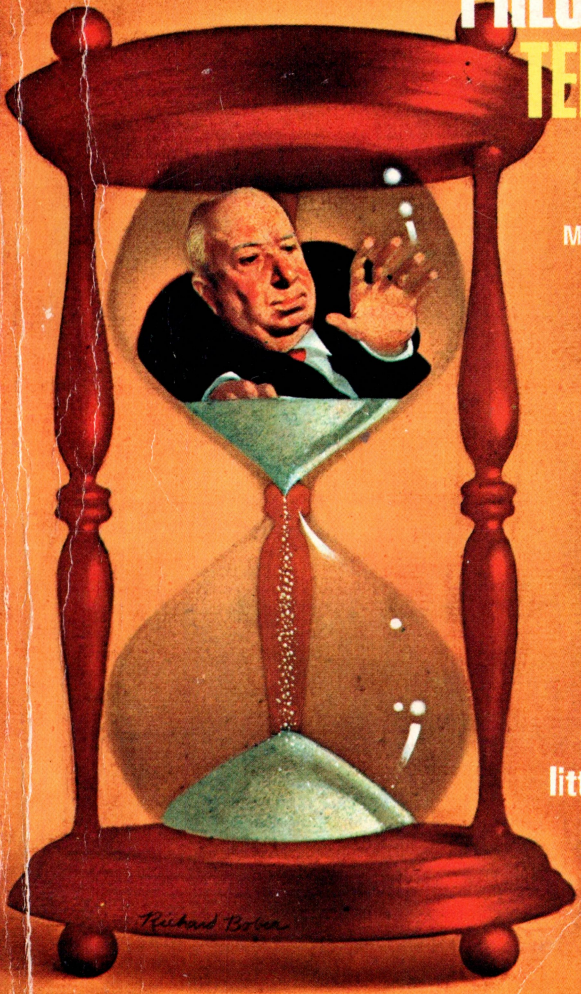
DELL
8615
75c

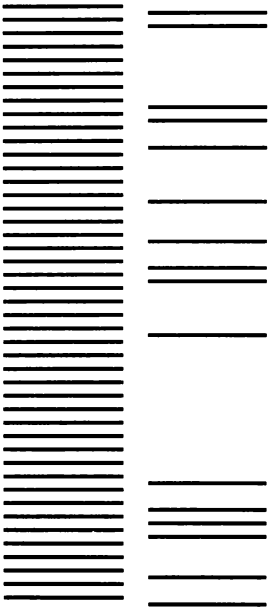
First time in paperback!

ALFRED HITCHCOCK PRESENTS: TERROR TIME

More tales from A Month of Mystery



Alfie says it's time to let off a little scream



ALFIE'S QUESTIONS

Alfred Hitchcock has been pondering a perplexing question: *What is the best time for murder?* The answer has proven infuriatingly elusive.

After all, there's a certain eerie silence in the early morn that makes a shriek of horror echo splendidly. But then what can match the surprised expression on a victim's face when he polishes off his noon repast and realizes something is wrong? And what more fertile atmosphere for evil is there than the sudden darkness when the moon has slipped behind the clouds?

At the present moment, Alfie can only say that when it comes to diabolical death, there's no time like now—and now's the time to enjoy the very finest in—

TERROR TIME

More Tales from *A Month of Mystery*

ALFRED HITCHCOCK PRESENTS:

TERROR TIME

More Tales from *A Month of Mystery*

Alfred Hitchcock, Editor

A DELL BOOK

Published by
DELL PUBLISHING CO., INC.
750 Third Avenue
New York, New York 10017
Copyright ©1969 by Random House, Inc.
All rights reserved under International and
Pan-American Copyright Conventions.
Dell ® TM 681510, Dell Publishing Co., Inc.
Reprinted by arrangement with
Random House, Inc.
New York, New York
Printed in the United States of America
First Dell printing—February 1972

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Acknowledgment is gratefully made to the following for permission to reprint:

"South of Market" by Joseph Gores was first published in *Manhunt* under the title "Down and Out" and is reprinted by permission of the author. Copyright © 1959 by Flying Eagle Publications.

"Love Will Find A Way" by David Alexander is reprinted by permission of the author. Copyright © 1960 by David Alexander.

"Retribution" by Michael Zuroy is reprinted by permission of the author. Copyright © 1961 by Flying Eagle Publications, Inc.

"Pool Party" by Andrew Benedict is reprinted by permission of Robert Arthur. Copyright © 1969 by Robert Arthur.

"A Taste for Murder" by Jack Ritchie is reprinted by permission of Larry Sternig Literary Agency. Copyright © 1963 by H.S.D. Publications, Inc.

"The Twelve-Hour Caper" by Mike Marmer is reprinted by

permission of the author. Copyright © 1961 by Mike Marmer. First published in *Cosmopolitan*.

"Death Wish" by Lawrence Block is reprinted by permission of the author and Henry Morrison, Inc., his agent. Copyright © 1967 by H.S.D. Publications, Inc.

"The White Hat" by Sax Rohmer is reprinted by permission of Paul R. Reynolds, Inc. Copyright 1948 by Sax Rohmer.

"Hard Sell" by Craig Rice is reprinted by permission of Scott Meredith Literary Agency, Inc., and the author's Estate. Copyright © 1960 by Pocket Books, Inc.

"A Twilight Adventure" by Melville Davisson Post is reprinted by permission of the Estate of Melville Davisson Post and the agent, Robert P. Mills. Copyright 1915 by Curtis Publishing Company, renewed 1943 by the author's Estate.

"Murder Matinee" by Harold Q. Masur is reprinted by permission of the author. Copyright 1946 by Harold Q. Masur.

"Love Me, Love Me, Love Me" by M. S. Waddell is reprinted by permission of the author's agent, London Authors. Copyright © 1969 by Martin Waddell.

"Special Handling" by John D. Keefauver is reprinted by permission of the author. Copyright © 1969 by John D. Keefauver.

"The Legend of Joe Lee" by John D. MacDonald is reprinted by permission of Littauer & Wilkinson. Copyright © 1964 by The Hearst Corporation. Originally published in *Cosmopolitan*.

"Crooked Bone" by Gerald Kersh is reprinted by permission of Mrs. Gerald Kersh. Copyright © 1968 by Curtis Publishing Company.

"Soldier Key" by Sterling E. Lanier is reprinted by permission of the author from *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. Copyright © 1968 by Mercury Press, Inc.

The editor gratefully acknowledges
the invaluable assistance of Robert Arthur
in the preparation of this volume

CONTENTS

IF, INDEED, IT IS EVENING—

GOOD EVENING.

I'm sure you will be intrigued to know that I am currently engaged in a project which will bring you those two words live in future volumes. Unfortunately, for the moment we can only reproduce them in ink. Therefore, they lack the nuances of delivery which I like to believe I perfected through long years before the television cameras.

However, at some future date I am confident that when you open one of my books it will speak aloud to you, saying in a firm and pleasant tone, "Good evening." Of course, if you open the book in the morning, this may not be entirely appropriate. This is one of the details we are still struggling to overcome.

In any case, I feel that evening is the best time to approach the stories I have gathered together. An easy chair, a darkened room, and a pool of light to read by offer the ideal setting in which to enjoy the varied attractions of these tales. If at all possible, avoid sharing the room with a teen-ager playing records that thump, shriek, and wail at you. This is bound to be distracting. Unless, of course, you are a teen-ager yourself. But if you are a teen-ager, what are you doing reading this book? Shouldn't you be out organizing a protest against something?

So much for that. This time, as you will see, I have assembled a sample of stories embracing many aspects of the mystery tale.

Start anywhere and read as fast as you please. Now I must get back to the laboratory. There's work to be done.

TERROR TIME

SOUTH OF MARKET

Joe Gores

In San Francisco, when you've stopped shaving every day and your hand shakes reaching for that first quick one, they'll say you're headed south of Market. It's like going north of the bridge on Clark Street in Chicago or down Washington Avenue to Second in Minneapolis; liquor stores outnumber everything but pawnshops and at night only the bars are bright. Cops work in pairs here, and winos sleep on street corners until the wagon takes them to the drunk tank at Fifth and Bryant. Any night, south of Market, you can find them: the snowbirds, the drunks, the whores, the bullies . . . and the men who are scared so deep down in their guts that they're almost beyond fear.

The men like me.

I was sitting in a slophouse on Third over a tired piece of pie and a cup of muddy jo when I saw two guys arguing outside. The grey-haired one wore a white shirt, sport jacket, and rumpled trousers. His tired whiskey eyes peered from a lined face that had been stepped on for more years than Mays has been with the Giants. The short dapper Mexican sported a blue suit, white shirt and red tie, cowboy boots, and two days' whiskers. One hand waved an nearly empty Tokay bottle; the other tried to fit his new white Stetson onto the old bird's head.

Just as I came out he spread his arms wide and ran into

a parking meter. Then he tried to drag the old guy down Third.

"G'wan. You got me in trouble once already. I ain't goin' down there with you."

After the Mexican had wandered off, he saw me and hollered, "Hey, sport!"

Coming over, he added: "I had just enough for a good bottle of Tokay, and then I went and give it to that Mexican. Found out afterwards that boy has plenty of glue—folding glue. Struck me as prob'ly a swell feller when he's sober." His faded blue eyes stared worriedly after the Mexican. "Hate to see that boy go south of Market with that glue. He don't know this town, an' what the hell is he gonna find down there except trouble?"

I couldn't answer that one. Figuring it for a touch, and being a soft-hearted slob, I separated myself from a couple aces.

"Here, Pops. Have yourself a ball."

"I didn't ask for this." His face got wistful as he palmed the two bucks. "Name's Kiely, sport—live at the Wessley on 22nd and Third. Ever out that way . . ."

He stopped there as if afraid of pushing it too much, treated me to a gentle smile, and slouched off. Just another grifter among the Third Street juice-heads and happy girls and silent drifting Negroes. In the bars I found the usual sad guys sucking away on draft beer with their pockets full of dust and their heads full of ghosts. I took in a triple feature, any seat in the house for 35¢.

Around midnight I started hiking out Folsom toward the Mission District where I lived. In a dark deserted stretch between the puddles of streetlight, a lean black 1968 Lincoln slid up to the curb, its exhaust murmuring poh-poh-poh in the cold night air. A heavy blue-chinned face with a fat cigar screwed in the middle of it was poked out the window.

"Give ya a lift, boyfriend?"

Before I could say no, the door was open and the short fat guy who belonged to the face was on the curb beside me. A switch-blade gouged my belt buckle.

"In, boyfriend."

His blue chin joggled the spitty cigar up and down like a frayed brown finger waggling. Under his blue topcoat were stuffed twenty-five extra pounds of soft Italian cooking,

but with the knife he was plenty tough for me just then.

His partner took the Lincoln down Eighth with the lights to Bryant, then cut left towards the waterfront. He had the build of a fast light-heavy, wavy blond hair, and cold blue eyes that seemed to focus on something a foot behind me.

"Call me Emmy," suggested the stubby Italian, working the cigarette lighter nonchalantly. This was old stuff to him.

"Listen," I said, "You have the wrong guy. You made a mistake."

Leaning foward, Emmy spoke around me.

"He says we make a mistake, Earl."

Earl didn't say anything. Settling back against the cushions, Emmy announced with finality: "We ain't made no mistake, boyfriend . . . Right, Earl?"

Earl went right on not saying anything. He swung the Lincoln into the dead end on First Street across from the squat grey mass of the Seaman's Union, and parked facing out towards Harrison with dimmed lights.

"What's the handle, kid?" he asked.

"Rick. I told you, you got the wrong guy."

"Make it easy on yourself, kid. Tell us about Kiely."

"I never even heard of him." I was sweating by then.

On the corner was a dive with a red neon sign above the door. Two guys came out, glanced incuriously at the Lincoln, and angled across Harrison. I didn't move. Beside me Emmy made wet noises on the end of his cigar like a baby with a new bottle.

"We knew he was in town." Earl's voice sounded detached, as if he was trying to remember that last man he'd gunned down. "Tonight we spotted him talking with you on Third, but we lost him."

"Then we make you again comin' outta the flics," put in Emmy.

"Hell," I said, remembering. "Was that Kiely? He's just a juice-head, bummed me for a buck."

"Did he say where he lived?"

After a second I said in a steady voice, "No—nothing. Not even thanks."

Earl began to drum on the steering wheel with his fingers. Then, abruptly, "Okay, kid, I guess you're straight. Emmy, let him out."

As I slid out, Emmy shoved his face close to mine. With

his saggy jowls and droopy outer eyelids, he resembled a well-fed bloodhound.

"Right down Harrison without trying to look-see the license plates, boyfriend."

"Can the musical comedy act and get to hell in here," snapped Earl.

I told him thanks and he laughed and I walked down Harrison feeling like a tin duck in a shooting gallery with his pulley broken, even though I knew it was silly. No one shot at me. After half a block I stopped to light a cigarette: the Lincoln was out of sight. Cupping the match my hands shook, but not nearly as much as Kiely's would have shaken.

The Wessley was an upstairs flophouse two and a half blocks from the Third Street precinct station where the bus had dropped me. When I paused under the single lightbulb over the hotel's street entrance, a big car slid in to the curb in the next block and cut its lights. Nobody got out. I had the street to myself.

There was a worn matting on the creaky stairs and the stuffy office was empty. Ajax Kiely, by the register, had room twenty-seven. The Wessley smelled old and worn out, like a tired miner after a day in the pits. A strip of faded maroon carpeting wandered down the narrow hall and around two right-angle turns to dead-end at twenty-seven. Nobody did anything when I knocked.

I went downstairs, outside, and into the saloon next door. It was an old-fashioned place with high ceilings; plain heavy glass bowls filled with hard-boiled eggs were set out on the mahogany bar. On my side of the plank were two Italian laborers, on the other a balding heavy-set barkeep who looked like he could have stopped Dempsey in his day. In that neighborhood he probably had a blackjack on his hip and a loaded .32 under the beer cooler.

In the mirror I was broad and tired and white around the mouth, friendly as a truck driver out of work. It was nearly two A.M.

"What's yours, Jack?"

"I want to talk with a guy named Kiely."

"Kiely?" He made it sound like the name of an unknown animal.

"Right . . . Ajax." I pointed at the ceiling and waggled

my thumb like Matt Dillon with his six-gun. "Number twenty-seven, upstairs."

"Uh huh." His dirty towel moved the dust around on top of the bar. "You better go ask at the kitchen."

Through a connecting doorway was a darkened delicatessen with another doorway in the rear from which shone dingy yellow light. I could smell garlic and steak frying. The tiny cluttered kitchen barely held a black iron cook stove and a fat Italian woman with a fine assortment of chins. Her hair was pulled back in a wispy bun and her stabbing blue eyes hadn't missed a buck since we went off the gold standard.

"I ain't doing anything but sandwiches tonight."

"Fellow name of Kiely lives upstairs in twenty-seven. Has he been around?"

"You from the finance Company?"

I wrinkled up my nose without answering, as if someone had hung a herring under it.

She flopped over the sizzling steak, cut it enough to peek in, took down a heavy platter and reached for a loaf of French bread with an economy of motion that would have shamed an efficiency expert.

As she cut the bread she said: "Harry had some trouble out front last week. He don't like to answer questions much." She shoved the platter with the sandwich on it into my hands. "Tell the guy on the end he owes me a buck. Kiely's out back."

Beyond a washed-out green curtain at the end of the tavern was a big barren room with long tables pushed back against the walls to open the unvarnished floor for Saturday night dancing. There were wooden booths along the left wall and in the second one was Kiely, sopping up gravy from a cleaned plate with a slice of French bread.

When I slid in across from him he looked up and grinned.

"Didn't expect you tonight, sport." He gestured at the plate. "Man hadn't ought to never neglect his diet. Learned that when I was batting 300 with the Chi Sox."

I said: "Listen, there's something—"

"When the war come along I got out of baseball, sport —enlisted in the Air Force and captained a flying squad in Australia." He hacked his piece of apple pie in two and stuffed half of it in his face. Red-brown flakes of crust

spilled down his shirt front. "Ain't ever liked a Limey since then. Bought a jug of juice off one on the bus, I did, for ten bucks American. When I opened it I found it was tea. Since then—"

I repeated patiently: "Two guys. They want you. I thought you might be faintly interested, but I wouldn't want to interrupt you."

His fork hit the plate and spanged off on the floor. In the bar the juke box started blaring.

"Two guys, huh? Earl an Emmy, ain't it? By God, they did it again." Suddenly his words were bullets. "What's your angle, sport? How'd they slice it for you?"

"To hell with you, Mr. Kiely."

I started to slide out of the booth but he grabbed my arm.

"Sorry, sport. I started in Philly and it's gone through New York and Chicago and Miami and New Orleans and L.A. Spend three years on the bum with death lookin' over your shoulder, an' it does sompthin' to you."

"Okay, Pops. Forget it. I get these impulses."

He nodded.

"I seen this Earl kill a man in Philly. There was a lotta money an' I got it, never mind how. When I shake him it'll be women an' likker an' fancy hotels an' flunkies shinin' old Kiely's shoes . . ." His voice stopped, lowered. "You ever seen eighty grand, sport?"

He clawed open the top buttons of his shirt and I saw a small leather pouch slung around his neck on a cord and hung under one arm. He took out a flat metal key with the number 181 stamped in it and laid it reverently on the table between us.

"There she is, sport. Safe deposit box. But only old Kiely knows the bank an' the city an' what name she's under."

There wasn't much more for me to say. Looking at the key lying in one of the rings his water glass had made, I thought about what a man might do with eighty grand. But I remembered Earl's eyes and competent killer's hands, and was glad I wasn't Kiely.

When I looked up he was watching me.

"I know, sport: you're thinkin' that Kiely's eighty grand ain't done him a hell of a lot of good. You're right. It ain't." His blue eyes sharpened with hate, like a hustler's

when the guy she's been working for drinks turns out to be a John from the vice squad. "But once you start runnin' it ain't easy to stop. An' it ain't just the money, neither; Earl needs me dead cause I can finger him for that old Philly kill."

"Look, Pops," I said suddenly. "Give me until tomorrow morning and I can raise maybe a double sawbuck to get you out of town."

He regarded me for a long time without speaking; then one forefinger slid the key across the table to me.

"I got a feelin', sport. Gimme this tomorrow mornin' at the bus depot. Now c'mon up to the room an' tell me about Earl."

"I don't want that key, Pops."

"This way, sport, if he . . . finds me tonight I can't tell him where it is, I won't know. I tell ya, I got a feelin'."

So I stuck the key in my pocket and followed him up the back stairs. His room was typical of a Third Street flophouse: faintly sour with dead cigar smoke and narrow as a reformer's mind, with newspapers cluttering the unmade bed just inside the door. In front of the window was a worn-out easy chair that had been there when Rockne was coach at Notre Dame. The thin brown shade was drawn and the closet door stood open just enough to let a mouse out. The nap of the brown patterned rug was thin as a depression dime. It was a room to have nightmares in.

"They'd give a lot to know that what they want is right here," said Kiely, switching on the light. I turned back to slide the night chain into its metal groove and he added, in a sudden high breathless voice, "When I was playin' ball with a fellow in Philly name of Moran . . ."

He stopped abruptly, with a sigh. As I started to turn from the door there was the splitting painless sensation of being struck on the head: then there was nothing at all.

Obscenely gay printed flowers were strewn across the sides of the cheap tin wastebasket and the brown carpet tickling my nose smelled moldy. A very large wasp was monotonously sinking its stinger into the base of my skull. When I rolled over I was not ashamed to groan. Kiely regarded me thoughtfully from the broken-down easy chair.

"What the hell?" I said to him. "What the hell?"

Somehow I answered the bell for the tenth. My shoes

skittered something across the rug to rattle against the wainscoting. It resembled the knife that Emmy had held against my belly earlier that evening. I remembered the cigar smoke odor and looked at Kiely. His shirt wore a new red necktie. As I watched, the end of the necktie lengthened and dripped twice in his lap. I'd fingered Kiely afterall.

Outside a lightly-touched siren growled throatily. I recalled that the precinct station was only two and a half blocks away. An anonymous phone call, probably. Hide the knife. I drifted over, picked it up, and slid it into my pocket. There was blood on my jacket sleeve. *What the hell?* I thought then, *I can't hide Kiely.*

"Pardon me," I said aloud.

Feet pounded up the echoing stairs by the front desk. I went around Kiely to lean against the window. It burst outward with a lovely shattering sound, taking the shade with it. Shockingly fresh air, heavy with mist, stung my sluggish brain.

A heavy fist made the thin door quake and a voice like Tarzan's bellowed: "Police! Open up in there!"

From the window sill I cannonballed into darkness. My heels crunched in a pail and flipped it over landing me tail-first in a shower of stinking garbage. I dodged through a junk-littered yard to the back fence, and, though my legs were wobbly, made the top on the first try. When I paused to curse the slivers in my hands, a flashlight beam from from Kiely's window probed the yard frantically and voices shouted, so I went on over.

The ground was low and wet, the night foggy. At the bottom of a shallow muddy embankment I found railroad tracks. They led me to the 25th Street intersection; here I turned uphill, away from Third, climbed towards the Potrero Terrace Housing Projects. The cement government prefabs waited emptily for the wreckers to come, grey and cold and ghostly in the swirling mist. I found a pay phone and called a Yellow.

Sweating out my cab in the shadow of a big warehouse at the foot of Connecticut, I rolled my jacket into a tight bundle with the blood inside and the knife still in the pocket. When a prowl car rocketed past on Army Street, siren and spot blazing, I didn't try to flag it down.

My shoes echoed hollowly on the cement ramp of the all-night auto park in the basement of the Bellingham Hotel on Sixth and Mission. A husky Negro about my own age was dozing on a cot in the bright cramped office by the foot of the ramp. He resembled Harry Belafonte and had the name of the garage stitched in neat red script across the chest of his blue mechanic's coveralls.

His sharp eyes opened, focused, lit up.

"Man," he said. "Little cool to be running around outside without a jacket. He sat up, rubbing his eyes, then reached for the desk drawer where the bottle was stored. I shook my head.

"Where you flopping now, Nat?"

"Dump over on Geary and Octavia. Why?"

"I need a pad for a few days."

He took a key from his pocket, dropped it on my open palm.

"Third house from the corner, yellow with lots of gingerbread. Front room on the ground floor. Don't let the landlady see you, man. She's death on Whites bein' in there. Bad trouble?"

"Bad enough. A guy got dead." When his eyes widened I added: "I didn't do it, Nat."

"Man," he said softly, "I didn't ask. You just naturally can't stay out of trouble." He stood up to reach an army field jacket down off a hook screwed into the unpainted wall. "Be sunup when I leave here, won't need this."

I laid my jacket on the chair. "Can you get rid of this thing, Nat? There's blood on it, and a knife in the pocket."

"This the knife that—"

"Ya."

"I'll call you a cab, man; you look like hell."

It was four o'clock.

A little Negro girl skipped down the sidewalk, wearing a bright red cloth coat, her hair sticking almost straight out in two tight black braids. She was happy. Behind her came three Negro boys and one Chinese boy, all dressed in gaudy windbreakers and brown corduroy trousers. Two of them carried school books. Golden sunlight slanted across the sidewalk; no town is lovelier than San Francisco when the sun shines. Nat came up the street from the bus stop,

whistling. Under his arm were school books, too; law school on the G. I. Bill.

Over steaming coffee fresh off his hot plate I told the whole story, ending with the key in my hand. He shook his head.

"Old soft-hearted Rick," he said.

"And eighty grand."

"When you went to warn him you didn't know about any eighty grand. How the devil you figure those cats found the old man's pad?"

"Earl didn't believe that I didn't know Kiely's place," I said bitterly, "so they just followed me out there. It must have been the Lincoln I noticed pulling in down the street just after I got there."

"So they read the register, jimmy Kiely's lock, and wait in the closet. When Kiely says that what they want is in the room—bingo!"

"Not they," I corrected. "Just Emmy. I bet Earl waited outside in case Kiely got away. He never would have knocked off the old man without making sure of the money first. When I woke up the room had hardly been disturbed.

Nat poured out more coffee and leaned back on the bed. Suddenly he sat bolt upright, making the springs whine protestingly.

"Hey, man, just before Kiely got it . . . what'd he say?"

"Something about Philly and a ballplayer named Moran. Nothing there that . . ."

I stopped and looked at the key in my hand.

"That's it," shouted Nat excitedly. "He was plenty sharp. The loot is in safe deposit box 181 at some bank in Philly under the name Moran."

"There're a lot of banks in Philly."

"We can beat that. The big thing now is that this cat Earl is going to realize that Kiely probably gave you something that he wants. Better stick right here, Rick. I'll poke around tonight before work, see what I can find out."

Later, as he was at the door, I called softly: "Nat—thanks."

His grin was huge. "Old army buddies—and eighty grand." Then he laughed and went out the door.

I never saw him again.

Time passed slowly. The papers gave Kiely's killing the usual skid-row treatment—a couple inches on page two.

The Giants were looking good and there was another doping charge in the Derby. They were drafting 10,000 men this month.

The floor wore a green carpet and someone had laid rose pink paint over the wallpaper. I found a jug in the closet. How many banks were there in Philly with safe deposit boxes? A team of patient men could cover them in time.

By eight-thirty the bottle was dry. I walked through the fog to the Chinese store in the 1100 block of Geary, averting my face when autos passed. In the hall at Nat's place a black teen-ager was pleading with a black woman in her thirties in front of her open door. The hall smelled like the halls in every cheap rooming house in the world. They stopped talking to stare at me with flat observant eyes from across the racial gulf that only love or friendship can really span.

I had a few belts and switched on radio station KYA: folk rock and acid rock and d.j.'s with a bright empty line of chatter. Sometime before midnight I fell asleep in the chair.

When a newscaster awoke me at six A.M. I wished that he hadn't:

> Nathaniel Webster Doobey, twenty-eight, colored, address unknown, was found by a cruising patrol car early this morning in a doorway off Jessie Street behind the Seventh Street Post Office. There were eleven knife wounds in his chest and abdomen, and four knuckles of his right hand were broken, indicating he had defended himself until overcome by loss of blood. Doobey died in the police ambulance without regaining consciousness. Robbery has been advanced as the motive behind the brutal slaying . . .

I took a hooker from the bottle for my hangover, then doused my head in cold water at the washstand in the corner. The single weak bulb over the sink gave me back a yellow and terrified face from the wavy mirror. It hadn't been a robbery; I was next. Maybe he'd spilled where I was hiding. Run.

Nat's dresser gave me enough money to get to Philadelphia. His sport jacket was just a little tight across the shoulders and I fitted into his grey flannel slacks. A cruis-

ing cab picked me up in front of the Tommy's Joyn't on Geary and Van Ness.

The one-way fare to Philly left me nine bucks. I tried to concentrate on a magazine at the Greyhound bus station on Seventh while I waited for the bus, but it didn't work. Dead faces kept blurring the pictures. I'd fingered Kiely. Earl had probably worked on Nat personally; he was the type who couldn't quit cutting once he was started. Nat had planned a law practice in the Fillmore District, with an office on O'Farrell Street. They shouldn't have left him bleeding his life away in a dirty gutter. My hands had shredded the magazine. I tossed the woman some change and walked out into the waiting room.

They were all people going places, intent on business or a vacation, people laughing or sad or not giving a damn. But going places. Then I admitted it: I wasn't going anywhere. Not yet I wasn't. San Francisco was my town, and somewhere in that town were Earl and Emmy, searching, asking questions. They would be silently noted—and remembered.

The evening rush hour crowds were thinning when I stopped to light a cigarette for the legless man who peddles pencils on Market Street. He has more of my dimes than the phone company. My feet hurt. The legless man rested on his neat square castored board, never turning his heavy handsome head but cataloguing every person who passed. As I bent over him with the lighter he said:

"The fat one came out of Western Union two hours ago, Rick. He had a Yellow Cab waiting."

At the cab stand by the bus depot it took me half an hour to find the guy I wanted. He was a tall stooped number with brown hair and a Los Angeles vocabulary. Five bucks made him use it.

"Ya, this guy you're talking about, like he bar-hopped down around Third and Folsom quite a while. Kept me waiting, Clyde, like he didn't stop for a drink. Looking for someone, y'know what I mean, Clyde?"

"Then where'd he go?"

"Ya, like I finally dumped him at the Rockwell on Jones and Eddy. Cheap, Clyde . . . no tip. I don't dig that jazz. You a private peeper or something, Dads?"

When I went away he reburied his nose in his movie

magazine as if it was a schooner of beer. The fat man running the newspaper stand in the middle of the block stopped me to say that Stan wanted to talk to me. I figured it might be important.

Stan is a steady honest Bohunk from the Old Country who's sold papers in Market and Kearny since I was old enough to remember. He and his fat Polish wife have had me over to dinner a couple of times. He was wearing a blue sweater, huddled up in the corner of his square green booth as if he was cold.

"This Nat, he always stop here buy paper on way home from work. Then maybe two hours sleep, go college." His faded eyes blinked, once, rapidly. "I hear this fellows you look for do this thing to Nat."

"That's right, Stan."

He nodded.

"Tall one, hard eyes, he walk by here maybe two three hours ago. Down Third he go."

"Looking for me."

"Other one—fat one . . ." He blew out his cheeks like a squirrel's and patted his belly above his gold watch chain. "Rockwell Hotel bar, Eddy Street, there he drinks. The Lincoln in the parking lot is, between Larkin and Leavenworth on Eddy. No attendant."

He wouldn't take my four bucks.

"You good boy, Rick. I think you do one thing a man have to do sometimes. I tell Mama you ask after her."

"You tell her that, Stan."

When I went on, the shrouded streets threw the sound of my impatient footsteps back at me. Men of chilled smoke hurried by in search of warm rooms and good drinks and maybe soft women to make them human again. On Alcatraz Island the foghorn bellowed desolately about being out in the Bay on such a night. Swirled pearl hazed the streetlights. Somewhere in that murk was Earl, moving as a hungry cat moves, his fist full of bills and his flat blue eyes full of death.

After checking out the Lincoln I called Emmy at the Rockwell bar. His voice was mushy, as if it was being strained through one of his wet chewed cigars.

"Ya?"

In a high rapid staccato I said: "You one of the guys looking for a joker named Rick?"

"Ah . . ." His ponderous brain moved around inside his thick skull like a fullback at a ballet lesson. "Ya, I—ah . . . wanta talk to him."

"You talked to a spade cat last night on Jessie Street. That kind of finger is going to cost you."

He breathed cautiously into the phone, finally said: "You got something on him we pay good."

"Okay. Meet me at the '76' station on Franklin and Pine in twenty minutes. Bring a car and be ready to travel. I'll talk when I see some green."

