENT**. Levine rapped and waited. After a minute, the door opened a couple of inches, held by a chain. A round face peered out at him from a height of a little over five feet. The face said, **"Who you looking for?"**

"Police," Levine told him. He opened his wallet and held it up for the face to look at.

"Oh," said the face. **"Sure thing."** The door shut, and Levine waited while the chain was clinked free, and then the door opened wide.

The super was a short and round man, dressed in corduroy trousers and a grease-spotted undershirt. He wheezed, **"Come in, come in,"** and stood back for Levine to come into his crowded and musty-smelling living room.

Levine said, **"I want to talk to you about Al Gruber."**

The super shut the door and waddled into the middle of the room,

shaking his head. "Wasn't that a shame?" he asked. "Al was a nice boy. No money, but a nice boy. Sit down somewhere, anywhere."

Levine looked around. The room was full of low-slung, heavy, sagging, over-stuffed furniture, armchairs and sofas. He picked the least battered armchair of the lot, and sat on the very edge. Although he was a short man, his knees seemed to be almost up to his chin, and he had the feeling that if he relaxed he'd fall over backwards.

The super trundled across the room and dropped into one of the other armchairs, sinking into it as though he never intended to get to his feet again in his life. "A real shame," he said again. "And to think I maybe could have stopped it."

"You could have stopped it? How?"

"It was around noon," said the super. "I was watching the TV over there, and I heard a voice from the back apartment, shouting, 'All! All!' So I went out to the hall, but by the time I got there the shouting was all done. So I didn't know what to do, I waited a minute, and then I came back in and watched the TV again. That was probably when it was happening."

"There wasn't any noise while you were in the hall? Just the two shouts before you got out there?"

"That's all. At first, I thought it was another one of them arguments, and I was gonna bawl out the two of them, but it stopped before I even got the door open."

"Arguments?"

"Mr. Gruber and Mr. Perkins. They used to argue all the time, shout at each other, carry on like monkeys. The other tenants was always complaining about it. They'd do it late at night sometimes, two or three o'clock in the morning, and the tenants would all start phoning me to complain."

"What did they argue about?"

The super shrugged his massive shoulders. "Who knows? Names. People. Writers. They both think they're great writers or something."

"Did they ever get into a fist fight or anything like that? Ever threaten to kill each other?"

"Naw, they'd just shout at each other and call each other stupid and ignorant and stuff like that. They liked each other, really, I guess. At least they always hung around together. They just loved to argue, that's all. You know how it is with college kids. I've had college kids renting

here before, and they're all like that. They all love to argue. Course, I never had nothing like this happen before."

"What kind of person was Gruber, exactly?"

The super mulled it over for a while. "Kind of a quiet guy," he said at last. "Except when he was with Mr. Perkins, I mean. Then he'd shout just as loud and often as anybody. But most of the time he was quiet. And good-mannered. A real surprise, after most of the kids around today. He was always polite, and he'd lend a hand if you needed some help or something, like the time I was carrying a bed up to the third floor front. Mr. Gruber come along and pitched right in with me. He did more of the work than I did."

"And he was a writer, wasn't he? At least, he was trying to be a writer."

"Oh, sure. I'd hear that typewriter of his tappin' away in there at all hours. And he always carried a notebook around with him, writin' things down in it. I asked him once what he wrote in there, and he said descriptions, of places like Prospect Park up at the corner, and of the people he knew. He always said he wanted to be a writer like some guy named Wolfe, used to live in Brooklyn too."

"I see." Levine struggled out of the armchair. "Thanks for your time," he said.

"Not at all." The super waddled after Levine to the door. "Anything I can do," he said. "Any time at all."

"Thanks again," said Levine. He went outside and stood in the hallway, thinking things over, listening to the latch click in place behind him. Then he turned and walked down the hallway to Gruber's apartment, and knocked on the door.

As he'd expected, a uniformed cop had been left behind to keep an eye on the place for a while, and when he opened the door, Levine showed his identification and said, "I'm on the case. I'd like to take a look around."

The cop let him in, and Levine looked carefully through Gruber's personal property. He found the notebooks, finally, in the bottom drawer of the dresser. There were five of them, steno pad size looseleaf fillers. Four of them were filled with writing, in pen, in a slow and careful hand, and the fifth was still half blank.

Levine carried the notebooks over to the card table, pushed the typewriter out of the way, sat down and began to skim through the books.

He found what he was looking for in the middle of the third one he

tried. A description of Larry Perkins, written by the man Perkins had killed. The description, or character study, which it more closely resembled, was four pages long, beginning with a physical description and moving into a discussion of Perkins' personality. Levine noticed particular sentences in this latter part: "Larry doesn't want to write, he wants to be a writer, and that isn't the same thing. He wants the glamour and the fame and the money, and he thinks he'll get it from being a writer. That's why he's dabbled in acting and painting and all the other so-called glamorous professions. Larry and I are both being thwarted by the same thing: neither of us has anything to say worth saying. The difference is, I'm trying to find something to say, and Larry wants to make it on glibness alone. One of these days, he's going to find out he won't get anywhere that way. That's going to be a terrible day for him."

Levine closed the book, then picked up the last one, the one that hadn't yet been filled, and leafed through that. One word kept showing up throughout the last notebook. "Nihilism." Gruber obviously hated the word, and he was also obviously afraid of it. "Nihilism is death," he wrote on one page. "It is the belief that there are no beliefs, that no effort is worthwhile. How could any writer believe such a thing? Writing is the most positive of acts. So how can it be used for negative purposes? The only expression of nihilism is death, not the written word. If I can say nothing hopeful, I shouldn't say anything at all."

Levine put the notebooks back in the dresser drawer finally, thanked the cop, and went out to the Chevy. He'd hoped to be able to fill in the blank spaces in Perkins' character through Gruber's notebooks, but Gruber had apparently had just as much trouble defining Perkins as Levine was now having. Levine had learned a lot about the dead man, that he was sincere and intense and self-demanding as only the young can be, but Perkins was still little more than a smooth and blank wall. "Glibness," Gruber had called it. What was beneath the glibness? A murderer, by Perkins' own admission. But what else?

Levine crawled wearily into the Chevy and headed for Manhattan.

Professor Harvey Stonegell was in class when Levine got to Columbia University, but the girl at the desk in the dean's outer office told him that Stonegell would be out of that class in just a few minutes, and would then be free for the rest of the afternoon. She gave him directions to Stonegell's office, and Levine thanked her.

Stonegell's office door was locked, so Levine waited in the hall,

watching the students hurrying by in both directions, and reading the notices of scholarships, grants and fellowships thumbtacked to the bulletin board near the office door.

The professor showed up about fifteen minutes later, with two students in tow. He was a tall and slender man, with a gaunt face and a full head of gray-white hair. He could have been any age between fifty and seventy. He wore a tweed suit jacket, leather patches at the elbows, and non-matching gray slacks.

Levine said, "Professor Stonegell?"

"Yes?"

Levine introduced himself and showed his identification. "I'd like to talk to you for a minute or two."

"Of course. I'll just be a minute." Stonegell handed a book to one of the two students, telling him to read certain sections of it, and explained to the other student why he hadn't received a passing grade in his latest assignment. When both of them were taken care of, Levine stepped into Stonegell's crowded and tiny office, and sat down in the chair beside the desk.

Stonegell said, "Is this about one of my students?"

"Two of them. From your evening writing course. Gruber and Perkins."

"Those two? They aren't in trouble, are they?"

"I'm afraid so. Perkins has confessed to murdering Gruber."

Stonegell's thin face paled. "Gruber's dead? Murdered?"

"By Perkins. He turned himself in right after it happened. But, to be honest with you, the whole thing bothers me. It doesn't make sense. You knew them both. I thought you might be able to tell me something about them, so it *would* make sense."

Stonegell lit himself a cigarette, offered one to Levine, but Levine declined. He'd given up cigarettes shortly after he'd started worrying about his heart.

"This takes some getting used to," said Stonegell after a minute. "Gruber and Perkins. They were both good students in my class, Gruber perhaps a bit better. And they were friends."

"I'd heard they were friends."

"There was a friendly rivalry between them," said Stonegell. "Whenever one of them started a project, the other one started a similar project, intent on beating the first one at his own game. Actually, that was more Perkins than Gruber. And they always took opposite sides of

every question, screamed at each other like sworn enemies. But actually they were very close friends. I can't understand either one of them murdering the other."

"Was Gruber similar to Perkins?"

"Did I give that impression? No, they were definitely unlike. The old business about opposites attracting. Gruber was by far the more sensitive and sincere of the two. I don't mean to imply that Perkins was insensitive or insincere at all. Perkins had his own sensitivity and his own sincerity, but they were almost exclusively directed within himself. He equated everything with himself, his own feelings and his own ambitions. But Gruber had more of the—oh, I don't know—more of a *world-view*, to badly translate the German. His sensitivity was directed outward, toward the feelings of other people. It showed up in their writing. Gruber's forté was characterization, subtle interplay between personalities. Perkins was deft, almost glib, with movement and action and plot, but his characters lacked substance. He wasn't really interested in anyone but himself."

"He doesn't sound like the kind of guy who'd confess to a murder right after he committed it."

"I know what you mean. That isn't like him. I don't imagine Perkins would ever feel remorse or guilt. I should think he would be one of the people who believes the only crime is in being caught."

"Yet we didn't catch him. He came to us." Levine studied the book titles on the shelf behind Stonegell. "What about their mental attitudes recently?" he asked. "Generally speaking, I mean. Were they happy or unhappy, impatient or content or what?"

"I think they were both rather depressed, actually," said Stonegell. "Though for somewhat different reasons. They had both come out of the Army less than a year ago, and had come to New York to try to make their mark as writers. Gruber was having difficulty with subject matter. We talked about it a few times. He couldn't find anything he really wanted to write about, nothing he felt strongly enough to give him direction in his writing."

"And Perkins?"

"He wasn't particularly worried about writing in that way. He was, as I say, deft and rather clever in his writing, but it was all too shallow. I think they might have been bad for one another, actually. Perkins could see that Gruber had the depth and sincerity that he lacked, and Gruber thought that Perkins was free from the soul-searching and self-doubt

that was hampering him so much. In the last month or so, both of them have talked about dropping out of school, going back home and forgetting about the whole thing. But neither of them could have done that, at least not yet. Gruber couldn't have, because the desire to write was too strong in him. Perkins couldn't, because the desire to be a famous writer was too strong."

"A year seems like a pretty short time to get all that depressed," said Levine.

Stonegell smiled. "When you're young," he said, "a year can be eternity. Patience is an attribute of the old."

"I suppose you're right. What about girl friends, other people who knew them both?"

"Well, there was one girl whom both were dating rather steadily. The rivalry again. I don't think either of them was particularly serious about her, but both of them wanted to take her away from the other one."

"Do you know this girl's name?"

"Yes, of course. She was in the same class with Perkins and Gruber. I think I might have her home address here."

Stonegell opened a small file drawer atop his desk, and looked through it. "Yes, here it is," he said. "Her name is Anne Marie Stone, and she lives on Grove Street, down in the Village. Here you are."

Levine accepted the card from Stonegell, copied the name and address onto his pad, and gave the card back. He got to his feet. "Thank you for your trouble," he said.

"Not at all," said Stonegell, standing. He extended his hand, and Levine, shaking it, found it bony and almost parchment-thin, but surprisingly strong. "I don't know if I've been much help, though," he said.

"Neither do I, yet," said Levine. "I may be just wasting both our time. Perkins confessed, after all."

"Still—" said Stonegell.

Levine nodded. "I know. That's what's got me doing extra work."

"I'm still thinking of this thing as though—as though it were a story problem, if you know what I mean. It isn't real yet. Two young students, I've taken an interest in both of them, fifty years after the worms get me they'll still be around—and then you tell me one of them is already wormfood, and the other one is effectively just as dead. It isn't real to me yet. They won't be in class tomorrow night, but I still won't believe it."

"I know what you mean."

"Let me know if anything happens, will you?"

"Of course."

Anne Marie Stone lived in an apartment on the fifth floor of a walk-up on Grove Street in Greenwich Village, a block and a half from Sheridan Square. Levine found himself out of breath by the time he reached the third floor, and he stopped for a minute to get his wind back and to slow the pounding of his heart. There was no sound in the world quite as loud as the beating of his own heart these days, and when that beating grew too rapid or too irregular, Detective Levine felt a kind of panic that twenty-four years as a cop had never been able to produce.

He had to stop again at the fourth floor, and he remembered with envy what a Bostonian friend had told him about a city of Boston regulation that buildings used as residences had to have elevators if they were more than four stories high. Oh, to live in Boston. Or, even better, in Levittown, where there isn't a building higher than two stories anywhere.

He reached the fifth floor, finally, and knocked on the door of apartment 5B. Rustlings from within culminated in the peephole in the door being opened, and a blue eye peered suspiciously out at him. "Who is it?" asked a muffled voice.

"Police," said Levine. He dragged out his wallet, and held it high, so the eye in the peephole could read the identification.

"Second," said the muffled voice, and the peephole closed. A seemingly endless series of rattles and clicks indicated locks being released, and then the door opened, and a short, slender girl, dressed in pink treader pants, gray bulky sweater and blonde pony tail, motioned to Levine to come in. "Have a seat," she said, closing the door after him.

"Thank you." Levine sat in a new-fangled basket chair, as uncomfortable as it looked, and the girl sat in another chair of the same type, facing him. But she managed to look comfortable in the thing.

"Is this something I did?" she asked him. "Jaywalking or something?"

Levine smiled. No matter how innocent, a citizen always presumes himself guilty when the police come calling. "No," he said. "It concerns two friends of yours, Al Gruber and Larry Perkins."

"Those two?" The girl seemed calm, though curious, but not at all worried or apprehensive. She was still thinking in terms of something no

more serious than jaywalking or a neighbor calling the police to complain about loud noises. "What are they up to?"

"How close are you to them?"

The girl shrugged. "I've gone out with both of them, that's all. We all take courses at Columbia. They're both nice guys, but there's nothing serious, you know. Not with either of them."

"I don't know how to say this," said Levine, "except the blunt way. Early this afternoon, Perkins turned himself in and admitted he'd just killed Gruber."

The girl stared at him. Twice, she opened her mouth to speak, but both times she closed it again. The silence lengthened, and Levine wondered belatedly if the girl had been telling the truth, if perhaps there had been something serious in her relationship with one of the boys after all. Then she blinked and looked away from him, clearing her throat. She stared out the window for a second, then looked back and said, "He's pulling your leg."

Levine shook his head. "I'm afraid not."

"Larry's got a weird sense of humor sometimes," she said. "It's a sick joke, that's all. Al's still around. You haven't found the body, have you?"

"I'm afraid we have. He was poisoned, and Perkins admitted he was the one who gave him the poison."

"That little bottle Al had around the place? That was only a gag."

"Not any more."

She thought about it a minute longer, then shrugged, as though giving up the struggle to either believe or disbelieve. "Why come to me?" she asked him.

"I'm not sure, to tell you the truth. Something smells wrong about the case, and I don't know what. There isn't any logic to it. I can't get through to Perkins, and it's too late to get through to Gruber. But I've got to get to know them both, if I'm going to understand what happened."

"And you want me to tell you about them."

"Yes."

"Where did you hear about me? From Larry?"

"No, he didn't mention you at all. The gentlemanly instinct, I suppose. I talked to your teacher, Professor Stonegell."

"I see." She got up suddenly, in a single rapid and graceless move-

ment, as though she had to make some motion, no matter how meaningless. "Do you want some coffee?"

"Thank you, yes."

"Come on along. We can talk while I get it ready."

He followed her through the apartment. A hallway led from the long, narrow living room past bedroom and bathroom to a tiny kitchen. Levine sat down at the kitchen table, and Anne Marie Stone went through the motions of making coffee. As she worked, she talked.

"They're good friends," she said. "I mean, they *were* good friends. You know what I mean. Anyway, they're a lot different from each other. Oh, golly! I'm getting all loused up in tenses."

"Talk as though both were still alive," said Levine. "It should be easier that way."

"I don't really believe it anyway," she said. "Al—he's a lot quieter than Larry. Kind of intense, you know? He's got a kind of reversed Messiah complex. You know, he figures he's supposed to be something great, a great writer, but he's afraid he doesn't have the stuff for it. So he worries about himself, and keeps trying to analyze himself, and he hates everything he writes because he doesn't think it's good enough for what he's supposed to be doing. That bottle of poison, that was a gag, you know, just a gag, but it was the kind of joke that has some sort of truth behind it. With this thing driving him like this, I suppose even death begins to look like a good escape after a while."

She stopped her preparations with the coffee, and stood listening to what she had just said. "Now he did escape, didn't he? I wonder if he'd thank Larry for taking the decision out of his hands."

"Do you suppose he asked Larry to take the decision out of his hands?"

She shook her head. "No. In the first place, Al could never ask anyone else to help him fight the thing out in any way. I know, I tried to talk to him a couple of times, but he just couldn't listen. It wasn't that he didn't want to listen, he just couldn't. He had to figure it out for himself. And Larry isn't the helpful sort, so Larry would be the last person anybody would go to for help. Not that Larry's a bad guy, really. He's just awfully self-centered. They both are, but in different ways. Al's always worried about himself, but Larry's always proud of himself. You know. Larry would say, 'I'm for me first,' and Al would say, 'Am I worthy?' Something like that."

"Had the two of them had a quarrel or anything recently, anything that you know of that might have prompted Larry to murder?"

"Not that I know of. They've both been getting more and more depressed, but neither of them blamed the other. Al blamed himself for not getting anywhere, and Larry blamed the stupidity of the world. You know, Larry wanted the same thing Al did, but Larry didn't worry about whether he was worthy or capable or anything like that. He once told me he wanted to be a famous writer, and he'd be one if he had to rob banks and use the money to bribe every publisher and editor and critic in the business. That was a gag, too, like Al's bottle of poison, but I think that one had some truth behind it, too."

The coffee was ready, and she poured two cups, then sat down across from him. Levine added a bit of evaporated milk, but no sugar, and stirred the coffee distractedly. "I want to know why," he said. "Does that seem strange? Cops are supposed to want to know who, not why. I know who, but I want to know why."

"Larry's the only one who could tell you, and I don't think he will."

Levine drank some of his coffee, then got to his feet. "Mind if I use your phone?" he asked.

"Go right ahead. It's in the living room, next to the bookcase." Levine walked back into the living room and called the station. He asked for Crawley. When his partner came on the line, Levine said, "Has Perkins signed the confession yet?"

"He's on the way down now. It's just been typed up."

"Hold him there after he signs it, okay? I want to talk to him. I'm in Manhattan, starting back now."

"What have you got?"

"I'm not sure I have anything. I just want to talk to Perkins again, that's all."

"Why sweat it? We got the body; we got the confession; we got the killer in a cell. Why make work for yourself?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'm just bored."

"Okay, I'll hold him. Same room as before."

Levine went back to the kitchen. "Thank you for the coffee," he said. "If there's nothing else you can think of, I'll be leaving now."

"Nothing," she said. "Larry's the only one who can tell you why."

She walked him to the front door, and he thanked her again as he was leaving. The stairs were a lot easier going down.

When Levine got back to the station, he picked up another plainclothesman, a detective named Ricco, a tall, athletic man in his middle thirties who affected the Ivy League look. He resembled more closely someone from the District Attorney's office than a precinct cop. Levine gave him a part to play, and the two of them went down the hall to the room where Perkins was waiting with Crawley.

"Perkins," said Levine, the minute he walked in the room, before Crawley had a chance to give the game away by saying something to Ricco, "this is Dan Ricco, a reporter from the *Daily News*."

Perkins looked at Ricco with obvious interest, the first real display of interest and animation Levine had yet seen from him. "A reporter?"

"That's right," said Ricco. He looked at Levine. "What is this?" he asked. He was playing it straight and blank.

"College student," said Levine. "Name's Larry Perkins." He spelled the last name. "He poisoned a fellow student."

"Oh, yeah?" Ricco glanced at Perkins without much eagerness. "What for?" he asked, looking back at Levine. "Girl? Any sex in it?"

"Afraid not. It was some kind of intellectual motivation. They both wanted to be writers."

Ricco shrugged. "Two guys with the same job? What's so hot about that?"

"Well, the main thing," said Levine, "is that Perkins here wants to be famous. He tried to get famous by being a writer, but that wasn't working out. So he decided to be a famous murderer."

Ricco looked at Perkins. "Is that right?" he asked.

Perkins was glowering at them all, but especially at Levine. "What difference does it make?" he said.

"The kid's going to get the chair, of course," said Levine blandly. "We have his signed confession and everything. But I've kind of taken a liking to him. I'd hate to see him throw his life away without getting something for it. I thought maybe you could get him a nice headline on page two, something he could hang up on the wall of his cell."

Ricco chuckled and shook his head. "Not a chance of it," he said. "Even if I wrote the story big, the city desk would knock it down to nothing. This kind of story is a dime a dozen. People kill other people around New York twenty-four hours a day. Unless there's a good strong sex interest, or it's maybe one of those mass-killings things like the guy who put the bomb in the airplane, a murder in New York is

filler stuff. And who needs filler stuff in the Spring, when the ball teams are just getting started?"

"You've got influence on the paper, Dan," said Levine. "Couldn't you at least get him picked up by the wire services?"

"Not a chance in a million. What's he done that a few hundred other clucks in New York don't do every year? Sorry, Abe, I'd like to do you the favor, but it's no go."

Levine sighed. "Okay, Dan," he said. "If you say so."

"Sorry," said Ricco. He grinned at Perkins. "Sorry, kid," he said. "You should of knifed a chorus girl or something."

Ricco left and Levine glanced at Crawley, who was industriously yanking on his earlobe and looking bewildered. Levine sat down facing Perkins and said, "Well?"

"Let me alone a minute," snarled Perkins. "I'm trying to think."

"I was right, wasn't I?" asked Levine. "You wanted to go out in a blaze of glory."

"All right, all right. Al took his way, I took mine. What's the difference?"

"No difference," said Levine. He got wearily to his feet, and headed for the door. "I'll have you sent back to your cell now."

"Listen," said Perkins suddenly. "You know I didn't kill him, don't you? You know he committed suicide, don't you?"

Levine opened the door and motioned to the two uniformed cops waiting in the hall.

"Wait," said Perkins desperately.

"I know, I know," said Levine. "Gruber really killed himself, and I suppose you burned the note he left."

"You know damn well I did."

"That's too bad, boy."

Perkins didn't want to leave. Levine watched deadpan as the boy was led away, and then he allowed himself to relax, let the tension drain out of him. He sagged into a chair and studied the veins on the backs of his hands.

Crawley said, into the silence, "What was all that about, Abe?"

"Just what you heard."

"Gruber committed suicide?"

"They both did."

"Well—what are we going to do now?"

"Nothing. We investigated; we got a confession; we made an arrest. Now we're done."

"But—"

"But hell!" Levine glared at his partner. "That little fool is gonna go to trial, Jack, and he's gonna be convicted and go to the chair. He chose it himself. It was *his* choice. I'm not railroad him; he chose his own end. And he's going to get what he wanted."

"But listen, Abe—"

"I won't listen!"

"Let me—let me get a word in."

Levine was on his feet suddenly, and now it all came boiling out, the indignation and the rage and the frustration. "Damn it, you don't know yet! You've got another six, seven years yet. You don't know what it feels like to lie awake in bed at night and listen to your heart skip a beat every once in a while, and wonder when it's going to skip two beats in a row and you're dead. You don't know what it feels like to know your body's starting to die, it's starting to get old and die and it's all downhill from now on."

"What's that got to do with—"

"I'll tell you what! They had the *choice*! Both of them young, both of them with sound bodies and sound hearts and years ahead of them, decades ahead of them. And they chose to throw it away! They chose to throw away what I don't have any more. Don't you think I wish I had that choice? All right! They chose to die, let 'em die!"

Levine was panting from exertion, leaning over the desk and shouting in Jack Crawley's face. And now, in the sudden silence while he wasn't speaking, he heard the ragged rustle of his breath, felt the tremblings of nerve and muscle throughout his body. He let himself carefully down into a chair and sat there, staring at the wall, trying to get his breath.

Jack Crawley was saying something, far away, but Levine couldn't hear him. He was listening to something else, the loudest sound in all the world. The fitful throbbing of his own heart.



1960

by Donald Honig

The place to begin a newspaper career, they said, is in the small town. There, they said, I would learn all the basic concepts: how real news is made, what makes a newspaper run, its unbending devotion to its readers, its ethics, and so on.

So, determined to be a student of my profession, I was anxious to begin.

Just to illustrate how we are all exposed to the reckless indiscrimination of chance twenty-four hours a day, I landed my first job purely by accident. And what a fortunate accident it was to become. (I was to learn later that in the newspaper business any accident is fortunate.) I happened to display my typewriter in the bus depot of a small town (which I would prefer to leave unidentified, for certain ethical reasons which will make their appearance shortly). My typewriter was observed by a gentleman who was many things in one, publisher, editor and staff of the local paper and who had the small, shrewd grey eyes that we associate with eminent newspapermen whoever they are. He assumed from my typewriter that I was a literate, aspiring person who knew how to spell in at least one language. And so was I discovered and hired.

We marched out of the bus depot and the editor, whose name was Mr. Cyril Flagg, took me right up to the office which was over a supermarket. It was a rather small office, with two desks and chairs, worn-out linoleum, faded wallpaper, a few pots of disconsolate and generally unwatered geraniums, a flood of excited-looking paper all over the place, and overall the very scent of thrill and fever, the pulse and the heartbeat of the newspaper world.

"This is it," Mr. Flagg said, unbuttoning his shirt collar and letting his tie-knot slide down. He looked like a real newspaperman.

"It's wonderful," I said.

"The other fellow disappeared," Mr. Flagg said laconically.

"Who?"

"Your predecessor."

"You mean he left?"

"Oh, he left all right. No question about that. But nobody seems to know where or why." He held up a copy of *The Dash*, dated several weeks previous. The headline read: ASSOCIATE EDITOR DISAPPEARS. He put it back down. "It sold out the whole edition. Best story we've had here in months. Disappearance stories never fail to intrigue people. Something morbid in their blood."

"Maybe he'll still turn up," I said.

"Tisn't likely," Mr. Flagg said. "When a person disappears around here, he disappears permanently."

I didn't like the sound of that. Mr. Flagg did not appear to be lamenting in the least the disappearance of his former employee. It gave me a very odd feeling.

"What's your name anyway?" Mr. Flagg asked.

"Gerber," I said. "Andrew Gerber."

"Do you understand the relationship between yourself and your newspaper, Gerber?" he asked. "It is a relationship more sacred than that of doctor and patient. The dissemination of news, that which interests and influences the minds of people, is the highest calling. We must always provide fodder for public consumption and never divulge our sources. Do you understand that, Gerber?" he asked sternly.

"Yes sir," I said.

"There is a code of ethics. Once you begin here you're sworn to it. It's an oath."

"I understand," I said.

"Good," he said. We shook hands.

Within a few days I was comfortably ensconced in my job. From my desk I could see the main street and I was able to watch all the happenings and all the comings and goings in town. This would have been an ideal situation except that nothing ever happened and very little either came or went. It was a somnolent little town, with only the merest ripples of animation.

I was beginning to wonder, after a few yawning weeks, what this town needed a newspaper for. Outside of the man who wound the clocks and the tavern that wound the man, there seemed need for little else. With patient fidelity *The Dash* reported births and deaths and an-

niversaries and other nostalgic events. Sometimes weeks went by with neither a birth nor a demise; that's how disinterested in the tides of history these people were.

But Mr. Flagg was unfailingly absorbed, as though he expected a few ax killings and floods and plagues every day. Sometimes, to fill up space, I had to write descriptions of sunsets, or go over to the school and interview the children about such controversial topics as Christmas and ice cream and bicycles.

One day, however, a crisis came. There was absolutely nothing to put on the front page. Everything in town had come to a standstill. Even the weather had remained unchanged for weeks. I sat at my desk and stared grievously at the indestructible immobility outside. I despaired of seeing a paper getting out that week. The sacrosanct tradition of never missing an issue certainly seemed in jeopardy. It was the most tragic moment of my life, up to that time.

I turned to Mr. Flagg, who was sitting at his desk dipping his pen into his inkwell and throwing patterns of inkspots onto the green blotter. I mentioned the impasse we had struck.

"Is that so?" he said, making his spots.

"Yes, sir," I said gravely.

"We'll have to do something then," he said, going on with his spots, apparently fascinated by them.

"Has this ever happened before?" I asked.

"Frequently," he said. "This very thing cropped up several weeks before your arrival. We were saved then by your predecessor's disappearance."

Again I had that odd, uneasy feeling.

"Now we must face the new emergency," Mr. Flagg said.

"What do we do?" I asked.

"We employ our imaginations. We cease being analytical and become creative. Let's see now," he said thoughtfully, cupping his chin and staring at the wall. "We could demand that a certain corpse be exhumed and an autopsy performed. But no, I think we used that one a few years ago."

I thought he was being unduly facetious. Then he got up and walked over to the far wall and removed from its nails a shotgun which I had hitherto regarded as some harmless and senile relic. He blew a cloud of dust from the barrel. Then he examined the breech, with satisfaction. Then he stepped over to the desk and from a drawer took out a few

surly-looking shells, rattling them in his hand. He split the shotgun and inserted several shells and closed the gun up again. Then he looked at me.

"Put on your hat," he said.

I did that, and followed him out of the office. We went down the back steps and got into Mr. Flagg's car. Then we drove from town, Mr. Flagg and I and the shotgun. We drove along an old dirt road until we saw a man walking.

"Ah," Mr. Flagg said with pleasure. "Old Jim." He stopped the car and took the shotgun and got out. I followed. He looked at me, his shrewd, grey newspaperman's eyes severe, uncompromising. "Do you remember your oath, Gerber?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," I said.

Then we went on. Old Jim was walking toward us. He waved when he saw us, giving a senile cackle.

"Doing some hunting, Cyril?" he asked Mr. Flagg.

"Yes," Mr. Flagg said grimly. "And in a good cause too." Whereupon he lifted the rifle, pointed it at Old Jim, squinted carefully down the barrel, and fired. There was a terrific explosion. When the smoke had gone and I had sufficiently recovered my faculties, I gathered courage and went over to Old Jim. He was lying in a peaceful heap in the road, his chest still smoking. My horror may well be imagined.

"All right," Mr. Flagg said calmly, blowing through puckered lips on the end of the barrel. "There's your story. Make your lead, 'Jim Penn murdered by person or persons unknown.' Make some notes."

Being a hired person, and seeing the smoking shotgun in his hands, I was obliged to comply, moving with haste. I took out my pad and pencil and began writing, although I could scarcely hold the pencil.

"It's a good story," Mr. Flagg said, discharging the empty shell. He put the shotgun back in the car and came back with his camera. He took several pictures. "All right," he said. "Tonight you'll go and interview the family. I'll write an editorial. Gosh, it's warm out today."

Murder on the dirt road. It made a thumping good story. It brought people out of their various lethargies. Excitedly they talked about it. We filled one whole issue with the story and the interviews, and the next issue with the story of the funeral and the next two issues with the investigation, and after that we had some editorial indignation left over to fill one more issue. Mr. Flagg said that perhaps we ought to accuse someone of the murder and cover the trial, but decided against it.

"We got five issues out of it," he said. "I'm satisfied. See, Gerber? Sometimes you have to improvise. The public must be served. Someday you'll have your own paper. I hope you'll remember and appreciate what I'm teaching you here."

Needless to say I was living in a state of cold, perpetual horror those weeks. I dared not face people. Directly after work every evening I fled straight home with my coat collar up around my face, my conscience chafing with screeching noises. I realized then that something evil had befallen my predecessor and I began to fear for my own life. So in order to avoid another impasse, which could have meant my own sacrifice upon the altar of *The Dash*, I worked with added vigor in trying to collect news, and through it all was becoming a good newspaperman which, after all, was the most important thing.

But then, a few months later, we struck another impasse, even more formidable than the previous one had been. Blank white pages leered at us from all over the office. I sat and watched Mr. Flagg, waiting. A cold, harrowing chill kept coming and going along my spine. I was terrified, but fascinated.

For several hours he sat in stolid contemplation. I realized that he might very well be having my own disposal under consideration. Once or twice he glanced at me and I could feel my image passing coldly through his imagination. His shrewd grey eyes were filled with deep meditation.

He made a sudden gesture and I leaped up.

"Why, Gerber," he said, "what's the matter?"

"Nothing," I said, embarrassed, feeling the springy little palpitations in my heart.

"I was getting up to leave," he said.

"So early?" I asked.

"Yes. I'm going to go and look for something for *The Dash*. We need something."

He went out and I slumped back down in my chair. I was in a dangerous situation, I realized. The only thing in my favor was the fact that he had so recently disposed of one of his editors, and that if another one were to disappear at this time it might not arouse the interest of his subscribers.

But I could never foretell how his mind was going to work. I was going to have to be on the alert from now on.

The next morning found the crisis still extant. Mr. Flagg, after a half

hour's silent meditation, rose, put on his hat and beckoned to me. Like a robot, cold and hypnotized, I followed. We went downstairs. We got into the car. For about a half hour we drove through the quiet streets, back and forth, up and down. He had left the shotgun on the wall, so it was going to be different this time.

Then we saw a woman crossing on a side street. Mr. Flagg tore down the block at top speed and got her perfectly. She flew legs-upward into the air as if she had been shoveled, turned over once, and landed comfortably on top of a well manicured hedge. I whirled in the seat and looked back.

"Well?" Mr. Flagg asked.

"She's moving," I said.

"Well, it'll do. Got your lead? 'Hit-and-run driver strikes down woman.' We'll blame it on a teenager and heap some abuse on the Safety Council. Also we'll accuse the Bureau of Licenses of accepting bribes and licensing incompetent drivers. Got it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. I'll drop you off at the next corner and you can scoot back and interview her. Make sure you spell her name right."

That story kept us going for two weeks and eased some of the pressure. We had to retract about the bribes of course, but did it in such a way as to cast even more suspicion. Mr. Flagg was quite pleased and I was relieved, for the immediate threat to my life had been removed.

One day Mr. Flagg asked how I was enjoying my apprenticeship.

"Very much," I said.

"Have you learned much?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "A great deal." He gave me a rather searching, uneasy stare. Then I knew that Mr. Flagg had become as afraid of me as I was of him.

That evening I stayed late at the office and began going back through the files. Some of the stories were appalling, but I couldn't help but be fascinated. I found one, dated back several years, about the "Mad Arsonist" who had burned down the school and the hospital. Another time someone had unlocked the lion's cage in a visiting carnival and three people had disappeared into the lion's jaws before the police had brought the depredations to a halt. Then there was the one about someone throwing a hand grenade into a Campfire Girls League get-together. That story ran for eight issues, with elaborate interviews. It was fol-

lowed by a picture of Mr. Flagg receiving an award from some editors' guild for outstanding human interest coverage.

I ran all the way home that night, trembling with a terrific exhilarating excitement. I paced my room all night, chain-smoking one cigarette after another. I began to feel for the first time the genuine thrill and excitement of newspaper work. My temples throbbed with an intoxication that was almost unbearable. There had never been a kidnapping or a drowning. Or a mad bomber. Perhaps Mr. Flagg might permit me to suggest one of these the next time.

I couldn't stand it. From sheer exhilaration I fell asleep.

And then several weeks later another lull set in. We sat in the office. Mr. Flagg appeared more deeply concerned than at any other time. But I was busy writing what I believed would certainly be an exciting lead.

"Gerber," he said wearily, "we've come to another impasse." He was getting old, losing his imaginative vigor. The hit-and-run story hadn't been as successful as he'd hoped.

"I'm working on something now, sir," I said.

"Good. Let me see it when you're done."

Then it was finished. I rose. Upon this day I was becoming a newspaperman. I could feel it. I brought the lead over to him. There in good, bold, black letters was my proposed lead: AWARD-WINNING EDITOR FOUND SLAIN IN OFFICE. As he whirled around I brought the paper-weight down on his head, again . . . and again . . .



1960

by James Holding

Mrs. Clyde Lattimer sat quietly behind the wheel of her gray De Soto convertible and waited for the school bell to ring. She was a very pretty woman with warm, golden skin, blonde hair, a trim figure. Her brown eyes, peering through the windshield, were still and luminous.

Her car was parked at the curb, a hundred yards from the school doors. That was close enough, however, for her to hear the dismissal bell when it rang at 3:30, and to see quite clearly the children who immediately began to pour from the building and scatter, chattering, to their homes. School was over for another day. And in this quiet suburb of a city whose name Mrs. Lattimer did not know, most of the pupils who attended elementary school walked home; they were not chauffeured by harried mothers as in the big city schools with which she was familiar.

Mrs. Lattimer was beginning to grow anxious when the child for whom she was waiting appeared. With several papers in her hand, a little girl of kindergarten or, perhaps, first grade age, emerged from the school entrance and turned down the street, moving without hurry, and alone.

Mrs. Lattimer stirred. A subdued excitement animated her face. She lifted one tapering hand to shade her eyes as she watched the sprightly figure of the little girl walking away from her. There was a youthful poise and springiness about the child's gait that caught at her throat; but she watched carefully, drawing deep breaths, until she saw that the child's route was firmly established as one that continued straight away from the school in a southerly direction.

Then she reached out and turned on the ignition of her car, trod on the starter, pulled from the curb.

The car was traveling thirty miles an hour when it passed the young-

ster on the sidewalk. Mrs. Lattimer stole a quick glance at her from the corner of her eye as she drove by.

Yes, she thought, joy flooding through her like a spring tide, yes!

She drove another eighth of a mile along the road that was being followed by the girl. The avenue rapidly became less built-up. Only an occasional house bordered it now. It was almost like a country road, she thought, almost like Merriweather Lane in the small mountain resort where she had met her husband, Clyde. Large, oriental plane trees, freshly dressed in bright green, shaded the asphalt road, their branches meeting overhead.

Mrs. Lattimer stopped on the right side of the road under one of these trees. Turning her head to look about her, she saw no one save the distant, approaching figure of the child. While she waited, she pulled the lever on the dashboard that lowered the canvas top of the convertible. It collapsed into ordered folds behind the rear seat.

When the little girl on the sidewalk came opposite the car, Mrs. Lattimer opened the door on the right side and spoke to her. "I'm going your way, darling," she said, with a smile on her full lips. "I thought I recognized you when I passed you back there. Hop in, and I'll drive you home."

The child hesitated.

"Don't worry," Mrs. Lattimer said gently, "I know your mother. I know where you live, too, and I'll have you there in a jiffy. Come on, now. It's all right." She continued to hold the car door open invitingly.

The child's eyes were busy. "A convertible," she said practically. "I never rode in one of those."

"Now's your chance, then," Mrs. Lattimer wheedled. "Get in, dear. There's nothing to be frightened of."

"I know. Mother says I mustn't get into a car with any strange man. But you're not a man, are you? You're a lady. You look nice, too. I guess it's all right." She clambered into the leather seat beside Mrs. Lattimer and pulled the heavy door shut. She said, "You smell good, too. Just like mother." She leaned back in the wide seat primly, holding the school papers that were covered with childish drawings in her lap, and tilted her head to look upward. "It's like riding in a boat, isn't it?" she said. "You can see the sky."

Mrs. Lattimer put her car in gear and turned out into the road. As she drove, she kept glancing with tenderness and love at the little girl, and when she had taken note of the fine-spun blonde curls, the gentian-

blue eyes, and the serious set of the young brows, she felt something like a hard muscular hand fasten around her heart and squeeze it tightly. Fondly, she catalogued the child's strap slippers of shiny black patent leather, the hand-smocked lavender dress under the open cardigan, and she sighed deeply in relief.

"You know, darling," she confided, "I was afraid I might have picked up the wrong little girl. But I didn't. You're exactly the right one."

"I'm glad I am. What's your name, please?"

"Mrs. Lattimer. What's yours?"

"Joan." This was said in a proper grown-up way. "But everybody calls me Joannie."

"Joan? Joannie?" There was a note of querulous disappointment in Mrs. Lattimer's voice. "That's a nice name. Have I always called you that, darling?"

Joan looked puzzled. "I guess not," she finally said. "You just know my mother, you see. You don't know me yet. Not until now."

The car was bowling along at good speed, bouncing with well-sprung ease over the potholes left in the road by the severe winter just past. Mrs. Lattimer turned left at the next intersection. Joan didn't notice. She was examining with interest the lever that controlled the convertible's canvas top.

"My daddy could get a convertible if he wanted to, I bet," Joan said. "I wish he would. I like convertibles. I like yours, anyway, Mrs. Lattimer. We have a Chevrolet sedan."

Mrs. Lattimer didn't take her eyes from the road. "A Chevrolet?" she said, surprised. "Daddy must have bought that without consulting me. We've *always* had De Sotos."

"My daddy, I mean. We've never had a De Soto. Only Chevrolets."

Mrs. Lattimer was silent, giving all her attention to her driving. When she spoke it was to change the subject. "Tell me, dear," she said warmly, "how are you getting along with your school work?"

Joan held out the papers in her lap. "Miss Gentry says I'm very good in art," she said. "I get good marks in that. I can't read very well though. I'm only in first grade."

"What happened?" Mrs. Lattimer said with some concern. "You ought to be finishing the second grade this year. At six, you certainly ought to be that far. I'll have a talk with Miss Lawrence, the first chance I get."

"I'm only five, Mrs. Lattimer. And my teacher is Miss Gentry. I'm not dumb enough to still be in first grade if I was six!" Joan was hurt.

"Of course," Mrs. Lattimer soothed her. "I'm a bit confused. Forgive me, darling. I thought you were six in October."

"Five," Joan said stoutly, "in August."

"Well," Mrs. Lattimer said quickly, "don't let my foolish mistakes upset you, Joannie. Has Miss Lawrence managed to teach you to tell time yet?"

"Miss Gentry."

"Yes, Miss Gentry. Has she taught you to tell time?"

"Only part way. I know what time it is when the hands on the clock are straight up and down, and . . ." She looked from the car and let her last words die. "Mrs. Lattimer!" she said urgently. "You're going the wrong way. This isn't the street that goes home."

"I know, Joannie. But I thought you'd like it if I took you for a little ride. You said you liked to ride in my open car."

"I do. But won't mother wonder where I am?"

"I can call her and tell her where you are, dear," Mrs. Lattimer offered comfortingly. "Then she won't worry."

"That'll be okay," Joannie said, "if you call up mother. I'd like to go for a ride with you."

"Of course you would. I was sure of it." The words had an undertone of eager excitement.

"Where will you phone from?"

"Maybe they have a phone over there in that candy store. I'll see." She waved a hand at a confectionery store on the near extremity of a long block of shops they were approaching, a shopping center development. "And shall I buy you a chocolate bar while I'm there?"

"Will you? I love chocolate bars. Without nuts."

"Without nuts. I'll remember." Mrs. Lattimer pulled into an empty parking space in the lot before the huge shopping center, where hundreds of cars were parked. The afternoon traffic was very heavy. "You stay right here in the car, Joannie," Mrs. Lattimer said. "I'll only be a minute. Have you ever been here before?"

"I don't think so. Where is it?"

"I'll be right back," Mrs. Lattimer said without answering Joan's question. She went hurrying off, her trim hips swaying as her slender legs carried her smoothly into the crowd of shoppers. Where is the

candy store, she thought, terrified, where is it? I don't know. I can't remember. I can't remember so many things.

She returned to the car quickly. "What did mother say?" Joan asked, trying to remember her manners and keep her eyes from straying to the chocolate bar that she could see in Mrs. Lattimer's hand. "Did she say okay?"

"She said okay, darling. I can have you for another hour, anyway. Here's your candy." She hurriedly got into the car, backed out of the parking space, and drove away.

"Thank you," Joannie said politely and began to strip the paper from the candy bar. Mrs. Lattimer stayed on the highway for a few miles, then turned off at an intersection. Soon they had left the busy urban area behind them and were riding in leisurely fashion through an attractive suburban countryside.

"Aren't you going to offer me a bite of your candy, Linda?" Mrs. Lattimer asked in a teasing voice. She turned to look with her luminous eyes at the small golden-haired sprite beside her. The sun was beginning to sink toward the horizon, so that the rays were long and slanting and as gold as Joannie's hair.

Joannie paused with the bar of candy halfway to her mouth. "You're funny, Mrs. Lattimer," she said with a bubble of treble laughter. "You called me Linda."

"What's wrong with that, darling? It's your name, isn't it?"

"No. My name isn't Linda. I told you, Mrs. Lattimer. My name is Joan."

Mrs. Lattimer turned her eyes back to the road. "There I go again," she said lightly, "making more mistakes. Forgive me, Joannie. Isn't this fun?"

"It's awful nice," Joan agreed. "Here's a bite of chocolate for you."

Mrs. Lattimer leaned over to nibble at the proffered chocolate bar with even white teeth. "Mmmm," she said. "Yum." She licked her lips. "That's good."

"Without nuts is best."

"Yes, that's the best kind."

They rode in companionable silence for a few minutes. Then Joan, who had been thinking, asked abruptly, "Why did you call me Linda, Mrs. Lattimer?"

Mrs. Lattimer's body jerked in the seat. She felt herself suddenly drawing away, almost physically, from a sinister nightmare presence

that lay in a dark cave somewhere inside her, waiting to spring out with a shattering roar. She turned her head from side to side several times, unconsciously, as though to ease a stiff neck. "Linda," she whispered, "why do you say such unkind things, Linda?"

"I'm not Linda. Are you sick, Mrs. Lattimer?"

"I'm a little dizzy, darling. That's all. Nothing serious, really. I'll just pull up here for a minute till it passes."

"I am awful sorry you're sick. I like you."

"Thank you. I want you to. So much." She felt better. The lurking monster in the cave drew back almost out of sight. Her mind was cool and controlled. She didn't even have to stop the car. She went on driving.

"I'm so glad you like me, Joannie," she said. "See, I didn't call you Linda that time, did I?" She was silent for a moment. Then she said, "I have a little girl of my own, you see, named Linda."

"Oh." This explained things to Joan. "And you call me Linda 'cause I'm like your little girl? Is that why?"

"That's right, darling. You are very much like her. She has blonde curls like yours. And blue eyes. And she wears patent leather slippers and smocked dresses, too."

"My grandmother made this dress for me," Joan said with a touch of vanity.

"I know. She makes them for Linda, too."

"Does Linda go to my school?"

"No, dear. You don't know her."

"But you said you knew my mother."

"I do." Mrs. Lattimer, all at once, was wracked with an enormous pity for all innocent, young, beautiful children. And somehow, all children seemed to her to be Linda. They were all the same. They were all one. They were all Linda. Beautiful. Incredibly beautiful. "I had this frightening dream a while ago, Joannie," she explained, staring straight ahead through the windshield. "I can't forget it. And that's strange, too, because I forget places, and names, and even things very easily."

"I hate scary dreams," Joan said with understanding. "I have them, too." She hesitated. "What was yours?"

"I shouldn't tell you, darling. It was too horrible. It was about you. I mean, about Linda, my little girl. Her daddy and I were going to take her to see the circus for the first time. Have you ever seen one?"

"Last summer. It was lovely."

"Yes. So you know how excited you can be, going to the circus for the first time. Linda was like that. She could hardly sit still. She was laughing and gay and talked about the circus for several days beforehand. We were going in the afternoon—to the matinee performance."

"That's the best time, my daddy says. The animals aren't tired yet."

"That's right. And Linda and I were waiting when her daddy came home from his office in the car to pick us up. We jumped in, and off we went to the circus."

"It's a nice dream so far," Joannie commented.

Mrs. Lattimer's hands gripped the steering wheel very hard.

"In my dream," she went on quietly, "we were driving along the highway to the circus grounds when, all of a sudden, another car came out of nowhere and struck us, head on. And we all went flying through the air, Linda and her daddy and I. We were riding in a convertible with the top down, just like this one. And Linda was killed. And her daddy was killed." Mrs. Lattimer laughed. "But I landed in a soft bed of weeds alongside the road, and I wasn't hurt a bit." She closed her eyes briefly, but her eyeballs seemed to push against her lowered lids like animals cautiously testing the walls of a cage, so she opened them again at once.

Joan was silent. That was a bad dream. Poor Mrs. Lattimer.

Presently Joan said in the comforting tones she had often heard her mother use when soothing her after a nightmare, "It was only a dream. When you wake up, things are always okay again."

Mrs. Lattimer sat up straighter in her seat. She drove a little faster. "Yes, darling," she said briskly, "it was all a bad dream. You're right. I must try to forget it."

Joan wrapped the silver paper around the remnants of her candy bar. "I'll save a bit for daddy," she decided. "He loves chocolate bars, too."

Mrs. Lattimer glanced at her wrist watch, a luxurious affair of platinum and diamonds. She stepped down slightly on the accelerator. "We must hurry, darling," she said. "We must hurry home. Daddy will be waiting."

"Okay," Joannie said resignedly. "It's been a very nice ride."

"We don't want to miss the circus," Mrs. Lattimer said.

Joan turned her head to look at her. The little girl's eyes grew big and puzzled. Fear dawned in them. "I want to go home, please," she said as calmly as she could.

"That's where we're going. As fast as ever we can, dear. Haven't you noticed the trucks? This is the truck route."

"But aren't we going in the wrong direction?"

"No, this is right. This is the way to Memphis, I feel sure."

"Memphis? Where's that, please, Mrs. Lattimer?"

"You silly child. That's where we live. You know that perfectly well, Linda."

Joan's lower lip began to quiver. "I don't live in Memphis, Mrs. Lattimer," she pleaded. "I live in Centertown. 945 South Paisley Street." She parroted the address her mother had taught her in case she should ever become lost. Tears began to roll down her cheeks. "I want to go home! I want my mother." She was sobbing now, utterly terrified at last.

"Mother's here, darling," Mrs. Lattimer said. "Right in the seat beside you. Don't cry. Please don't cry, dear. Everything will be all right for us."

"It *isn't* all right!" Joan wept. "I want my mother. Please, Mrs. Lattimer, take me home."

"Don't call me Mrs. Lattimer, Linda. That's a funny way to talk to your own mother, isn't it?"

"You're *not* my mother!" Joan screamed hysterically. "You're not, you're not!"

Mrs. Lattimer stopped the car. The sun was touching the horizon and the strange, opalescent light of that peaceful time of day gave the deserted countryside through which the car had been traveling an unreal appearance of golden gaiety, like the mellow tones of wheat fields in old landscape paintings.

"I'm not?" Mrs. Lattimer said gropingly. "I'm not your mother?" Heartbreak looked through her glistening brown eyes. "You're being very naughty, Linda, to say such a thing! Of course I'm your mother."

"No," Joan sobbed.

"You're tired, that's what's the trouble, darling. You didn't have your nap this afternoon. Why don't you lie down and take a little rest right now, dear? You'll feel ever so much better when you wake up. You'll know, then, who you really are."

"No, Mrs. Lattimer. Please. Please."

"You *must* rest, Linda. I insist. Remember, daddy will be home soon. And you'll want to be fresh and rested for the circus." Mrs. Lattimer turned in the seat and reached her hands out toward Joan. And even though Joan shrank away from her, pressing herself desperately

into the far corner of the front seat, the love and tenderness in Mrs. Lattimer's gaze did not falter for an instant.

"My poor darling," she crooned, "Linda's so tired. Sleep just a little while, dear. Mother will wake you in plenty of time for the circus." Her hands fastened around Joannie's slender throat. She thought she was being very gentle. But her hands squeezed harder than she knew. "Sleep, Linda," she said softly, the cadences of a lullaby all at once distinguishable in her low voice. "Go to sleep, darling."

A strange, rather pleasant sensation of repleteness assailed Mrs. Lattimer, as though she were a hollow vessel suddenly filled to overflowing with the sublime emotions of motherhood—kindness, patience, understanding, gentleness, infinite love. And she felt a pure, sweet weight of pity sink down through her body until it reached the dark cave where her nightmare lay and blocked up the cave mouth securely.

She kept murmuring, "Go to sleep, darling," over and over again, although she was confused by the wild threshing of Joannie's arms and legs, and by the large childish blue eyes that stayed wide open, bulging, staring at her in terror, instead of closing quietly in sleep as she knew they should.

The hiss of air bleeding from applied air brakes suddenly distracted Mrs. Lattimer. She took her hands from Joan's throat and glanced over her shoulder. A large trailer truck was bearing down upon them rapidly, its speed diminishing as it approached the parked car. The driver evidently intended to stop.

Mrs. Lattimer put her right arm around Joan's shoulders and pulled the little girl against her tenderly. She ignored the gully sobs and harsh breathing of the almost strangled child, turning with calm courtesy to the driver of the truck who pulled his rig up beside her and looked down upon her from the open window of his cab. She saw that he was young and swarthy, with a cigarette dangling from one corner of his mouth.

"Am I on the right road for Centertown, lady?" he asked with a curious glance at the gasping child beside her.

"Yes," Mrs. Lattimer said. "Go straight ahead and you can't miss it." She knew absolutely nothing about the road or where it led.

He nodded. "Thanks," he said. Again he looked at Joan. "Is your little girl all right, lady? She's not sick, is she?"

"No. Just naughty. I've been giving her a good talking to," Mrs. Lattimer said, smiling. "I'm afraid I've made her cry." She patted Joan's

shoulder and looked up at the truck driver confidentially. "She won't take her nap, you know."

The truck driver nodded. "Kids," he said. "They think they know better than us. Mine are the same." He put his truck in gear and fed gas to the big motor.