"I oughtta wait until—"

"This Rick is checking out tonight. He's got his mitts on something big. Be there." I hung up.

The narrow parking lot was sandwiched between two red brick office buildings that must have seen the '06 'quake. It was dark and only held a dozen cars. When Emmy waddled up he was panting and sweat glinted on his forehead. I waited until he was bent over the door lock, then came out from between the Lincoln and the wall.

I judo chopped his shoulder with a force that numbed my hand. He sprawled sideways against the Lincoln, his hand dipping under the blue topcoat and coming out to flick a deadly steel finger at me. The blade slid white-cold across my hand, missing the tendons. Then my fingers locked around his wrist. I broke his left thumb when it tried to gouge my eye.

For thirty seconds we hung there, motionless as flies mating, while the veins swelled on our necks and the sweat began to burn my eyes. Then Emmy grunted and gave back a step. I bent him across the hood and turned his hand in toward his own stomach. He sobbed. His foot growled on the gravel. We slid over sideways against the fender. Our arms writhed like snakes: then his wrist twisted with my grip and my hand thudded against his belly.

Emmy stopped panting and let his hands drop to his sides. He stared down, dumbly. The handle of his new switchblade was a grotesque horn growing from the center of his lower abdomen.

"Oh Jesus!" There was a terrible urgent despair in his voice. The words were not a curse. "Oh Jesus Christ!"

His right hand groped for support, making opaque smears on the black polished hood of the Lincoln. The backs of his fingers were matted with dark hair. Harsh

noises came from his throat and he sat down on the gravel suddenly, like a fat man at a picnic. I backed out from between the cars, unable to look away.

From the entrance of the lot came a coarse male voice, whiskey-burred: "This is the one."

I sprang back between the cars and huddled over Emmy, clamping my hand over his mouth to shut off the slow agonized sounds.

"This—fog!" came a woman's loose voice. "Which—car is it? Down at the end by the Lincoln?"

My fingertips gently touched the switchblade's cold handle.

"That ain't it." Their long shadows danced on the gravel. They picked the car on the other side of the Olds against which I was leaning. I released a long breath and let go of the knife. The woman was giggling drunkenly; there was sudden movement and slopping kissing noises. Finally their light blinked on, the motor grumbled, and the car pulled out with its wipers snickering at the haze.

A warm tickle made me look down and see blood; my hand jerked back from Emmy's face as if it had been burned.

He stared at me in the faint light.

"Hey . . . hey . . . boyfriend . . ."

Then his lips blew some small pink sad bubbles and he died. His glassy eyes regarded me like a pair of thoughtful cocktail onions. I took a deep breath and began.

When I stood up the knife was in one hand, blade glistening and his hotel key was in the other. I walked over four cars and threw up against the door of someone's new Ford.

Here at the Rockwell, I came straight through the lobby without glancing at the desk, bouncing the room key in my hand. No one seemed to notice me. I took the stairs up here to the third floor and found this room.

That was an hour ago. Maybe the cops have found Emmy by now and loaded him on the meat wagon. Or maybe Earl found him first, got into the Lincoln, and drove quietly away. But I don't think so.

I think Earl will be up. If he's found Emmy he'll be moving warily now, looking back over his shoulder into the fog. Because he'll know then that I'm not a frightened

wino like Kiely or an inoffensive guy like Nat. He'll know that only one of us can live.

The knife is held low along my side, the way I learned on the streets out in Mission District as a kid. When the door swings open I will be hidden for the instant it will take to slide the blade into Earl's kidneys . . . if he hasn't found Emmy.

There is the clang of the elevator doors; the boy is saying: "Good night, sir."

Silence.

Is it Earl, padding down the hall on noiseless feet like the tiger I used to watch at Fleishaker Zoo on Sunday afternoons? Does he know? In my mouth is the taste of fear, as if I have been chewing on a brass cartridge case. I am so frightened I am beyond fear: I am almost calm.

The key is in the lock! It is Earl! In a dozen seconds I'll know if he's found Emmy and is prepared for me.

In a dozen seconds . . .

If I'm alive.

LOVE WILL FIND A WAY

David Alexander

When you see an avalanche roar down a mountain, you believe in God.

Not the new God of peace and compassion and forgiveness, but the old, fierce God of wrath and vengeance, whose eyes were lit with lightning and whose voice was thunder in the hills. Only such a God could make a mountain tear itself apart.

We were on the topmost ledge of the peak the Swiss call God's Staircase, standing outside the log-girded summit house, when we heard the first low rumblings of disaster. In the beginning there was only a faint patter as tiny pebbles bounced from ledge to ledge, and then the sharp staccato of a stony hailstorm, and finally the rending crash as tons of tight-packed snow exploded into a lethal torrent. Boulders that were old when dinosaurs walked the earth were belched up suddenly to skip and hurtle and pound as they broke the mountain's granite face.

For half an hour, for thirty minutes that were all eternity, the three of us—my wife Linda, the Swiss guide Keller, and myself—stood there suspended in awesome space as the terrifying tidal wave swept by within a hundred feet of us. Fragments of rock and shards of ice-hard snow were spewed into our faces, but none of us moved. We simply stood there staring at this unbelievable spectacle. When the

old, forgotten God returns to show his might, you do not turn away.

When the thing was finally over we saw that half the topmost shelf, the shelf on which we roosted precariously, had been sheared away. All the other ledges had disappeared and we knew at once that there was no way down. We would almost surely die here in a little log house suspended a mile above the earth.

We thought of the pleasant village beneath the clouds and of the laughing, rosy people, buried now forever beneath a new mountain made of rubble.

God's Staircase is the most peculiar peak in all of Switzerland—but I should not use the present tense. It *was* the most peculiar, before the avalanche sliced half of it away. It stood remote from other mountains. From a distance it resembled a slender spindle thrusting up into the clouds, or a gnarled finger pointing to Infinity. On three sides it had been sheer, slick rock, with no handholds, no footholds. A mountaineer, however foolish and daring he might be, would never have attempted to scale those sides. The fourth side afforded the easiest climb in Europe. Even fat old ladies encased in rigid corsets could conquer the fourth side of the mountain without undue exertion. That was why the villagers compared it to a staircase.

In some remote age of earth a slowly grinding glacier had made a serrated design on one side of the mountain, so that it resembled a jagged saw blade. There was a pattern of ledges, some narrow, some uncomfortably wide, from top to bottom. Climbing God's Staircase had always been an amusement rather than a feat. There had been little difficulty in moving upward—or downward—from ledge to ledge. Now the avalanche had struck, it was impossible to move either up or down.

The three of us were stranded in eternity as effectively as spacemen in a runaway rocket.

I can remember now how Schweder, the fat innkeeper, had warned us against the climb. In the spring, he said, the mountain clears its throat and someday it will cough and the whole village will be destroyed. Keller, our guide, had laughed at him and chided him for being an old woman.

"There has been no avalanche in the memory of the oldest man," he said. "It is safer to scale the peak than to climb your creaky stairs, Innkeeper."

I had not wanted to make the climb. I have never been a physical man and I have had little exercise since I was a child. I can see no point at all in knocking a small ball over acres of ground, even though this appears to be the sport of Presidents. It seems to me to be sheer cruelty to make bloody holes in animals with bullets or to rip the mouths of fish with jagged hooks. I am a novelist, you see, a novelist and a poet. I am most at peace with myself in my book-lined study in a quiet old house. I am entirely happy only when I am putting words on paper. That is why I am scribbling in my journal now, despite the unendurable pain, despite the gnawing hunger in my gut, despite the fact that death stands here beside me, hovering like a white-faced nurse, waiting patiently. A writer must always write, even at a time like this.

When we came to Switzerland I certainly entertained no idea of climbing a mountain. It was Linda who insisted that we should scale God's Staircase. Linda is a strong woman and a determined woman. She is also a very physical woman. She nearly always finds a way of doing exactly what she wants to do.

Linda and I had been drifting further and further apart in recent years. We had come to Europe on a kind of second honeymoon in the hope of saving our marriage. I suppose that basically the trouble was our lack of mutual interests. Linda seldom reads books, although she makes an effort to read the ones I write. She loves the outdoors and excels in sports. She plays tennis and golf and rides to hounds and it seems to me that she has spent more time in the summers swimming in water than she has spent walking on dry land.

The walls of my study are decorated with delicate and charming Japanese prints by Hiroshige and Sharaku and Hokusai and many other masters. Linda has expressed admiration for only two of the beautiful prints in my large collection. She likes a portrait of a rearing horse by Harunobu and a wrestling scene by Shuncho. The rest of our home belongs to Linda. At least she has appropriated it. The walls of the living room and dining room and halls are cluttered with prints of beefy men, whose faces are as crimson as their coats, mounted on leaping horses.

Linda says that our widely different interests are not the real cause of the trouble that arose between us. She says

my gnawing jealousy is the true reason. It is a fact that I am jealous of Linda's admiration of other men. I have no proof that she has ever been unfaithful to me. Still, there have been ugly stories linking Linda with Benson, the golf professional at the country club, and with young Aldrich, who is usually her partner in mixed doubles, and even with the gross and fattening Gaines, who is a Master of Foxhounds, whatever that may mean.

Linda says I criticize her too much. It's true that her eating habits used to annoy me almost as much as her strenuous physical life. I do not see how a woman can possibly retain a figure as lovely as Linda's and still eat heavy meals of meat, potatoes, and rich desserts. I have always been a spare eater myself. A single lamb chop, a green salad, and rice pudding for a sweet used to comprise a feast for me.

Now that I am on the verge of starvation I confess that my mind is swimming with dreams of the rich and heavy food that Linda fancies. Oddly enough, now that there is no possibility of gratifying the fleshy appetites, these unholy lusts overwhelm me. I do not deeply regret the books and poems I did not write. I regret that I was not a glutton and a lecher while I had the chance of gratifying the hungers of the body. Human beings like to think that in their final hours they turn their minds to God and dwell only upon matters of the eternal spirit. This is false. When you know that death is near, that it is inevitable, you become an animal. Your mind is occupied entirely with yearning for the most primitive pleasures of the flesh.

When they feed me my ever-decreasing rations, I wolf them down like the slavering mastiff Linda once owned wolfed down raw meat. That dog was the beginning of the trouble between Linda and myself. Linda threatened to divorce me when she discovered that I had poisoned the disgusting beast. Now I am little better than the dog. I exist from morsel to morsel that Linda and Keller give me. Sometimes I whine and beg for more. When Linda is near, I reach out a clawlike hand to touch her wasting body and an overmastering, though impotent, desire burns in me. Yes, I have become an animal. Even in this extremity, Linda and the guide named Keller have managed to cling to some shred of human dignity. Both still have hope, I think, but hope died in me long ago. Because of my broken

leg, I am completely dependent upon them. They must do everything for me. I know they have given me more than my share of the scant supply of tinned food with which the summit house was stocked against an emergency like ours. Now the food is gone. Half an hour ago I was fed the last of it.

Even now, Linda does not despair. When I sobbed and begged for just a teaspoon more, she had to tell me that the rations were completely exhausted, that she and Keller had given me the last. When I finished the last food I will ever taste, Linda put her thin arm around my shoulder and tried to comfort me.

"Don't worry, darling," she said. "There has to be some way down the mountain. I will find the way before it's too late. I promise you." She managed an almost cheerful little laugh. "Love will find a way," she added.

Linda's habit of uttering clichés as if they were original and witty remarks used to grate on me.

Now I said, my voice so weak I could barely whisper, "Do you really love me, Linda? Did you really love me all the time?"

She gave my shoulder a squeeze and said, "Of course, you foolish darling. And I love life. I do not want to die. I am going to find a way to live."

I dozed off into one of my fitful sleeps after writing the above. In reading it over, I see my narrative is wandering, and I wish to be coherent, for there is at least a chance that the journal will be found some day. Pain and hunger do something to the mind. It is difficult to think clearly, to set things down in their proper order. But I will try.

As I have said, it was Linda who insisted upon climbing the peak called God's Staircase. I refused point-blank and we arrived at another of the small and silly crises that have been too frequent during our married life. Linda stated that she would make the climb, even if I did not go. I could not tolerate that, of course. She would be alone on the summit with Keller, the guide, and he was the physical type of man I have always heartily detested, a stocky, ruddy fellow with fair hair and bright blue eyes. I had seen Linda looking at the Switzer covertly, the way she always looks at male animals who appeal to her.

And so the three of us made the climb, despite the landlord's grumbled warnings.

I suppose the climb was an easy one, as Keller had said. Yet by the time we were halfway up I was choking for breath and my body was slimy with sweat. My wife and Keller seemed to find the ascent only a mildly exhilarating experience. Neither was even breathing hard. They tried to conceal their annoyance at the slow progress I was making, for I was holding them back, of course. At last we thrust our heads through low-hanging snow clouds and reached the final shelf at the top of the peak. I dropped down, completely exhausted.

It was a few moments later than the mountain began to "clear its throat" as Schweder, the landlord, had predicted. Within seconds the bellowing thunder of snow and rock began.

When it was finally over I stood for moments dazed by shock. And then I screamed at Keller, "How will we get down? How will we get down again?"

Keller examined the havoc carefully before he answered. Then he shook his head and said, "There is no way down."

I became hysterical. My voice was little more than a womanish screech. "You have to get us down! We can't just die up here!"

Keller looked at me with contempt. He threw out his arms and gestured toward the village that was hidden beneath the snow clouds.

"We are better off than the ones down there," he said. "They are already buried. My father and mother and my sister are all buried in the village."

I could waste no pity on Keller and his lost relatives. Our own predicament was too urgent.

"But we're alive!" I cried. "You must find a way down. You're our guide and it's your duty to take us down safely!"

Linda spoke softly, as if she were conversing with herself. "There has to be a way," she said. "There's always some way out."

Keller was exasperatingly calm.

"It has begun to snow," he said. "The clouds hang very low and there is fog in the valley. There is no way down, and there is no way up, either. No rescue party could try to scale this peak now. But there is a chance. There is the little plane from the military post, the one that has the

funny windmill on top of it. It is possible it can land on this ledge and take us off. But not now, and not tomorrow. Not until the weather clears. And no one can say when that may be. No one knows when the snow and fog may disappear in these mountains. Perhaps a few days from now. Perhaps a few months."

"We must signal somehow," I said. "We must. . . ."

"There is no use," Keller interrupted. "No one could see our signals through the clouds and fog and snow. And they will be quite busy down there for many days digging out the bodies. But it could be worse. We have shelter in the summit house. There are cots and blankets inside. There is a stove and firewood. We guides have stocked the place with tinned food, bought out of the small fees we earn from tourists. It will last a while if we are careful. We can melt snow for water. My fellow guide and friend, Jan Brucker, knows we made the climb today. He is taking a party up Thunder Ridge, miles from here, and he will have missed the avalanche. He will tell the military post we are on God's Staircase. When the little windmill plane can fly, they will search for us."

"And when will that be?" I screamed. "When, Guide, when?"

The Switzer remained calm. "I cannot answer that," he said. "Perhaps the little plane will come in time, perhaps not. It all depends upon the weather. We must use what rations we have most carefully. By the way, there is *schnapps* inside the log house, too. You are trembling. You can use a glass."

His tone infuriated me. I was even more enraged by Linda, who put her hand on my arm and spoke to me as if she were a patient mother soothing a squalling child.

"We will find a way," she said. "There is always some way. Keller has been climbing this peak for many years. He knows every detail of the mountain, the way you know every detail of your Oriental prints."

Her words drove me mad with fury. In this life-and-death emergency she relied entirely upon the strength and resourcefulness of this stocky blond stranger. She looked upon her husband as a helpless, puling, effeminate man, good for nothing but such precious pastimes as collecting Japanese color prints.

Linda's words goaded me to an act of ridiculous bravado.

"*I* will find a way down!" I yelled at them.

And I began to run forward over the slippery rock, toward the path we had ascended, the path the avalanche had crushed. When I reached the precipice, I looked down. The clouds parted for a moment and I could see the sheer, awful drop. But I had to make a gesture, I had to impress Linda, who was calling after me in a frightened voice. I had to dare a thing the phlegmatic Switzer refused to attempt.

I saw that just below our shelf, before the naked plunge of almost vertical cliffside, there was a slight protuberance of rock, heaped over with the rubble of the landslide. I was sick and dizzy, but I began to lower myself carefully and slowly over the precipice, seeking a foothold in the debris of broken rock and snow. It was a completely futile risk that I was taking, for even if I found a foothold just below, there was no possibility of my proceeding farther.

My left foot touched something that seemed solid, but the rubble parted under me like quicksand and my whole leg was sucked down into the pile of snow and rock. And then the boulder itself gave way and went plummenting down the mountain and my kneecap was banged against the hard side of the peak, and I was dangling by my fingertips, it seemed. A sickening pain stabbed my leg from ankle to hipbone, and I screamed.

Keller managed to lift me back to the ledge. He examined me and found my leg was broken. I am a small, slight man. Keller had little trouble lifting me in his arms and carrying me into the log house. He placed me on a rude bed. I was still screaming in my agony. There was a little cache of medicines in the log house, as well as food and firewood. The Switzer found a syrette of morphine and injected the narcotic into my arm. Then he took pieces of firewood and the coiled rope from his belt and devised a splint of sorts.

I cannot tell you how long ago that was. I am sure that Linda and Keller have kept track of time, but I am afraid to ask them how long we have been here. I only know that they say the snow and fog still screen the peak where I lie dying.

The little log house is partitioned into two sections. Linda sleeps in here with me and sometimes she sits beside my bed, holding my hand, assuring me that she will find a

way. But she spends more and more time in the other room with Keller. Perhaps that is because I am too weak to talk much to her.

I can hear Linda's footsteps now. She is coming toward the door. Perhaps she has found more food. Oh, please, God, please! Make Linda bring me food!

Linda did not bring food. When I complained, she told me there was none to bring. Instead she gave me an injection of morphine. She told me it was the last syrette. When the effect wears off, I will be left to suffer unendurable pain, and to starve to death. . . .

. . . I have waited awhile before continuing this record. I tried to sleep. But I have become immune to morphine, it seems. To please Linda, I closed my eyes and breathed heavily. She thought that I was sleeping as she tiptoed back to Keller's room. She left the door open a crack, and I could hear them talking. Perhaps the pain and hunger have sharpened my sense of hearing. I could hear them quite clearly, although they spoke in low voices, fearing to awaken me.

Linda said, "Keller, will the helicopter come in time?"

"The what?" asked Keller dully.

"The helicopter. The little windmill plane."

There was a long silence before Keller spoke. "I will tell you truthfully," he said, "the little plane will come, but I do not think now that it will come in time. We are very weak. We have been here a long while and all the food is gone. And we gave most of what we had to your husband. No, I do not think our lives will outlast the fog and snow that keep the little plane away."

Linda spoke very softly. "I have found a way, Keller. We must not die. I have a plan that will save our lives."

Linda told Keller of her plan. I listened in amazement. It was so obvious, so simple. I could not understand why she had not thought of it before. She is such a clever woman, equal to any emergency. Now that I know Linda has a plan, I am hardly conscious of the searing pain in my leg or the gnawing hunger in my belly. I can even smile. There is nothing I have to do now but wait. . . .

. . . I have not waited very long. I can hear Linda coming toward my door. I wonder if she will tell me of her plan, of the way that she has found. No, of course not.

She will think it much better to have it come as a surprise to me.

There is no need to tell me. I have heard them talking and I know exactly what they are going to do.

They are going to eat me.

RETRIBUTION

Michael Zuroy

"You're quite sure?" the president of the Chowder Falls National Bank stared unwaveringly at the auditor, his face expressionless. He was a large man whose features and bald head seemed formed out of one solid chunk of stone, unsoftened by the rigidly brushed and trimmed hair at the sides. The neat nameplate on the desk before him said in black and gold letters: Augustus Prescott, President.

"Quite sure," said Mr. Tunney, the auditor, matching Prescott's unemotional tone.

"Your figures show that something over forty thousand dollars is missing?"

"Exactly forty thousand, two hundred and eleven dollars," said Tunney, as though reading from a balance sheet. Tunney was a crisp, spare man with cool eyes behind rimless glasses. One could not picture him in anything but rimless glasses.

There was a silence. When Prescott spoke again, it was with a heavy deliberateness, as though he intended to make absolutely certain of one point before going on to the next. "Your audit also proves that one of our tellers, Robert Dorp, took the money?"

"That's right."

"There's no question about it?"

"None."

"Seems to me," said Prescott, "a difficult thing for an audit to pinpoint the crook. Is that evidence conclusive enough to stand up in a court of law?"

"Absolutely." Tunney left his seat alongside Prescott's desk and strode to a long table, on which were spread out ledgers, balance sheets and work sheets. "These figures prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that the shortage originated with Dorp. Any C.P.A. in the country would agree with that."

"I don't want to prosecute the man unless we're certain."

"I repeat, this evidence is indisputable."

Prescott let out a weighty sigh, crossed the office and opened the door slightly to that the two men could look out at the banking floor. Dorp was at his cage several windows down, serving a woman depositor, smiling pleasantly. He was tall and lean with dark hair that held a trace of a curl.

"Fine-looking man," said Prescott.

"Yes. Attractive to the ladies."

Prescott and Tunney exchanged glances. "Too damn attractive," said Prescott.

Both men fell silent, wrapped up in their own thoughts. After a while, Tunney asked, "How's your daughter?"

"Eh? Oh, coming along, thanks."

"She still doesn't realize that you know?"

"She doesn't and never will, if I can help it. They call me a hard man, Tunney, but I'm soft when it comes to my daughter. I'd never hurt her—and I'd make anyone who tried to hurt her sorry."

"I'm sure," said Tunney. "By the way, how did you find out?"

"She confided in a girl friend of hers. The friend thought I ought to know."

"You are not one to advertise your feelings," said Tunney, "but I know how you felt. I know that you worship the child."

"Don't get me wrong," said Prescott savagely. "I wouldn't stand in her way when the proper time comes and the proper person. I don't go for this father antagonism towards the lover, and I don't expect her to remain a virgin child forever. But she's barely sixteen now, and not

ready for life. What happened to her was just a rotten seduction."

"Do you think she sees it that way?"

"I think she's beginning to feel that. There's a humiliated, shamed look about her. She's hurt. I think she's feeling that she's been used and discarded. You know the romantic illusions of a young girl. Instead of the adoring prince her lover's turned out to be a rutting goat that stayed for a few encounters and has gone looking for other females in heat."

Tunney nodded sympathetically. "She'll get over it. Time, you know."

"At her age it'll leave an emotional scar." Prescott lit a cigar and brooded over the smoke for a while. Then he shook his head, as though to shake the thing from his mind, and inquired of Tunney, "How's the wife?"

"Oh, all right, I suppose. She's at her mother's."

"Yes, of course."

"I don't feel that I want her at home just now."

"Yes."

"Give us both a chance to calm down, you see."

"What are your intentions?"

"I suppose I'll take her back. I think I can forgive her in view of her attitude."

"Oh?"

"Yes, she begged me for another chance. Swore that this was a temporary insanity, that the scoundrel was so persuasive that she couldn't help herself. She's considerably younger than I am, of course, and hot-blooded. But she claims she loves me and has never been unfaithful to me before, and never will again if I take her back."

"I see. And how did you find out?"

"I walked in on them."

"A shock, eh?"

"You can imagine. I'd finished an out-of-town audit unexpectedly soon, and decided not to stay away another night. It was a long drive home, and well past midnight when I arrived. I didn't want to disturb Ann, so I was quiet. I was about to step through the bedroom door when I realized what kind of sounds I was hearing. I couldn't believe it. I waited, listening to the relentless sounds and to Ann's soft crying, which I hear all too seldom myself. My eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, and the moonlight

came through the window. I saw Ann's naked form and glazed eyes and bared teeth. I saw the man's lithe, animal body, and in that instant I admit I envied him his youth and strength. It was only afterwards that I grew furious.

"I didn't know what to do. I backed away and left. I'd seen the man's face clearly in the moonlight, and I decided I could take measures later. Ann, of course, I sent packing the next day."

"And so he remains unaware of your knowledge?"

"Yes."

A long silence ensued. Finally, Tunney broke it. "What do you intend to do with the whip now?"

"The cat-o'-nine-tails? Keep it as a curio."

Tunney grimaced. "Nasty-looking thing. You could kill a man with it."

Prescott permitted himself a frosty smile. "Yes, I could. However—what about your gun?"

"I'm getting rid of that. I won't have any use for it now, any more than you'll have for that whip."

"In my opinion," said Prescott slowly, "it's extremely fortunate that we happened to begin exchanging confidences over a drink. Had we not uncovered the similarity of our situations, one of us would be in trouble now."

"Yes, and awful trouble. I would hate to be facing a murder charge."

"It's much better this way."

"Much better. Do you think he suspects anything?"

"Not a thing."

"Yes, he's a handsome fellow," said Tunney. "Real ladies' man."

"Well, let's get on with it." Prescott took a key from his pocket and unlocked the bottom drawer of the desk. He brought up two packages of currency and two shiny half-dollars. "That adds up to your figure. Twenty thousand, one hundred and five dollars apiece in bills, and a half-dollar apiece to make up the odd dollar."

The men pocketed the money.

Prescott said, "Once more, you're positive you've set up the audit to prove Dorp guilty beyond a doubt? No loopholes?"

"None whatsoever. These figures are incontestable. Remember my standing."

"Fine." Prescott puffed at his cigar. "Personally, I think

he's getting off easy. I think we're being pretty fair."

"Under the circumstances I think we're being very fair."

"Well, might as well call the police."

He reached for the phone.

POOL PARTY

Andrew Benedict

George Raymond worked steadily at the bolts that held the chrome steel ladder to the tiling at the diving-board end of the pool. It was a short ladder, going under water only a couple of feet. Already the pool, which was nine feet deep from end to end, was down almost two feet, so that the bottom of the ladder was nearly exposed.

The other ladder, at the far end, he had already removed and stored in the garage.

"Kid vandals," he remarked to Beth as he worked. "Get in and take anything they can just for the hell of it. I'll remove as much temptation as I can."

"Mightn't they break into the house, though?" Beth asked. "Those big windows—"

"Chance we have to take. There. I can lift the ladder out now."

"Wait, darling . . . One more dive? Just to say goodbye to my beautiful pool?"

"Not now. When we finish packing, maybe. I'll leave the ladder here until then, so if there's time you can have a last couple of dives."

"I'll never have another pool like this." She tried to smile. "Will we be gone long?"

"Probably. In any case we won't be coming back here. You know that."

"I know."

He stood up, linked her arm through his, and led her toward the low, sprawling house that nestled up against the dead end of one of the canyons that dot the hills around Los Angeles. "Let's finish the packing now," he said. "We have to be at International Airport by five at the latest. Remember, only the two bags. Just what you need. No souvenirs, no mementos. I'm not even taking my typewriter. We're traveling light."

"And fast," she said. "Won't you tell me what it's all about darling? I know we're running from something. That letter from your agent this morning—Can't you tell me?"

"When we're in Spain, Beth," he said patiently. "It would —take too long now. Right now we're birds of passage, and we're migrating."

He led her into the house. She was puzzled, and a little frightened, but she did not ask any more questions.

An hour later an old convertible with the top down swung around a curve in the canyon road and stopped where the road ended at the foot of a driveway. On either side of the driveway were stone pillars. One of them bore a small sign: *Raymond—Private.* A heavy chain, secured by a large padlock, swung between the pillars.

The man at the wheel, short, fat, middle-aged, was hatless, his face burned red. He lifted his sunglasses to inspect the sign. Then he turned to his companion, who was younger, light-haired and muscular. "This is it, Joe. We've found the Professor."

The younger man exhaled cigarette smoke. "Private road. Iron chain. Bushes, trees, all up the dead end of a canyon. He picked himself a nice place where nobody would see much of him."

"That figures." The fat man opened the car door and got out. "He's doing all right these days. Two best sellers, last three years. And married to a good-looking wife, just a couple of years ago. Former member of the women's Olympic diving team."

He walked up to the iron chain and inspected the padlock. Then from his pocket he took an instrument with a number of narrow blades. With this he worked briefly at the lock. It snapped open and he unhooked it, dropped the chain. "The bigger they are, the easier they open," he said.

Joe slid over behind the wheel and drove the car across

the chain and into the driveway. The fat man replaced the chain and relocked the padlock, then got back into the car. "Now let's drive up and say hello."

The convertible moved up the blacktop drive, past screening bushes, and came out in a graveled area by the pool, in front of the open garage. The two men got out.

"A pool yet," the older man said. "A big one. For the wife, I'd say. Joe, we've got it made. Everybody says California is the only place to live."

Joe gave the premises a swift scrutiny. "Look," he said. He pointed to George Raymond's car, just outside the garage, the lid of the trunk up. "Two suitcases in the car. They're packing for a little trip. We got here just in time."

"But we got here." The fat man led the way toward the house. "Say, that pool looks good. Suppose the Professor has some trunks he can lend us? After he's welcomed us, that is."

They strode across the tiled patio and into the house without bothering to ring.

Beth Raymond closed the second bag and locked it. Then she called into the next room, "I'm finished, George."

He came to the door, looking at his watch.

"Good," he said. "We'll have an hour to spare. You can have a quick swim, and we'll still have time to stop at the bank. How about a drink?"

"I'll fix it," she told him, and started for the living room. She was halfway into the room before she saw the fat, red-faced man lounging in a chair, a brandy glass in his hand.

"Hello, Mrs. Raymond," the fat man said. "Join me in a drink?"

"Who are you?" Her voice was taut. "What are you doing in here? I didn't hear any ring."

"I didn't ring. Call me Max. You keep a real nice bar, Mrs. Raymond."

"Get out of here! At once, or I'll call the police."

"Will you?" He chuckled. "You know, I don't think you will."

"Then I'll show you." The telephone was beside her. She took one step and started to dial. Someone stepped up behind her, put a muscular arm around her and pulled her tightly back against a body that smelled of sweat. She real-

ized instantly she was no match for the man's strength, and forced herself not to struggle.

The man who held her was young, blond, with closely cropped hair; not tall, but with the body of an athlete. He had been studying her pictures over the fireplace, from the '60 Olympics, and she had not seen him until he seized her.

"You know something, doll?" he said into her ear. "You feel good. The Professor has taste."

"Let her go, Joe," Max said. "We don't want to get off on the wrong foot with our hostess. No use rushing things."

"That's right, Max," the younger man agreed. "Plenty of time to get acquainted later."

He released Beth. Controlling an impulse to shake, she took a step away and turned. The young man looked her up and down in insolent admiration. His features were those of a very handsome, slightly sulky child—except for his lips and eyes.

"I don't know what this means"—she kept her voice steady with an effort—"but the police out here are very unpleasant toward intruders."