Although Joan could not yet draw a full breath through her bruised windpipe, although she could not summon from her vocal cords a single word of appeal to the departing truck driver, his departure—and with him, hope—caused her to try to free herself. Mrs. Lattimer grabbed her once, but Joan broke free of her grasp again and squirmed up and over the closed convertible door like a panic-crazed eel. She fell to hands and knees on the shoulder of the road but was up again in a moment and running for life itself into the wooded field beside the car.

For a long time Mrs. Lattimer felt such an enervating lassitude sweep over her that she could scarcely make herself realize that Linda was gone. Finally, with an enormous effort, she lifted her head and looked blankly at the empty seat beside her.

"Linda," she said appealingly, "where are you?" She felt like crying. "You *can't* hide now, Linda! It's time for your nap. Please don't make me provoked with you, darling."

She waited as though for an answer, and then slowly she clambered out of the car, taking the keys with her. She walked around to the trunk and opened it. When it gaped wide, with the lid standing high on its hinges, she peered into the luggage compartment anxiously. Then a smile of relief softened her taut lips. "Oh, there you are, Linda dear," she said joyfully.

The body of a little girl lay inside the trunk—a little girl who had been about Joan's age and with the same golden hair and blue eyes. One of the dead child's hands was arranged under her cheek, and her legs were curled into the attitude that many children assume when they sleep.

Mrs. Lattimer leaned far inside the luggage compartment and kissed the child's forehead. "That's right, Linda," she said, smoothing the golden hair. "Go to sleep."

When she got into her car again and began to drive, she felt better. The lassitude left her. The monster was safely shut up in his cave. She hummed softly to herself. Dusk was falling. It was her favorite time of day.

Their ride had evidently taken them on a great circle, for she was

aware after a short while that she was back in Centertown again. She pointed the nose of the gray De Soto south. On her way out of town, she passed the school where she had found Joan.

There was considerable activity going on there now, she noticed. In the twilight she could see many parked cars. Some had the word "Police" lettered on them. And a lot of men—men with grim determined faces, parents, perhaps?—were milling around a big fellow in police uniform who appeared to be briefing them.

"Oh dear," Mrs. Lattimer thought aloud, "how awful! It's a search party being organized. Somebody's child is lost."

She drove sedately past, slowly, carefully, but with a sharp swelling happiness rising in her.

She thought exultantly, it isn't *my* child that's lost. Thank God I haven't lost Linda.



by Glenn Andrews

From the time of its founding, Leeds College for Women was exclusive, fashionable, and dedicated to progressive educational methods. In 1894, its name was officially changed to Leeds. Today, as in the case of students at Bennington, Vassar, and Sarah Lawrence, those who attended Leeds were granted status as well as an education. And it is not surprising that Leeds' student body, numbering 1,326, had girls coming from families that prided themselves on their wealth, position, and genealogy. However, in its class of '64, there was also an emotionally confused, but very beautiful girl whose father had in the summer of 1949 and in Los Angeles County been tried and convicted of murder.

A second tragedy for Ann Griffith started—if you can actually determine the exact genesis of the fateful events of an individual's life—on September 14th, 1960, the first day of registration in Leeds' Main Gym.

Widely spaced card tables formed an oval on the gym floor and behind them sat representatives of the 172-member faculty ready to advise and direct incoming students. Ann Griffith was standing hesitantly outside the periphery of the tables and it was there that Carol Lynn Lauscher—heir to the Lauscher brewery, soft drinks, baby dolls, pulp paper, and horse racing millions—spoke to her for the first time.

Carol Lynn, too tall for a girl, with a face that sadistic, adolescent boys invariably described as horsey, made up for these lacks and her family's wealth by a driving personality. So when Carol Lynn saw Ann Griffith, she noticed her beauty—the pallid, dark-eyed ethereal sort—and that she was not tall, but an enviable five foot two or three.

"Hi," Carol Lynn said, slapping the rolled-up catalogue of courses in the palm of her hand as she approached Ann. "You look lost. You must be new here. I am too."

All Ann did was smile—tentatively. She'd overheard her uncle and her aunt—separately, and on irritatingly innumerable occasions—observe

regretfully that she was slow to make friends. But it was more than that now. She was scared. She wished she were back with her uncle and aunt, that she had never permitted them and their imported Boston psychologist to decide it would be best that she, finally, get away from their "omnipresent protection." There had been the chronic worry at high school that the girls would find out about her father, but being overawed by Leeds—its tradition and standing—made that worry worse. But Ann was pathetically vulnerable to requests.

And so before she knew it, Ann found that Carol Lynn had talked her into being her roommate—third floor, front, in Randolph Hall, facing the quad. And so she also found herself talked into archery in Physical Ed, though it passed through her mind that bows and arrows were weapons, even if it was a gun that her father had used.

But apprehensive though she was at the start, Carol Lynn's acceptance of her also made Ann feel more secure. They actually made a good pair, because Ann, by allowing herself to be a docile follower, helped Carol Lynn subconsciously to reassure herself that personality—and that was what she had—was superior to beauty.

Carol Lynn got Ann to change her hairdo, from pageboy to the more current bouffant. And Carol Lynn took over their dorm room, littering it with her belongings and artifacts, chief of which was the "scalp" of a boy she had met in Cannes while attending a Swiss finishing school. She covered one end wall with a billboard poster that said all Madison Avenue wanted the poster to say, though not a word was used; merely a frosted, larger-than-life can of Lauscher Beer. Ann's end of the room remained monastically bare. And most important of all, Carol Lynn arranged blind dates with two boys from nearby Dartmouth, for the Saturday of registration week. That was a mistake, but Carol Lynn had no way of knowing that.

The date went the usual catastrophic way of blind dates. Cliff Farnsworth II, who was to have been Carol Lynn's date, was dark and handsome, but he was not tall—not tall enough for her. And so Cliff switched, very naturally and casually, to Ann. Unfortunately for Carol Lynn, though Mike Petruski, the other blind date, had height and athletic prowess, he lacked mental breadth and so he sat like a clod, a superb specimen of a clod, not saying a single word.

They had gone to a roadside place frequented by college kids. It was jammed and noisy. Dancing was practically impossible, and you had to

hold your drink with one hand and guard it with the other if you didn't want it spilled.

Ann's first feeling of terror came soon after Cliff took her hand, holding it behind him, and running interference for her through the jam-up at the bar. Outside, the air by contrast felt wonderfully cool and fresh.

Ann was terribly aware that Cliff was still holding her hand. A reflection from a neon sign bathed his face with a pink glow.

"Out here, at least," Cliff said, "you can hear yourself think. What a relief."

And then it came.

"Don't I know you from someplace, Ann?" Cliff asked. "You seemed familiar, the minute I saw you, but I just can't . . ."

Ann shook her head.

And then Cliff said he was from California and Ann's first reaction was to snatch her hand from his and run, though she was only seven when the murder had taken place and she had left California immediately afterward.

The second feeling of terror came when the fellows had dutifully seen the girls to the dorm. Mike had wandered off, after mumbling what was probably good-night and good-by, and Carol Lynn had headed up the stairs to her toothbrush and bed on the third floor.

The entry where Ann and Cliff were standing was practically dark; the only light coming into it was from an overhead light in the lounge straight ahead. Though Cliff at nineteen thought himself a man of the world, there was the embarrassed awkwardness that preceded kissing a certain girl for the first time. But his inflated estimate of his way with women made it imperative that he kiss Ann good-night.

"This date, you know," he said, "has been the greatest."

"I had a very nice time, Cliff."

The awkward silence was back.

"Now look, Ann, I'm seeing you tomorrow. Don't tell me no. I won't be going back to school till way late in the afternoon. Gee, we haven't had a chance to talk. I want to get to know you better . . ."

Cliff went on with what he regarded as a sure-fire approach, but he'd left Ann's thoughts behind with his "I want to get to know you better." They were alarmed and terrified thoughts. The old reflective fear that her friends might find out about her father.

". . . just a little, innocent good-night kiss," Cliff concluded.

Suddenly Ann realized Cliff had his arm around her waist and was

trying to kiss her. She drew back, but Cliff wasn't one to give up. And then, because she was a mixed-up kid, she impulsively went to the other extreme and responded to Cliff's advance with a desperate sort of eagerness that both frightened and puzzled him and left him somewhat overwhelmed.

Ann didn't remember walking up the three flights of stairs. She didn't hear what Carol Lynn said when she entered the room. When she got down to earth, Ann found herself sitting on the edge of her bed and was aware that her side of the room was as dark as the entry downstairs had been. Carol Lynn's gooseneck desk lamp was on and Carol Lynn sat cross-legged in the middle of her bed, brushing at her hair, spot-lighted by the lamp.

Ann vaguely recalled that Carol Lynn had been speaking about what a bust her end of the date had been. And she was now expounding on the opportunities of the forthcoming fall mixer, which would be attended by men of all shapes, sizes, and native ability.

"Carol Lynn," Ann said hesitantly.

"Well! So you can talk!" Carol Lynn didn't stop brushing at her hair. "You've been awfully quiet. Like someone in love. Boy, that fellow, that Cliff, does he admire his looks and way of life."

Ann thought, "I don't want to confide in her. No, not really. I just want to tell her, tell everybody, and kill my chances here. Get kicked out of Leeds. Show that oh-so-smart mind reader from Boston. Show my oh-so-solicitous aunt and uncle. God, if I could only go off someplace and die."

And then Ann stood up and told Carol Lynn about her father. The whole thing in a fast nutshell—the murder, his confession, the trial, his death in prison.

And Carol Lynn listened to it all, paused only twice in her brush strokes. She wasn't horrified as Ann had expected her to be, for Carol Lynn had gone to all the good schools and one thing she had absorbed was that one should never appear to try too hard, should be flip at all times—or brittle—and should never be unduly impressed.

"My dad was investigated—by Congress," Carol Lynn said. "So what are you getting all excited about?"

"Oh, but that's not the same thing," Ann protested.

"It made as much of a stir. It was about anti-trust or something. Dad has all these subsidiaries. He had beer—just beer—and then for taxes or

something he got these others. Probably it's all illegal, but Dad has just been smart. We're all crooks. We're all potential murderers."

"But my father killed a man—"

"There are all kinds—"

"—and that makes me more of a potential murderer than you. Because of heredity. Genes determine more than if you're going to have blue eyes or brown eyes—I've studied about it."

"All right, your father shot somebody," said Carol Lynn, her tone indicating she was now going to be very dispassionate about the whole thing. "At least he did it because he loved a woman. But there are all kinds of murder. What about the man who has a tenement house and children in it die because of unhealthy living conditions? He's a murderer, too, isn't he?"

"You think everybody at Leeds would take your attitude to—to—"

"Probably not." Carol Lynn shrugged. "There are all kinds of people, you know."

"That's it, that's just it. And I'm always scared that that kind will find out. But I do think I ought to tell Cliff."

"Why, for heaven's sake?"

"I'm seeing him tomorrow and I—"

"Don't tell me that you've fallen for that line of his. Oh, Ann, what a little, tiny babe in the woods you are. You need someone to watch over you. *There* is a wolf—that Cliff, that conceited, handsome, strutting man from Dartmouth."

"Don't you think I ought to see him?"

"That's up to you, child. But I certainly wouldn't take him seriously. I'd—I'd just bear in mind the sort he is."

Ann didn't sleep; she lay on her back, looked at the blackness of the night, and thought. One thing she decided: Carol Lynn was sore at Cliff because he had been her date to start with and he hadn't stuck with her. So she ran him down, called him a wolf. She was really envious, and didn't want her to have Cliff. And look at the way she'd even belittled the fact that her father was a murderer, actually trying to make out that her father was just as bad, if not worse. Maybe—very likely—she just wanted her to tell Cliff all about her father and the murder, so that she'd lose Cliff. But if she couldn't tell Cliff, would she ever be able to tell any man?

And when Ann thought of Cliff's kissing her and his saying that he

wanted to see her the next day, she had the feeling that he was in love with her and she wondered if she was really in love with him.

And then in the most obvious, corniest way, her fantasy showed her married to Cliff: she was serving him at a beautifully appointed table; they were seated side by side in front of the fire of a fireplace, hands clasped. But it also showed her what might happen if she told Cliff about her father. She saw him shaking his head, his expression pained, turning from her, leaving her forever.

And then the fantasy pictures switched off and she thought, "I won't tell Cliff—not yet, anyway." As so frequently happened, she thought of suicide—and that, if anything went wrong, she could always turn to it. It occurred to her that perhaps if she had told Carol Lynn about the time they had to pump her stomach after she'd taken the sleeping pills, Carol Lynn might have admitted that she wasn't as much of a potential murderer as her roommate was. For it was Karen Horney, or one of them, who said suicide was simply murder turned inwards.

And then she thought of Dean Mattison's address of welcome. The Dean's saying that Leeds' first function was to help the individual find her true identity, her true individuality. This was something that always bothered Ann, almost as much as being found out.

And, finally, Ann's thoughts merged with sleep.

Ann just made it for breakfast the next morning; in another minute or so the dorm dining room would have been closed. Then, because it was such a beautiful autumn day, she walked aimlessly over the campus lawns until the horrified thought occurred to her that Cliff might call while she was out walking.

The phone room was just off the dorm lounge, so Ann sat on a couch along a wall opposite the entrance and leafed abstractedly through the *Sunday Times*. She missed one item, looked right over it, that was of vital significance to her.

The dateline was Pasadena.

"Clara Francis Stanton, one of the key figures in a sensational murder trial of the forties, underwent major surgery at the Cedars of Lebanon Hospital . . ."

There was no one in the lounge except Ann and a girl playing snatches of Chopin on the piano.

Ann tired of looking at the *Times* without reading it. She rose and went to the phone board, on the slight chance that Cliff might have

called during the brief interval of her after-breakfast walk. As she expected, there wasn't a message for her on the board.

Back to the lounge Ann went to wait some more, back to the same couch along the far wall. But in walking to the couch, she had the uncomfortable feeling that the girl at the piano noticed that she was waiting for a call and knew it was from a man and that the man was standing her up.

"I'm imagining it," she told herself. "I'm paranoid."

But she was unable to remain in the lounge and went up to her room.

The room was empty and silent and lonely, Carol Lynn's bed unmade. Carol Lynn had already been gone when Ann had awakened and rushed off for breakfast.

"It's still early—for Sunday," Ann thought. "Cliff's probably still sleeping."

But she immediately realized that she was up and that Carol Lynn had been up even before her, and that if Cliff were eager to see her, he would have been up especially early.

She sat at her desk, opened *From Beowulf to Thomas Hardy*, but found herself unable to concentrate on her English Lit assignment.

Carol Lynn rushed in around twelve, grabbed a looseleaf notebook, and, before rushing out, paused in the doorway long enough to pant, "I thought you were seeing that *wunderkind* today."

Before Ann could answer, her roommate was gone. And her departure brought back the terrible loneliness of the room. Ann wished she were dead. She was certain she was different from all other girls—and far, far unhappier.

Ann didn't go down for lunch.

She lay on her bed and looked at the ceiling.

At one point a voice yelled up at the dorm windows, "Bea Schrader! Telephone! It's a man!" There was distant muffled laughter, and a voice answering, "Coming!"

Ann got up and went to the window and looked down on the campus. Her attention fastened on a pretty blonde in a red-and-green kilt and matching knee socks. Because she wanted to believe it, she was sure this girl had no real problems, that she felt wonderfully secure, that she had found her true identity. Thinking this, Ann's eyes filled with tears of self-pity. And standing at the window and feeling as she did caused her to recall the long stretch of time when she had a compulsion to jump out of windows that were high up. She tried and tried to re-

member the name of the doctor in Syracuse who'd really helped her get over this, but couldn't.

It was while she was still trying to remember that she saw Cliff, walking arm in arm with a girl, both of them kicking playfully through the fallen autumn leaves. Her tears obscured what she saw and so to make sure that she was actually seeing Cliff and this girl, she hurriedly rubbed at the tears with her hand.

Ann saw that Cliff and the girl were crossing the open end of the quadrangle. They were laughing and talking and, being arm in arm, their faces were close; it was all very cozy.

"Oh," Ann said, clenching and unclenching her hands, "I could kill him. I could kill him."

And then she twisted from the window, bent forward as in tortured pain, her hands pressed tight to the top of her head. She kept telling herself that Carol Lynn had been right about Cliff. She hated him, hated him . . .

She fell on her bed, face down, and felt her terrible hurt, her unbearable humiliation. His kiss hadn't meant anything. He had probably completely forgotten that he had said he wanted to see her on Sunday. And here she had waited and waited . . .

When she finally got up and splashed cold water in her face, she thought—with more self-pity—that now she could go out; she had no one to wait for.

"Ann Griffith, telephone!" someone shouted from down below, outside. "Telephone! Telephone! Ann—Ann Griffith!"

Ann went to the window. "All right," she told the girl looking up at the dorm windows.

Before, when she'd waited for Cliff's call, she would have run down the stairs; now she purposely, consciously, took her time. She was sure it was her uncle on the wire. She'd tell him how unhappy she was. If he didn't come and take her out of Leeds, she'd run away—or jump out the window and kill herself.

But it was Cliff on the phone. Surprised, confused, Ann had a difficult time concentrating. And he was doing all the talking.

"Please forgive me, honey," he was saying. "I'm calling long distance. I had to rush back to school this morning, so naturally I couldn't see you and I didn't have a chance to get in touch with you. But how about next weekend? How about it, honey?"

"He's a liar," Ann thought. "He couldn't be back at school yet. Anyhow, I certainly saw him here this morning with that girl."

"Let me make it up to you," he was saying, "for standing you up? Huh? What do you say?"

"All right," Ann said, thinking, "This will give me my chance to hurt him the way he hurt me."

"How about next Saturday?" he asked.

"Fine. Next Saturday'll be fine."

"Oh, you're a doll. No wonder I feel about you the way I do."

"You love me, don't you?"

There was a pause. He'd been so voluble, this was clearly a definite pause. "'Course I do," Cliff said, finally.

"Next Saturday will be fine," Ann said, and it felt as if her blood were boiling.

She left the dorm and walked and walked. And as she walked she plotted how she would have her revenge. She now felt that standing Cliff up, giving him some of his own medicine, wouldn't be enough. That wouldn't satisfy her. Then she remembered what she said aloud when she was looking out of the window and saw him with that girl. "I could kill him," was what she'd said. That she'd said that—automatically, reflexively—struck her as significant. That was what she really wanted to do—kill him. Then she told herself that she had no choice, really, because she was a murderer. That was her true identity; she'd undoubtedly inherited the desire to kill from her father.

Ann knew where the fellows roomed when they came to Leeds, the old frame houses right off the campus, along Whittaker Street. She would walk right in on Cliff, the way her father had walked in on the man he had killed, and she would shoot him.

She would have to get a gun. She wanted the same type of murder weapon that her father had used. It was almost, she thought whimsically, sadly, as if there was a gene that transmitted a predilection in the matter of murder weapons.

Perhaps thought of murder weapons led her to the gym locker room, where she got her new Osage Orange bow and a sheaf of arrows. After a whole day of inactivity, this was something to do. And shooting an arrow was related to shooting a gun and this now made it desirable.

The archery area was in a meadow far to the rear of the gym and, though running parallel to the tennis courts, far removed from them.

Bales of straw that formed a high protective wall behind the targets were a safety measure.

Ann had been shooting arrows automatically and dispiritedly for about half an hour when she decided to go back to her room. She wanted to look at the picture of her father that she kept hidden face down under some blouses in a drawer. There was a marked resemblance between Ann and her father, especially around the eyes. After rejecting her father for all these years, she hungered to be one with him, to have a father at last like all the other girls. And she wanted to gain further assurance from the resemblance between her and her father that she had also inherited those traits that had made him a murderer. She'd miss Sunday supper, too, she decided. And, after looking at her father's picture, go right to bed. She'd tell Carol Lynn she wasn't feeling very well.

Dusk was just coming on. The setting sun had made a wide tangerine border of the horizon and enhanced the wild richness of color of the autumn leaves. Even this beauty hurt Ann; it magnified, by contrast, the ugly thing Cliff had done to her.

And then, as though he'd been taken by the hand and led to that spot by Fate, there Cliff was, walking towards her.

"Ann!" he exclaimed, as though meeting her like this was the pleasantest of surprises.

Ann said nothing, felt only a cold numbness.

"This is a little awkward, isn't it?"

Ann didn't answer.

Cliff laughed. "I sure would have dodged you if I had seen you coming," he said. "I'll admit I would." He waited for Ann to say something, but when he saw she wasn't going to, he asked, with a show of irritation, "What do you want, an explanation? Or should we forget the whole blooming thing and start from scratch?"

"This explanation," Ann said, suddenly so furious she was trembling, "it would be a lie. Another lie, I suppose."

"Now, honey," Cliff said, "let's not get in an uproar."

"You won't want to see me next Saturday," Ann heard herself saying.

"I sure do."

"I couldn't make up my mind," Ann rushed on, "whether or not I should tell you something that's quite personal. Now I'm going to. My

father was a murderer. A murderer. You still want to see me? It might be dangerous. You might stand me up again and then I might—"

"Aw," Cliff said and tried to put his arm around her, to render bygones bygones. He had obviously not taken seriously what she had said. He managed to brush her cheek with his lips, but she had moved back, as though repelled. This angered him. "All right," he said. "Be mad. Who the hell cares?"

He was walking away from her. She hated him with an overwhelming hate. She wanted to kill him. And this desire blended instantaneously with the rationalization that she had to kill him, because the compulsion to kill was in her blood and couldn't be checked.

He was still walking away. Soon he would blend with the dusk and disappear. It wasn't until Ann heard the twang that the string made when it glanced off the protective archery shield on her arm that she was brought back to reality. Cliff was no longer walking away from her. He lay curled on his side. The shaft of an arrow protruded from his back.

Ann became aware of herself running and then of Carol Lynn and her uncle coming towards her. In her dreams she invariably ran and people she never expected were always turning up, so this was a dream.

When Ann had started running, she had headed straight for Randolph Hall—to confess to the house mother what she had done. Now, in a state of shock, she knew only that there was something important she had set out to do, but she could not remember what it was, or what it was all about.

It felt good being held in her uncle's embrace. But when he told her that he had wonderful news—that Clara Francis Stanton had made a death-bed confession that exonerated Ann's father; that he had taken the rap for this woman because he loved her and because he was a fine, honorable person, no more a murderer than the man in the moon—Ann made no meaning out of what he had said.



1961

by Donald Martin

As usual, Mrs. Grady read the morning paper with her breakfast. And again as usual, she skipped over the national and international news—it had become too vast and complex for her to understand—and read the local news on the inside pages. With morbid fascination she found the inevitable crime stories. Mayhem was flourishing with ever-increasing fragrance. She winced and cringed inwardly as she sipped her coffee and read the unblushing details of the latest brutal robbery or murder.

"It's as Oliver always said," she said aloud. Oliver was her late husband, dead these twenty years, but still orally referred to by his widow, for he had uttered many memorable things. Oliver had said once, and Mrs. Grady was remembering it now: "I tell you, Myrt, instead of civilization advancing, actually it's the opposite. The very fact that people, in the face of scientific and intellectual progress, still remain heartless brutes, means that they are going backwards." Oliver had been a subway motorman and had come into daily contact with thousands of people, so his observations meant something. According to Oliver people were becoming less patient and less understanding, more cold and selfish. He was able to document these grim theories by tales of the incidents he saw daily. Perhaps Oliver had been too sensitive a man for such a position, but his tales of mankind's thoughtless brutality had always made Myrt shudder, and she still shuddered today as she saw in the daily newspaper reports vindicating her late husband's words.

Finishing her breakfast and folding away the paper (she was always careful to save half of it to read with her lunch), Mrs. Grady prepared to go downstairs to attend to her morning shopping. She put on her hat and coat and went out. As she was going down the hall stairs she noticed someone bent over the letter boxes. It was a youth. He was intent on what he was doing. His fingers were busily seeking entry into one of the little boxes on the wall.

Mrs. Grady froze on the steps, watching the youth: she wished she could turn invisible, she wanted that much to continue to watch. The youth's fingers were picking away at the box when he glanced around and locked eyes with the enthralled spectator. Mrs. Grady started, feeling a momentary guilt; the youth jumped back, gave Mrs. Grady an accusing stare, and then turned to run. There was a baby carriage standing near the door, and in his frantic flight he did not allow for its presence, as he ran with his head half turned. He crashed into the obstacle and fell to the floor with a bellow as the carriage rocked and giggled on its springs as if it had been tickled. He twisted on the floor, made an effort to rise but sank back with a gasp.

First alarm and then fear had swept through Mrs. Grady. Now she felt a certain cautious pity as she stared at the prostrate youth. She was uncertain what should be done. When the carriage had ceased to rock, she began a slow advance down the stairs, one hand riding the banister, her eyes fixed on the youth.

As she passed her mailbox she glanced in. She saw there the familiar tan envelope with the cellophane window which contained her monthly check. So that was what he had been after. She looked down at him, savoring the superiority a standee feels, looking down on the fallen.

"Are you hurt?" she asked.

He groaned, not from pain alone, but because this was the most absurd question.

"What is it?" she asked. "Your leg?"

He nodded, grimacing. Now he managed to sit up on his hands. He looked down at his throbbing ankle. His face revealed considerable strain. As he peered at his foot, she examined him. He was not more than twenty. His long black hair had not been cut for some time. His black leather jacket had silver buckles. It hung apart over his T-shirt. His blue jeans bound tight around his thighs. His face changed; it reflected intense displeasure, self-directed. He looked up at Mrs. Grady.

"Now," she said, "wasn't that foolish of you. You ought to be more careful. You might have injured yourself seriously."

"All right, lady," he said. "Here I am." His voice held a sour resignation to his bitter defeat.

"Can't you move?" Mrs. Grady asked.

"No, I can't move. If I could move . . ."

Mrs. Grady pinched her underlip. "It's your ankle, isn't it?"

"I fell on it," the youth said.

They regarded each other. The youth seemed expecting to hear something which he could answer. His face showed a certain churlish anticipation.

"You probably have a sprain," Mrs. Grady said. "Well, we can't leave you just lying here. Here," she said, offering him her hand, "let me help you up. Easy now." The youth extended his hand and clasped hers. Throwing his weight awkwardly on his good ankle, he managed to rise. He stood with the injured ankle folded back from the floor, one hand on the wall for balance.

"You young people," Mrs. Grady said with a doleful shake of her head, her voice soft with sad pessimism, with implied foreboding. "I don't know what's to become of you."

She assisted him up the stairs. It was an agonizing journey. Finally they reached the top and the youth leaned against the wall. Mrs. Grady unlocked the door. She swung back the door and the youth limped in, setting careful weight on his injured foot. She directed him to a great cushion chair which he sank into, with a sigh. He watched his concerned hostess slide a footstool towards him. He extended his throbbing leg upon the footstool.

Mrs. Grady removed her coat.

"We'll have a look at that now," she said. She knelt and unlaced his ankle-high work shoe and very lightly slid it off. Then she peeled down his sock and gazed critically at the ankle. She made a solemn humming sound. "There's quite a swelling," she announced. "You'll have to soak it."

"Look, lady . . ." the youth began, but he was overruled.

"Now you look, young man," she said. "You have a very painful and incapacitating injury there. And I'm going to take care of it. Don't worry, I know what to do. I'll soak it for you and then bind it. After a little while you'll be able to walk on it again."

"Then what? You turn me in?"

Mrs. Grady stood up. "Turn you over to the police?" she said hesitantly. She hadn't given any thought to that yet. It was in the back of her mind, a tantalizing temptation. She was reluctant to give it recognition. "We'll talk of that later," she said. "But first we have to see to your injury. That's the most important thing." And she bustled off to the kitchen, humming to herself.

The youth's face registered puzzlement and suspicion. He looked as

though he was confronted with something he had heard about, but had doubted.

He watched as Mrs. Grady heated kettles of water in the kitchen. Then she poured the hot water into a wide pan over which she then dipped a box of Epsom salts, releasing a thin stream which hissed into the water. She brought the pan in and put it down in front of him. He slid his foot from the stool and advanced it gingerly into the potion, then sprang it back.

"It's hot," he wailed.

"Oh, a grown lad like you," Mrs. Grady said reproachfully. "Now come on," she coaxed. "That's what you want. Now just put your foot in there." With a grimace the youth obeyed. "What's your name anyway?" Mrs. Grady asked.

"Tobin," the youth said sullenly.

"Well, Mr. Tobin, what were you doing downstairs at my letterbox?"

"It was obvious what I was doing."

"Trying to steal my check. That wasn't very nice."

"You shouldn't leave it there like that."

"I was just coming down for it. Here, let me take your jacket," Mrs. Grady said, rising from the chair she had taken opposite. The youth sat forward and squirmed his arms and shoulders from the jacket. Mrs. Grady took it and as she was about to hang it behind the door she felt an instrument in the pocket. Putting in her hand, she found a switchblade.

"Oh, dear," she said, holding up the knife. She pressed the button and the silver blade snapped out with a sharp click and poised rigidly. Mrs. Grady shuddered as though holding a snake. "What an awful thing," she said.

"I need it," Tobin said, embarrassed. "For protection."

"For protection? From what?"

Tobin shrugged.

"That's the trouble with you young people today," Mrs. Grady said. "Switchblades, gangs, violence, brutality. Whatever goes on inside your heads, I don't know. It was never that way when I was a young person. Oh, we had our share of crime all right, but it was never as brutal as what goes on nowadays. Thieves never carried things like that," she said, showing him the knife. Unable to close it she put it down.

Tobin shrugged again. He was not impressed. To him Mrs. Grady was merely detailing progress. It seemed proper.

"I used to do housework for the Hascombs," Mrs. Grady said. "Do you know who the Hascombs are?"

"No," said the youth.

"Well, they're just some of the richest people in the world. That's who *they* are. They have a Long Island estate that's big enough for them to have their own polo field. In his later years Mr. Hascomb was a judge. He used to tell me of the young people that came before him—people like yourself, Mr. Tobin. He was shocked by the brutal nature of their crimes; but what was worse, he said, seldom did he ever see the slightest shade of remorse or any indication whatsoever that these people wanted to learn a better way of living. It was simply dreadful. Why today, may I ask, does it take eight or ten of you to rob an old man, and then why must you kick him senseless after you have his money?"

The youth shrugged again. "Everybody does it," he said.

"Have you done it?" Mrs. Grady asked. She looked at him with sad disapproval. "Shame on you," she said.

Tobin sighed. He took his thumbnail between his teeth. He had heard this kind of talk before and it bored him. But then he heard something else that caught his attention quickly.

"You want to know if I'm going to tell the police about you," Mrs. Grady said. "Suppose I don't? Lord knows I don't want to. But if I let you go how do I know I won't be subjecting some innocent person to your deviltry? How do I know that tonight or tomorrow night you won't be out preying on people?"

The youth pondered this. He looked down at his reddened foot in the water. It symbolized his helplessness.

"You young people are absolutely awful," Mrs. Grady said. "Suppose I were to take a club and beat you now, because you're sitting helpless? Would that be right? And I could have every justification, you know—you tried to steal the money I need to live on. I'm a widow, alone in the world."

"I can't help it, ma'am," Tobin said, letting his hand drop. "It's the way things are. That's how it is."

"Does that mean you have to give in to it? Didn't it ever occur to you that you might try to make it a better place?"

"These things have been going on a long time."

"Of course—crime is as old as the world. But what I'm saying is how terribly brutal it's become. There's really no need for it to be that way."

It's senseless. When I was young, crime was different. There were a lot of gentlemen in it. It was done with more finesse, less brutality."

The youth pondered again, gnawing at his thumbnail once more. How many people had tried to reform him so far? It began in school with his teachers, then his parents, his older brother, then certain city officials. He had listened cynically and skeptically to it all. Words came easy to people. Some people uttered them so smoothly and effortlessly it seemed they did not really care, that they were speaking only because they felt it an obligation, that they were relieved when they could stop, when Tobin was removed from their presence. He had always supposed they would be shocked and disbelieving if he had promised reformation. He never did. He only listened, because he had sensed the hollowness behind their words.

"If I turn you over to the police," Mrs. Grady said gravely, "it will be very bad for you. I suppose you have a record."

"I've been mentioned," Tobin said laconically.

"Robbing the mails. It's quite a serious charge. You'd be put behind bars for a long time. How old are you?"

"Twenty."

She seemed to be stricken by this. She said it to herself. Twenty. It was a tragedy.

"But then," she said, "if I let you go, who knows what innocent person might suffer for it?"

"Perhaps no one would suffer," the youth said suddenly.

Mrs. Grady felt elated. But she dared not show it. She studied him, testing his sincerity. She tried to appear casual, lest her thoughts be revealed in her face.

"How do I know you mean that?" she asked.

"I've been in jail before," Tobin said. "I'll be honest with you. I didn't like it. I don't want to go back, ever. I suppose eventually I will go back, if I keep on like this."

"So, you do see that much," Mrs. Grady said. She felt a flicker of excitement. "Are you man enough to make a promise and hold to it?"

"Yes," the youth said.

"To promise to change your ways and lead a decent life?"

"Yes," the youth said. "You're right. I know you're right. It's never been put to me this way before. I feel you really mean it, that it means something to you to have me go straight."

"It does," Mrs. Grady said. "I can't bear the thought of you going around hitting people over the head."

"I'll be honest with you—it won't be easy."

"But you will try?"

Change your ways, Tobin, old boy, the youth thought. Find the right path and adhere to it. The new life. It amused him, in a sardonic way.

"Yes," he said. "I'll try."

Mrs. Grady didn't know what to do. Her mind devoted itself completely to the problem. It became extraordinarily complex. She saw the whole world involved. It was as though she were to make a judgment of universal proportions. She began to wonder if fate wasn't taking unfair advantage of her, considering the magnitude of this dilemma; but then she realized that a duty had fallen upon her and that she would have to make a decision.

She frowned like a magistrate. She did not want to send this youth to jail. His destiny was now in her hands. This great power made her feel humble. Then she thought: What would Oliver do? Oliver had been a very stern man. But he also had his compassionate side. He had often announced that men did not have sufficient understanding for each other. She looked up at where Oliver was frowning from the wall in a tarnished gold frame. But his expression never changed. The problem remained with Mrs. Grady.

She had the youth's promise. Suppose it was a genuine promise? Suppose she sent him to jail at the very moment he was seeking to redeem himself? If this happened, then such an action on her part would be unforgivable.

The youth spoke. "Are you going to turn me over to the cops?" he asked.

The question flustered Mrs. Grady. It pushed her forward to her decision before it had quite matured in her mind.

Mrs. Grady knew quite well that some people became helplessly caught up in a life of crime. She also knew that some found such a life irresistible.

"Do you realize what you're promising?" she said.

"Of course."

"You're promising to change your way of life. Perhaps it might be asking too much of you."

Tobin looked at her dubiously.

"At least promise me you'll stop hitting people over the head, and stop carrying those awful knives and guns," she said.

"Why, sure," the youth said.

Mrs. Grady clasped her hands. She was immensely pleased.

"You'll be doing yourself a great service," she said. "Oh, dear, I must sound like some old lady preacher or something. Has the water cooled? Here, I'll heat some more. You just sit there and relax. You're going to be all right now. I can just see that you're going to be all right." She took the pan away.

Tobin watched her. When she had gone into the kitchen, he braced his arms and pushed himself forward, up from the great chair. He kicked away the footstool and carefully got to his feet. He let gradual weight shift to the injured foot. To his immense delight he could stand on it with a minimum of pain. He took a few steps and pronounced himself healed. Quickly then he put on his sock and shoe, lacing the shoe with lightning fingers. He straightened up, and his eyes began to fly about the room. Spotting a bureau he went to it and opened the top drawer. A flat tin box lay in one corner. He opened it and a wave of excitement swept over him as he saw jewelry resting regally on some fluffy cotton. He lifted a sparkling bracelet and let it dangle before his greedily appreciative eyes. He dropped it into his pocket. Then he took up the rest of the jewelry.

When he turned around he saw Mrs. Grady standing in the doorway watching him, the pan of water held before her. Her face was filled with dismay. For a moment he felt ashamed; but that soon melted.

"All right, mom," Tobin said. He moved toward her. He had a slight limp, but that was a minor impediment now with the jewelry burning in his pocket like a torch. He picked up the open switchblade. "I don't want to hurt you, mom," he said. The knife lay loose in his hand, the light glancing off the blade.

Mrs. Grady's eyes filled with reproach. "Why must you carry that horrible weapon?" she demanded. "Why don't you throw it away?"

"I'm getting out of here," the youth said. "I want to leave quietly. I want you to keep your mouth shut until I'm gone. You gave me a break and now I'm giving you one. If you say a word to the cops about me I'll come back and get you." With this ugly threat on his lips he backed toward the door. They stared at each other with the intensity of duelists, Mrs. Grady still with the pan of water held up before her like an offering. Then he was gone. She heard him running down the stairs.

Mrs. Grady gasped and put down the pan of water and rushed to the bureau. She knew what she would find. She looked into the gaping top drawer, into the empty tin box, at the cotton cushion where the jewelry had rested. She clasped her hands.

"Oh," she said aloud. "Oh, *damn* him."

Tobin stepped out into the glaring sun. He looked up at the old woman's windows. He expected to hear a scream at any moment. So he ran. He ran one block and turned a corner, running with a perceptible limp. This grotesque appearance—a man running with a limp suggested the darkest of devious behavior—attracted the attention of two policemen in a squad car. They set after him immediately. They jerked to the curb just ahead of him and leaped out of wide-flung doors. Tobin gasped. Then he cursed to himself.

Shortly after, he was sitting in the police station, a figure of dejection.

"We found this on him," said one officer, dropping the switchblade onto his superior's desk. And now the officer said something that he had evidently been preparing as a great presentation, for he said it as though introducing a royal person. "And these." Following this pronouncement he laid on the desk before his startled superior a handful of splendid jewelry.

The superior officer almost leaped.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he whispered.

"It checks out," said the officer who had presented the jewelry, smiling like the father of twins. "Some of it's the Hascomb stuff. And the rest looks like it's from some of the other Long Island jobs."

The youth heard and whirled, first to his right and then to his left. All he could say was:

"Listen, I didn't pull those jobs!"

But all he heard were voices that sounded deceptively paternal, but which he knew were warming up for sterner things:

"Sure, kid. Sure. It's a tough break. Tell us all about it, now."



1962

by Jean Garrie

Webber came to Wilde Island on the Tuesday afternoon mail boat.

The Wilde Island Inn sat on a rock ledge just above the dock, and since there were no vehicles in the community, everyone walked. He moved along with his fellow passengers up the steep unpaved road, speaking to no one, glancing around him at the shore, the moored craft, the gossipy gulls. At the top of the hill, the road forked. To the right was the Inn itself, to the left a row of cottages. A lighthouse perched on the crest of another, higher hill.

Webber and several others of the group turned to the right, taking the path up to the Inn, where rocking-chair sitters on a long verandah watched them speculatively. The dark lobby inside had the unmistakable odor of a building abandoned to many winters and the air was damp.

He waited until the others had registered before he approached the desk.

"I have no reservation," he confessed, smiling. "If you can't accommodate me, I'll just look around and go back to Scoville Harbor on the evening boat."

The clerk, a pretty college senior, assured him that he could have a room and bath on the seaside. "It's early in the season," she explained. "July and August are our busy months." She handed him the registration form and went off to answer the switchboard.

He picked the pen up with his right hand and then dropped it into his left. He wrote: "George R. Reed, 11 Down Road, NYC."

When the girl came back, he pushed the card toward her. "I should have used my own pen," he said, feigning embarrassment. "I'm left-handed, and this pen," holding it up, "seems to have been used exclusively by right-handed people. I fear I may have ruined it."

"That's all right," she answered. "Room 44 on the next floor."

The name on the card was barely legible, the pen leaked and blotted from the strain of being so roughly and inexpertly used. The girl would remember that he had been left-handed—if it ever became necessary for her to remember anything about George R. Reed.

Room 44 had the shabby comfort usual in any old and marginally profitable resort hotel: a bed, an easy chair, night table, chest, and two lamps. Webber locked his door and put down his bags. He went to the window and looked down at the lawn with its white wooden chairs, croquet court, and flower beds. Below, the sea reflected golden waves of sunlight, and lobster boats and modest pleasure craft rode at anchor, rocking gently in the wind and incoming tide.

He went now to the mirror to inspect himself. Sometimes he forgot what he looked like, and, too, it was always a pleasure to regard the results of his remarkable talent.

George R. Reed, as he had conceived him, was a man of medium stature with black hair gone quite grey, heavy shoulders and a promising paunch. George R. Reed was recently a widower and therefore not open to sudden summer friendships or spontaneous small talk. He was left-handed, had atrocious penmanship, and was generally a little awkward. He was on a relatively salt-free diet which would necessitate inquiries about the spicing of food.

Webber was thoroughly satisfied with George R. Reed.

He read a magazine and dozed in his chair until five. Then he washed his hands, tidied his windblown hair and went down to the dining room. The hostess checked her clipboard and informed him that he would share a table with Mr. and Mrs. Fielding and Miss Lyons.

He declined the plan shyly. He explained that he'd come to Wilde Island for a rest, not to socialize. He had, he went on, only weeks ago lost his dear wife, and his stay here was to help him collect his wits, not to forget. Not yet. The soft husky voice he assumed for George R. Reed grew huskier with emotion.

The hostess understood and gave him a solitary table where he asked the waitress immediately about the salting of the food.

It was during the salad that he identified the man he intended to kill.

They were a party of three males, all casually but carefully dressed, men moving slowly and tautly toward their forties. West was not a fraction as nervous as he had been the last and only other time Webber had seen him, the night West was fingered, pointed out to Webber. West had just then been acquitted of a murder charge and was being given a cele-

bration by impressed friends. That night he'd been trying to cover his anxiety and letdown by talking and drinking too much.

Webber observed the trio during the rest of the meal and then went to his own room and went to bed.

The next day he began his orientation. He examined first the Inn itself, wandering about the bar, inviting himself into the kitchen, admiring the view from the roof. He walked down to the docks, along the beach, up a forest path, and circled back toward the Inn after visiting the general store, post office and church. That afternoon, he went in the other direction—through the brief residential section, even stopping at the tiny library to read for an hour, and finally wandering up the highest hill to the lighthouse where Coast Guard signs warned him against going further.

Thursday, with a basket lunch packed by the Inn, he toured the uninhabited western side of the island where artists painted the vast seascape and counted six easels.

He saw West at meals and also encountered him several other times on his walks. West was never alone. The killing would have to be quick and certain, for even though West seemed to have shed a great deal of his apprehension he was still on guard and guarded. West was intelligent enough to know that a certain segment of the population resented his acquittal, and had their own methods of obtaining justice.

Webber observed West with a scientific, academic curiosity, noting his habits, his schedule, his preferences in island scenery, what and how much he ate and drank, how often he changed his clothes, how much he conversed with his companions.

He noted particularly that every afternoon West and his guards sat on the white painted chairs on the lawn and watched the mail boat arrive.

By Friday, Webber had decided that this was the time and the place, and Friday evening, by prearrangement with his employer, a telegram was telephoned to the Inn from the mainland which read: "Imperative for you to be at conference 11:00 A.M. Monday. Sorry to cut short your much needed recuperation. Plan to return if you like the place. Walter."

The pretty desk clerk who received the message couldn't pretend ignorance of its contents.

"If you intend to come back," she said, "you'd better make a reservation now. July and August are our busy months."

Webber smiled. "I came for a rest," he answered. "These few days

have been very refreshing. I seem to have gotten hold of myself. Perhaps getting back to work—back into harness—is best.”

“What sort of work do you do?” she asked.

“Building,” he replied. “We specialize in brick construction.”

“Perhaps it would be best,” she agreed. Everyone at the Inn knew by now of his recent loss. “Doing something—constructive.”

He nodded and sighed. “Habit, yes. I guess that is the best grief killer. A man must stick to his trade even if he *does* feel like—”

She understood, but said, “If you *do* want to come back, you’d better make a reservation now.”

“The habit of work,” he smiled. “You have it too.”

She didn’t understand exactly what he meant, so she smiled in reply.

Saturday was change day. Old guests left and new ones arrived in greater numbers than at any other time of the week.

Early in the morning, Webber went over his route once more. He loitered in the lobby until it was empty and the desk momentarily unattended. Then he hurried into the dark, deserted bar, checked the door to the men’s room to be sure it was not locked, and sidled out the exit which had been cut to allow the cottagers to come and go without crossing the sedate lobby and porch or entering the Inn itself. He noted that the white chairs were in the same place—at the conical crest of the lawn—and then he moved along the seaward slope to the bathers’ stairway which had been cut in the rock, remembering as he went that on this trip the contour of the lawn had obscured his presence from observers on the hill road. At the foot of the stairs he turned right and walked up the brief, uninviting beach and came to the dock. The Inn and the unpaved road hung above him. Perfect, he said silently.

When he got back to his room, the chambermaid was already preparing it for a new arrival.

His luggage was packed and locked. He took it down to the lobby.

He inquired if the boat were on time and went out on the porch for a last view of the vibrant harbor, the little boats, the blown sea. As he seemed to be enjoying this final look at Wilde Island, West and his friends came out and took their usual seats on the bright windy lawn.

Webber waited until most of the other guests had checked out before he approached the desk. The dank lobby was full of people and luggage, noisy with voices saying goodbye, making promises to write, to

meet here again next year. He accepted his statement, read it, and reached for his wallet.

It was then that the knife escaped him and imbedded itself upright in the soft, ancient wood of the bare floor. It vibrated with a businesslike twang and then stood still.

A horrified silence descended on the room like a theater's asbestos curtain, shutting him off from everyone but not lessening the consciousness of his presence.

"Oh, Lord!" he said. He snatched up the knife and said, "Oh, Lord!" again. He pushed the knife into his inner pocket and found his handkerchief, which he wrapped around his left hand.

The pretty clerk was stunned.

"You must understand," he pleaded. He was speaking to her but the others, whose attention was now directed to him and his knife, strained to hear. "When I came here, I was despondent," he groaned. The tears began to form noticeably along his lower lids. "I couldn't live. I thought—"

The girl roused herself, from the habit of work, to make the best of it. "You've cut yourself. You'd better wash—"

"Wash it," he agreed. He turned toward the stairs, toward where his room had been until minutes ago, then paused, baffled.

"The men's room in the bar! In the bar!" a voice directed urgently.

"Yes, yes!" he nodded distractedly. "My first-aid kit—now which bag is it in?" To settle the question, he took both, and hurried into the bar as the sudden babble of talk rose to a crescendo in the lobby. He closed the door of the men's room just as the bell at the dock began announcing the arrival of the boat.

In the tiny, dim rectangle, Webber stripped.

He pulled off the jacket with its heavily padded shoulders, the white shirt that had been tailored to fit his assumed shape, the trousers whose contours had forcibly changed his walk. Beneath his underwear was a harness of foam rubber that was his thick back and paunch. He straightened up and admired his hard young liberated body in the dusty mirror. He kicked off the slightly elevated shoes and took off the greying toupee and rumpled his own thinning reddish-blond hair. From inside his mouth, he removed the curved piece of hard rubber which had distended his lower lip.

He rolled each discarded item into the smaller bag which had from the first contained expendable, almost finished things: toothpaste, shav-

ing cream, blades. Then he pushed against the corners of the case. They gave under pressure and he tucked the small heavy square into the large piece of luggage.

He dressed as himself now: blue shirt, flannel trousers, blue jacket, leather sandals. He combed his hair and put on his glasses. He checked himself in the mirror and admired the straight hardness of his thin shoulders, the compactness of this familiar identity.

Even this inspection was part of the timing. It had taken two minutes and nine seconds—not quite as long as might have been required to staunch the bleeding of a hand cut by a suicidal knife, but long enough for those in the lobby, primed for departure, to begin to crowd toward the door, forgetting George R. Reed and his weapon.

Webber came out of the men's room into the grey, empty bar. It smelled of comatose winters and generations of dead tobacco and unfinished drinks. With his single piece of luggage, he moved quietly out the public entrance and into the sunlight. He followed the path to the designated point and took out the knife, never pausing in his step.

West and his friends sat in the white slatted chairs watching the boat dock and the departing guests moving noisily down the hill.

Now with his glasses, Webber saw that his planning had been excellent. Everything was clearer, more critically defined. He could actually see the two-inch openings between the uprights of wood that composed the chairs' backs. This gift of corrective lenses coupled with his knowledge of anatomy made an interestingly remunerative task a measure of his skill. He held the knife by the blade, closed his right eye, and flung the weapon forward with a simultaneous jerk of his lean shoulder and broad wrist.

West stirred and relaxed.

His bodyguards were guarding a dead man.

Webber walked on down the path, descended the bathers' steps, traversed the hostile beach, and moved onto the straggling base of a wedge of new people who climbed slowly toward the Inn, passing along the way the eager, departing guests who had temporarily forgotten George R. Reed.

As was his habit, he waited until the others had broken ground: registered, made inquiries, begun to disperse toward their assigned rooms.

"Hello," he greeted the desk clerk briskly, in his own voice. "I'm Paul Wilton, I wired for reservations last Saturday."

He knew by her eyes that he was a stranger and not totally unattractive.

"Yes, we have Room 42 for you," she answered.

"What does one do for amusement around here?" he asked. "I didn't see any tennis courts. And that beach isn't even decently covered with sand."

"People come to Wilde Island for the scenery or to rest," she answered. "I'm afraid that unless you want to paint or sketch there isn't much here for you *except* rest." She pushed the registration form toward him.

He took the pen in his right hand and wrote: "Paul Wilton, 112 Autumn St., Battlebrook, Conn." He shook the pen. "Who's been writing with this?" he demanded. "Some kid?"

"We had a rather difficult guest," she admitted. "He was left-handed and caused a lot of trouble. He ruined the pen and then wanted to commit suicide. Right here!"

He sensed her excitement. "Did you lock him up?" he asked.

"Oh, no," she replied. "He just now left on the boat—thank heavens."

Webber laughed with her and asked to be directed to his room. "I hope there's a good shower," he said. "I feel too salty."

She pointed toward the stairs and turned back to her desk.

Just as the new Paul Wilton closed his door, West's bodyguards realized they were guarding a dead man, and calamity ensued on the lawn. He strode quickly to the window and looked down on the chaotic indecision that had upset the croquet game, the viewers of the harbor, the evening artists. Then he went to the little dark bathroom and turned on the shower. He had had enough experience with the sluggard plumbing to know that his running water would obstruct the plans of anyone on the floor for washing hands or flushing a toilet. If asked, Paul Wilton could verify and have witnesses to prove that he'd been showering when the body was discovered.

He scrubbed thoroughly and excavated another change of clothes out of his big bag: grey-blue worsted suit, white shirt, striped tie, black ox-fords.

At six, he went down to the bar.

He was obviously a newcomer; curious, gregarious, not a little offensive. He tried to buy drinks for several people and get information about the obvious departure from hotel routine. The lobby was, by

now, filled with mainland people who'd raced out on the Coast Guard's fastest cutter: a sheriff, policemen from Scoville Harbor, and, surprisingly, two agents from the nearest F.B.I. office. No one was allowed to loiter in the lobby or use the little reading room on the west side. In the bar the rumor was that the victim was laid out there on its ancient magazine table.

Webber yielded himself up to the bartender with his most studied and obnoxious talent. "Look," he directed. "I came here to have a good time. I get off the boat and clean myself up and come down here for a little sociable drink. And what happens? A big pug hustles me out of the lobby before I can turn in my key. And everyone here," he waved at the other patrons, "clams up and won't even say 'hello'."

"Trouble," the bartender confided without a trace of personality.

"So? What kind of trouble?" Webber demanded. "That old goat over there in the black jacket says there's a body in the reading room. So some guy gets himself drowned—on an island. You come to an island and it's a chance you take. You're surrounded by water—"

"This guy was stabbed," the bartender corrected. "Him and two friends was sitting on the lawn, and all of a sudden, he's dead!"

Webber frowned, considering this.

"He was a big guy—they say *now*," the bartender went on, glad for a listener who knew less than he did. "Some guy in the rackets—Chris West. Beat a murder rap two months ago." He polished a shot glass lovingly. "To me, he was Mr. Davis," he said. "Nice guy. Big tipper. So were his two friends." He poured Webber another bourbon. "He was stabbed at close range—in broad daylight."

"And the knife belonged to a man named Reed who went out on the afternoon boat," a customer beside Webber said.

Webber showed brief interest in the stranger. "They'll get him," he predicted. "Just pick him up when the boat docks at Scoville Harbor."

"May I point out," requested the other patiently, "that the boat docked at Scoville Harbor two hours ago and this Reed wasn't on it?"

"Then obviously he's still here!" Webber concluded happily.

"He was thinking about suicide," the bartender remarked. "He said so."

"That's a long way from murder," the third man stated.

"Positively, it had to be Reed," the bartender countered. Suddenly he wanted to talk. "I overheard it was really *his* knife. Can I buy you guys a drink?"

"Later. I've got to eat," Webber answered. He slid off the stool. "Point me toward the dining room, gentlemen. I can't drink like I used to."

He spent a pleasant if speculatively bizarre dinner hour with Mr. and Mrs. Fielding and Miss Lyons.

"Mr. Reed sat right over there," Miss Lyons said, pointing with a hand gloved discreetly in a napkin. "We heard that he refused to sit at *our* table. Wanted to be alone. But we didn't *think* anything."

"A maniac," Mr. Fielding pronounced. "He confessed to being suicidal in the lobby, you know. And then he turned homicidal. That's all."

But this didn't close the subject for his wife or Miss Lyons. Or Webber.

"He talked to no one," Mrs. Fielding said. "Brooding about his wife."

"But he wasn't on the boat," Webber stated. "I heard that in the bar. He must still be here on the island." He gave a shudder.

"I see it all very realistically," Miss Lyons said. "He had this knife—a vicious weapon. He was intent upon self-destruction. He changed his mind—in reference to himself, of course—but the impulse was upon him. He sneaked up on poor Mr. Davis—or West—and stabbed him. Then, despondent, he cast himself over one of those dreadful cliffs on the other side of the island."

"A fine analysis!" Webber cheered softly.

Miss Lyons pulsated good will and appreciation.

"I think I'll tell that sheriff your theory," he said. "Will you excuse me now?" he asked the others. "I don't think this should wait."

As were all the other diners, Webber was stopped in the lobby.

Asked his name, he said, "Paul Wilton."

"Where do you live?"

"112 Autumn Street, Battlebrook, Connecticut."

"Occupation?"

"Antique dealer."

"How long have you been here?"

"He came this afternoon," the girl clerk said from the wicker-infested shadows. "Why do you have to be so mean to these nice people, Mr. Daley? Mr. Reed cut his hand—his left hand." She was on the verge of nervous tears. "Mr. Wilton hasn't any wound or bandage, and, besides, he wasn't even here."

"Sorry, sir," Officer Daley nodded. "We're just trying to get a line on a man who was staying here."

"Reed," Webber said. "Look, Daley, I have some theories of my own. When you're off duty, come up to my room—42—and I'll tell you what I think."

"Thanks for the kind offer," Daley replied acidly, and went back to his post at the dining-room door.

Webber found the tired, anxious clerk back at her desk. "This is pretty rough on you," he remarked.

She nodded. "They've been questioning all the guests, and the guests blame the whole thing on the Inn."

"Is it true our corpse was in the rackets?"

"That's what they say," she answered. "His friends admitted he was Chris West just as soon as they raised the alarm. They said they didn't want any 'hick cop' on this. That made the sheriff mad and he called the F.B.I."

"Speaking of the F.B.I.," said a voice so close and unexpected that Webber started, "would you please go to your room or somewhere else, sir? We're trying to keep the lobby clear."

"Are you F.B.I.?" Webber inquired.

The dark-haired, blue-eyed young man nodded.

"Do me a favor?" Webber asked. "In the movies you guys always just flash your credentials." He palmed nothing with a flare of grace. "Could I have a look, please, at whatever it is you have in that folder?"

Amused, the other man obliged.

"Good picture of you," Webber commented, and then read aloud, "Anthony J. Bordenelli."

"Satisfied?" Bordenelli inquired.

Webber grinned and directed: "Look, Tony, I'll sleep on this murder business. By morning I'll have some answers for you."

"Thanks," Bordenelli smiled. "And now will you go to the bar or out to look at the moonlight or upstairs?"

"Sure, sure," Webber agreed cheerily. "I'll see you."

At breakfast, Webber was in excellent spirits. He greeted his table-mates with an air of conspiracy and satisfying knowledge. "I've got this all figured out," he informed them. "Miss Lyons was right—up to a point. Reed changed his mind about suicide, but he still had the compulsion, so he killed Davis—or West—as the case may be," he intoned.

"But he didn't become remorseful and he didn't throw himself over a cliff. He's hiding—in our midst. And he'll strike again."

Miss Lyons almost choked on her toast. "You aren't serious—"

"I am," he insisted. "It's so logical, and it was you, dear lady, who made this idea clear to me."

"It's a gruesome thought," Mrs. Fielding murmured.

"Bad way—very bad way—to start the day," Mr. Fielding decided.

All morning Webber pursued his seemingly uninsultable way: pestering the lawmen, alarming the guests, trying to organize search parties to track down Reed.

At ten, West's body was removed to a Coast Guard cutter and hurried to the mainland. The jobless bodyguards went along, as did the sheriff and police.

The radios blared all day and evening the internationally interesting news that Chris West, noted criminal, who had moved for years just beyond the law, had met his end at the hands of a party unknown, on a remote Maine island where he was cooling off after beating a recent murder indictment and evading the Federal authorities on a tax matter. A majority, however, seemed to regard it as an act of Providence: the executioner was a man crazed with grief who had killed randomly. Several even went so far as to point out that George R. Reed—whoever he was—had done society a service, and that he ought to make himself known and take his chances with the law—after he had been suitably rewarded by a grateful public.

The following day was a banner day for Webber in his campaign to increase his unpopularity. Each hour he had newer and better solutions to the crime, and everyone at the Inn—law officers, staff, and guests—had begun to wish that if George R. Reed did strike again, Webber would be his next victim.

At dinner that evening, he thoroughly alienated the Fieldings and Miss Lyons with a two hour monologue on bizarre and horrible crimes, tragic and bloody accidents, and the mysterious demises of obscure persons here and abroad.

Webber spent the following morning interfering, imposing himself and his ideas on the officers, troubling the already angry and disconcerted guests.

When he went to lunch, the hostess met him at the door and told him that the seating arrangements had been changed. She gave him a solitary table, the table where George R. Reed had sat alone. Mr. and Mrs.

Fielding and Miss Lyons managed to avoid his wounded gaze. And after lunch, when he went upstairs, there was a note just under his door. It was from the management, which deeply regretted a misunderstanding about his reservations. It was imperative that his room be vacated by five o'clock. Efforts to locate other lodging for him on Wilde Island had failed, and it was therefore suggested that he leave on the early evening boat for Scoville Harbor.

Thoroughly satisfied, he began to pack.

At five, he carried his one heavy bag down to the lobby.

Bordenelli, the F.B.I. man, sat at a desk in the corner working industriously at a portable typewriter. Webber interrupted him to announce gloomily, "I'm leaving."

"Have a good trip," Bordenelli replied patiently.

"Mix-up about my reservations," Webber went on. "They have to have my room." He made a conspicuous effort to read what Bordenelli had typed. "Is it all right with you if I go?" he asked.

"No objections here," Bordenelli informed him in a tone that would have offended a more sensitive person.

"But I could be so helpful. If you guys would listen to my ideas—"

Bordenelli stood up. "I've heard your ideas," he said. "You've scared the wits out of half the people here."

"But I could be so helpful—"

"Look, Wilton, you weren't even here when this happened," Bordenelli pointed out sharply. "You've stuck your nose into everything and made it all even more confused than it was to begin with."

"You'll see I'm right," Webber insisted. "People kill other people, and they get away with it because the professional investigators won't listen to the unbiased views of the casual observers."

"I don't like that kind of talk," the Federal man stated.

"Nor do I," Webber admitted. "But it's true. I'll be surprised if you ever catch *this* killer—the way you're going about it."

Bordenelli's temper and acquired poise finally fragmented. "If you'd get the hell off this island and stop confusing everybody, we might get the killer," he roared. "You weren't even here! You never saw West or Reed. But you *know* all about it!"

"Then it's all right with you if I go?" Webber asked, still unimpeachable.

"Go!" Bordenelli shouted. "Get out! Go down and wait for the boat! Better still, swim. But leave *me* alone!"

"Okay, okay," Webber conceded unhappily. "But some day you may be sorry that you didn't keep me here and—"

"That's a chance I'm going to love taking," Bordenelli grinned. Webber left on the evening boat.



1962

by Bob Bristow

The black and white squad car wheeled through the afternoon traffic with abandon, siren wailing hideously. The car lurched around a corner, leaning dangerously.

"Ease up," the man in the back seat said levelly.

"I thought . . ."

"Just get us there."

Captain Dan Kellogg was able to see his own face in the rearview mirror. It was a long, ugly face with deeply etched lines, and at the moment, it was a tense face. He let the jaw muscles relax and the face softened slightly. *Again*, he thought. He had to be prepared. But he was not prepared at all. In a sense, he never was. He had been sipping a cup of coffee in the office, talking about Saturday's double-header, when the call came. The patrolman had summoned him over the intercom system.

"We've got one, Dan. We're holding a squad car for you."

He had reached the patrol car on the run, slamming the door as the wheels began to turn. Every moment counted now.

"When you get within six blocks, kill that siren," he said.

"Yes, sir."

"How long has she been up there?"

"The Lieutenant said twenty minutes. It may have been more."

"All right." *Twenty minutes*. She was probably nearing the critical time. She was having doubts, growing more afraid of it or more determined, and *only she knew*.

"Captain Kellogg," the driver said, "what do you say to them?"

Dan Kellogg took out a cigarette and flicked the lighter. His hand was almost steady and he inhaled the smoke before answering with another question. "What would *you* say?"

The patrolman shook his head, keeping his eyes on the approaching intersection. "I don't know. I couldn't do it."

The siren wailed. *I'm coming. Wait for me. Please wait.*

Perhaps he would fail. Perhaps it would be this time. Dan did not want to think of the possibility of failure. With determination he put it out of his mind for the moment.

The car was approaching the traffic congestion. A radio announcer had broadcast the news of the story and the curious public had rushed to the scene. This was going to be trouble.

"Kill the siren now, please," Dan said.

The squad car slowed and weaved through the cars.

Dan spotted a woman who stood looking down the block toward the building. She was holding the hand of a four-year-old child as though they had come to witness a circus act.

"I wonder *why*," Dan said sadly.

"Sir?"

"Nothing."

The car came to a stop a half block from the building.

"Do you have any orders, Captain?"

Dan Kellogg opened the door of the car. "Start clearing these people out of here. Send for help. I want every car gone in five minutes. Rope off this area for three blocks. Arrest anybody who resists. I mean that."

The driver reached for the microphone obediently, and Dan walked away through the tangled mass of cars. When he neared the building, he saw the firetruck, the ambulance, and two other squad cars. The officers, as well as the crowds of people, stood craning their necks up toward the building.

Dan reached the squad car as a flashbulb popped in his face. He jerked his thumb angrily. "You," he said, "that's enough. Now get out."

"I'm from the *Daily News* . . ." Arrogantly.

"Lock him up," Dan said to the officer.

"You can't . . ."

"Get him *out* of here."

Dan had not allowed his eyes to seek the fourteenth floor. He spoke to the uniformed officer.

"Take this truck and the ambulance around the corner. Clear this area. You got that?"

"Yes, Captain." The officer was nodding, a big blonde Swede who Dan believed would get the job done.

"Has she moved in the last few minutes?"

"No, sir . . . she's been frozen there. Looking up at the sky."

And at that moment Dan let his eyes move up the side of the building. The woman was a small splash of red against the grey walls. The crimson dress fluttered in the breeze, her legs spread for balance, her back against the wall and her head stretched toward an almost cloudless sky.

"What are you going to do, Captain?" The reporter had come back.

"Share the view," Dan said softly. He walked across the street and entered the building. It was a hotel, a fashionable place. He imagined that she lived there. Not poor. It wasn't money. But then it never really was.

Are you ready, Dan? You've got to be, you know.

Dan moved hurriedly toward the elevator, aware that he picked up the hotel manager and a house detective. He did not hesitate for them.

"How do I get out there?" he asked the manager.

"The window. She climbed out the window."

"How wide is the ledge?"

"It's a foot or so."

Another patrolman stood at the elevator. Dan flipped his billfold, showing his credentials, then turned to the manager and the detective.

"Ride up with me."

The elevator moved swiftly.

"Who is she?"

"Miss Hanson. Susan Hanson," the manager said.

"How old?"

"Twenty-eight or nine. She might be . . ."

"What does she do?"

"She's an artist. She designs sets for musical productions. Something like that."

"She's not married?"

"Oh no . . . she's . . ."

"She's what?"

The elevator stopped and the door opened.

"She's rather plain," the manager said charitably.

Dan stepped out. A patrolman stood at the door of the apartment halfway down the long carpeted hallway.

"Come on," Dan said. He took large strides toward the door. "Do you know what might be bothering her?"

"No . . . she seemed very controlled. I had no idea . . ."

"Has she had a man?"

"Sir?"

"A man . . . coming here recently?"

"Well, we don't . . ."

"Just answer me. You know what's going on."

The manager turned to the house detective, a short, sharp-eyed Latin.

"Yeah, for a while. But I haven't seen him lately."

"Did he stay all night?"

"He stayed late, but not all night."

The manager frowned.

The patrolman stepped aside as Dan reached the door.

"What's your name?"

"Sergeant Devore."

"All right. Devore, I want this place kept empty and quiet. Anybody in there?"

"A couple of reporters and a preacher. And Lieutenant Mason."

"That's just fine," Dan said angrily.

He opened the door and pointed a stubby finger at the two reporters who were hovering about the open window.

"Okay . . . out."

"Hello, Kellogg," one of them said cheerfully.

Like a picnic. Hello, Kellogg.

"I'm not going to tell you again." His voice had dropped half an octave.

Lieutenant Mason pulled away from the window and saw him. His face was flushed and he was sweating. The large soft rear of the other man in the window appeared comical.

"That's the preacher?" Dan asked.

"Yes. She won't answer him."

Dan tapped the minister on the back. "Come on inside," he said evenly.

The minister was quoting scripture as he drew back inside. He was a young man with a round face from too many potatoes. "I think she's listening," he said.

"She is," Dan agreed. "Did she say she'd come back in?"

"She won't talk."

"Do you mind if I take over now?"

"I was reading from Saint . . ."

"Do you mind? I'm going out there."

The minister blinked and glanced at Lieutenant Mason. He nodded slowly. "Certainly."

Dan moved and touched the window. "Everybody out. Mason, you take care of that, please."

In a few moments the room was empty. Dan looked about thoughtfully. He hesitated. *Can you do it, Dan? If it comes, can you?* He had an uncontrollable sense of inadequacy. He did not want to do this. But he had no choice. None at all.

The muscles of his stomach tightened as he pushed through the window. She stood ten feet away, moving her mouth soundlessly, her face upturned. Her eyes were closed.

Dan eased through the window silently, watching her closely, because he did not want to startle her. Everything counted now. Everything.

He stood on the ledge. It was probably fifteen inches wide. Immediately a queasy weakness crept through his body when he saw the tops of the cars a half dozen blocks away in the background. He made no attempt to move toward her. He slid away from her, to the other side of the window, and drew in a deep breath. He unbuttoned his coat and reached for his cigarettes. The breeze was warm, not strong, and it was pleasant.

Dan slipped his hand into his pocket and took a cigarette. He put it in his mouth, but did not light it. He leaned against the wall casually, as though he might have been leaning against a lamp post waiting for a bus.

We are two people alone now. Isolated from the world. And so terribly hopeless. We have only each other. And eternity.

Dan spoke very softly. "Are you afraid, Susan?"

He watched her body stiffen as she turned her head, suddenly startled. His lips compressed the filter of the cigarette tensely. Her face was grotesque, like that of a gargoyle protruding ornamentally from the side of the building. The muscles of her neck were stretched taut.

Dan smiled. "Don't be afraid, Susan. Please."

"Don't come near me." Her mouth twisted horribly when she spoke. "I'm going to jump."

He let her settle a moment before he spoke again. A wave of emotion overwhelmed him. She was like a child, lost and bewildered, ready to plunge into the manmade canyon. Could she imagine the agony this was causing him?

"I sent the cars away," he said. "They're almost all gone. I thought you'd want me to do that."

She looked down briefly and drew in a sudden breath. There was only the ambulance there. In a moment, it too would be moving out of sight.

"I'm going to do it," she said. "I have to get these last things thought out, but I'm going to do it. Don't preach to me."

"All right. But answer me, Susan. *Are you afraid?*"

"No!" She shouted it.

"Be honest, Susan."

She turned her head and her fingers dug against the sandstone wall. Her eyes were desperate.

"Yes . . . yes. But I'm *going* to do it . . . I am . . ."

"Don't be afraid. That's the worst part."

"I'm going to. *I am!*"

"But not afraid. You don't want to die afraid."

She mouthed unintelligible words and her knees buckled momentarily. Her lips trembled uncontrollably as she spoke. "You're saying I'm a coward!" She almost screamed it.

"No! Not about jumping. That's the easiest part. But I don't want you to die afraid of the other."

"You don't *know*."

"*I know*," he said softly.

She turned half away from him and her balance was not good. Dan thought she was going. He closed his eyes and slipped his hand into his pocket and found the lighter. He flicked the wheel and touched it to his cigarette. When he tasted the smoke he opened his eyes and she was still there. And his sense of momentary relief was so powerful that it almost staggered him.

"No matter what happens," he said gently, "wouldn't you like to talk to me first?"

"I think," she said more evenly than before, "that I'm going now."

"Please . . . not yet." His voice was controlled. But his heart had accelerated suddenly.

She studied his face for a long moment.

"You just stand there leaning as though . . ."

"I'm not afraid. Not any more," he said.

"You won't try to stop me?" she said.

"Have I?"

"No."

"I won't do that. I understand, Susan. I *do* understand. I know that it isn't jumping at all. Those people who were watching think that, but they're wrong. They just don't know."

She was not pretty. The face was shaped poorly for beauty, but as the eyes became less terrified, he sensed a softness there. A depth.

"You don't understand," she said, but without conviction.

"Yes. That's why I sent them away. They have no right to this moment. *This is ours.*"

"Ours," she repeated. She laughed and the laugh broke into a sob. *So very sad. So very desperate.*

"Susan, would you smoke a cigarette?"

"No . . . don't come near me." Sober again. Control now. Acute awareness.

Dan saw the fat woman in the window of the building across the street pointing excitedly. *People . . . so insensitive. Or were they really?*

"I'll bet she has something cooking," Dan said. "If we see smoke, we'll know it's burning."

"I hope it does."

There was the beginning of a smile, but it turned into a grimace and he saw hate there. Wasn't it that way almost always? The ones who could hate deeply or could love deeply. So completely.

"My name is Dan Kellogg," he said. "Dan Kellogg." He repeated it slowly. "I'm a special officer."

"What are you trying to do?" she asked.

He wondered if she was even aware that she was calmer.

"Share these moments. No matter what happens. These are important." There was a sadness in his voice.

"Yes, I was trying to be calm," she said.

"I want you to be calm. Do you know how I do it?"

"No . . ."

"Would you like to know?"

She glanced at him quickly. He had not moved. Leaning so relaxed against the wall smoking. He wondered if she believed it. And decided she did. When she did not answer him, he began thoughtfully.

"I think of those special moments that were good. Everybody has had them."

"You think I won't jump," she challenged.

"No . . . but if that happens, I want you to not be afraid. That's all I want right now."

He thought she accepted that. "Tell me," she said.

"I bring those moments back. Do you know what some of them are?"

"Tell me. But hurry."

Dan lowered his voice. "There were times before all the trouble. Before I couldn't seem to handle it. A long time ago, I was a farm kid. Look at me. You can't imagine me a farm kid, I'll bet." He crushed the cigarette against the wall and put the butt in his pocket, because she must not see anything falling . . . *falling* . . .

"Sometimes I'd walk down to this little pond we had and I'd stretch out and listen to the sounds. And let the sun go through me. Kick off my shoes and put my arms behind my head and—this may sound foolish—but I'd be so happy I'd lie there and laugh. At nothing really."

She was nodding her head.

"Did you ever do anything like that?" he asked.

"I didn't laugh. It was something like that, but I didn't laugh."

Dan bit down against his lip harshly. They were so thoroughly alone. *Groping for understanding. Seeking some few moments of tranquillity in this crazy, terrible world, before disaster.*

"And music," he said. His voice was even, but heavy with emotion, and she sensed it. She turned curiously, and he made no effort to control himself.

"There were moments that some melody would go through my mind. I remember walking along a street at night whistling some love song. And it made my heart . . . well, full. It didn't matter that the love affair ended very sadly. That happened many times, Susan. But—and this was strange—the love song was there, and even when it was unhappy, the song was the thing. Do you understand, Susan?"

She shook her head.

"There is some almost mathematical scale behind it all. As though the deeper the sadness one can experience, the greater the joy one can have when everything is right. Doesn't this seem true?"

She nodded, and spoke wearily. "And it gets so terribly oppressive that it isn't worth it any more."

"Yes . . . sometimes," he agreed.

"I feel better. You can go back. I think I'm ready."

"You loved him very much," Dan said.

"Yes."

"Susan . . . he ridiculed you, didn't he?"

She sobbed and removed one hand from the wall and covered her face. Dan leaned away and stood tensely, not drawing a breath, and waited until she turned and saw his outstretched hand. Then he let the hand drop to his side. She did not know what it meant to him or why. But she would soon. He dreaded that moment.

"I understand ridicule," he said. "But that wasn't why I surrendered. Not exactly. There isn't too much difference in us."

"He said terrible things," she said.

"He's a shallow fool, to be pitied. Is he an actor? Vain?"

"No. He was an artist. He used me. Then he didn't need me any longer."

"Tell me, Susan."

"He made me feel loved, and I believed him. It didn't seem possible that he could be deceiving me. It seemed so deep and genuine. He would repeat dozens of times that he loved me. Like a record going over and over."

"And you believed him."

"I asked him to marry me. I thought he couldn't quite say it. I told him about some work. I said we could do it together. He went to the producer and . . ."

"He did it alone."

"Yes."

"I'm sorry."

"He said cruel things when he saw me. He laughed and . . . I don't think he knew how deeply I loved him. He didn't even suspect."

"And didn't know how valuable a thing he had," Dan said.

"It isn't self-pity. I just don't want to live any more."

He had to decide about her. But hadn't he already? She wasn't insane. And because she had a mind, he had no real choice. He was committed.

"Mine was different," he said. "But the same, in a way."

"What do you mean?"

"When my time happened, Susan. I've been here, you know. That's how I understand. Would you like to hear about it?"

She did not answer. She studied his face thoughtfully.

"I was twenty-two. Eight years ago this spring. There was this kid—he went into a filling station one night and pulled a gun. Somebody saw him through the glass and I got the call. I was only five blocks away in

a squad car. He was scooping the money in a hat when I got there, and I jumped out and saw his gun and drew mine . . ." Dan paused and closed his eyes, because he was seeing it again, and that feeling of despair was returning and growing stronger. "He turned, you see, and he was frightened. The gun was shaking in his hand and he made a movement and I fired. Maybe you know the rest. He died there, crying like a child. His gun wasn't loaded. The barrel was so fouled that it couldn't have fired anyway. Later, I found out that his father had been killed in a street accident. A hit-run thing.

"There were seven in the family . . . and the kid worked from sun-up to dark loading trucks, but he didn't make enough, and when he got desperate, he took the gun and bluffed his way into a robbery. There had been other things before that—many things, Susan, but this was the thing that got me down."

Did she know? Could she feel what had happened to him?

His voice broke, but he pushed the words out. "It hit me hard, Susan. Day by day, my world fell apart. Finally I drove to a place in the country and got out of the car. I sat down and leaned against a tree. I took my revolver and cocked it and put it into my mouth. And . . . when I was waiting—you must believe this, Susan—an unexpected thing happened. A farmer who lived nearby appeared carrying a shotgun. He stopped and looked at me for a long time, and he said, 'Are you afraid?'"

Would she remember? Had his first words gotten through to her?

"He'd been in the war, Susan . . . and there had been a time when he thought he couldn't take any more. He understood what I was doing because he'd been there . . . just as I know how you feel now. He didn't preach. None of that. *He understood.*"

"It doesn't matter. I won't change."

"It matters to me. You are all that matters to me."

"I'm going now." She meant it. It was an electric moment.

"*And,*" he said evenly, powerfully, "*I'm going with you.*"

She turned, the muscles in her face drawn tightly. "What?"

"Because—and you have to understand this—that day in the woods, that farmer told me he was going to go with me if I did it. I made the decision for both of us." Dan took a step toward her, then hesitated. "*Susan, he meant it.* I mean it too. If you go . . . I'll take your hand. But I insist that neither of us go in terror."

"You . . . you don't want . . ."

"No. I made it back. I've known many joys. There are so many."

"I don't believe you mean this."

He stepped toward her and his smile was one of surrender. "There is love," he said. "There is sadness. There is joy. And pain. But no one is alone in it. I will bear the pain with you. And the sadness. I will rejoice in your love and in your happiness. The time I have had this last eight years has been a gift, because I believed that farmer that day, just as you believe in me now. We are tied together by this. Your weakest hold to life is my weakest. And my courage . . . now . . . is your courage."

The street was empty below. There was a silence as he moved toward her. He was an instant away from eternity and he had put himself in her hands. He reached her side, but did not touch her at all. She looked up into his face.

"I'm prepared, Susan. You know what I want of you. I'm not afraid to live. But I'm not afraid to die either. You must decide for us."

"Would you?" Her voice was low, incredulous.

He did not reply. He let her see it in his eyes. He let her see that moment with his back against the tree. The great love of which mankind is capable embodied in the farmer. And she did not doubt him any longer. He watched her close her eyes. She did not speak for more than a minute.

Then she shook her head slowly. "Please," she said, "help me."

He touched her hair. "I will."

She searched his face and he watched the desperation leave her.

"In triumph or despair," he said, "you will not be alone again." And the face smiled.

"I don't think I can walk," she said wearily.

He touched her hand gently. "I'll help you. Take my arm."

She nodded, and he slid his feet on the ledge. She followed slowly until they reached the window. He braced her as she turned and climbed inside. Dan followed and closed the window. She had slumped in a chair a few feet away. He lighted two cigarettes and slipped one between her fingers. He turned her face with his hand until she looked at him.

"I'm going to send you to the hospital. You'll be able to avoid the reporters as much as possible there. But they may manage to talk to you. If they do . . . you understand you can't tell them about what we know. *Nothing at all.*"

"Yes."

"I'll be in touch with you. Often." He ran his fingers along her face. "You'd like to meet the farmer, wouldn't you?"

She nodded.

"There are seven of us. Eight now, Susan. We meet twice a year. Once the decision was made, we've never had anyone fail us. We depend on each other. We depend on you now."

There were footsteps outside. Dan glanced at the door.

"Are you ready?"

"You took a terrible chance," she said, shakily, her lips trembling.

He did not answer her until he had gone to the door and beckoned the ambulance attendants to bring the stretcher.

"Because I couldn't afford not to," he said.

When the medics were ready to take her, Dan bent and kissed the corner of her mouth. Then she was gone.

Dan Kellogg stood alone and was deeply grateful. For the courage and dignity she had found in herself. For the gift that as yet she did not know she had given. He remembered the sun warming his body beside the lake. *And the laughter.* He remembered the song stirring in his heart when love was lost. *And the sadness.*

Dan Kellogg stubbed out his cigarette and went slowly out the door.



1963

by Warren Donahue

In the undistinguished resort run by Mom Potter high in the mountains, the most distinguished natural phenomenon was a tall, skinny, 71-year-old blind man. Partly through a curious devotion he had engendered in Mom's otherwise flinty heart, and partly through that instinctive talent for preying on others which is so often developed by the seemingly helpless, he had succeeded in reducing the other guests to the position of his errand boys and servitors. In retaliation, they had dubbed him, with an irony that seemed to please them, "The Judge."

George Jones would have been called "The Mouse" had he been around Mom's guests long enough to earn a nickname. As it was, the sole recollection left in most minds was a furtive, bird-like little man nearly completely hidden by four enormous suitcases as he scurried up the porch on the day of his arrival at the Potter resort.

The Judge got to know him better. Twenty minutes after George arrived, there was a knock on his door. It was Mom.

"Open up," she said. "I've got an errand for you."

"But, lady," protested George, unlocking the door, "I just got here."

"I want you to take the Judge down to the city."

At the mention of the title, George flinched. "Look, lady," he said, "I don't want nothing to do with no . . ."

"He's not a real judge," Mom explained, as she did for all new guests, "and he can't see. He's blind. See?"

"But, lady," George began again, his voice rising to a wail, "it's over fifty miles back to . . ."

"I must say I think that's very nice of you," said the Judge, elbowing Mom aside and marching briskly into the room. "And it will give us time for a nice chat. Why, Mom," he exclaimed, turning to her, "this is one of the nicest rooms I've ever been in."

"I thought you said he was blind," sniffed George suspiciously.

"He is," said Mom, "but he don't miss much."

"Would you care to see for yourself, George?" asked the Judge. With a single long stride, he placed himself squarely in front of George. Whipping off his dark glasses, he stooped suddenly and brought his dead, sightless eyes within inches of George's horrified stare.

"Cheeps!" chirped George, backing suddenly away, "take it easy."

"Ah! A sensitive soul!" exclaimed the Judge. "A man after my own heart. Any time you're ready, George."

"Yes, sir," said George.

"You know," said the Judge as they entered the car, "I've been here six months without finding the right man, but I have a hunch about you. Do you mind if I have a better look?"

"Hey! What are you doing?"

"Why, I'm having a better look," said the Judge mildly, as his long, slender fingers crept over George's face, tracing with delicate precision the hard, bald pate, the fluttering, watery eyes, the pulpy nose, sunken chin and bobbing Adam's apple that gave George's face its peculiar indistinctness.

"George," said the Judge, his own strongly-chiseled features breaking into a wry smile, "from a physical standpoint, you're practically ideal."

"Look, Judge," said George, pleadingly, "I'm awful tired. If this is some kind of rib . . ."

"Move on," ordered the Judge. "This is no rib."

Halfway down the winding slope the Judge said suddenly, "Quick! Pull in here!" George hit the brakes, jerked the wheel, skidded the car to a screeching halt. They were in front of a soft-drink stand.

"Now, what the hell—"

"Excellent reflexes," said the Judge. "Give me a light, will you?"

George took the matches, struck one, and cupped it in his hands. The Judge's slender fingers covered his, and brought the match into position.

"For a man who is as nervous as you are, George, you have remarkably steady hands," he said.

"Please, Judge," said George. "What the hell is this, an obstacle course?"

"Why, George," exclaimed the Judge, delight lighting his features, "that's exactly what it is. And you're doing marvelously. In fact, you may be the one."

"Please, Judge, I don't want to be the one."

"Drive on, George," ordered the Judge.

In the city, the Judge took over completely. "Take a left. Now a right. Another left." George obeyed mechanically. Finally, they were in the heart of the business district. "Stop here," ordered the Judge. "Find a place to park and come back and meet me in this bank."

"Here I am," whispered George, when he had returned. "Now what do you want?"

"Why, George," said the Judge, "I don't want anything. I simply thought you'd like to have a good look in daylight at the bank we're going to rob tonight."

"Gee, Judge, you shouldn't talk like that. You sound like you're off your rocker. Let's get out of here."

The Judge allowed himself to be led docilely out to the car.

"Tell me, George," he asked harshly, "just what is your racket?"

"Judge," said George, sternly, "you got to stop talking like that. I'm a—an accountant."

"Splendid! What sort of accounting do you do?"

"Er-um, ah, regular accounting."

"George," said the Judge, his voice rising in triumph, "you're perfect! You're exactly the kind of small-time, penny-ante crook that I've been waiting for."

"Gee, Judge, you shouldn't . . ."

"Let's get this straight, George," said the Judge, his voice hardening. "First, you're a crook. Or you wouldn't be allowed within twenty miles of Mom's. Did you think I was under the impression that it was a tourist resort? Because I'm blind? You will have to learn, George, that there are many advantages to being blind. Second, you're a small-time crook, or you wouldn't have been put in that crummy back room of Mom's. Whatever her faults, she has an excellent sense of status. And finally, George, you're a weakling. You have a weak face. You have a weak voice. You even lie weakly. Do we understand one another, George?"

"Yes, sir," said George.

"No need to be hangdog, George. You will soon be rich," said the Judge cheerily. "But now we have work to do."

Under the Judge's drill-master instructions, George wheeled the car through the city streets, learning by dint of patient repetition the entire pattern of the city's traffic flow, the major arteries, the narrow cross-streets, and over and over, the twelve-minute route from bank to railroad station until he could have driven it blindfolded.

"George," said the Judge finally, "you make a splendid seeing-eye dog. Now back to Mom's and report to my room at ten-thirty."

At exactly ten-thirty, there was a timorous knock on the Judge's door.

"Come in," said the Judge.

"Hey, what the—"

"Oh, I'm sorry, George. I forget the limitations of the sighted. You'll find the light switch next to the door. I'm afraid I have very little use for it."

The fumbling, scratching noises of George searching for the light switch were followed at last by the click of the switch and, after a momentary pause, a long, low, astonished whistle.

"Ah, an art-lover," said the Judge, his delicate, tapering finger tracing the final line of the clay he had been sculpturing.

"What's that!" exclaimed George.

"This, George," explained the Judge kindly, "is a bank."

"That's a *bank*?"

"George, you're looking in the wrong direction. I take it that what you are observing is a poor work of mine of a rather deep-bosomed, wide-hipped female. Done from memory, George. That's the trouble with it. Of course, with your splendid assistance, I shall soon have the funds to work from life. Ah! Life! Come here, George."

As George's shuffling steps gave audible evidence of his reluctance to leave the work he had been admiring, the Judge's long arm snaked out and gripped him firmly at the back of the neck, forcing his attention to the table where he had been working. With his sculptor's tool as a pointer, the Judge outlined the perfect miniature of the bank.

"This is where I was standing today. Here are the tellers' cages. Over here, the manager's office. Back here, the vaults. Here are the accounting offices. You said you were an accountant, I believe. And here—observe carefully—is where we enter. Now!"

Over and over, exactly as he had taught George the pattern of the city, the Judge led him now through a step-by-step detailing of the robbery until he could repeat it verbatim. Finally, he was satisfied.

"We leave in a half-hour, George. Now how about a drink to tone up the system? Just one to—" The glass in his hand half-raised, the Judge stopped abruptly.

"George, there is no sound in the world like the click of the safety catch on an automatic. No, George, give it here."

With extraordinary speed, the Judge stepped forward and, grabbing George's wrist in one powerful hand, he removed the automatic with the other.

"George, you're a fool. Were you testing me? Or were you testing yourself? Were you trying to decide if you could commit murder? You fool! Take my word for it, you can't. You're not the type. You haven't the stomach for it. But I have, George. You want to dissolve our partnership? Very well."

Raising the gun, the Judge pointed it steadily at George.

"You're looking right into the barrel, aren't you, George? Now watch my finger as it tightens on the trigger."

"No, Judge! No!"

"Watch the finger, George. See it tightening?"

"No, Judge. Please! Listen! Judge!"

Snap! The hammer of the gun clicked down.

"What do you know, George, a misfire! Well, if at first you don't succeed . . ."

"Judge! Please!"

Snap! Snap! Twice more the gun clicked as the Judge calmly pulled the trigger. Suddenly the Judge bent over in a convulsion of laughter, reveling in his joke.

"Oh, George! What I would have given to see your face! I told you that you were small-time and penny-ante. I really was surprised to find your gun this afternoon, so I took the precaution of removing the bullets. For your own safety, you understand, George. You were never in any danger, let me add, since it was obvious from the weight of the gun that you hadn't reloaded it. If only I could have seen your face!"

Putting the gun in his pocket, the Judge pressed a drink into George's sweating, trembling hands. George gulped it in great noisy, sobbing draughts.

"All right, George," said the Judge, once more kindly, "pull yourself together. Get your things and meet me at the car in exactly fifteen minutes."

George stumbled to the door, opened it, and said, "Judge . . ."

"Yes, George?"

"Judge, you're a mean no-good."

"Why, thank you, George," said the Judge. "At last we understand one another. . . ."

"Nine, ten, eleven, now!" whispered the Judge, crouched in the darkness of the bank, and a dull, muffled *boom* told him his timing had been precise, well calculated.

"Cheez, Judge! Look at that!"

"What do you see, you fool? Tell me!"

"Money! Tons of it! Cheez!"

"Shut up and start shoveling it into this suitcase. Remember—nothing less than fifties. Do you understand? Hurry!"

Three minutes later, precisely on schedule, they were in the car, traveling at a law-abiding 30-miles-per-hour to the railroad station.

Seventeen minutes later, they were seated in a compartment of the train, speeding south at a measured 60-miles-per-hour.

"Now, George, we begin the most delicate phase of our operations. We divide the money."

"Boy, let me at it!" cried George.

"Restrain yourself, George. First I must explain the ground rules. Item one: clean out one of your suitcases and bring it here."

As George struggled with his enormous suitcases, noisily snapping clasps, transferring his belongings, the Judge opened a small silver flask and carefully measured two equal portions into water glasses. When George had placed his empty suitcase beside the one holding the money, the Judge held up his hand.

"George, a toast to our success! But observe, first, and very carefully, the glasses that I've used."

"What about the glasses?"

"Are they equal, George?"

"Sure."

"Does it matter which one I pick? Will I get the same amount as you, no matter which I choose?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Then this, George, is how we divide the money. Do you understand? I can't read the denominations, George, but I can, I feel sure, rely on you and your weakness, your unwillingness to take a chance. Because while you divide the money, George, I do the choosing. Is that clear, George? Unless you divide the money into exactly equal amounts, you run the risk that I will choose the larger. I have no doubt that you would like to take it all. But I see no way for you to cheat me. Should you try, George, I will take it all."

"Cheez, Judge, I wouldn't try to cheat you."

"Begin, George. Call off the denominations, and divide them."

Humming merrily throughout the counting, the Judge, at the end, chose the pile nearest him, returning it to his own suitcase.

"Now, George," he said, "both suitcases, yours and mine, are exactly equal. Is that correct?"

"They sure are."

"Splendid. Now, as one further precaution, just so they don't get mixed up with the rest of your luggage, I'll put them both here under my berth for safekeeping."

When he had stowed the suitcases carefully away, the Judge straightened to his full height and smiled benignly.

"George, I think a little celebration is in order. Suppose you go down to the dining car and get us a bottle of champagne. Get two bottles."

"Gee, Judge, can't we ring for it?"

"Now, George, let me do the thinking. We don't want people remembering the two of us together, do we? Go ahead like a good fellow. And get chilled glasses. If he doesn't have them chilled, wait for them."

Mumbling unhappily to himself, George left the compartment.

For a long moment, the Judge listened intently to the retreating footsteps. Then he knelt beside the berth and, with the meticulous tidiness that only old bachelors possess, neatly transferred the half of the money that was in George's suitcase to his own.

One step remained. It was not necessary, but it pleased the Judge's sense of symmetry.

Moving lightly, he explored George's luggage. There was one suitcase of the size of the money suitcase, but it was locked. A larger one, held together by straps, yielded what he wanted. From it, he extracted a pair of shoes, pants, a shirt and some ties. These he stuffed into the suitcase from which he had taken George's share of the money.

The champagne was excellent.

Toward dawn, the train began to slow. In the compartment, the Judge prodded George awake.

"What happens now?" George's sleepy voice demanded.

"You leave the train here, George, and you're on your own. I go on."

George was dressed before the train had fully stopped. His suitcase under one arm, he reached for the last suitcase under the Judge's berth.

"Not yet, George. I think you'd better wait to be the last one off."

"Yeah, sure."

When the cry of "All Aboard" gave evidence that the train was ready to pull out, the Judge yanked George's suitcase from beneath his berth.

"Come on, George," he said, "I'll carry it out to the steps for you."

When they reached the steps, the train was just beginning to move. George scrambled down the steps.

"George," said the Judge, above the gathering noises of the train, "I want you to remember one thing: go straight. You haven't got what it takes to be a crook. Whatever your racket is, I'm sure you're a failure at it."

"Judge!" shouted George, now trotting alongside the moving train, "throw me my suitcase."

"Here, George," said the Judge.



1963

by Michael Zuroy

It was practically an inquisition. Eastern Chemicals, Inc., did not lightly select new employees for its ten stories of administrative offices in a Manhattan skyscraper. Drew Whitney had already filled out numerous application forms. He had undergone three gruelling interviews. He now opened yet another form headed: **ADDITIONAL PERSONAL INFORMATION, CONFIDENTIAL.**

Flipping through it as he sat at one of the small bare desks for job applicants set along a wall in Eastern's personnel office, he had trouble keeping a sneer from his coldly handsome features. Screwball stuff.

Big corporations these days, Whitney reflected, sometimes nosed into a man's personal background to the point of foolishness. This questionnaire was about as bad as they came. Probably doped out by the psychologists and the bright personnel boys to, in some way, help set up an overall picture of a man and determine what niches he might fit. Whitney understood the purpose all right, but to him it was still piddling hogwash. "Have you ever owned a sports car?" He was applying for an accountant's job. What kind of a question was that?

Are you familiar with fine wines? Do you know any dentists socially? the questions went on. This was from outer space, Whitney was thinking. If married, list schools attended by your wife. Is your wife's hair color natural? Do you skin-dive? Is there a history of baldness in your family? Brother!

Forcing patience, Whitney began filling out the form. Objecting would only get him out the door and he wanted to work for Eastern. This was a deliberate, considered choice. Eastern Chemicals had what he wanted—standing, wealth, power, opportunity. It was in a firm like this that he'd decided to make his big push. A sardonic expression touched his lips. If they could see into his mind he'd lose his welcome here, fast. He'd thought out his methods while gaining experience in

smaller firms. They were ruthless methods, but he meant to be a big man while he was still young. He meant to climb to power, no matter how many throats he had to cut. There was something in him that needed power and money.

Whitney wrote his answers neatly, knowing better than to let his handwriting betray impatience. They'd be watching for that, the bright boys, the psychologists. In sober figures, he put down his age, 26, although Eastern already had that information. Have you ever been arrested? the form inquired at another point. Whitney wrote, "No."

Father's occupation? Without pride, Whitney wrote, "Waiter." At least he didn't have to tell them what kind of third-rate joints the old man had worked until he died, or about the seamy life he'd given his family. The kind of a life, Whitney thought, he was going to put far behind him, forever . . .

Do you know of any criminal record against your father? Whitney blinked at that one. He wrote, "No."

Your mother? Whitney blinked again. It wasn't his parents who were applying for this job. He answered, "No."

Do you know of any criminal records against your grandfathers, paternal and maternal? Your grandmothers?

Whitney stared at the form. This was over the line. This was too senseless and nosy even for Eastern Chemicals. He had a fleeting temptation to write in, "None of your damned business!" but while he hesitated he realized that from one of the nearby glassed-in cubicles he was being watched by the coldly appraising eyes of Mr. Johnson, the personnel man handling his application. Whitney knew that a show of annoyance would mean a mark against him. He knew he'd made a good impression so far. Tall, personable, respectful, he was aware that one of his assets was that he appeared the potential executive type favored by large corporations. Without further hesitation, he answered "No" to the question. He completed the form and handed it into Mr. Johnson with a calculated smile, pleasant but not obviously ingratiating. He spent the rest of the afternoon taking an I.Q. test, then went home to await results.

Some days later, he was called back to Eastern's offices. He was to have a final interview with the president of the corporation. "The president himself?" Whitney said, surprised that he rated this. He was only being considered for a minor accounting job.

"President Mitchell personally passes on all administrative applicants, regardless of grade," Mr. Johnson explained aloofly.

President Mitchell's office was at the top of Eastern's tier, on the thirty-seventh floor of the skyscraper. The room was spacious, deep-carpeted, mellow with dark wood, heavy with the air of tradition. One wall was covered by an impressive mural depicting Eastern's mines and plants. On another wall were several portraits in oils of gloomy and severe-looking people who seemed to resemble Mitchell. A bank of low-silled windows afforded a spectacular panorama of the city and the river beyond, unobstructed by any other nearby tall buildings.

Whitney drew a quick, excited breath. Here was the pinnacle, the stronghold of power. He wanted this place for himself. Someday he might have it.

President Mitchell was a massive, powerful man whose shoulders bulged like a lumberjack's inside his expensive suit. Still under sixty, his voice was forceful, eyes uncompromising pits under looming brows. An overwhelming personality, but Whitney did not feel intimidated. He met the scrutiny guilelessly, while deep within himself the thought snuggled that Mitchell's throat, too, could be cut.

At last, Mitchell grunted. "You seem the right type."

"Thank you, sir."

"We're fussy, yes," Mitchell said. "A company can be ruined by its employees. We don't want anybody here who doesn't fit our picture. Above all, we insist upon high moral character. Did that grandparent question surprise you?"

"Well—a bit, sir," Whitney admitted cautiously.

"My own idea, that," Mitchell rumbled. "Based on a theory that hasn't failed me yet. I believe in heredity. Crooks breed crooks."

"Yes, sir," said Whitney, knowing when to agree. President Mitchell's stare brooked no contradiction.

"Blood will tell," Mitchell said.

"Yes, sir."

"For your job level, we check the grandparents. The higher the job level and the trust we have to place in an employee, the further back we check his ancestry. If an individual has a marked criminal heritage, no matter how far back, it will come out in him sooner or later. We can't take any chances on that sort."

"Yes, sir," Whitney said, incredulous at the idea, not venturing to comment that nobody could have a model ancestry.

As though divining his thought, Mitchell said, "Oh, we're realistic, we don't expect perfection. We use a crime-time ratio system that passes the great majority of our employees, but determines the worst risks. An unsatisfactory ancestry rating closes the more responsible positions to an employee. Serious ancestral crimes—such as murder—carry the most weight, naturally. Do you have enough faith in your heritage to work for us, young man?"

"I'm willing to trust my ancestors, sir," Whitney said without hesitation, knowing that it was the right answer. His thoughts were contemptuous. The personnel boys in big companies were sappy enough. When the big wheel butted in with his pet ideas it could be downright idiotic. Nothing to worry about once you were in. He was sure you couldn't run a company that way. Mitchell, himself, had just said that most employees passed. Besides, how much could be dug up about anybody's ancestry, especially as it got more ancient? He didn't know very much about his own grandparents, for instance.

Again, as though understanding Whitney's thought, President Mitchell said, "Our investigators are expert and thorough. An individual's knowledge of his own ancestry is unreliable, so we do not depend on it. Our agents operate all over the world. The past is obscure, certainly, but each generation back double in number; if they lose one trail, they switch to another. They seldom fail. They are, in effect, detectives who work in the past. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

Mitchell raised a thick finger. "This may be a new idea to you. It may seem harsh. I am satisfied that it works. Some of our key executives were cleared as far back as the Eleventh Century A.D. They've proved to be men of the highest integrity. Blood tells, right?"

"Right, sir," agreed Whitney, feeling somewhat dazed.

"Well," said Mitchell briskly, "our check of your grandparents bore out your statements. They're cleared. This will suffice for your present job level. You may report back to the personnel office."

Which, Whitney realized, meant that he had the job. He smiled.

Drew Whitney spent the next few months marking time, becoming familiar with the company and his job, preparing for his first ruthless move. Not for him the slow merit promotions, the crawling advance in seniority which might, in thirty years, bring him a minor executive post. He'd doped it all out. The fast way was to eliminate whoever blocked the road. It was a matter of watching for opportunities, creating them if

necessary. Whitney found himself chuckling. Let Eastern putter around with the past and Mitchell's stuffy ancestor theories. Something was going to happen in the near future which they'd never understand.

The department he was in was Equipment Inventory. Whitney's first objective was to become head of this department. There were fourteen people with more seniority between him and his goal, all jockeying for position, while the incumbent head seemed to be settled for years to come, a usual situation in a large firm. Everybody wanted to climb, but nobody had the guts or the brains to do what he was going to do.

Whitney picked Ed Thorpe as the most suitable victim. Thorpe, a slight man with hair that curled around a bald spot, had been with Eastern for twelve years and was one of the hopefuls for department head, when it became open. Whitney cultivated Thorpe. He turned on the charm, so that soon they were joking amiably together, engaging in serious discussions, lunching with each other. The friendship ripened gradually to the point where they began getting together with the wives on occasional evenings. Whitney even brought Thorpe's three curly-headed youngsters little presents, earning the name Uncle Drew. Oh, a great guy the Thorpes obviously considered Drew Whitney, with his clean-cut looks and sincere manner.

Naturally, when Whitney began to ask casual questions about Thorpe's work, Thorpe was glad to explain. When the questions grew sharper, Thorpe showed no annoyance. Why not teach a friend a few things? Young Whitney couldn't be a competitor, he was too far behind in seniority. At home, and in the office, Thorpe taught Whitney the fine points of his work, transferred to him the essence of what he'd learned in twelve years at Eastern. "Hope this helps you, someday," Thorpe smiled.

"Oh, it will, Eddie," Whitney smiled back. "It will."

Once the brain-picking stage was over, Whitney gave thought to working out the next step. Tax time was approaching. This could be useful. Whitney began looking through certain folders from the files, referring to some of the entry books that were amassed in this accounting division. No one paid any particular attention. He worked here, he was doing his job, the records were open to him.

Whitney felt confident he would get away with what he was planning, simply because it was unthinkable. There were things that just weren't done in offices. There was a line that few, even the worst back-biters,

would think of stepping over. He was going to step over that line. Because he had the guts.

From a current file of pencilled tax work-sheets awaiting posting to the permanent ledger, he chose several entitled ALLOWANCE FOR DEPRECIABLE EQUIPMENT. They had been prepared by Ed Thorpe and carried his signature. They also bore the O.K. of Lee Southerfield, who had checked Thorpe's work.

From among the crowded entries, he picked out one which read, "Owens-Hookworth Ore-Pulverizer Unit, Model G-48, Serial Number 879904R—\$7,423.00." Deftly, he erased the figures which represented Thorpe's calculated depreciation allowance and substituted a figure of \$9,898.00. He chose four more items scattered through the work-sheets and altered those figures upwards too. So meticulously did he make the changes and imitate Thorpe's figures that when he was done, Thorpe himself could not have detected the tampering.

He waited patiently some weeks until after the tax returns were in and all entries posted to the permanent ledger. Then he approached Mr. Bobak, the department head. His manner was that of one performing a reluctant duty.

"A serious tax error? An over-deduction for depreciation?" Bobak's round face was incredulous.

"Yes, sir," Whitney said. "Internal Revenue's sure to spot it. If we don't amend it first, it's liable to hurt us with them in the future."

Bobak's blue eyes had turned frigid and unblinking. They plainly conveyed his opinion of this young upstart. "Thanks for the warning," he said. "So, out of all the experts we got here, you were the one to find it out, hey?"

"Well," said Whitney diffidently, "I noted the figures in the ledger. They didn't look right to me. I computed the items according to our years-digit method. The figures were incorrect."

"A genius," Bobak murmured tiredly. "So who did the original accounting on this?"

"Uh . . . Ed Thorpe," Whitney answered with a nice show of hesitation.

"Yes." Bobak leaned back in his chair. "Look. Thorpe's been with us twelve years. He knows his job. Southerfield does the checking in that section. Another top-notch. I'll go by them. We can't spend all our time re-checking complicated figures. This is very conscientious of you, young fellow, but I think you're speaking from inexperience."

Whitney left, outwardly subdued. In fact, he was quite satisfied. So much the better that Bobak hadn't risen to the bait at once, the shock would be all the greater when it came. Internal Revenue would see to that. But Internal Revenue was slow. However, they could be safely accelerated. They did not reveal their informants. Whitney posted a note to the Treasury Department.

Within a week, two polite men with briefcases visited Eastern Chemicals, Inc., and spent some time going over the books in Bobak's department. As one of the results of this visit, Bobak emerged red-faced from what was apparently a severe chewing-out by his superiors. He, in turn, chewed out Thorpe and Southerfield. "Don't know how I made those errors," Thorpe muttered. "Don't understand it at all."

To Whitney, Bobak said privately, "Eastern doesn't like spots on the record, especially with the tax people. I don't know why in hell I didn't listen to you, it would've been less damaging then. You seem to be a sharp young man. No one else caught this. Thorpe seems to be slipping . . . and if I can't trust Southerfield . . . look, Whitney, I'm going to try you out on more responsible work . . ."

"Thank you, sir," Whitney said gratefully, reflecting that the next throat to be cut would be Bobak's.

Thorpe's chances for the department head slot were gone. So were Southerfield's. And Bobak's status had been weakened. Eastern Chemicals was not tolerant of major blunders in any of their departments.

Whitney applied himself to his work during the next few months. He knew that he was sharp enough, that much was true. He'd picked Thorpe's brains. He had no difficulty applying what he'd learned. And he'd turned the charm on Bobak, he was high in his favor, acting as his watch-dog. He made a practice of looking for the inevitable small errors in other people's work and exposing them to Bobak. Inexorably, he was taking over an increasing share of Ed Thorpe's responsibilities. Thorpe had the seniority, but his title was losing much of its meaning. Whitney now had only a distant politeness for Thorpe. He had served his purpose.

Eventually, Whitney received official promotion. The day before this happened, however, a messenger from Personnel dropped a sealed envelope on his desk. Inside he found papers headed, CONFIDENTIAL ANCESTRY REPORT—EMPLOYEE'S COPY. "Congratulations!" it said. "Your ancestry has passed further examination. You are cleared for this promotion."

Whitney had almost forgotten about President Mitchell's pet project. He read the report, impressed despite himself with its thoroughness. He'd never known this about his ancestors. Four generations back, a Stafford Whitney had operated a sawmill in Turnbull, Missouri. There had been a Silas Whitney, intrepid Indian fighter. Barbara Sherman, who later married Colin Whitney, trader, had, as a girl, been noted in the town of Amesworth, Pennsylvania, for her skill with the needle.

They dug hard enough, reflected Whitney with contempt. Let them, as long as they dug only in the past. The future concerned him.

He continued to work diligently, often putting in extra hours on his own. He was the first to arrive, the last to leave. He was creating the picture of a dedicated, dependable, and highly capable company man, and he knew that the picture was in time noted by S. D. Simpson, head of the division and Bobak's superior.

Meanwhile, he continued to deftly snipe away at the others in his department. Thorpe and Southerfield, who had been the two strong contenders for department head, were now out of the running. The others in the department were not serious executive possibilities, but Whitney was taking no chances. He never relented from undermining them, trustingly backed up by Bobak.

He let another year go by, to build up more seniority and solidify his status. Then he went after Bobak.

His plan was simple, but he considered it safe, because again it was unthinkable, something that wasn't done. Again, he was willing to step over the line.