"Now you know something?" Max smiled at her over his glass. "I don't think your husband would want you calling the police, even if we let you. Would you, Professor?"

Beth turned. George had come up behind her. He stopped, and took her cold hand in his. "No, Beth. I think —no police."

"You—you know these men?"

"I know Max. We—roomed together, once."

Max chuckled. "That's one way of putting it. You see, Mrs. Ramond—"

"I'll tell her, Max!"

The fat man shrugged. "Just so she knows. Women get impulsive. But Mrs. Raymond looks like a very sensible type. Once she knows."

"George, what is he talking about?"

"Beth—it's what I was going to tell you when we got to Spain. The reason I've always been evasive when you tried to get me to talk about myself. Max and I were cellmates in the penitentiary, back in New York. I escaped eight years ago."

"Now don't take it too hard, Mrs. Raymond," Max said, watching her face. "It was just one of those things. The Professor—your husband, that is—was just out in a car with a couple of young hoods who decided to stick up a gas station. The attendant got killed. Your husband had no part of it, but he had a record, so they sent him up for twenty years."

"I'm sorry, Beth," George said, holding her hand tightly. "Sorry you had to learn like this."

After a moment she returned the pressure of his fingers. "It's all right," she said. "I know the kind of man you really are. I know you couldn't hurt anyone."

"Thank you, Beth . . . Max, how did you get here?"

Max rose and ambled over to the cellarette. He refilled his glass. "A drink, Professor, to old times? You, Mrs. Raymond? Well, don't say I didn't ask you." He returned to his chair and stretched out indolently. "How did we get here? Well, you see, Georgie, I happened to read your last book. Best seller, and all. I recognized a couple of little things in it that I told you about when we were sharing cell 413. That got me curious.

"When they paroled me, I hooked up with Joe, here. We found out nobody knew much about that popular author, George Raymond. No pictures, no address. Man of mystery. Most people thought it was a publicity gag, but I knew better. I knew George Raymond had to be George Rice, otherwise the Professor, my old cellmate."

He sipped, and smacked his lips. "I sent Joe in to talk to your literary agent's secretary. Joe has a way with women. Joe got your address from her. We bought an old car and headed west. I certainly am happy to see how well you've done for yourself, Professor."

"My agent wrote me," George said drily. "She finally told him. Now that you've found me, what do you want? Money?"

"Money?" Max chuckled again. Joe, seated at the piano, ran his fingers over the keys in a mocking chord. "We can make money. But Joe is a little bit hot and I'm violating parole. We expect to make new connections out here. Until we do, we need a nice quiet place to stay. We're moving in with you."

"No!" Beth cried involuntarily. "We're going abroad!"

"*Were* going abroad," Max corrected. "You were hop-

ing to be long gone when we got here, weren't you, Georgie?"

Unwillingly, George nodded. To Beth he said, "When I got Peter's letter this morning I knew someone must have come across my trail. That was the reason I suddenly decided we'd go to Spain."

"We'll have some great times." Max chuckled. "Why, while you and me are hashing over told times, Joe and your wife can be having a ball. She can teach him longhair music and he can teach her boogie-woogie. Joe, show the folks."

"A pleasure." Joe turned to the keyboard. " 'Piano Roll Blues'?"

He launched into the tune with verve. When he had finished he rose and made a little bow. "Thank you for your kind attention, folks."

"Joe could make a living playing in nightclubs," Max said. "That's how he started. Until he learned that killing people pays better money."

Unwillingly, Beth looked at the smiling small-boy face, almost cherubic except for the eyes. And the mouth.

"That's right," Joe said. "I rub people out." He pointed a finger at her like a pistol and made a series of popping sounds with his lips. Involuntarily Beth flinched. George's arm tightened around her.

"Like that," Joe said. "Through the heart, the eye, the skull—whatever I aim at. I've never been caught."

"But last time was a pretty close call," Max said, "so, like I say, Joe is a little bit hot." He stood up and drained his glass. "We've driven a long way, and we're hot and sticky. Joe, what do you say we get cleaned up and let our good friends here give us a little lunch?"

"I want to try a swim in that pool before lunch." Joe grinned. "I never swam in a private pool before."

"Okay, Professor, you got some spare trunks?"

"In the guest room. That door there. Top drawer."

"We'll go and change. Come on, Joe, we'll let the Professor and his lady talk things over."

They strolled into the guest room and closed the door.

"George—" Beth began.

"Let's go outside." He led her out into the patio beside the big pool. It was a third empty by now.

"Beth," he said, his face tight. "I honestly thought I was

safe, or I'd never have married you. Now there's only one thing to do. I have to stay here. You get in the car and go. Any place. Divorce me. Forget me."

"Before you decide my future for me"—her tone was icy—"you might tell me a little more about your past. The truth, this time."

"It's not a pretty story. I was a gutter kid. I became a sneak thief. I was in the penitentiary before I was twenty. In prison I got interested in reading and began to educate myself. But as soon as I was out I drifted back into crime. Then came that killing Max told you about. He's right. I was just riding with a couple of guys I didn't like very well, and I was sent up because of my record.

"I was twenty-four. I haunted the library and in time I became the assistant librarian. That's when I was nicknamed the Professor. I started writing stories about the men I knew. Then one day I escaped—just walked out with a delegation of visiting doctors.

"I came to California, holed up in a shack, began writing. When I clicked, I kept my picture out of print, avoided publicity, mingled with just a few selected people. When I met you, I'd aged enough so I figured no one would recognize me."

"And now?" she asked.

"Now I'm at Max's mercy. One word to the police and I'll be back in jail. But you're not tied down. Beth, you have to go. Leave me."

"Leave you now? What kind of woman do you think I am? Of course I don't intend to leave you."

"He was silent a moment. Then, "Thank you, Beth," he said. "Thank you very much."

"But what are we going to do?" she asked. "Something terrible will happen if they stay. I know it will. That Joe frightens me. He—"

"Beth! Go get the police. I have money now, I can hire lawyers, get a new trial. In the end, I think I can prove I'm rehabilitated."

"No!" She gripped his hand. "Suppose you don't win? You think I'll risk having them take you away from me? No, George! I won't take that chance. I can't!"

Her gaze went past him. Max and Joe were coming out of the house. Max wore red swimming trunks and Joe a pair of gaudy Hawaiian print.

"Hey!" Joe said as they came up. "The pool. The water's way down. What's wrong?"

"We were draining it," George said. His lips twisted. "We were going away."

"Well, stop draining it. Turn the water back on. You've got company now and you're not going any place."

"All right." George walked over to the valves, closed the drain valve, and turned on the inlet valve.

Joe grinned at Beth. "I showed you how I play the piano," he said. "Suppose you show me how to dive, now. Seems you're quite a diver, doll. As soon as there is enough water."

"There is enough water now," Beth said. "Let me get my suit on."

She ran into the house. Joe's gaze followed her.

Max chuckled. "You tell the little woman the facts of life, Professor?" he asked as George turned.

"I told her," George said.

"Pretty doll," Max said. "We read about her. A music student when she won a bronze medal in the Olympics. Played some concerts, took to composing music. Guess you were feeling pretty safe to marry her. Well, I have to admit you aren't a skinny kid any more. Even I might not have recognized you if I hadn't known who you were."

"What do you really want, Max?" George demanded. "If all you want is a hideout—how long?"

"We'll see, we'll see. Long enough to make some good connections. After that, George, you and your little lady will be free as birds. Of course, now that you're in clover, I know you'll want to share with an old pal."

"Blackmail? For the rest of my life?"

"You'll get used to it. I won't bear down too hard. Say, here comes your little lady back. You know, I think she's going to take a liking to Joe. The women all do. Just a word of advice, Georgie. Don't get jealous."

"No, Max," George said violently as Beth, in a dry swim suit and wearing wooden clogs, came running out. "I won't buy it. I'm going to the police and take my chance."

Without seeming to move, Max seized his wrist and twisted it up behind his back. "Joe," he said. Smiling lazily, Joe stepped up and gave George two vicious slaps. Then he drove a short punch to George's jaw. George

sagged in Max's arms. The fat man lowered him to the tiles and let him sprawl.

"George!" Beth ran up to them and knelt beside her husband. "You've hurt him!"

"Just a little lesson, doll," Joe said. "A nice clean knockout. He'll come around by and by as good as ever."

"He was talking about the cops," Max said. "You'd better speak to him when he wakes up. Somebody might get hurt if he doesn't change his mind. Him—or maybe even you."

"And we'd hate to hurt anybody as pretty as you," Joe said. "Let the Professor sleep it off. Now how about that diving lesson you promised me? Later I'll teach you something." He paused and grinned. "Maybe how to play boogie-woogie."

Beth took a deep breath and slowly stood up. George was breathing evenly, though deeply unconscious. "All right," she said. "It doesn't seem as if I have any choice."

She walked to the diving platform, kicking off her clogs as she went. Climbing to the board, she poised there, gathered herself, and dove. She clove the water neatly and made a long glide to the surface. "See?" she said. "There's plenty of water. Six feet of it. This is a nine-foot pool. Just don't dive too deep."

"Anything you can do, I can do." Joe dove from the edge of the pool and came up beside her. "We're going to have to do this lots, doll." He turned and waved to Max. "Come on in, Max. It's really great. Dunk the carcass."

"All right." Max chuckled. "Just until the Professor wakes up. A quick one now. Plenty of time later."

He sat on the edge of the pool and went into the water feet first. He came up blowing and sputtering. "This is it, Joe boy. This is the life."

"The life for us, eh Max?"

"Now I'll show you something else," Beth said. She swam to the pool ladder and lifted herself out.

"We're watching, doll," Joe said. "What are you going to show us?"

"This," Beth bent and pulled out the bolts that George had previously loosened, the bolts that anchored the pool ladder to the tiling. Then she lifted the whole ladder out of the water and put it down several feet away. "Now," she

said, her voice tight, "Teach me something. Teach me how to get out of a diving pool with no shallow area, when there's no ladder and the water is too low to pull yourself out."

"Hey!" Max said in sudden alarm. "She took out the ladder. Joe, how are we going to get out of this pool? The sides are too high to reach the top."

"I'll show you." Joe's tone was coldly savage. "The doll wants to play games, I'll show her games."

He swam strongly to the side of the pool, let himself go low in the water, then propelled himself upwards as high as he could reach. The rounded rim of the pool was now three feet above the water level, but he caught it with his finger tips and clung there. Then he pulled himself up inch by inch, until his head was level with the rim of the pool.

Beth watched as he strained upwards. Then she reached for one of the wooden clogs she had discarded. Holding it like a hammer, she brought it down on his fingers. As if squashing a fly, she smashed first his right hand, then his left.

Joe screamed and fell back into the pool. He came up gasping and choking, and trod water below her. "All right!" he said hoarsely. "You're going to be one sorry doll when I get through with you."

"Am I, Joe?" She knelt and looked directly down into his face. "Then come on, show me how you're going to get out of this pool, with the water so low and the steps gone and nothing to hold on to."

She leaned closer. "I'll tell you something. It happened to me once years ago. I swam for three hours before someone came to help me out. But I'm a good swimmer. Can you swim three hours, Joe? Or three days, maybe? With me here to smash your fingers every time you try to climb out?"

"Joe!" Max's eyes were bulging with panic. He was threshing and floundering, trying to keep his head high out of the water. "I got to get out. I'm getting out of breath. I'm all out of shape from being in stir."

"Lie back, you clown! Float. Be calm. You can float a long time. I'll figure this."

He raced for the opposite side of the pool while Max shouted after him. He made it to the pool wall, flung himself up, and once more managed to catch the rim with

his fingertips. Grimacing with pain, he struggled to pull himself the rest of the way.

Without hurrying, Beth walked around the pool and stood over him. "Another lesson, Joe?" Stooping, she smashed his hands again with the wooden clog.

Joe fell back into the water, yelling obscenely. Then he stopped, to save his breath, and swam back to the other side again. But she was waiting for him when he got there. He did not try to climb out. Instead he floated, looking up at her. She bent over, her face mirroring cold loathing.

"You hurt my husband," she said. "You've hurt lots of people. Killed some of them. But nobody's ever hurt you before, have they?"

"You can't get away with this, doll," Joe gasped. "Any minute somebody will come."

"No one comes here unless they're invited. And no one can hear you yell—we're too isolated. You came here to destroy my husband and our happiness. Now you're trapped. Don't you understand yet?"

"Joe," Max said. "She means it. Look, Mrs. Raymond, listen, it was all a gag, see? I mean, just a joke. We weren't going to stay. Just put down that ladder and we'll go quietly. We won't bother the Professor ever again."

"No, Max," Beth said, her voice flat. "You came here to stay and you're going to stay. Where you are. In the pool."

"Max," Joe said sharply. "You swim to one end and I'll swim to the other. She can't stop both of us."

Lying on his back now, floating, Max looked at the three-foot expanse of wall above the water level doubtfully.

"It's no good, Joe," he said finally. "My arms ain't long enough. I couldn't get up high enough to get a grip. You're tall, but I'm a shorty."

"You're not giving up, Max?" Beth's voice was taunting. "Giving up so soon? Oh, you're two big, brave murderers, aren't you? The kind of men who think all women are soft and frightened. Well, we aren't. Not when we're fighting for something. And I'm fighting for my husband and my happiness."

She paused, to catch her breath, and the two men floating in the water stared up at her.

"You haven't thought this through, doll," Joe said. "There will still be police. They'll catch up with the Professor."

"I don't think so. When you get tired swimming, we'll drive your car thirty or forty miles up into the mountains, after it's good and dark. You'll be in it. There are lots of ravines for it to go into. If you are ever found and identified, there won't be anything to connect you with my husband. Nothing."

"Joe," Max wheezed, "I got my breath back a little, but I can't swim much longer, not even float. I mean I'm too soft from all that time in stir. You gotta think of something, Joe."

"I have thought of something." Joe's voice was harsh. "I'm six foot, see? Standing on my shoulders, you can scramble out of the pool easy."

"Yeah." A cold light of calculation came into the older man's eyes. "You go under by the wall, I get on your shoulders and climb out. Then we got her."

Beth lifted the wooden clog warningly. "You know what will happen to you, Max."

"Ha!" Max snorted. He was already swimming to the pool wall, with Joe beside him. "Just let me get my hands on you, doll, and you've got a broken leg or wrist. If necessary, I'll pull you in with us, then we'll see. A couple of whacks won't kill me."

Joe was preparing to submerge himself, while Max got behind him, awkwardly trying to get his knees on Joe's shoulders. The first attempt failed, but they started it over again.

Beth, after watching for a moment, fled to the garage. Swiftly she snatched, from where they had stored it, a coiled hose used for washing off the tiled area around the pool, and ran back with it.

Joe was heaving now and Max's head had emerged above the rim of the pool. Max fell forward with his chest on the tiles, and gasping, scrambling, while below him Joe pushed, he pulled himself inch by inch forward.

Hurrying, but not too fast, Beth threaded the end of the hose to the pipe connection. She got it tight and spun the faucet handle wide open in a final action. Then she ran back to stand three feet in front of Max, trailing the hose behind her. "Try this, Max," she cried, and gave the nozzle a turn.

A heavy stream of water, at high pressure, shot out.

Max, gaping at her, his mouth open, caught the stream first between his eyes, then in his open mouth.

He slid back, choking, gasping, as he tried to get air into his lungs and drew in water which had been driven down his throat.

"Max!" Joe shouted below, unable to see what was happening. "Get her!"

But Max, helpless in his agony for air, fell back on top of Joe. He grasped the younger man around the neck in a desperate attempt to stay above water, and they both went under, threshing and churning the pool in frantic waves.

"Max, let go! You'll drown us both!" Joe half shouted, half sobbed, as he managed to get his head above water again.

But Max, still choking uncontrollably, was beyond reason. They went under once more, in a wild tangle of arms and legs. Seconds later they surfaced again, but only for an instant, just long enough for Joe to let out a blubbering scream. This time, when they went under, they did not come up again.

George moaned. Beth ran to his side, knelt. "George," she whispered. "George, dear."

He took a deep breath. His eyes opened, shut again, then opened once more. He looked up and managed a smile. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"I'm fine. How do you feel?"

"Shaky. Help me up."

She helped him stand, and after a wobbly moment he was able to stand by himself. He looked around and blinked. The big pool was empty. The agitated surface of a few moments before was smoothing out except for a few last air bubbles that came up and burst.

"Why, where are they?" George asked. "Inside the house?"

"No." She held his hand tightly. "No, George."

"Then where?" He stared at her, puzzled.

"We took care of them. Me and my pool. I knew I could do it as soon as they said they wanted a swim. You'd have stopped me. But I knew it had to be done. They were evil! They'd have done terrible things to us. And I wouldn't allow that! I'm a woman, George, and a woman will do anything she has to, to protect her happiness. No

one is going to take you away from me. Ever!"

Then she put her face against his shoulder and began to weep. But when the period of reaction was over, and she told him what they had to do next, she felt nothing but savage satisfaction.

A TASTE FOR MURDER

Jack Ritchie

"It's my belief that the sausage is one of the noblest inventions of mankind," Henry Chandler said. "And presented in the form of a sandwich, it is not only nourishing, but also so practical. One can conduct the process of eating without undue preoccupation. One may read, or watch, or hold a gun."

On the wall, the electric clock showed fifteen minutes after twelve noon, and except for Chandler and me, the offices were empty.

He bit into the sandwich, he chewed, and he swallowed. Then he smiled. "You and my wife were discreet, Mr. Davis. Exceptionally discreet, and that now works to my advantage. I will, of course, arrange matters to make it appear that you have taken your own life. But should the police not be deceived and decide a murder has been committed, they will still be at a loss for a motive. There is nothing obvious to link you and me beyond the fact that you employ me . . . and twenty others."

I placed my cold fingers on the desk top. "Your wife will know. She'll go to the police."

"Really? I doubt it. A woman may do a great deal for her lover . . . when he is alive. But once he is dead, it is another matter. Women are intensely practical, Mr. Davis. And there is the fact that she will only *suspect* that I may have murdered you. She will not *know*. And this uncer-

tainty, if nothing else, will prevent her from going to the police. She will tell herself, quite reasonably, that there is no reason to bring her affair with you into the open. Perhaps there are dozens of people besides me who might want you dead."

Desperation was apparent in my voice. "The police will check on everyone. They'll discover that you stayed up here after the others left."

He shook his head. "I don't think so. No one knows I'm here. I left when the others did, but I returned when I knew you were alone." He chewed for a moment or two. "I decided that it would be wisest to kill you during the lunch period, Mr. Davis. That is the time in which the police would have the most difficulty in placing anyone. People eat, they wander about, or shop, and eventually they return to their work. It is almost impossible to verify . . . or disprove . . . where they claim to have been."

He reached into the brown-paper bag again. "Ordinarily I eat in any of the number of cafeterias in this neighborhood. But I am not the type who is noticed—or missed. For two weeks, Mr. Davis, I have been waiting for you to linger after the others left." He smiled. "And then this morning I noticed that you brought your lunch to the office. Did you decide that you would be too busy to go out and eat?"

I licked my lips. "Yes."

He raised the top half of the sandwich and peered at the two small sausages. "The human body reacts in peculiar ways. I understand that in moments of stress—grief, fear, anger—it often responds with hunger. And at this moment, Mr. Davis, I find myself ravenously hungry." He smiled. "Are you positive you wouldn't care for a sandwich? After all, they are yours."

I said nothing.

He wiped his lips with a paper napkin. "In his present state of evolution, man still requires meat. However, from the point of view of one with my sensitivity, there are certain obstacles to enjoying its consumption. When I am presented with a steak, for instance, I approach it timidly. Did you know that should I bite into just one morsel of gristle, I am immediately so shattered that I cannot finish the meal?"

He studied me. "Perhaps you think that I am a bit hysterical to be discussing food at a time like this?" Then he nodded almost to himself. "I don't know why I don't shoot you this instant. Is it because I enjoy these moments and wish to prolong them? Or is it because I really dread the final act?" He shrugged. "But even if I *do* dread it, let me assure you that I have every intention of going through with this."

I took my eyes off the paper bag and reached for the pack of cigarets on my desk. "Do you know where Helen is now?"

"Did you want to say goodby? Or try to have her persuade me not to do this? I'm sorry I can't arrange that, Mr. Davis. Helen left on Thursday to spend a week with her sister."

I lit a cigaret and inhaled deeply. "I have no regrets about dying. I think I'm quite even with the world and the people in it."

He tilted his head slightly, not understanding.

"It's happened three times," I said. "Three times. Before Helen there was Beatrice, and before Beatrice there was Dorothy."

He smiled suddenly. "Are you talking to gain time? But that will do you no actual good, Mr. Davis. I have locked the outer doors to the corridor. Should anyone return before one o'clock—which I doubt—he cannot enter. And if he is persistent and knocks, I will merely shoot you and leave by the back way."

My fingertips left wet marks on the desk top. "Love and hate are close, Chandler. Especially with me. When I love —or hate—I do it intensely."

I stared at my cigaret. "I loved Dorothy and I was certain that she loved me. We would be married. I had planned upon it. I had expected it. But at the last moment, she told me that she didn't love me. That she never had."

Chandler smiled and bit into the sandwich.

I listened for a moment to the street traffic outside. "I couldn't have her, but no one else could either." I looked at Chandler. "I killed her."

He blinked and stared at me. "Why are you telling me this?"

"What difference does it make now?" I dragged on the

cigaret. "I killed her, but that wasn't *enough*. Do you understand, Chandler? It wasn't *enough*. I hated her. *Hated* her."

I ground out the cigaret and spoke quietly. "I bought a knife and a hacksaw. And when I was through I weighted the bag with stones and I dropped the pieces into the river."

Chandler's face had paled.

I glared at the butt in the ashtray. "And two years later I met Beatrice. She was married, but we went out together. For six months. I thought that she loved me as I loved her. But when I asked her to divorce her husband . . . to come with me . . . she laughed. She *laughed*."

Chandler had backed away a step.

I could feel perspiration on my face. "This time the hacksaw and the knife weren't enough. That wouldn't satisfy me." I leaned forward. "It was night when I took the bag to the animals. Moonlight. And I watched as they growled and tore and waited at the bars for more."

Chandler's eyes were wide.

I got up slowly. I touched the sandwich he had left on my desk and lifted up the top slice of bread. Then I smiled. "Pork casings come packed in salt, Chandler. Did you know that. In a little round carton. Fifty feet of casings for eighty-eight cents."

I put the slice of bread back in place. "Did you know that a sausage stuffer costs thirty-five dollars?"

I stared past him and smiled "First you bone the meat and then you cut it into convenient-sized pieces. The lean, the fat, the gristle."

I met his eyes. "Your wife would not leave you, Chandler. She had been toying with me. I loved her and I hated her. More than I had ever hated anyone in the world. And I remembered the cats and how much they had enjoyed every . . ."

I looked into Chandler's horror-filled eyes. "Where do you think Helen *really* is now?"

And then I extended the half-eaten sandwich toward him.

After the funeral, I helped Helen back to the car. When we were alone, she turned to me. "I'm positive Henry

didn't know anything about us. I just can't understand why he should kill himself, and in your office."

I drove out of the cemetery gates and smiled. "I don't know. Maybe it was something he ate."

THE TWELVE-HOUR CAPER

Mike Marmer

Herbert Wiggam stood in the doorway, one thin hand gripping a bowler hat and rolled umbrella, the other resting on the knob of the half-closed door.

"I'm leaving, Mother," he called back into the early morning stillness.

"Have a nice day." The voice from the rear bedroom was sweet, but spiritless. "You won't be late tonight, will you, dear?"

"No, Mother."

"Seven o'clock?"

"Seven o'clock," he echoed absently, his eyes sweeping the living room.

He felt curiously moved. I shall miss all of this, he thought, taking in the graceful Hepplewhite furniture, the satinwood breakfront which housed his mother's painstaking collection of Wedgwood and Minton ware, the knick-knack shelf in the corner, supporting an astonishing variety of free-blown glass miniatures.

It had once been a proud room, each piece burnished and gleaming, reflecting the morning's light. But now, everything was faded and shabby and tired, even as his mother seemed faded and shabby and tired. A widow since the crash of '29, she had taken a job and, as Herbert's salary was small, she had never given it up.

He called a gentle good-by to the shuffling, flannel-

robed figure just disappearing into the kitchen. He waited for the familiar good-by, dear, then clicked the door shut behind him.

Herbert entered, and pressed the "I" button of the ancient elevator, scarred with the names of countless teenagers who had made this groaning, perilous descent for generations. Only his own name was missing, he thought wistfully. He had lived in this apartment building for thirty of his forty years and had never found the boldness to scratch even his initials into the rust-flecked green paint. Fingering the flat gold penknife at the end of the watch chain which spanned his pigeon chest, he found himself struck with a sudden impulse. But, natural timidity and observance of order brought the hand out of the vest pocket—empty. He sighed; he would never have another chance.

For Herbert Wiggam, a prim, narrow-shouldered man of regular, unexciting habits, who allowed himself only a single secret smile as he stepped out into the morning sunshine, planned to steal a half-million dollars before the day was through.

This morning, as usual, Herbert sat in the rear of the third subway car. His *New York Times* was neatly folded into quarters, his eyes were myopically trying to make out the print.

At the Wall Street stop, the car disgorged Herbert and the numberless cousins of his bowler, umbrella, and dark serge suit. He walked a short block and entered a gray-faced building, nodding to a uniformed guard at the entrance. He took the elevator up and, at the seventeenth floor, got out. He stood for a long moment in front of a frosted-glass door which bore the legend:

> H. TUPPER & SONS, ESTABLISHED 1848, MEMBERS NEW YORK STOCK EXCHANGE. STOCKS & BONDS, CORPORATE FINANCING.

He followed a corridor and pushed through a hinged gate in the railing. Hardly glancing at the huge blackboard upon which were chalked the securities and bonds quotations at the close of the previous day's market, he went into a small, clinical room. There were a half-dozen desks, a cluster of open-face files, and a cagelike window in one

wall. Herbert's desk was set apart from the others, attesting to his clerical seniority after twenty-three years with H. Tupper & Sons.

Within a few minutes of each other and of nine o'clock, the occupants of the other desks filed in. Frisbee, tall and gaunt, with only two years' less service than Herbert, nodded laconically and slid into his chair. Miss Pomfritt, a well-endowed young woman of thirty, added a final touch to her makeup as she eased behind her desk, located near the oaken door which led into the private office of Sylvester Tupper, Vice-President. She was followed in close order by two junior clerks named Cranshaw and Lowe and finally, by Laurence Westbrook, son of Mrs. Sylvester Tupper's favorite sister.

Young Westbrook arrived just in time to be greeted by a baleful glance from his uncle, who had stepped from the inner office to count heads. Satisfied that everyone was present and, excluding his nephew, hard at work, Tupper signaled Miss Pomfritt to follow him back inside.

At 10:30 Miss Pomfritt emerged from Sylvester Tupper's office touching a hand to a few awry strands of hair at the nape of her upswept coiffure. She was hardly winded from the daily pursuit around Tupper's desk, and Herbert noted that seven years as the Vice-President's secretary had honed her agility to a fine edge.

Tupper himself, portly and pompous, came out shortly afterward and stepped to Herbert's desk.

"Good morning, Wiggam," he greeted him with an artificial smile. "Everything going smoothly?"

"Just fine, Mr. Tupper," Herbert replied.

"This is the Friday, you know. That special bond transfer is arriving this afternoon. You'll handle the shipment yourself, of course. Rather an important lot, all negotiable. We'll deposit them in the night vault downstairs."

Herbert nodded, then his eyes narrowed as Laurence Westbrook was suddenly at Tupper's side.

"Uncle Sylvester," he said obsequiously, "perhaps this would be a good time for me to take on duties a little more important than the ones I now have."

Sylvester Tupper turned to Herbert. "What do you think, Wiggam?"

Assistance on this particular shipment was the last thing Herbert wanted, so he offered his best seniority-laden look.

"I don't know, Mr. Tupper. They are my responsibility. After all, they are Bearer Bonds, and the interest coupons can be cashed at any bank without identifications, and—"

"Quite right," Sylvester Tupper cut in.

The nephew muttered darkly and went back to his desk.

After Sylvester Tupper had squeezed out another artificial smile and returned to his office, Herbert gazed casually around the room. Noting that he was unobserved, he reached for the telephone on his desk and made three calls in rapid succession. The first, to his mother, was part of the regular morning ritual. The second, which he conducted in a low but businesslike tone, confirmed a luncheon appointment at a small cafeteria on the fringe of the financial district. The third, in which he managed to disguise his voice admirably, was to a Mr. Smollet of Harbinger and Durand, a brokerage firm located on the floor directly beneath H. Tupper & Sons.

Replacing the receiver on its cradle, he unlocked the center drawer of his desk and withdrew a bundle of oblong-shaped receipt tickets. They were all blank, and had been obtained with meticulous care over the past month from the same transfer company which was to make the delivery that afternoon.

Herbert began to fill out the tickets, copying the required names and serial numbers from a neat typewritten list which he removed stealthily from a vest pocket.

When the wall clock showed noon, he had almost completed the packet of forged receipts. Slipping them back into the center drawer, he locked it and went to the wooden coat tree in the corner, from which he took his jacket and hat.

He made his way off the elevator and into the street, covered five blocks at a brisk pace, and entered a small self-service cafeteria. Making his modest selections, he balanced the tray of food and weaved his way to a table occupied by two men. One was small with a ferret face and thin, sharp nose; the other was burly with thick eyebrows and a heavy, lantern jaw.

Herbert addressed his luncheon companions as Mr. Webster and Mr. Brand. However, they were better known to the police department as Louie Webster and Muggsy Brand, a pair of fringe underworld characters whom Herbert had managed to unearth after a diligent three-week

search through the seamier barrooms of New York.

Between bites of his chicken à la king, Herbert explained the reason for his urgent summons, and when he mentioned the size of the haul, his two companions stared at each other, stunned.

Herbert took a sip from his glass of milk, then patted his lips with a paper napkin. "There's no danger whatsoever," he said. "Everything has been worked out to the last detail. It's foolproof." He hunched himself forward and outlined the first phase of the plan.

It was neat and precise, involving a step-by-step timetable. Herbert covered the clerical staff's early leave-taking on Fridays; Louie and Muggsy's appointment with Mr. Smollet downstairs, ostensibly for investment counsel, and their subsequent departure for the Fire Exit stairway; and Miss Pomfritt's unvarying habit of leaving her desk for five minutes before closing time to apply her street make-up. During her absence, the robbery would take place.

It was to be a simple operation. When Herbert entered the Vice-President's office with the bonds, Louis and Muggsy would push in right behind him. They would display guns, grab the bonds, and hit Sylvester Tupper on the head, just hard enough to put him out of commission. Then they would tap Herbert, much more lightly, merely for the record. No one, he warned solemnly, must be hurt.

The two hoodlums nodded. They had been following the plan with mute admiration. Only when the next step revealed an alarm, which signaled the guards on the main floor and automatically locked all exits, was the rapt silence broken.

"Hold it!" Louie cut in sharply. "If the Pomfritt dame comes back too soon, we're in trouble."

"Yeah," added Muggsy. "The appointment with Smollet gives us a legit reason for being in the building. But, if we're searched, they'll find the bonds."

"No, they won't!" Herbert announced triumphantly. "Because you won't have the bonds!"

Two pairs of eyebrows shot up.

"That," declared Herbert, "is the last detail of the plan." He beckoned them closer. "Now, listen carefully. When you leave the office after the robbery, you will drop the two packages into my wastebasket. I will leave some scrap paper on the edge of the desk, which you can sweep into

the basket to cover up the bonds. You will then proceed to the Fire Exit stairway, remove your masks, and walk down to the floor below. From there, you will take the elevator to the ground floor."

"Gotcha," said Muggsy eagerly. "If the alarm does go off, we're clean. Right?"

"Right."

"Not so right," said Louie. "How do the bonds get out of the building?"

"Simple. The police will question me and naturally find me innocent; after all, I am a trusted employee. When they have left, I will remove the bonds from the wastebasket, slip them into my briefcase, and depart unmolested with the spoils!" Herbert's voice ended on a proud note.

"Well, now, ain't that something." Muggsy gloated. "We pull off a half-million-dollar bond job and don't even take the chance of getting caught with the stuff."

Louie was a little more practical-minded. "How much can we peddle these bonds off for? You said they're easy to cash."

A dreamy look flitted across the clerk's face. "A cautious man could go to some foreign country, clip the interest coupons as they come due, and live very nicely on an income of about twenty thousand dollars a year." The dreamy look disappeared abruptly. "But, of course, you gentlemen are hardly the cautious type. The sale of the bonds should realize about two hundred and fifty thousand dollars, I would say. Now—are we all clear on the timetable?"

The three men put their heads together and repeated the schedule, step by step. When they finished, Herbert stood up and squared the bowler hat on his head.

"Good-by, gentlemen," he said gravely. "Until we meet again—at 4:58."

As he walked to the door of the cafeteria, he paused for a moment; then, on a sudden impulse, he tilted the bowler to a more rakish angle and stepped jauntily out into the street.

The early afternoon, like the early morning, was routine. Herbert dispatched more runners, counted more securities, compared more monies, and every chance he could, he worked quietly at his desk, adding to the growing stack of forged receipts.

He had just completed them at 3:30, when the special bond shipment arrived. Mildly surprised at his own composure, Herbert accepted the bonds through the cage window, arranged for a cup of coffee for the uniformed courier, and went to his desk. It was then that Laurence Westbrook gave Herbert his second anxious moment.

As Herbert was making every pretense of checking, and signing for, the shipment, he was suddenly joined by the young man. Westbrook stood above him, arms folded across his chest, neck craned.

"I hope you don't mind my looking over your shoulder," he said, acidly. "I just want to see how a responsible man works."

Only when his uncle unexpectedly poked his head out of the office did Westbrook scurry back to his own duties.

"Will you be finished by five, Wiggam?" the Vice-President called to him.

"Perhaps a few minutes earlier," Herbert answered and, as Tupper's door closed, Herbert effected the switch, turning the counterfeit receipts over to the messenger.

At four o'clock he uttered a silent prayer that Louie and Muggsy had arrived at Harbinger and Durand, and were absorbing some needless financial counsel from the guileless Mr. Smollet.

By 4:15 he had the large yellow proof sheet spread across the desk and was making the forged entries in their proper squares. A glowering Laurence Westbrook had already left for the weekend, followed shortly by the two young clerks, Cranshaw and Lowe, and finally by the gaunt Frisbee.

Herbert carefully checked and rechecked the entries against his secret list which was derived from serial numbers of bonds credited to the personal account of Sylvester Tupper. It might be five or even ten years before the Vice-President would have any need for them, so the serial numbers for which the police would be keeping a lookout would be lying in Tupper's safe-deposit box all the while.

When Herbert finished, he checked the time again and was startled to discover it to be 4:55, the moment when Louie and Muggsy were scheduled to leave the brokerage house downstairs, and Miss Pomfritt was due to perform her afternoon makeup ritual.

True to form, the secretary took a voluminous handbag from a side drawer and headed for the washroom, tossing an absent smile as she passed. Herbert returned it, a little less absently perhaps.

Quickly, he moved his wastebasket to the most advantageous position and carefully laid a dozen or so sheets of scratch paper at the edge of the desk, partially hanging over the basket. He stepped back to survey the scene; it was perfect. He slipped heavy rubber bands around the two stacks of bonds, compressing them into tight packets. One more look at the clock. It was 4:58, the time when Louie and Muggsy should be stepping into view.

He closed his eyes tightly, then opened them slowly, almost fearfully. As if by magic, two masked figures appeared in the doorway. Herbert's knees almost buckled from relief.

The robbery went precisely according to plan and, from his prone position, Herbert watched as the bonds were dropped into his wastebasket, papers slid off the desk to cover them, and two pairs of trousered legs ran off.

They were replaced in short order by a pair of shapely silk-clad ones, and Miss Pomfritt's scream resounded from the walls.

It was almost an hour later when the beefy, red-faced police lieutenant had finished questioning Miss Pomfritt and Sylvester Tupper and turned his attention to Herbert.

The Vice-President had a large bandage around his head and was being comforted by his secretary. Herbert, seated in his own chair, wore a small patch on his forehead.

"So, you can't describe the holdup men, either, Mr. Wiggam," said the lieutenant as he sat on the edge of Herbert's desk, legs dangling.

"No, sir," replied Herbert. "It was just as Mr. Tupper said; one was big and husky, the other was short and thin. They both wore masks."

The lieutenant held a list of numbers in his hand. "And this is a complete list of the stolen bonds?"

"Yes, sir. I took the liberty of compiling it while we were waiting for you."

"Good thinking. It will help us identify the bonds when they show up." He put the list down on the desk.

"Will you need us any longer?" asked Sylvester Tupper.

"No, I don't think so. I have a few more questions for Mr. Wiggam here, and that should do it."

"Then we'll take our leave." Leaning a little more heavily on Miss Pomfritt than his injury required, Tupper made his way out the door.

The lieutenant twisted back to Herbert. As the questions were snapped off and answered, Herbert noted with growing concern that the policeman's foot was swinging back and forth, narrowly missing the wastebasket each time.

The concern turned the anxiety to anguish as, with a thonk, the foot made contact.

The wastebasket teetered, tilted, and, just as it seemed about to topple over, rocked wobbled, and finally settled back to normal.

Herbert stared down, then compressed his lids tightly, trying to blot out the sight. One of the packets of bonds was now exposed amongst the scrap paper!

As the lieutenant got up and looked speculatively toward Tupper's office, Herbert stealthily elbowed the remaining papers from the desk into the basket.

"What's this?" barked the lieutenant, spinning suddenly. He reached into the wastebasket and began removing the top layers of paper. Tiny beads of perspiration popped out on Herbert's upper lip. The lieutenant straightened up.

"You almost threw the serial numbers away," he said in mild rebuke, waving the list. "Now, let's take one more look at the scene of the crime."

As he was being led toward the Vice-President's office, Herbert glanced back over his shoulder, just as a large burlap bag on a cart was being pushed into the room. Behind the cart shuffled a listless form, deep lines of weariness etched into its aged face.

Following Herbert's gaze, the lieutenant muttered, "It's just the cleaning woman," and pulled the clerk into the office.

Even as the lieutenant and two uniformed policemen reenacted the crime with him, Herbert, his pulse pounding, could hear the sound of a dust rag being flicked over the desks and the metallic clank of wastebaskets being lifted and their contents now dumped into the burlap bag.

When they emerged from Tupper's office, Herbert stepped quickly back to his desk and looked down.

The wastebasket was empty!

His eyes followed the back of the cleaning woman as she maneuvered her cart through the door and out into the corridor.

It took another half-hour before the lieutenant wound up the investigation to his satisfaction and led the way down the elevator and out into the street.

Herbert felt mild shock that the buildings and sidewalks were still bathed in light; the last few hours had seemed like an eternity. He refused the offer of a ride home, saying that he preferred to walk a bit first. The lieutenant thanked him again for the list of serial numbers, and the police car roared off.

The moment it disappeared from sight, Herbert sprinted to the corner, where he hailed a passing taxi. He gave the driver his destination, told him to hurry, and settled back into the cushions, trying to catch his breath.

As the cab pulled up at the airport, Herbert got out and went directly to the passenger loading area. A loud-speaker was blaring: "Last call for Rio de Janeiro, Flight 706, boarding at Gate 4-C."

Glancing up at the airline clock, Herbert saw the time was seven o'clock; exactly twelve hours since he rose from bed that morning.

At Gate 4-C, he walked up to a tiny figure in a black coat and flowered pillbox hat. Occupied with two suitcases, the woman had her back toward him. Herbert tapped her on the shoulder.

"I'm right on time, Mother," he said.

"That's fine, dear." The voice was still as sweet, and it had lost some of the dispirited air. "Did everything go all right?"

"Yes, Mother, right down to the last detail."

"That's nice, dear."

Herbert picked up the two suitcases and, as they walked out to the plane, he smiled gently. The lines of weariness seemed less deeply etched in his mother's face. And her step seemed less shuffling than it had been just an hour ago, when she finished her last day as cleaning woman for H. Tupper & Sons.

DEATH WISH

Lawrence Block

The cop saw the car stop on the bridge but didn't pay any particular attention to it. People were apt to pull over to the side in the middle of the span, especially late at night when the traffic was thin and they could stop for a moment without somebody's horn stabbing them in the back. The bridge was a graceful steel parabola over the deep channel of river that cut the city neatly in two, and the center of the bridge provided the best view of the city, with the old downtown buildings clustered together on the right, the flour mills downriver on the left, the gentle skyline, the gulls maneuvering over the river. The bridge was the best place to see it all. It wasn't private enough for the teenagers, who were given to long-term parking and preferred drive-in movie theatres or stretches of road along the north bank of the river, but sightseers stopped often, took in the view for a few moments, and then continued across.

Suicides liked the bridge, too. The cop didn't think of that at first, not until he saw the man emerge from the car, and walk slowly to the footpath at the edge, and place a hand tentatively upon the rail. There was something in his stance, something in the pose of the solitary figure upon the empty bridge in the after-midnight gloom, something about the grayness of the night, the way the fog was com-

ing off the river. The cop looked at him and cursed and wondered if he could get to him in time.

He walked toward the man, headed over the bridge on the footpath. He didn't want to shout or blow his whistle at him because he knew what shock or surprise could do to a potential jumper. Once he saw the man's hands tense on the rail, his feet lifting up on the toes. At that moment he almost cried out, almost broke into a run, but then the man's feet came back into position, his hands loosened their grip, and he took out a cigarette and lit it. Then the cop knew he had time. They always smoked that last cigarette all the way down before they went over the edge.

When the cop was within ten yards of him the man turned, started slightly, then nodded in resignation. He appeared to be somewhere in his middle thirties, tall, with a long narrow face and deep-set eyes topped with thick black eyebrows.

"Nice night," the cop said.

"Yes."

"Having a look at the sights?"

"That's right."

"Saw you out here, thought I'd come out and have a talk with you. It can get lonely this hour at night." The cop patted his pockets, passed over his cigarettes. "Say, you don't happen to have a spare cigarette on you, do you? I must have run out."

The man gave him a cigarette. It was a filter, and the cop normally smoked nothing but regulars, but he wasn't about to complain. He thanked the man, accepted a light, thanked him again and stood beside him, hands on the rail, leaning out over the water and looking at the city and the river.

"Looks pretty from here," he said.

"Does it?"

"Sure, I'd say so. Makes a man feel at peace with himself."

"It hasn't had that effect on me," the man said. "I was thinking about, oh, the ways a man could find peace for himself."

"I guess the best way is just to go on plugging away at life," the cop said. "Things generally have a way of straightening themselves out, sooner or later. Some of the

time they take a while, and I guess they don't look too good, but they work out."

"You really believe that?"

"Sure."

"With the things you see in your job?"

"Even with all of it," the cop said. "It's a tough world, but that's nothing new. It's the best we've got, the way I figure it. You're sure not going to find a better one at the bottom of a river."

The man said nothing for a long time, then he pitched his cigarette over the rail. He and the cop stood watching it as it shed sparks on the way down, then heard the tiny hiss as it met the water.

"It didn't make much of a splash," the man said.

"No."

"Few of us do," the man said. He paused for a moment, then turned to face the cop. "My name's Edward Wright," he added. The cop gave his own name. "I don't think I would have done it," the man went on. "Not tonight."

"No sense taking chances, is there?"

"I guess not."

"You're taking a chance yourself, aren't you? Coming out here, standing at the edge, thinking it over. Anyone who does that long enough, sooner or later gets a little too nervous and goes over the edge. He doesn't really want to and he's sorry long before he hits the water, but it's too late; he took too many chances and it's over for him. Tempt fate too much and fate gets you."

"I suppose you're right."

"Something in particular bothering you?"

"Not . . . anything special, no."

"Have you been seeing a doctor?"

"Off and on."

"That can help, you know."

"So they say."

"Want to go grab a cup of coffee?"

The man opened his mouth, started to say something, then changed his mind. He lit another cigarette and blew out a cloud of smoke, watching the way the wind dispersed it. "I'll be all right now," he said.

"Sure?"

"I'll go home, get some sleep. I haven't been sleeping so well, not since my wife—"

"Oh," the cop said.

"She died. She was all I had and, well, she died."

The cop put a hand on his shoulder. "You'll get over it, Mr. Wright. You just have to hold on, that's all. Hold on, and sooner or later you'll get over it. Maybe you think you can't live through it, nothing will be the same, but—"

"I know."

"You sure you don't want a cup of coffee?"

"No, I'd better get home," the man said. "I'm sorry to cause trouble. I'll try to relax, I'll be all right."

The cop watched him drive away and wondered whether he should have taken him in. No point, he decided. You went crazy enough hauling in every attempted suicide, and this one hadn't actually attempted anything, he had merely thought about it. Too, if you started picking up everyone who contemplated suicide you'd have your hands full.

He headed back for the other side of the bridge. When he reached his post he decided he should make a note of it, anyway, so he hauled out his pencil and his notebook and wrote down the name, *Edward Wright*. So he would remember what the name meant, he added *Big Eyebrows, Wife Dead, Contemplated Jumping.*

The psychiatrist stroked his pointed beard and looked over at the patient on the couch. The importance of beard and couch, as he had told his wife many times, lay in their property for enabling his patients to see him as a function of such outward symbols rather than as an individual, thus facilitating transference. His wife hated the beard and felt he used the couch for amorous dalliance. It was true, he thought, that he and his plump blonde receptionist had on a few occasions occupied the couch together. A few memorable occasions, he amended, and he closed his eyes, savoring the memory of the delicious way he and Hannah had gone through Krafft-Ebing together, page by delirious page.

Reluctantly, he dragged himself back to his current patient. ". . . no longer seems worth living," the man said. "I drag myself through life a day at a time."

"We all live our lives a day at a time," the psychiatrist commented.

"But is it always an ordeal?"

"No."

"I almost killed myself last night. No, the night before last. I almost jumped from the Morrissey Bridge."

"And?"

"A policeman came along. I wouldn't have jumped anyway."

"Why not?"

"I don't know."

The interplay went on, the endless dialogue of patient and doctor. Sometimes the doctor could go through the whole hour without thinking at all, making automatic responses, reacting as he always did, but not really hearing a word that was said to him. *I wonder*, he thought, *whether I do these people any good at all. Perhaps they only wish to talk and need only the illusion of a listener. Perhaps the entire profession is not more than an intellectual confidence game. If I were a priest,* he thought wistfully, *I could go to my bishop when struck by doubts of faith, but psychiatrists do not have bishops. The only trouble with the profession is the unfortunate absence of an orderly hierarchy. Absolute religions could not be so democratically organized.*

He listened, next, to a dream. Almost all of his patients delighted in telling him their dreams, a source of unending frustration to the psychiatrist, who never in his life remembered having a dream of his own. From time to time he fantasied that it was all a gigantic put-on, that there were really no dreams at all. He listened to this dream with academic interest, glancing now and then at his watch, wishing the fifty-minute hour would end. The dream, he knew, indicated a diminishing enthusiasm for life, a development of the death wish, and a desire for suicide that was being tentatively held in check by fear and moral training. He wondered how long his patient would be able to refrain from taking his own life. In the three weeks he had been coming for therapy, he had seemed to be making only negative progress.

Another dream. The psychiatrist closed his eyes, sighed, and ceased listening. Five more minutes, he told himself. Five more minutes and then this idiot would leave, and perhaps he could persuade plump blonde Hannah to do some further experimentation with him. There was a case of Stekel's he had read just the other night that sounded delicious.

The doctor looked up at the man, took in the heavy eyebrows, the deep-set eyes, the expression of guilt and fear. "I have to have my stomach pumped, Doctor," the man said. "Can you do it here or do we have to go to a hospital?"

"What's the matter with you?"

"Pills."

"What sort? Sleeping pills? Is that what you mean?"

"Yes."

"What sort? And how many did you take?"

The man explained the content of the pills and said that he had taken twenty. "Ten is a lethal dose," the doctor said. "How long ago did you take them?"

"Half an hour. No, less than that. Maybe twenty minutes."

"And then you decided not to act like a damned fool, eh? I gather you didn't fall asleep. Twenty minutes? Why wait this long?"

"I tried to make myself throw up."

"Couldn't do it? Well, we'll try the stomach pump," the doctor said. The operation of the pump was unpleasant, the analysis of the stomach's contents even less pleasant. The pumping had been in plenty of time, the doctor discovered. The pills had not yet been absorbed to any great degree by the bloodstream.

"You'll live," he said finally.

"Thank you, Doctor."

"Don't thank me. I'll have to report this, you know."

"I wish you wouldn't. I'm . . . I'm under a psychiatrist's care. It was more an accident than anything else, really."

"Twenty pills?" The doctor shrugged. "You'd better pay me now," he said. "I hate to send bills to potential suicides. It's risky."

"This is a fine shotgun for the price," the clerk said. "Now, if you want to get fancy, you can get yourself a weapon with a lot more range and accuracy. For just a few dollars more—"

"No, this will be satisfactory. And I'll need a box of shells."

The clerk put the box on the counter. "Or three boxes for—"

"Just the one."

"Sure thing," the clerk said. He drew the registry ledger from beneath the counter, opened it, set it on top of the counter. "You'll have to sign right there," he said, "to keep the state happy." He checked the signature when the man had finished writing. "Now I'm supposed to see some identification, Mr. Wright. Just a driver's license if you've got it handy." He checked the license, compared the signatures, jotted down the license number, and nodded, satisfied.

"Thank you," said the man, when he had received his change. "Thank you very much."

"Thank *you,* Mr. Wright. I think you'll get a lot of use out of that gun."

"I'm sure I will."

At nine o'clock that night Edward Wright heard his back doorbell ring. He walked downstairs, glass in hand, finished his drink and went to the door. He was a tall man, with sunken eyes topped by thick black eyebrows. He looked outside, recognized his visitor, hesitated only momentarily, and opened the door.

His visitor poked a shotgun into Edward Wright's abdomen.

"Mark—"

"Invite me in," the man said. "It's cold out here."

"Mark, I don't—"

"Inside."

In the living room Edward Wright stared into the mouth of the shotgun and knew that he was going to die.

"You killed her, Ed," the visitor said. "She wanted a divorce. You couldn't stand that, could you? I told her not to tell you. I told her it was dangerous, that you were nothing but an animal. I told her to run away with me and forget you but she wanted to do the decent thing and you killed her."

"You're crazy!"

"You made it good, didn't you? Made it look like an accident. How did you do it? You'd better tell me, or this gun goes off."

"I hit her."

"You hit her and killed her? Just like that?"

Wright swallowed. He looked at the gun, then at the man. "I hit her a few times. Quite a few times. Then I

threw her down the cellar stairs. You can't go to the police with this, you know. They can't prove it and they wouldn't believe it."

"We won't go to the police," the man said. "I didn't go to them at the beginning. They didn't know of a motive for you, did they? I could have told them a motive, but I didn't go, Edward. Sit down at your desk, Edward. Now. That's right. Take out a sheet of paper and a pen. You'd better do as I say, Edward. There's a message I want you to write."

"You can't—"

"Write *I can't stand it any longer. This time I won't fail,* and sign your name."

"I won't do it."

"Yes, you will, Edward." He pressed the gun against the back of Edward Wright's shaking head.

"You wouldn't do it," Wright said.

"But I would."

"You'll hang for it, Mark. You won't get away with it."

"Suicide, Edward."

"No one would believe I would commit suicide, note or no note. They won't believe it."

"Just write the note, Edward. Then I'll give you the gun and leave you with your conscience. I definitely know what you'll do."

"You—"

"Just write the note. I don't want to kill you, Edward. I want you to write the note as a starter, and then I'll leave you here."

Wright did not exactly believe him, but the shotgun poised against the back of his head left him little choice. He wrote the note, signed his name.

"Turn around, Edward."

He turned, stared. The man looked very different. He had put on false eyebrows and a wig, and he had done something to his eyes, put make-up around them."

"Do you know who I look like now, Edward?"

"No."

"I look like *you,* Edward. Not exactly like you, of course. Not close enough to fool people who know you, but we're both about the same height and build. Add the character tags, the eyebrows and the hair and the hollow eyes, and put them on a man who introduces himself as Edward

Wright and carries identification in that name, and what have you got? You've got a good imitation of you, Edward."

"You've been impersonating me."

"Yes, Edward."

"But why?"

"Character development," the man said. "You just told me you're not the suicidal type and no one will believe it when you kill yourself. However, you'd be surprised at your recent actions, Edward. There's a policeman who had to talk you out of jumping off the Morrissey Bridge. There's the psychiatrist who has been treating you for suicidal depression, complete with some classic dreams and fantasies. And there's the doctor who had to pump your stomach this afternoon." He prodded Edward's stomach with the gun.

"Pump my—"

"Yes, your stomach. A most unpleasant procedure, Edward. Do you see what I've gone through on your account? Sheer torture. You know, I was worried that my wig might slip during the ordeal, but these new epoxy resins are extraordinary. They say you can even wear a wig swimming, or in the shower." He rubbed one of the false eyebrows with his forefinger. "See how it stays on? And very lifelike, don't you think?"

Edward didn't say anything.

"All those things you've been doing, Edward. Funny you can't recall them. Do you remember buying this shotgun, Edward?"

"I—"

"You did, you know. Not an hour ago, you went into a store and bought this gun and a box of shells. Had to sign for it. Had to show your driver's license, too."

"How did you get my license?"

"I didn't. I created it." The man chuckled. "It wouldn't fool a policeman, but no policeman ever saw it. It certainly fooled the clerk, though. He copied that number very carefully. So you must have bought that gun after all, Edward."

The man ran his fingers through his wig. "Remarkably lifelike," he said again. "If I ever go bald, I'll have to get myself one of these." He laughed. "Not the suicidal type? Edward, this past week you've been the most suicidal man in town. Look at all the people who will swear to it."

"What about my friends? The people at the office?"

"They'll all help it along. Whenever a man commits suicide, his friends start to remember how moody he's been lately. Everybody always wants to get into the act, you know. I'm sure you've been acting very shocked and distraught over her death. You'd have to play the part, wouldn't you? Ah, you never should have killed her, Edward. I loved her, even if you didn't. You should have let her go, Edward."

Wright was sweating. "You said you weren't going to murder me. You said you would leave me alone with the gun—"

"Don't believe everything you hear," the man said, and very quickly, very deftly, he jabbed the gun barrel into Wright's mouth and pulled the trigger. Afterward he arranged things neatly enough, removed one of Wright's shoes, positioned his foot so that it appeared he had triggered the shotgun with his big toe. Then he wiped his own prints from the gun and managed to get Wright's prints all over the weapon. He left the note on top of the desk, slipped the psychiatrist's business card in Wright's wallet, stuffed the bill of sale for the gun into Wright's pocket.

"You shouldn't have killed her," he said to Wright's corpse. Then smiling privately, he slipped out the back door and walked off into the night.

THE WHITE HAT

Sax Rohmer

I

"Hallo! Innes," said Paul Harley as his secretary entered. "Someone is making a devil of a row outside."

"This is the offender, Mr. Harley," said Innes, and handed my friend a visiting card.

Glancing at the card, Harley read aloud:

"Major J. E. P. Ragstaff, Cavalry Club."

Meanwhile a loud harsh voice, which would have been audible in a full gale, was roaring in the lobby.

"Nonsense!" I could hear the Major shouting. "Balderdash! There's more fuss than if I had asked for an interview with the Prime Minister. Piffle! Balderdash!"

Innes's smile developed into a laugh, in which Harley joined, then:

"Admit the Major," he said.

Into the study where Harley and I had been seated quietly smoking, there presently strode a very choleric Anglo-Indian. He wore a horsy check suit and white spats, and his tie closely resembled a stock. In his hand he carried a heavy malacca cane, gloves, and one of those tall, light-gray hats commonly termed white. He was below medium height, slim and wiry; his gait and the shape of his legs, his build, all proclaimed the dragoon. His complexion was purple, and the large white teeth visible beneath a bristling gray moustache added to the natural ferocity of

his appearance. Standing just within the doorway:

"Mr. Paul Harley?" he shouted.

It was apparently an inquiry, but it sounded very much like a reprimand.

My friend, standing before the fireplace, his hands in his pockets and his pipe in his mouth, nodded brusquely.

"I am Paul Harley," he said. "Won't you sit down?"

Major Ragstaff, glancing angrily at Innes as the latter left the study, tossed his stick and gloves on to a settee, and drawing up a chair, seated himself stiffly upon it as though he were in a saddle. He stared stright at Harley, and:

"You are not the sort of person I expected, sir," he declared. "May I ask if it is your custom to keep clients dancin' on the mat and all that—on the blasted mat, sir?"

Harley suppressed a smile, and I hastily reached for my cigarette-case which I had placed upon the mantelshelf.

"I am always naturally pleased to see clients, Major Ragstaff," said Harley, "but a certain amount of routine is necessary even in civilian life. You had not advised me of your visit, and it is contrary to my custom to discuss business after five o'clock."

As Harley spoke the Major glared at him continuously, and then:

"I've seen you in India!" he roared; "damme! I've seen you in India!—and, yes! in Turkey! Ha! I've got you now sir!" He sprang to his feet. "You're the Harley who was in Constantinople in 1912."

"Quite true."

"Then I've come to the wrong shop."

"That remains to be seen, Major."

"But I was told you were a private detective, and all that."

"So I am," said Harley quietly. "In 1912 the Foreign Office was my client. I am now at the service of anyone who cares to employ me."

"Hell!" said the Major.

He seemed to be temporarily stricken speechless by the discovery that a man who had acted for the British Government should be capable of stooping to the work of a private inquiry agent. Staring all about the room with a sort of naïve wonderment, he drew out a big silk hand-

kerchief and loudly blew his nose, all the time eyeing Harley questioningly. Replacing his handkerchief he directed his regard upon me, and:

"This is my friend, Mr. Knox," said Harley; "you may state your case before him without hesitation, unless—"

I rose to depart, but:

"Sit down, Mr. Knox! Sit down, sir!" shouted the Major. "I have no dirty linen to wash, no skeletons in the cupboard or piffle of that kind. I simply want something explained which I am too thick-headed—too damned thick-headed, sir—to explain myself."

He resumed his seat, and taking out his wallet, extracted from it a small newspaper cutting which he offered to Harley.

"Read that Mr. Harley," he directed. "Read it aloud."

Harley read as follows:

> "Before Mr. Smith, at Marlborough Street Police Court, John Edward Bampton was charged with assaulting a well-known clubman in Bond Street on Wednesday evening. It was proved by the constable who made the arrest that robbery had not been the motive of the assault, and Bampton confessed that he bore no grudge against the assailed man, indeed, that he had never seen him before. He pleaded intoxication, and the police surgeon testified that although not actually intoxicated, his breath had smelled strongly of liquor at the time of his arrest. Bampton's employers testified to a hitherto blameless character, and as the charge was not pressed, the man was dismissed with a caution."

Having read the paragraph, Harley glanced at the Major with a puzzled expression.

"The point of this quite escapes me," he confessed.

"Is that so?" said Major Ragstaff. "Is that so, sir? Perhaps you will be good enough to read *this*."

From his wallet he took a second newspaper cutting, smaller than the first, and gummed to a sheet of club notepaper. Harley took it and read as follows:

> "Mr. De Lana, a well-known member of the Stock

Exchange, who met with a serious accident recently, is still in a precarious condition."

The puzzled look on Harley's face grew more acute, and the Major watched him with an expression which I can only describe as being one of fierce enjoyment.

"You're thinkin' I'm a damned old fool, ain't you?" he shouted suddenly.

"Scarcely that," said Harley, smiling slightly, "but the significance of these paragraphs is not apparent, I must confess. The man Bampton would not appear to be an interesting character, and since no great damage has been done, his drunken frolic hardly comes within my sphere. Of Mr. De Lana, of the Stock Exchange, I never heard, unless he happens to be a member of the firm of De Lana and Day?"

"He's not a member of that firm, sir," shouted the Major. "He *was*, up to six o'clock this evenin'."

"What do you mean exactly?" inquired Harley, and the tone of his voice suggested that he was beginning to entertain doubts of the Major's sanity or sobriety; then:

"He's dead!" declared the latter. "Dead as the Begum of Bangalore! He died at six o'clock. I've just spoken to his widow on the telephone."

I suppose I must have been staring very hard at the speaker and certainly Harley was doing so, for suddenly directing his fierce gaze toward me:

"You're completely treed, sir, and so's your friend!" shouted Major Ragstaff.

"I confess it," replied Harley quietly; "and since my time is of some little value I would suggest, without disrespect, that you explain the connection, if any, between yourself, the drunken Bampton, and Mr. De Lana, of the Stock Exchange, who died, you inform us, at six o'clock this evening as the result, presumably, of injuries received in an accident."

"That's what I'm here for!" cried Major Ragstaff. "In the first place, then, I am the party, although I saw to it that my name was kept out of print, whom the drunken lunatic assaulted."

Harley, pipe in hand, stared at the speaker perplexedly.

"Understand me," continued the Major, "I am the person—I, Jack Ragstaff—he assaulted. I was walkin' down

from my quarters in Maddox Street on my way to dine at the club same as I do every night o' my life, when this flamin' idiot sprang upon me, grabbed my hat"—he took up his white hat to illustrate what had occurred—"not this one, but one like it—pitched it on the ground and jumped on it! Jumped on it, sir, with both feet!"