He managed a private talk with the white-clad cafeteria man who brought up their orders during coffee break. He showed the man a bill which made his eyes narrow in greed. "Just some office fun," Whitney smiled. "You know. But you've got to keep your mouth shut or you might get us both in a little trouble. Everybody might not understand."

The man nodded slowly, but still with a shade of doubt. "Oh, sure, I know you guys kid around sometimes up there. But I don't wanna take any chances. You sure those pills are harmless?"

"For Pete's sake," Whitney said with a show of impatience, "I'm letting you buy them yourself, what more do you want? They couldn't harm a baby. Ask the druggist. All you got to do is slip a couple into Bobak's coffee order when I tell you to. But if you'd rather forget about it . . ."

The man reached for the money, convinced.

Shortly afterwards, some time past one of the coffee breaks, the office was astounded to see Mr. Bobak sound asleep in his chair. The sleeping pills were working very well.

Gradually, Bobak slumped to his desk, pillowed his head comfortably on his arms and began a piercing, regular snoring. For the benefit of the others, Whitney tried to shake him awake, but Bobak was too deep in sleep to respond. Later, Whitney was gratified to observe S. D. Simpson looking in disgustedly through the glass partition at the slumbering Bobak. Bobak awoke in a couple of hours, horror-stricken when he realized what he'd been doing.

A couple of weeks later, the same performance was repeated. "Don't know what got into me," Bobak muttered, aghast. "I don't usually feel sleepy during the day . . ."

Whitney was not surprised to find himself in S. D. Simpson's office one afternoon. "Of course, you're on the young side," Simpson told him, "and not as long in experience as some of the others, but, by George, we're convinced you're the most capable man in the department. And we're afraid Bobak's losing his grip. That tax trouble in his department last year . . . and when a man keeps falling asleep at his work . . ."

Again, another confidential ancestry report appeared on Whitney's desk. With some curiosity, Whitney noted that one of his forebears had been a naval officer under Drake. Well, well. There was a physician, a magistrate, a couple of clergymen. Another line showed blacksmiths, cobblers, other artisans, still in England. A few minor indiscretions had been noted, but the sum total was a satisfactory rating. Cleared for promotion to department head.

Bobak was removed to an obscure niche. "Too bad, Bobak," Whitney told him, having shed his respectful tone. "This is as much a surprise to me as it is to you. But you've still got your seniority. You've still got a pension to look forward to."

Whitney invested two more years in consolidating his position, presenting the ideas of underlings as his own if they had merit, running his department with a strict and efficient hand, calculating every move towards impressing the big wheels. He didn't mind doing a little waiting now; he was in the executive class. His next step could be a big one.

When at last he moved up again, it was to by-pass three high-level executives, including S. D. Simpson himself. A bit of blackmail could be useful.

While he waited, Whitney had had a firm of private detectives secretly snooping for indiscretions in the lives of Eastern's top officials. They couldn't all be angels, Whitney had reasoned. He'd struck pay dirt in the case of the Comptroller, Van Schilder. There had been a liaison between Van Schilder and a certain blonde model. Van Schilder had boosted Whitney up the line to avoid a scandal that would have ruined his reputation and his domestic serenity.

He was getting closer to the inner circle now. He disposed of the next man in his path in short order. Whitney had built up a rumor mill, a private corps of spies and toadies, to which he consigned the reputation of R. J. Fredericks. Rumors soon spread all over Eastern that Fredericks was an alcoholic, that he was given to placing bets on the horses with bookies, that he was accepting under the table kick-backs from Eastern's vendors, that he was selling out Eastern trade secrets to competitors. There were no open charges, nothing that Fredericks could defend himself against, only rumors, but the rumors kept coming to the ears of the top echelon, until at last, disquieted, unwilling to run risks, they removed Fredericks to a harmless sinecure. Whitney moved up again.

Barely thirty years old now, he was in line for a Vice-Presidency in the huge Eastern Chemicals Corporation. A most amazing advancement. He was regarded as one of the brightest young men in the industry, a man who undoubtedly must have remarkable executive ability to rise so fast.

With his promotions, further ancestry checks had been run, of course, far back into previous centuries, but had given no trouble. Whitney had anticipated none—that far back in the past, how much could be learned? And how much could it count?

He was somewhat surprised when President Mitchell, meeting him in the corridor, placed a hand on his shoulder and, with a relaxing of his features that might have been a smile, rumbled, "Ah, Whitney."

"Yes, sir?" Whitney said respectfully. Beyond some occasional routine contact, Mitchell had had little to do with him. Mitchell was a remote, unbending figure, inhabiting a world of forbidding dignity penetrated only by Vice-Presidents, members of the Board, and others of equal importance.

"I've read your latest ancestry report," President Mitchell said. "An interesting point—in the Thirteenth Century, your ancestors lived in Wicklington, Cheshire, in old England. So did mine."

"Really, sir? Then they must have known each other."

"Precisely," said Mitchell, in a kindly tone. He chuckled. **"In a way, that makes us old acquaintances, doesn't it?"** He took Whitney's arm, walked him along the corridor, chatting cordially about Thirteenth Century life in Wicklington.

While Whitney responded to the huge man in the proper tones of respect, interest and geniality, he was thinking that here was his ultimate target. This was the man who held the position he wanted above all. This was the most important throat he was going to cut. The king is dead, long live . . . President Drew Whitney of Eastern Chemicals, Inc. It would have a fine sound.

During Whitney's other operations, he had also steadily been gathering data on Mitchell, seeking out his weaknesses. This ancestry business was one of the weaknesses. Whitney had discovered that it was not popular among the other high-level company officials, considered little more than one of those eccentricities to which men of great achievement and power were entitled. Mitchell sometimes delivered talks on heredity to his officials. **"Heredity is not a dead record,"** he would say. **"The past lives in us. We follow the patterns of our ancestors, we are to a degree responsible for their actions. . ."** Whitney had detected notes of weary boredom in the polite agreement of the other executives. There was no doubt that the ancestor policy would be thrown out when Mitchell was out of office—meanwhile, it was a chink in Mitchell's armor, possibly it could be useful in some way to help discredit the man with the Board of Directors when the time came.

But Whitney was not ready for Mitchell yet. He needed a Vice-Presidency first. He needed the job of his immediate superior, Vice-President F. Griswold.

And Griswold proved to be the most difficult obstruction he'd yet faced. Griswold was comparatively young and vigorous; there seemed little chance that he would retire in less than fifteen or twenty years. He was efficient, capable, sharp, powerful. He was strongly entrenched—his reputation was top-drawer. Blackmail was out of the question. Whitney's agents had been unable to get anything on him. Whitney felt that it would be dangerous to repeat any of his previous tactics, and against this man it would be futile. Griswold was too highly placed and imperious.

Griswold was blocking the road.

Whitney debated a long time before he reached his decision. He was

willing to do the unthinkable, he was willing to step over the line, but this far? He would prefer some other way. It was a serious, risky act he was contemplating, the kind of thing which belonged in some other incredible, unreal world. Yet, would not its very improbability be its strongest point?

And against Griswold there seemed no other way. He wanted the Vice-Presidency badly, he needed it, like his right arm.

Whitney then made up his mind.

Once this was done, he acted with his usual thorough-going resolution and efficiency. During his investigations he moved cautiously and warily until he was sure that he had found the right man. "I'll pay top money," he told the man, "but I want a perfect job. Not just an injury. Injured people can recover."

The thin man looked at him from under light, almost invisible eyebrows. "I got a rep, mister," he said softly. "When I go after a guy, he's through. Quit worryin'."

The office was shocked by the news of the tragic accident. Vice-President Griswold had been struck down and killed by a hit-run driver. They had not been able to trace the car.

Another ancestry report reached Whitney's desk. Whitney had stepped into the Vice-Presidency. Sorrowfully, he stated: "It is with deep regret that I take over poor Frank Griswold's duties. These are painful circumstances under which to accept the honor of a Vice-Presidency. I shall try to respect Griswold's memory by doing the best job I can."

Actually, Whitney did have faint misgivings about what he had done, brief feelings of guilt. They soon vanished. He was almost there . . . Nothing must stand in his way. Nothing. He'd see to that.

In the third week of his Vice-Presidency, while he was still savoring the change in his status, the prestige, the new deference accorded him, he was summoned to President Mitchell's office. He walked into the room expecting that this would be an executive consultation on high-level affairs. He was not prepared for the grimness in the big man's face. He saw that they were alone. He closed the door behind him, hearing the automatic click of the snap lock.

"Sit down," Mitchell grunted. Whitney took a chair. Mitchell went to the bank of windows that looked out upon the vast panorama of the city, flung open a couple and took a deep breath. "This air conditioning's all right," Mitchell said, "but I like to get some real air in here

every day." Whitney waited. Mitchell returned to his desk, extracted a folder from his drawer and opened it. His heavy brows drew together. His deep-set eyes regarded Whitney so steadily that the younger man's glance flicked away uncomfortably for an instant, registering again the heavy dignity of the room, the mural, the oil portraits of a few of Mitchell's forebears. "Got some new information here," Mitchell said at last. "It came late. Our investigators in England just turned it up in the old vaults at Wicklington, Cheshire. It concerns your ancestry, Whitney. Belongs with your last report, by rights."

"My ancestry?" This was the furthest thing from Whitney's thoughts.

"That's right. It's a deathbed confession by an ancestor of yours, Garth Whitney, fletcher of Wicklington. It's dated August 12, 1173. Almost eight hundred years ago. Now listen."

Mitchell read:

"Synce I, Garth Whitney, did knowe that Baker Mitchell was a man of muche welthe, I did hie me to his abode on this darke nighte and did spie thru the window that he was alone and did knock uponne his dore and he did comen and openne. Then did I smite with a cudgel uponne his hed agen and agen and he did dye. I did find muche store of gold inne his cotage and I did flee and hyde the gold, so that when muche hue and tumulte was afterwards rayseed, none did wot it was I who had donne this. So did I lyve out my dayes in Wicklington and later have gude use of the gold, and none did suspecte, but nowe I lye on my dying bed, I wishet that the treuthe be knowne."

There was a silence. "It appears," said President Mitchell at last, "that you have murder in your heritage, Whitney."

Whitney did not allow the stir of concern to show in his face or voice. He knew how seriously Mitchell took this stuff; it had to be minimized. He said lightly, "Sorry to hear that, but I disown the old boy. My other ancestors averaged out all right, didn't they?"

Mitchell's severe expression didn't change. "Did you note the name of the man your ancestor murdered? Mitchell, the baker. My own ancestor."

It struck Whitney. He stared incredulously at Mitchell. Of all people, why did old Garth have to pick on a Mitchell? He forced a smile. "But that happened in the Twelfth Century, sir. Surely, you don't hold that deed against *me*."

"Well," Mitchell said, not returning the smile, "as you know, I hold that we're all in some degree responsible for our ancestors' actions."

However, I don't wish personal bias to enter into company affairs. The main point here is that the murder drops your ancestry rating below that required of a Vice-President. You'll have to give up that position."

"You'd take away my office because of this?"

"According to our present rating system, yes. You're still qualified to hold certain limited lower positions. Sorry, Whitney."

A wave of bitterness swept through Whitney. To have come so far, to have risked so much . . . and to have it snatched away because of the asinine theories of this man. . . . For an instant he considered fighting, lodging a complaint with the Board of Directors, trying to rally other company officials to his support. Then he knew that it would be hopeless. Mitchell was unassailable right now. Eastern Chemicals had achieved much of its greatness under his leadership. Like many other strong men, he could afford a few eccentricities. No, he couldn't get Mitchell now, he needed more time, another couple of years.

Desperately, feeling that it was futile, Whitney said, "But this is ancient history. How about the present? How about my own record? You'll admit that it's topnotch. I've given my best efforts to Eastern. Doesn't that count?"

Mitchell rose, went to the windows and looked out. At last, he said slowly, "It carries weight, yes. As I say, you're still qualified for some responsibility. But, as for a Vice-Presidency, I'm afraid . . ."

It was while Mitchell was talking that the thought came to Whitney. The man was no more than a step or two away, back towards him. The window was open, the sill low, ankle height. One firm push would do it. He'd say it had been an accident. Who could prove otherwise? Mitchell's habit of breathing deeply in front of the open window was known. The man might have tripped or had a dizzy spell, he was getting along in years—

He'd destroy the report on Mitchell's desk. With Mitchell gone, nobody would concern themselves with ancestry reports anyhow. The whole foolish business would be thrown out; from the Directors on down, there was no real sympathy for the thing. He'd retain his Vice-Presidency; might even have a chance at the vacant Presidency sooner than he'd expected.

Whitney rose silently. Yes, he was willing to go this far. He'd already done so with Griswold. The decision was easy this time. One quick push would give him everything he wanted.

Whitney took a step and lunged at Mitchell's back.

He hadn't thought the big man could hear him or move so fast.

He found his arms imprisoned in a crushing grip, Mitchell's deep-set eyes locked with his own. He tried to struggle. It was useless. The man was too powerful.

"Murder me, would you?" Mitchell said quietly. "I thought you might try that. Proves my point, doesn't it? There's murder in your heritage. Blood will tell."

"Let go of me," Whitney said.

"In a moment," Mitchell said. His eyes held the detached contempt of a judge's regarding a vicious criminal. "The law's practically helpless against you right now, it can't punish you much for what you tried to do to me. Let you go free and in time you'll succeed in murdering someone, if it suits your purposes. And there's another small consideration. Garth Whitney never paid the penalty for his crime. Eh?" For an instant longer the two men's eyes remained locked. Then Mitchell said, "Well, over you go, my lad," as he heaved Whitney out the window.



1964

by Jack Ritchie

The girl at the Classified Ads counter read my submission, chewed on her pencil, and then looked up uncertainly. "You want this put in our paper?"

"Yes. And I would like to have a box number for the replies."

The item I intended to insert in the *Herald Journal* read: *Are you hopelessly tied to your marriage partner? Perhaps there is one ultimate solution to your problem. All correspondence kept strictly confidential. Write Herald Journal, Box No.*

I studied the doubt on her face. "Is there anything wrong?"

The pencil received a few more indentations. "I'm new here. I don't know exactly what the policy of the paper is." She summoned a Mr. Wilson, who was evidently in charge of the section.

He read my sheet of paper. "Are you a lawyer?"

"No."

"I mean . . . aren't you referring to divorce?"

"No."

He cleared his throat. "Just what *do* you mean by 'one ultimate solution'?"

"I prefer to let the ad speak for itself."

And so I was channeled through other hands, ever upward, and finally ushered into the office of J. G. Bingham, advertising manager.

My sheet had preceded me and lay on his desk. He came directly to the point. "I'm afraid you'll have to explain this ad to my satisfaction or this newspaper cannot publish it."

I sighed. "Very well. My name is James Parkerson. I am a professor at the university, and my field is psychology."

He indicated the sheet. "And this has something to do with your field?"

"Yes. I am beginning a paper, and it is my thesis that perhaps ten

times as many husbands and wives would be murdered by their mates except for one psychological fact."

"That they are afraid of being caught?"

"That certainly is an important factor, of course. However, it is my contention that equally as important—if not more so—is the fact that people simply cannot bring themselves to the actual act. If they could *delegate* the act of murder—be able to hire someone else for the job—then there would be a tremendous increase in the number of violent deaths."

He frowned. "Do you mean to say that you're actually *advertising* to commit murder? Do you seriously expect people to answer this ad?"

"Of course. People are quite responsive to even the most ridiculous of things. For instance, several years ago an ad appeared in a national magazine consisting of the following words: *This is your last chance. Send one dollar to Box 107.* Just that and nothing more. Absolutely nothing was promised in return and yet thousands of readers sent dollars.

"I specifically chose the words 'one ultimate solution'. The word 'murder' would, of course, frighten away everyone but the insane. I expect my replies to fall into two categories. The first will consist of letters from people who assume that I am a lawyer with some new information about divorce laws. These will not serve for the purposes of my study and I will merely put them aside."

I had been standing, but now I took the chair Bingham indicated. "The letters in the second category will at first reading appear similar to those in the first, but the *seed* of murder will be there and I am sure that I will be able to detect it. These will be from people to whom the 'one ultimate solution' means something else, and they will be incredulously wondering: *Can it actually be possible? Can this ad really mean what I think it means?* And they will spend a little time and a stamp to cautiously probe."

Bingham was dubious. "But when they find out who you are and what your purpose is, won't they shy away immediately?"

"I do not intend to reveal to them who I actually am until my interviews are finished. For all apparent purposes I will be a professional murderer selling my services."

Bingham thought about it for a full minute and then rubbed his neck. "All right. I'm not sure I'm doing the right thing, but on the other hand I'm curious myself. We'll run the ad. For how long?"

"For the present, just one day."

He thought of something else. "You'd better pick up your replies direct from this office. No telling but what some reporter might be waiting downstairs if you go to your box."

My ad appeared in that evening's *Herald Journal*. The next day, after my last class at the university, I appeared at Bingham's office to collect my replies.

Bingham appeared uncomfortable as he introduced the solidly built man with him. "This is Sergeant Larson of the bunco squad. He tells me that one of his jobs is to read the classified ads, especially personals, and to smell out anything fishy."

"There is absolutely nothing fishy about this," I said firmly. "Perhaps you'd better explain to the sergeant what I am doing."

Larson cut in. "He already has. But I'd like to check this out for myself. Let's see your wallet. Take out your money first."

I did as I was told and he examined the billfold. "Well, at least you've got Parkerson's wallet. I'll drop in at the university to make certain that you really are who you say you are."

Bingham handed me a small pack of envelopes. "These came in the mail this morning."

There were only six of them. I was a bit disappointed.

Larson watched me put them in my pocket. "Are some of those from people who you think might want to have their husbands or wives murdered?"

"I haven't read them yet, but I believe so."

He put forward one hand. "Let's have the letters."

I ignored the extended palm. "Certainly not. These are addressed to me. They are my personal correspondence."

He scowled. "Look, Professor, don't you want to *prevent* murder?"

"Of course. And ultimately my work will contribute to that direction. But first one must diagnose the extent of the disease before one can go about treating it. And besides, don't you see that none of these people will murder until they can actually hire someone? And while they are negotiating with me, they are at least temporarily neutralized."

Sergeant Larson accepted that reluctantly. "But when you're through negotiating, we want those names. We'd like to talk those people out of the notions they have."

I agreed. "It might be a breach of confidence, but on the other hand, I do see your point. When I am through you shall receive the names."

I drove home and was about to enter my study when my wife, Doris, stopped me. "Dear, have you been thinking about what we'll do on your sabbatical year?"

"We'll stay right here," I said. "I'd like to do work on a new project of mine."

She sighed. "You work too hard, dear. I've been reading about those round the world trips on tramp steamers. Most of them take a limited number of passengers. Wouldn't that be a nice way to spend the year?"

I was impatient to get at my letters. "Doris, what is your reason for wanting to travel?"

"Why, to see new people, I imagine."

"Really? But don't you agree that people all over the world are basically pretty much alike?"

"Well . . . yes."

"In that case, Doris, what is the purpose of spending a lot of money to verify a fact which you already know?"

I went into my study, opened the six letters, and read them. Four fell positively into Category One. The remaining two were the ones in which I was interested.

I re-read the first.

Dear Sir:

I have just seen your most interesting advertisement in this evening's *Herald Journal*.

It occurred to me that perhaps you do not know the possibilities of 'one ultimate solution'. Or do you?

If you wish to exchange letters, please insert the following ad in the *Herald Journal*: Lost. Collie dog. Male. Answers to name of Regis.

The letter was unsigned.

I studied the typewritten sheet of paper. The o's and e's were clogged and the rest of the type could have used a thorough brushing. The ribbon, too, was faded and should have been replaced. Except for the redundancy of "Collie dog", and the spelling "ocurred", the letter seemed literate enough.

Or was that spelling correct? I glanced about for my desk dictionary, but didn't see it. I rose and went to the doorway. "Doris, how would you spell 'occurred'?"

She thought a moment. "O-c-u-r-r-e-d."

That still didn't sound right to me. "Where is the dictionary?"

"It's on the secretary in the living room, dear."

I fetched the dictionary and returned to my study. The word was spelled with two c's.

I turned to the second letter in Category Two. It, also, was typewritten—without salutation or signature—and quite brief.

Mac's Bar. 21st and Wells. Tonight. 8 P.M. Order scotch.
Untie and retie right shoelace.

Simple enough, I thought, and I would certainly keep the appointment.

I picked up the phone, called the *Herald Journal*, and had the ad concerning Regis, the lost collie, inserted in tomorrow's newspaper.

When I hung up, my eyes wandered to the dictionary and then back to the first of the two letters. I stared at it for about five minutes and then took a blank sheet of paper to the typewriter.

I inserted it and typed: *It occurred to me that the quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog.* And also, *It occurred to me that six quick movements by the enemy will jeopardize the five gunboats.*

I studied the words. They were dark and clear. No clogging of the o's and e's. I smiled sheepishly and crumpled the paper. Really, it was ridiculous what thoughts occasionally occurred to the human mind.

After supper, I put on my topcoat. "I'm going back to the university for a little while, dear. Have some work to do. No telling when I'll be back."

"All right, dear," she said. "By the way, did you notice that I cleaned your typewriter keys and put on a new ribbon?"

I paused in the process of putting on my hat. "When did you do that?"

"This morning, dear."

I left the house. It was drizzling.

Millions of people misspell "occurred", I reflected somewhat aggressively as I turned the ignition key of my car. They either use one "c" or one "r", or both. And typewriter keys are cleaned and new ribbons put on . . .

The motor caught and I drove on to Mac's Bar.

I found an empty stool at the bar and ordered a scotch. I untied and

retied my right shoelace and then gazed expectantly about the place for someone to step forward.

No one did.

I glanced at the wall clock. Exactly eight. Perhaps he, or she, was late.

Ten minutes later an average-sized man entered Mac's Bar. I downed my drink and then, in a clear carrying voice, ordered another scotch. I untied and retied my right shoelace. The new patron ignored me.

I waited patiently for the next person to enter the tavern.

Eight persons later, I decided to give up. Besides, I had succeeded in tying a completely unworkable knot in my right shoelace.

When I entered my house, Doris appeared to be asleep upstairs. I finished a large bag of potato chips I vaguely remembered purchasing at Mac's Bar, and then went to bed. I had a bit of difficulty negotiating the stairs.

In the morning I had a splitting headache. It was entirely possible that I was allergic to potato chips. I managed to untie the knot in my shoelace, and at breakfast I took nothing but coffee.

Doris looked worried. "Catching the flu?"

"Possibly." I finished my black coffee, took two aspirins, and left the house.

At the university, my morning classes dragged on interminably, and it was a profound relief to me when the noon hour finally came.

I managed to eat something at the faculty cafeteria and then decided that a stroll about the campus might do me good. I paused near the Memorial Union to light my pipe. As I glanced over the match flame, I saw a tall, well-dressed man approach.

He smiled slightly. "How do you feel this morning?"

I had never seen him before, and the condition of my health was clearly none of his business.

He glanced down at my shoes. "I see that you got the knot untied."

I stared at him. "Were you . . . ? Did *you* send me that . . . ?"

He nodded. "Yes. And I was at Mac's Bar last night."

I bristled. "Then why the devil didn't you come forward? Especially before I purchased those potato chips."

"Because I am a very cautious man, and this is a cautious matter."

He studied me. "What did you mean by one ultimate solution?"

I had not quite regained my temper. "Try me," I said bluntly.

He smiled faintly. "Murder?"

I hesitated, but then said, "Correct."

His eyes went over me again. "Just how much would you charge to murder my wife?"

I selected a number off-hand. "Ten thousand dollars."

The amount did not seem to disturb him in the least. "Just how would you go about doing it?"

"We would, of course, arrange that you have an alibi, and I would shoot your wife at that particular time. You would not be involved."

He nodded. "Very simple, and therefore it should work, Professor Parkerson."

I was slightly disconcerted. "How did you know my name?"

"I followed you to your home last night and to the university this morning. I made it my business to find out who you are. And somehow, Professor, I simply do not believe that a man in your position would turn to murder, either as a profession or a hobby."

"Sir," I said stiffly. "Do you or do you not want me to murder your wife?"

"I am not married. Just what *are* you up to, Professor?"

"That is *my* business."

His eyes flickered. "I think I'll report this to the police. They might be interested."

"I already have clearance with the police. At least on the sergeant level."

"Or perhaps I should take my information to some newspaper reporter? He might find the story worthwhile."

That dismayed me considerably. While I wanted the publicity of a two-line ad for one day, I did not want the publicity of a feature story. That would certainly frighten away all my prospective clients for the present and the future.

He pressed again. "Shall I go to a newspaper with my information?"

I sighed. "No."

We sat down on a nearby bench and I told him about my project. He was thoughtful when I finished.

"Have you received any replies to your ad?"

"Six, so far."

He was silent for a few moments and then said, "Professor Parkerson, when you get the names of your clients—those in the second category—would you pass them on to me?"

"To you? Why?"

"I will pay you five hundred dollars for each name—providing, of course, that I ultimately do business with the client."

A light flickered in my brain. "Why do *you* want those names?"

He smiled. "One of the difficulties of my profession is establishing contact with prospective clients. I of course cannot advertise for them. But you can."

I blurted the unnecessary question. "Your profession is *murder*?"

"Possibly we could work out some percentage arrangement instead," he said. "Let us say fifteen percent of anything I receive?"

I stood up. "I believe that it is now *my* turn to summon the police."

He shrugged. "What could you possibly prove? I would deny that we ever had this conversation. And my name and fingerprints do not appear in police records anywhere." His eyes seemed to glitter. "You don't seem to realize how *big* we can make this. Your 'research' needn't be confined to just one locality. You can make it nation-wide. A veritable Kinsey report—in volume, at least. And your profession is a perfect legitimate front."

"Never. Absolutely never."

He was not perturbed. "I'll give you a little time to think it over, Professor. And remember that there are probably hundreds of other psychologists who might jump at the chance I'm offering you."

I watched him cross the street and get into a sleek 1963 convertible.

After my last class of the day, I drove home in my 1946 sedan.

Doris was sorting a mass of clothes. "For the rummage sale at church, dear."

I looked over the garments. "What is my brown suit doing there? That's the one I wore when we were married."

"It's worn, dear. I didn't know you were sentimental about it."

"I am not sentimental. But there is still a lot of good wear in it. Put the suit back into the closet."

"All right, dear. But you really don't have to be married and buried in the same suit these days."

I regarded her speculatively. Why did she choose that particular expression? Married and buried.

I shrugged and went into the study. I reached for a sheet of paper. The population of the United States is approximately 186,000,000. Suppose one hundred thousand of those people wanted to get rid of their mates—surely a conservative figure. But why limit the field to hus-

bands and wives? After all, there are uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces, friends. . . .

Suppose one could establish contact with just five thousand of them? And suppose one would average five thousand dollars per individual? That would come to twenty-five million dollars. And fifteen percent of twenty-five million was. . . .

I crumpled the paper abruptly and tossed it away. I turned to a stack of tests, and doggedly set about marking them.

On Thursday afternoon I went to the *Herald Journal*. In box number 1183 I found an envelope in response to my ad about Regis, the lost collie.

I read the note.

Dear Sir:

I have seen the ad concerning Regis, your lost collie dog.

I think it is time we met. I suggest the Leoni Restaurant at the corner of 27th and Gerald at eight in the evening. Friday.

I shall be wearing a rose chiffon scarf and expect you to have a bachelor's-button boutonniere. I shall say, "Regis", and you will respond with, "Black collar".

I re-read the words. The fact that the writer was a woman was now definitely established. And this time the typewritten words were clear and dark.

The Leoni Restaurant? Oh, yes. I remembered the place. Doris and I had dined there a year ago. Or was it two?

I thought about that for a while and then continued on home. When I entered the house, I said, "Doris, it's been some time since we went out to dinner. Suppose we make it Leoni's this Friday evening?"

She looked up from her magazine. "I'm sorry, dear. But that's my Women's Club night. I'd cancel, but I'm chaplain this year and really ought to be there. When one becomes an officer in an organization, one must assume certain responsibilities, and attendance is one of them."

I put my hat back on. "I'm going outside for a short walk."

"But you just came in, dear."

"Nevertheless, I am going for a walk."

It was dark and windy outside. Was it possible that Doris was just playing some kind of trick on me? But how could she know about my

project? It is my policy to be secretive about my work until I am fully into it. This saves the embarrassment of withdrawal, should the field prove to be an impossible one.

Or was it actually possible that Doris seriously entertained the fantastic notion of getting rid of me?

We'd been married ten years and, I had thought, happily. Of course ours had been the quiet life, but certainly Doris must be acclimated to something like that. I had deliberately married "in service," so to speak. Her father had been a Professor of Romance Languages and her mother Associate Professor in Zoology. Her recreation of the ecology of a pond is still the standard exhibit in that department.

Should I confront Doris and demand an explanation?

I shook my head. No. I had to find out just how far she really intended to go.

Should I wear a beard or something of that order when I met her at Leoni's? I'd see Professor Tibbery of the Drama Department tomorrow and see what he could do for me.

A long convertible slowed down, passed me, and then drew to a stop at the curb. The tall stranger who made murder his business got out of the car and waited for me.

"Well, Professor, have you made up your mind to play along?"

A new chain of thoughts came to my mind. Why do people kill? For profit, of course. For passion. *And* in self-defense.

My eyes widened at the idea. Would I be morally justified in having Doris murdered before she had the chance to murder me? Should I hire someone to do the job for me? Like this man standing before me? I closed my eyes and wrestled with cold logic and warm emotion.

No. I couldn't have Doris killed. I had married her for better or worse, though this was considerably worse than I had expected.

"Well, Professor," the stranger said again. "Are you ready to do business?"

I opened my eyes. "We have absolutely no business to discuss."

He tilted his head slightly for ten seconds of appraisal and then reached inside his topcoat. He produced a card and handed it to me. "I shall be at the Westland Hotel for one more day. And let me remind you that there are other psychologists who might jump at this opportunity."

"Feel free to help yourself."

When the tail lights of his automobile disappeared around the corner,

I took the card to the nearest lamp light. It contained no information besides the name. Charles A. Hasker. Was that his real name? If he truly did not have a record with the police, that could very well be. However, it really did not matter. I would inform Sergeant Larson where Hasker could be reached.

Perhaps the police could do nothing about him at the moment, but on the other hand they would be informed of his existence and profession, and he could be watched. Eventually he would be apprehended.

When I reached home, I found my neighbor, Professor Conner, waiting at the chess board.

Why he continually chooses to drop in, I do not know. We have little in common. His field is zoology. I introduced the *divertissement* of chess because it is preferable to his conversation.

At eleven, he consumed two of Doris' tuna-salad sandwiches and departed.

On Friday, after supper, Doris went upstairs to dress for Women's Club. When she came down, she kissed me lightly. "I don't know exactly when I'll get back, dear. The subject for discussion tonight is Castro, and there's no telling how many resolutions we'll pass."

I regarded her moodily. "Have you forgotten anything? Like a rose chiffon scarf?"

"It's in my purse, dear. Do you mind if I take the car tonight?"

"I thought Professor Bronson's wife usually picked you up?"

"I told her not to. Frankly I'd like a little freedom of movement. Otherwise I always have to leave when she does."

When she left, I opened the closet and fetched the make-up Professor Tibbery had given me earlier in the day.

I reviewed his directions and propped up a mirror. Why in the world would Doris want to kill me? *Why?* For money? Ridiculous. Our assets were modest indeed.

For my life insurance? It was a fairly tidy amount, yet not so great that it should constitute a temptation. Was there another man? I smiled at that. There was absolutely not one iota of evi—

I sat without moving for fully a minute.

Why did Professor Conner appear at our home so often? Was he really interested in chess? Why did Doris always serve those confounded tuna-salad sandwiches? They are definitely not *my* favorite.

And Conner is a bachelor. His interest is vertebrate zoology. Cer—

tainly a man who specializes in the lower vertebrates would eventually aspire to the higher. . . .

I glared at my now bearded reflection and then put on my pair of green-tinted sunglasses. On the way out of the house I stopped at the refrigerator and removed the bachelor's-button boutonniere from its concealment behind the dill-pickle jar.

I arrived at Leoni's at approximately eight and stood immediately inside the entrance, aggressively exhibiting my boutonniere.

Leoni's was a modest establishment containing about a dozen tables and a similar number of booths. My eyes searched the room. None of the women at the tables was wearing a rose chiffon scarf. I could not, however, see into the booths.

I remained standing where I was for five minutes and had about determined to make a personal inspection of the booths when a woman of about twenty-five rose from one of the tables and approached me.

She spoke somewhat tentatively. "Regis?" She stared at me warily.

I blinked. "You are not wearing a rose chiffon scarf."

"But I *am*."

Then I remembered my green-tinted glasses. I flushed slightly and removed them. Yes, she was wearing a rose chiffon scarf.

And I had never seen her before in my life.

"Black collar," I said weakly.

She led me to her table and I listened to her story. She wanted to get rid of her husband, but would not disclose the motive. Probably money, I thought, but I couldn't have cared less.

We quickly settled for a fee of ten thousand dollars and I made an appointment to meet her once again when we would thrash out details. But, of course, I had not the slightest intention of seeing her again. I would give her name and address to Sergeant Larson and leave it to him to dissuade her from murder.

As far as I was concerned, this was the end of my current project. Instead, I would devote my sabbatical year to constructing a personality silhouette of Certified Public Accountants. After all, that had been my second choice.

I went to the nearest bar and ordered a scotch and soda. I felt a sense of exhilaration which, I suppose, is normal to any man when he discovers that his wife does not want to kill him.

I lingered over three more scotches and at ten-thirty I left. It was

about three miles to my house, a gibbous moon had risen, and I felt like walking.

The residential streets were quite silent and deserted, and so it happened that I noticed the automobile which passed me four blocks from my home.

It was my own sedan, and Doris was probably returning from Women's Club. The car pulled to the curb approximately one block ahead of me.

Ah, Doris had seen me, and was waiting.

But then something else occurred to me. I was still wearing the beard. How had she recognized me? And in the moonlight?

I frowned as I approached the car.

What I had taken for a rather bulky shadow in the front seat now parted. There were two people in the car. I stopped and stared into the window. Doris . . . and Professor Conner!

The two faces coldly returned my stare and conveyed the message that what was happening here was clearly none of my business.

My wife's voice came uncharacteristically hard. "Got nose trouble, mister? Move on."

I moved on.

At the corner I turned and immediately crouched behind the cover of a hedge to peer back. I had not been mistaken. They resumed their embrace. And in *my* car!

I timed them by my watch. Ten minutes. Fifteen. There was no indication when they would cease. I rose and marched toward the light of a public phone booth a block away.

How much would Hasker charge to permanently dispose of Doris? And Professor Conner? Probably some outrageous sum. Even with a fifteen percent discount, I doubted if I could afford it.

Or perhaps he would do it for nothing, if he and I became partners.



Death by Misadventure

1965

by Wenzell Brown

There warn't no two ways about it. Red Emma was the fattest woman in the whole o' Pisquaticook County. That was until Bessie Bellinger come round. Then I reckon you'd have to flip a coin to decide which one was fatter than the other.

Who could have guessed there'd be so much fussin' and feudin' over a matter of avoirdupois? But then there wouldn't never have been no real trouble, at least not the killin' kind, if it hadn't been for Joe Dongan and the yen he had for buxom females.

Looks like I'm gettin' ahead of my story. Mebbe I better start the cart rollin' by tellin' about the Ringside Diner. Bein' as how I'm County Sheriff, I don't get much call to go over to Bancroft, which is the biggest town hereabouts, but when I do, I always make it a point to drop into the Ringside and put on the feedbag. There ain't no fancy trimmin's about their fare, just plain Maine food, the kind that sticks to your ribs, and plenty of it, but I reckon that's good enough for any man.

Nigh on to twenty years ago, Joe Dongan bought up the diner with money he'd saved up in the prize ring. He'd been a heavyweight boxer in his day and had a cauliflower ear and a flattened-out nose to prove it. Me, I ain't never studied up on the fight game, but people 'round tell as how Joe was goin' great guns, and might have been the champ if he had got the breaks. I ain't disputin' their claims but I reckon you got to take 'em with a pinch of salt, considerin' local pride and all.

One thing's for sure, Joe ain't no chucklehead. In no time at all he's got a flourishin' business, and 'tain't long afore he's expandin', buildin' hisself a bowlin' alley and sports arena. Joe rates as a solid citizen too, awardin' high school athletic trophies and settin' up a scholarship at the state university. But a lot of folks in Bancroft got it figured that Emma Foley's the real brains behind Joe Dongan.

Nobody rightly remembers when Red Emma first drifted into town or

where she come from. But one day there she is a-settin' on a high stool in back of the cashier's counter at the Ringside Diner, greetin' everybody as comes in with a big warm smile and that boomin' voice of hers.

Emma ain't no beauty. She's got carrotty hair, a slew of freckles, broad, flat cheekbones, and the build of a lumberjack. Just the same she's all woman. When she smiles her face lights up deep inside, so a man feels sort of happy just lookin' at her.

Plenty of people put a heap o' store by Red Emma. Ain't never no reason for an honest man to go hungry in Bancroft, and nobody knows when Emma puts a meal on the cuff. But she don't stand for no hanky-panky. Let a feller start cussin' or cuttin' up mean in the Ringside and she lays it on the line. It's either shut up or get out, and Emma don't take no back talk. She's got enough beef, and Joe's taught her enough judo tricks, so she don't have no trouble at all frog-marchin' a drunken truck driver right out onto the street.

Same with the high school kids. The diner's a hangout for the teenagers, 'specially after the late movies. Emma likes to see 'em have a good time but there's a limit to what she'll take. None of 'em dare sass her back. At least not more'n once. I reckon it's partly because of her Bancroft ain't got much of this here juvenile delinquency you read so much about in the papers.

Big as she is, there's more'n one man's gone sweet on Emma. But she ain't never had eyes for no one save'n Joe Dongan. Trouble is Joe's got a wife, though you might say in name only. Poor Lulie Dongan was always a puny little thing and not very bright. Joe married her afore he turned twenty. Warn't more'n a year afterward when they had to put her away in a sanitarium up 'Gusty way. Joe takes care of all the bills and visits her when he can but, accordin' to what I hear, Lulie don't even recognize him. She just sits starin' into space when he comes.

Most ways Maine folk tend to be sort o' narrer-minded but I never do hear much criticism of Joe and Emma, not even when she rents a cottage on the Shore Road north of Cripple's Bend and Joe's car is parked up there most nights and weekends. Course Joe could have shucked Lulie and tied up with Emma. But that ain't the way they call the play, and folks think the better of 'em for it. Everyone takes it for granted they'll get spliced if they ever have a chance.

That's the way things is standin' when Bessie Bellinger enters the scene. She's Ralph Napier's mother-in-law. Now the Napiers have been livin' in Bancroft since it was founded. They owned the paper mill and

practically run the town at one time. But that ain't sayin' that Ralph was popular. He was a snooty kid with a hankerin' for licker, fast cars and faster women. I had him in once for speedin' and he paid his fine like he was doin' me a favor.

An Ivy League college don't improve Ralph none, nor a couple of years in New York. When his daddy died, Ralph come back and settled down in the old Napier house on Cedar Street, bringin' his bride with him. Even if I don't cotton to Ralph, I got to admit he knows how to pick a wife. Doris Napier is pretty as a pitcher and right pleasant too. And that bein' the case, there ain't no need for Ralph to play the field no more.

Everything's hunky-dory until Doris' widdered mother came to live with 'em. Now Bessie would attract a heap of attention in a town a lot bigger'n Bancroft. She's built along the lines of an outsized kewpie doll, all pink and white and dimpled. She has a pile of auburn hair, touched with gray, sparklin' brown eyes and a complexion like a fresh peach. When she joggles down the main street the youngsters giggle and pass mockin' remarks, but more'n one old buck stops to ogle her.

Now I know a fat woman ain't stylish, but I reckon there's a lot of men gets tired of the scrawny females he meets up with nowadays. And there ain't no denyin' there's plenty of attractive curves to Bessie. It ain't only that; she's what you might call the quintessence of femininity. She dresses to the nines with broad-brimmed hats, high-heeled shoes, and plenty of ribbons and fancy gewgaws. Her plump little hands are soft and warm and covered with diamond rings, and she always smells of expensive perfume.

More'n once I find an excuse to pass the time o' day with her. She's got a croonin' sort of voice and a laugh like dried leaves a-rustlin' in the wind. Even if I do feel sheepish admittin' it, she puffs a man up and makes him feel like he can really roar.

'Taint no time at all afore the town's a-buzzin' with speculation as to whether Bessie or Red Emma is the fattest. I reckon you toss 'em on the scales and Emma'd win by a few pounds. But Miss Daisy Lunt, the librarian, pretty well sums up the situation when she points out that ain't a fair comparison. Emma's carryin' a load of bone and muscle, while Bessie's all soft and rollin'.

In a town the size of Bancroft, gossip makes the rounds fast. Neither Bessie nor Emma is takin' kindly to the jokes linkin' them together. Everyone's a-wonderin' what'll happen when they meet face to face.

The Ringside Diner is smack in the middle of Bancroft's main street, and most any day Red Emma's a-settin' in the winder for anyone to see. A couple of times Bessie stops in front of the diner, her lips pursin' in and out while she's pretendin' to read the menu in the winder, but really sizin' up Emma. Seems like she don't care for what she sees, because each time she gives a sort of sniff and goes on her way. As for Emma, she sits stony-faced like she don't know that Bessie's a-peerin' in at her.

Then one day Bessie flounces into the Ringside and settles herself down at one of Minnie Martin's tables. She orders clam chowder and preens a bit while she's waitin'.

Pretty soon Minnie slides a big frothy bowl in front of her, filled with clams, 'taters, onions, celery and such, with a great gob of rich yeller butter swimmin' around on top. Bessie crumbles a few crackers in the bowl and stirs 'em up, sort of holdin' herself away from it, like she's scared one of them clams is going to jump up and bite her.

After a while she raises a spoonful to her mouth and takes a weeny bit of a sip. She puckers up her lips, sighs and lays the spoon down. She nibbles at a dill pickle, makes a little move and sets that down too.

Red Emma's takin' it all in from behind the cashier's counter. Ain't nobody ever turned up their nose at her clam chowder afore. Matter of fact, tourists from all over the country go clean out of their way for a shore dinner at the Ringside Diner. She's smilin' but anyone who knows her can recognize the danger signs. Her eyes are bright and shiny, and her lips are pressed back hard against her teeth in a forced smile.

Bessie calls for her check and Minnie, the waitress, comes over, all flustered, and hands it to her. By this time everybody in the diner is watchin'.

"I hope there's nothin' wrong," Minnie quavers.

"Oh no, I'm not very hungry," Bessie says, sweet as you please. "You might not guess it to look at me, but I eat like a bird."

Minnie says, "Isn't there anything else I can get you?"

Bessie shakes her head, still smilin'. "I don't think so, dear. I have a very delicate appetite and well—" She looks down at the heavy, chipped, crockery bowl and the tin spoon.

Minnie flushes and starts apologizin' but Bessie cuts her off. "It's not your fault, darling."

She digs around in her oversized handbag, hauls out a fifty cent piece and tucks it under the napkin for a tip. Then she sails over to the cashier's counter with the check and a dollar bill in her hand.

Emma's all a-bristle now. She's still got her fixed smile on but it's wearin' mighty thin.

She says, "There won't be any charge, Mrs. Bellinger."

"But I insist."

"We don't want dissatisfied customers."

"Land's sake! Did I make any complaint? I didn't say a thing!"

Emma's gettin' rattled and her words snip off real sharp.

"We don't want your money or your patronage. Do you understand?"

Bessie's got more experience at this kind of game. She coos, "Really, you can't force food down people's throats. Do you make everyone who comes in here eat what's put in front of them? Why, mercy sakes, you'd think I was a naughty child."

Things is just gettin' set to be right interestin' when who walks into the diner but Joe Dongan. Emma sees him and slices off whatever retort she's about to make.

Joe comes up behind Bessie and puts a hand on her arm. She bridles a bit, and Joe says, "I'm sorry, Mrs. Bellinger. Is something wrong?"

Bessie gives her chuckling laugh. "Not a thing except, well, I'm feeling a trifle peckish. I ordered some clam chowder and your—er—cashier seems to think I'm obliged to eat it. Otherwise, I'm banned from the Ringside Diner."

Joe scowls at Emma. She gives him a baffled look and turns away. Joe's voice grows firmer. "Ridiculous, Mrs. Bellinger. You're always welcome here."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that," says Bessie. "I must say you've been very kind and considerate."

While he's been talkin', she's been sidlin' toward the door, leavin' the dollar bill on the glass counter. Joe's movin' right along with her.

Out on the street they stop and chat for a while. Nobody inside can hear what they're sayin', but Bessie's smilin' and gesticulatin', while Joe has a silly grin on his ugly pan. 'Taint long afore Joe leads her over to his shiny black car that's parked at the curb. He helps her into the front seat, gallant as all get-out, and then runs around the car to jump in beside her.

Red Emma's watchin' like a cat. She's so mad she's all a-tremble, and her fingers is clampin' the dollar bill so hard she rips it to shreds.

Pretty soon the word is spread all over town that Joe Dongan is squirin' Bessie Bellinger around, takin' her for drives in his car, escortin'

her to the Beacon Theatre on Sat'dy nights, and even tryin' to teach her to bowl.

Nobody has to be a mind-reader to know that Red Emma is burned up. She takes to moonin' around the cashier's desk, and a-starin' out the winder like she ain't seein' a thing. What's more, she's right snappish with the customers, and that ain't like Emma at all.

Then comes a crisis. Lulie Dongan up and dies, and Joe is free to marry, at last. But it looks like mebbe Emma's been a-waitin' all these years just to get cut out by Bessie Bellinger.

Seems like most everybody in Pisquaticook County is pitchin' for Emma, claimin' as how Joe Dongan's givin' her the dirty end o' the stick. Feelin' runs high against Bessie Bellinger too, 'specially as the widder's supposed to be loaded, while Emma ain't got a red cent save'n what Joe's a-payin' her.

There's plenty of snickerin' goin' on behind Joe Dongan's back, but nary a soul has got the guts to say nothin' to his face. That is, nobody 'cept Ralph Napier. Now it's general knowledge that Ralph ain't doin' so well in a business way, and he's been bankin' on comin' into a packet when his mother-in-law dies. Mebbe that's just gossip, but sure as shootin' Ralph views Joe's courtship o' Bessie with a jaundiced eye.

Ralph ain't makin' no secret of how he feels about Joe. Course he ain't puttin' it on a money basis. Accordin' to him the Napiers has always been gentlefolk, while Joe Dongan's a roughneck and not far from a gangster. The idea of Joe linkin' himself up to the Napiers, Ralph says, is enough to make him sick to his stomach.

The showdown comes late one night when Joe's bringin' Bessie home from a picnic on the beach. Ralph's waitin' up for them and he lights into Joe, orderin' him out of the house. Ain't much Joe can do but leave. Later on that night the neighbors say there's big goin's-on at the Napier place, with Ralph and Bessie a-hollerin' and givin' each other what-for, while Doris is tryin' to cool 'em both down and not succeedin' too well.

Bessie and Joe keep right on seein' each other, but Joe don't go 'round to the Napier place no more. Instead, they meet at the Ringside Diner, right under the nose of Red Emma. And that spells more trouble, seein' as how Joe and Emma ain't hardly on speakin' terms these days.

Things is bad enough but Ralph Napier makes 'em worse. One night he comes chargin' into the diner with whiskey on his breath and fire in

his eye. He tries orderin' Bessie home, and when she says as how she won't go, he grabs for her wrists and starts tryin' to yank her to her feet.

That's too much for Joe Dongan. He bellers for Ralph to let her loose. Now Ralph ain't much for size but he's a fightin' cock of a man, 'specially when he has a few drinks under his belt. He faces Joe in a boxer's stance with both fists raised. Joe just wades in, takin' two or three hard punches without even gruntin'. Then he's got Ralph by the scruff o' the neck and the seat o' the pants. He lifts him right off the floor, carries him to the door and tosses him out on the sidewalk.

Ralph jumps up and rushes Joe but he's way out of his class. Joe plants a big palm in Ralph's face and gives a heave that sends Ralph head over heels into the gutter.

By this time quite a crowd is gathered 'round. Ralph gets up and shakes himself and starts toward the door again but some of the men hold him back. Ralph's face is all aflame and he's fit to be tied, but I reckon even he knows he's a fool to mix it up with Joe Dongan.

After that things just ride along for a while. Joe don't give up seein' Bessie but he seems to have patched things up with Red Emma. He's dividin' his time equal between the two women. The town bookie's takin' bets on which one of 'em will hook Joe. The odds is still heavy on Bessie, but Emma's creepin' up all the time.

Meanwhile Ralph Napier's doin' a lot of plain and fancy drinkin' and, as soon as he's had over three drinks, all he can talk about is how he's going to get even with Joe Dongan.

"I'll kill the bum," he boasts. "Some day I'll murder him."

Up in Icy's Grill it gets to be a standard joke.

"How you going to do it?" the boys ask. "You going to tackle him again with your fists?"

Ralph just wags his head and looks wise. "I'll fix him, all right. Needn't any of you fellows worry about that."

The way I look at it the whole town's sort of to blame for the tragedy that follows. Here's Ralph Napier spittin' murder and, instead of takin' him serious, everyone's laughin' at him and eggin' him on.

As County Sheriff I ain't got no authority in Bancroft and it ain't rightly my affair. All the same, I drop by the office of Steve Roper, Bancroft's Chief of Police, and chew things over.

Steve ain't worried. He says, "I've known Ralph Napier since he was knee-high to a grasshopper. I ain't sayin' Ralph ain't given to violence when he's had a few drinks. But he wouldn't pull a kill in cold blood.

He's too almighty fond of his own skin. Anyway, I reckon Joe Dongan is capable of takin' care of himself."

I don't like it, but I've spoke my piece and there ain't nothin' more to do but keep my big mouth shut.

Like I said, Emma's got a cottage on a wild stretch of the Shore Road. She ain't usin' it much of late, doin' most of her sleepin' in her room above the diner. But I reckon the next time I get a chance I'll have a word with her. After all, the cottage is in my territory.

I drop around there on a Sat'dy afternoon, not expectin' no trouble. First thing I see is Emma's car parked on the circular drive of her house. Alongside of it is another car, and I don't have to look twice to recognize Ralph Napier's white sports car. I sit in the county car for a while, mullin' things over and not likin' what I'm thinkin'.

Finally I lumber out o' the car and mosey up to the house. Red Emma's a-settin' on the porch with a cocktail glass beside her. In a rat-tan chair opposite her is Ralph Napier, lookin' like a cat with a bowl of cream.

Ralph rolls his eyes up at me with that insolent way he's got. He says, "Surprise, Sheriff! What brings you to Emma's hidey-hole?"

I'm plum out o' words. Ain't nothin' wrong with Emma and Ralph havin' a drink together but, sure as sin, that ain't the way Joe Dongan'll look at it. I got a shrewd suspicion Ralph's stirrin' up trouble, and Emma's playin' along in the hope of makin' Joe jealous and winnin' him back. It's a plan that can backfire. I don't like it one little bit.

Emma gives me her warm breezy smile.

"Have a cocktail, Sheriff. Please do. It's quite a drive out here."

I don't go in for these here fancy drinks. When I drink at all, I like my lick straight. But I'm in need of some time, so I gives her a nod.

She's still busy with the cocktail shaker when I hear the roar of an engine in the drive. Don't seem like more'n two shakes of a lamb's tail afore Joe Dongan's slammin' the screen door back on its hinges.

He strides across the porch toward Ralph. Now I can move right fast when I have to, even if I am a bit long in the tooth. I shoves in between them and it's lucky I do. Joe understands I ain't the sort o' man to be pushed around and he stops dead in his tracks, glarin' at me. Then I see him look past me and his eyes pop out and his mouth goes slack with disbelief.

I swing around to Ralph Napier. He's sittin' cool as a cucumber, one

leg dancin' over the rattan arm of the chair. He's got a black automatic in his hand, the snout pointin' square at Joe's heart.

He lowers the gun when he sees me lookin' at him and grins. He says, "Maybe you don't believe it, Sheriff, but you just saved Joe's life. If he'd laid a finger on me, I would have plugged him. I'd have been within my rights too. Self defense, and you'd have been a witness to prove it. After all, a prize-fighter's fists are lethal weapons."

"Mebbe so. Mebbe not. You'd still be in a peck o' trouble," I warn him. "Have you got a license for that gun?"

"You know I have, Sheriff." He's right about that. He belongs to a pistol club and he's a crack shot.

Joe hollers, "You leave Emma alone or I'll ram your teeth down your throat."

Ralph turns to me. "You heard him threaten me, Sheriff."

I says, "Shut up. Both of you. You, Ralph, get a-movin'. You ain't got no rightful business here."

Ralph's eyes grow round and innocent and his voice as smooth as cold cream. "Now listen, Sheriff. I've got a right to call on Emma if I feel like it. She's free, white and twenty-one. Dongan hasn't got any strings attached to her. Not legal ones anyway. Of course, if Emma asks me to leave, that's different. It's her house. But it seems to me like Dongan is trying to cut his cake two ways."

We all look at Emma. She says real soft, "I wish you'd go, Ralph. You too, Sheriff. I want to talk to Joe."

I follow Ralph out to his car. He shows his teeth in a nasty little grin afore he tucks himself behind the wheel. I wait until he's disappeared afore I head out. A look back shows me Joe and Emma on the porch, both of 'em standin' stiff and awkward.

When I get home I talk things over with Maw. There's a storm brewin'; there's no doubt o' that. Ralph Napier's as smart as he is mean, and he's needlin' Joe Dongan into an attack where there'll be a killin'.

Maw heaves a sigh. She heaps all the blame on Bessie Bellinger. She says, "There ain't nothin' that woman reminds me of so much as an overdressed marshmeller. Now if we could only feed her some reducin' tablets, mebbe Joe would come to his senses and fergit about her."

I says, sort o' ruminatin' about, "It ain't going to be so easy as all that. Mebbe I could have another talk with Steve Roper and persuade him to pick up Ralph's gun license."

"It won't help none," Maw vows. "Ralph can always lay his hands

on another gun. 'Taint no problem around here. Seems to me like the key is Red Emma. She's got plenty o' hoss sense. If we put our heads together we might work somethin' out."

I don't know what Maw had in mind, and I never do get to find out because tragedy hits even sooner'n I expect. Funny thing too. I seen it happen and there warn't a tootin' thing I could do to stop it.

The very next night I get a call from up Granger way. A chicken farmer, name o' Hixon, has got himself a bellyful of corn licker from a still and is beatin' up on his wife. I knew this feller, Hixon. Mild as a field mouse when he's sober, and mean as tarnation when he's lickered up. Ain't nothin' for me to do but head up to Granger and take him over to the police barracks until he cools off.

It ain't no night for drivin'. Rain's been fallin' most of the day and it's snapped off real cool, freezin' the puddles along the edge of the road and makin' the asphalt slippery as the underside of an eel.

I take it slow and easy, crawlin' along the Shore Road, where the banks drop down to jagged rocks with the surf poundin' over 'em and throwin' spray thirty feet high. I'd just hit the curve where the road makes a big half circle around Benson's Bay when I see the headlights flashin' toward me. Even from where I am, I can tell they're going too fast. I suck in my breath and pull the car into a cuttin', so as to be out of the way.

When I look again there's not one pair o' headlights but two, racin' lickety-split along the twistin' road. With the bright moonlight and the way the road angles, I can make out Joe Dongan's big sedan in the lead, with Ralph Napier's white car doggin' his tail.

There's a blast of a horn and the sports car draws up beside the sedan. They're bowlin' along a narrer road with scarce room enough for two cars to pass. They ain't more'n inches apart. It's like the crazy drag races some of the teenagers pull from time to time, but a lot more deadly. A stand o' pine trees is on one side o' the road and, on the other, nothin' but a white guardrail to break the fall off the cliff-side into the ocean.

The lights jounce and bounce around and seem to blend together. I reckon Ralph is tryin' to force Dongan off the road, but Joe ain't havin' none of it. He's edgin' over to Ralph's car. And then what I been a-fearin' all along happens. The slap of metal as the two cars hit is like a peal o' thunder. For seconds they cling together, then they're spinnin' hard toward the guardrail. They crash through, both of 'em plungin'

onto the rocks below. There's another crash and a rumblin' when they hit. Then the echoes die away and there ain't no sound but the pounding of the surf.

I'm shakin' all over. I get the car into gear but there ain't no sense hurryin'. It ain't possible for a man to survive a crash like that. There ain't a thing can be done for either Ralph or Joe 'til the tow cars can come with their grapples, and that won't be 'til mornin'.

I reckon, if you want to be technical about it, you could call it double murder or mebbe double suicide. Or mebbe you could attach the blame to Ralph Napier or Joe Dongan. But all you'd be accomplishin' by that is airin' a lot o' dirty linen in public. The coroner's verdict called it "death by misadventure" and when you come to think on it that ain't such a bad name for what happened.

Afore the inquest I have a long chat with Red Emma. Seems like Ralph Napier's been givin' her a hard time. He's been a-moonin' around after her, claimin' that's the way to make Joe jealous and bring him back to his senses. Emma don't want no truck with such tricks. She says she'll win Joe fair and square or not at all.

But Ralph won't stay away. He's sittin' in her front room on Sunday night when Joe comes bustin' in. Joe stands in the doorway, lookin' 'em both over.

He says, "Well, Ralph, I'm glad you're here. I got news for you and Emma, and this way I can get it all off my chest at once. Me and Bes-sie's took out a marriage license and we're plannin' to get hitched in Portland next week. What's more, there ain't nobody stoppin' us so there ain't no use tryin'."

Ralph jumps up, his face all livid. He yells, "You'll never marry Bes-sie except over my dead body."

Joe says, "I'm marryin' her."

Ralph goes for his gun the same as he done when I was there. He's got it lined up on Joe's chest and his knuckles is white on the trigger. Mebbe he would've shot Joe and mebbe he wouldn't. He's so excited he fergits all about Emma. She comes up in back of him and slaps down hard on his wrist. The gun explodes, the bullet splinterin' into the floor.

Joe moves fast then. He loops a heavy right to Ralph's jaw that lifts him plum off his feet and slams him into the sofa. Then Joe wheels and strides away.

Ralph ain't hurt bad. Emma helps him to his feet. He stands there groggy, shakin' his head and feelin' his jaw. Then he rushes out to his

car. Emma follows him as far as the yard. The tail lights of Joe's car are already winkin' a long way down the road. But Ralph takes off after him like a cat with salt on his tail.

That's the last that Emma hears about either of 'em until I bring her news of the wreck. She has to admit that Ralph was out for blood that night. On the other hand it was Joe's car that rammed Ralph's and drove it through the guardrail. Mebbe both of 'em had killin' on their minds, or mebbe neither one. No one can tell for sure, savin' they're both dead.

Well, everybody's mighty curious as to what'll happen next between Red Emma and Bessie Bellinger. Already they'd been feudin' and fightin' and ready to cut each other's throats. Emma's lost her man to Bessie, only for Bessie to lose him for good, and her son-in-law to boot. So it seems like the feud is slated to go on forever. But that ain't the way it works out.

Instead o' that, they get real chummy. Even though Joe was plannin' to get spliced to Bessie, he hadn't got around to changin' his will. Red Emma inherits his estate, includin' the Ringside Diner.

She runs it just the way she did when Joe was alive, settin' up in front, with a big smile for everybody as comes in.

As for Bessie, if she's a-grievin' over Joe she don't show it no more'n Emma does. Her doctor's gone and put her on a diet, and she's shed a lot o' weight. That means she and Emma ain't rivals no longer. Things have come around full circle, just like they was afore Bessie Bellinger showed up in town. There ain't no two ways about it. Red Emma's the fattest female in the whole o' Pisquaticook County.



by Lawrence Block

I had one degree from Trinity, and one was enough, and I'd had enough of Dublin, too. It is a fine city, a perfect city, but there are only certain persons that can live there. An artist will love the town, a priest will bless it, and a clerk will live in it as well as elsewhere. But I had too little of faith and of talent and too much of a hunger for the world to be priest or artist or pen warden. I might have become a drunkard, for Dublin's a right city for a drinking man, but I've no more talent for drinking than for deception—yet another lesson I learned at Trinity, and equally a bargain. (Tell your story, Joseph Cameron Bane would say. Clear your throat and get on with it.)

I had family in Boston. They welcomed me cautiously and pointed me toward New York. A small but pretentious publishing house hired me; they leaned toward foreign editors and needed someone to balance off their flock of Englishmen. Four months was enough, of the job and of the city. A good place for a young man on the way up, but no town at all for a pilgrim.

He advertised for a companion. I answered his ad and half a dozen others, and when he replied I saw his name and took the job at once. I had lived with his books for years: *The Wind At Morning*, *Cabot's House*, *Ruthpen Hallburton*, *Lips That Could Kiss*, others, others. I had loved his words when I was a boy in Ennis, knowing no more than to read what reached me, and I loved them still at Trinity where one was supposed to care only for more fashionable authors. He had written a great many books over a great many years, all of them set in the same small American town. Ten years ago he'd stopped writing and never said why. When I read his name at the bottom of the letter I realized, though it had never occurred to me before, that I had somehow assumed him dead for some years.

We traded letters. I went to his home for an interview, rode the train there and watched the scenery change until I was in the country he had

written about. I walked from the railway station carrying both suitcases, having gambled he'd want me to stay. His housekeeper met me at the door. I stepped inside, feeling as though I'd dreamed the room, the house. The woman took me to him, and I saw that he was older than I'd supposed him, and next saw that he was not. He appeared older because he was dying. "You're Riordan," he said. "How'd you come up? Train?"

"Yes, sir."

"Pete run you up?" I looked blank, I'm sure. He said that Pete was the town's cab driver, and I explained that I'd walked.

"Oh? Could have taken a taxi."

"I like to walk."

"Mmmmm," he said. He offered me a drink. I refused, but he had one. "Why do you want to waste time watching a man die?" he demanded. "Not morbid curiosity, I'm sure. Want me to teach you how to be a writer?"

"No, sir."

"Want to do my biography? I'm dull and out of fashion, but some fool might want to read about me."

"No, I'm not a writer."

"Then why are you here, boy?"

He asked this reasonably, and I thought about the question before I answered it. "I like your books," I said finally.

"You think they're good? Worthwhile? Literature?"

"I just like them."

"What's your favorite?"

"I've never kept score," I answered.

He laughed, happy with the answer, and I was hired.

There was very little to do that could be called work. Now and then there would be a task too heavy for Mrs. Dettweiler, and I'd do that for her. There were occasional errands to run, letters to answer. When the weather turned colder he'd have me make up the fire for him in the living room. When he had a place to go, I'd drive him; this happened less often as time passed, as the disease grew in him.

And so, in terms of the time allotted to various tasks, my job was much as its title implied. I was his companion. I listened when he spoke, talked when he wanted conversation, and was silent when silence was indicated. There would be a time, his doctor told me, when I would have more to do, unless Mr. Bane would permit a nurse. I knew he

would not, any more than he'd allow himself to die anywhere but in his home. There would be morphine shots for me to give him, because sooner or later the oral drug would become ineffective. In time he would be confined, first to his home and then to his room and at last to his bed, all a gradual preparation for the ultimate confinement.

"And maybe you ought to watch his drinking," the doctor told me. "He's been hitting it pretty heavy."

This last I tried once and no more. I said something foolish, that he'd had enough, that he ought to take it with a little water; I don't remember the words, only the stupidity of them, viewed in retrospect.

"I did not hire a damned warden," he said. "You wouldn't have thought of this yourself, Tim. Was this Harold Keeton's idea?"

"Well, yes."

"Harold Keeton is an excellent doctor," he said. "But only a doctor, and not a minister. He knows that doctors are supposed to tell their patients to cut down on smoking and drinking, and he plays his part. There is no reason for me to limit my drinking, Tim. There is nothing wrong with my liver or with my kidneys. The only thing wrong with me, Tim, is that I have cancer.

"I have cancer, and I'm dying of it. I intend to die as well as I possibly can. I intend to think and feel and act as I please, and go out with a smile for the ending. I intend, among other things, to drink what I want when I want it. I do not intend to get drunk, nor do I intend to be entirely sober if I can avoid it. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mr. Bane."

"Good. Get the chessboard."

For a change, I won a game.

The morning after Rachel Avery was found dead in her bathtub I came downstairs to find him at the breakfast table. He had not slept well, and this showed in his eyes and at the corners of his mouth.

"We'll go into town today," he said.

"It snowed during the night, and you're tired. If you catch cold, and you probably will, you'll be stuck in bed for weeks." This sort of argument he would accept. "Why do you want to go to town, sir?"

"To hear what people say."

"Oh? What do you mean?"

"Because Rachel's husband killed her, Tim. Rachel should never have married Dean Avery. He's a man with the soul of an adding ma-

chine, but Rachel was poetry and music. He put her in his house and wanted to own her, but it was never in her to be true, to him or to another. She flew freely and sang magnificently, and he killed her.

"I want to learn just how he did it, and decide what to do about it. Perhaps you'll go to town without me. You notice things well enough. You sense more than I'd guessed you might, as though you know the people."

"You wrote them well."

This amused him. "Never mind," he said. "Make a nuisance of yourself if you have to, but see what you can learn. I have to find out how to manage all of this properly. I know a great deal, but not quite enough."

Before I left I asked him how he could be so sure. He said, "I know the town and the people. I knew Rachel Avery and Dean Avery. I knew her mother very well, and I knew his parents. I knew they should not have married, and that things would go wrong for them, and I am entirely certain that she was killed and that he killed her. Can you understand that?"

"I don't think so," I replied. But I took the car into town, bought a few paperbound books at the drugstore, had an unnecessary haircut at the barber's, went from here to there and back again, and then drove home to tell him what I had learned.

"There was a coroner's inquest this morning," I said. "Death by drowning induced as a result of electrical shock, accidental in origin. The funeral is tomorrow."

"Go on, Tim."

"Dean Avery was in Harmony Falls yesterday when they finally reached him and told him what had happened. He was completely torn up, they said. He drove to Harmony Falls the day before yesterday and stayed overnight."

"And he was with people all the while?"

"No one said."

"They wouldn't have checked," he said. "No need, not when it's so obviously an accident. You'll go to the funeral tomorrow."

"Why?"

"Because I can't go myself."

"And I'm to study him and study everyone else? Should I take notes?"

He laughed, then chopped off the laughter sharply. "I don't think you'll have to. I didn't mean that you would go in my place solely to

observe, Tim, though that's part of it. But I would want to be there because I feel I ought to be there, so you'll be my deputy."

I had no answer to this. He asked me to build up the fire, and I did. I heard the newspaper boy and went for the paper. The town having no newspaper of its own, the paper he took was from the nearest city, and of course there was nothing in it on Rachel Avery. Usually he read it carefully. Now he skimmed it as if hunting something, then set it aside.

"I didn't think you knew her that well," I said.

"I did and I didn't. There are things I do not understand, Tim; people to whom I've barely spoken, yet whom I seem to know intimately. Knowledge has so many levels."

"You never really stopped writing about Beveridge." This was his fictional name for the town. "You just stopped putting it on paper."

He looked up, surprised, considering the thought with his head cocked like a wren's. "That's far more true than you could possibly know," he said.

He ate a good dinner and seemed to enjoy it. Over coffee I started aimless conversations but he let them die out. Then I said, "Mr. Bane, why can't it be an accident? The radio fell into the tub and shocked her, and she drowned."

I thought at first he hadn't heard, or was pretending as much; this last is a special privilege of the old and the ill. Then he said, "Of course, you have to have facts. What should my intuition mean to you? And it would mean less, I suppose, if I assured you that Rachel Avery could not possibly be the type to play the radio while bathing?"

My face must have showed how much I thought of that. "Very well," he said. "We shall have facts. The water in the tub was running when the body was found. It was running, then, both before and after the radio fell into the tub, which means that Rachel Avery had the radio turned on while the tub was running, which is plainly senseless. She wouldn't be able to hear it well, would she? Also, she was adjusting the dial and knocked it into the tub with her."

"She would not have played the radio at all during her bath—this I simply *know*. She would not have attempted to turn on the radio until her bath was drawn, because no one would. And she would not have tried tuning the set while the water was running because that is sheerly pointless. Now doesn't that begin to make a slight bit of sense to you, Tim?"

They put her into the ground on a cold gray afternoon. I was part of a large crowd at the funeral parlor and a smaller one at the cemetery. There was a minister instead of a priest, and the service was not the one with which I was familiar, yet after a moment all of it ceased to be foreign to me. And then I knew. It was Emily Talstead's funeral from *Cabo's House*, except that Emily's death had justice to it, and even a measure of mercy, and this gray afternoon held neither.

In that funeral parlor I was the deputy of Joseph Cameron Bane. I viewed Rachel's small body and thought that all caskets should be closed, no matter how precise the mortician's art. We should not force ourselves to look upon our dead. I gave small words of comfort to Dean Avery and avoided his eyes while I did so. I sat in a wooden chair while the minister spoke of horrible tragedy and the unknowable wisdom of the Lord, and I was filled with a sense of loss that was complete in itself.

I shared someone's car to the cemetery. At graveside, with a wind blowing that chilled the edge of thought, I let the gloom slip free as a body into an envelope of earth, and I did what I'd come to do; I looked into the face of Dean Avery.

He was a tall man, thick in the shoulders, broad in the forehead, his hair swept straight back without a part, forming upon his head like a crown. I watched his eyes when he did not know that anyone watched him, and I watched the curl of his lip and the way he placed his feet and what he did with his hands. Before long I knew he mourned her not at all, and soon after that I knew the old man was right. He had killed her as sure as the wind blew.

They would have given me a ride back to his house, but I slipped away when the service ended, and spent time walking around, back and forth. By the time I was back at her grave, it had already been filled in. I wondered at the men who do such work, if they feel a thing at all. I turned from her grave and walked back through the town to Bane's house.

I found him in the kitchen with coffee and toast. I sat with him and told him about it, quickly, and he made me go back over all of it in detail so that he could feel he had been there himself. We sat in silence awhile, and then went to the living room. I built up the fire and we sat before it.

"You know now," he said. I nodded, for I did; I'd seen for myself and knew it and felt it. "Knowing is most of it," he said. "Computers

can never replace us, you know. They need facts, information. What's the term? Data. They need data. But sometimes men can make connections across gaps, without data. You see?"

"Yes."

"So we know." He drank, put down his glass. "But now we have to have our data. First the conclusion, and then backward to the proof."

My eyes asked the question.

"Because it all must round itself out," he said, answering the question without my giving voice to it. "This man killed and seems to have gotten away with it. This cannot be."

"Should we call the police?"

"Of course not. There's nothing to say to them, and no reason they should listen." He closed his eyes briefly, opened them. "We know what he did. We ought to know how, and why. Tell me the men at the funeral, Tim, as many as you remember."

"I don't remember much before the cemetery. I paid them little attention."

"At the cemetery, then. That's the important question, anyway."

I pictured it again in my mind and named the ones I knew. He listened very carefully. "Now there are others who might have been there," he said, "some of whom you may not know, and some you may not remember. Think, now, and tell me if any of these were there."

He named names, five of them, and it was my turn to listen. Two were strangers to me and I could not say if I'd seen them. One I remembered had been there, two others had not.

"Get a pencil and paper," he told me. "Write these names down: Robert Hardesty, Hal Kasper, Roy Teale, Thurman Goodin. Those will do for now."

The first two had been at the funeral, and at the cemetery. The other two had not.

"I don't understand," I said.

"She had a lover, of course. That was why he killed her. Robert Hardesty and Hal Kasper should not have been at that funeral, or at least not at the cemetery. I don't believe they're close to her family or his. Thurman Goodin and Roy Teale should have been at the funeral, at the least, and probably should have been at the cemetery. Now a dead woman's secret love may do what you would not expect him to do. He may stay away from a funeral he would otherwise be expected to attend, for fear of giving himself away, or he might attend a funeral where

his presence would not otherwise be required, out of love or respect or no more than morbid yearning. We have four men, two who should have been present and were not, and two who should not have been present but were. No certainty, and nothing you might call data, but I've a feeling one of those four was Rachel Avery's lover."

"And?"

"Find out which one," he said.

"Why would we want to know that?"

"One must know a great many unimportant things in order to know those few things which are important." He poured himself more bourbon and drank some of it off. "Do you read detective stories? They always work with bits and pieces, like a jigsaw puzzle, find out trivia until it all fits together."

"And what might this fit into?"

"A shape. How, why, when."

I wanted to ask more, but he said he was tired and wanted to lie down. He must have been exhausted. He had me help him upstairs, change clothes, and into bed.

I knew Hal Kasper enough to speak to, so it was his shop I started in that night. He had a cigar store near the railroad terminal and sold magazines, paperbound books, candies and stationery. You could place a bet on a horse there, I'd heard. He was thin, with prominent features—large hollow eyes, a long, slim nose, a large mouth with big gray-white teeth in it. Thirty-five or forty, with a childless wife whom I'd never met, I thought him an odd choice for a lover, but I knew enough to realize that women did not follow logic's rules when they committed adultery.

He had been at the funeral. Joseph Cameron Bane had found this a little remarkable. He had no family ties on either side with Rachel or Dean Avery. He was below them socially, and not connected through his business. Nor was he an automatic funeral-goer. There were such in the town, I'd been told, as there are in every town; they go to funerals as they turn on a television set or eavesdrop on a conversation, for entertainment and for lack of better to do. But he was not that sort.

"Hi, Irish," he said. "How's the old man?"

I thumbed a magazine. "Asleep," I said.

"Hitting the sauce pretty good lately?"

"I wouldn't say so, no."

"Well, he's got a right." He came out from behind the counter,

walked over to me. "Saw you this afternoon. I didn't know you knew her. Or just getting material for that book of yours?"

Everyone assumed I was going to write a novel set in the town, and that this was what had led me to live with Mr. Bane. This would have made as much sense as visiting Denmark in order to rewrite *Hamlet*. I'd stopped denying it. It seemed useless.

"You knew her?" I asked.

"Oh, sure. You know me, Irish. I know everybody. King Farouk, Princess Grace—" He laughed shortly. "Sure, I knew her, a lot better than you'd guess."

I thought I'd learn something, but as I watched his face I saw his large mouth quiver with the beginnings of a leer, and then watched the light die in his eyes and the smile fade from his lips as he remembered that she was dead, cold and in the ground, and not fit to leer over or lust after. He looked ever so slightly ashamed of himself.

"A long time ago," he said, his voice pitched lower now. "Oh, a couple of years. Before she got married, well, she was a pretty wild kid in those days. Not wild like you might think; I mean, she was free, you understand?" He groped with his hands, long-fingered, lean. "She did what she wanted to do. I happened to be there. I was a guy she wanted to be with. Not for too long, but it was honey-sweet while it lasted. This is one fine way to be talking, isn't it? They say she went quick, though; didn't feel anything, but what a stupid way, what a crazy stupid way."

So it was not Hal Kasper who had loved her; not recently, at least. When I told all this to Joseph Cameron Bane he nodded several times and thought for some moments before he spoke.

"Ever widening circles, Tim," he said. "Throw a stone into a still pool and watch the circles spread. Now don't you see her more clearly? You wouldn't call Kasper a sentimental man, or a particularly sensitive man. He's neither of those things. Yet he felt that sense of loss, and that need to pay his last respects. There's purpose in funerals, you know, purpose and value. I used to think they were barbaric. I know better now. He had to talk about her, and had also to be embarrassed by what he'd said. Interesting."

"Why do we have to know all this?"

"Beginning to bother you, Tim?"

"Some."

"Because I am involved with mankind," he quoted. "You'll learn more tomorrow, I think. Get the chessboard."

I did learn more the next day. I learned first to forget about Roy Teale. I had not recognized his name, but when I found him I saw that he was a man who had been at the funeral, as he might have been expected to be. I also learned, in the barber shop, that he was carrying on a truly passionate love affair, but with his own wife. He sat in a chair and grinned while two of the men ragged him about it.

I left, knowing what I had come to learn; if I'd stayed much longer I'd have had to get another haircut, and I scarcely needed one. I'd taken the car into town that day. It was colder than usual, and the snow was deep. I got into the car and drove to Thurman Goodin's service station. Mr. Bane usually had me fill the car at the station a few blocks to the north, but I did want to see Goodin. He and Robert Hardesty were the only names left on our list. If neither had been the woman's lover, then we were back where we'd started.

A high school boy worked afternoons and evenings for Goodin, but the boy had not come yet, and Thurman Goodin came out to the pump himself. While the tank filled he came over to the side of the car and rested against the door. His face needed shaving. He leaned his long hard body against the car door and said it had been a long time since he'd put any gas into the car.

"Mr. Bane doesn't get out much any more," I said, "and I mostly walk except when the weather's bad."

"Then I'm glad for the bad weather." He lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. "Anyway, this buggy usually tanks up over to Kelsey's place. You had better than half a tankful; you could have made it over there without running dry, you know."

I gave him a blank look, then turned it around by saying, "I'm sorry, I didn't hear you. I was thinking about that woman who was killed."

I almost jumped at the sight of his face. A nerve twitched involuntarily, a thing he could not have controlled, but he might have covered up the other telltale signs. His eyes gave him away, and his hands, and the movements of his mouth.

"You mean Mrs. Avery," he said.

His wife was her cousin, Mr. Bane had told me. So he should have been at her funeral, and now should have been calling her Rachel or Rachel Avery. I wanted to get away from him!

"I was at the funeral," I said.

"Funerals," he said. "I got a business to run. Listen, I'll tell you

something. Everybody dies. Fast or slow, old or young, it don't make a bit of difference. That's two twenty-seven for the gas."

He took three dollars and went into the station. He came back with the change and I took it from him. My hand shook slightly. I dropped a dime.

"Everybody gets it sooner or later," he said. "Why knock yourself out about it?"

When I told all this to Joseph Cameron Bane he leaned back in his chair with sparkle in his eyes and the ghost of a smile on his pale lips. "So it's Thurman Goodin," he said. "I knew his father rather well. But I knew everybody's father, Tim, so that's not too important, is it? Tell me what you know."

"Sir?"

"Project, extend, extrapolate. What do you know about Goodin? What did he tell you? Put more pieces into the puzzle, Tim."

I said, "Well, he was her lover, of course. Not for very long, but for some space of time. It was nothing of long standing, and yet some of the glow had worn off."

"Go on, Tim."

"I'd say he made overtures for form's sake and was surprised when she responded. He was excited at the beginning, and then he began to be frightened of it all. Oh, this is silly, I'm making it all up—"

"You're doing fine, boy."

"He seemed glad she was dead. No, I'm putting it badly. He seemed relieved, and guilty about feeling relieved. Now he's safe. She died accidentally, and no one will ever find him out, and he can savor his memories without shivering in the night."

"Yes." He poured bourbon into his glass, emptying the bottle. Soon he would ask me to bring him another. "I agree," he said, and sipped at his whiskey almost daintily.

"Now what do we do?"

"What do you think we do, Tim?"

I thought about this. I said we might check with persons in Harmony Falls and trace Dean Avery's movements there. Or, knowing her lover's name, knowing so much that no one else knew, we might go to the police. We had no evidence, but the police could turn up evidence better than we, and do more with it once they had it.

He looked into the fire. When he did speak, I thought at first that he was talking entirely to himself and not to me at all. "And splash her

name all over the earth," he said, "and raise up obscene court trials and filth in the newspapers, and pit lawyers against one another, and either hang him or jail him or free him. Ruin Thurman Goodin's marriage, and ruin Rachel Avery's memory."

"I don't think I understand."

He spun quickly around. His eyes glittered. "Don't you? Tim, Timothy, don't you truthfully understand?" He hesitated, groped for a phrase, then stopped and looked pointedly at his empty glass. I found a fresh bottle in the cupboard, opened it, handed it to him. He poured a drink but did not drink it.

He said, "My books always sold well, you know. But I had a bad press. The small town papers were always kind, but the real critics . . . I was always being charged with sentimentality. They used words like *cloying* and *sugary* and *unrealistic*." I started to say something but he silenced me with an upraised palm. "Please, don't leap to my defense. I'm making a point now, not lamenting a misspent literary youth. Do you know why I stopped writing? I don't think I've ever told anyone. There's never been a reason to tell. I stopped, oh, not because critics were unkind, not because sales were disappointing. I stopped because I discovered that the critics, bless them, were quite right."

"That's not true!"

"But it is, Tim. I never wrote what you could honestly call sentimental slop, but everything always came out right, every book always had a happy ending. I simply *wanted* it to happen that way, I wanted things to work out as they *ought* to work out. Do you see? Oh, I let my people stay in character, that was easy enough. I was a good plot man and could bring that off well enough, weaving intricate webs that led inexorably to the silver lining in every last one of the blacker clouds. The people stayed true but the books became untrue, do you see? Always the happy ending, always the death of truth."

"In *Cabot's House* you had an unhappy ending."

"Not so. In *Cabot's House* I had death for an ending, but a death is not always an occasion for sorrow. Perhaps you're too young to know that, or to feel it within. You'll learn it soon enough. But to return to the point, I saw that my books were false. Good pictures of this town, of some people who lived either in it or in my mind or in both, but false portraits of life. I wrote a book, then, or tried to; an honest one, with loose threads at the end and—what was that precious line of Salinger's?

Yes. With a touch of squalor, with love and squalor. I couldn't finish it, I hated it."

He picked up the glass, set it down again, the whiskey untouched. "Do you see? I'm an old man and a fool. I like things to come out right, neat and clean and sugary, wrapped with a bow and a smile for the ending. No police, no trials, no public washing of soiled underwear. I think we are close enough now. I think we have enough of it." He picked up his glass once more and this time drained it. "Get the chessboard."

I got the board. We played, and he won, and my mind spent more of its time with other pawns than the ones we played with now. The image grew on me. I saw them all, Rachel Avery, Dean Avery, Thurman Goodin, carved of wood and all of a shade, either black or white; weighted with lead, and bottomed with a circlet of felt, green felt, and moved around by our hands upon a mirthless board.

"You're afraid of this," he said once. "Why?"

"Meddling, perhaps. Playing the divinity. I don't know, Mr. Bane. Something that feels wrong, that's all."

"Paddy from the peat bog, you've not lost your sense of the miraculous, have you? Wee folk, and gold at the rainbow's end, and things that go bang in the night, and man a stranger and afraid in someone else's world. Don't move there, Tim, your queen's *en prise*, you'll lose her."

We played three games. Then he straightened up abruptly and said, "I don't have the voice to mimic, I've barely any voice at all, and your brogue's too thick for it. Go up to the third floor, would you, and in the room all the way back, there's a closet with an infernal machine on its shelf—a tape recorder. I bought it with the idea that it might make writing simpler. Didn't work at all; I had to see the words in front of me to make them real. I couldn't sit like a fool talking at a machine. But I had fun with the thing. Get it for me, Tim, please."

It was where he'd said, in a box carpeted with dust. I brought it to him, and we went into the kitchen. There was a telephone there. First he tested the recorder, explaining that the tape was old and might not work properly. He turned it on and said, "Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of the party. The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog." Then he winked at me and said, "Just like a typewriter; it's easiest to resort to formula when you want to say something meaningless, Tim. Most people have trouble talking when they have nothing to say. Though it rarely stops them, does it? Let's see how this sounds."

He played it back and asked me if the voice sounded like his own. I

assured him it did. "No one ever hears his own voice when he speaks," he said. "I didn't realize I sounded that old. Odd."

He sent me for bourbon. He drank a bit, then had me get him the phone book. He looked up a number, read it to himself a time or two, then turned his attention again to the recorder.

"We ought to plug it into the telephone," he said.

"What for, sir?"

"You'll see. If you connect them lawfully, they beep every fifteen seconds, so that the other party knows what you're about, which hardly seems sensible. Know anything about these gadgets?"

"Nothing," I replied.

He finished the glass of whiskey. "Now what if I just hold the little microphone to the phone like this? Between my ear and the phone, hmm? Some distortion? Oh, won't matter, won't matter at all."

He dialed a number. The conversation, as much as I heard of it, went something like this:

"Hello, Mr. Taylor? No, wait a moment, let me see. Is this 4215? Oh, good. The Avery residence? Is Mrs. Avery in? I don't . . . Who'm I talking with, please? . . . Good. When do you expect your wife, Mr. Avery? . . . Oh, my! . . . Yes, I see, I see. Why, I'm terribly sorry to hear that, surely . . . Tragic. Well, I hate to bother you with this, Mr. Avery. Really, it's nothing . . . Well, I'm Paul Wellings of Wellings and Doyle Travel Agency . . . Yes, that's right, but I wish . . . Certainly. Your wife wanted us to book a trip to Puerto Rico for the two of you and . . . Oh? A surprise, probably . . . Yes, of course, I'll cancel everything. This is frightful. Yes, and I'm sorry for disturbing you at this—"

There was a little more, but not very much. He rang off, a bitter smile on his pale face, his eyes quite a bit brighter now than usual. "A touch of macabre poetry," he said. "Let him think she was planning to run off with Goodin. He's a cold one, though. So calm, and making me go on and on, however awkward it all was. And now it's all ready on the tape. But how can I manage this way?"

He picked up a phone and called another number. "Jay? This is Cam. Say, I know it's late, but is your tape recorder handy? Well, I'd wanted to do some dictation and mine's burned out a connection or something. Oh, just some work I'm doing. No, I haven't mentioned it, I know. It's something different. If anything ever comes of it, then I'll

have something to tell you. But is it all right if I send Tim around for your infernal machine? Good, and you're a prince, Jay."

So he sent me to pick up a second recorder from Jason Falk. When I brought it to him, he positioned the two machines side by side on the table and nodded. "I hate deception," he said, "yet it seems to have its place in the scheme of things. I'll need half an hour or so alone, Tim. I hate to chase you away, but I have to play with these toys of mine."

I didn't mind. I was glad to be away from him for a few moments, for he was upsetting me more than I wanted to admit. There was something bad in the air that night, and more than my Irish soul was telling me so. Joseph Cameron Bane was playing God. He was manipulating people, toying with them. *Writing* them, and with no books to put them in.

It was too cold for walking. I got into the car and drove around the streets of the town, then out of the town and off on a winding road that went up into the hills beyond the town's edge. The snow was deep but no fresh snow was falling, and the moon was close to full and the sky cluttered with stars. I stopped the car and got out of it and took a long look back at the town below, his town. I thought it would be good right now to be a drinking man and warm myself from a bottle and walk in the night and pause now and then to gaze at the town below.

"You were gone long," he said.

"I got lost. It took time to find my way back."

"Tim, this still bothers you, doesn't it? Of course it does. Listen to me. I am going to put some people into motion, that is all. I am going to let some men talk to one another, and I am going to write their lines for them. Do you understand? Their opening lines. They wouldn't do it themselves. They wouldn't start it. I'll start it, and then they'll help it play itself out."

He was right, of course. Avery could not be allowed to get away with murder, nor should the dead woman's sins be placed on public display for all to stare at. "Now listen to this," he said, bright-eyed again. "I'm proud of myself, frankly."

He dialed a number, then poised his index finger above one of the buttons on the recorder. He was huddled over the table so that the telephone mouthpiece was just a few inches from the recorder's speaker. The phone was answered, and he pressed a button and I heard Dean Avery's voice. "Goodin?"

A pause. Then, "This is Dean Avery. I know all about it, Goodin.

You and my wife. You and Rachel. I know all about it. And now she's dead. An accident. Think about it, Goodin. You'll have to think about it."

He replaced the receiver.

"How did you . . ."

He looked at my gaping mouth and laughed aloud at me. "Just careful editing," he said. "Playing from one machine to the next, back and forth, a word here, a phrase there, all interwoven and put together. Even the inflection can be changed by raising or lowering the volume as you bounce from one machine to the other. Isn't it startling? I told you I have fun with this machine. I never got anything written on it, but I had a good time fooling around with it."

"All those phrases—you even had his name."

"It was *good* of you to call. And the tail syllable of some other word, *happen*, I think. The two cropped out and spliced together and tossed back and forth until they fit well enough. I was busy while you were gone, Tim. It wasn't simple to get it all right."

"Now what happens?"

"Goodin calls Avery."

"How do you know?"

"Oh, Tim! I'll call Goodin and tell him how my car's broken down, or that he's won a football pool, or something inane, and do the same thing with his voice. And call Avery for him, and accuse him of the murder. That's all. They'll take it from there. I expect Avery will crack. If I get enough words to play with, I can have Goodin outline the whole murder, how it happened, everything."

His fingers drummed the table top. "Avery might kill himself," he said. "The killers always do in that woman's stories about the little Belgian detective. They excuse themselves and blow their brains out in a gentlemanly manner. There might be a confrontation between the two. I'm not sure."

"Will it wait until morning?"

"I thought I'd call Goodin now."

He was plainly exhausted. It was too late for him to be awake, but the excitement kept him from feeling the fatigue. I hated playing nursemaid. I let him drink too much every day, let him die as he wished, but it was not good for him to wear himself out this way.

"Goodin will be shaken by the call," I told him. "You'll probably

have trouble getting him to talk. He may have closed the station for the night."

"I'll call and find out," he said.

He called, the recorder at the ready, and the phone rang and went unanswered. He wanted to wait up and try again, but I made him give it up and wait until the next day. I put him to bed and went downstairs and straightened up the kitchen. There was a half inch of whiskey in a bottle, and I poured it into a glass and drank it, a thing I rarely do. It warmed me and I'd needed warming. I went upstairs and to bed, and still had trouble sleeping.

There were dreams, and bad ones, dreams that woke me and sat me upright with a shapeless wisp of horror falling off like smoke. I slept badly and woke early. I was downstairs while he slept. While I ate toast and drank tea, Mrs. Dettweiler worried aloud about him. "You've got him all worked up," she said. "He shouldn't get like that. A sick man like him, he should rest, he should be calm."

"He wants the excitement. And it's not my doing."

"As sick as he is . . ."

"He's dying, and has a right to do it his own way."

"Some way to talk!"

"It's his way."

"There's a difference."

The radio was playing, tuned to a station in Harmony Falls. Our town had one FM station but the radio did not get FM. Mrs. Dettweiler always played a radio unless Mr. Bane was in the room, in which case he generally told her to turn it off. When she was upstairs in her own room, the television was always on, unless she was praying or sleeping. I listened to it now and thought that he might have used it for his taping and editing and splicing. If you wished to disguise your voice, you might do it that way. If Dean Avery had never heard Thurman Goodin's voice, or not well enough to recognize it, you could work it well enough that way. With all those words and phrases at your disposal. . . .

Halfway through the newscast they read an item from our town, read just a brief news story, and I spilled my tea all over the kitchen table. The cup fell to the floor and broke in half.

"Why, for goodness . . ."

I turned off the radio, thought better and reached to pull its plug. He never turned it on, hated it, but it might occur to him to tape from it, and I didn't want that. Not yet.

"Keep that thing off," I said. "Don't let him hear it, and don't tell him anything. If he tries to play the radio, say it's not working."

"I don't . . ."

"Just do as you're told!" I said. She went white and nodded mutely, and I hurried out of the house and drove into town. On the way I noticed that I held the steering wheel so tightly my fingers had gone numb. I couldn't help it. I'd have taken a drink then if there'd been one about. I'd have drunk kerosene, or perfume—anything at all.

I went to the drugstore and to the barbershop, and heard the same story in both places, and walked around a bit to relax, the last with little success. I left the car where I'd parked it and walked back to his house and breathed cold air and gritted my teeth against more than the cold. I did not even realize until much later that it was fairly stupid to leave the car. It seemed quite natural at the time.

He was up by the time I reached the house, wearing robe and slippers, seated at the table with telephone and tape recorder. "Where'd you go?" he wanted to know. "I can't reach Thurman Goodin. Nobody answers his phone."

"Nobody will."

"I've half a mind to try him at home."

"Don't bother."

"No? Why not?" And then, for the first time, he saw my face. His own paled. "Heavens, Tim, what's the matter?"

All the way back, through snow and cold air, I'd looked for a way to tell him—a proper way. There was none. Halfway home I'd thought that perhaps Providence might let him die before I had to tell him, but that could only have happened in one of his novels, not in this world.

So I said, "Dean Avery's dead. It happened last night; he's dead."

"Great God in Heaven!" His face was white, his eyes horribly wide. "How? Suicide?"

"No."

"How?" he asked insistently.

"It was meant to look like suicide. Thurman Goodin killed him. Broke into his house in the middle of the night. He was going to knock him out and poke his head in the oven and put the gas on. He knocked him cold all right, but Avery came to on the way to the oven. There was a row, and Thurman Goodin beat him over the head with some tool he'd brought along. I believe it was a tire iron. Beat his brains in, but all the noise woke a few of the neighbors and they grabbed Goodin on his way

out the door. Two of them caught him and managed to hold him until the police came, and of course he told them everything."

I expected Bane to interrupt, but he waited without a word. I said, "Rachel Avery wanted him to run away with her. She couldn't stand staying with her husband, she wanted to go to some big city, try the sweet life. He told the police he tried to stop seeing her. She threatened him, that she would tell her husband, that she would tell his wife. So he went to her one afternoon and knocked her unconscious, took off her clothes and put her in the bathtub. She was still alive then. He dropped the radio into the tub to give her a shock, then unplugged it and checked to see if she were dead. She wasn't, so he held her head under water until she drowned, and then he plugged the radio into the socket again and left.

"And last night he found out that Avery knew about it, about the murder and the affair and all. So of course he had to kill Avery. He thought he might get away with it if he made it look like suicide, that Avery was depressed over his wife's death and went on to take his own life. I don't think it would have washed. I don't know much about it, but aren't the police more apt to examine a suicide rather carefully? They might see the marks on the head. Perhaps not. I don't really know. They've put Goodin in jail in Harmony Falls, and with two bloody murders like that, he's sure to hang." And then, because I felt even worse about it all than I'd known, "So it all comes out even, after all, the way you wanted it, the loose ends tied up in a bow."

"Good heavens!"

"I'm sorry." And I was, as soon as I'd said the words.

I don't think he heard me. "I am a bad writer and a bad man," he said, and not to me at all, and perhaps not even to himself but to whatever he talked to when the need came. "I thought I created them, I thought I knew them, I thought they all belonged to me."

So I went upstairs and packed my bags and walked all the way to the station. It was a bad time to leave him and a heartless way to do it, but staying would have been worse, even impossible. He was dying, and I couldn't have changed that, nor made the going much easier for him. I walked to the station and took the first train out and ended up here in Los Angeles, working for another foolish little man who likes to hire foreigners, doing the same sort of nothing I'd done in New York, but doing it at least in a warmer climate.

Last month I read he'd died. I thought I might cry but didn't. A week ago I re-read one of his books, *Lips That Could Kiss*. I discovered that I did not like it at all, and then I did cry. For Rachel Avery, for Joseph Cameron Bane. For me.



by Michael Wilson

There was a sharp click as someone picked up the phone. "Hello." It was a girl's voice, full and rich, expectant.

"Hello, baby," Max Damon said, pulling his handkerchief tight about the receiver. "Is this Lambert 4007?"

"Yes." The voice was suddenly hesitant. She'd been called before, this girl. She knew what was coming.

"You don't know me, baby," Max said. "But I've seen you around. I thought I'd call and have a chat."

"Is this some kind of joke?" The voice was still even, still controlled.

Max laughed. "No, baby," he said softly. "This is no joke."

There was a long silence, but Max could hear her breathing. She was scared; scared as Susan had been that first time when the stranger called.

"Don't hang up, baby," Max said.

"I won't."

He could barely hear her. "You know how it is in a small town, baby," Max said. "You see a girl around and you want to get to know her better. How about it?"

"Look," the girl said, louder now, trying to sound as though she didn't care, "why don't you tell me your name?"

"The name wouldn't mean anything to you, baby," Max assured her. "You don't know me."

"I don't like to talk to people I don't know."

"Take it easy, baby."

She wouldn't hang up; he was sure of that. The police had issued a warning to keep the killer on the line if he phoned—keep him on the line until the call could be traced. He chuckled to himself. This was obviously a sensible girl.

Susan had been sensible. After the first call she had gone to the sheriff.

"Next time, hang up," Blaisdell had told her in his tough voice. He liked to play tough. "This isn't New York," he had said. "We don't have the gizmos to trace calls. Hang up and forget about it next time."

Max felt a twist of the old pain. Perhaps if he had been home he could have kept her alive. He should have been home. What sort of a father had he been, chasing business all over the map. Susan had been twenty-one, but a girl needs a father until she gets a husband. A girl needs someone to protect her.

He clenched his hand and pressed it against the table, softly so he would not wake the man sleeping in the house. He wondered if this girl had a father.

"Have you hung up?" she asked him. Her voice was shaking now.

"Oh, no, baby, I'm still here. You're going to be hearing a lot from me."

"What—what do you mean?"

"Just what I said, sister. Just exactly what I said, sweetheart."

"Are you threatening me?" Her control was slipping badly.

Max smiled in the dark and shifted the receiver to the other ear. She must be terrified, the way Susan had been terrified when the second call came—and the third. Terrified when she'd gone to Blaisdell again, asking for protection.

"What you need is a boyfriend, Susan." That had been his answer. "Girls get these ideas about men bothering them when they ain't got boyfriends."

An old and familiar fury set Max's heart knocking in his chest. His fist tightened around the phone. There was a faint rustling behind him, and he whirled, staring into the shadows.

Silence—even the girl was silent.

It was nothing. Nothing. Better not let his nerves break now. He'd had a difficult time getting into the house, but, after crawling through the kitchen window, his mouth dry with fear, he had been able to find a kitchen extension when he used the pen-sized flashlight that Susan had given him for his birthday two years ago.

Susan—no more birthday presents, ever.

"What's the matter, baby?" he said. "Don't you wanna talk?"

"I don't think . . ."

"You don't have to think, honey. Let me do that. I'll do the thinking for both of us."

"You—you should see a doctor," she said unsteadily. "Get some help."

Max forced a short laugh. "Don't sweat it, baby. You're going to give me all the help I want. Lots of help."

He heard her sharp intake of breath as he lowered the receiver into its cradle. That should do it; enough time, but not too much. The man they were going to trace the call to would have been too smart to talk for too long. He would have known just how many minutes *too* long was. It had to look like a mistake on his part, an error in judgment—because the town had the right gizmos now.

After Susan had been strangled, there had been more anonymous calls, and important people had got on Blaisdell's tail, asking for protection. Blaisdell listened to important people. The tracing device was attached to the phones of those who had been called within a month.

Too late. Too late for Sue.

Everyone knew about the new equipment, and some folks thought the killer wouldn't make any more calls. But old Doc Jackman said he'd call because he wouldn't be able to help it. It was compulsive.

Max stuffed his handkerchief into his pocket. He could hear Blaisdell snoring, and he wondered if Blaisdell's pals from the station would believe him when he told them he had been asleep. Would they believe him when they found out he was alone in the house from which the call had been made?

Max pulled himself through the window and lowered it behind him just as the sirens began to sound in the distance.



1967

by Edward D. Hoch

"But that was in another war," Mason argued, pausing to light his cigar. "You simply can't compare the use of tanks in North Africa with that in Korea. The terrain was different, the weather conditions . . ."

Roderick Care shuffled his feet against the carpet and stared at the younger man. "I'm not running down what you fellows did in Korea—don't misunderstand me! I'm only pointing out that given the right circumstances a massed armored attack can be both impressive and effective."

Mason leaned back in his chair, enjoying himself for all the surface disagreement. Care, ten years his senior, was the sort of man with whom he liked to argue. "I don't know," he said with just a hint of a smile. "If they're all like you, I don't know that I'd be too welcome in the AWB."

Roderick Care, a graying man with a spreading paunch, and no sense of humor, leaped to the defensive. "Come, now! You can't be serious! The AWB is the finest bunch of guys you'd ever want to meet. They accepted me, and I'm British! That must prove something right there. We're not the American Legion or the VFW or the Catholic War Vets, you know. We're strictly social, just a bunch of fellows out for a good time. We like to get away from the wife and children for a few days occasionally and do some hunting or fishing, or just drink beer and talk about our service days."

"The others have plenty of social activities," Mason argued. "In fact I dropped out of a veterans' group once because they were a bit too social. Dinners and dances and all the rest."

"But those things are with the wife! I know you like to get away with the boys once in a while. Everybody does. Hell, how many other veterans' organizations have a hunting lodge like our place in River Forks?"

Mason was ready for that one. "The Khakis have a lodge not too far from there."

"The Khakis! Would you rather belong to the Khakis or the American War Buddies—buddy?"

"Neither group excites me too much, to be perfectly frank about it," Mason told him.

Care spread his hands in a pleading gesture. "At least come to one of our meetings, see what it's all about. What harm can that do?"

More to put an end to the discussion than because he really wanted to go, Mason finally agreed. He'd expected an evening of reminiscing when he agreed to dine with Roderick Care, but he'd hardly foreseen the sort of high-pressure sales talk to which he'd been subjected. As he drove home through the warm autumn night he reflected that he had now committed himself to next week's meeting whether he liked it or not. Well, at least he could tell that to the man from the Khakis who kept phoning him.

"Nice dinner, dear?" Maria asked him as he came in from the garage. "He didn't try to sell you any insurance, did he?"

"No, we talked about North Africa and Korea, and tank warfare and stuff."

She'd put the children to bed and was in the process of finishing the dinner dishes. He sat at the kitchen table smoking a cigarette and watching her, ever amazed that she could still manage to look as youthful as when he'd married her twelve years ago. "Well, I'm glad you didn't buy anything," she told him. "Both children are going to need new shoes soon, and we still have the color TV to pay off."

"He wants me to come to the next AWB meeting."

"The *what*?"

"You know. The American War Buddies."

"You're not going, are you?"

"Why?"

"Well, it's just that you've always been sort of cynical about veterans' groups."

"Well, maybe this one's different. Or maybe it's a sign of middle age that I suddenly want to talk about my days as a tank commander in Korea."

"You were never a commander!"

"I was for a day, after Scotty got killed. I told you about that."

She sighed and went back to the dishes. "I should think when fellows

come back from the wars they'd just want to forget about all the killing, not go on being reminded of it at monthly meetings."

"Oh, they talk about other things, Maria. In fact, Care said it was mostly a social group. They have a hunting lodge up in River Forks."

"That figures!"

He found himself growing a bit annoyed at her attitude. "Hell, I usually go hunting once or twice every year anyway. If they've got a lodge I might as well use it."

"Do whatever you want," she said.

He grunted and started reading the evening paper, looking for some newsy item with which to change the subject.

The following week's meeting of the American War Buddies was about what he'd expected. It was held in a big private dining room at the Newton Hotel, a room which also served the needs of the Lions' Club and the County Republican Committee. A large American flag hung from the wall behind the speaker's table, and several of the members wore ribbon-bedecked campaign hats.

A man named Crowder, who walked with a stiff-legged limp, conducted the meeting running through routine matters and the preparations for the autumn reopening of the lodge at River Forks. Peering out from beneath bushy black eyebrows, he reminded Mason of a movie-version communist at a cell meeting in the Thirties.

After the surprisingly brief meeting, he walked over to greet Mason personally. "Pleasure to have you here, Mr. Mason. I'm Crowder, this year's president of AWB. Roderick Care tells me you're thinking of joining."

"Only thinking right now."

Crowder offered him a cigarette, shifting weight onto his good leg. "This is the best time of the year to join. There's the lodge, and the Christmas party, and then the big national convention in the spring. Frankly, Mason, we're looking for young blood—Korea and after. Too many of our members are left over from wars that everyone's forgotten. You could go high in the organization right now—maybe even a national office on the executive committee."

"I'm not looking for more work," Mason told him. "Besides, you look young enough to have been in Korea yourself." His eyes droppeded unconsciously to the stiff leg.

"I was over there, right at the end of things. But not a tank commander like you."

"I came out without a scratch," Mason said. "I have great respect for those who didn't."

Crowder gave a short, husky laugh. "This leg? Foolish hunting accident two years ago. Shot myself in the kneecap."

"Oh." Mason felt a gentle hand on his shoulder and turned to see Roderick Care beaming at him. He had another man in tow, a white-haired man with a small and gentle face.

"Mason, this is Dr. Fathion, one of our most respected members. He was a major during the South Pacific campaign."

"Pleased to meet you, Doctor," Mason said.

"A pleasure, Mr. Mason. I trust you've been won over by our president?"

"I'm considering it," Mason replied with a smile.

Roderick Care motioned toward the back of the room, where the hotel waitresses were preparing to serve coffee and cake. "Let's discuss it over some coffee. Or would you rather go down to the bar?"

"Coffee's fine."

It was good coffee, and Mason found himself beginning to like these men who clustered around him.

"Tell us about Korea," Crowder said. "I never saw much action over there myself."

"Except with the girls," Care said, muffling an explosion of laughter. "Crowder here is quite the lover."

"You will be joining us at the lodge, won't you?" Crowder asked Mason. "You *do* hunt?"

"A little." He turned to the doctor. "How about you, Dr. Fathion? You do much hunting?"

The doctor shook his head, slightly horrified. "I never fire a gun. Never even fired one in the army. But I go along for the opening of the season. I'm a great poker player, and we usually get a few nice games going."

"It must have been tough going through the South Pacific without firing a shot."

The little doctor shrugged. "Oh, they made us fire at a few training targets, but in battle I was always too busy with the wounded. Field hospital, behind the lines. One day I operated on fifty-five wounded men. I was ready to drop by nightfall."

Mason liked the doctor, and he liked the others too, to varying degrees. After the coffee he joined them at the hotel bar for a quick drink, and found himself signing a membership application with no resistance at all.

Maria was waiting up for him when he got home. "It's pretty late," she said. "I thought you'd be home by ten."

"We had coffee and then I stopped with them for a drink."

"You joined, didn't you?" she asked, making it into something like an accusation.

"Well, hell, yes I did! That's no crime! They only meet once a month and for a few social gatherings. If I get tired of it I just won't go."

"All right," she sighed. "I didn't mean to sound like a shrew."

He mumbled something and went out to the kitchen for a glass of milk.

"So now I'm an AWB wife. Do they have a ladies' auxiliary or something?"

"I'll ask," he replied, not certain that she wasn't continuing to needle him.

"That means you'll be going hunting with them, I suppose."

"Just the first day. I'll only be away one night. Or two at most."

In the morning she was her usual cheerful self, and his membership in the AWB was not mentioned again.

About a week later he received a call at work from a lawyer he knew slightly, a member of the Khakis. "Have you thought any more about joining us, Mason, boy?"

"Sorry, Cliff. I've signed up with the AWB."

"Oh. Sorry to hear that."

"They seemed like a nice bunch of fellows."

"Well . . . yes. But that sort of puts us on opposite sides of the fence."

Mason chuckled into the phone. "Not really, Cliff. I'll still throw some legal business your way. How about lunch one of these days?"

Cliff seemed to hedge at that. "Um, let's make it after Thanksgiving, huh? I'm getting into my busy season."