Harley was quite unable to conceal his smiles as the excited old soldier dropped his conspicuous head-gear on the floor and indulged in a vigorous pantomime designed to illustrate his statement.

"Most extraordinary," said Harley. "What did you do?"

"What did I do?" roared the Major. "I gave him a crack on the head with my cane, and I said things to him which couldn't be repeated in court. I punched him, and likewise hoofed him, but the hat was completely done in. Damn crowd collected, hearin' me swearin' and bellowin'. Police and all that; names an' addresses and all that balderdash. Man lugged away to guard-room and me turnin' up at the club with no hat. Damn ridiculous spectacle at my time of life."

"Quite so," said Harley soothingly; "I appreciate your annoyance, but I am utterly at a loss to understand why you have come here, and what all this has to do with Mr. De Lana, of the Stock Exchange."

"He fell out of the window!" shouted the Major.

"Fell out of a window?"

"Out of a window, sir, a second-floor window ten yards up a side street! Pitched on his skull—marvel he wasn't killed outright!"

A faint expression of interest began to creep into Harley's glance, and:

"I understand you to mean, Major Ragstaff," he said deliberately, "that while your struggle with the drunken man was in progress Mr. De Lana fell out of a neighboring window into the street?"

"Right!" shouted the Major. "Right, sir!"

"Do you know this Mr. De Lana?"

"Never heard of him in my life until the accident occurred. Seems to me the poor devil leaned out to see the fun and overbalanced. Felt responsible, only natural, and made inquiries. He died at six o'clock this evenin', sir."

"H'm," said Harley reflectively. "I still fail to see where I come in. From what window did he fall?"

"Window above a sort of teashop, called Café Dame—damn silly name. Place on a corner. Don't know name of side street."

"H'm. You don't think he was pushed out, for instance?"

"Certainly not!" shouted the Major; "he just fell out, but the point is, he's dead!"

"My dear sir," said Harley patiently, "I don't dispute that point; but what on earth do you want of me?"

"I don't know what I want!" roared the Major, beginning to walk up and down the room, "but I know I ain't satisfied, not easy in my mind, sir. I wake up of a night hearin' the poor devil's yell as he crashed on the pavement. That's all wrong. I've heard hundreds of death-yells, but"—he took up his malacca cane and beat it loudly on the table—"I haven't woke up of a night dreamin' I heard 'em again."

"In a word, you suspect foul play?"

"I don't suspect anything!" cried the other excitedly, "but someone mentioned your name to me at the club—said you could see through concrete, and all that—and here I am. There's something wrong, radically wrong. Find out what it is and send the bill to me. Then perhaps I'll be able to sleep in peace."

He paused, and again taking out the large silk handkerchief, blew his nose loudly. Harley glanced at me in rather an odd way, and then:

"There will be no bill, Major Ragstaff," he said; "but if I can see any possible line of inquiry I will pursue it and report the result to you."

II

"What do you make of it, Harley?" I asked. Paul Harley returned a work of reference to its shelf and stood staring absently across the study.

"Our late visitor's history does not help us much," he replied. "A somewhat distinguished army career, and so forth, and his only daughter, Sybil Margaret, married the fifth Marquis of Ireton. She is, therefore, the noted society beauty, the Marchioness of Ireton. Does this suggest anything to your mind?"

"Nothing whatever," I said blankly.

"Nor to mine," murmured Harley.

The telephone bell rang.

"Hallo!" called Harley. "Yes. That you, Wessex? Have you got the address? Good. No, I shall remember it. Many thanks. Goodbye."

He turned to me.

"I suggest, Knox," he said, "that we make our call and then proceed to dinner as arranged."

Since I was always glad of an opportunity of studying my friend's methods I immediately agreed, and ere long, leaving the lights of the two big hotels behind, our cab was gliding down the long slope which leads to Waterloo Station. Thence through crowded, slummish high-roads we made our way via Lambeth to that dismal thoroughfare, Westminster Bridge Road, with its forbidding, often windowless, houses, and its peculiar air of desolation.

The house for which we were bound was situated at no great distance from Kensington Park, and telling the cabman to wait, Harley and I walked up a narrow, paved path, mounted a flight of steps, and rang the bell beside a somewhat time-worn door, above which was an old-fashioned fanlight dimly illuminated from within.

A considerable interval elapsed before the door was opened by a marvellously untidy servant girl who had apparently been interrupted in the act of black-leading her face. Partly opening the door, she stared at us agape, pushing back wisps of hair from her eyes and with every movement daubing more of some mysterious black substance upon her countenance.

"Is Mr. Bampton in?" asked Harley.

"Yus, just come in. I'm cookin' his supper."

"Tell him that two friends of his have called on rather important business."

"All right," said the black-faced one: "What name shall I tell him?"

"No name. Just say two friends of his."

Treating us to a long, vacant stare and leaving us standing on the step, the maid (in whose hand I perceived a greasy fork) shuffled along the passage and began to mount the stairs. An unmistakable odour of frying sausages now reached my nostrils. Harley glanced at me quizzically, but said nothing until the Cinderella came stum-

bling downstairs again. Without returning to where we stood:

"Go up," she directed. "Second floor, front. Shut the door, one of yer."

She disappeared into gloomy depths below as Harley and I, closing the door behind us, proceeded to avail ourselves of the invitation. There was very little light on the staircase, but we managed to find our way to a poorly furnished bed-sitting-room where a small table was spread for a meal. Beside the table, in a chintz-covered armchair, a thick-set young man was seated smoking a cigarette and having a copy of the *Daily Telegraph* upon his knees.

He was a very typical lower middle-class, nothing-in-particular young man, but there was a certain truculence indicated by his square jaw, and that sort of self-possession which sometimes accompanies physical strength was evidenced in his manner as, tossing the paper aside, he stood up.

"Good evening, Mr. Bampton," said Harley genially. "I take it"—pointing to the newspaper—"that you are looking for a new job?"

Bampton stared, a suspicion of anger in his eyes, then, meeting the amused glance of my friend, he broke into a smile very pleasing and humorous. He was a fresh-colored young fellow with hair inclined to redness, and smiling he looked very boyish indeed.

"I have no idea who you are," he said, speaking with a faint north-country accent, "but you evidently know who I am and what has happened to me."

"Got the boot?" asked Harley confidentially.

Bampton, tossing the end of his cigarette into the grate, nodded grimly.

"You haven't told me your name," he said, "but I think I can tell you your business." He ceased smiling. "Now look here, I don't want any more publicity. If you think you are going to make a funny newspaper story out of me change your mind as quick as you like. I'll never get another job in London as it is. If you drag me any further into the limelight I'll never get another job in England."

"My dear fellow," replied Harley soothingly, at the same time extending his cigarette-case, "you misapprehend the object of my call. I am not a reporter."

"What!" said Bampton, pausing in the act of taking a cigarette, "then what the devil are you?"

"My name is Paul Harley, and I am a criminal investigator."

He spoke the words deliberately, having his eyes fixed upon the other's face; but although Bampton was palpably startled there was no trace of fear in his straightforward glance. He took a cigarette from the case, and:

"Thanks, Mr. Harley," he said. "I cannot imagine what business has brought you here."

"I have come to ask you two questions," was the reply. "Number one: Who paid you to smash Major Ragstaff's white hat? Number two: How much did he pay you?"

To these questions I listened in amazement, and my amazement was evidently shared by Bampton. He had been in the act of lighting his cigarette, but he allowed the match to burn down nearly to his fingers and then dropped it with a muttered exclamation in the fire. Finally he answered.

"I don't know how you found out," he said, "but you evidently know the truth. Provided you assure me that you are not out to make a silly-season newspaper story, I'll tell you all I know."

Harley laid his card on the table, and:

"Unless the ends of justice demand it," he said, "I give you my word that anything you care to say will go no further. You may speak freely before my friend, Mr. Knox. Simply tell me in as few words as possible what led you to court arrest in that manner."

"Right," replied Bampton, "I will." He half closed his eyes, reflectively. "I was having tea in the Lyons café, to which I always go, last Monday afternoon about four o'clock, when a man sat down facing me and got into conversation."

"Describe him!"

"He was a man rather above medium height. I should say about my own build; dark, going gray. He had a neat moustache and a short beard, and the look of a man who had traveled a lot. His skin was very tanned, almost as deeply as yours, Mr. Harley. Not at all the sort of chap that goes in there as a rule. After a while he made an extraordinary proposal. At first I thought he was joking, then when I grasped the idea that he was serious I concluded he

was mad. He asked me how much a year I earned, and I told him Peters and Peters paid me a hundred and fifty pounds. He said: 'I'll give you a year's salary to knock a man's hat off!' "

As Bampton spoke the words he glanced at us with twinkling eyes, but although for my own part I was merely amused, Harley's expression had grown very stern.

"Of course, I laughed," continued Bampton, "but when the man drew out a fat wallet and counted ten five-pound notes on the table I began to think seriously about his proposal. Even supposing he was cracked, it was absolutely money for nothing.

" 'Of course,' he said, 'you'll lose your job and you may be arrested, but you'll say that you had been out with a few friends and were a little excited, also that you never could stand white hats. Stick to that story and the balance of a hundred pounds will reach you on the following morning.'

"I asked him for further particulars, and I asked him why he had picked me for the job. He replied that he had been looking for some time for the right man; a man who was strong enough physically to accomplish the thing, and someone"—Bampton's eyes twinkled again—"with a dash of the devil in him, but at the same time a man who could be relied upon to stick to his guns and not to give the game away.

"You asked me to be brief, and I'll try to be. The man in the white hat was described to me, and the exact time and place of the meeting. I just had to grab his white hat, smash it, and face the music. I agreed. I don't deny that I had a couple of stiff drinks before I set out, but the memory of that fifty pounds locked up here in my room and the further hundred promised bucked me up wonderfully. It was impossible to mistake my man; I could see him coming toward me as I waited just outside a sort of little restaurant called the Café Dame. As arranged, I bumped into him, grabbed his hat and jumped on it."

He paused, raising his hand to his head reminiscently.

"My man was a bit of a scrapper," he continued, "and he played hell. I've never heard such language in my life, and the way he laid about me with his cane is something I am not likely to forget in a hurry. A crowd gathered, naturally, and (also naturally) I was pinched. That didn't mat-

ter much. I got off lightly; and although I've been dismissed by Peters and Peters, twenty crisp fivers are locked in my trunk there, with the ten which I received in the City."

Harley checked him, and:

"May I see the envelope in which they arrived?" he asked.

"Sorry," replied Bampton, "but I burned it. I thought it was playing the game to do so. It wouldn't have helped you much, though," he added; "It was an ordinary common envelope, posted in the City, address typewritten, and not a line enclosed."

"Registered?"

"No."

Bampton stood looking at us with a curious expression on his face, and suddenly:

"There's one point," he said, "on which my conscience isn't easy. You know about that poor devil who fell out of a window? Well, it would never have happened if I hadn't kicked up a row in the street. There's no doubt he was leaning out to see what the disturbance was about when the accident occurred."

"Did you actually see him fall?" asked Harley.

"No. He fell from a window several yards behind me in the side street, but I heard him cry out, and as I was lugged off by the police I heard the bell of the ambulance which came to fetch him."

He paused again and stood rubbing his head ruefully.

"H'm," said Harley; "was there anything particularly remarkable about this man in the Lyons' café?"

Bampton reflected silently for some moments, and then:

"Nothing much," he confessed. "He was evidently a gentleman, wore a blue top-coat, a dark tweed suit, and what looked like a regimental tie, but I didn't see much of the colors. He was very tanned, as I have said, even to the backs of his hands—and oh, yes! there was one point: He had a gold-covered tooth."

"Which tooth?"

"I can't remember, except that it was on the left side, and I always noticed it when he smiled."

"Did he wear any ring or pin which you would recognize?"

"No."

"Had he any oddity of speech or voice?"

"No. Just a heavy, drawling manner. He spoke like thousands of other cultured Englishmen. But wait a minute—yes! There was one other point. Now I come to think of it, his eyes very slightly slanted upward."

Harley stared.

"Like a Chinese's?"

"Oh, nothing so marked as that. But the same sort of formation."

Harley nodded briskly and buttoned up his overcoat.

"Thanks, Mr. Bampton," he said; "we will detain you no longer!"

As we descended the stairs, where the smell of frying sausages had given place to that of something burning—probably the sausages:

"I was half inclined to think that Major Ragstaff's ideas were traceable to a former touch of the sun," said Harley. "I begin to believe that he has put us on the track of a highly unusual crime. I am sorry to delay dinner, Knox, but I propose to call at the Café Dame."

III

On entering the doorway of the Café Dame we found ourselves in a narrow passage. In front of us was a carpeted stair, and to the right a glass-panelled door communicating with a discreetly lighted little dining room which seemed to be well patronized. Opening the door Harley beckoned to a waiter, and:

"I wish to see the proprietor," he said.

"Mr. Meyer is engaged at the moment, sir," was the reply.

"Where is he?"

"In his office upstairs, sir. He will be down in a moment."

The waiter hurried away, and Harley stood glancing up the stairs as if in doubt what to do.

"I cannot imagine how such a place can pay," he muttered. "The rent must be enormous in this district."

But even before he ceased speaking I became aware of an excited conversation which was taking place in some apartment above.

"It's scandalous!" I heard, in a woman's shrill voice.

"You have no right to keep it! It's not your property, and I'm here to demand that you give it up."

A man's voice replied in voluble broken English, but I could only distinguish a word here and there. I saw that Harley was interested, for catching my questioning glance, he raised his finger to his lips enjoining me to be silent.

"Oh, that's the game, is it?" continued the female voice. "Of course you know it's blackmail?"

A flow of unintelligible words answered this speech, then:

"I shall come back with someone," cried the invisible woman, "who will *make* you give it up!"

"Knox," whispered Harley in my ear, "when that woman comes down, follow her! I'm afraid you will bungle the business, and I would not ask you to attempt it if big things were not at stake. Return here; I shall wait."

As a matter of fact, his sudden request had positively astounded me, but before I had time for any reply a door suddenly banged open above and a respectable-looking woman, who might have been some kind of upper servant, came quickly down the stairs. An expression of intense indignation rested upon her face, and without seeming to notice our presence, she brushed past us and went out into the street.

"Off you go, Knox!" said Harley.

Seeing myself committed to an unpleasant business, I slipped out of the doorway and detected the woman five or six yards away hurrying in the direction of Piccadilly. I had no difficulty in following her, for she was evidently unsuspicious of my presence, and when presently she mounted a westward-bound 'bus I did likewise, but while she got inside I went on top, and occupied a seat on the near side whence I could observe anyone leaving the vehicle.

If I had not known Paul Harley so well I should have counted the whole business a ridiculous farce, but recognizing that something underlay these seemingly trivial and disconnected episodes, I lighted a cigarette and resigned myself to circumstance.

At Hyde Park Corner I saw the woman descending, and when presently she walked up Hamilton Place I was not far behind her. At the door of an imposing mansion she stopped, and in response to a ring of the bell the door was opened by a footman, and the woman hurried in. Evident-

ly she was an inmate of the establishment; and conceiving that my duty was done when I had noted the number of the house, I retraced my steps to the corner; and hailing a taxicab, returned to the Café Dame.

On inquiring of the same waiter whom Harley had accosted whether my friend was there:

"I think a gentleman is upstairs with Mr. Meyer," said the man.

"In his office?"

"Yes, sir."

Thereupon I mounted the stairs and before a half-open door paused. Harley's voice was audible within, and therefore I knocked and entered.

I discovered Harley standing by an American desk. Beside him in a revolving chair which, with the desk, constituted the principal furniture of a tiny office, sat a man in a dress-suit which had palpably not been made for him. He had a sullen and suspiciously Teutonic cast of countenance, and he was engaged in a voluble but hardly intelligible speech as I entered.

"Ha, Knox!" said Harley, glancing over his shoulder, "did you manage?"

"Yes," I replied.

Harley nodded shortly and turned again to the man in the chair.

"I am sorry to give you so much trouble, Mr. Meyer," he said, "but I should like my friend here to see the room above."

At this moment my attention was attracted by a singular object which lay upon the desk amongst a litter of bills and accounts. This was a piece of rusty iron bar somewhat less than three feet in length, and which once had been painted green.

"You are looking at this tragic fragment, Knox," said Harley, taking up the bar. "Of course"—he shrugged his shoulders—"it explains the whole unfortunate occurrence. You see there was a flaw in the metal at this end, here"—he indicated the spot—"and the other end had evidently worn loose in its socket."

"But I don't understand."

"It will all be made clear at the inquest, no doubt. A most unfortunate thing for you, Mr. Meyer."

"Most unfortunate," declared the proprietor of the res-

taurant, extending his thick hands pathetically. "Most ruinous to my business."

"We will go upstairs now," said Harley. "You will kindly lead the way, Mr. Meyer, and the whole thing will be quite clear to you, Knox."

As the proprietor walked out of the office and upstairs to the second floor Harley whispered in my ear:

"Where did she go?"

"No.———Hamilton Place," I replied in an undertone.

"Good God!" muttered my friend, and clutched my arm so tightly that I winced. "Good God! The master touch, Knox! This crime was the work of a genius—of a genius with slightly, very slightly, oblique eyes."

Opening a door on the second landing, Mr. Meyer admitted us to a small supper room. Its furniture consisted of a round dining table, several chairs, a couch, and very little else. I observed, however, that the furniture, carpet, and a few other appointments were of a character much more elegant than those of the public room below. A window which overlooked the street was open, so that the plush curtains which had been drawn aside moved slightly to and fro in the draught.

"The window of the tragedy, Knox," explained Harley.

He crossed the room.

"If you will stand here beside me you will see the gap in the railing caused by the breaking away of the fragment which now lies on Mr. Meyer's desk. Some few yards to the left in the street below is where the assault took place, of which we have heard, and the unfortunate Mr. De Lana, who was dining here *alone*—an eccentric custom of his—naturally ran to the window upon hearing the disturbance and leaned out, supporting his weight upon the railing. The rail collapsed, and—we know the rest."

"It will ruin me," groaned Meyer; "it will give bad repute to my establishment."

"I fear it will," agreed Harley sympathetically, "unless we can manage to clear up one or two little difficulties which I have observed. For instance"—he tapped the proprietor on the shoulder confidentially—"have you any idea, any hazy idea, of the identity of the woman who was dining here with Mr. De Lana on Wednesday night?"

The effect of this simple inquiry upon the proprietor

was phenomenal. His fat yellow face assumed a sort of leaden hue, and his already prominent eyes protruded abnormally. He licked his lips.

"I tell you—already I tell you," he muttered, "that Mr. De Lana he engage this room every Wednesday and sometimes also Friday, and dine here by himself."

"And I tell you," said Harley sweetly, "that you are an inspired liar. You smuggled her out by the side entrance after the accident."

"The side entrance?" muttered Meyer. "The side entrance?"

"Exactly; the side entrance. There is something else which I must ask you to tell me. Who had engaged this room on Tuesday night, the night before the accident?"

The proprietor's expression remained uncomprehending, and:

"A gentleman," he said, "I never see him before."

"Another solitary diner?" suggested Harley.

"Yes, he is alone all the evening waiting for a friend who does not arrive."

"Ah," mused Harley, "alone all the evening was he? And his friend disappointed him. May I suggest that he was a dark man? Gray at the temples, having a dark beard and moustache, and a very tanned face? His eyes slanted slightly upward?"

"Yes! yes!" cried Meyer, and his astonishment was patently unfeigned. "It is a friend of yours?"

"A friend of mine, yes," said Harley absently, but his expression was very grim. "What time did he finally leave?"

"He waited until after eleven o'clock. The dinner is spoilt. He pays, but does not complain."

"No," said Harley musingly, "he had nothing to complain about. One more question, my friend. When the lady escaped hurriedly on Wednesday night, what was it that she left behind and what price are you trying to extort from her for returning it?"

At that the man collapsed entirely.

"Ah, Gott!" he cried, and raised his hand to his clammy forehead. "You will ruin me. I am a ruined man. I don't try to extort anything. I run an honest business—"

"And one of the most profitable in the world," added

Harley, "since the days of Thais to our own. Even at Bond Street rentals I assume that a house of assignation is a golden enterprise."

"Ah!" groaned Meyer, "I am ruined, so what does it matter? I tell you everything. I know Mr. De Lana who engages my room regularly, but I don't know who the lady is who meets him here. No! I swear it! But always it is the same lady. When he falls I am downstairs in my office, and I hear him cry out. The lady comes running from the room and begs me to get her away without being seen and to keep all mention of her out of the matter."

"What did she pay you?" asked Harley.

"Pay me?" muttered Meyer, pulled up thus shortly in the midst of his statement.

"Pay you. Exactly. Don't argue; answer."

The man delivered himself of a guttural, choking sound, and finally:

"She promised one hundred pounds," he confessed hoarsely.

"But you surely did not accept a mere promise? Out with it. What did she give you?"

"A ring!" came the confession at last.

"A ring. I see. I will take it with me if you don't mind. And now, finally, what was it that she left behind?"

"Ah, Gott!" moaned the man, dropping into a chair and resting his arms upon the table. "It is all a great panic, you see. I hurry her out by the back stair from this landing and she forgets her bag."

"Her bag? Good."

"Then I clear away the remains of dinner so I can say Mr. De Lana is dining alone. It is as much my interest as the lady's."

"Of course! I quite understand. I will trouble you no more, Mr. Meyer, except to step into your office and to relieve you of that incriminating evidence, the lady's bag and her ring."

IV

"Do you understand, Knox?" said Harley as the cab bore us toward Hamilton Place. "Do you grasp the details of this cunning scheme?"

"On the contrary," I replied, "I am hopelessly at sea."

Nevertheless, I had forgotten that I was hungry in the excitement which now claimed me. For although the thread upon which these seemingly disconnected things hung was invisible to me, I recognized that Bampton, the city clerk, the bearded stranger who had made so singular a proposition to him, the white-hatted major, the dead stockbroker, and the mysterious woman whose presence in the case the clear sight of Harley had promptly detected, all were linked together by some subtle chain. I was convinced, too, that my friend held at least one end of that chain in his grip.

"In order to prepare your mind for the interview which I hope to obtain this evening," continued Harley, "let me enlighten you upon one or two points which may seem obscure. In the first place you recognize that anyone leaning out of the window on the second floor would almost automatically rest his weight upon the iron bar which was placed there for that very purpose, since the ledge is unusually low?"

"Quite," I replied, "and it also follows that if the bar gave way anyone thus leaning on it would be pitched into the street."

"Your reasoning is correct."

"But, my dear fellow," said I, "how could such an accident have been foreseen?"

"You speak of an accident. This was no accident! One end of the bar had been filed completely through, although the file marks had been carefully concealed with rust and dirt; and the other end had been wrenched out from its socket and then replaced in such a way that anyone leaning upon the bar could not fail to be precipitated into the street!"

"Good heavens! Then you mean—?"

"I mean, Knox, that the man who occupied the supper room on the night before the tragedy—the dark man, tanned and bearded, with slightly oblique eyes—spent his time in filing through that bar—in short, in preparing a death trap!"

I was almost dumbfounded.

"But, Harley," I said, "assuming that he knew his victim would be the next occupant of the room, how could he know—?"

I stopped. Suddenly, as if a curtain had been raised, the

details of what I now perceived to be a fiendishly cunning murder were revealed to me.

"According to his own account, Knox," resumed Harley, "Major Ragstaff regularly passed along that street with military punctuality at the same hour every night. You may take it for granted that the murderer was well aware of this. As a matter of fact, I happen to know that he was. We must also take it for granted that the murderer knew of these little dinners for two which took place in the private room above the Café Dame every Wednesday—and sometimes on Friday. Around the figure of the methodical major—with his conspicuous white hat as a sort of focus—was built up one of the most ingenious schemes of murder with which I have ever come in contact. The victim literally killed himself."

"But, Harley, the victim might have ignored the disturbance, you know."

"That is where I first detected the touch of genius, Knox. He recognized the voice of one of the combatants—or his companion did. Here we are."

The cab drew up before the house in Hamilton Place. We alighted, and Harley pressed the bell. The same footman whom I had seen admit the woman opened the door.

"Is Lady Ireton at home?" asked Harley.

As he uttered the name I literally held my breath. We had come to the house of Major Ragstaff's daughter, the Marchioness of Ireton, one of society's most celebrated and beautiful hostesses!—the wife of a peer famed alike as sportsman, soldier, and scholar.

"I believe she is dining at home, sir," said the man. "Shall I inquire?"

"Be good enough to do so," replied Harley, and gave him a card. "Inform her that I wish to return to her a handbag which she lost a few days ago."

The man ushered us into an anteroom opening off the lofty and rather gloomy hall, and as the door closed:

"Harley," I said in a stage whisper, "am I to believe—?"

"Can you doubt it?" returned Harley with a grim smile.

A few moments later we were shown into a charmingly intimate little boudoir in which Lady Ireton was waiting to receive us. She was a strikingly handsome brunette, but tonight her face, which normally, I think, possessed rich coloring, was almost pallid, and there was a hunted look in

her dark eyes which made me wish to be anywhere rather than where I found myself. Without preamble she rose and addressed Harley:

"I fail to understand your message, sir," she said, and I admired the imperious courage with which she faced him. "You say you have recovered a handbag which I had lost?"

Harley bowed, and from the pocket of his great-coat took out a silken-tasselled bag.

"The one which you left in the Café Dame, Lady Ireton," he replied. "Here also I have"—from another pocket he drew out a diamond ring—"something which was extorted from you by the fellow Meyer."

Without touching her recovered property, Lady Ireton sank slowly down into the chair from which she had arisen, her gaze fixed as if hypnotically upon the speaker.

"My friend, Mr. Knox, is aware of all the circumstances," continued the latter, "but he is as anxious as I am to terminate this painful interview. I surmise that what occurred on Wednesday night was this—(correct me if I am wrong): While dining with Mr. De Lana you heard sounds of altercation in the street below. May I suggest that you recognized one of the voices?"

Lady Ireton, still staring straight before her at Harley, inclined her head in assent.

"I heard my father's voice," she said hoarsely.

"Quite so," he continued. "I am aware that Major Ragstaff is your father." He turned to me: "Do you recognize the touch of genius at last?" Then, again addressing Lady Ireton: "You naturally suggested to your companion that he should look out of the window in order to learn what was taking place. The next thing you knew was that he had fallen into the street below?"

Lady Ireton shuddered.

"It is retribution," she whispered. "I have brought this ruin upon myself. But *he* does not deserve—"

Her voice faded into silence.

"You refer to your husband, Lord Ireton?" said Harley.

Lady Ireton nodded.

"It was to have been our last meeting," she said.

She shuddered, and her eyes blazed into sudden fierceness.

"I would give my life willingly to spare my husband the

knowledge of what has been," said Lady Ireton in a low, monotonous voice. "Three times I sent my maid to Meyer to recover my bag, but he demanded a price which even I could not pay. Now it is all discovered, and Harry will know."

"That, I fear, is unavoidable, Lady Ireton," declared Harley. "May I ask where Lord Ireton is at present?"

"In Africa after big game."

"H'm," said Harley, "in Africa, and after big game? I can offer you one consolation, Lady Ireton. In his own interests Meyer will stick to his first assertion that Mr. De Lana was dining alone."

A strange look came into the woman's eyes.

"You—you—are not acting for—?" she began.

"I am acting for no one," replied Harley tersely. "Upon my friend's discretion you may rely as upon my own."

"Then why should *he* ever know?" she whispered.

"Why, indeed," murmured Harley, "since he is in Africa?"

As we descended the stair to the hall my friend paused and pointed to a life-sized oil painting by London's most fashionable portrait painter. It was that of a man in the uniform of a Guards officer, a dark man, slightly gray at the temples, his face tanned.

"Having had no occasion for disguise when the portrait was painted," said Harley, "Lord Ireton appears here without the beard; and as he is not represented smiling, one cannot see the gold tooth. But the painter, if anything, has accentuated the slanting eyes. You see, the fourth marquis —the present Lord Ireton's father—married one of the world-famous Yen Sun girls, daughters of the mandarin of that name by an Irish wife. Hence, the eyes. And hence—"

"But, Harley—it was murder!"

"Not within the meaning of the law, Knox. It was a recrudescence of Chinese humor! Lord Ireton is officially in Africa (and he went actually after 'big game'). The counsel is not born who could secure a conviction. We are somewhat late, but shall therefore have less difficulty in finding a table at Prince's"

HARD SELL

Craig Rice

"Malone," the voice said, "you've got to help me."

The little lawyer waggled a finger at Joe the Angel and sat impassive while the bartender poured another double shot of rye. Then he swallowed the rye, reflecting thoughtfully that clients were always turning up when you needed them the least. "I don't have to help you," he said without bothering to turn around. "My office rent is paid a month in advance. My secretary is paid a week in advance. My bar tab is paid several drinks in advance. So go away."

"Money," said the voice, "is no object."

"That's what I've been trying to tell you," Malone said. "Besides, if you want me, why don't you call me at my office?"

"I tried," the voice admitted. "I talked to a girl named Maggie. She said *this* was your office."

Malone turned around, deciding firmly that Maggie would never again be paid anything in advance. He found himself looking at a large man with iron-gray hair, blue eyes, and a prominent chin. The man looked so healthy that Malone wanted to turn away again. "Go ahead," he said. "Tell me all about it."

"Can't we go some place private?"

"This is my office," Malone reminded him. "How private can you get?"

The man looked around vacantly, then back at Malone.

"My name is Gunderson," he said. "Frank Gunderson. Mean anything to you?"

"Nothing," Malone said. "So far."

"I sell magazine subscriptions," Gunderson announced.

"That's nice," Malone said pleasantly. "Working your way through college?"

Gunderson looked very unhappy. "I don't exactly sell them," he explained. "I employ salesmen. Gunderson Sales, Inc. Door-to-door sales of leading magazines. A customer buys one or two magazines and gets another free. It's a very attractive offer."

"I'm sure it is," the little lawyer agreed. "But I can't read. So you're wasting your time."

"You don't understand," Gunderson said. "It's like this, Malone. Somebody's been killing my salesmen. One after the other, day by day, my men have been murdered."

"By prospective customers?"

"By a fiend," Gunderson said. "First Joe Tallmer, struck down brutally by a hit-and-run driver. That was a week ago. Then, two days later, Leon Prince was pushed into an empty elevator shaft. The very next day Howie Kirschmeyer was shoved from an elevated platform and mangled by an oncoming train. And—"

Malone held up a hand, both to silence Gunderson and to summon Joe the Angel. He downed the double rye that Joe poured and fixed sad eyes on Gunderson.