"Fine. I'll be talking to you." He hung up, wondering if he had made the right choice. But Cliff had told him very little about the Khakis, really, and had never invited him to one of their monthly meetings.

He went back to the pile of work on his desk and promptly forgot about it.

A few days before the opening of hunting season, Roderick Care phoned him. "Monday's the big day—just thought I'd call to remind you. A group of us are driving up to the lodge Sunday night, just to be there at dawn when the deer start running. You might as well come along."

Mason hesitated only a moment. "All right," he agreed.

"What kind of rifle do you have?" Care asked.

"I've got two—a Remington and an old Italian army gun I don't use much any more."

"Better bring them both. Somebody might be able to use it."

"All right."

"I'll pick up Dr. Fathion and then swing by for you around six. It's a three-hour drive."

Mason was ready on Sunday evening, and he stepped into the brisk night air as soon as Care's auto pulled up in front. He wasn't too anxious for the men to come in and face Maria's cool indifference to the trip.

Dr. Fathion was in the back, and Mason rode in front, feeling good for the first time in days. "Put these with the others," he said, passing over the two gun cases.

The doctor accepted them. "You should get rid of that red hat," he suggested as they got under way.

Mason fingered the fluorescent material. "This? Hell, I don't want to get shot for a deer." He glanced into the back seat at the other cased rifle. "Mind if I look at yours, Care? Not loaded, is it?"

"No, no. Go ahead!"

Mason leaned over the seat and unzipped the case. "A carbine? Semiautomatic? I thought they were illegal in this state."

Roderick Care smiled. "The deer never said they were illegal."

They drove for a long time in silence, with both Care and the doctor reluctant to join in any conversation about their common interests. Mason mentioned North Africa and the South Pacific and finally Korea without getting a rise out of either man.

It had been dark for more than two hours by the time they turned off the main highway, and there was another hour's trip over a rutted mountain road before they finally reached the hunting lodge at River Forks. Three other cars had gotten there ahead of them, and a dozen men were already inside, playing poker and drinking beer.

Crowder limped over to greet them, startling Mason with his costume

of green-and-brown camouflage. "That's a heck of a thing to wear when you're hunting," Mason said.

"I probably won't go out with this knee anyway."

The lodge was large enough to sleep a score or more men. There were three big bedrooms with an array of cots, plus a kitchen, indoor toilet, and central living room where others could sleep. It was a pleasant place, though it seemed to Mason that none of the men were very relaxed.

Mason chatted with the various men and examined an AWB banner that he hadn't seen before. He ended up in a card game with Care and Crowder and the doctor, and won five dollars. He drank a few beers, talked guns with Care for a time, and finally caught a few hours' sleep on one of the cots. None of the others seemed interested in sleep, and he awakened around three-thirty in the morning to hear Crowder sending one of the men out of the lodge on some mission.

Mason felt around for his fluorescent cap but it was gone. While he slept someone had substituted a dark brown one with ear flaps that was a size too large. He got up and joined the others, yawning, noticing for the first time that none of them wore any brightly colored garment.

"Where are the cars?" he asked, glancing out the window.

Care walked over to stand beside him. "We have a garage around back. They'll be safe there."

"What? Say, who was that who just went out?"

"Schlitzer. He's just looking around."

"It's a couple of hours till daylight."

Dr. Fathion was making coffee, and passing the steaming cups around at random. Mason drank, feeling an odd sort of tension building in his gut. It was almost the way he'd felt in Korea.

Then something about the windows caught his eye, something he hadn't noticed before. He walked over to feel the folded shutters, then turned to Roderick Care. "Since when do you need steel shutters on a hunting—"

The crack of the rifle shot was very close, off in the woods somewhere but very close. Instantly Crowder was on his feet shouting orders. Two men grabbed their rifles and hurried outside, while a third picked up the AWB banner and went out the door behind them, planting it in the soft earth with a firm hand.

"What *is* it?" Mason shouted to Care. "What in hell's happening?"

The answer came through the door. The two hunters were back al-

ready, carrying the fallen Schlitzer. He was bleeding from a wound in the stomach.

"On the table," Dr. Fathion shouted, slipping his arms into a white plastic jacket that had a large red cross on front and back. "Get my instruments. Quickly, men!"

Crowder was issuing orders as the others grabbed for their rifles. Someone shoved Mason's into his hands. Then he was facing Crowder as the lame man spoke quickly. "It's a sneak attack by the Khakis," he said, talking in an officer's monotone. "Two hours before the official start. Somebody get those shutters closed."

As soon as he had spoken, one window shattered under the ripple of gunfire. Roderick Care pulled Mason down along the wall. "We're in for it this year," he said. "It's another Pearl Harbor!"

"You mean this happens—"

Care was hugging the wall, edging toward the window with his carbine. "Last year we were lucky—only two wounded. I suppose we were due."

"But this is madness!"

"No more so than any war." Care lifted his head to the window and fired a quick burst with his carbine. "Didn't you ever wonder why so many people get shot on the first day of hunting season?"



1968

by Roderick Wilkinson

Don't let anyone tell you that this Scotch boom is going to go on forever. *I* know it isn't. In fact nearly everybody in America who blends it, bottles it, or sells it knows that we simply can't go on importing millions of barrels of a liquor from a tiny island off the coast of Europe just because it can't be made anywhere else in the world.

Oh, yes, we make whisky in the U.S. Everybody knows that. It's darned good whisky, too. Don't try to tell *me* that a southern mash or a Kentucky single grain doesn't make life a lot easier for millions of fastidious Americans, but a Scotch malt whisky can't be made here. It simply can't be done. That's why—at a time when we're nearly colonizing the moon—it makes me mad to think that we have to get every single drop of the stuff from a country smaller than New York.

Don't ask me *why* this is. If anybody should know the answer, *I* should. I've been in the whisky business forty-odd years; I talk to whisky men all day in my New York office, at the bonding warehouses, at the brokers' places, in the U.S. grain distilleries, out in the field, in the bars, in saloons, at the dealers' places. I also discuss whisky with my gardener on Long Island, my barber, my travel agent, Joe at the country club, my wife, and anybody else who'll listen. Scotch is my business.

It's something to do with the water. Not even the water in the *lowlands* of Scotland will do. It *must* be water from a peaty, Highland river like the Spey or the Lochie or the Livet. It is also something to do with the barley they use—plump Aberdeen or Angus or Banff barley is taken up every year by the Scottish distillers, whole harvests at a time. All the rest has something to do with the peat-fire they use under the still, the aromatic juices in the hot stills which haven't been cleaned out in 150 years, the temperature, the humidity, the skill of the stillmen who know exactly when to "run off," as it's called in the industry.

If there's anything else it must be witchcraft and, believe me, *that* wouldn't surprise me about the Scots.

All I get is the product; and all I know is that I have to import barrels and barrels of the stuff to make a living for about two thousand of my employees who work three shifts getting it on the market.

I want to tell you about a day last March when a grey-haired man called Ogilvie from our Scottish supplier phoned me from Glasgow. The conversation went something like this:

"Mr. Sullivan?"

"Yes."

"This is Hector Ogilvie. From Glasgow."

"Hello, Hector."

"I'm phoning you because I don't want to put any of this in writing."

"Oh?"

"You know Andrew Lamont?"

"I don't think so."

"Yes, you do. You met him at our Tomintoul distillery last summer. He was the tall man, about thirty; wore a white coat; black hair—"

"He had a blonde wife, good-looking girl?"

"That's him. He's our chemical engineer based at Glasgow. He was at Tomintoul on a visit when you were there."

"What about him?"

I heard him breathe before he said, "He made ten gallons of Islay malt artificially last week."

It was a few seconds before I thought what to say. If it had been anyone but Hector Ogilvie on the other end of that phone four thousand miles away, I would have made polite noises and hung up. But this was a *whisky* man talking. Ogilvie had been managing one of Charlie McIntyre's distilleries at Glenasky for years. I said, "It went back to raw alcohol."

"It didn't."

"Then it didn't hold the flavor."

"It did."

"It won't mature."

"It will."

I found my voice a little thicker. "You're kidding."

"I am not. He's proved it out—many times."

"Who knows about it?"

"You. And me. And him."

"What about McIntyre?"

"He doesn't know. He wouldn't know what to do if he did. Lamont says the development's got to be done now in America. There isn't enough money here."

"What d'you want me to do?"

"Get Bailey and Green and Pudner lined up. I think I can bring Lamont over to New York next week for a test demonstration. He'll need a lab and three assistants."

"They'll take some convincing. So will I. We'll need to see long-term tests."

"You will also need a lot of money." Well, they came over. I got the other three whisky men together and by the time Lamont had worked on the fourth test I had a feeling we had kissed goodbye to four hundred years of the Scotch-whisky industry as we knew it. That meeting was supposed to last three hours and it lasted five days. We almost slept in the place. Lamont worked behind locked doors but he showed us all we wanted to know. First he distilled a few pints from corn. Then he went on to coarser grain like maize. He finished up producing three gallons of the loveliest, peat-tanged, malt-flavored nectar we had ever tasted from a sack of Oklahoma potatoes. He matured it by electronics.

I don't know if you realize what I'm saying here but, to get the picture straight in your mind, it was as if somebody from Vienna had brought over a computer and composed, scored, and played music that suddenly put everyone who made music all over the world out of business overnight—opera organizers, orchestra leaders, recording artists, singers and musicians—finished.

That was the size of the problem we had at 4 A.M. on the eighteenth floor of the Tallamady Building in New York, and it wasn't nice. The next day we rushed in the specialists from the Midwest—men who *knew* whisky even better than we did—tasters, smellers, sniffers, blenders, who could tell precisely what kind of Orkney or Speyside would mix best with the sharp water of East San Francisco. They passed Andrew Lamont's product as one of the finest Glenlivet's they had ever tasted.

The potato reached a dizzy height in the history of the liquor business that night, that's for sure.

At first everyone was too scared to talk money. I just kept walking the carpet and horse-talking about "International consequences in the spirit trade . . . responsibilities far beyond the immediate profit incen-

tives . . . a breakthrough in our industry as far-reaching as the atom bomb."

Ogilvie glared through his spectacles and said, "*Somebody's* got to get it started. The time to do it is here and now. Let's get something drawn up." He talked as if he were Lamont's theatrical agent.

Harold Bailey, a big whisky man from the West Coast, agreed with him. "To hell with this 'international consequences' jazz. Is this the United Nations? Let's sign them up now, at least with a provisional contract."

The other two whisky men, James Green and O. B. Pudner, kept silent. They looked scared out of their wits with the Scotsman's discovery. They knew this was the end of the Scotch trade.

All this time, Lamont just drew squiggles on a scratch pad and looked sad. Everybody knew what everybody else was thinking. This was Survival Day, and the men who signed up Lamont would make a fortune. Those who didn't were done.

We all started pushing Lamont at once—provisional rights for six months, guaranteed exclusives for the first three years, outright payments, royalties, stock-sharing—and the more we pushed the sadder Lamont looked. I hoped he was just tired.

"Let's think about it," he said as he took off his white lab coat. "We've plenty of time."

Bailey got panicky. "Yeah, you do that, Andrew. You think about it, and while you're doing that, somebody in Germany or Japan will get on to the method in a month and sell the world out in a year."

He started packing up his things. "They won't get on to it. It took me eight years working night and day. This is no do-it-yourself whisky-water. It's complicated." He smiled before he left. "I want to think about it." His mouth was tight.

We nearly went mad. Think about what? What was he trying to do, hike the price into billions? Had he no sense of decency? Think about it!

Bailey and I kept talking to him all the way back to his hotel. Then I went down to the airport and tried again. "Just tell me why you want to delay, Andrew."

He leaned against a stair railing. "I'll try. What *is* Scotland, anyway? The top part of a small volcanic hiccup off the coast of Europe; five million people. You could lose it in Los Angeles. We don't have much—a reputation for building ships, playing the bagpipes, and making tartan

and whisky. That's about it, one way or another." He lit a cigarette. "Maybe we should keep the little we've got."

"Listen, Andrew, I know how you feel," I said, "but you can't keep back progress. You've found the way to mass-produce Scotch malt whisky anywhere in the world. This'll take money to develop, and a plant and men and materials. Let *me* develop it. I can raise the money—"

"Goodnight, Alex." He held out his hand.

I watched them walk to the runway for his plane. Hector Ogilvie was waving his arms at him and, from where I stood, looked as if he were swearing continuously at the thickest, most stupid chemical engineer in the whisky business.

I think I'd better tell you something about myself at this stage, then you'll know why I went straight back to my New York office that evening and did some very clear thinking. I'm fifty-two years of age, although I don't look it. My father was an Irish immigrant and my mother came from Liverpool in England. You'll pardon my inverted snobbery if I tell you I came up the hard, hard way near the New York waterfront. And you'll pardon me if I leave out some of the years during prohibition; let's just say that's how I got into the liquor business. I married Kate Bergman in 1933, divorced her in 1939. I married again in 1942 and Lucy and I live on Long Island in a fine house with all the trimmings. Our boy Larry works with me in the business. He's sharp.

Don't press me for details; that's about the size and breadth of my life. Better people than you have tried to put a bite on me by digging up some early-Sullivan relics on that waterfront.

I sat in my office that night, and when all the anger and scare had left me I began to laugh. You know what this was, don't you? This was a Situation, and I hadn't had one of these in years. Business problems, yes; plenty of them. But something like this? Not since Ed Buccelli and I worked together had I got myself a Situation that had to be handled; managed; fixed.

I put together the facts. A young Scots chemical engineer had found a way of making Scotch malt whisky artificially from almost any kind of vegetable matter that would produce ethyl alcohol. If this development were launched anywhere in the world, Scotch whisky would no longer be a monopoly of the Scots. It could be produced in the Gobi Desert from sagebrush! It needed money to develop it. I could get the money. If I had that patent, or the rights, I could make a fortune and put every other Scotch importer in the world out of business.

So, I had to have that patent or the know-how. That's me. Why should I try to tell *you* otherwise? D'you imagine I got to the top in the liquor business letting somebody *else* manipulate these things?

I picked up the telephone book and looked for "Buccelli." Ed was a good starting point.

The man who came to see me later that night on Long Island looked like a lawyer. He was of medium height, had black, wavy hair, nice brown eyes, and a broad face that smiled easily. His name was Daly, and he spoke with a Scottish accent.

I took him into the library and I poured drinks. "That was quick."

"Mr. Buccelli said you were in a hurry, Mr. Sullivan." He sat down in the big hide chair, and I noticed how well-cut was his dark-grey suit.

I sat on the sofa and hoped I looked younger than I felt with this thirty-odd-year-old, clean-cut, serene executive type. "Did he tell you anything about what I want?"

"Only that you had an assignment you wanted to talk over." He sat back.

I sipped my drink. "Are you on your own or with an organization?"

He brought out a wallet and from it a card which he handed to me. It read:

Gascoine Peterson, Inc.
328 44th Street
New York, N.Y.
U.S.A.

I had to use my reading glasses. I said, "This doesn't tell me much."

"I'm not *selling* my company's services, Mr. Sullivan." He picked up his glass.

"That doesn't give me much encouragement to buy them."

"I'm not encouraging you." He took some whisky.

I sighed. This was not going to be easy. What was the world coming to? You ask for a pressure service and what do you get? You get a crease-panted young so-and-so sitting back drinking your whisky, not giving a damn whether he wanted your work or not. In the old days—well, times have changed. I said, "Let me tell you the story."

I told him about Lamont.

When I had finished he lit a cigarette, leaned forward and exhaled smoke slowly as he stared at the floor. "You want the know-how?"

"Legally or illegally."

"That means you want Lamont?"

"Right."

"You can raise the money?"

"Yes."

"How much?"

I shrugged and rose to refill our glasses. How much! I'd seen the day when anybody you hired to lean on somebody—well, I suppose these organizations operate differently now. I said, "Half a million dollars."

"Is it worth that?"

"Every cent. I know."

He accepted the refill thoughtfully. "Is there a time factor?"

"Yes. Tomorrow."

He grinned. "Let's be realistic."

"That guy Lamont is on a plane tonight with enough power in his skull to blow my whisky business, and everyone else's in the world, to smithereens in a week. He'll be wandering around Scotland *asking* for something to happen to him. I want him and his know-how back here working for me within weeks. Is *that* realistic?"

"Maybe." He was making notes in a little pad. "He's married? Got children?"

I began to feel better about Daly. I smiled. "Mr. Daly, there's something I like about you and your outfit. You get to where people live."

We finished about 2 A.M. and by the end of our meeting I began to have a fresh respect for the modern approach of today's professional pressure business. There was no doubt about it, things had come a long way since Ed Buccelli and I made our first few thousand dollars unprohibiting on the New York riversides. Gascoine Peterson got my account that night.

My reckoning was that I had about six weeks, at the outside, to get Lamont's know-how into my business. I had no complaint when Daly visited me at my office in New York the following afternoon with a portfolio which he put on my desk in front of me. It was titled "Project 183". I grinned as he sat down in front of my desk. "I wonder what the other one hundred and eighty-two were."

"Successful." He lit a cigarette.

The twenty-two sheets of typewritten paper in the portfolio were laid out like a marketing plan or a new financial venture or a research report. In these later days of my business-running, I had seen hundreds like it. This one was exceptional; it planned only one thing—how to get me Andrew Lamont's process for making Scotch whisky artificially. Im-

portant giveaway words were coded. Whisky was called china-clay and Scotland was called Panama. Only Daly and I knew the code words.

I took three-quarters of an hour to read it, while Daly looked out the window and smoked cigarettes. When I had finished I asked, "How much?"

"Forty thousand dollars."

"You're crazy."

He came over to the desk, took the portfolio, and put it in his briefcase. He had put on his hat when I said, "I'll buy it." I had a feeling you didn't mess around with these people. Times had changed.

The first part of that plan involved me personally. The agreement was that if I succeeded and there was no need for further intervention by Gascoine Peterson, my outlay would be a token one of five thousand dollars. Naturally I wanted that part to succeed, although I didn't have much hope.

Helen Lamont was a good-looking woman. When she walked into the cocktail bar of the hotel in Glasgow, dressed in blue, I felt glad I had no stomach or double chin.

She smiled. "Mr. Sullivan?"

I rose. "Yes, Mrs. Lamont." We shook hands. "I'm glad you could come. Won't you sit down?"

She was shapely and had a clear pink complexion.

"Thanks for describing the color of your tie. It's distinctive, indeed."

"I met you once at a distillery opening in the Highlands, but I felt you wouldn't know me again. That's why I mentioned the tie."

"Did you have a pleasant flight?" For the wife of a Scots whisky chemist, she seemed very assured.

"Yes, thanks." I ordered drinks as she took off her white gloves. Yes, Mrs. Lamont was a good-looking woman. She had a very shapely neck and very clear blue eyes. "Did your husband enjoy his few days in New York?"

"Not very. He didn't say much about it to me, but I got the impression he was kept very busy. Of course, Andrew doesn't discuss business with me very much." She looked me straight between the eyes. "So I don't ask a great deal. He tells me what he wants to tell me. That suits me."

The waiter brought the drinks, and this gave me some time to think

how I should approach her. "Mrs. Lamont, I think you know why I'm here today."

"I could make a guess."

"You know why your husband was in New York with Mr. Ogilvie."

"Yes." She smiled.

I lifted my glass and smiled. "That makes my job easier."

"Does it?"

"Do you want him to make a lot of money from his whisky process?"

"If that's what Andrew wants." She sipped her drink as if there were nothing more to say. It took me a few seconds to get used to it.

"You haven't told me what *you* want."

She nodded and put down her glass. "Mr. Sullivan, I think I know what you want. You would like me to try to influence my husband to sell you or lease you the rights of his process. You want to negotiate."

I offered her a cigarette which she accepted. "I admire your sense. Don't misunderstand me. I want to buy that process at a price which would make your head swim."

"My head doesn't swim easily. I think I know what it's worth, although I don't know anything about the process. I can tell you in a nutshell all *I* want. I want him to sell out so that he and I and the children can have all we've wanted for years. I want us to be rich."

I had a real job stemming my enthusiasm. "Then why in the world doesn't he sell it—to me?"

"Because he has scruples."

"Scruples about what?"

"You don't *have* to have scruples about anything, Mr. Sullivan. You just have to have them. Some people have a lot of them—like freckles, or hair on their heads. My husband is one of these." She sighed. "I know how he feels about this; he just doesn't want to be the means of ruining the Scotch whisky industry. He says it's like killing the French wine industry." She played with her glass. "Scotland means a great deal to him."

"Mrs. Lamont, listen to me—" It was the way she moved her eyes very slightly that made me turn around in my chair quickly. Andrew Lamont was standing right behind me. I felt terrible. Then I felt angry.

"Don't get up," he said, smiling. He moved around and sat in the vacant chair at our table. "You never give up, do you, Alex?"

I lit a cigarette. "No, I don't."

Mrs. Lamont appeared a little embarrassed. Frankly that's how I saw

it, too. She said, "I told Andrew you'd asked to meet me here today. I don't keep secret appointments, Mr. Sullivan."

I tried to smile. "Look, let's face this right in the teeth. Andrew—"

"No, you face it right in the teeth, Alex," Lamont said. "I know what my wife wants because she's laid all her cards on the table to me; she wants the Lamont family to make a lot of money from this process. I know what I want; I want the process to be proved a success. And I know what *you* want; you just want your hands on that process so you can corner the artificial Scotch market and put everybody out of business in two years." He lit a cigarette. "There's just one snag. Nobody's going to *get* what he wants because I am not prepared to kill off a traditional industry that's been exclusive to this country for five hundred years."

Mrs. Lamont was looking at the water jug.

I sighed and swallowed some temper. "You really mean that?"

"That's exactly how I see it."

I got up because I couldn't just sit there and watch that jumped-up Scottish peasant lay down a statement like that which left me no room to move even an inch—no negotiation, no compromise, no nothing—so I pushed back my chair and said, "You're goin' to see this another way soon." I thought of the balance of payment to Daly and I felt angrier.

"I don't think so."

"But I *know* so. Don't you be crazy enough to imagine you can sit on something like this on your own terms and hold back progress of *this* size in the liquor industry, Lamont. If you don't have the brains to sell this process now to the industry, you'll have to be treated like an escaped lunatic and the responsibility taken out of your hands."

"And put into *yours*, Mr. Sullivan?" It was Helen Lamont who spoke.

"Yes. I have the money and the facilities to develop it, and I am going to use them."

Lamont took his wife's arm and she stood up as he said, "I wouldn't do a deal with you on this process if you were the last whisky man in the world, Sullivan. Goodbye."

I went out and straight to room 418 where Daly was waiting for me.

He laid down his newspaper as the door slammed. "No dice?"

"Pull the switch, Daly. Give them everything. You sold me pressure. I bought it. Now you apply it. And fast."

Nobody knows exactly how agencies like Gascoine Peterson work

when they get going, but I did insist on knowing *what* they were doing in Scotland to the Lamonts.

They started on the children. First, they took the older boy to a country lane outside Glasgow, roughed him up and telephoned the parents where they would find him. Then they frightened the younger boy, ripped his clothing, and he scurried home screaming.

By Thursday of the following week I was beginning to feel back home on the New York waterfront with Buccelli. On Monday they intended starting on Helen Lamont; I didn't like this—I always hated hearing about women being kicked—but Daly reckoned Lamont would be ready to crack by the end of that week.

I received no calls on Saturday or Sunday, and I got into my office early on Monday morning. Daly was looking out of the window of my office when I walked in. He didn't even turn around.

"Hello," I said as I put my hat on the rack.

He said nothing.

I walked behind my desk and sat down. I was about to talk to him again when I saw the package of papers, fastened with an elastic band and topped with a letter. I picked it up warily, as if I knew already it was something very important. The letter was multigraphed and it began "Dear . . ." then followed my name handwritten in ink.

"You'd better read it," Daly said in a flat voice.

I ripped off the elastic band, and the following is what I then read:
Dear Mr. Sullivan,

The enclosed papers, drawings, and chemical specifications will give you full details of a method for the production of Scotch malt whisky from any basic vegetable matter. The process has been scientifically proved at various periods under various conditions and at numerous locations over the past eight years.

Any further information you require about the process will be supplied to you free of charge on request from the writer. You should know that facsimile copies of the drawings and the specifications of the process have been mailed to every liquor-producing company in the world simultaneously. There are 1153 such companies in the mailing.

Yours faithfully,
Andrew Lamont

My hands were trembling. I dropped the package on my desk. "What the hell—is this?"

Daly turned around. "Mr. Lamont has delivered."

"This damn letter—it's—duplicated. He's sent it everywhere."

"That's what he says. He's sent it to every important manufacturer in the world." He sat down opposite my desk.

"Did you know it was here?"

He lit a cigarette. "I knew he was sending it. I came off the plane from Scotland this morning. Before I left he showed me a copy of it, and the drawings and specifications."

I felt my voice bleating. "He's—but he's sent it everywhere."

"All over the world. The printing and mailing costs were eight hundred pounds sterling. He paid it himself."

"He's—nuts."

"It was his wife's idea. She's a clever woman. She organized it the day you left them in Glasgow."

"B—but what do I get out of this?"

"Nothing."

I felt the sweat on my upper lip. "Nothing!" I tried to laugh. "Well, well! You can't beat a public announcement, can you? You can't patent something everybody's got, can you?" I took out my handkerchief and patted my mouth. "This guy's fooled all of us. Or his wife has."

There was a silence. We looked at each other. Then I saw Daly smile and fetch a slip of paper from his pocket. He laid it on my desk. "May as well get it all over in one morning, Mr. Sullivan."

"What's this?"

"That's our bill."

"Bill? What for?" I picked up the paper. I don't remember what I said. All I can remember is my own babbling voice. I felt terrible but I couldn't stop. "Forty thousand dollars! This is crazy! You can't charge me for this. I know I said I wanted this process, but not like this. You must see that yourself. It's unreasonable. You can't push me to this. It's a lot of money. There were certain conditions. Be fair. What about a drink? Couldn't we talk this over? I didn't know it would turn out like this. Be reasonable."

I was still talking in a funny kind of high voice when Daly went to the door and opened it. Two large men came in quietly, and one of them took a rubber truncheon from his pocket. I tried to scream but no sound would come. I heard Daly say, "Leave his right arm intact. He'll need it for signing the check."

by Bill Pronzini

He had been walking under the blinding desert sun for two hours, following the straight, solid line of the railroad tracks, when he saw, first, the highway, and then the single building standing near it.

Having been put off the freight at a siding somewhere in the lower Arizona desert when he had been found hiding in a hot and dirty cattle car, he had wanted to rest in the shade of one of the buildings, but the man at the siding told him that the sheriff would be called if he stayed around there, and that he had better move on if he didn't want to spend time in the county jail. He had asked for some water, because his mouth and throat were scorched from thirst, and he had been given a single cupful, nothing more. Then he had begun to walk.

He had no idea where he was, except that he was in the desert, but he knew if he followed the tracks they would eventually lead him to a town. It did not matter to him what town, not really, not any more. They all looked alike.

Now he paused on the raised bank of the tracks, staring at the highway and along it, some five hundred yards, to where he could see the single building. The highway came out of the west, diagonally toward the tracks, and then curved gradually to parallel them. The building, standing back from the highway, was almost equidistant between it and the tracks.

He ran his tongue over dry, cracked lips and looked up into the red ball of the sun. It had begun to sink now, slowly, moving down behind the long, thin, black ribbon of the highway.

He wondered about the building. More than likely a gas station, he decided. That meant they would have water, and rest rooms where he could wash the smell of the cattle car from his body and change out of the sweat-soaked clothing he wore.

Taking a firmer grip on the small overnight bag he carried, he went

down the sloped bank and began to walk through the mesquite and scrub brush to the highway, hurrying a little now, and wondering if they had food there at the building. He felt the hunger in his stomach. How long had it been since he'd eaten? Last night—had it been almost twenty-four hours?

The highway was molten black glass, and he had to walk with his eyes cast downward to keep from being blinded by the sun-glare. The building, he saw as he approached it, was old and wooden, a single-story, unpainted affair, fronted by a small, packed-dirt parking lot and two weathered gas pumps. To the right of the main building, and slightly behind it, was a smaller, squat building.

As he reached the dusty, unpaved access road leading off the highway, he saw a faded sign, the black-lettered words dulled by the hot desert winds, which read: *Charley's Oasis*.

He went down the access road, smelling the dry dust and tasting it in his mouth. When he came to the dirt lot, he could see a screen door under a wooden awning, and two windows, one on either side of the door. In one of the windows was a soft-drink sign; in the other was a colorful beer advertisement.

A sign on the front of the squat building to the right pointed to *Rest Rooms*, and he went there first. Inside, he peered into the small mirror over the lavatory. He saw a man named Jack Hennessy, a man who was thirty-one years old, and who looked forty. He saw pain lines etched at the corners. He saw close-cropped black hair that had already begun to lighten at the temples, making him look older. *I don't know this face any more*, he thought.

He rubbed the beard stubble on his jaw. He hadn't shaved in two days. The desert sun had turned his skin a boiled pink color which looked incongruous against the blackness of the beard and the grime of the cattle car.

He wondered what Karen would say if she could see him like this. No. Not now. He didn't want to think about Karen.

He stripped off his sodden shirt and trousers and underwear. He turned on the tap and cupped his hands under the thin stream of water. He rinsed his mouth, resisting the urge to drink. The water tasted of chemicals. They would have fresh water inside.

From the overnight bag he took a thin bar of soap, washed his face and neck, then spilled water on the rest of his body. He took a towel from the bag and dried himself, then put on a thin blue shirt and his

only other pair of shorts and a pair of wrinkled denim trousers. Looking in the mirror again, he debated shaving.

Oh, hell, he thought, I'm not dressing to go out to dinner with Karen. I'm not . . . Oh, why do I have to keep thinking about her? How long will it go on? Aren't you ever able to forget?

He put his soiled clothes in the bag, wet his hair and ran a comb through it, then stepped out onto the deserted sun-baked lot and walked to the main building.

It was warm inside, an overt stuffiness. A large ceiling fan whirled overhead, and there was an ice-cooler on a table in the rear, but they did little to appease the heat. He paused to let his eyes grow accustomed to the change in light, then went to a long, deserted lunch counter along the right-hand wall. The remainder of the room was taken up with wooden tables covered with red checked oilcloth, all of them empty now, and straight-backed chairs. On the wooden walls around the room were hung prospecting tools—picks, shovels, nugget pans and the like. In the rear, next to an old-fashioned wood stove, was a rocking cradle like the ones prospectors used.

Behind the lunch counter was a young blonde girl in a white uniform. She appeared to be about eighteen, was very pretty in a young, scrubbed sort of way. Her cheeks had a rosy glow, and she wore no makeup. As Jack sat down on one of the stools, he noticed she had blue eyes. *Karen had blue eyes, too. Karen, Karen, Karen . . .*

"May I help you, sir?" the girl said.

"A glass of water, please."

She took a large glass and filled it from a fountain tap. He tasted it—ice cold. Then drank thirstily, spilling some on his clean shirt, aware the girl was watching him.

"Would you like some more?" she asked.

"Yes, please." He drank another glass.

"I saw you come up," the girl said, indicating the window to the right of the door. "You weren't walking in that sun, were you?"

"My car broke down," he said, and then wondered why he had lied.

"We haven't got a mechanic here," she said.

"No, it's all right," Jack said. "I'm expecting a friend."

Another lie. Why? Why am I lying to this young girl?

"Would you care for something to eat?"

"Yes, all right. Something . . ."

She gave him a single card with the menu printed on it: *Hamburger,*

50¢; Cheeseburger, 60¢; Grilled Ham and . . . He put the card down and passed a hand across his face.

"Is something the matter, sir?" the girl asked.

"No, nothing."

"Have you decided?"

"Some eggs," he said. "Just some scrambled eggs and toast."

"Something cold to drink?"

"No," he said. "Coffee."

The girl turned to a square opening in the wall, said, "Poppa."

An old man with bright grey eyes and a long, thin nose, dressed in a white shirt and apron, appeared in the opening. "Two, scrambled," the girl said, and the old man nodded. The girl took a cup from a stack on the back counter, poured coffee into it from a glass pot on a two-burner there, and set the cup in front of Jack.

"You're not from around here, are you?" she said. "Back East someplace, I'll bet. I can tell by your accent. New York?"

"Boston," he said.

Still another lie. They seemed to flow from his lips without conscious thought. He did not know how many lies he had told in the past four months. He did not even know what reason he had for lying; not self-deception surely.

"Going to California?" the girl asked.

"Why do you ask that?"

"It seems like everybody is going to California these days," she said, and laughed.

"I'm going to Los Angeles."

"I was there once," the girl said. "It's awfully big. We're from Yuma."

"Is that near here?"

"About forty miles."

"Is that where the highway out there leads?"

"Yes, eventually." The girl smiled at him. "I'll be right back," she said. "I have to chip up some fresh ice."

After she left, Jack took out his wallet and looked inside—two dollars. He looked in the coin pocket—a little more than a dollar in change.

That was the last of it. Nothing left, then. Karen would be frantic if she knew he did not have any money. The idea pleased him, but then she was undoubtedly frantic as it was.

He wondered if she had the police looking for him.

Of course she would have the police looking for him. It was four months since he had left. She might even have private detectives looking for him, too. She would do that, all right. She would do anything to get what she wanted. There was no doubt about that, not any longer. How could he have lived and slept and eaten and laughed and talked with somebody for three long years and not have any idea what she was really like. How was that possible?

The girl came back behind the counter carrying a pan full of ice which she dumped into a cooler filled with beer and soft drinks.

"The ice melts awfully fast in this heat," she told him. "You have to keep putting in fresh to keep things cold."

He nodded and lifted his cup. He sipped some of the coffee, and burned his tongue.

"Careful," the girl said. "It's very hot."

"Yes," he said, and drank some ice water.

He wondered suddenly why he was running. The thought came out of nowhere, flashing into his mind, and he frowned. Well, that was stupid. It was very simple why he was running. He was running because he refused to work ten hours a day drafting engineering designs to pay for his selfish wife's extravagance. He was running because there was a pain down deep inside him, the pain of a shattered dream, and he wanted to forget that pain and the cause of that pain. He was running because he had been stripped of his pride, and left with nothing. He was running because . . .

Why am I running? And where am I running to? He sat rigidly erect, with the coffee cup held halfway to his mouth. *Come on, that's enough now. You thought it all out once, didn't you? You decided this was the only way, didn't you? Come on, now. Come on, you . . .*

He brought the cup clattering to the counter, spilling coffee. He felt himself sweating. *It must have been the sun. Yes, that was it.*

"Are you sure you're all right?" the girl asked. She had been watching him curiously.

"Fine," he said. "I was just walking too long in the sun."

"Do you want some aspirin?"

"No, I'm fine now."

"Two, scrambled," the old man said from the kitchen.

The girl took the plate of eggs and a plate of toast from the sill and set them in front of Jack. He picked up his fork. He had an urge to lift the plate of eggs and scrape them into his mouth, but he forced himself

to eat slowly, taking alternate bites of egg and toast, and then little sips of coffee. The girl watched him eat, not speaking.

He heard the car then, and turned slightly on his stool. Looking out one of the windows, he saw a dusty, dark green station wagon coming down the access road. It turned onto the lot and parked next to the building. Two men got out.

Jack could see that they were average-sized, dressed in sports shirts and slacks, and both wearing cotton jackets. In this heat? One had black hair and a neatly-trimmed moustache. The other was blond, had a wide forehead and a cupid's-bow mouth. Jack turned back to his eggs, but looked up again briefly when the door opened and the two men came inside. They stood just inside the door, as he had, to let the glare of the sun fade from their eyes. Then they went to one of the oilcloth-covered tables and sat down.

"Damn, it's hot," one of the men said, wiping his face with a handkerchief.

"A scorcher," the other man agreed.

The girl came around the counter and went to them, asked, "Can I help you, gentlemen?"

"Two beers, and I hope they're cold."

"Yes, sir," the girl said. "Ice cold."

"And bring a menu, will you?"

Jack finished his eggs, then spread jam thickly on his last piece of toast.

The girl took two beers from the cooler, opened them, put them on a tray with two of the menu cards and took them to the table where the two men were sitting.

They studied the menus. "What does the house recommend?" one of them asked.

"The ribs. They're charcoal-broiled, with our own special sauce."

"What do you say, Frank?"

"Sure, two orders of ribs. And bring two more beers."

"Yes, sir."

The girl came back and called the order into the kitchen. Jack said, "Miss, I'd like another cup of coffee, please."

"Certainly." She poured him another cup, and filled his water glass again.

He sipped his coffee, looking out the window and up to the shimmer-

ing asphalt highway. He wondered if he could get a ride. There didn't seem to be many cars on the road.

The girl opened another two bottles of beer and took them to the two men.

"Are you gentlemen going to California?" she asked.

"Are we going to California, Frank?"

"No," Frank said. "We're not going to California." He laughed.

"Are you salesmen?"

"Do we look like salesmen?"

"Well, we have a lot of salesmen stopping here."

"We're not salesmen," Frank said.

"We're hunters," the other man said, smiling.

"Oh, then you're going to Nevada. They say there's good hunting in Nevada."

"No, we're not going to Nevada," Frank said. "There's some good hunting right here."

The girl laughed. "No, you're wrong there. Unless you want to hunt jackrabbits. That's all we have around here."

"You're wrong there, missy."

"Ribs are ready," the old man called from the kitchen.

"Excuse me," the girl said to the men, and came around behind the counter to pick up the ribs.

Jack looked at his watch. It was after five o'clock. Maybe he could pick up a ride into the nearest town before it got to be too late; or maybe into Yuma. He would have to get a room for the night, and then in the morning he would have to find a job. Washing dishes was about all he could get, coming into a strange town. He'd washed a lot of dishes in the past four months.

He glanced at the tab the girl had put in front of him—fifty-seven cents. He found two quarters, a nickel and two pennies in the coin pocket of his wallet and put them on top of the tab. Then he stood, picked up his bag, and looked toward the two men.

He might be able to get a ride with them, but they had said they were hunters, were probably going into the mountains someplace.

Deciding he would try to catch a ride on the highway, he walked to the door.

"Hey, fellow, where you going in such a hurry?" one of the men sitting at the table asked.

Turning, Jack said, "I'm leaving."

"Why don't you sit down and have another cup of coffee?" the man invited.

"I don't want another cup of coffee."

"I think you better have one."

"Oh, hell," Jack said. Maybe they were drunk. He was glad he hadn't asked them for a ride. He turned for the door.

He had taken two steps when he heard the girl's muffled gasp behind him, and he came around again. Both of the men were standing, and each of them held a gun which they had taken from beneath their jackets.

Jack, staring at them, felt a cold knot in his stomach. "Hey," he said.

"Hey, what is this? What's—"

"Sit down there," one of the men said, motioning with his gun.

"What kind of joke is this?"

"It's no joke. Sit down."

Jack sat down. Those were real guns. What was going on?

He saw the girl standing behind the counter, with one hand pressed to her mouth and her eyes wide like blue marbles. She stood absolutely motionless, as if she had been hypnotized.

Frank, the one with the black hair and moustache, said, "You, old man, come out here."

The old man stood behind the opening into the kitchen, but he did not move. He was frozen, like the girl.

"Didn't you hear me, old man?"

The old man moved then. He came around through the swing doors at the far end of the diner and stood next to the girl.

"There anybody else here?" Frank asked. "Dishwasher or a man on the pumps?"

"No."

"All right. Both of you come around and sit down next to your friend there."

The old man took the girl's arm and led her around to where Jack was sitting, and both of them sat down.

"Now," Frank said, "that's fine."

"What is this?" the old man asked loudly. "Is it a holdup?"

The two men laughed, and the blond one, Earl, said, "So you think it's a holdup?"

"We don't have any money," the old man said. "There's only twenty dollars in the register."

"Take it easy," Frank told him. "We don't want your money."

"What do you want then?"

"Just be quiet and you won't get hurt."

The girl, sitting next to Jack, began to cry. Instinctively, Jack put his arm around her, and she leaned against him, crying against his shoulder.

"That's nice," Frank said. "You take care of her."

Jack felt a sudden anger. "What the hell's the matter with you? What did you want to pull those guns for?"

"Maybe we like to pull guns," Earl said. "Maybe we do it all the time."

"You've got no right to scare people like this."

"If you don't shut up, I'm going to do more than scare you," Frank warned.

"What do you want here?" the old man asked.

"All right. So you want to know, do you? Earl, you tell him what we want here."

"We're here to kill a man."

"What!" Jack exploded.

"You heard me."

"You're crazy," the old man said, staring at them.

"We're not crazy," Frank denied.

"Who are you going to kill?"

"Maybe you," Earl said, and laughed.

"Shut up, Earl," Frank ordered.

"What do you mean by that?" the old man said.

"We're going to kill a man named Spikes," Earl told him.

"There's no one around here named Spikes."

"There will be."

"You're crazy," the old man said again.

"What time is it?" Frank asked Earl.

Earl looked at his watch, said, "Five-ten."

"Twenty minutes," Frank said.

"What happens in twenty minutes?" Jack asked.

"The train comes through."

"It's a freight," the old man said. "It doesn't stop anywhere around here."

"We know that," Earl said.

"Is the man you're going to kill on the five-thirty freight?"

"He'd better be."

"But it doesn't stop."

"It doesn't have to stop."

"The hell with all this," Frank said. "At five-thirty that freight is coming through here. There's a man named Spikes hiding in one of the boxcars, and when it passes by here he's going to jump off. Then he's going to come right here, because he thinks there's going to be a car waiting here for him, and a friend who's going to drive him to Mexico. But there isn't going to be any car and there isn't going to be any friend."

"Just us," Earl said.

"That's right, old man, just us."

"And you're going to kill him?"

"That's right, we're going to kill him."

"But why?"

"Let's just say he did something he shouldn't have done," Frank said.

No, Jack thought. No, this is silly. This can't be happening. Things like this don't happen any more.

He felt the girl's body shaking beneath his arm. He looked at the two men, standing there very casually, holding the guns, and he felt the sweat, hot and slick, on his back and under his arms. It was very hot in the diner. A shaft of sunlight from the sinking red ball outside the window was splashed on the wooden floor, and dust motes danced inside. Jack's throat was parched.

It was very quiet. The only sounds were the whirring of the overhead fan, and the girl's crying. Finally, Earl said, "I'm going to finish my ribs."

"All right," Frank said. "You go ahead."

Earl sat down and began to eat noisily, smacking his lips.

"What are you going to do to us?" the old man asked. He was sitting stiffly, his back arched into a straight line, but he did not seem afraid.

"Nothing," Frank told him. "If you keep quiet and do just what we tell you, we're not going to do anything to you."

Jack knew he was lying. *They're going to kill us, he thought. After they kill this other man, this Spikes, then they're going to kill us too. Or maybe they'll just tie us up and leave us in the kitchen. But we can identify them. No, no, they're going to kill us.*

Then, for the first time since the men had taken out their guns, Jack began to feel fear.

Earl finished eating, and Frank was glancing around the room, his eyes moving slowly.

"What's back there?" he asked the old man, indicating the door at the rear of the diner.

"The storeroom."

"Is there a window in there?"

"Yes," the old man nodded.

"Earl, you go back there and watch for the train," Frank ordered. "Leave the door open so you can see in here." Earl drank the rest of his beer, then went into the storeroom, leaving the door open. Jack could see him standing beside the window, peering out at the desert. Through the window, in the distance, he could see the raised mound that was the railroad tracks.

They waited five minutes, ten, in silence. It seemed to grow hotter in the diner, as if all the desert heat had concentrated somehow inside the building. Jack was sweating freely now. Droplets of water rolled from his forehead down across his cheeks and fell on his shirt. His arm seemed to have gone to sleep around the girl's shoulders, but he made no move to take it away.

He felt protective somehow. Like a father with his daughter, that was how he felt. Yes, like a father to the child he'd wanted but never had. *Later*, Karen had said. *When we can afford it. Later, darling.*

Much, much later . . .

"Here comes the train," Earl called from the storeroom.

Jack could see the freight passing on the tracks outside; a long string of boxcars, a string of empty flats, two tankers, then a group of cattle cars and another set of boxes.

He could feel his heart pounding in his chest.

"Do you see him?" Frank called to Earl.

"No, not yet."

"Maybe he jumped on the other side."

The freight sped past.

"There he is!" Earl called, and Jack saw him then, standing in the half-open doorway of one of the boxcars near the end of the freight. He stood poised there for a moment, and then he jumped. He hit the sand at the side of the tracks, rolling, and then got to his feet slowly and stood there, brushing sand and dust from his clothing. The man looked in the direction of the building, then began to run toward them.

Earl came back inside the diner. "He'll come around to the parking

lot, looking for the car," Frank said. "When he doesn't see it, he'll figure it's late. He'll have to come inside then. He can't stand out there in the sun."

Earl nodded, and moved to the window by the door, looking out.

"All right," Frank said, "the three of you come around and stand behind the counter. We don't want you catching any stray bullets, do we?"

The old man immediately went around behind the counter. Jack helped the girl up and around to where the old man stood.

"You just stand there and keep quiet," Frank said to them. "Don't move at all and don't make a sound, you understand?"

Jack realized the full impact of what was about to happen then. *They are going to kill a man. Oh, God, we are going to stand here and watch them murder a man and there is nothing we can do about it.*

"Put your head against my shoulder," Jack whispered to the girl. "Don't look at this."

"Shut up, you," Frank said, moving the gun.

Jack looked at him and clamped his teeth tightly together. As he brought his eyes back, he glanced at the old man. He was standing just to the side of the two-burner, and his hand was resting on the back counter. Jack saw the old man wet his lips, looking first to where Frank was and then down to where the glass coffee pot sat on the two-burner.

Jack knew instantly what the old man was thinking, and he felt a surge of hope. But just as quickly, the hope died. No, it was crazy. It wouldn't work. There were two of them, and Earl was on the other side of the room, at the window. How could he—

The old man caught Jack's gaze then, and he moved his head slightly, rolling his eyes. Jack, realizing he was trying to tell him something, followed the old man's eyes. He was looking at the cash register. No, no, he was looking to a small shelf beneath it, built into the counter; but there was nothing on the shelf except two empty mason jars, a cigar box that held cash register receipts, a roll of shelf paper, some rags . . .

He saw the gun then.

He saw the gun, and his heart gave a throbbing leap, moving up into his throat. It was wrapped in the rags on the shelf, so that only the tip of the barrel showed.

He kept looking at the gun, feeling a slight weakness in his legs, and listening to the pounding of his heart. Then, realizing that Frank might be watching him, he tore his eyes away, looking up quickly.

Frank was staring at the window, to where Earl stood peering out.

Jack looked back to the old man, and saw the pleading question in the old man's eyes. Would he try it? Would he take the gamble? It was Jack's choice. Neither of them could do it alone, but together they might be able to pull it off. Jack was nearer the gun, and the old man couldn't get to it without stepping around both Jack and the girl. There was not enough time for that, not for him to do both. It had to be the two of them, or nothing.

He didn't know if he could do it. He hadn't fired a gun since the Army. Ten years—he didn't know if he could shoot a man. He didn't know if he could . . .

He felt the pressure of the girl's fingers on his arm. He looked down at her. They would kill her, too; just a young girl, not even out of her teens—

He made up his mind, suddenly.

He met the old man's eyes, and the message passed between them silently, a mute understanding, and then they both looked away.

"I see him," Earl said from the window.

"Where is he?"

"Over by the rest rooms. He sees the wagon."

"He knows that's not the car."

"He's just standing there."

"Give him time."

"He doesn't know what to do."

"He'll come inside," Frank said. "He doesn't have any choice."

"Wait," Earl said. "Here he comes."

Jack tensed the muscles in his back, standing stiffly. He made his mind a complete blank. He did not trust himself to think.

"He's coming to the door," Earl said softly, and backed away from the window, into the center of the room.

"Get set," Frank whispered.

The front door of the diner opened.

Everything that happened then seemed to happen simultaneously, jammed into a single, frozen second, so that when that second ended it was all over.

When Jack saw the front door starting to swing open, he yelled, breaking the heat-shrouded silence that hung in the room, "Look out, they've got guns! Don't come in!"

Immediately, the old man, his hand sweeping upward from the

counter to the two-burner, and then outward in a single motion, threw the pot of hot coffee at Frank.

The pot struck him on the right shoulder, splashing the scalding liquid over his face and neck. He screamed, dropping his gun, his hands flying to his face.

Earl, on the opposite side of the room, fired a shot at the man in the doorway at the exact moment Frank screamed, but the sound of the scream jerked his arm and sent the shot thudding into the wall. The man in the doorway threw himself to the floor, tried to scuttle back outside on his hands and knees.

When the old man threw the pot of coffee, Jack had moved fast. He had jumped forward, with his warning yell and the sound of the gunshot ringing in his ears, and snatched the gun out of the rags, his finger automatically sliding off the safety the way he had been taught in the Army, and he brought the gun up in his right hand just as Earl swung around to the counter.

I'm going to kill a man, Jack thought, and pulled the trigger.

The bullet caught Earl high in the right shoulder. He staggered backward with the impact, his own gun flying from his hand, and toppled over one of the wooden tables, his head cracking on the solid wood floor. He lay very still.

Jack swung the gun, then, toward Frank, but he had fallen to the floor, his hands covering his scalded face. He was moaning. Jack lowered the gun.

The old man ran around to the front of the counter and picked up Frank's gun, holding it in both hands. The man from the train was still on the floor, half in and half out of the doorway, on his hands and knees. His face was the color of paste.

"They were going to kill you," the old man said to him. "They were going to kill you as soon as you walked in the door."

"Oh, my God," the man said. "Oh, my God."

The girl was crying hysterically. Jack looked down at the gun in his hand. It slipped from his fingers and clattered on the floor. His hands began to shake.

"I killed a man," he said.

The old man, standing above where Earl lay on the floor, said, "No, he's not dead. But he's out for a while."

"Get a doctor," Frank screamed from the floor. "Oh, get a doctor. My face is on fire."

Jack looked at him, and then at the girl. She was rocking on her feet, hugging herself. He went over to her. "Come on," he said. "Come on, it's all right. It's all over now."

At the sound of his voice she stopped crying and looked up at him. Her eyes said everything.

The old man was still holding Frank's gun with both hands. "Mandy," he said to the girl, "call the sheriff."

"Yes, Poppa," she said, and went to the phone on the rear wall.

The man in the doorway had scrambled to his feet. Then he turned and began to run.

"Hey!" the old man yelled. "Hey, you, come back here!"

The man, ignoring him, kept running toward the highway.

"What's the matter with him?" the old man complained.

"He's running away from something," Jack said. "He doesn't want to be here when the sheriff comes."

He's running away, Jack thought. *Yes, he's running away.*

He went to the door and stood there watching the man running up the dirt road.

That's me running, he thought with a sudden realization, and he wiped a hand across his eyes. *That's me running up there.*

We are very much alike, that man and me. Aren't we both frightened of what is behind us, and just as frightened of what lies ahead?

But I'm the lucky one. Oh, yes, I'm the lucky one because I don't have to run. I never had to run at all. I thought I was hurting Karen, but in reality the only person I had been hurting was myself.

Jack felt then as if a great and heavy burden had been lifted from his shoulders and from his mind. He felt a certain peace that he had not known for a long, long while, because on this single day, with all that had happened, he had learned more about himself than he had known in all his previous thirty-one years.

Turning from the doorway, he looked at the still figure of Earl lying on the floor, and at Frank holding his face in his hands and moaning. He looked at the girl just hanging up the telephone on the rear wall, and he looked at the old man, standing very straight and tall with the gun held in both hands.

The girl came to him and touched his arm, briefly, timidly.

The old man said simply, "Thanks, son."

Jack nodded slowly. There was nothing more to be said.

The sheriff arrived twenty minutes later with two deputies and an am-

balance. After the two men were loaded into the ambulance, the sheriff asked the questions he was bound to ask and when he had finished, he tipped his hat and went outside to his car.

Jack picked up his bag, and solemnly shook hands with the old man. The girl kissed him on the cheek, like a daughter would kiss her father, and he smiled at her. Then he went outside to where the sheriff was just starting his car.

"Can you give me a lift?" Jack asked.

"Be glad to," the sheriff said. "Where are you going?"

"Home," Jack said. "I'm going home."

"Home?"

"Because I don't have to run, you see."

The sheriff just smiled, because he did not understand.



1969

by Alice Scanlan Reach

Harry Fortune woke up one Saturday morning in May with one thought in mind. He was going to kill Eddie.

Eddie was Harry's fifty-year-old sister, Edith, who couldn't have been more appropriately nicknamed when you took into account her masculine swagger, shingled grey hair, voice the timbre of a bullfrog's, and the unmistakable mustache looming over her thin, mean upper lip.

Harry hated her. He couldn't remember a day in his life when he hadn't loathed the sight and sound of Eddie. His earliest memory—he couldn't have been more than five or six—was of an afternoon when she discovered a small, drab, obviously injured sparrow floundering in some tall weeds. Fascinated, Harry watched as Eddie fashioned a cage of boards and chicken wire, made a nest of twigs and grass, and then commanded him to fetch a handful of sunflower seeds, a worm or two, and a shallow tin pan of water.

"Now," Eddie had said, as she settled the sparrow inside the cage and secured the wire, "you just tend to our little birdie real good and maybe we can cure what ails him."

Dutifully, Harry did as he was told. After a week or so, the injury—whatever its nature—seemed to heal and the sparrow began to chirp and hop around its cage.

"And now," Eddie said one day, "we'll see if our birdie can fly." Laughing, she opened the cage. The sparrow hopped out, spread its wings and soared skyward for a moment or two, then suddenly faltered and fluttered to the ground. It took Harry almost another moment to realize why: Eddie had tied a long—but not too long—string to one of the sparrow's legs. Still laughing, she reeled the bird in as she would a hooked fish, and placed it back in the cage, leaving the string tied.

Despite Harry's cries of protest and pleading, which gained him nothing but a sore bottom, Eddie repeated the torture day after day; tan-

talized the sparrow with a brief taste of freedom, and then relentlessly pulled it back into the cage. So it was almost with a sense of relief that Harry went to water and feed the sparrow one morning and found that in its frantic efforts to free itself from the string it had strangled. Harry wept. Maybe it was then that, subconsciously, he began to think of himself as another helpless sparrow tied to Eddie's cruel string . . .

When, at eighteen, Harry enlisted in the Navy, he promised himself that he would never lay eyes on his sister again, but a German submarine smashed Harry's promise and Harry as well. After spending a year in a veteran's hospital, he finally hobbled home; back to the old frame farmhouse which still squatted in gloomy solitude some fifteen miles from town.

Once there, Eddie saw to it that he didn't "baby himself," as she put it, that he pitched in to help her raise a few scrawny chickens and vegetables, and that each month he endorsed over to her his disability check.

Things wouldn't be so bad, so lonesome, Harry often reflected dimly, if they just had a TV set. But whenever he ventured this suggestion aloud, Eddie would explode. "Ain't hardly enough money to put food in our mouths and you want a TV! If you weren't such a no-account bumbler you'd know how to fix the radio!"

Harry always subsided after such an exchange. He *had* tried, time and again, to fix the old pre-war radio, but his efforts were always, in the end, futile. Sometimes it squawked to life, then quickly lapsed into dead silence.

The only day of the week that could bring a straightening of Harry's thin shoulders and an anticipatory gleam of excitement to his pale blue eyes was on Saturdays. After supper Eddie would hoist her bulk into their battered truck and wait impatiently for Harry to climb in beside her. Their destination was always the same: the nearest farmhouse seven miles down the road, the home of Sheriff Jess Snell, his wife, Ida, and an assortment of offspring. Then, having deposited his passenger, Harry would gun the truck's engine and head for town and the Easy Rest Tavern where invariably the first person to greet him as he crossed the threshold was—the sheriff.

"Well, here he comes, right on time," Jess would boom out to the general amusement of all. "Henpecked Harry himself!" Whereupon, for the next ten minutes or so, Harry was joshed mercilessly about himself and his sister.

Harry didn't mind. He was too grateful for the warmth of the cozy

tavern, the companionship of menfolk, and the sound of their laughter, even if it was at his own expense. He always just smiled, sat down at the bar, and listened to the voices around him while he sipped a couple of beers until it was time to pick up Eddie. And so it went, week after week, year after year, with not a single variation.

Harry knew the exact day and hour when he decided that the only way to get rid of Eddie was to get rid of her. It was shortly after the miracle happened; when Eddie got the letter from Cousin Lucy who lived in Ridgeway, ninety miles away. Playing her usual cat-and-mouse game, Eddie didn't immediately reveal its contents, but kept a sly, smug look on her face for almost a week before she finally mentioned it.

"Cousin Lucy wants me to come for a visit," she announced importantly as she plopped a plate of lukewarm beans in front of Harry. "Reckon you could make do alone?"

"Reckon so." Harry swallowed a forkful of beans.

"Course I'd only be gone a week or two. Maybe three."

"Uh-huh."

"Maybe we could get a TV—on time—to keep you company."

Abruptly, Harry shoved his plate away and got to his feet.

Eddie's marble-size eyes widened with surprise. "Ain't you gonna finish your supper?"

"Had enough." Harry opened the kitchen door and, unseeingly, limped out to the far pasture. It wasn't the first time that Eddie had held out a half-promise of pleasure, a half-hope of freedom. She knew very well how much he longed for a little privacy, a little comfort, a little peace. She knew!

But what she didn't know, Harry told himself with a great sense of satisfaction, was that this time she wasn't fooling him one bit. She didn't know that less than twenty-four hours after the arrival of Lucy's letter, Harry had discovered its hiding place and read it. Cousin Lucy had made no mention of a visit. Indeed, all she wanted from Eddie was "a bit of cash to tide us over"—a request which would most certainly be ignored.

Harry paused in his aimless wandering and threw himself down among the gently waving wands of grass. How he wished that Lucy really *had* invited Eddie for a visit! How he wished that Eddie would go away not for just one, two, or three weeks, but for good! The grass smelled fresh and sweet, and for a long time Harry lay there smelling the sweetness and staring up at the stars . . .

When he picked up Eddie at the Snells the following Saturday, she'd barely settled herself beside him before she started her taunts.

"Ida says I should pack up and visit Lucy, and I've about made up my mind to do just that."

Harry glanced at her out of the corner of his eye and saw the familiar sly smile on her face. He knew she was deriving enormous pleasure out of spinning her fictitious tale to Ida. At the same time, she thought he'd swallowed her lie; that he really believed she was going to set him free. And then, like the sparrow on the string . . .

Lying sleepless that night, Harry had only one thought in his head, the same thought he'd had ever since that night in the pasture; how to get rid of Eddie. He finally fell into exhausted sleep still wondering how, how . . .

Then another miracle happened on the following Saturday as he walked into the Easy Rest Tavern.

"Hey, Harry," Jess boomed. "Ida says you're gonna lose Eddie for a spell. Now ain't that a shame?" The Easy Rest patrons exploded into laughter. "How you aim to spend your spare time?" Jess prodded. This time the laughter was interspersed with acid words of advice and deprecating jibes about Harry's physical prowess.

Harry barely heard them. He had a wild thought that set his heart to hammering and caused him to spill some of his beer. He knew *how!*

When the laughter subsided and his hands stopped shaking, Harry swallowed the last of his beer, got up, and walked out to the truck. He drove out of town until he reached a deserted stretch of road where he pulled over to the side and cut the truck's motor. Sitting there in the darkness, he worked out every detail. He decided to wait one week—no, two—just to make sure that Eddie would continue to play her vicious game, keep on telling her lies.

Eddie was in a rage when he pulled up at the Snells. When she finally lapsed into silence, after railing at him for keeping her waiting, Harry decided to risk a question.

"You and Ida talk anymore about you visiting Cousin Lucy?"

"Sure did," Eddie snapped. "Told her I might take off any day now."

Any day now! Harry almost smiled.

The following Saturday at the Easy Rest, Jess roared at him from across the room. "Guess you're almost a free man, huh, Harry? Ida says Eddie's gonna take off any day now."

"Yup," Harry replied, calmly sipping his beer. "Any day now."

He was right on time that night to pick up Eddie. She settled herself in the truck and for a few moments neither brother nor sister spoke. Finally Harry broke the silence.

"Ran into Jess at the Easy Rest," he remarked in an offhand manner. "He said you told Ida you were aiming to take off any day now."

Eddie snorted. "Your ears going bad like the rest of you? I've told you a hundred times that I was going to visit Lucy."

"Yeah," Harry nodded. "You told me, but I didn't know you'd told Ida."

"Told you that too! And I told Ida again tonight."

"You did?"

"Course I did."

"Then you really mean it?"

"Now why . . ." A sly smile played around the corners of her mouth. ". . . *Why* would I say a thing like that if I didn't mean it?"

Harry's heart sang. He drove the truck into the old barn, picked up the heavy hammer he'd hidden under the driver's seat, and followed Eddie into the house.

"Guess you'll be mighty sorry to see me go," Eddie said smugly as she turned her back to him to hang her coat and hat on a peg in the darkened hallway. "Guess you'll be sorry—"

Harry swung the hammer and cut her off. He swung it again and again and cut her off permanently. Then he methodically went to work, and as he worked, he whistled. It was almost dawn before he was finished; until there wasn't a trace of his toil and Eddie lay safe and sound at the bottom of the old abandoned well in the far pasture.

When Harry walked into the Easy Rest the next Saturday, he didn't wait for Jess Snell's usual raucous greeting. "Eddie finally took off for Ridgeway," he announced as he signaled for his customary beer.

"That so?" Jess whistled. "Never thought the old girl would make it. Or your old truck."

"Truck?" Harry shook his head. "I put her on the six-fifteen bus last Wednesday. Her and two suitcases." He *had*, in fact, packed most of Eddie's belongings, and they now shared her final resting place.

There was a sudden unaccustomed silence in the room, but Harry was too engrossed in his own happy thoughts to notice.

"You put Eddie on the bus?" Jess said slowly. "Last Wednesday?"

"Yup."

"You're sure?"

"Sure I'm sure!" Harry grinned. "And the first thing I'm going to do with my vet check is buy me a TV." Another happy thought struck him. "Come to think of it, maybe I'll get one of those fancy combinations—TV, radio, and hi-fi."

The silence in the room persisted. Only vaguely was Harry aware that Jess was standing next to him.

"Guess your old radio is on the blink again, huh, Harry?" Jess said.

Harry chuckled. "Hasn't been a squawk out of the old box for at least six months."

"Then you wouldn't have any way of knowing."

Harry turned to him, puzzled. "Knowing? Knowing what?"

"That there's a strike on," Jess said heavily. "That there ain't been a bus in or out of here since last *Sunday*." He placed a firm, sheriff-like hand on Harry's shoulder. "Now, if Eddie's really gone, Harry, suppose you tell me where. Where, Harry?"

Harry stared at him, openmouthed and speechless, and somehow the only words he could think of were: *sparrow on a string* . . .



1969

by Richard Deming

The first phone call came just before eleven o'clock on a bleak Monday night in February. When the phone rang Martha Pruett was already in her nightgown, sitting before the dying embers in the fireplace in a robe and with Ho Chi Minh on her lap, sipping her nightly glass of hot milk.

Ho Chi Minh made a strong protest in Siamese when she ejected him from his bed by standing up. He followed her into the bedroom, still complaining, when she went to answer the phone. Martha sat on the edge of the bed and set her glass on the bedside table. The cat made a final comment and rubbed himself against her leg.

"Hello," Martha said into the phone, as she stroked Ho Chi Minh.

A pleasantly husky feminine voice said hesitantly, "I saw this number in the personal column in the newspaper."

Martha Pruett had expected it to be one of those calls, because none of her friends would phone this late. The classified ad the caller referred to appeared daily and read: *SUICIDE prevention. 24 hour service. Confidential, free. 648-2444.* The number wasn't Martha's. It was merely an exchange number from which incoming calls were automatically relayed to the home number of whatever volunteer happened to be on duty.

Martha said in a friendly voice, "You have reached Suicide Prevention. May I help you?"

There was a period of silence before the woman said, "I'm not sure why I called. I'm not—I mean I'm not really planning to kill myself. I just feel so blue, I wanted to talk to somebody."

The caller was one of those rare ones who didn't like to admit to suicidal impulses, Martha decided. Most potential suicides had no such restraint. The old saw about people who threatened suicide never committing it had been proved wrong long ago. Many suicides had histories of

repeatedly threatening to take their own lives before they actually got around to doing it. There were cases where suicides gave no previous warning, though. The very fact that this woman had phoned the Suicide Prevention number indicated that the thought must have at least occurred to her.

Martha said, "That's why I'm here, to talk to people. What are you blue about?"

"Oh, different things," the caller said vaguely. There was another pause, then, "You don't trace calls or anything like that, do you?"

"Of course not," Martha said easily. "People would stop calling us if we did. We like to know who our callers are, but we don't insist on it. If you wish to remain anonymous, that's up to you. However, if you tell me your name, it will remain in strict confidence. You don't have to worry that I will do anything such as sending the police to haul you off to a hospital. I am here solely to help you and I won't contact anyone at all on your behalf without your permission."

Again there was a pause. Then the woman said suddenly, "You sound like a nice person. Who are you?"

This was a question Martha frequently had to parry. Volunteers were instructed never to reveal their identities to callers in order to avoid the possibility of emotionally disturbed persons attempting to make personal contact. Indiscriminately passing out your name to emotionally unbalanced people wouldn't be wise in any event, but it would have been particularly foolish for a sixty-year-old spinster who weighed less than a hundred pounds and lived alone except for a Siamese cat.

She said, "I'm just one of numerous volunteer workers who devote their time to this work. It's more important who you are."

"Don't you have a name?" the caller asked.

"Oh, yes. It's Martha."

That much was permissible when a caller became insistent; but further insistence would be met with the polite but firm explanation that workers were not allowed to give their last names. Fortunately this caller didn't push it any farther.

"My name is Janet," she volunteered.

Martha contemplated probing for the last name, then decided going after it too quickly just might dampen their growing rapport. Instead she said, "Glad to know you, Janet. You sound fairly young. Are you somewhere in your twenties?"

"Oh, no. I'm thirty-two."

"Well, from the viewpoint of my age, that's still fairly young. Are you married?"

"Yes. For nearly ten years."

"Is your husband home now?" Martha asked casually. It was standard procedure to attempt to learn just who, if anyone, was in the house with a caller.

The woman said, "He bowls on Mondays and doesn't get home until after midnight."

"I see. Do you have any children?"

"No. I had a couple of miscarriages." There was no regret in the voice. It was just a statement of fact.

"Then you're all alone at home now?" Martha asked.

"Yes."

Martha allowed a few seconds of silence to build before saying gently, "Do you want to tell me your last name now, Janet?"

There was an equal period of silence before the husky voice asked with reluctance, "Do I have to?"

Suspecting the woman was on the verge of hanging up, Martha said instantly, "Of course not." She allowed another few seconds to pass, then asked, "What does your husband do?"

"He's a professional man." A subtle change in tone told Martha's practiced ear that the woman was suddenly becoming cagey about giving answers which might reveal her identity. Martha immediately switched tack.

"Was it some trouble with your husband which made you call this number, Janet?" she asked.

"Oh, no. Fred's a wonderful husband. It was just things in general."

Martha made a mental note that the husband's name was Fred. There immediately followed another bit of inadvertent information. In the background Martha heard, "Cuckoo, cuckoo!" followed by eleven rather sharp chimes and then another, "Cuckoo, cuckoo!"

Background noises often gave clues to the location from which a call came. Sounds from outdoors, such as traffic noises or railroad trains, were more helpful than indoor noises, but a cuckoo clock which also had chimes was rare enough to identify a house or apartment if, through other clues, you could narrow the location to a specific neighborhood. Martha was in the habit of mentally filing every scrap of information she could glean from a caller.

She said, "What sort of things are bothering you, Janet?"

"They don't seem as important now as when I decided to call you. I'm beginning to feel a lot better just from talking to you. Could I phone you again if I start to feel blue?"

"You won't necessarily get me, but someone is available around the clock."

"Oh." The husky voice sounded disappointed. "When are you on duty? I want to talk to you."

"Just Mondays and Wednesdays from eight in the evening until eight the following morning."

"Well, maybe I can arrange only to get blue on Monday and Wednesday evenings," the woman said with a nervous and rather forlorn attempt at humor. "Thanks for talking to me, Martha."

"I was glad to," Martha said. "You're sure you'll be all right now?"

"I'll be all right," the woman assured her. "You've been a big help. Thanks again." She hung up.

Martha discovered her hot milk had cooled too much while she was on the phone. She poured it into Ho Chi Minh's bowl and went to bed.

The second call came just at midnight the following Wednesday. Martha had been in bed for an hour and was awakened from a sound sleep by the phone.

When she switched on her bedside lamp and put the receiver to her ear, she heard the sharp chimes of the clock in the background tolling midnight. She waited until the final, "Cuckoo, cuckoo!" before saying, "Hello."

"Martha?" the husky feminine voice said uncertainly.

"Yes, Janet."

"Oh, you recognized my voice," the woman said with mild surprise. "I thought maybe with all the calls you must get, you wouldn't remember me."

"I remember you," Martha said. "Are you feeling blue again?"

"Awfully blue." There was a muffled sob and the voice seemed to disintegrate. "I—I lied to you Monday, Martha."

"Oh? About what?"

"When I said I wasn't thinking about killing myself. I think about it all the time. I don't know what I'm going to do."

"Is your husband there tonight, Janet?"

"No, he's out of town at the National Den—" She broke off and appended, "I'm all alone."

National Den. Some kind of fraternal order? Martha wondered. The Cub Scouts had dens, she recalled. Perhaps her husband was on the National Council of the Cub Scouts. She must remember that.

She said, "Do you have a friend who lives nearby who might be willing to come over and stay with you for a time, Janet?"

"Oh, I couldn't possibly tell any of my friends what is wrong with me," the woman said in a horrified voice.

"What is wrong with you?" Martha inquired.

After a period of dead silence, the woman whispered, "I haven't told another soul, Martha. What's wrong with me is that I know I'm going mad."

"What makes you think that, Janet?"

"I don't just think it. I know it. I love my husband, but periodically I get this horrible urge to kill him." Her tone sank to one of despair. "Last Sunday night it went so far that I crept out of bed and went to the kitchen for a butcher knife. I was heading back for our bedroom with the knife in my hand, meaning to stab Fred in his sleep, when I came to my senses. It was that incident which made me call you the next night."

Martha's heart began to pound. This was her first contact with a caller who seemed to suffer from more than acute neurosis. This woman obviously was psychotic and would have to be handled with extreme care.

Until she retired on a small inheritance the previous year, Martha Pruett had been a social worker. Her training had given her just enough of a smattering of psychiatry to make her know she was totally unequipped to psychoanalyze anyone, particularly over a telephone. She knew there was no point in attempting to talk a psychotic out of homicidal impulses. The only sensible plan of attack was to attempt to talk her caller into submitting to immediate treatment.

She said, "You haven't told anyone at all about these impulses, Janet?"

"Just you," the woman said in a broken voice.

"Your husband doesn't even suspect you have such thoughts?"

"He knows I love him," Janet said in despair. "That's why, when I'm normal, I want to kill myself. Better that I should die than kill the man I love."

"Now, there is no necessity for either," Martha said in firm voice. "You phoned me for advice, I assume. Are you prepared to take it?"

"What is it?" the woman whispered.

"You seem to be quite aware that you are mentally ill, and all the psychologists say this is the first big step toward cure. It's the mentally disturbed person who is convinced there is really nothing wrong with him who is in real psychiatric trouble."

"Don't suggest that I see my family doctor," the woman said wearily. "He happens to be my brother-in-law, and I couldn't possibly tell him what I have told you."

"It isn't necessary for either your family doctor or your husband to know you have sought treatment, Janet. You will find numerous psychiatrists listed in the yellow pages of the phone book. Or, if you prefer, I'll recommend one."

There was a considerable period of silence before the husky voice said hesitantly, "He wouldn't tell my husband?"

"You must know that doctors have a code of ethics which makes everything a patient tells them a matter of confidence, Janet. I'm not saying that whatever psychiatrist you pick may not try to talk you into confiding in your husband, but I will guarantee that he won't tattle on you."

The woman's tone became hopeful. "You think this one you offered to recommend might help me?"

"I'm sure he could."

"Who is he?"

"Dr. Albert Manners, in the Medical Exchange Building. I have never had a doctor-patient relationship with him but I know him quite well because he was on the board of directors of a social agency I once worked for, and I know he has a fine reputation. Do you have a pencil and paper there?"

"I can remember that all right. Dr. Albert Manners in the Medical Exchange Building."

"Will you call him first thing in the morning?" Martha asked.

"I will. I promise I will. Oh, thank you, Martha."

"When do you expect your husband home?" Martha asked, but she was speaking into a dead phone. The woman had hung up.

Martha had to get up and heat herself some milk before she could go back to sleep, because she wasn't at all satisfied with her performance. She should have wormed the woman's last name out of her. Now, if she

killed her husband or herself, Martha would have it on her conscience that she might have averted the tragedy if she had been efficient enough to find out who the caller was and warn her husband.

The third and last call came at a few minutes to nine P.M. the following Monday. When Martha answered the phone, she at first failed to recognize the thick voice which said, nearly incomprehensibly, "'Stoo late. Couldn't wait tomorrow. 'Stoo late."

Then she recognized the husky undertone in the thick voice. She said sharply, "Janet?"

"Yeah," the voice said. "'Lo, Martha."

"Have you taken something?" Martha demanded.

"'Stoo late. Couldn't wait tomorrow."

"Wait for what, Janet?"

"'Pointment. 'Pointment Dr. Manners. Would've killed him tonight when came home from bowling. Better this way."

"Janet!" Martha said loudly. "What have you taken?"

"You tell Fred did it for him?" the voice said with increased thickness. "Tell 'im love 'im?"

"Where can I reach him, Janet?" Martha asked desperately. "Where is he bowling?"

"Elks Men's League. Tell 'im—tell 'im—" The voice trailed off into a somewhat portentous silence.

In the background there sounded, "Cuckoo, cuckoo!" then nine sharp chimes and again, "Cuckoo, cuckoo!"

"Janet!" Martha called, but there was no answer.

She tried several more times to rouse the woman, without success. The line remained open, however, because Martha could hear no dial tone. Even if she hung up, the connection wouldn't be broken, Martha knew, because the caller had to hang up in order to sever a connection. Martha had no idea of the electronic reason for this phenomenon, but she had occasionally in the past received calls where the caller for some reason had failed to hang up, and it had been necessary to go out to another phone to call the phone company before she could make any outgoing calls.

It therefore should be perfectly safe to click the bar up and down in the hope of rousing an operator, she reasoned. She attempted it, and the second time she depressed the bar and released it again, she was horrified to hear a dial tone. So much for her vaunted knowledge of

how phones worked, she thought with dismay. Now she had destroyed all possibility of having the call traced.

She had a few clues to work on, however. The most valuable was that Janet's husband was bowling with the Elks Men's League.

Looking up the phone number of the local Elks Club, she dialed it. After several rings a male voice answered.

"Is there anyone there who would know all the members of the Elks Bowling League?" Martha asked.

"Huh?" the man said. "Not me, lady. I'm just the bartender, and the steward has gone home."

"This is an extreme emergency," Martha told him. "Isn't there anyone there who knows your bowlers?"

"The Exalted Ruler is at the bar. I'll let you talk to him."

When the Exalted Ruler, who identified himself as Edwin Shay, got on the phone, Martha gave him her name and explained that she was a volunteer worker for Suicide Prevention.

"It is absolutely essential that I get in touch with one of your Men's League bowlers at once," she concluded. "The difficulty is that I have only his first name. It's Fred."

Edwin Shay said wryly, "The Men's League has fourteen teams, Miss Pruett, with five men on each team. Offhand I can think of three Freds."

"His wife is named Janet, Mr. Shay, and he has a brother who is a doctor. Does that mean anything to you? Do you know who he is?"

"Oh, sure," the Exalted Ruler said with recognition. "You're talking about Doc Waters. He's a dentist."

That was it, Martha thought with jubilation, suddenly understanding the puzzling remark her caller had made the previous Wednesday. The woman had probably started to say National Dental Association Convention, or something similar, before she cut the phrase short and it came out simply, "National Den."

"Where does the league bowl?" she asked.

"The Delmar Bowl. What's this all about, anyway?"

"I haven't time to explain it now," Martha said. "Thank you very much for your help."

She hung up, found the number of the Delmar Bowl in the phone book and dialed it. It took a few minutes to get Dr. Fred Waters to the phone, but finally a warm male voice said in her ear, "Yeah, Janet. What's up?"

"It isn't your wife, Doctor," Martha said. "I'm a volunteer worker for Suicide Prevention. About fifteen or twenty minutes ago I got a phone call from your wife. You had better get home immediately, because she has taken some kind of pills. She passed out while I was talking to her."

"What!" Dr. Waters said with a mixture of fright and astonishment. "My wife took pills?"

"You really should hurry, Doctor," Martha said. "And if it's a very long drive to your home, I suggest that before you start, you phone for an ambulance to meet you there."

"All right," he said hurriedly. "Who did you say this is calling?"

"Miss Martha Pruett. I would appreciate it if you would take down my phone number and call me back later as to how things came out."

"Of course, Miss Pruett. What is it?"

Martha read off her number.

"Got it," the dentist said. "Thanks for calling."

An interminable period of waiting followed. The suspense was too great for Martha to generate any interest in either television or a book. She busied herself by brushing Ho Chi Minh, brushing her own hair, giving herself a manicure and, in final desperation, even a pedicure.

She managed to dispose of two hours in that manner, but then she ran out of time-killing chores. She was contemplating dusting the already immaculate front room when the phone finally rang at eleven-thirty.

Her nervousness had long since discouraged Ho Chi Minh from all idea of a nap on her lap, and he had retreated to a spot in the center of the living-room rug. This put him between Martha's chair and the bedroom door, so that she ran straight toward him when she raced to answer the phone. Ho Chi Minh fled to the kitchen.

Grabbing up the phone, Martha said breathlessly, "Yes?"

"Miss Pruett?" a strange male voice asked.

"Yes."

"This is Lieutenant Herman Abell of the police, Miss Pruett. Dr. Waters asked me to phone you, because he's not quite up to talking. I understand you're a Suicide Prevention worker and it was you who phoned him that his wife had taken pills."

"Yes, that's right. How is she?"

"It was too late to do anything for her. She was dead on arrival at the hospital."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Lieutenant."

"Just one of those things, Miss Pruett. We won't know until the autopsy just how many sleeping pills she swallowed, but a bottle that Dr. Waters says held three dozen is empty."

"How horrible! And she was only thirty-two."

"Were you personally acquainted with her?" the police officer asked in surprise. "I thought you people kept yourselves anonymous insofar as callers are concerned."

"We do, but I managed to pick up a good deal of information about her. We had two previous phone conversations before tonight, Lieutenant."

"Oh? This wasn't her first attempt then?"

"Well, I don't know that she made any previous attempts, but she had contemplated suicide. I would have contacted her husband before, but I was never able to worm out of her who she was, except for her first name. She never told me, even tonight. I tracked down her identity from certain clues she had dropped. I feel terrible about not worming her identity from her sooner. I might have saved her."

"Well, it wasn't your fault," the lieutenant said. "We'll need your statement, of course, though. When could you stop by headquarters?"

"At your convenience," Martha said. "I'm retired, so my time is pretty much my own."

"Fine. I'm on the night trick and don't go on duty until four P.M. Would four be convenient?"

"All right, Lieutenant."

"Then I'll expect you at the Homicide squad room at four P.M. Just ask for Lieutenant Abell."

"Homicide?" Martha said inquiringly.

"Don't let it throw you," the police officer said with a slight chuckle. "The Homicide Squad doesn't confine itself just to murder investigation. We have a half-dozen separate responsibilities, and one of them is suicide."

"Oh," Martha said. "All right, Lieutenant. I'll see you at four tomorrow."

Martha had hoped there would be a photograph of Janet Waters in the morning paper, but there wasn't. There was merely a brief item on an inner page reporting her death from an overdose of sleeping pills and announcing that, pending further investigation, the police had tentatively listed the death as a suicide.

Martha arrived at the Homicide squad room promptly at four. Lieutenant Herman Abell turned out to be a thick-bodied, unsmiling man in his forties. Dr. Fred Waters was also there, and he made an instant impression on Martha. The dentist was a tall, lean, handsome man with thick wavy black hair and very white teeth. Martha guessed him to be in his mid-thirties.

He was not only handsome, but exceedingly charming, she decided within minutes of being introduced to him. Part of his appeal was to her latent maternal instinct, she suspected, because he was so obviously bereaved. He seemed to be literally stunned by the news that his wife had repeatedly considered killing him. Under questioning by Lieutenant Abell, he admitted that she had recently had some rather severe bouts of depression, but he hadn't even suspected psychosis.

"She always acted as though she loved me," he kept saying with rather pitiable insistence.

"She did," Martha assured him. "You'll have to face it, Doctor, that your wife was simply mentally deranged."

"That seems plain enough," Lieutenant Abell confirmed. "Are you ready to make your formal statement, Miss Pruett?"

When Martha said she was, he had her dictate it into a tape recorder, had it typed up and she signed it. She included everything she could remember about all three phone conversations with the dead woman, and also her conversation with the Elks' Exalted Ruler.

The whole thing took less than an hour. The case was so obviously a suicide that the lieutenant gave the impression his investigation was routine, but Martha noted that nevertheless it was thorough. For instance, he checked by phone with the office girl of psychiatrist Albert Manners to verify that Janet Waters had actually made the appointment she told Martha she had when she made her last, incoherent phone call.

She had made the appointment. Since the doctor's receptionist said the only contact had been when she phoned in for an appointment, and that Dr. Manners had not even talked to her on the phone, Lieutenant Abell didn't bother to talk to the psychiatrist himself.

When first introduced to Dr. Fred Waters, Martha had murmured a word of sympathy and had gotten a courteous thank-you in reply. In parting, she again told the dentist she was sorry for his bereavement and, this time, got such an appreciative smile in return that it dazzled her. Since her own dentist had recently retired and moved to Florida,

she made a mental note to try Dr. Fred Waters the next time she had her teeth cleaned.

It was another three months before Martha was due for her semiannual dental checkup and cleaning. In May she called Dr. Waters' office. The girl who answered the phone gave her an appointment for a Friday afternoon at 4:30.

Dr. Waters' office was a good seven miles from Martha's apartment. She misguessed the traffic situation and arrived five minutes late. She would have been even later if she had not found a parking place for her little sports car right in front of the office building. The dental office being on the first floor saved the time of waiting for an elevator, too. She entered his office out of breath at exactly 4:35.

The young red-haired receptionist smiled away her apology and offered one of her own. Dr. Waters was running late with his appointments and probably couldn't take her until five.

"I may have to leave before he gets to you," the girl said in further apology. "I'm going away for the weekend and have to catch a six o'clock bus. If I do have to leave, I'll give you your chart, and you can just hand it to the doctor when he takes you."

"All right," Martha agreed.

The receptionist invited her to have a seat.

It was a typical dentist's waiting room, moderately well furnished with leather-covered easy chairs and a sofa, and with a table containing an assortment of out-of-date magazines. Martha found a women's magazine she hadn't read and settled back to wait. The receptionist, behind the counter running the length of one wall, was doing some kind of desk work.

Ten minutes after Martha's arrival the silence was suddenly broken by a single, "Cuckoo!" followed by three sharp chimes, then succeeded by another, "Cuckoo!"

Martha glanced up at the wooden clock on the wall in time to see the bird pop out for the second "Cuckoo!" then disappear again. Could this be the same clock she had heard in the background each time Janet Waters had phoned her, she wondered? That had cuckooed twice before and after chiming the hour, but perhaps this one did too, and cuckooed once only on the quarter hours.

Clearing her throat, Martha said to the receptionist, "Miss, do you happen to know if Dr. Waters has a clock at home similar to the one you have here?"

The receptionist said politely, "I've never seen Dr. Waters' home. I've only worked for him a little over two weeks."

"Oh," Martha said, and subsided.

Several moments passed in silence, then the girl looked up again. "It may be that they have, and that's why they put this one here. I wish they hadn't, because it drives me crazy, sounding off every fifteen minutes."

Martha said puzzledly, "What do you mean *they* put it here?"

"Dr. and Mrs. Waters, when they were married."

"But they were married ten years ago, weren't they?" Martha said, confused.

The redhead smiled at her. "I mean his current marriage, Miss Pruett. They were only married a couple of weeks ago. That's how I got this job, because Joanne was his previous receptionist."

Martha was mildly shocked. He certainly hadn't waited a very decent interval before taking a second wife. *Men*, she sniffed to herself. *After all of his show of bereavement.*

The redhead was saying, "Joanne had the clock at her apartment, and of course when she moved from there to Dr. Waters' home, she had no place to put her furnishings, because his home was already furnished. She sold most of her things, but she brought a few of the smaller items here."

The girl went back to her work. Martha stared up at the clock while a series of astonishing thoughts ran through her mind. If all those calls had come from the apartment of Dr. Waters' former receptionist instead of from his home, quite obviously it had not been Janet Waters to whom Martha had talked; and the fact that this same receptionist had become the second Mrs. Waters so soon after the death of the first added a sinister element.

This thought so staggered Martha that she didn't realize how long she had been sitting there mulling it over until the clock sounded again. This time all doubt was removed from her mind, because it cuckooed twice before chiming five times, then cuckooed twice again.

At that moment the door from the inner office opened and Dr. Fred Waters ushered out a male patient.

"Make Mr. Curtis another appointment for next week, Ruby," the dentist said to the receptionist. "Then you can leave, because I know you have to catch a bus. I'll close up."

He turned to glance at Martha and a startled expression crossed his

face. "Oh, hello there," he said. "I didn't realize you were my last appointment. Ruby likes to surprise me."

The remark caused the receptionist to glance curiously from Martha to the dentist, but she made no comment. She merely handed him a large card and said, "Here is Miss Pruett's chart, Doctor."

After a brief glance at it, Dr. Waters said to Martha, "Sorry to have kept you waiting, Miss Pruett. Come on in."

Beyond a jerky nod, Martha had made no response to the dentist's greeting, but no one seemed to notice. She rose and rather woodenly preceded him into the treatment room. She sat in the dental chair, allowed a bib to be tied around her neck, and obediently opened her mouth.

"Hmm," the dentist said after a brief examination. "Exceptionally fine teeth for your age." He smiled down apologetically and amended that to, "I mean for any age."

He started to work with a scraper and a pick. Fortunately the nature of dental treatment prohibits conversation, because Martha couldn't have thought of a word to say to him. Time passed in silence. She knew when fifteen minutes had passed, although it seemed much longer, because the cuckoo clock sounded the quarter hour.

Only seconds later, at a moment when Martha was seated erect to rinse out her mouth, there was a light rap on the door, then it immediately opened. A strikingly beautiful blonde of about twenty-five stood in the doorway.

"Oh, excuse me, honey," she said in a husky voice. "I assumed your last patient would be gone by now."

She was starting to pull the door closed again from outside when Martha blurted, "You must be Joanne."

The woman paused to gaze at her inquiringly. Dr. Waters' expression denoted doubt as to whether he should introduce the two women or simply request the blonde to wait outside.

His patient took the decision out of his hands by announcing, "I'm Martha. Remember me, Joanne?"

The blonde's face lost all expression. Dr. Waters turned pale. The woman pushed the door all the way open again and studied Martha with pursed lips.

"You sound as though we had met before," she said with an assumed air of puzzlement which failed to fool Martha in the least. She could tell

by the woman's expression that she had recognized Martha's voice as instantly as Martha had recognized hers.

Martha said coldly, "Only over the phone. What a remarkable murder plan! You managed to establish through a totally disinterested witness that Janet was a psychotic who had committed suicide, when the poor woman was probably entirely normal." She looked at the dentist. "How did you give her the pills before you went bowling, Doctor? In her coffee?"

Belatedly, she knew that this verbal outburst had been unwise when she saw how both of them were looking at her. Sliding from the dental chair, she undid her bib and draped it over the chair arm. "I guess I'll be going," she said nervously.

The blonde Joanne remained centered in the open doorway. In an unemotional voice she said to her husband, "Accidentally giving a patient an overdose of anesthetic won't help your professional reputation, but it wouldn't hurt as much as a murder trial."

The dentist gazed from his wife to Martha and back again with an expression of desperation on his face.

Martha said to the woman in the doorway, with a mixture of fright and belligerence, "You had better get out of my way."

Ignoring her, Joanne said to Dr. Waters, "You have no choice. It'll pass as an accident. It's happened in other dental offices."

Dr. Waters came to a decision so suddenly he took Martha by surprise. Grasping her frail figure by both shoulders, he threw her back into the dental chair.

Despite her age and small size Martha was as agile as an eel, and now she behaved like one. She writhed and kicked and twice nearly broke loose from the man's grip before he finally subdued her by lying across her legs and holding her shoulders down with both hands. She had to give up then, because he was nearly double her weight.

"You know how to use the gas," the dentist said to his wife. "Get the mask over her face while I hold her down."

A moment later a conelike rubber mask with gas hissing from it was clamped over Martha's nose and mouth. She shook it loose by violently shaking her head from side to side, but then Joanne grasped her beneath the chin with one hand and held her head immobile while she firmly reset the mask in place with the other hand.

Martha held her breath. She could feel the gas cooling her cheeks as it was forced from both sides of the mask by her refusal to breathe. She

could also feel the pressure of Joanne's right thumb on her cheek alongside the mask.

Martha's lungs were on the verge of bursting and she was ready to capitulate by taking a deep breath when the hurried voice of the receptionist said from the open door, "I left my bus ticket in my desk, Doctor. I have to rush—" There was a pause, then: "What—"

Dr. Waters started so violently that he released his grip on Martha's shoulders and half rose from his position across her body. Joanne started too, less violently, but enough to relax momentarily the pressure of both hands.

Martha jerked her head to one side and used the exceptionally fine teeth Dr. Waters had admired to bite his wife's thumb nearly to the bone.

With a yowl of pain, the blonde dropped the face mask and staggered backward. Martha drew both knees to her chest and pushed the dentist away by placing her feet in his stomach and shoving. He reeled across the room to crash into an instrument table.

Martha bounced from the dental chair and sped past the astonished redhead in the open doorway.

She was thankful that the dental office was on the first floor, because she had to gulp air into her starved lungs while she was running, and she probably would have collapsed if she had been required to race downstairs. Desperation made her good for a short sprint, though. She was outdoors, into her car and had the engine started before there was any sign of pursuit. As she shot away from the curb, she spotted Dr. Waters in the rear-view mirror, just emerging from the building.

Martha headed for police headquarters.



1970

by Donald Olson

Adrian Kelly shot himself in the head, but I wonder how many other fingers you might truthfully say were on that trigger.

Both Ade and Esther worked here in the Sales Department, Ade having started about a month before Esther. There is a constant turnover of girls in a big office like this, but I remember the day Esther came in for her interview. She looked straight ahead as Joe Vincent led her past the low row of desks toward Mr. Hempel's office. Perhaps she was too busy arranging her thoughts for the interview to pay any attention to the dozens of pairs of eyes, male and female, that gave her the usual curious scrutiny, so discomposing to most of the new arrivals. She was tall and slim, close to thirty, I should say, with fine dark eyes and chestnut hair. Her looks were pleasant but not exceptional, although as she passed me I decided she might be rather pretty if she were to crack a smile, but she did not smile then and she was not smiling when she went by again on her way out.

Apart from noticing that she was well dressed—maybe a shade too well dressed for applying for a secretary's job—I didn't then pay much attention to what she was wearing. It really wouldn't have mattered, since she happened to be wearing exactly the same thing the next day when she came to work. Phyllis Regan called this to my attention at the coffee machine where I ran into her and Betty Pringle sipping hot chocolate and fanning the dreary embers of some recent office scandal. They ostentatiously changed the subject when they saw me coming. Phyll asked me what I thought of Hempel's new secretary. I said I hadn't yet met her.

"She must have a thing about brown," said Phyll, with one of those smiles that her buck teeth make even more malicious. "She's wearing the same dress today she had on yesterday when she came in to be interviewed for the job."

"Same dress," added Betty, "same shoes, same rosebud corsage, same little thingamajig in her hair."

A bitchy but hardly memorable remark, or so I thought at the time, but then the following morning Tom Ogilvie draped himself over my desk and started rubbing my shoulder in that irritating way of his. He used to be a minor league ball player and still retains the mannerisms of the diamond. "Hey, skipper, she's wearing it again today."

"Who's wearing what again today?"

"Hempel's new girl. Esther March. These cats around here are all worked up because she's wearing the same dress today she wore yesterday and the day before."

"So what?"

"The way they talk you'd think there was a law against it."

Later that afternoon I took some inventory run-offs into Hempel's office and got a good look at Esther March. All I can say is, Phyllis Regan should be the last one to talk. At least Esther's dress wasn't loud. Phyllis always wears these psychedelic muu-muus because she thinks they make her look glamorous. Maybe they would, if you put a bag over her head; but I did see what the girls meant about Esther's dress. ("Oh, it's darling, but just too fussy for an office—unless the boss is taking you out to lunch or something.")

The details of the dress, some of which had to be defined for me later by one of the girls, might be described like this: the color was topaz; the material, taffeta. It had a full skirt, long sleeves, a panel of lace set in the bodice, and a corsage of yellow rosebuds was pinned to the shoulder. Her shoes looked new and expensive: dark brown suede spikes. The "thingamajig" in her hair was a wide flat velvet bow perched on top of her head.

It must have been the day after this that Esther's dress became the number one topic along the grapevine. I suppose people were weary of hashing over what Mr. Swallow said to Patty about Gloria's bra, and I doubt Swallow ever made that crack anyway, he's such an old stick. Esther's dress was now *the* conversation piece. I mean, no matter where you went, even down in Cost, there was somebody to give you that arch smile and you knew what was coming. When I went down to give Jimmy Tilbridge yesterday's production schedule, that little blonde next to him leaned over and said, "Hey, what do you think about Mr. Hempel's new girl and that *dress*?"

"I like it."

"I know, it's darling, but every *day*?"

"What is this?" said Jimmy. "Is it really true she's worn the same dress every day since she started?"

Like a record I was already sick of hearing, the girl chimed in, "Same dress, same shoes, same rosebud corsage, same doohickey in her hair. Did you ever hear of anything so funny? I mean, the dress is *adorable*, but . . ."

Now, to us guys there was nothing so outrageous in all this. Odd, yes; amusing, of course, but nothing to get all steamed up about. But then, unlike the girls, we didn't have this silly mystique about clothes. We didn't go uptown at noon and shop for shoes and blouses and hats and sweaters and come back and put on a fashion show at each other's desk with coos and clucks of admiration and envy. We might joke about our ties now and then, but we weren't all hung up on the subject. Not that any of those women were what you would call a fashion plate, and even some of them wore the same dress, out of necessity, more frequently than they would have preferred, but this was entirely natural. Esther March's wearing the identical ensemble day after day was not natural. The clotheshorses interpreted it as a subtly ironical affront. Esther's dress caused their finery to go unnoticed, and hers wasn't even a new dress. The cattiest of the group insisted it must be at least ten years old; it was not only fussy, it was tacky. Pinning a fresh corsage of rosebuds on it every day only made it more ridiculous.

What rankled most, however, was that Esther herself could not be dismissed as a kook, nor reviled as a grouch. Every group must have its mavericks and oddballs, its jokers who serve as touchstones upon which the group as a whole is wont to express its normalcy and its superiority. The idiosyncratic behavior of the jokers poses no threat to the average, but instead strengthens its solidarity; but Esther was not an eccentric. Her behavior was normal and her manner invariably nice.

"If she's not careful," said Phyllis Regan spitefully, "Elaine Jessup is going to lose her title as Miss Goody Two Shoes of 1970 to our dear little Esther."

This was unfair. Esther's was not that cloying sweetness that invites intimacy, but rather the warmly modest, genteel refinement of a saint among women, the kind of sweetness that makes every man a courier and every woman a friend—but no one a confidant. There were many oblique remarks made in an attempt to unravel the mystery of Esther's dress, though nothing malicious enough, even from Phyllis, to be called

a dig. The meanest observation suggested it was no more than a very clever device to attract attention. After all, Esther was no beauty, and even if she were to put every penny she made on her back, she still couldn't compete with some of these glamour pussies, so what could be more shrewd than to do just the opposite: stick with one dress and never vary the ensemble by so much as a brooch or handkerchief. There was no doubt it did prick the curiosity of some of the bachelors. More than one of them tried to date Esther and were turned down flat, even Todd Delaney, the handsomest man in the office. The fact that she was obviously not out to hook a man did not, however, placate the other girls, though it may have dulled their malice.

Eventually, someone was bound to ask her bluntly why she wore the same outfit every day. By now the girls were nearly insane with curiosity and, naturally, it fell upon Phyll Regan to do the asking.

Esther's answer, uttered in the sweetest of voices and showing no sign of being offended by the question, did not satisfy the curiosity. "The same dress?" she said, innocently surprised. "Oh, but it isn't. It just looks the same."

"It's just the answer you deserved," I told Phyll. "You might as well go in a hospital and ask a nurse why she wears the same dress every day."

"Don't be an idiot. This isn't a hospital—although you sometimes wonder, with nuts like her around. Besides, in a hospital *all* the nurses wear the same thing."

This was, of course, the whole point. If one nurse were allowed to wear a different style and color uniform every day, the morale of her co-workers would deteriorate as rapidly as the morale of the girls around here began to deteriorate. Mrs. Bolton had to give them all a pep talk on efficiency. There was an alarming increase in absenteeism, and it seemed to me the girls were more waspish than usual. That Esther's dress was an unsettling influence had by now been communicated to the powers that be, but it was not the sort of issue with which they had ever been called to deal. It was rumored that Mr. Keeler did suggest to Mr. Hempel that he might adroitly encourage Miss March to wear a different dress at least once a week to appease the wrath and cool the resentment of the other girls. Hempel flatly refused. As far as he was concerned, Esther March could come to work every day in the week stark naked as long as she continued to be such a whiz at taking dictation and turning out such flawless letters.

The situation did not change for some weeks, and then the girls got the ammunition they needed to wage all-out war against Esther March. It was provided by Sue Butterfield, a vacant-faced blonde who had previously worked for Cranford and Leeds, downtown. She got a job here in Sales and though due to chronic tardiness her career with us was of short duration, she stayed long enough to spark the conflict that soon began to rage. Sue immediately became a chum of Phyll Regan, and it was Phyll who broadcast the news that Sue had known Esther from downtown. According to Sue, Esther had also worked for Cranford and Leeds—until she was fired.

Phyll was coaxing all this out of Sue, who really didn't need any coaxing. "Now tell him *why* she was fired."

"Well," said Sue, shifting her gum from one side of her mouth to the other and fixing me with a dumb stare, "I said we all *assumed* she was really fired."

"Okay, okay, but tell him why."

"Promise you won't repeat this, but she was having an affair with a married man."

"And tell him who the married man was."

"Adrian Kelly."

My stunned reaction couldn't have pleased them more. I couldn't believe it. *Ade Kelly?*

"That's not all," said Phyllis. "When Esther was at C and L, she wore that same tired dress every day there, too."

"Same dress, same shoes, same corsage, same bow in her hair . . ."

Judicious cross-examination soon produced the fact that this "affair" between Esther March and Ade Kelly was based purely on conjecture. Ade had resigned his position at C and L and Esther quit her job shortly after. But wasn't that indication enough? Why should they both have quit perfectly good jobs practically at the same time and for no good reason? Besides, they had been seen together more than once. In fact, Sue and her boyfriend had seen them in the Automat, and they were acting very mysterious, pretending they weren't even together. "I mean, they weren't even at the same table," said Sue. "That was because they saw Hal and me there, too, and they didn't want us to get suspicious."

"And now they both turn up here," declared Phyllis with a knowing smirk. "Even Goody Two Shoes couldn't claim *that* was just a coincidence."

"Well," said Sue primly, "everyone at C and L knows I'm not the type that goes around making things up, but nobody has to draw me a picture. I'm not *that* dumb."

The damage was done. The malice was no longer veiled, the invective no longer confined to innuendo. Sweet, innocent, hoity-toity Esther March and Adrian Kelly! Esther mixed up in one of those sordid messes with a married man. Phyllis immediately dubbed her Messie Essie. The war was on.

Ade Kelly was in some ways as much a mystery as Esther. He was quiet and not at all self-assertive. He looked like a man with a lot on his mind. Though not over forty, he was something of a nervous wreck. His hair was gray at the temples, he smoked two packs of cigarettes a day, took more trips to the coffee machine than Phyll Regan, and had a nervous tic that made one corner of his eye keep scrunching up. Some of the girls thought this harried air gave him a sexually appealing look. Indeed, his sensitive, lined face must once have been extraordinarily handsome but, though he still had a good build, there were rumors he had been drinking like a fish and the effect was beginning to tell around his waist and under his worried blue eyes.

Now, even if these allegations were true, and I was at first inclined to doubt them, it should not have explained Esther's dress; but it did, at least to the satisfaction of the girls.

"We were right the first time," said Phyllis, with a sneer. "She just does it to attract attention. It's just the sort of cheap trick that kind of home-breaker would resort to. No wonder they were both canned at C and L."

"You don't know that."

"Oh, you're just like all these guys. Now you know what she is, you stick up for her. Wait and see, buster. The same thing will happen here. They'll both wind up getting the ax."

I grinned. "You mean, they will if you have anything to do with it."

Her crocodile eyes widened in outraged innocence. "It's no skin off my nose what they do. But the company won't put up with that kind of hanky-panky for very long."

In fairness to the girls, I should admit that I may have falsely given the impression that the fellows in the office refrained from all this malicious gossiping and rumor spreading, but I'm sure that anyone who has ever worked in a big office would know this isn't true. The men did their share of it, though perhaps with less rancor and waspishness. Some

of the fellows whose vanity had been wounded when they were given the cold shoulder by Esther were delighted to learn that it wasn't because she was too pure to play; some of them didn't hesitate to make snide comments to Ade Kelly whenever they had a chance, and the way he played dumb only enforced the general belief in the story's truth. I still wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen what I did with my own eyes.

I had a date with Jane Isaacs, who works in Payroll, to meet for dinner at The Purple Mynah. Knowing she would be late, I stopped in the bar for a drink. The first person I laid eyes on was Ade Kelly. He sat at the bar alone, nursing an old-fashioned. When I greeted him he gave a little nervous recoil. I perched on the next stool and we chatted for a few minutes, but he seemed only vaguely aware of my presence, as if deeply engrossed in his own private thoughts. I kept glancing hopefully at the door, wishing Jane would show up.

From the bar in The Purple Mynah you can look across a bamboo partition to see the upper level of the adjacent dining room. I hadn't done so until then, but now that conversation with Ade was proving impossible I let my gaze wander about the room, and that was how I happened to spot Esther sitting alone at a dimly lit corner table in the dining room. There was a candle burning in the middle of the table and above it her face, pale and mysterious, the eyes mere shadowy pits, was watching us. She was wearing that same dress and on her shoulder, deeper than gold in the candlelight, the usual corsage of yellow rosebuds.

My embarrassment was worse now because I was so conscious of *his*. At the same time I felt a twinge of annoyance. It wasn't my fault I had blundered into their plans and put a hitch in them. If that was their game they should choose less prominent restaurants than The Purple Mynah, although with its dim lighting and exotic decor, I can see why it would appeal to them. No doubt Esther was supposed to meet him in the bar, had seen me and detoured into the dining room, hoping I'd soon get up and leave. I felt sufficiently piqued to toy with the idea of proposing to him that all four of us should have dinner together. That would have shaken him up, and what a tale we could tell next day at the office. Not that we would have, of course. At least I wouldn't, but I don't know about Jane. She's quite a blabbermouth.

Maybe it would serve them right, but to me there was something touchingly sad about an affair between these two. Without knowing

anything about the true nature of the situation, one got the feeling of something inherently tragic about it: Ade with his drinking problem, his facial twitch, his rapidly fading but still striking good looks, and Esther with her gentility, her quiet pride, her air of mystery—and her dress. Her notorious, unforgettable, exasperating, incomprehensible brown *dress*!

At the same time, it would be silly to pretend I hadn't seen Esther. She had seen me looking at her; she would tell him.

"I think I see one of our fellow workers in the dining room," I said casually.

He didn't move his head to look. He must have guessed that she had come in. All he said was, "Oh? Who?" His fingers were wrapped tightly around his glass. His head drooped forward.

"Esther March."

With a swiftness that startled me, he raised the glass to his lips, drained it, then set it down with a force that might easily have shattered it. The bartender gave him a funny look. Ade said nothing.

I laughed. "I'll be damned if she isn't wearing that same dress. Ade, why on earth do you suppose she—"

"Sorry," he cut me off. "I've got to get home. I'm late." He jammed his hand into his pocket for his wallet, scattered some bills on the bar, didn't wait for his change, and barged out of there without even a glance toward the dining room. On the way out he almost collided with a woman coming through the door.

It was Jane. She looked amused, but shaken, as she joined me. "Wasn't that Ade Kelly? Did you see the way he almost knocked me down?"

"He left in a hurry, yes."

Her green eyes glittered. "How come?"

"I'm afraid I threw a monkey wrench into his plans for the evening. Don't look now, but Esther March is sitting alone at a corner table. She must have come in while I was chatting with Ade here at the bar. When I mentioned I'd seen her, he tore out of here like his pants were on fire and it was raining in the street."

"No!" This short word cannot begin to convey the long drawn-out gasping manner in which it was uttered, with all the overtones and undertones of a gossip-loving woman whose most reprehensible instincts have just been supremely gratified. I knew she couldn't wait to get to the office next morning and spread the story.

She didn't disappoint me. Tom Ogilvie brought me coffee at ten

o'clock and eyed me as if he were on the pitcher's mound and I were threatening to steal second. "Party pooper!"

"Huh?"

"I heard Esther and Ade Kelly were holding hands at The Purple Mynah last night and you spoiled their fun."

"It wasn't quite like that," I said dryly, not wishing to elaborate.

"Oh, really? Phyll said they were right in the middle of their dinner when you and Jane came in and they both got all shook up and high-tailed it out of there, leaving half a bottle of champagne behind."

"Was Phyll there?"

"No, but she said Jane told Sue and Sue told Phyll."

"And Phyll told you. I'm surprised it's even that accurate."

I told him what had really happened, but afterward I wished I'd kept my mouth shut, since now there would be two versions of the story circulating and nothing fed the flames of gossip better than ambiguity. Not that it really mattered. After this, it was accepted as gospel that Esther and Ade Kelly were having a clandestine love affair. As further confirmation of the already damaging testimony, Jessie Proudfoot submitted that she had been crossing Armory Park Sunday evening and had seen Ade Kelly walking his dog on a nearby path, and when she was leaving the park she saw Esther March, wearing that same dress and corsage, walking slowly toward that very path where Jessie had seen Ade.