"Accidents," he said soberly, "can happen."

"But, Malone—"

"Three accidents," he went on. "The first one got hit by a car. The second one was too dumb to wait for the elevator. The third one tried to walk across the tracks. It figures, in a way. Anyone dumb enough to sell magazines for a living—"

"You don't understand," Gunderson cut in. "There was a fourth one. Just this morning."

"What happened to him?"

"He was shot through the head with a .45," Gunderson said. "He's dead," he added unnecessarily.

John J. Malone suddenly felt very tired. "Sounds like murder," he admitted. "But I'm sure the police can take care of it."

"I don't see how," Gunderson said. "The man's name was Henry Littleton. He was sitting over coffee while his

wife was upstairs making the beds or something. Somebody came in, shot him, and left."

"The gun?"

"It was on the breakfast-room table. No prints, no registration."

"Hmmmm," Malone said.

"You see," Gunderson continued, "the police can do nothing. Littleton wasn't murdered by someone who knew him. He was murdered for the same reason as Tallmer and Prince and Kirschmeyer."

"And why were *they* murdered?"

"I wish I knew," Gunderson said. "I wish I knew."

Malone paused to light a cigar. "Come, now," he said gently. "You must have some idea. Otherwise you wouldn't be here annoying me."

Gunderson hesitated. "Malone," he said, "I don't want to sound paranoid. Not good, sounding paranoid. But I think someone is trying to ruin me, Malone. Killing my men one after the other. Crippling my sales force. Two of my men quit me today, Malone. Left me cold. Told me they couldn't take the chance of working for me. One of 'em said he had a wife and a kid. Hell, *I've* got a wife and kid. Two kids, as a matter of fact. And—"

"Shut up for a minute," the little lawyer said absently. "Who would want to cripple your sales force? You have any competition to this little con game of yours?"

Gunderson colored. "It's not a con game. But I do have a competitor."

"Does he have a name?"

"Tru-Val Subscriptions," Gunderson said.

Malone sighed. "That's a strange name for a man," he remarked. "What do they call him for short? Troovie?"

"That's the company name, Malone. The man's name is Harold Cowperthwaite."

Malone looked around vacantly. He could understand the murder of door-to-door salesmen, especially if such murder were performed by dissident customers. But he didn't *want* to understand, not now. He didn't want the case at all.

"Malone? Here's a check: Twenty-five hundred dollars. I'll have another check for twenty-five hundred for you when you clear this up. Plus expenses, of course. Will that be sufficient?"

Malone took the check and found a place for it in his wallet. He nodded pleasantly at Gunderson and watched the man leave the City Hall Bar, walking with a firm stride, arms swinging, chest out. Then he looked around until he found Joe the Angel again and pointed to his empty glass. It was, he decided, time to begin piling up expenses for Gunderson.

Harold Cowperthwaite was not helpful. He looked as sickly as Gunderson looked vigorous, and was just about as much fun to be with. Malone decided that he disliked them both equally.

"—incredible accusation!" Cowperthwaite had just finished shouting. "Couple of his doorbell punchers keel over and he blames me for it! Blames me for everything! Ought to sue him for libel! Serve him right!"

Malone sighed, wishing the little man wouldn't talk exclusively in exclamation points. "Then you didn't kill them," he suggested.

"Kill them!" boomed Cowperthwaite. "Course I didn't kill them! I wanted to kill anybody, I'd kill Gunderson! Know what I think, Malone?"

Malone was totally unprepared for the question mark. "Hmmm," he said, "what *do* you think?"

"Think he killed 'em himself!" Cowperthwaite shouted. "Throw the suspicion on me! Make trouble for me! People bothering me all the time!"

"Oh," said Malone. "No, he couldn't have done that."

"No?"

"Of course not," Malone said. "He's my client."

Cowperthwaite's words followed the lawyer out of the door marked *Tru-Val Subscriptions.* Malone managed to close the door before the man reached the exclamation point. It was, he decided, a day for small triumphs.

"The way I see it," von Flanagan said, "we wait until he kills another one. Then maybe he leaves a clue."

"He?" Malone said, lost. "Who he?"

"The killer," the big cop said. "The bird who killed Littleton and the others without leaving a trace. Pretty soon he'll find another magazine salesman and kill him. Maybe

we get lucky and catch him in the act. Wouldn't that be nice?"

"For everybody but the magazine salesman," Malone agreed. "You don't seem to be taking much of an interest in this one. Something wrong?"

"Plenty," von Flanagan said. "For one thing, it's an impossible one to solve. For another, I don't want to solve it."

"Why not?"

Von Flanagan shook his head wearily. "Malone," he said, "have you ever had a run-in with a magazine salesman? Have you ever had one of those little monsters stick his foot in your door and tell you how much you needed his rotten magazines? Have you, Malone?"

Malone nodded.

"They should kill every last one of them," von Flanagan said. "I mean it, Malone. Anybody kills a magazine salesman, he deserves a medal."

Malone sighed. "The case," he reminded von Flanagan. "Let's talk about the case. Tell me all about it. Everything."

"There's not much to tell," von Flanagan said, relaxing into a chair. "This Littleton is thirty-three years old, has a wife and two kids. One is a boy and the other—"

"—is a girl," Malone guessed.

"You know the story? Then why bother me?"

"I'm sorry," Malone said, sorry. "Please go on."

"He's a hustler," said von Flanagan. "Holds down two jobs at once. Works real hard. Sells magazines evenings for this Gunderson character and works nine to five in a garage. Hasn't got any money, though. He's had a tough run of luck lately. Doctor bills, things going wrong with the kids, you know. But he's not in debt either. A good, steady guy. A guy you might like if he wasn't a magazine salesman."

"The crime," Malone said gently.

"Murder," von Flanagan said. "Not by the wife, either. I thought of that, Malone. I didn't want to because she's such a sweet little woman. A doll. But she was upstairs with the kids at the time. The kids said so. They wouldn't lie. Too young to lie."

Malone lit a cigar. "He was shot by somebody inside the house?"

Von Flanagan nodded. "At close range," he said. "It almost looked as though the killer wanted to make it look like suicide. But he didn't try very hard. No powder burns, for one thing, and the gun was lying near Littleton's left hand. And he was righthanded. We checked."

"Clever of you," the lawyer said. "So it was murder, and not by the wife. How about the other salesmen? Tallmer and Prince and Kirkenberger?"

"Kirschmeyer," von Flanagan corrected. "That's the funny part of it. Tallmer was a typical hit-and-run. Prince and Kirschmeyer look more like accidents than most accidents. But with them all coming together like this—"

"I know," Malone said gloomily. "Did Littleton have any insurance?"

"Insurance?" von Flanagan looked lost. "Oh," he said. "Littleton, insurance. Yeah. A big policy. But that's out, Malone. The wife is the only beneficiary and she's clear. So that's out."

"Thanks," Malone said. "So am I."

"So are you what?"

"Out," Malone said. "For a drink."

With two double ryes under his belt and a pair of beer chasers keeping them company, Malone felt in condition to use the phone. He called Charlie Stein, a useful little man who served as Dun and Bradstreet for a world far removed from Wall Street, running credit checks for gamblers and similarly unsavory elements.

"Take your time on this one," he told Stein. "Nothing urgent. I want to find out if there's anything around on a man named Henry Littleton. And," he added sadly, "there probably isn't."

"You're wrong," Stein said. "There is."

Malone came back to life. "Go on," he said. "Talk to me."

"Henry Littleton," Stein said. "He's into Max Hook for seventy-five grand. That all you want to know?"

"That's impossible," Malone said. "I mean—"

"Impossible but true."

"Oh," Malone said. "Well, you better cross him off, Charlie. Somebody shot him in the head."

Malone hung up quickly, then lifted the receiver again and put through a call to Max Hook. The gambler picked up the phone almost at once. "Malone, Max," Malone said

cheerfully. "You didn't order a hit for a guy named Henry Littleton, did you?"

"Littleton? That's the fink who owes me seventy-five grand. Seventy-five grand he owes me and a nickel at a time he pays me. That guy." There was a pause. Then, with the air of someone just hearing what Malone said in the first place, Hook said: "You saying somebody chilled him?"

"This morning. It wasn't you, was it?"

"Of course not," Hook said. "Why kill somebody who owes me money? That doesn't make sense, Malone."

"I didn't think it did," Malone said pleasantly. "Just checking, Max." He put the receiver on the hook and made his way back to the bar.

"You don't look so hot," Joe the Angel said thoughtfully. "You want me to leave the bottle?"

Malone sighed. "Don't be ridiculous," he said. "Then I wouldn't have anybody to talk to." He closed his eyes and tried to think. This Littleton had been hard-working, honest, and seventy-five thousand dollars in debt. Hook hadn't killed him, and Cowperthwaite hadn't killed him, and his wife hadn't killed him, and he hadn't committed suicide. The whole thing was terrifying.

"I'm glad I found you," von Flanagan was saying. "You're drunk, but I'm still glad I found you. I want to tell you you've been wasting your time. We thought there was a connection between the salesmen. But there isn't."

"You're wrong," Malone said magnificently. "But go on anyway."

"Tallmer," von Flanagan said, ignoring the interruption. "The first one. A guy walked into the station-house and said he was the hitter-and-runner. Conscience was bothering him. And there was no connection between him and the rest. Accidents. Like we figured."

"Wrong," said Malone sadly. "Completely wrong."

"Huh?"

"I'll explain," said Malone. "I will tell all. I sort of thought something like this would happen." He sighed. "Tallmer was a typical hit-and-run. That much you know."

"That much I just told you."

Malone nodded. "Prince and Kirschenblum—"

"Kirschmeyer."

"To hell with it," said Malone. "Anyway, the two of them were murdered. By the same person who killed Littleton."

"If you're so smart," said von Flanagan, "then you can tell me that person's name. The one who killed them all."

"Simple," said Malone. "The name is Littleton."

He explained while von Flanagan sat there gaping. "Littleton was in debt," he said. "Seventy-five grand in debt. With no way out. Then Tallmer got hit by a car."

"Precisely," said von Flanagan.

"And Littleton got an idea," he said. "He wanted to kill himself but he didn't want his wife to lose the insurance. So he killed himself and made it look like murder."

Malone lit a fresh cigar. "He set up a chain," he went on. "Chucked Prince down an elevator shaft and heaved Kirschengruber in front of the elevated."

"Kirschmeyer."

"You know who I mean. Anyway, Littleton did this, and set up a chain. A subtle chain. Then he shot himself."

"Of course," Malone said. "If you wanted to make it look like murder, would you use your right hand and put the gun in your mouth? See?"

Von Flanagan thought it over. "So it's suicide," he said. "And we write it off as murder and suicide, with Littleton the murderer. Right?"

"Wrong," Malone said. "You write Prince and Kicklebutton off as accidents and Littleton as murder by person or persons unknown. If he went to all that trouble there's no sense in conning the wife and kids out of the insurance. Besides, you'd never get a suicide verdict. Not unless I persuaded the coroner's inquest. And I won't."

Von Flanagan shrugged. "How are you going to collect your fee?"

"I tell Gunderson his salesmen are safe," Malone said. "I'll offer to repay the fee in full if another one gets murdered. And if that's not enough for him, he can keep the twenty-five hundred he owes me. Remember, I didn't want this case in the first place."

A TWILIGHT ADVENTURE

Melville Davisson Post

It was a strange scene that we approached. Before a crossroad leading into a grove of beech trees, a man sat on his horse with a rifle across his saddle. He did not speak until we were before him in the road, and then his words were sinister.

"Ride on!" he said.

But my Uncle Abner did not ride on. He pulled up his big chestnut and looked calmly at the man.

"You speak like one having authority," he said.

The man answered with an oath.

"Ride on, or you'll get into trouble!"

"I am accustomed to trouble," replied my uncle with great composure; "you must give me a better reason."

"I'll give you hell!" growled the man. "Ride on!"

Abner's eyes traveled over the speaker with a deliberate scrutiny.

"It is not yours to give," he said, "although possibly to receive. Are the roads of Virginia held by arms?"

"This one is," replied the man.

"I think not," replied my Uncle Abner, and, touching his horse with his heel, he turned into the crossroad.

The man seized his weapon, and I heard the hammer click under his thumb. Abner must have heard it, too, but he did not turn his broad back. He only called to me in his usual matter-of-fact voice:

"Go on, Martin; I will overtake you."

The man brought his gun up to his middle, but he did not shoot. He was like all those who undertake to command obedience without having first determined precisely what they will do if their orders are disregarded. He was prepared to threaten with desperate words, but not to support that threat with a desperate act, and he hung there uncertain, cursing under his breath.

I would have gone on as my uncle had told me to do, but now the man came to a decision.

"No, by God!" he said; "if he goes in, you go in, too!"

And he seized my bridle and turned my horse into the crossroad; then he followed.

There is a long twilight in these hills. The sun departs, but the day remains. A sort of weird, dim, elfin day, that dawns at sunset, and envelops and possesses the world. The land is full of light, but it is the light of no heavenly sun. It is a light equal everywhere, as though the earth strove to illuminate itself, and succeeded with that labor.

The stars are not yet out. Now and then a pale moon rides in the sky, but it has no power, and the light is not from it. The wind is usually gone; the air is soft, and the fragrance of the fields fills it like a perfume. The noises of the day and of the creatures that go about by day cease, and the noises of the night and the creatures that haunt the night begin. The bat swoops and circles in the maddest action, but without a sound. The eye sees him, but the ear hears nothing. The whippoorwill begins his plaintive cry, and one hears, but does not see.

It is a world that we do not understand, for we are creatures of the sun, and we are fearful lest we come upon things at work here, of which we have no experience, and that may be able to justify themselves against our reason. And so a man falls into silence when he travels in this twilight, and he looks and listens with his senses out on guard.

It was an old wagon-road that we entered, with the grass growing between the ruts. The horses traveled without a sound until we began to enter a grove of ancient beech trees; then the dead leaves crackled and rustled. Abner did not look behind him, and so he did not know that I came. He knew that some one followed, but he doubtless took it for the sentinel in the road. And I did not speak.

The man with the cocked gun rode grimly behind me. I did not know whither we went or to what end. We might be shot down from behind a tree or murdered in our saddles. It was not a land where men took desperate measures upon a triviality. And I knew that Abner rode into something that little men, lacking courage, would gladly have stayed out of.

Presently my ear caught a sound, or, rather, a confused mingling of sounds, as of men digging in the earth. It was faint, and some distance beyond us in the heart of the beech woods, but as we traveled the sound increased and I could distinguish the strokes of the mattock, and the thrust of the shovel and the clatter of the earth on the dry leaves.

These sounds seemed at first to be before us, and then, a little later, off on our right-hand. And finally, through the gray boles of the beech trees in the lowland, I saw two men at work digging a pit. They had just begun their work, for there was little earth thrown out. But there was a great heap of leaves that they had cleared away, and heavy cakes of the baked crust that the mattocks had pried up. The length of the pit lay at right angles to the road, and the men were working with their backs toward us. They were in their shirts and trousers, and the heavy mottled shadows thrown by the beech limbs hovered on their backs and shoulders like a flock of night birds. The earth was baked and hard; the mattocks rang on it, and among the noises of their work they did not hear us.

I saw Abner look off at this strange labor, his head half turned, but he did not stop and we went on. The old wagon-road made a turn into the low ground. I heard the sound of horses, and a moment later we came upon a dozen men.

I shall not easily forget that scene. The beech trees had been deadened by some settler who had chopped a ring around them, and they stood gaunt with a few tattered leaves, letting the weird twilight in. Some of the men stood about, others sat on the fallen trees, and others in their saddles. But upon every man of that grim company there was the air and aspect of one who waits for something to be finished.

An old man with a heavy iron-gray beard smoked a pipe, puffing out great mouthfuls of smoke with a sort of deliberate energy; another whittled a stick, cutting a bull

with horns, and shaping his work with the nicest care; and still another traced letters on the pommel of his saddle with his thumbnail.

A little to one side a great pronged beech thrust out a gray arm, and under it two men sat on their horses, their elbows strapped to their bodies and their mouths gagged with a saddlecloth. And behind them a man in his saddle was working with a colt halter, unraveling the twine that bound the headpiece and seeking thereby to get a greater length of rope.

This was the scene when I caught it first. But a moment later, when my uncle rode into it, the thing burst into furious life. Men sprang up, caught his horse by the bit and covered him with weapons. Someone called for the sentinel who rode behind me, and he galloped up. For a moment there was confusion. Then the big man who had smoked with such deliberation called out my uncle's name, others repeated it, and the panic was gone. But a ring of stern, determined faces was around him and before his horse, and with the passing of the flash of action there passed no whit of the grim purpose upon which these men were set.

My uncle looked about him.

"Lemuel Arnold," he said; "Nicholas Vance, Hiram Ward, you here!"

As my uncle named these men I knew them. They were cattle grazers. Ward was the big man with the pipe. The men with them were their renters and drovers.

Their lands lay nearest to the mountains. The geographical position made for feudal customs and a certain independence of action. They were on the border, they were accustomed to say, and had to take care of themselves. And it ought to be written that they did take care of themselves with courage and decision, and on occasion they also took care of Virginia.

Their fathers had pushed the frontier of the dominion northward and westward and had held the land. They had fought the savage single-handed and desperately, by his own methods and with his own weapons. Ruthless and merciless, eye for eye and tooth for tooth, they returned what they were given.

They did not send to Virginia for militia when the savage came; they fought him at their doors, and followed him

through the forest, and took their toll of death. They were hardier than he was, and their hands were heavier and bloodier, until the old men in the tribes of the Ohio Valley forbade these raids because they cost too much, and turned the war parties south into Kentucky.

Certain historians have written severely of these men and their ruthless methods, and prattled of humane warfare; but they wrote nursing their soft spines in the security of a civilization which these men's hands had builded, and their words are hollow.

"Abner," said Ward, "let me speak plainly. We have got an account to settle with a couple of cattle thieves and we are not going to be interfered with. Cattle stealing and murder have got to stop in these hills. We've had enough ot it."

"Well," replied my uncle, "I am the last man in Virginia to interfere with that. We have all had enough of it, and we are all determined that it must cease. But how do you propose to end it?"

"With a rope," said Ward.

"It is a good way," replied Abner, "when it is done the right way."

"What do you mean by the right way?" said Ward.

"I mean," answered my uncle, "that we have all agreed to a way and we ought to stick to our agreement. Now, I want to help you to put down cattle stealing and murder, but I want also to keep my word."

"And how have you given your word?"

"In the same way that you have given yours," said Abner, "and as every man here has given his. Our fathers found out that they could not manage the assassin and the thief when every man undertook to act for himself, so they got together and agreed upon a certain way to do these things. Now, we have indorsed what they agreed to, and promised to obey it, and I for one would like to keep my promise."

The big man's face was puzzled. Now it cleared.

"Hell!" he said. "You mean the law?"

"Call it what you like," replied Abner; "it is merely the agreement of everybody to do certain things in a certain way."

The man made a decisive gesture with a jerk of his head.

"Well," he said, "we're going to do this thing our own way."

My uncle's face became thoughtful.

"Then," he said, "you will injure some innocent people."

"You mean these two blacklegs?"

And Ward indicated the prisoners with a gesture of his thumb.

My uncle lifted his face and looked at the two men some distance away beneath the great beech, as though he had but now observed them.

"I was thinking of them," he answered. "I was thinking that if men like you and Lemuel Arnold and Nicholas Vance violate the law, lesser men will follow your example, and as you justify your act for security, they will justify theirs for revenge and plunder. And so the law will go to pieces and a lot of weak and innocent people who depend upon it for security will be left unprotected."

These were the words that I have remembered, because they put the danger of lynch law in a light I had not thought of. But I saw that they would not move these determined men. Their blood was up and they received them coldly.

"Abner," said Ward, "we are not going to argue this thing with you. There are times when men have to take the law into their own hands. We live here at the foot of the mountains. Our cattle are stolen and run across the border into Maryland. We are tired of it and we intend to stop it.

"Our lives and our property are menaced by a set of reckless desperate devils that we have determined to hunt down and hang to the first tree in sight. We did not send for you. You pushed your way in here; and now, if you are afraid of breaking the law, you can ride on, because we are going to break it—if to hang a pair of murderous devils is to break it."

I was astonished at my uncle's decision.

"Well," he said, "if the law must be broken, I will stay and help you break it!"

"Very well," replied Ward; "but don't get a wrong notion in your head, Abner. If you choose to stay, you put yourself on a footing with everybody else."

"And that is precisely what I want to do," replied Abner, "but as matters stand now, every man here has an advantage over me."

"What advantage, Abner?" said Ward.

"The advantage," answered my uncle, "that he has heard all the evidence against your prisoners and is convinced that they are guilty."

"If that is all the advantage, Abner," replied Ward, "you shall not be denied it. There has been so much cattle stealing here of late that our people living on the border finally got together and determined to stop every drove going up into the mountains that wasn't accompanied by somebody that we knew was all right. This afternoon one of my men reported a little bunch of about a hundred steers on the road, and I stopped it. These two men were driving the cattle. I inquired if the cattle belonged to them and they replied that they were not the owners, but that they had been hired to take the drove over into Maryland. I did not know the men, and as they met my inquiries with oaths and imprecations, I was suspicious of them. I demanded the name of the owner who had hired them to drive the cattle. They said it was none of my damned business and went on. I raised the county. We overtook them, turned their cattle into a field, and brought them back until we could find out who the drove belonged to. On the road we met Bowers."

He turned and indicated the man who was working with the rope halter.

I knew the man. He was a cattle shipper, somewhat involved in debt, but who managed to buy and sell and somehow keep his head above water.

"He told us the truth. Yesterday evening he had gone over on the Stone-Coal to look at Daniel Coopman's cattle. He had heard that some grazer from your county, Abner, was on the way up to buy the cattle for stockers. He wanted to get in ahead of your man, so he left home that evening and got to Coopman's place about sundown. He took a short cut on foot over the hill, and when he came out he saw a man on the opposite ridge where the road runs, ride away. The man seemed to have been sitting on his horse looking down into the little valley where Coopman's house stands. Bowers went down to the house, but Coopman was not there. The door was open and Bowers says the house looked as though Coopman had just gone out of it and might come back any moment. There was no one about, because Coopman's wife had gone on a

visit to her daughter, over the mountains, and the old man was alone.

"Bowers thought Coopman was out showing the cattle to the man whom he had just seen ride off, so he went out to the pasture field to look for him. He could not find him and he could not find the cattle. He came back to the house to wait until Coopman should come in. He sat down on the porch. As he sat there he noticed that the porch had been scrubbed and was still wet. He looked at it and saw that it had been scrubbed only at one place before the door. This seemed to him a little peculiar, and he wondered why Coopman had scrubbed his porch only in one place. He got up and as he went toward the door he saw that the jamb of the door was splintered at a point about halfway up. He examined this splintered place and presently discovered that it was a bullet hole.

"This alarmed him, and he went out into the yard. There he saw a wagon track leading away from the house toward the road. In the weeds he found Coopman's watch. He picked it up and put it into his pocket. It was a big silver watch, with Coopman's name on it, and attached to it was a buckskin string. He followed the track to the gate, where it entered the road. He discovered then that the cattle had also passed through this gate. It was not night. Bowers went back, got Coopman's saddle horse out of the stable, rode him home, and followed the track of the cattle this morning, but he saw no trace of the drove until we met him."

"What did Shifflet and Twiggs say to this story?" inquired Abner.

"They did not hear it," answered Ward; "Bowers did not talk before them. He rode aside with us when we met him."

"Did Shifflet and Twiggs know Bowers?" said Abner.

"I don't know," replied Ward; "their talk was so foul when we stopped the drove that we had to tie their mouths up."

"Is that all?" said Abner.

Ward swore a great oath.

"No!" he said. "Do you think we would hang men on that? From what Bowers told us, we thought Shifflet and Twiggs had killed Daniel Coopman and driven off his cat-

tle; but we wanted to be certain of it, so we set out to discover what they had done with Coopman's body after they had killed him and what they had done with the wagon. We followed the trail of the drove down to the Valley River. No wagon had crossed, but on the other side we found that a wagon and a drove of cattle had turned out of the road and gone along the basin of the river for about a mile through the woods. And there in a bend of the river we found where these devils had camped.

"There had been a great fire of logs very near to the river, but none of the ashes of this fire remained. From a circular space some twelve feet in diameter the ashes had all been shoveled off, the marks of the shovel being distinct. In the center of the place where this fire had burned the ground had been scraped clean but near the edges there were some traces of cinders and the ground was blackened. In the river at this point, just opposite the remains of the fire, was a natural washout or hole. We made a raft of logs, cut a pole with a fork on the end and dragged the river. We found most of the wagon iron, all showing the effect of the fire. Then we fastened a tin bucket to a pole and fished the washout. We brought up cinders, buttons, buckles and pieces of bone."

"Ward paused.

"That settled it, and we came back here to swing the devils up."

My uncle had listened very carefully, and now he spoke.

"What did the man pay Twiggs and Shifflet?" said my uncle. "Did they tell you that when you stopped the drove?"

"Now that," answered Ward, "was another piece of damning evidence. When we searched the men we found a pocketbook on Shifflet with a hundred and fifteen dollars and some odd cents. It was Daniel Coopman's pocketbook, because there was an old tax receipt in it that had slipped down between the leather and the lining.

"We asked Shifflet where he got it, and he said that the fifteen dollars and the change was his own money and that the hundred had been paid to him by the man who had hired them to drive the cattle. He explained his possession of the pocketbook by saying that this man had the money in it, and when he went to pay them he said that they might just as well take it, too."

"Who was this man?" said Abner.

"They will not tell who he was."

"Why not?"

"Now, Abner," cried Ward, "why not, indeed! Because there never was any such man. The story is a lie out of the whole cloth. Those two devils are guilty as hell. The proof is all dead against them."

"Well," replied my uncle, "what circumstantial evidence proves, depends a good deal on how you get started. It is a somewhat dangerous road to the truth, because all the signboards have a curious trick of pointing in the direction that you are going. Now a man will never realize this unless he turns around and starts back, then he will see, to his amazement, that the signboards have also turned. But as long as his face is set one certain way, it is of no use to talk to him, he won't listen to you; and if he sees you going the other way, he will call you a fool."

"There is only one way in this case," said Ward.

"There are always two ways in every case," replied Abner, "that the suspected person is either guilty or innocent. You have started upon the theory that Shifflet and Twiggs are guilty. Now, suppose you had started the other way, what then?"

"Well," said Ward, "what then?"

"This, then," continued Abner. "You stop Shifflet and Twiggs on the road with Daniel Coopman's cattle, and they tell you that a man has hired them to drive this drove into Maryland. You believe that and start out to find the man. You find Bowers!"

Bowers went deadly white.

"For God's sake, Abner!" he said.

But my uncle was merciless and he drove in the conclusion.

"What then?"

There was no answer, but the faces of the men about my uncle turned toward the man whose trembling hands fingered the rope that he was preparing for another.

"But the things we found, Abner?" said Ward.

"What do they prove," continued my uncle, "now that the signboards are turned? That somebody killed Daniel Coopman and drove off his cattle, and afterward destroyed the body and the wagon in which it was hauled

away. . . . But who did that? . . . The men who were driving Daniel Coopman's cattle, or the man who was riding Daniel Coopman's horse, and carrying Daniel Coopman's watch in his pocket?"

Ward's face was a study in expression.

"Ah!" cried Abner. "Remember that the signboards have turned about. And what do they point to if we read them on the way we are going now? The man who killed Coopman was afraid to be found with the cattle, so he hired Twiggs and Shifflet to drive them into Maryland for him and follows on another road."

"But his story, Abner?" said Ward.

"And what of it?" replied my uncle. "He is taken and he must explain how he comes by the horse that he rides, and the watch that he carries, and he must find the criminal. Well, he tells you a tale to fit the facts that you will find when you go back to look, and he gives you Shifflet and Twiggs to hang."

I never saw a man in more mortal terror than Jacob Bowers. He sat in his saddle like a man bewildered.

"My God!" he said, and again he repeated it, and again.

And he had cause for that terror on him. My uncle was stern and ruthless. The pendulum had swung the other way, and the lawless monster that Bowers had allied was now turning on himself. He saw it and his joints were unhinged with fear.

A voice crashed out of the ring of desperate men, uttering the changed opinion.

"By God!" it cried, "we've got the right man now."

And one caught the rope out of Bowers' hand.

But my Uncle Abner rode in on them.

"Are you sure about that?" he said.

"Sure!" they echoed. "You have shown it yourself, Abner."

"No," replied my uncle, "I have not shown it. I have shown merely whither circumstantial evidence leads us when we go hotfoot after a theory. Bowers says that there was a man on the hill above Daniel Coopman's house, and this man will know that he did not kill Daniel Coopman and that his story is the truth."

They laughed in my uncle's face.

"Do you believe that there was any such person?"

My uncle seemed to increase in stature, and his voice became big and dominant.

"I do," he said, "because I am the man!"

They had got their lesson, and we rode out with Shifflet and Twiggs to a legal trial.

MURDER MATINEE

Harold Q. Masur

I could see the fine texture of Mia Farrow's million-dollar skin. She was looking straight at me. But she wasn't talking to me.

Up there on the big screen Paul Newman got a half-Nelson on her that must have caught the censor's office asleep.

A sigh expired at my side. I glanced sideways at the girl in the next seat. She was an attractive number with a sturdy little figure. Brown hair curled over the back of her neck. Her full red mouth worked on a stick of gum. Her expression was so rapt, so fixed, you'd think she was in a trance.

I swiveled my head and grinned. "Whew! What a scene!"

She started to give me a stony look, but it melted like grilled cheese all over her face and became a smile. I'm no Steve McQueen, but then I'm no Karloff either. I was well burned by two years in the Far East before I got my C.D.D. from the Army. I was wearing white linens touched off with a blue pastel tie.

"Newman's wonderful, isn't he?" she said.

"So is Mia."

After that bit of sparkling repartee we divided our time between the picture and side remarks. Pretty soon our shoulders were touching. I was pleased. This, I thought, is

going to be easy. It was early afternoon, and we sat there in the huge auditorium, almost alone. I looked at my wrist watch. I had a phone call to make, so I deposited my hat on her lap and drifted back to the lobby.

You know Keeler's Cathay, that huge fantastic pile just off the main stem, as vast and as bizarre as a maharajah's palace. Admission is three bucks a head and entitles you to walk on its lush carpets and sink into a chair comfortable as a Pullman seat. Roscoe Keeler had built several of these monsters around the country.

I got back during the newsreel. She sat slumped comfortably back. I dropped beside her, linked her arm. She got friendly. She put her haircut on my shoulder and nuzzled her forehead against my neck. The newsreel ended.