Something was bound to happen. The situation was too potentially explosive. Word of it reached the wrong ears, or, as Phyll would have it, the right ears. One Friday afternoon word leaked out that Ade Kelly had been fired. His work had been unsatisfactory, and lately he had been taking too many days off without legitimate reasons.

On the following Monday Phyll was spreading an even more exciting tidbit.

"I was right about Ade, wasn't I? I knew he'd get the ax. And guess what? *Esther March has quit*. Now we won't have to look at that ghastly dress anymore. All I can say is, good riddance!"

In itself, this was enough to keep the gossip mill grinding for another few days, but after that Esther and her dress and Ade Kelly would have become stale news; some fresher scandal would be found to supplant it. But then, three days after being fired, Ade Kelly went into his garage, stuck the barrel of a hunting rifle in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

I thought there would be more people from the office at the funeral,

but other than the men he had worked for, I was the only one—except, of course, Esther. I suppose that's why they didn't come, and why I very nearly stayed away myself. After all, gossip had helped to guide Ade's finger to that trigger, and we were all guilty of that. I know I sat as far away from Esther in the chapel as I could. I don't think I'd have had the courage to look her in the eye, but I did sit where I could see her face. Although very pale, she appeared to be as self-contained as she always was. Not once did I see her eyes glisten or her lips tremble. When it was over I stayed in my seat, not wishing to run into her outside; but she, too, remained until only she and I and Ade were left.

Finally she stood up, walked slowly to the casket and stood gazing down into that cold, waxen face, restored by death and the mortician's art to at least a mask of its former beauty. As I watched, she did something I thought extraordinarily touching. She unpinned that familiar corsage of yellow rosebuds from her shoulder and gently laid it upon his breast. Then she quickly turned and walked out.

I followed, overcome by emotion. Outside on the steps, in a cold drizzle, I saw an elderly gray-haired man talking to Esther, consoling her, I supposed, although his face was stern and Esther's expression more defiant than bereaved. Suddenly she turned her back on him and walked away down the street. I never saw her again.

As I was hurrying toward my car I passed the old man standing at the bus stop, turning up his coat collar in a vain effort to ward off the rain. On an impulse, I asked him if he wanted a lift downtown. He was quick to accept the offer.

"Ade was my nephew," he said, when we were in the car. "I must say it was a shock to see how greatly he had changed. I live in Florida now. It's been years since I saw him."

I don't know why I said it, but it was a long ride downtown and I was curious. "Did you know about Ade and Esther? I saw you talking to her."

He looked puzzled. "Ade and Esther?"

"She must have loved him very much." I could still see her, placing those yellow rosebuds on his breast.

He looked at me coldly now. "My dear young man, you can't have known either of them very well. Esther March despised my nephew."

"Oh, but—"

"I can't imagine why she came to his funeral. Unless it was to gloat."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

Ordinarily, the man beside me might have been inclined toward reticence, but after a funeral one has an urge to talk, an eagerness to assert one's place among the living. "Minister's eulogy wasn't bad," he said. "But not very relevant. They seldom are." He paused, stared out the window. "Once upon a time Ade was going to marry Ellen March, Esther's twin sister. Ellen was a sweet, shy little thing. Absolutely mad about Ade. Couldn't blame her, he was a swell-looking fellow in those days. But flighty. It was all arranged. They were going to be married by a justice of the peace. Esther and I were going to stand up with them. Ellen and Esther were waiting when we got there. We could see them through the door from an outer office. Ellen looked radiant. But Ade . . . he just stood there, looking at her through that door. I never saw a face as white as his. Just stood there as if he'd turned to stone. Then he said, 'I can't . . . I can't . . .' and he just bolted. Just turned around and walked right out of there and didn't come back. That poor little girl. I'll never forget the look on her face. A few days later she took an overdose of sleeping pills and died."

I waited. The rain was falling harder now, drumming on the car roof. "And Esther . . . ?"

"Oh, Esther took it as hard as her sister. You know how it is with twins sometimes. It was like Ade had done it to her as much as to Ellen. She swore she'd never let Ade forget that he had killed her sister. You know how people will say things at a time like that. I suppose she's never even seen him since then, until today."

I saw no reason to set him straight. It would have been too much like gossiping.

"It really gave me a jolt," he said, "seeing her like that. I said to myself, it's Ellen!"

"They were identical twins?"

"Oh, no. Didn't look any more alike than any sisters. It was the dress."

"The dress?"

"Esther's dress. It was what Ellen wore that day she and Ade were to be married. That's exactly the way she looked, from head to toe. Same dress, same shoes, same corsage of yellow roses, same little thing in her hair . . ."

1971

by William Brittain

The legs of Sy Cottle's chair scraped on the rough-hewn plank floor as he got up, walked to the iron stove in the center of the room and rammed another piece of wood into the blazing fire. It was going to be a cold, stormy night. Already he could hear the north wind sighing through the mountain pines, and wet, heavy snowflakes spattering against the front window.

It'd be a hellish night for anyone caught outside. In spite of the heat from the stove, Sy felt a shiver run along his spine as he returned to his perusal of the mail-order catalog by the light of the kerosene lamp.

He didn't hear the first gentle tapping on the building's front door; it was masked by the keening wind. The second time, the knocking was louder and more urgent. Sy looked up in surprise from a two-page spread of hunting shirts. What kind of tomfool would come to such a deserted part of the mountains on a night like this?

It took some time to undo the rusty latch of the front door, and meanwhile the knocking grew to a loud pounding. Finally he was able to swing the door open on protesting hinges, and a figure rushed inside in a flurry of snow.

The man wore a gray snap-brim hat and a light raincoat. His shoes, once fashionably stitched and highly polished, were now two lumps of mud and wet leather. He went to the glowing stove and began rubbing his hands, soaking up the heat gratefully.

City feller, thought Sy.

"It's c-cold out there," said the man through chattering teeth.

"Yeah," answered Sy and then was silent. No sense wasting words till he found out what the man wanted.

The man began peeling off his sodden coat. "My name's John Da—" There was a long pause. "John Dace," he said finally.

"Uh-huh. I'm Sy Cottle. Somethin' I can do for you?" he asked.

"Gas. I need gas for my car. It ran dry about eight miles back." Dace waved a hand to indicate the direction from which he'd come. "I had to walk."

"I see. Lucky you came this way. The nearest place in the other direction is Cedar Village, and that's twenty-five miles from here. You could have froze to death before you got there."

"I know," said Dace. "We stopped in Cedar Village on the way. But about the gas—"

"What makes you think I've got any gas around here?"

"Why, I saw the pumps outside, and I thought—"

"Too bad you couldn't have seen 'em in daylight," said Sy, shaking his head. "Rusted solid, both of 'em. I haven't pumped a gallon of gas in the last seven years. When the state put in that new six-lane highway over in the next valley, it about put me out of business. Sometimes two, three weeks go by without my even seeing a car on this road, especially in the winter. It's all a body can do to earn enough money to stay alive."

"But—" Dace's face was a study in panic. "But I've got to get some gas."

Sy scratched the stubble on his face and took a battered cigar from his shirt pocket. "That's the trouble with you city fellers," he said, scratching a wooden match on the table and lighting the cigar. "Always in a hurry. Now, the highway boys'll be around by this road in another week or so. They'll give you a tow."

"No! You don't understand. I've got to have the gas now. Tonight!"

"I see." Sy eyed his visitor shrewdly. "How come it's so all-fired important for you to get your car movin' tonight?"

"My wife—she's waiting for me in the car. She could freeze to death before morning."

"Um." Sy considered this for several seconds. "That does put a new face on the matter," he said.

"Look, old timer," snapped Dace. "If you've got gas here I need a couple of gallons. If not—" He reached for his coat.

"Won't do you no good to leave here," said Sy. "Especially with the snow pickin' up the way it is. Like I told you, Cedar Village is twenty-five miles back the way you come."

"Then I'll go on."

"The nearest place on up the road belongs to Steve Sweeney," said Sy complacently. "He runs a small airport, so he'd probably have some

gas you could buy." He sucked slowly on the glowing cigar. "Course, it is seventeen miles from here . . ."

Dace looked about him like a trapped animal. "I'll—I'll walk back and get Helen," he said in a shaking voice, "and bring her here."

Sy got up from the chair and sauntered to the window. "That's sixteen miles you'd be walkin', round trip," he said softly. "You'd probably make it to the car all right. But comin' back? I dunno. Especially with a woman. Ever see anybody that was froze to death, mister?"

"But I've got to do something!" moaned Dace.

"That's true," said Sy. "Well, maybe—just maybe I got some gas in a drum out back. I might be willin' to sell you a little, seein' as my truck's up on blocks for the winter with the tires off and the radiator drained."

"You've got gas?" Dace breathed a long sigh, and his tense body relaxed. "I'll buy some. Two gallons ought to be enough." He reached into a hip pocket and drew out a wallet.

"Just a minute, mister."

"What's the matter?"

"Have you given any thought to how you're going to carry this gas? You can't just pour it in your pocket, you know."

"Why, can't I just borrow a jug or something?"

"I don't set much store by havin' my stuff borrowed," said Sy. "But I might be willing to sell you a jug. This one right here, for instance." He reached down and pulled a glass container from underneath the table.

Dace smiled wryly. "Okay, old timer," he said. "I suppose you've got to make a little on this, too. How much for the jug?"

"Five dollars."

"Well, that's kind of expensive, a gallon of gas for five dollars. Especially since I'll be needing two of them. But I guess when you're out here in the middle of nowhere, you have to fleece the tourists while the getting is good. Here, you old robber." Dace took a ten-dollar bill from the wallet and extended it toward Sy.

Sy ignored the money and looked Dace straight in the eye. "I don't think you got the drift of what I told you," he said flatly. "The five dollars—that's for the jug. It don't include the gas."

"What! Five dollars for that thing—and no gas? Why, I could pick one up in any store in the world for a quarter."

"That's true. What store you plannin' on visitin' tonight?"

Dace stared at the window, where a crust of snow had formed over

the glass. He clenched his fists in impotent fury. "How—how much for the gas?" he asked finally.

Sy flicked a glance at Dace's wallet. "Oh, seein' as you've been so pleasant about the whole thing, and bein' in distress and all . . . Let's say fifty dollars a gallon."

"Fifty dollars! Hell, that's highway robbery!"

"The price of gas is goin' up," Sy said calmly.

"That's not funny," replied Dace.

"Wasn't meant to be. Just a statement of fact."

Desperately, Dace flipped through the bills in his wallet. "Damn!" he muttered finally. "I've only got sixty dollars here."

"Well, that'll buy you a gallon, and—figuring the cost of the jug—you'll have five dollars to keep," smiled Sy. "I won't charge you nothin' for warmin' yourself at the stove."

"That's real decent of you," snarled Dace. "But I've got to have two gallons."

"But it don't look like you can pay for 'em," said Sy. "Unless your wife's got some money on her. Speakin' of that, she must be gettin' mighty cold out in that car."

"Look, two gallons. Please. I—I'll give you my watch." Dace began tearing at the strap on his wrist.

"Don't need a watch. Time don't mean much in these parts. But if I was you, I'd be gettin' back to the car with that gas. The snow seems to be gettin' worse. Then on your way back here, you decide whether you want to buy more gas or stay on here until somebody passes by. I can give you a good deal on a room with grub thrown in. Daily or weekly rates."

Without waiting for a reply, Sy took the empty jug into the rear of the building and filled it from a large gasoline drum. When he returned, Dace had already put on his coat.

"Here's your money," Dace snarled, extending a fistful of bills. "I hope you choke on it."

"That ain't no way to talk to a man who saved your life," grinned Sy. He took the money and counted it carefully. "Fifty-five dollars. It's been a pleasure doin' business with you. I wish I could give you a lift, but like I said, my truck's laid up for the winter. I guess I can expect you back in about two, three hours. That right, Mr. Dace?"

With a shouted oath, Dace threw open the door and walked out into the howling storm.

It was nearly midnight, and the wind and snow had stopped, when Sy heard the crunching of automobile tires outside the building. He opened the door and watched Dace get out of the car and approach, followed by a slender woman dressed in light clothing which was almost no protection against the frosty air. As they entered the building and huddled near the stove, Sy could see that their lips were blue with cold.

"This is Helen—my wife," said Dace by way of introduction. "I told her about the gas you were—kind enough to sell me."

"Always glad to be of service," Sy said with a smile. "You two decide whether you want to buy another gallon?"

"I've got some money," said Helen in a soft voice. "We'll take the gas."

"Good, good. Only thing is, the price went up again. A gallon costs sixty-five dollars now. Course, you can use the jug you already bought, so that's a saving right there."

Helen opened her purse. "This ought to pay for the gas," she said, tossing a small bundle toward Sy. It fell to the floor with a faint thump.

Sy bent to examine the packet, and Dace heard him gasp with surprise. "Why, all the money in here!"

"That's what you wanted, isn't it?" asked Helen.

"Yeah, but—wait a minute. On this paper strap it says—"

Sy looked up in surprise, and straight into the muzzle of the revolver Dace had pointed at him.

"It says 'Bank of Cedar Village', doesn't it, old timer?" said Dace. "And we've got a lot more bundles like that out in the trunk of the car. I told you we'd been in Cedar Village, but I didn't tell you why."

"You—you robbed the bank up there," Sy gasped in sudden realization. "But you said you didn't have no more money when you was here before," he accused them.

"You don't think I'd be crazy enough to carry it on me while I was walking, did you?" grinned Dace. "No telling what kind of characters I'd meet on these back roads."

"Look, Mr. Dace," Sy said, looking wide-eyed at the gun. "There don't nobody have to know you was here. I—I can keep my mouth shut for—for—"

"For how much, old timer? I'm sorry, but your prices are kind of high. I've got a better way of handling you. Helen, get some of that wire that's hanging on the wall there and tie him up."

"Should I gag him?"

Dace shook his head. "Let him shout. From what he's told me, there won't be anybody along this way for at least a couple of days. We'll have plenty of time to get away from here."

In moments, Sy was tied securely to the chair. He could feel the copper wire biting into his wrists, and he knew it would be impossible to free himself without assistance. His feet were wired off the floor to the rungs of the chair, effectively preventing him from shifting his position.

"We'll take the gas now," said Dace, looking down at him. "All we need."

Sy remained silent.

"Two gallons," mused Dace. "That's all it would have taken."

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

"We knew all about that airport you mentioned when we planned this job," explained Dace. "Just seventeen miles up the road from here. We figured to take this back road while the police were looking for us on the highway. A pilot who's a friend of mine was going to land a small plane at the airport, and we'd be out of these hills before anyone could come near us."

"But you had to forget to gas up the car before the heist," taunted Helen.

"That's right. So we ran out of gas. If you'd sold me only two gallons, old timer, we could have made it to the airport without stopping here again. But you got greedy, so we had to bring the car back here or risk running dry farther up the road. And in the meantime, how were we to know you hadn't heard about the robbery on the radio or something?"

"But I swear I didn't hear anything," gasped Sy. "I don't even own a radio, that's the truth."

"Sorry, old timer, but we had no way of knowing that. And it's a little late now for it to make any difference."

The car was quickly filled with gas, and Helen went outside. Dace took an extra moment to examine the wires that bound his captive.

"Mr. Dace?" said Sy in a hoarse whisper.

"Yeah?"

"It usually gets awful cold after a snowstorm in these hills."

"So I've heard."

"Sometimes it goes below zero. And the fire in that stove is good for only a few more hours."

"You're probably right about that."

"I'll freeze to death, Mr. Dace."

"You didn't seem too worried when it was my wife out in the cold."

"Dying is a pretty high price to pay just for gypping you out of an extra gallon of gasoline."

"Well, it's like you said, old timer."

"What do you mean by that?"

"The price of gas is going up."



1972

by James Michael Ullman

All afternoon the air had been humid and oddly still, with the temperature hovering in the nineties. Old-timers, wiping their brows and gazing at dark thunderheads gathering in the southwestern sky, knew they were in for trouble.

At dusk, as thunder cracked and rain pelted down in blinding sheets, the trouble came in the form of whirling, funnel-shaped clouds.

One tornado ripped through a mobile-home court, killing five people. Another flattened every structure in a whistle-stop on the St. Louis-San Francisco Railway, and a third blew a sedan off a county road, fatally injuring its occupant.

At least a dozen funnel clouds had been sighted by 9:08 P.M., at which time a tall, dark-haired woman walked from the kitchen of a remote farmhouse into the parlor. She thought she'd heard a car in the front yard. Her imagination, probably. Nobody in his right mind would be out driving on a wild night like this.

She started toward a window, but never made it.

Someone kicked the front door open, springing the lock, and two men stumbled in. Both carried pistols.

The taller and older of the two swung the bore of his weapon toward the young woman's midsection and said, "Freeze, lady. Anyone else in this house?"

Wordlessly, she shook her head.

"Okay. You can sit down now. But be nice and quiet, and keep your hands at your sides."

Slowly, she eased into a chair.

The room's only light came from kerosene lamps. The power had gone out long ago. From the kitchen, music wafted faintly from a transistor radio.

The two intruders, bareheaded, with crew cuts, were dressed in soaking wet blue denim uniforms.

"Jerry, close that door," the older man ordered. "Then see if there's anyone else here. She might be lying."

Jerry, a thin, short youth of about twenty, hesitated a moment to stare at the young woman. Her features were plain but she was well-built, with a robust figure quite clearly defined under a sleeveless blouse and fashionably brief shorts. Then he slammed the front door, braced it with a table and took off to search the house.

The other man walked around behind the woman. He had broad shoulders, a flat belly, a hawklike profile and dark rings under eyes that burned with an abnormal intensity. His age could have been anywhere between thirty-five and fifty.

Placing the pistol's muzzle to the woman's head, he asked, "What's your name?"

"Karen." Terrified, she worked hard at keeping her voice steady. Her intuition told her that any display of panic might trigger violence against her person. "Karen Smallwood."

"Who lives here with you?"

"I don't live here. My parents do, but they're away. I'm a teacher—I live in town. I came out to straighten up for them but got caught by the storm."

"We're lost. We were on County B, headed for Hanksville and the Interstate, when we hit a washout. We had to detour onto the cowpath that took us here. Where's it go?"

"Same place as County B—to Hanksville—only it takes a few minutes longer to get there."

"Any bridges in between?"

"No, there'll be no more washouts."

"Driving to this farm, we were going up a hill. What's on the other side? Another farm?"

"Not right away. Nobody lives within three miles of here."

"If you been listening to that radio, you must know who we are. Except for the tornadoes, we been the big story on every newscast."

"Yes," she said. "I know. I don't remember your name . . ."

"Garth," he said pleasantly. "Ben Garth."

"You and your friend broke out of prison yesterday. The police in half the country are looking for you."

She didn't bother adding what they both knew very well: that Garth

had been serving a sentence for murder, Jerry for rape; that since breaking out, they had shot and killed a motorist whose car they had stolen, and then beaten a waitress to death in a roadside diner. The newscaster had termed it a "senseless killing spree."

Jerry came back. "There's nobody else," he reported, "but I found this."

He held a faded photograph of Karen, then a leggy teen-ager, and a middle-aged couple. The man in the picture wore a state police uniform.

"The cop your father?" Garth asked.

"Yes," she admitted. "But he isn't a trooper anymore. He was hurt chasing a speeder, so they pensioned him off."

"Where are your folks now?"

"A flea market in Canton, Texas. They won't be back until next week."

"A what?"

"Flea market," she repeated. "A place where anyone can go and sell anything. My folks barely make out on my father's pension. As a sideline, they sell antiques. Just look around . . ."

Garth scrutinized the home's interior more closely. She was right. The parlor and dining room looked more like an antique store than a farmhouse. Pictures in Victorian frames hung from the walls; shelves and cupboards were filled with china and glassware; and the floor areas were jammed with heavy old chairs and tables.

"You're pretty cool about all this," Garth said. "I admire women who don't lose their heads and start hollerin', like the one in the diner this mornin'—the one we had to shut up . . ."

He didn't admire her. He was probing, wondering how much she could take.

"There's no point in screaming," Karen said as casually as she could, "if nobody but you two would hear."

"Smart girl. Just in case the storm gets worse, you got a storm cellar in this place?"

"The door's in the kitchen floor."

Jerry went to the kitchen, lifted the door and swung a kerosene lantern down for a better look. "It's no fancy hotel," he called back, "but we could sweat it out if we had to."

"Any guns in this house?" Garth went on. "If your old man was a cop, he must have some guns."

"Two hunting rifles, a shotgun and two revolvers," she replied without hesitation. "They're locked in a case upstairs. My father has the key, but if you want them you can just break the glass."

"We'll take 'em when we leave."

"You were wise," Karen said, "ditching your car to find shelter. A car's the worst place to be if a twister hits."

She said that to get Garth's mind off guns. She didn't want him thinking about guns because there was one she hadn't mentioned, an ancient, double-barreled shotgun hanging in plain sight on the wall over the mantel in the dining room.

Apparently, it was now nothing more than a decorative but useless antique; it hung so high that to get it, she'd have to climb up on a chair to lift it off its brackets.

While it was antique it was not useless, however. Despite its age it was loaded and in perfect working condition. That old shotgun, her father had said, would be his ace in the hole. He hoped he'd never need it, but as a former law officer living far out in the country, and knowing some men held grudges against him, he wanted an emergency weapon.

At the moment, though, it seemed the shotgun would not do Karen much good. It was difficult to imagine the circumstances under which Garth would allow her to climb the chair, reach up and turn the weapon on her captors . . .

Garth took the pistol away from Karen's head and jammed it under his belt. "Okay," he drawled, "we ain't ate since mornin' and I never been fed by a lawman's daughter before. So you just haul into that kitchen and fix us somethin'-fast."

The men drank beer and watched her every move as she prepared a quick supper of frankfurters and canned beans. As they ate, they made her sit across the dining-room table from them—the shotgun on the wall behind them.

When they were through, Karen cleared the table and brought more beer. On the radio, the announcer reported the sighting of more funnel clouds.

"I don't suppose," Karen said, settling back in her chair, "either of you has ever seen a tornado."

"No, I ain't," Garth said. "And I don't hanker to."

Jerry asked, "Have you?"

"Yes."

"What's it like?"

She thought back to that terrifying afternoon so many years ago. "It's a black, whirling piece of hell, that's what. They say the funnel's wind moves so fast it can drive a splinter of wood into your brain like a high-powered bullet. And pieces of glass—God help you if you're near a window. You'll be cut to ribbons."

Uneasily, Jerry glanced at the broad expanse of windows in the dining room. "Then it's dangerous just sitting here. We should be down in the cellar, like the radio said."

"It's a little dangerous," Karen conceded. "If a twister dipped down from the sky to exactly this spot, we'd be finished. But if it's already on the ground and moving toward you, you'll probably know it and have warning. Even if it's night and you can't see the twister, you can hear it."

"I read about that," Jerry told her. "They make a noise."

"Yes. Like a freight train. The time I heard that sound I was in open country. I looked up and there it was, bearing down on me. There was a ditch nearby and I had enough sense to climb into a culvert. Even so, it's a miracle I lived through it. You know what happens sometimes? The funnels pick people up and pull them so high into the sky that when they drop down, they're frozen solid. And then at other times they simply—"

"That's enough." Garth frowned. "I don't wanna hear no more about it."

Again, he looked around the house. This time his perusal was slower and more thorough. His gaze even paused briefly at the ancient shotgun before moving on.

He asked, "Any money around here?"

"Only the few dollars in my purse. My father never leaves cash in the house when he's going out of town."

"Uh-huh." Garth turned to Jerry. "Get it. Then go through the rest of this place. See if there's more stashed away."

Rummaging through Karen's purse, Jerry came up with a few bills and coins. "Four dollars and thirty-five cents," he said in disgust. "That won't take us far . . ."

He shoved the money into his pocket and began ransacking the house, sweeping shelves clean and pulling out drawers and dumping their contents onto the floor. It was part search and part pure vandal-

ism, random destruction for its own sake. Karen compressed her lips to keep from crying out as the boy smashed the collections of porcelain, glassware and other fragile artifacts her parents had spent so much of their time assembling.

When Jerry was through on the ground floor he went upstairs. They could hear him tramping around, smashing more things.

Watching Karen while sipping from still another can of beer, Garth smiled humorlessly. Even the modest amount of alcohol in the beer seemed to be having a bad effect on his mood. Clearly she was dealing with a highly unstable psychopath likely to go berserk upon little or no provocation.

Jerry returned with only a few more coins for his efforts.

"I told you," Karen said patiently, "my father didn't keep money here."

"Yeah." Garth was looking at her in an odd way. "Too bad. If he had, we'd be more friendly-inclined. We need money to get out of the country."

"I'm sorry."

"Teacher, you just *think* you're sorry. But before we're through with you, you'll *really* be sorry."

He was tormenting her verbally before getting around to the real thing. She had to stall him as long as possible.

"Why would you want to hurt me?" She tried to sound friendly and reasonable. "I haven't made any trouble. I've done everything you asked."

"Maybe just because you're a lawman's daughter. We got an abiding dislike for lawmen and anyone connected with 'em. Matter of fact, we don't much like teachers either. Do we, Jerry?"

The boy grinned at her vacuously. She'd get no help from that quarter.

"It wouldn't make sense anyhow," Garth went on, "leavin' you here alive. The police think we're a couple hundred miles north of here. But the first thing you'd do after we left would be to put 'em straight."

"You could lock me in the storm cellar. That'd give you plenty of time for a head start."

"Nope. Can't take chances. We'll lock you in the storm cellar, all right, but when we do you won't be in no condition to climb out. Not ever. That way, we *know* we'll have a head start. It might be a long

time before anyone gets curious enough to bust in, to see why you ain't been around lately."

Despite the fear tearing at her insides, Karen managed a smile. "You're just trying to frighten me. You're playing games. Well, sure I'm scared. What girl wouldn't be? But you know you don't have to kill me, Garth. If you don't want to leave me, take me along. I won't try anything stupid. I'll . . ." She paused. "Just a minute. You hear that?"

Garth stood up. "Hear what?"

"Shut up," Jerry broke in, his grin gone. "I think I hear it, too."

Then there was no doubt. They all heard it, far off but coming closer, a growing clatter and roar suggestive of an approaching freight train . . .

Karen rose. "I don't know about you," she announced, "but while there's still time, I'm going into that storm cellar!"

She took a step forward but Jerry lunged ahead, shoving her aside. Garth hesitated a moment and then, as the sound mounted in intensity, he plunged after Jerry.

As they scrambled for the door in the kitchen floor, Karen climbed up on the chair. She lifted the shotgun from its rack, stepped down, cocked the piece, aimed it while shoving the stock tight against her shoulder, and braced herself against the wall.

As Garth looked up and clawed for his pistol, she squeezed one trigger and then the other.

At dawn, her face expressionless, Karen watched from a parlor window as Garth's body was loaded into a hearse. The blasts had killed him almost instantly. Jerry had been seriously wounded but would live.

Standing beside Karen, a state police detective said, "I know how you feel. No matter how justified, it's terrible to kill someone. But you had no choice. If you hadn't stopped them, they'd almost surely have killed you and others."

"I know. Thinking about that is the only way I'll be able to live with this."

"Anyhow, either you were mighty lucky or they were mighty careless, allowing you to get your hands on the gun."

"Oh, that." She smiled faintly. "At the time, they were trying to get into the storm cellar. I'd told them how a tornado sounded like a fast

freight train." Her gaze strayed beyond the yard to the other side of the hill and the main line of the St. Louis-San Francisco Railway. "So when the night freight came high-balling by a little before ten, like it always does, I made out like it was a twister."



1973

by Patricia Highsmith

It was an impossible situation. Penn Knowlton had realized that as soon as he realized he was in love with Ginnie Ostrander—Mrs. David Ostrander. Penn couldn't see himself in the role of a marriage-breaker, even though Ginnie said she had wanted to divorce David long before she met him. David wouldn't give her a divorce, that was the point. The only decent thing to do, Penn had decided, was to clear out, leave before David suspected anything. Not that he considered himself noble, but there were some situations . . .

Penn went to Ginnie's room on the second floor of the house and knocked.

Her rather high, cheerful voice called, "You, Penn? Come in!"

She was lying on the sunlit chaise longue, wearing black, close-fitting slacks and a yellow blouse, and she was sewing a button on one of David's shirts.

"Don't I look domestic?" she asked, pushing her yellow hair back from her forehead. "Need any buttons sewed on, darling?" Sometimes she called him darling when David was around, too.

"No," he said, smiling, and sat down on a hassock.

She glanced at the door as if to make sure no one was about, then pursed her lips and kissed the empty air between them. "I'll miss you this weekend. What time are you leaving tomorrow?"

"David wants to leave just after lunch. It's my last assignment, Ginnie. David's last book with me. I'm quitting."

"Quitting?" She let her sewing fall into her lap. "You've told David, too?"

"No. I'll tell him tomorrow. I don't know why you're surprised. You're the reason, Ginnie. I don't think I have to make any speeches."

"I understand, Penn. You know I've asked for a divorce. But I'll keep on asking. I'll work something out and then—" She was on her

knees suddenly in front of him, crying, her head down on her hands that gripped his hands.

He turned his eyes away and slowly stood up, drawing her up with him. "I'll be around another two weeks, probably; long enough for David to finish this book, if he wants me around that long. And you needn't worry. I won't tell him why I'm quitting." His voice had sunk to a whisper, though David was downstairs in his soundproofed study, and the maid, Penn thought, was in the basement.

"I wouldn't care if you told him," she said with quiet defiance.

"It's a wonder he doesn't know."

"Will you be around, say in three months, if I can get a divorce?" she asked.

He nodded, then feeling his own eyes start to burn, he smiled. "I'll be around an awful long time. I'm just not so sure you want a divorce."

Her eyebrows drew down, stubborn and serious. "You'll see. I don't want to make David angry. I'm afraid of his temper, I've told you that. But maybe I'll have to stop being afraid." Her blue eyes looked straight into his. "Remember that dream you told us, about the man you were walking with on the country road, who disappeared? And you kept calling him and you couldn't find him?"

"Yes," he said, smiling.

"I wish it would happen to you—with David. I wish David would just disappear suddenly, this weekend, and be out of my life forever, so I could be with you."

Her words did strange and terrible things to him. He released her arm. "People don't just disappear. There're other ways." He was going to add, "Such as divorce," but he didn't.

"Such as?"

"I'd better get back to my typewriter. I've got another half-hour tape to do."

David and Penn left in the black convertible the next afternoon with a small suitcase apiece, one typewriter, the tape recorder, and an iced carton of steaks and beer and a few other items of food. David was in a good mood, talking about an idea that had come to him during the night for a new book. David Ostrander wrote science fiction so prolifically that he used half a dozen pen names. He seldom took longer than a month to write a book, and he worked every month of the year. More

ideas came to him than he could use, and he was in the habit of passing them on to other writers at his Wednesday night Guild meetings.

David Ostrander was forty-three, lean and wiry, with a thin, dry-skinned face thatched with fine, intersecting wrinkles—the only part of him that showed his age at all and exaggerated it at that—wrinkles that looked as if he had spent all his forty-three years in the dry, sterile winds of the fantastic planets about which he wrote.

Ginnie was only twenty-four, Penn remembered, two years younger than himself. Her skin was pliant and smooth, her lips like a poppy's petals. He stopped thinking about her. It irked him to think of David's lips kissing hers. How could she have married him? Or why? Or was there something about David's intellect, his bitter humor, his energy, that a woman would find attractive? Of course David had money, a comfortable income plus the profits of his writing, but what did Ginnie do with it? Nice clothes, yes, but did David ever take her out? They hardly ever entertained. As far as Penn had been able to learn, they had never traveled anywhere.

"Eh? What do you think of that, Penn? The poison gas emanating from the blue vegetation and conquering the green until the whole earth perishes! Say, where are you today?"

"I got it," Penn said without taking his eyes from the road. "Shall I put it down in the notebook?"

"Yes. No. I'll think about it a little more today." David lit another cigarette. "Something's on your mind, Penn, my boy. What is it?"

Penn's hands tightened on the wheel. Well, no other moment was going to be any better, was it? A couple of Scotches this evening wouldn't help, just be a little more cowardly, Penn decided. "David, I think after this book is over, I'll be leaving you."

"Oh," said David, not manifesting any surprise. He puffed on his cigarette. "Any particular reason?"

"Well, as I've told you, I have a book of my own to write. The Coast Guard thing." Penn had spent the last four years in the Coast Guard, which was the main reason David had hired him as a secretary. David had advertised for a secretary "preferably with a firsthand knowledge of Navy life." The first book he had worked on with David had a Navy background—Navy life in 2800 A.D., when the whole globe had been made radioactive. Penn's book would have to do with real life, and it had an orthodox plot, ending on a note of hope. It seemed at that mo-

ment a frail and hopeless thing compared to a book by the great David Ostrander.

"I'll miss you," David said finally. "So'll Ginnie. She's very fond of you, you know."

From any other man it might have been a snide comment, but not from David, who positively encouraged him to spend time with Ginnie, to take walks in the woods around the estate with her, to play tennis on the clay court behind the summerhouse. "I'll miss you both, too," Penn said. "And who wouldn't prefer the environment to an apartment in New York?"

"Don't make any speeches, Penn. We know each other too well." David rubbed the side of his nose with a nicotine-stained forefinger. "What if I put you on a part-time basis and gave you most of the day for your own work? You could have a whole wing of the house to yourself."

Penn declined it politely. He wanted to get away by himself for a while.

"Ginnie's going to sulk," David said, as if to himself.

They reached the lodge at sundown. It was a substantial one-story affair made of unhewn logs, with a stone chimney at one end. White birches and huge pine trees swayed in the autumn breeze. By the time they unpacked and got a fire going for the steak, it was seven o'clock. David said little, but he seemed cheerful, as if their conversation about Penn's quitting had never taken place. They had two drinks each before dinner, two being David's limit for himself on the nights he worked and also those on which he did not work, which were rare.

David looked at him across the wooden table. "Did you tell Ginnie you were leaving?"

Penn nodded, and swallowed with an effort. "I told her yesterday." Then he wished he hadn't admitted it. Wasn't it more logical to tell one's employer first?

David's eyes seemed to be asking the same question. "And how did she take it?"

"Said she'd be sorry to see me go," Penn said casually, and cut another bite of steak.

"Oh. Like that. I'm sure she'll be devastated."

Penn jumped as if a knife had been stuck into him.

"I'm not blind, you know, Penn. I know you two think you're in love with each other."

"Now listen, David, just a minute. If you possibly imagine—"

"I know what I know, that's all. I know what's going on behind my back when I'm in my study or when I'm in town Wednesday nights at the Guild meeting!" David's eyes shone with blue fire, like the cold lights of his lunar landscapes.

"David, there's nothing going on behind your back," Penn said evenly. "If you doubt me, ask Ginnie."

"Hah!"

"But I think you'll understand why it's better that I leave. I should think you'd approve of it, in fact."

"I do." David lit a cigarette.

"I'm sorry this happened," Penn added. "Ginnie's very young. I also think she's bored—with her life, not necessarily with you."

"Thanks!" David said like a pistol shot.

Penn lit a cigarette, too. They were both on their feet now. The half-eaten meal was over. Penn watched David moving about as he might have watched an armed man who at any minute might pull a gun or a knife. He didn't trust David, couldn't predict him. The last thing he would have predicted was David's burst of temper tonight, the first Penn had seen. "Okay, David. I'll say again that I'm sorry. But you've no reason to hold a grudge against me."

"That's enough of your words! I know a heel when I see one!"

"If you were my weight, I'd break your jaw for that!" Penn yelled, advancing on him with his fists clenched. "I've had enough of your words tonight, too. I suppose you'll go home and throw your bilge at Ginnie. Well, where do you get off, shoving a bored, good-looking girl at your male secretary, telling us to go off on picnic lunches together? Can you blame either of us?"

David muttered something unintelligible in the direction of the fireplace. Then he turned and said, "I'm going for a walk." He went out and slammed the thick door so hard that the floor shook.

Automatically, Penn began clearing the dishes away, the untouched salad. They had started the refrigerator, and Penn carefully put the butter away on a shelf. The thought of spending the night here with David was ghastly, yet where else could he go? They were six miles from the nearest town, and there was only one car.

The door suddenly opened, and Penn nearly dropped the coffeepot.

"Come out for a walk with me," David said. "Maybe it'll do us both good." He was not smiling.

Penn set the coffeepot back on the stove. A walk with David was the last thing he wanted, but he was afraid to refuse. "Have you got the flashlight?"

"No, but we don't need it. There's moonlight."

They walked from the lodge door to the car, then turned left onto the dirt road that went on for two miles through the woods to the highway.

"This is a half moon," David said. "Mind if I try a little experiment? Walk on ahead of me, here where it's pretty clear, and let me see how much of you I can make out at thirty yards. Take big strides and count off thirty. You know, it's for that business about Faro."

Penn nodded. He knew. They were back on the book again, and they'd probably work a couple of hours tonight when they went back to the lodge. Penn started counting, taking big strides.

"Fine, keep going!" David called.

Twenty-eight . . . twenty-nine . . . thirty. Penn stopped and stood still. He turned around. He couldn't see David. "Hey! Where are you?"

No answer.

Penn smiled wryly, and stuffed his hands into his pockets. "Can you see me, David?"

Silence. Penn started slowly back to where he had left David. A little joke, he supposed, a mildly insulting joke, but he resolved to take no offense.

He walked on toward the lodge, where he was sure he would find David thoughtfully pacing the floor as he pondered his work, perhaps dictating already into the tape recorder; but the main room was empty. There was no sound from the corner room where they worked, nor from the closed room where David slept. Penn lit a cigarette, picked up the newspaper and sat down in the single armchair. He read with deliberate concentration, finished his cigarette and lit another. The second cigarette was gone when he got up, and he felt angry and a little scared at the same time.

He went to the lodge door and called, "David!" a couple of times, loudly. He walked toward the car, got close enough to see that there was no one sitting in it. Then he returned to the lodge and methodically searched it, looking even under the bunks.

What was David going to do, come back in the middle of the night and kill him in his sleep? No, that was crazy, as crazy as one of David's story ideas. Penn suddenly thought of his dream, remembered David's

brief but intense interest in it the night he had told it at the dinner table. "Who was the man with you?" David had asked. But in the dream, Penn hadn't been able to identify him. He was just a shadowy companion on a walk. "Maybe it was me," David had said, his blue eyes shining. "Maybe you'd like *me* to disappear, Penn." Neither Ginnie nor he had made a comment, Penn recalled, nor had they discussed David's remark when they were alone. It had been so long ago, over two months ago.

Penn put that out of his mind. David had probably wandered down to the lake to be alone for a while, and hadn't been courteous enough to tell him. Penn did the dishes, took a shower and crawled into his bunk. It was 12:10. He had thought he wouldn't be able to sleep, but he was asleep in less than two minutes.

The raucous cries of ducks on the wing awakened him at 6:30. He put on his robe and went into the bathroom, noting that David's towel, which he had stuck hastily over the rack last night, had not been touched. Penn went to David's room and knocked. Then he opened the door a crack. The two bunks, one above the other, were still made up. Penn washed hurriedly, dressed, and went out.

He looked over the ground on both sides of the road where he had last seen David, looking for shoeprints in the moist pine needles. He walked to the lake and looked around its marshy edge; not a footprint, not a cigarette butt.

He yelled David's name, three times, and gave it up.

By 7:30 A.M. Penn was in the town of Croydon. He saw a small rectangular sign between a barber's shop and a paint store that said POLICE. He parked the car, went into the station, and told his story. As Penn had thought, the police wanted to look over the lodge. Penn led them back in David's car.

The two policemen had heard of David Ostrander, not as a writer, apparently, but as one of the few people who had a lodge in the area. Penn showed them where he had last seen David, and told them that Mr. Ostrander had been experimenting to see how well he could see him at thirty yards.

"How long have you been working for Mr. Ostrander?"

"Four months. Three months and three weeks to be exact."

"Had he been drinking?"

"Two Scotches. His usual amount. I had the same."

Then they walked to the lake and looked around.

"Mr. Ostrander have a wife?" one of the men asked.

"Yes. She's at the house in Stonebridge, New York."

"We'd better notify her."

There was no telephone at the lodge. Penn wanted to stay on in case David turned up, but the police asked him to come with them back to the station, and Penn did not argue. At least he would be there when they talked with Ginnie, and he'd be able to speak with her himself. Maybe David had decided to go back to Stonebridge and was already home. The highway was only two miles from the lodge, and David could have flagged a bus or picked up a ride from someone, but Penn couldn't really imagine David Ostrander doing anything that simple or obvious.

"Listen," Penn said to the policemen before he got into David's convertible, "I think I ought to tell you that Mr. Ostrander is kind of an odd one. He writes science fiction. I don't know what his objective is, but I think he deliberately disappeared last night. I don't think he was kidnapped or attacked by a bear or anything like that."

The policemen looked at him thoughtfully.

"Okay, Mr. Knowlton," one of them said. "Now you drive on ahead of us, will you?"

Back at the station in Croydon, they called the number Penn gave them. Hanna, the maid, answered. Penn, six feet from the telephone, could hear her shrill, German-accented voice; then Ginnie came on. The officer reported that David Ostrander was missing since 10 o'clock last night, and asked her if she'd had any word from him. Ginnie's voice, after the first exclamation which Penn had heard, sounded alarmed. The officer watched Penn as he listened to her.

"Yes . . . What's that again? . . . No, no blood or anything. Not a clue so far. That's why we're calling you." A long pause. The officer's pencil tapped but did not write. "I see . . . I see . . . We'll call you, Mrs. Ostrander."

"May I speak to her?" Penn reached for the telephone.

The captain hesitated, then said, "Good-bye, Mrs. Ostrander," and put the telephone down. "Well, Mr. Knowlton, are you prepared to swear that the story you told us is true?"

"Absolutely."

"Because I've just heard a motive if I ever heard one. A motive for getting Mr. Ostrander out of the way. Now, just what did you do to him

—or maybe say to him?" The officer leaned forward, palms on his desk.

"What did she just tell you?"

"That you're in love with her and you might have wanted her husband out of the picture."

Penn tried to keep calm. "I was quitting my job to get away from the situation! I told Mr. Ostrander yesterday that I was going to quit, and I told his wife the day before."

"So you admit there was a situation."

The police, four of them now, looked at him with frank disbelief.

"Mrs. Ostrander's upset," Penn said. "She doesn't know what she's saying. Can I talk to her, please? Now?"

"You'll see her when she gets here." The officer sat down and picked up a pen. "Knowlton, we're booking you on suspicion. Sorry."

They questioned him until 1 P.M., then gave him a hamburger and a paper container of weak coffee. They kept asking him if there hadn't been a gun at the lodge—there hadn't been—and if he hadn't weighted David's body and thrown it in the lake along with the gun.

"We walked half around the lake this morning," Penn said. "Did you notice any footprints anywhere?"

By that time, he had told them about his dream and suggested that David Ostrander was trying to enact it, an idea that brought incredulous smiles, and he had laid bare his heart in regard to Ginnie, and also his intentions with her, which were nil. Penn didn't say that Ginnie had said she was in love with him, too. He couldn't bear to tell them that, in view of what she had said about him.

They went into his past. No police record. Born in Raleigh, Virginia, graduated from the state university, a major in journalism, worked on a Baltimore paper for a year, then four years in the Coast Guard. A clean slate everywhere, and this the police seemed to believe. It was, specifically, the cleanliness of his slate with the Ostranders that they doubted. He was in love with Mrs. Ostrander and yet he was really going to quit his job and leave? Hadn't he any plans about her?

"Ask her," Penn said tiredly.

"We'll do that," replied the officer who was called Mac.

"She knows about the dream I had, too, and the questions her husband asked me about it," Penn said. "Ask her in privacy, if you doubt me."

"Get this, Knowlton," Mac said. "We don't fool around with dreams. We want facts."

Ginnie arrived a little after three P.M. Catching a glimpse of her through the bars of the cell they had put him in, Penn sighed with relief. She looked calm, perfectly in command of herself. The police took her to another room for ten minutes or so, and then they came and unlocked Penn's cell door. As he approached Ginnie, she looked at him with a hostility or fear that was like a kick in the pit of his stomach. It checked the "Hello, Ginnie" that he wanted to say.

"Will you repeat to him what he said to you day before yesterday, Mrs. Ostrander?" asked Mac.

"Yes. He said, 'I wish David would disappear the way he did in my dream. I wish he were out of your life so I could be alone with you.'"

Penn stared at her. "Ginnie, *you* said that!"

"I think what we want to know from you, Knowlton, is what you did with her husband," said Mac.

"Ginnie," Penn said desperately, "I don't know why you're saying that. I can repeat every word of the conversation we had that afternoon, beginning with me saying I wanted to quit. That much you'll agree with, won't you?"

"Why, my husband had *fired* him—because of his attentions to *me*!" Ginnie glared at Penn and at the men around her.

Penn felt a panic, a nausea rising. Ginnie looked insane—or like a woman who was positive she was looking at her husband's murderer. There flashed to his mind her amazing coolness the moment after the one time he had kissed her, when David, by an unhappy stroke of luck, had tapped on her door and walked in. Ginnie hadn't turned a hair. She was an actress by nature, apparently, and she was acting now. "That's a lie and you know it," Penn said.

"And it's a lie what you said to her about wanting to get rid of her husband?" Mac asked.

"Mrs. Ostrander said that, I didn't," Penn replied, feeling suddenly weak in the knees. "That's why I was quitting. I didn't want to interfere with a marriage that—"

The listening policemen smiled.

"My husband and I were devoted."

Then Ginnie bent her head and gave in, it appeared, to the most genuine tears in the world.

Penn turned to the desk. "All right, lock me up. I'll be glad to stay here till David Ostrander turns up—because I'll bet my life he's not dead."

Penn pressed his palms against the cool wall of the cell. He was aware that Ginnie had left the station, but that was the only external circumstance of which he was aware.

A funny girl, Ginnie. She was mad about David, after all. She must worship David for his talent, for his discipline, and for his liking her. What was she, after all? A good-looking girl who hadn't succeeded as an actress (until now), who hadn't enough inner resources to amuse herself while her husband worked twelve hours a day, so she had started flirting with her husband's secretary. Penn remembered that Ginnie had said their chauffeur had quit five months ago. They hadn't hired another. Penn wondered if the chauffeur had quit for the same reason he had been going to leave? Or had David fired him? Penn didn't dare believe anything, now, that Ginnie had ever said to him.

A more nightmarish thought crossed his mind: suppose Ginnie really didn't love David, and had stopped on her way to Croydon and found David in the lodge and had shot him? Or if she had found him on the grounds, in the woods, had she shot him and left him to be discovered later, so that he would get the blame? So that she would be free of David and free of him, too? Or was there even a gun in Stonebridge that Ginnie could have taken?

Did Ginnie hate David or love him? On that incredible question his own future might hang, because if Ginnie had killed him herself . . . But how did it explain David's voluntarily disappearing last night?

Penn heard footsteps and stood up.

Mac stopped in front of his cell. "You're telling the truth, Knowlton?" he asked a little dubiously.

"Yes."

"So, the worst that can happen is, you'll sit a couple of days till Ostrander turns up."

"I hope you're looking for him."

"That we are, all over the state and farther if we have to." He started to go, then turned back.

"Thought I'd bring you a stronger light bulb and something to read, if you're in any mood for reading."

There was no news the next morning.

Then, around four P.M., a policeman came and unlocked Penn's cell.

"What's up?" Penn asked.

"Ostrander turned up at his house in Stonebridge," the man said with a trace of a smile.

Penn smiled, too, slightly. He followed him out to the front desk.

Mac gave Penn a nod of greeting. "We just called Mr. Ostrander's house. He came home half an hour ago. Said he'd taken a walk to do some thinking, and he can't understand what all the fuss is about."

Penn's hand shook as he signed his own release paper. He was dreading the return to the lodge to get his possessions, the inevitable few minutes at the Stonebridge house while he packed up the rest of his things.

David's convertible was at the curb where Penn had left it yesterday. He got in and headed for the lodge. There, he packed first his own things and closed his suitcase, then started to carry it and the tape recorder to the car, but on second thought decided to leave the tape recorder. How was he supposed to know what David wanted done with his stuff?

As he drove south toward Stonebridge, Penn realized that he didn't know what he felt or how he ought to behave. Ginnie: it wasn't worthwhile to say anything to her, either in anger or by way of asking her why. David: it was going to be hard to resist saying, "I hope you enjoyed your little joke. Are you trying to get a plot out of it?" Penn's foot pressed the accelerator, but he checked his speed abruptly. *Don't lose your temper*, he told himself. *Just get your stuff quietly and get out.*

Lights were on in the living room, and also in Ginnie's room upstairs. It was around nine o'clock. They'd have dined, and sometimes they sat awhile in the living room over coffee, but usually David went into his study to work. Penn couldn't see David's study window. He rang the bell.

Hanna opened the door. "Mister Knowlton!" she exclaimed. "They told me you'd gone away for good!"

"I have," Penn said. "Just came by to pick up my things."

"Come right in, sir! Mister and Missus are in the living room. I'll tell them you're here." She went trotting off before he could stop her.

Penn followed her across the broad foyer. He wanted a look at David, just a look. Penn stopped a little short of the door. David and Ginnie were sitting close together on the sofa, facing him, David's arm on the back of the sofa, and as Hanna told them he was here, David

dropped his arm so that it circled Ginnie's waist. Ginnie did not show any reaction, only took a puff on her cigarette.

"Come on in, Penn!" David called, smiling. "What're you so shy about?"

"Nothing at all." Penn stopped at the threshold now. "I came to get my things, if I may."

"If you may!" David mocked. "Why, of course, Penn!" He stood up, holding Ginnie's hand now, as if he wanted to flaunt before Penn how affectionate they had become.

"Tell him to get his things and go," Ginnie said, smashing her cigarette in the ash tray. Her tone wasn't angry, in fact it was gentle, but she'd had a few drinks.

David came toward Penn, his lean, wrinkled face smiling. "I'll come with you. Maybe I can help."

Penn turned stiffly and walked to his room which was down the hall. He went in, dragged a large suitcase out of the bottom of a closet, and began with a bureau drawer, lifting out socks and pajamas. He was conscious of David watching him with an amused smile. The smile was like an animal's claws in Penn's back. "Where'd you hide that night, David?"

"Hide? Nowhere!" David chuckled. "Just took a little walk and didn't answer you. I was interested to see what would happen. Rather I *knew* what would happen. Everything was just as I'd predicted."

"What do you mean?" Penn's hands trembled as he slid open his top drawer.

"With Ginnie," David said. "I knew she'd turn against you and turn to me. It's happened before, you see. You were a fool to think if you waited for her she'd divorce me and come to you. An absolute fool!"

Penn whirled around, his hands full of folded shirts. "Listen, David, I wasn't waiting for Ginnie. I was clearing out of this—"

"Don't give me that, you sneak! Carrying on behind your employer's back!"

Penn flung the shirts into his suitcase. "What do you mean, it's happened before?"

"With our last chauffeur. And my last secretary, too. I'd get a girl secretary, you see, but Ginnie likes these little dramas. They serve to draw us together and they keep her from getting bored. Your dream gave me a splendid idea for this one. You see how affectionate Ginnie is

with me now? And she thinks you're a prize-winning sucker." David laughed and lifted his cigarette to his lips.

A second later, Penn landed the hardest blow he had ever struck, on David's jaw. David's feet flew up in the wake of his body, and his head hit a wall six feet away.

Penn threw the rest of his things into his suitcase and crushed the lid down as furiously as if he were still fighting David. He pulled the suitcase off the bed and turned to the door.

Ginnie blocked his way. "What've you *done* to him?"

"Not as much as I'd like to do."

Ginnie rushed past him to David, and Penn went out the door.

Hanna was hurrying down the hall. "Something the matter, Mr. Knowlton?"

"Nothing serious. Goodbye, Hanna," Penn said, trying to control his hoarse voice. "And thanks," he added, and went on toward the front door.

"He's *dead*!" Ginnie cried wailingly.

Hanna was running to the room. Penn hesitated, then went on toward the door. The little liar! Anything for a dramatic kick!

"*Stop him!*" Ginnie yelled. "Hanna, he's trying to get away!"

Penn set his suitcase down and went back. He'd yank David up and douse his head in water. "He's not dead," Penn said as he strode into the room.

Hanna was standing beside David with a twisted face, ready for tears. "Yes—he is, Mr. Knowlton."

Penn bent to pull David up, but his hand stopped before it touched him. Something shiny was sticking out of David's throat, and Penn recognized it—the haft of his own paper knife that he'd neglected to pack.

A long, crazy laugh—or maybe it was a wailing sob—came from Ginnie behind him. "You *monster*! I suppose you wiped your fingerprints off it! But it won't do you any good, Penn! Hanna, call the police at once. Tell them we've got a murderer here!"

Hanna looked at her with horror. "I'll call them, ma'am. But it was you that wiped the handle. You were wiping it with your skirt when I came in the door.

Penn stared at Ginnie. He and she were not finished with each other yet.

ABOUT THE EDITOR

Eleanor Sullivan is editor of *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*. She was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and her stories and articles have appeared in various magazines and newspapers.

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Bob Bristow
Wenzell Brown
Borden Deal
Richard Deming
Warren Donahue
Jean Garris
Evans Harrington
Patricia Highsmith**

**Edward D. Hoch
James Holding
Donald Honig
Donald Martin
Donald Olson
Bill Pronzini
Alice Scanlan Reach
Jack Ritchie
Henry Slesar
Paul Tabori
James Michael Ullman
Donald E. Westlake
Roderick Wilkinson
Michael Wilson**

Michael Zuroy