I said, "Let's breeze. There's a lot of cold beer waiting."

She didn't move. I looked down at her. Her eyes were open and her lips slightly parted.

"They've got a dandy air-cooled system here," I said. "But winter is still a couple of months off. Let's go."

She ignored the hint. She kept her head on my shoulder. I shifted slightly and her body tilted into my lap. Her head just flopped over as if there were no muscles in her neck. I got a chill. I sat very still. Then suddenly the lights went on like they always do at the Cathay and I was staring at the light brown hair that curled over the nape of her neck.

An usher coming up the aisle stopped short. He was staring at it too. Then his jaws began working and he uncorked a bray like a horse in a burning barn. He was just a kid.

I couldn't take my eyes off her hair. It was stained red. Her good red blood was leaking out, and some of it was on my right hand. Between my fingers and on the palm. Maybe I would have yelled too but my throat had a knot in it.

Oh, brother, I thought, *what is this now? What am I in for?*

I reached for her wrist. I pressed the vein. Nothing, nothing at all, no pulse. I lifted her chin. Her eyes were open. But they weren't looking at anything. And her bright red-painted mouth was pulled tautly back in a thin smile that wasn't a smile at all.

She was terribly dead.

Suddenly I felt sick. Everything inside me was upset. I

couldn't stand the blood on my hand. I got to my feet fast and she slipped sideways, thumping softly against the seat.

The next hour can be washed forever out of my life. It is blank, blotted out, and so is my memory of it. All I can remember is sitting in the manager's office and staring at the girl. They had carried her body back there and loaded it onto a couch.

Look at her, I kept thinking, *only an hour ago she was alive and now she's dead.*

I remember there were a lot of men in the room. I remember that one of them was asking me questions which I answered dully. Gradually I became more aware of this man. His name was Alec Hynd. He owned a long stiff face with deep cracks and eyes as hard and deadly as the bore of a forty-five. The rest of the guys there from headquarters just stood by and watched him. He was the whole show, the works.

He said, "Where did you hide the knife, Crown?"

Was it a knife? I thought. *Was she killed with a knife?* My head was clearing. I knew there were a number of places he could have learned my name. Peter Crown. Trouble-shooter and efficiency expert. Oh, brother, what a laugh that was! Efficiency expert and I couldn't even keep myself out of a jam.

I said, "I never had any knife."

Somebody stuck a thumb into the back of my neck so hard it gave me a stitch in the brain and brought a red haze over my eyes.

I didn't like the sound of Hynd's laugh. "You told us you got up to make a phone call. You came back to the lobby and hid the knife. Where?"

I shook my head stubbornly. "No. That's when it must have happened. Somebody sneaked up behind her, stuck the knife into her back, and sat her up in the chair. When I came back and sat down, her head fell against my shoulder. I—I thought she liked me, but she was dead all the time."

Hynd's lower lip rode onto his upper. "Where did you hide it? This is one hell of a big theater, Crown. You can save us a lot of trouble."

"Sure," I said bitterly. "I'll confess. Take this down. I killed her. I didn't like the perfume she used. It bothered

me. Then I swallowed the knife and stayed right there waiting to get caught."

"You never saw her before?"

"Never."

Hynd stretched his lips. He laughed. He gave one short laugh. "So you never saw her before. Only we can prove you followed her here. The doorman saw you and remembered, because he knew the girl. An usher saw you. And a jeweler standing outside his store saw you."

My face felt stiff as parchment. "All right," I admitted. "So I followed her here."

"And you knew who she was. You knew her name was Helen Craig."

"Yes, I knew her name." There was no use denying it.

Hynd straightened and now his eyes had a dark flat color.

"What were you after, Crown? What did you want from that girl?"

"I was working on something and I had to talk to her. Where's Mr. Bolton? Where's the manager?" My eyes jerked around the room. "Tell him, Bolton."

He stepped forward, a small, immaculate item, pale-faced and pale-eyed. On his face he wore a harassed expression, and on his spare frame a piece of flannel cut by an artist. He was as neat and orderly as a stack of fifty-millimeter shells.

"That's quite true. Mr. Hynd. Crown's been working here for two days now."

"Yeah? Doing what?"

"Trouble-shooting. Mr. Keeler hired him. Business has been falling off. Most seriously. In this theater and in our others, all over the country. We thought an efficiency expert might put his finger on the trouble."

Hynd gave me a stony look. "What about that, now?"

"It's true," I said. "Until two weeks ago, Helen Craig was a cashier here. She got ninety-five bucks a week. But in a bank account in Brooklyn she had ten thousand, all deposited within the last six months. Where did it come from? I figured if I could strike up an acquaintance, get friendly with her, get into her confidence without letting her know what I was after, then I might find some connection between that dough and this theater."

Alec Hynd didn't like that. He was the kind of guy who

hates to think he's been wrong. He stayed in there and kept punching questions at me, how long I'd been tailing the girl, why didn't I accuse her right out, stuff like that—trying to suck me into a vortex of contradictions, until I advised him where to go. I shut up tight as a miser's vault.

Now only the two of us were left. Bolton, the manager, and myself. Hynd had gone and the rest of the cops along with him. Helen Craig's body had been carted off in a wicker basket to the morgue. Smoke, thick, grey, and heavy, hung over the place like a London fog. Bolton broke out a bottle of Scotch and two tumblers.

"This is what we need, what we both need."

I put my drink down, had another. It was good. I felt better. I walked to the window and let what breeze there was dry moisture from my face.

"Bad publicity," mourned Bolton. "Very bad."

"Maybe not," I said. "People are morbid. This may pull them in."

Let's go to the Cathay, dearie. A girl was murdered there right in the middle of the day.

"I hope so," said Bolton. "If things get much worse, I'm liable to be looking for a new job."

I fingered my empty tumbler. "What do you know about this girl, Helen Craig?"

"Not much. She worked here for about a year, then quit suddenly. She seemed like a reliable girl. I liked her. Matter of fact she roomed with one of the other employees. You can talk to her later."

Incidental music, soft and muffled, came through the closed door. "How'd the house do last night?" I asked.

"Not too good." Bolton went on, "Maybe it's the war. Maybe they're making pictures without appeal. Maybe people hate to go to the movies when they're worried about what's going on over there."

"Nonsense," I said. "Every gin mill, every night club, every theater in the country is doing a booming business. People's nerves are raw, sure, that's why they need relaxation. And they're fighting to get it. Everybody's got a lot of dough and a slippery palm. They'll pay anything for amusement. Hell, you could jack up the price of admission and you still ought to do more business."

Bolton spread his neatly manicured fingers in a resigned gesture.

"I give up. I can't understand it. When business fell off in the Chicago theater I was glad to be transferred east. Now it's just as bad here."

I clucked sympathetically. I was thinking about his bottle of Scotch when the door opened and a tall man entered. He had wavy red hair, a crisp red mustache, and eyes that also looked red.

He said, "The ticket machine is almost empty, Mr. Bolton. May I have a new roll?"

"I'll take care of it, Vic," said Bolton. And to me, "This is Vic Schramm, our assistant manager."

I nodded, admiring the midnight blue tuxedo and the satin striped trousers pressed to a crease sharp enough to cut your throat.

Bolton went to the safe and said over his shoulder, while spinning the dial, "Take care of Mr. Crown, Vic. Anything he wants."

Schramm's mouth worked into a fawning smile. I followed him down to the mezzanine, feeling the carpet nap licking at my ankles.

Schramm said, "Bad business about that girl. I thought the cops might close up the place for a day or so."

"You knew her?"

He gave me his dentures in a rueful smile. "Not very well. You see, in my position it's not too good a policy to get friendly with minor employees."

"Yeah," I nodded. "Just what is your position?"

"Why, assistant manager, of course."

"Sure. But what are your duties?"

"Oh!" He shrugged. "My reponsibilities are limited. I keep an eye on all the help, see that the ushers are neat and polite. Control the overflow, if any. Check to see that the exchange gets pictures here on time. Stuff like that."

"Who buys the pictures?"

"Mr. Bolton does for most of the chain. He makes contracts for a year at a time." The shoulders lifted in a helpless gesture. "I don't often agree with his choice, but . . ."

What he left unsaid was supposed to indicate that he thought Bolton a first-class bungler. I let it pass. He tried again: "Are they going to reorganize the staff?"

"That depends," I told him noncommittally.

"On what?"

"On business. It's rotten."

This time he put it more bluntly. "The place needs new blood."

I looked at him. He wasn't especially worried about his job. "Maybe," I said. "If the trouble is really with the management."

"Frankly," he announced, "I think Cathay could do better."

"That's the point." I rubbed my right thumb and forefinger. "Money. How heavy is the little leather bag at the end of the day? Take this theater, and the Zanzibar in Chicago, the Pyramid in Minneapolis, the Rio in Philadelphia, they're all the way behind last year."

He started to say something but a shrill whistle from the gallery cut him off. The orchestra took it up and added catcalls. In three minutes the whole place was making noise with their hands and feet. Vic Schramm cursed.

We slipped over to an empty aisle and looked at the screen. Mia was talking. At least her lips were moving, but not even a whisper came out of the speakers.

Schramm snapped. "Confound that sound track! Excuse me, Crown. See you later." He took off for the projection room.

About five minutes passed, then words started booming from the amplifiers again. The operator attenuated the volume and the audience quieted down. I stood there for a minute, then headed toward the outside lobby. I did this on an impulse.

When I followed Helen Craig, I had bought a ticket. I did that because I wasn't sure if the doorman would recognize me, and I was afraid of losing the girl. Even being in a hurry like I was I remembered the girl in the ticket booth. She made a decoration that decidedly called for further investigation.

She was there all right, only this time she had company. Bolton was in the booth, messing with the automatic ticket seller. He looked harried. He snapped the brass cover shut.

"You see what I have to contend with, Crown? Tickets run low, nobody tells me. Bad prints from the exchange and hooting like in any cheap double-feature barn. Where's Schramm?" He hurried back into the house.

I stayed there at the window and grinned at the cashier.

She was small and compact and stacked like a professional model with a movie actress smile. It was a professional smile, loaded with a row of gleaming crockery that belonged on a toothpaste ad. When I didn't say anything, the smile collapsed like a bride's courage.

"How many, please?"

How can I describe her voice? They haven't yet designed the instrument that makes nicer music.

I said, "If you were a hostess in a dance hall, I'd buy them all."

Her eyes were cobalt and they widened like china saucers. She opened her mouth but didn't say anything.

"I don't really want a ticket," I said.

Suddenly the smile came back again—bright and flashing. "I know," she said. "You're doing some kind of work here. Mr. Schramm told me about it."

"What else did he tell you?"

"To be careful. That you looked like a dangerous character."

"Did he tell you not to have supper with me?"

"Well . . . " she gasped. "Well . . ."

"When are you off duty?"

"I don't—" she started. "At nine-thirty."

"I'll be waiting under the marquee."

She just sat there, staring at me along her lashes, and my heart began hammering.

I added, "And don't keep me waiting, because I'll be holding my breath."

It was summer in New York. When the light fades and the heat goes out of the sidewalks, you can feel the city pulse into life. White glare from a million neons start Broadway blazing. It was something fine to see time and time again. Long streams of cars crawl along the stem. Horns and brakes are a muted undertone to the clatter of the traffic. From every subway kiosk the crowd had thickened. Now it was milling and spilling down side streets, forming long queues in front of box offices.

It was summer and everybody had a lot of dough and was going to spend it.

I turned the corner toward the Cathay. Vic Schramm was moving down the line of people, trying to keep order. There seemed to be a charge of current in the air and peo-

ple didn't like waiting in line. Small groups broke formation and went away. Schramm spotted me.

"I wish we had a thousand more seats tonight, Mr. Crown." He went inside.

It was almost 9:30. I went into the inner lobby. I saw the blonde coming toward me. She was lovely. She was smiling. I saw the smile, then suddenly I didn't see it. I didn't see anything. The Cathay turned absolutely black.

Every single bulb in the place snuffed out.

It was blacker in there than Hitler's honor. Even the screen was dead. You couldn't see the width of a cross hair in front of you. It was a shock, the abrupt change from glittering light to opaque nothingness. A woman called out. The crowd surged nervously back. Here and there a small flashlight twinkled helplessly.

"It's only a fuse," I yelled. "Stay where you are, everybody."

But I knew it was more than a fuse or even ten fuses. It seemed incredible for something like that to happen in a theater like the Cathay. Pretty soon the lights came on again.

I cut a wake toward the basement and found the electrician. He was doing some of the best cursing I ever heard. I spoke to him for a couple of minutes, then went back to the lobby.

On the way out I noticed some of the lights were still dead. I asked the doorman to tell the electrician. The blonde reassured him that it would be all right for him to leave me in charge.

It was quiet in the box-office now, because a lot of people had walked off in the blackout. While I was taking tickets, Bolton raced past. His face was pasty and worried. He didn't look quite so neat. His mouth was rough and dry and he was sweating.

The doorman returned. I got away. When I reached for the blonde's arm I found two ticket stubs in my hand which I had forgotten to drop in the chopper. I put them into my pocket and steered the girl into the street.

We ordered dinner at Luigi's. When she told me her name, I thought she was kidding. It was Melody.

"Whoever pinned a tag like that on you?"

It turned out her father had been a music teacher with a sense of humor. Her eyes crinkled when she gave me the

whole monicker. Melody Krauss. And she wasn't a ticket seller at the Cathay at all. You must have seen her there at the hundred-thousand-dollar Hammond making organ music between shows.

I asked her what she was doing at the box-office.

"When Helen quit—" she started to tell me and then broke. Her teeth pinched off her lower lip to keep it steady.

I looked at her anxiously.

She got hold of herself. "Helen was my roommate."

I didn't say anything. What can you say to a girl whose friend has just been killed?

She said, "I guess you think I'm pretty hard going out with you like this, but I really didn't feel like being alone tonight."

The waiter brought two cocktails and that helped things.

"You see," she explained. "I used to be a cashier too. Then Mr. Bolton found out that I could play the organ and gave me an audition. Helen used to room with me. After I became the organist we stayed together."

Bolton had been unable to get a replacement for Helen and had asked Melody to help out. She asked me about the lights at the theater.

"Seems that somebody deliberately burned some fuses and pulled the master switch."

"But that's sabotage! Who could have done such a thing?"

"Exactly," I said. "Who?"

"Something's always going wrong these days," she said.

I leaned forward. "For example?"

She shrugged. "I don't know—it's just something you feel about a place."

We finished eating. "How about letting me look over Helen's stuff. Maybe some kind of clue will turn up."

She nodded and we taxied over.

It was a cozy little building in the East Nineties. She fumbled in her purse and gave me a key.

"Go ahead up," she said. "Apartment 3-B. I want to get some ginger ale."

I protested. But she wanted it her way, so I climbed three flights, found the door, and keyed it open. A reading lamp was burning in the sitting room. It spread yellow light on the guy who was sitting on the mohair chesterfield with

his long legs crossed. It was Alec Hynd, the headquarters cop.

He stared at me without expression. "So it's you."

I slammed my hat down. "What the devil is this?"

He said, "I thought you didn't know the Craig girl."

"It's true. I didn't."

"But you have a key to her apartment and you walk in like it's habit."

I laughed in his teeth. "You're smart," I said. "You're bright. Just like a cop. Take the tracks away and his mind won't run. Listen, I'll make it easy. The Craig girl has a roommate. She sent me up. She'll be here in a minute."

Hynd sighed irritably through his nose. "I've been a cop for almost twenty years, Crown. And every time a novice sticks his smeller into police business, he gets hurt—bad. It never fails. I'll lay a nickel to a dollar you wind up on a morgue slab. What's more, if—"

Melody rang the doorbell, and I let her in. She gazed blankly at Hynd.

"Just duty," he said. "A cop has the right to examine the effects of a murdered girl. The questions I want to ask you will wait till morning."

He went away.

Melody mixed a couple of drinks weak enough to keep a schoolgirl sober. When I put it down, she let me into Helen Craig's room. I combed through the place, found nothing of interest, some tepid letters to a guy overseas, costume jewelry, snapshots, the usual stuff a girl would save.

Then Melody remembered a suitcase in one of her own closets where Helen had kept some stuff. There was a lot of fancy understuff and a couple of envelopes. One of them held two Cathay theater ticket stubs. the other carried a letter from Vic Schramm. He had lied about not knowing her well.

Melody was looking over my shoulder. It was a short letter. I think it would have ignited asbestos. He couldn't sleep. He couldn't eat. He knew she'd been cheating on him. If he ever found her with another guy, he'd kill them both. I faced Melody.

Her eyes were wide. She said, "Schramm wanted to marry Helen. He swore he'd have plenty of money, that he was going to be the new manager of the Cathay before long."

At first I didn't get it, then I grabbed Melody by the shoulders.

"So Schramm thought he was getting Bolton's job, eh?"

She nodded, dazed at my vehemence. "Yes. He told her the skids were under Bolton."

"Sure," I said. "And I know who put them there." A lot of little ideas piled in on me, little but they add up. "See you later," I said, and barged out.

A cab was cruising down the street, and I made a run for it. I never caught that cab and it was a damn good thing. They were repairing manholes on the street. One of them hadn't been set in right. A little thing that undoubtedly saved my hide. It caught the toe of my shoe and sent me sprawling headlong into the street.

At precisely that instant the bullet whistled inches over my head and the roar of the gun echoed dully down the building canyon. I lay very still, not breathing. Diminishing steps raced down an alley.

Slowly I got up. I looked at my hand. It was unsteady. I was shaking. The starch was out of me. I stood there. Then quite suddenly I was seized with a cold ferocious rage that brought my blood to the boiling point.

I started walking. It was about one o'clock in the morning. I had the address in my pocket. Vic Schramm's place was across the park, thirty minutes by foot. I wanted that extra time now to marshal my facts.

It was a converted brownstone and he wasn't home yet. I waited across the street until I saw him climb the stairs. Then I found a drug store and called Bolton's hotel.

"Meet me in front of Schramm's place," I told him. "The lid is going to pop."

In fifteen minutes a cab unloaded Bolton near the corner. The flannel suiting was a little ruffled. His forehead was moist, and he serviced it with a carefully folded handkerchief. I waved him along.

Vic Schramm answered our knock. He was stripped to the waist. The same red hair on his head and mustache sprinkled a concave chest. He lifted his brows, glanced from one to the other of us, then stepped aside. Bolton closed the door.

"Sit down, Schramm," I said.

He stared at us. "What is this—a party?"

"Sure," I said. "A farewell party. Sit down."

He twisted toward the bedroom. "Mind if I get a robe?"

"I mind very much," I said. "The pockets are too big and I can't see what's in them."

"Meaning just what?" he asked, narrowing his eyes.

"A gun," I said. "Once a night is enough."

His brow wrinkled like a piece of cracked cardboard. He shifted to Bolton. "What the hell is he talking about?"

Bolton shrugged. "I don't know, Vic. This is Crown's show."

I said, "You're scared, Schramm, aren't you? I don't blame you. So scared you tried to funnel a bullet into me tonight."

He shook his head like a fighter after a hard punch. He swallowed twice. "A bullet. Why would I do that?"

"I'll tell you," I said. "Because you knew I was getting wise. You wanted the Craig girl, but she couldn't see you as far as the corner. So you were going to prove what a guy you were. Show her you could be top man, manager, at the Cathay.

"How? By forcing Bolton out. By gradually screwing up the works and giving the house a lousy reputation. You had charge of the film prints. You deliberately damaged the sound track."

"Prove it!" snapped Schramm. The muscles in his neck made hard lumps.

"Today," I said, "you jerked the master switch, throwing the whole theater into darkness and stopping the picture. Nobody ever touches that switch. We'll take your prints off it. Maybe right here in this apartment we'll find some of the fuses you swiped."

Schramm didn't like that. At the corner of his mouth he suddenly developed a tick.

I said, "This evening people were lined up in front of the box-office, but they broke away after you passed by. What did you tell them? I know. That no seats were available. You were discouraging them. You wanted business to go from bad to worse, hoping they'd throw out the manager and promote you. You told the Craig girl you had the skids under Bolton."

"So what?" he growled. He was leaning forward and he kept his stiffly sullen face turned towards me.

"Just this. Maybe Helen Craig got wise, threatened to expose you. Or," I said slowly, "maybe she found a daddy

with some real sugar, somebody who gave her ten grand. She was going to chuck you. You were crazy with jealousy. If you couldn't have her, then nobody could; so you opened a leak in her neck while she sat in the theater. You killed her, and she never had a chance to say a word."

Schramm's face was grey. His tongue came out and coiled over his lip. His nostrils were flared and quivering.

"Me kill her?" he said thickly. "I couldn't. I was nuts about her."

"Here's a letter you wrote her," I said, digging it out of my pocket. "Threatening to kill her if she ever left you. You think there's a juror too dumb in the world to figure it."

I unfolded the letter and a couple of Cathay ticket stubs fell into my hand. The two I'd taken as doorman. The one I'd bought earlier that day when I was trailing Helen Craig.

They lay in my palm and I looked at them. I was on the point of returning them to my pocket, when something grabbed at my eyes. I was staring at the serial numbers. The numbers looked up at me like swollen headlines.

The ticket I had bought had a number higher by hundreds than the other two. Yet I had bought it earlier in the day. You see what that meant? Theater tickets are sold consecutively. The number sold determines how much money they should have at the end of the day. So much money for so many tickets.

I didn't look up. I was afraid what my face might show. My larynx was too big for my throat. So big it hurt.

"You say somebody shot at you?" croaked Schramm. "When? What time?"

"About one o'clock."

His fingers clawed excitedly at my arm. "But I was still at the theater at one o'clock. The janitor saw me. He'll swear I was there."

I didn't answer him. I got the envelope containing the two ticket stubs Helen Craig had been saving. I glanced at the serial numbers. The numbers were identical.

It hit me on the brain like a blow. I could see it now. It was pretty clear. Of course Schramm hadn't fired at me.

I looked up at Bolton. "You never let anyone else handle the tickets, did you?"

His face was suddenly grey with fatigue, washed out.

I said, "Ticket stubs with the same numbers, a cashier who got wise and wanted a cut—"

Schramm cried, "Tickets with the same numbers! It was him, it was Bolton. He was counterfeiting tickets, selling them, and keeping the money."

Now Bolton was against the wall and he had a gun in his hand. He held it leveled against Schramm's stomach. The corner of his mouth was jacked up as if it had been caught by a fish hook.

Schramm's eyes were frozen to the gun muzzle. It fascinated him. He stood impaled to the floor. The terror in his face was something terrible to see.

Derision laced Bolton's voice. "Sure," he said. "I was ringing in between two and five hundred fake tickets a day. That's what hurt business. You think it was your stupid tricks that cut down receipts?" His fist grew tense and white around the gun.

Schramm's voice was a hoarse whisper. "No, no, Bolton—don't—" His breath came hard like the breath of a man choking to death. It whistled through the pinched slits of his nostrils.

Bolton shot him three times.

The bullets knocked Schramm back. He looked at me. You could see that he didn't believe what had happened. His knees started to buckle. He stretched out a begging hand, then caved. He crumpled slowly forward and rolled over on his back with his face turned up. His eyes were still open and bulging. He was very dead. His lips were pulled back, leaving his teeth naked to the gums.

The gun muzzle made a small tight arc and focused on my chest. "Pretty good idea, wasn't it?" Bolton said.

"Five hundred tickets a day at a chip a head is a load of cloth," I agreed. "When you saw me come into the theater following Helen Craig, you were afraid she might let something slip."

He nodded. "She had to go anyway. She was blackmailing me. I gave it to her as soon as you went back to the lobby. I'd been watching you all the time." His eyes were abnormally bright. "When I saw you taking tickets tonight and later found that you were at the apartment looking around, I knew that you had to go too." He shrugged. "There was no way of telling what evidence she might have left around."

I could feel the sweat on my face like a film of oil.

Bolton said dully, "I must have been crazy to fool around with those tickets while you were making an investigation. But I needed the money."

I was surprised. "You needed money with a grand or two coming in every week?"

A wry smile twitched at his lips. "I didn't get it all. We managers are run by a syndicate. Our cut is a percentage."

I asked, "And all of Keller's theaters are being racketed that way?"

His eyes again. They worried me. He looked trigger-happy. The hair seemed to crawl along the back of my neck. "We've had enough lip-flapping," he said. His muscles were bracing against the coming recoil of the gun. His gestures were stiff and mechanical.

The explosion splitting the air was fearful. My heart suffered a violent spasm. I felt my knees go rubbery. Then, abruptly, the door at Bolton's side crashed inward before the weight of a man. I saw that the shot, fired from the outside, had shattered the lock.

Bolton wavered. His eyes went wild, his mouth flapped open like the mouth of a dead fish. He lurched around. The man before the open door was Alec Hynd. He acted in one swift decisive movement. Everything about him was fast, except the thin tendril of smoke curling lazily from the muzzle of his police gun. He slammed the barrel across Bolton's face. Bolton fell down.

Hynd looked at him. He looked at Schramm. Then he turned to me.

"Cops aren't so dumb, Crown. I learned about Schramm's connection with the dead girl myself, and came over to have a talk with him. I heard some of what went on."

I sucked in a long breath. I felt like a drowning man who has just been hauled out of a whirlpool. All I could say was, "Thanks."

Hynd reached for the phone. "Spring 7—3100," he said. He looked over at me. "It goes round and round. Beat it, Crown. That blonde's worried about you."

LOVE ME, LOVE ME, LOVE ME

M. S. Waddell

I was not alone.

I stopped and turned around. I knew there was somebody there, somebody following, somebody who did not want to be seen, somebody shy.

Well, all right, so there was nobody there. Maybe it was just my imagination . . . again.

I lit a cigarette, pausing beneath a street lamp. Maybe it was nerves, maybe I had been doing too much, maybe now was the time to do something about it. I'm not made of iron. Time to take a rest. I walked on up the avenue, mechanically counting my paces between the trees that flanked it.

Harcourt could do it . . . no doubt about that. He was able, he knew the ropes. Nothing would go far wrong with Harcourt in charge. There was no need to actually go away. I could stay at home . . . where I would be on hand if anything happened.

The feeling again, the feeling that somebody was watching me. I fought against it, unavailingly. I turned around.

Nothing.

A quiet road, trees, and bushes, an odd friendly light winking over the top of a hedge, only not so many now as there usually were because now it was getting late, or early, depending on the way you look at it. One-thirty A.M., a cool morning, not unpleasant. The way I like

it . . . the best way for relaxing; not lying in bed, getting up and walking. Not far, just along the road and back, makes the thoughts stand still, makes things insignificant. People, too many people all day . . . nobody at night . . . usually.

So I quickened my pace. Maybe it would be better to get home, get to bed. This feeling . . . this was bad. Feet on the ground . . . people with feet on the ground don't start imagining things, not this way . . . this rustling on the road behind me.

Turn round . . . again? All right . . . don't turn round. So what about the rustling on the road . . . a dog?

Glad to get home just the same. I unlatched the gate, turned up the path. Thirty yards, feet scraping on the gravel. Keys . . . groping for the keys, fumbling for the lock.

Someone was standing at the gate, something. A shape . . . colourless . . . then it was gone, faded. Imagination . . . or not imagination? I went back down to the gate. Nothing. Always nothing.

Or was there? Nothing tangible . . . but there was something. A feeling in the air . . . a fondness . . . the only way to describe it. Something personal about the night.

Then there wasn't. There was only night, impersonal. Time to go inside to have a drink, to go to bed. To fix it with Harcourt tomorrow for a rest . . . a real rest.

Back into the house . . . a drink . . . to calm things down.

Looking through the window . . . there is nothing at the gate.

There is nothing at the gate.

There is something at the gate . . . someone. A someone . . . waiting at the gate. Last night . . . I don't know about last night. Maybe there wasn't last night. Tonight there is someone, or something—I don't know— at the gate. Curiously there is no feeling of anxiety about it in my mind . . . curiosity yes . . . that much good the day's rest has done.

This thing at the gate . . . It still isn't there when I look directly. Just now and then . . . a glance through the curtains and there it is, glowing faintly in the light from the road.

Harcourt is coming tonight. That ought to be the test. I can see it clearly now . . . inside the gate. Never close . . . but inside the gate standing at the foot of the garden in the darkness.

It's not so shy now . . . it lets me look at it. I'm not afraid. Maybe it is imagination . . . maybe not. If not, then I should be afraid. But I'm not . . . just rather happy. I'm not afraid . . . maybe *it* is, or shy, or something.

Harcourt didn't see it. I was near to him, close to him in the darkness, but he didn't know. I didn't ask him. I couldn't ask him because he would have thought . . . well, it's obvious what he would have thought—wouldn't anybody?

You can't talk to a man like Harcourt about a thing like . . . the thing. Can you call a thing a person? Harcourt has his head firmly screwed on. You can talk to him about budgets and schedules and items for procedure . . . my sort of man, a man who doesn't need an imagination.

We talked. We sat by the window and talked. I kept the curtains back . . . I wanted to see if he would see it. I didn't want him to see it . . . not really. If he saw it, then it wasn't an it . . . it was something that could be classified and boxed away in his orderly mind . . . if he didn't see it, it was part of my imagination, or strain from overwork or nerves.

Well . . . he didn't see it.

It saw him.

He must have seen it, if it was there to see. It came right out into the light as it has never done before, right up the garden towards the window.

I know more about it now. It looks like a woman . . . a girl, not a woman. Too slight for a woman, too soft in its movements. It never actually seems to move. One minute it is in one spot, the next a little farther on. But coming towards the house, definitely. White . . . or perhaps not really white. Colourless, like water formed into a shape, like rain frozen into a pattern on glass.

"You know your way?" I asked Harcourt at the door.

"Down to the station . . . Yes."

I held the door open for him.

"Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

He walked down the path.

I stood in the door. He must have thought I was watching him particularly, he made a gesture of farewell at the gate.

The thing was standing against the hedge. It had the most wistful, sad little face I have ever seen. It stood as high as my shoulder, still, more than is implied by still . . . motionless, its fingers clasped against its cape. It had turned its face aside so that I could not look directly upon it. It wore high old-fashioned shoes, a long, plain-cut dress, a cape draped over its shoulders.

I waited at the door. It did not move.

"Come in," I said out loud. "You can come in."

I stepped forward, and it was gone.

"You musn't be afraid of me," I said, standing in the garden in the darkness. "You mustn't be afraid." My voice sounded shrill, uncertain. I was trying to be sincere. It was afraid, and cold and lost, wherever it was, whoever it had been.

I waited a minute, two, three . . . till there was no point in it. I turned back to the house, pausing at the door. "You don't have to be afraid of me," I said again, softly.

I went back into the sitting-room. I sat by the window, looking out, in my favourite chair, where it would expect to see me. I waited. I went to sleep.

Morning . . . and the sun shining through the glass. I awoke slowly, comfortable, taking my time like a tabby cat. Plenty of time . . . all the time in the world.

Only it was running short of time . . . it had not found what it needed, it was still searching, with all the time in the world, but short of time.

In the moisture on the window pane it had traced with its finger, LOVE ME, LOVE ME, LOVE ME.

Tonight Harcourt walked through it. It was waiting by the door when I let him in, and he moved through it. Just for a moment its face mingled with Harcourt's smart black suit, then I was looking at it over his shoulder . . . and it was looking at me.

"You look pale," Harcourt said, as I closed the door. "You were right to take a rest."

"I don't know," I said. "I'm beginning to wonder if it was such a good idea."

"Oh?"

I looked at his face, He wasn't really interested. Fair enough . . . he wasn't paid to be interested.

"Gets a bit lonely out here," I said. "You know the way it is."

"Go off somewhere then," he said, settling in his chair by the table, spreading the papers from his briefcase before him. "Nothing to hold you here, is there?"

"No," I said. "I suppose not."

We went on to other things then . . . Harcourt's sort of things. But I went on thinking about it . . . and it wasn't right. There was something to hold me here . . . there was that thing in the garden for a start.

Just how long was it going to stay in the garden?

Not long. She was waiting in the hall when I showed Harcourt to the door. The same frozen stance, the same fragile hand clutching the edge of her cape.

I let Harcourt out, closed the door, turned round. She was still there, standing at the foot of the stairs, her eyes upon me.

"Well, you're in at last," I said. "What do you want?"

For a wraith she wasn't very forthcoming. Just the eyes, soft and sad, trying to say something. A fragile little thing.

"I don't know how to get through to you," I said. "I'm sorry. I don't know what you want."

She smiled. It was the first time I had actually seen her make any movement. It was a nice smile, wistful maybe, but nice. Then she started to fade. One minute she was standing against the banister, the next she wasn't.

"You mustn't be afraid," I said, hopefully.

There wasn't much point in waiting about in the hall for a timid spectre, so I abandoned the idea. Maybe she couldn't stay in one place very long? She was gone, anyway.

I waited round a bit that night, just to see if she would put in an appearance. Nothing happened. Once or twice there seemed to be a shade, a movement in the firelight, but she didn't let me see her.

So it went on for a day or two. She would turn up at odd spots round the house, just standing there smiling. Once

she reached out towards me, dainty fingers uncoiling. I moved towards her . . . too quickly . . . she faded away. That was the way it always was . . . she wanted me . . . she wanted to contact me, to try me, but she was afraid.

Harcourt still came each night. She didn't pay any attention to him. Once or twice she appeared in the room while we were talking, once standing by the window, frowning, again seated in the large leather armchair, her hands folded coyly on her lap. She was watching me, all the time, so that it was hard to keep my mind on what Harcourt was saying.

"This can't go on," I said one night, after Harcourt had left. She was still there in the armchair, still smiling. We're not getting anywhere."

I came towards her, slowly this time, so as not to scare her. I had learnt my lesson. I stopped, two or three feet from the chair. I extended my hand.

"It's all right," I said. "All right."

She pushed away from my hand, so that, just for a moment, her body faded into the back of the armchair . . . but she was learning too, she did not fade away.

"It's all right. You're all right," I went on saying.

Then her hand stretched out and touched my right shoulder. A shock of cold ran down my arm. A withering, stinging sensation. I snatched my hand back, involuntarily. She faded away. I was left clutching my right arm, my cold arm, with my left hand.

That was the beginning . . . the real beginning I suppose.

For the first time I was afraid. I was afraid because I wanted to touch her, I wanted to stroke that face, to hold that tiny chill hand. I knew she knew it . . . I knew that was what she wanted . . . that the other, the talking, the searching for communication had all been to her the byplay of love. This was what she had come for, this was the meaning of the words she had traced on the window, Love me, Love me, Love me.

It was easy. There was no one to come between us. Harcourt came, but he came only at night and he did not stay for long. She came to me . . . she came at odd times, there was no rhyme or reason. She came, and she would sit there smiling, and I would come to her and reach out and

take her in my arms and press her cold little nothingness of a body to mine, and the chill would run through me.

"You don't look well," Harcourt said, gathering his papers together. For once there was a note of genuine concern in his voice.

"I feel well enough in the circumstances."

"Your accident, of course." His voice trailed off. He was looking at my arm, the white edges of bandage that showed beneath my sleeve.

"A scald," I said, "rather more severe than I thought."

"You've had the doctor, of course."

"Of course."

He believed me. He has been trained to believe me and not to question.

Then he left. I went back into the room and she was standing by the window, watching him go. But she turned to me again, and I came to her, and the short sharp chill ran down the side of my face as her formless fingers stretched out to me.

She touches me now, strokes me. I know that where she strokes me the flesh will wither and peel, the tissue will rot, the blood will dry. She strokes me now. I cannot draw myself from her because I love her, but soon . . . soon it will be over.

Harcourt came again tonight. He let himself in . . . I have given him a key. He came up to the bedroom and we talked. I kept the room dark so that he could not see . . . what there was to see. I told him it was my eyes . . . but he will know soon enough.

She was watching. She sat at the foot of the bed and watched him. Once or twice I saw his eyes flicker towards the place where she sat as though he saw something, a half shape in the darkness. But then he has a rational mind.

He said goodbye and he got up to leave. She stirred. He went out. She stood at the foot of the bed. She smiled at me, and she turned her head away and glided from the room and I knew that she was going, too.

I watch them from the window. He strides down the road, she glides behind him. He turns suddenly, as though he

senses something there. He stops. He lights a cigarette. He shakes his head, he walks on.

A scrap of withered flesh falls from my face on to the carpet as I turn, to grope my way back to the bed.

She was mine . . . she was mine. . .

SPECIAL HANDLING

John Keefauver

When Yates' house began to shrink not long after the package came for him from *Reduce Today!* I thought at first it was my imagination, or my eyes. But then when I had trouble getting the bills from the same company into his mailbox because it was getting smaller, I knew it wasn't my imagination or my eyes at all. His house, the mailbox out front, a shed on the side, his car parked next to the shed, the trees in the yard, the fence around his place—they all started getting smaller after I delivered him that package from *Reduce Today!*

I'm sure about the name of the company because it was the only mail he ever got. It was the only mail I delivered him, anyway, since I started the route. The first thing that came for him was the package, during my first week on the job. It wasn't a big package; it fitted into his mailbox easy. I wouldn't even have noticed it, except that besides being the first mail I'd delivered to him it didn't have any return address. Just *Reduce Today!* in big letters, and a Chicago postmark. Then about a week later the second piece of mail came for him, a bill from the same company. I thought then the mailbox seemed to be smaller. It sat all by itself—not in a row with others—so it was hard to tell, at first. You couldn't *compare* his house with others either. It sat all by itself, too, hidden from his neighbors by clumps of trees. You could see the house from the road,

though. A little bat-and-board bungalow; it wasn't very big to begin with.

When the second bill came, maybe ten days later, I was sure the mailbox was smaller. I could hardly get my hand in it, and it was not lower than my car window. I thought maybe he had put up a smaller box—it was new, like the "other" one—and I was thinking that I might go rap on his door and tell him he couldn't have a mailbox smaller than regulation, it would get me in trouble. While I was sitting there, undecided and looking at his house, half hoping he'd come out, the house seemed to get smaller right in front of my eyes. Not only the house but the shed and his car, too. And the oaks in the yard. I thought I heard something, too, like a ripping or tearing. It made me nervous and I drove away.

Yates didn't get any mail for a while, and since he lived at the end of a dead-end road I didn't see his house for a number of days. I didn't want to either. As soon as I'd delivered to the houses on his road, I'd turn around and head back. His house was around a bend from his nearest neighbor, and he was the only one who had any reason to drive to the end of it, out in the country like it was. It was almost like a private road.

In a few days another bill came to him from *Reduce Today!* No return address, as usual. When I delivered it, I had to lean down from my car window to get it in the mailbox, and the envelope just barely fitted inside. I still thought, though, that Yates must be some kind of a practical joker who was putting up a smaller box every week or so. Then I looked at his house, which I had been avoiding doing. The bungalow—and car, and trees in the yard, and shed, and fence around his yard—was *definitely* smaller. I was absolutely sure of it. My eyes are good.

I was scared, and I got away from there fast. Even a practical joker wasn't going to tear down his house every week and build a smaller one. Even if he did, how could he make it exactly like the larger one, only smaller. And a smaller car—how could he build one of them? And smaller trees?

I hadn't told anybody about what was going on for a good reason. I didn't want people to think I was nuts. Particularly since I was a new man on the job. And new in

town, too, with people not knowing me well enough to even begin to believe such a story. And I had no wife to tell. Also, there was something funny about why the man who had the route before me had left it—so quick, in fact, that he didn't even stay around long enough to break me in. The superintendent of mails had to do it. No one in the post office or in town could talk about it, or even tell me his name. They were protecting him, I guess—or me. I finally did find out, though, that nobody in the post office, or in town, wanted the job I had, although I couldn't find out why. That was why I, an outsider, was finally hired—nobody else wanted the job.

When another bill from *Reduce Today!* came for Yates, I was tempted to throw it away. But I delivered it, and it wasn't easy. I had to get out of my car and lean down to get it in the mailbox. And I had to fold the envelope in order to get it inside. The house—and the shed, car, trees, and fence—was now about half the size that it had been originally. And, like the times before, I didn't see any sign of life around the place. You would have thought nobody lived there. But the bills were always gone from the mailbox. I assumed that Yates got them. None was addressed to anybody except him—Mr. H. L. Yates. And no other mail came at all to the place—to a *Mrs.* Yates, or a *Miss.* I kept asking around the post office and town about him—very casually, on the pretext that I never saw anybody at home and wondered about him, living there by himself—but everybody said they didn't know anything about him. They weren't good liars.

I knew one thing. I wasn't going to go out to his house on my own to investigate.

About ten days later another bill came from the same company for Yates. The mailbox was now about a foot from the ground, and I had to almost roll up the envelope to get it inside. The house, and other things in the yard, wasn't much bigger, in proportion. It was as if I was looking at a doll house and yard.

Going around the rest of the route, I thought about ways I could quit the job without having to tell why.

When the next bill came from *Reduce Today!* I stopped just before I got to the Yates place and had a stiff shot. It helped. Particularly since I'd been too nervous to eat any breakfast, figuring it was about time for a Yates bill. By

the time I got to what was left of his house and yard, I was praying his last bill would still be in the mailbox; that would at least seem more normal, somehow. But the box was empty, as usual and nearly level with the ground, about as big as a matchbox. I was so nervous I couldn't fold the envelope and just jammed it into the box with the end of my finger, then got the hell away from there, trying not to look at his house. But I couldn't help myself. The house was about two feet tall, maybe less.

I don't remember much about the next week or so. I began to drink hard, and I've never been a drinking man. I could barely pull myself to work. I was so nervous, afraid of getting another *Reduce Today!* bill to deliver, that it was a wonder I got the mail sorted and delivered at all. At night I went home and got right into bed—with a bottle. Hardly ate at all, and I was skinny to begin with.

When another bill came for Yates, I about collapsed. Before I started around my route I bought another bottle; the one in the car was only a third full. By the time I got to his house I was pretty well soused. So soused, in fact, that for a while I thought I wasn't at his house at all. There wasn't any house any more. No mailbox either. No car parked in the yard, no fence, no shed, no trees. There was simply an empty space where his house had been. And where he had been, I could only assume.

I drove directly back to the post office, not delivering one damn piece of mail, gave the latest *Reduce Today!* bill to the postmaster, and told him the whole damn story—pretty incoherently, I guess, considering the booze I had in me and the wildness of the story. He obviously didn't believe one word of it. I was drunk. I was not only drunk on the job but I was also nuts, batty, insane.

But I do remember one thing very clearly. Thinking I was too far gone to understand, I guess, he turned to the assistant postmaster and said, "This is the same story Yates told us."

"Yates!" I yelled. "Who in the hell *is* Yates anyway!"

"He was the man who had your route before we hired you."

"*H. L.* Yates?"

The postmaster nodded. "We had to let him go after he told us that a house on his route got smaller and smaller until it disappeared."

"His *own* house?"

"No. Another one. He only moved out onto his own route—yours now—after we let him go. Said he wanted to get out of town."

That explained, anyway, why his mailbox was new.

The postmaster coughed. "I'm sorry, Bill, but I'm afraid we're going to have to let you go, too . . ."

I could have kissed him.

Then, about a week later, and when I was beginning to wonder why I wasn't getting any mail myself, another package came from *Reduce Today!* It was addressed to me.

THE LEGEND OF JOE LEE

John D. MacDonald

"Tonight," Sergeant Lazeer said, "we get him for sure."

We were in a dank office in the Afaloosa County Courthouse in the flat wetlands of south central Florida. I had come over from Lauderdale on the half chance of a human interest story that would tie in with the series we were doing on the teen-age war against the square world of the adult.

He called me over to the table where he had the county map spread out. The two other troopers moved in beside me. "It's a full moon night and he'll be out for sure," Lazeer said, "and what we're fixing to do is bottle him on just the right stretch, where he got no way off it, no old back country roads he knows like the shape of his own fist. And here we got it." He put brackets at either end of a string-straight road.

Trooper McCollum said softly, "That there, Mister, is a eighteen-mile straight, and we cruised it slow, and you turn on off it you're in the deep ditch and the black mud and the 'gator water."

Lazeer said, "We stake out both ends, hid back good with lights out. We got radio contact, so when he comes whistling in either end, we got him bottled."

He looked at me as though expecting an opinion, and I said, "I don't know a thing about road blocks, Sergeant, but it looks as if you could trap him."

"You ride with me, Mister, and we'll get you a story."

"There's one thing you haven't explained, Sergeant. You said you know who the boy is. Why don't you just pick him up at home?"

The other trooper Frank Gaiders said, "Because that fool kid ain't been home since he started this crazy business five-six months ago. His name is Joe Lee Cuddard, from over to Lasco City. His folks don't know where he is, and don't much care, him and that Farris girl he was running with, so we figure the pair of them is off in the piney woods someplace, holed up in some abandoned shack, coming out at night for kicks, making fools of us."

"Up till now, boy," Lazeer said. "Up till tonight. Tonight is the end."

"But when you've met up with him on the highway," I asked, "you haven't been able to catch him?"

The three big, weathered men looked at each other with slow, sad amusement, and McCollum sighed, "I come the closest. The way these cars are beefed up as interceptors, they can do a dead honest hundred and twenty. I saw him across the flats, booming to where the two road forks come together up ahead, so I floored it and I was flat out when the roads joined, and not over fifty yards behind him. In two minutes he had me by a mile, and in four minutes it was near two, and then he was gone. That comes to a hundred and fifty, my guess."

I showed my astonishment. "What the hell does he drive?"

Lazeer opened the table drawer and fumbled around in it and pulled out a tattered copy of a hot-rodder magazine. He opened it to a page where readers had sent in pictures of their cars. It didn't look like anything I had ever seen. Most of it seemed to be bare frame, with a big chromed engine. There was a teardrop-shaped passenger compartment mounted between the big rear wheels, bigger than the front wheels, and there was a tail-fin arrangement that swept up and out and then curved back so that the high rear ends of the fins almost met.

"That engine," Frank Gaiders said, "it's a '61 Pontiac, the big one he bought wrecked and fixed up, with blowers and special cams and every damn thing. Put the rest of it together himself. You can see in the letter there, he calls it a C.M. Special. C.M. is for Clarissa May, that Farris girl

he took off with. I saw that thing just one time, oh, seven, eight months ago, right after he got it all finished. We got this magazine from his daddy. I saw it at the Amoco gas in Lasco City. You could near give it a ticket standing still. Strawberry flake paint it says in the letter. Damnedest thing, bright strawberry with little like gold flakes in it, then covered with maybe seventeen coats of lacquer, all rubbed down so you look down into that paint like it was six inches deep. Headlights all the hell over the front of it and big taillights all over the back, and shiny pipes sticking out. Near two year he worked on it. Big racing flats like the drag strip kids use over to the airport."

I looked at the course screen picture of the boy standing beside the car, hands on his hips, looking very young, very ordinary, slightly self-conscious.

"It wouldn't spoil anything for you, would it," I asked, "if I went and talked to his people, just for background?"

" 'Long as you say nothing about what we're fixing to do," Lazeer said. "Just be back by eight thirty this evening."

Lasco City was a big brave name for a hamlet of about five hundred. They told me at the sundries store to take the west road and the Cuddard place was a half mile on the left, name on the mailbox. It was a shacky place, chickens in the dusty yard, fence sagging. Leo Cuddard was home from work and I found him out in back, unloading cinder block from an ancient pickup. He was stripped to the waist, a lean, shallow man who looked undernourished and exhausted. But the muscles in his spare back writhed and knotted when he lifted the blocks. He had pale hair and pale eyes and a narrow mouth. He would not look directly at me. He grunted and kept on working as I introduced myself and stated my business.

Finally he straightened and wiped his forehead with his narrow arm. When those pale eyes stared at me, for some reason it made me remember the grisly reputation Florida troops acquired in the Civil War. Tireless, deadly, merciless.

"That boy warn't no help to me, Mister, but he warn't no trouble neither. The onliest thing on his mind was that car. I didn't hold with it, but I didn't put down no foot. He fixed up that old shed there to work in, and he needed something, he went out and earned up the money to buy

it. They was a crowd of them around most times, helpin' him, boys workin' and gals watchin'. Them tight-pants girls. Have radios on batteries set around so as they could twisty dance while them boys hammered that metal out. When I worked around and overheared 'em, I swear I couldn't make out more'n one word from seven. What he done was take that car to some national show, for prizes and such. But one day he just took off, like they do nowadays."

"Do you hear from him at all?"

He grinned. "I don't hear *from* him, but I sure God hear *about* him."

"How about brothers and sisters?"

"They's just one sister, older, up to Waycross, Georgia, married to an electrician, and me and his stepmother."

As if on cue, a girl came out onto the small back porch. She couldn't have been more than eighteen. Advanced pregnancy bulged the front of her cotton dress. Her voice was a shrill, penetrating whine. "Leo? Leo, honey, that can opener thing just now busted clean off the wall."

"Mind if I take a look at that shed?"

"You help yourself, Mister."

The shed was astonishingly neat. The boy had rigged up droplights. There was a pale blue pegboard wall hung with shining tools. On closer inspection I could see that rust was beginning to fleck the tools. On the workbench were technical journals and hot-rodder magazines. I looked at the improvised engine hoist, at the neat shelves of paint and lubricant.

The Farris place was nearer the center of the village. Some of them were having their evening meal. There were six adults as near as I could judge, and perhaps a dozen children from toddlers on up to tall, lanky boys. Clarissa May's mother came out onto the front porch to talk to me, explaining that her husband drove an interstate truck from the cooperative and he was away for the next few days. Mrs. Farris was grossly fat, but with delicate features, an indication of the beauty she must have once had. The rocking chair creaked under her weight and she fanned herself with a newspaper.

"I can tell you, it like to broke our hearts the way Clarissa May done us. If'n I told LeRoy once, I told him a thousand times, no good would ever come of her messin'

with that Cuddard boy. His daddy is trashy. Ever so often they take him in for drunk and put him on the county road gang sixty or ninety days, and that Stubbins child he married, she's next door to feeble-witted. But children get to a certain size and know everything and turn their backs on you like an enemy. You write this up nice and in it put the message her momma and daddy want her home bad, and maybe she'll see it and come on in. You know what the Good Book says about sharper'n a sarpent's tooth. I pray to the good Lord they had the sense to drive that fool car up to Georgia and get married up at least. Him nineteen and her seventeen. The young ones are going clean out of hand these times. One night racing through this county the way they do, showing off, that Cuddard boy is going to kill hisself and my child too."

"Was she hard to control in other ways, Mrs. Farris?"

"No sir, she was neat and good and pretty and quiet, and she had the good marks. It was just about Joe Lee Cuddard she turned mulish. I think I would have let LeRoy whale that out of her if it hadn't been for her trouble.

"You're easier on a young one when there's no way of knowing how long she could be with you. Doc Mathis, he had us taking her over to the Miami clinic. Sometimes they kept her and sometimes they didn't, and she'd get behind in her school and then catch up fast. Many times we taken her over there. She's got the sick blood and it takes her poorly. She should be right here, where's help to care for her in the bad spells. It was October last year, we were over to the church bingo, LeRoy and me, and Clarissa May been resting up in her bed a few days, and that wild boy come in and taking her off in that snorty car, the little ones couldn't stop him. When I think of her out there . . . poorly and all . . ."

At a little after nine we were in position. I was with Sergeant Lazeer at the west end of that eighteen-mile stretch of State Road 21. The patrol car was backed into a narrow dirt road, lights out. Gaiders and McCollum were similarly situated at the east end of the trap. We were smeared with insect repellent, and we had used spray on the backs

of each other's shirts where the mosquitoes were biting through the thin fabric.

Lazeer had repeated his instructions over the radio, and we composed ourselves to wait. "Not much travel on this road this time of year," Lazeer said. "But some tourists come through at the wrong time, they could mess this up. We just got to hope that don't happen."

"Can you block the road with just one car at each end?"

"If he comes through from the other end, I move up quick and put it crosswise where he can't get past, and Frank has a place like that at the other end. Crosswise with the lights and the dome blinker on, but we both are going to stand clear because maybe he can stop it and maybe he can't. But whichever way he comes, we got to have the free car run close herd so he can't get time to turn around when he sees he's bottled."

Lazeer turned out to be a lot more talkative than I had anticipated. He had been in law enforcement for twenty years and had some violent stories. I sensed he was feeding them to me, waiting for me to suggest I write a book about him. From time to time we would get out of the car and move around a little.

"Sergeant, you're pretty sure you've picked the right time and place?"

"He runs on the nights the moon is big. Three or four nights out of the month. He doesn't run the main highways, just these back country roads—the long straight paved stretches where he can really wind that thing up. Lord God, he goes through towns like a rocket. From reports we got, he runs the whole night through, and this is one way he comes, one way or the other, maybe two, three times before moonset. We got to get him. He's got folks laughing at us."

I sat in the car half listening to Lazeer tell a tale of blood and horror. I could hear choruses of swamp toads mingling with the whine of insects close to my ears, looking for a biting place. A couple of times I had heard the bass throb of a 'gator.

Suddenly Lazeer stopped and I sensed his tenseness. He leaned forward, head cocked. And then, mingled with the wet country shrilling, and then overriding it, I heard the

oncoming high-pitched snarl of high combustion.

"Hear it once and you don't forget it," Lazeer said, and unhooked the mike from the dash and got through to McCollum and Gaiders. "He's coming through this end, boys. Get yourself set."

He hung up and in the next instant the C.M. Special went by. It was a resonant howl that stirred echoes inside the inner ear. It was a tearing, bursting rush of wind that rattled fronds and turned leaves over. It was a dark shape in moonlight, slamming by, the howl diminishing as the wind of passage died.

Lazeer plunged the patrol car out onto the road in a screeching turn, and as we straightened out, gathering speed, he yelled to me, "Damn fool runs without lights when the moon is bright enough."

As had been planned, we ran without lights too, to keep Joe Lee from smelling the trap until it was too late. I tightened my seat belt and peered at the moonlit road. Lazeer had estimated we could make it to the far end in ten minutes or a little less. The world was like a photographic negative—white world and black trees and brush, and no shades of grey. As we came quickly up to speed, the heavy sedan began to feel strangely light. It toedanced, tender and capricious, the wind roar louder than the engine sound. I kept wondering what would happen if Joe Lee stopped dead up there in darkness. I kept staring ahead for the murderous bulk of his vehicle.

Soon I could see the distant red wink of the other sedan, and then the bright cone where the headlights shone off the shoulder into the heavy brush. When my eyes adjusted to that brightness, I could no longer see the road. We came down on them with dreadful speed. Lazeer suddenly snapped our lights on, touched the siren. We were going to see Joe Lee trying to back and turn around on the narrow paved road, and we were going to block him and end the night games.

We saw nothing. Lazeer pumped the brakes. He cursed. We came to a stop ten feet from the side of the other patrol car. McCollum and Gaiders came out of the shadows. Lazeer and I undid our seat belts and got out of the car.

"We didn't see nothing and we didn't hear a thing," Frank Gaiders said.

Lazeer summed it up. "OK, then. I was running without

lights too. Maybe the first glimpse he got of your flasher, he cramps it over onto the left shoulder, tucks it over as far as he dares. I could go by without seeing him. He backs around and goes back the way he came, laughing hisself sick. There's the second chance he tried that and took it too far, and he's wedged in a ditch. Then there's the third chance he lost it. He could have dropped a wheel off onto the shoulder and tripped hisself and gone flying three hundred feet into the swamp. So what we do, we go back there slow. I'll go first and keep my spotlight on the right, and you keep yours on the left. Look for that car and for places where he could have busted through."

At the speed Lazeer drove, it took over a half hour to traverse the eighteen-mile stretch. He pulled off at the road where we had waited. He seemed very depressed, yet at the same time amused.

They talked, then he drove me to the courthouse where my car was parked. He said, "We'll work out something tighter and I'll give you a call. You might as well be in at the end."

I drove sedately back to Lauderdale.

Several days later, just before noon on a bright Sunday, Lazeer phoned me at my apartment and said, "You want to be in on the finish of this thing, you better do some hustling and leave right now."

"You've got him?"

"In a manner of speaking." He sounded sad and wry. "He dumped that machine into a canal off Route 27 about twelve miles south of Okeelanta. The wrecker'll be winching it out any time now. The diver says he and the gal are still in it. It's been on the radio news. Diver read the tag, and it's his. Last year's. He didn't trouble hisself getting a new one."

I wasted no time driving to the scene. I certainly had no trouble identifying it. There were at least a hundred cars pulled off on both sides of the highway. A traffic control officer tried to wave me on by, but when I showed him my press card and told him Lazeer had phoned me, he had me turn in and park beside a patrol car near the center of activity.

I spotted Lazeer on the canal bank and went over to him. A big man in face mask, swim fins and air tank was preparing to go down with the wrecker hook.

Lazeer greeted me and said, "It pulled loose the first time, so he's going to try to get it around the rear axle this time. It's in twenty feet of water, right side up, in the black mud."

"Did he lose control?"

"Hard to say. What happened, early this morning a fellow was goofing around in a little airplane, flying low, parallel to the canal, the water like a mirror, and he seen something down in there so he came around and looked again, then he found a way to mark the spot, opposite those three trees away over there, so he came into his home field and phoned it in, and we had that diver down by nine this morning. I got here about ten."

"I guess this isn't the way you wanted it to end, Sergeant."

"It sure God isn't. It was a contest between him and me, and I wanted to get him my own way. But I guess it's a good thing he's off the night roads."

I looked around. The red and white wrecker was positioned and braced. Ambulance attendants were leaning against their vehicle, smoking and chatting. Sunday traffic slowed and was waved on by.

"I guess you could say his team showed up," Lazeer said.

Only then did I realize the strangeness of most of the waiting vehicles. The cars were from a half-dozen counties, according to the tag numbers. There were many big, gaudy, curious monsters not unlike the C.M. Special in basic layout, but quite different in design. They seemed like a visitation of Martian beasts. There were dirty fenderless sedans from the thirties with modern power plants under the hoods, and big rude racing numbers painted on the side doors. There were other cars which looked normal at first glance, but then seemed to squat oddly low, lines clean and sleek where the Detroit chrome had been taken off, the holes leaded up.

The cars and the kids were of another race. Groups of them formed, broke up and re-formed. Radios brought in a dozen stations. They drank Cokes and perched in dense flocks on open convertibles. They wandered from car to car. It had a strange carnival flavor, yet more ceremonial. From time to time somebody would start one of the car engines, rev it up to a bursting roar, and let it die away.

All the girls had long burnished hair and tidy blouses or sun tops and a stillness in their faces, a curious confidence of total acceptance which seemed at odds with the frivolous and provocative tightness of their short shorts, stretch pants, jeans. All the boys were lean, their hairdos carefully ornate, their shoulders high and square, and they moved with the lazy grace of young jungle cats. Some of the couples danced indolently, staring into each other's eyes with a frozen and formal intensity, never touching, bright hair swinging, girls' hips pumping in the stylized ceremonial twist.

Along the line I found a larger group. A boy was strumming slow chords on a guitar, a girl making sharp and erratic fill-in rhythm on a set of bongos. Another boy, in nasal and whining voice, seemed to improvise lyrics as he sang them. "C.M. Special, let it get out and *go.*/C.M. Special, let it way out and *go.*/Iron runs fast and the moon runs slow."

The circle watched and listened with a contained intensity.

Then I heard the winch whining. It seemed to grow louder as, one by one, the other sounds stopped. The kids began moving toward the wrecker. They formed a big silent semicircle. The taut woven cable, coming in very slowly, stretched down at an angle through the sun glitter on the black-brown water.

The snore of a passing truck covered the winch noise for a moment.

"Coming good now," a man said.

First you could see an underwater band of silver, close to the drop-off near the bank. Then the first edges of the big sweeping fins broke the surface, then the broad rear bumper, then the rich curves of the strawberry paint. Where it wasn't clotted with wet weed or stained with mud, the paint glowed rich and new and brilliant. There was a slow sound from the kids, a sigh, a murmur, a shifting.

As it came up further, the dark water began to spurt from it, and as the water level inside dropped, I saw, through a smeared window, the two huddled masses, the slumped boy and girl, side by side, still belted in.

I wanted to see no more. Lazeer was busy, and I got into my car and backed out and went home and mixed a drink.

I started work on it at about three thirty that afternoon. It would be a feature for the following Sunday. I worked right on through until two in the morning. It was only two thousand words, but it was very tricky and I wanted to get it just right. I had to serve two masters. I had to give lip service to the editorial bias that this sort of thing was wrong, yet at the same time I wanted to capture, for my own sake, the flavor of legend. These kids were making a special world we could not share. They were putting all their skills and dreams and energies to work composing the artifacts of a subculture, power, beauty, speed, skill and rebellion. Our culture was giving them damned little, so they were fighting for a world of their own, with its own customs, legends and feats of valor, its own music, its own ethics and morality.

I took it in Monday morning and left it on Si Walther's desk, with the hope that if it were published intact, it might become a classic. I called it "The Little War of Joe Lee Cuddard."

I didn't hear from Si until just before noon. He came out and dropped it on my desk. "Sorry," he said.

"What's the matter with it?"

"Hell, it's a very nice bit. But we don't publish fiction. You should have checked it out better, Marty, like you usually do. The examiner says those kids have been in the bottom of that canal for maybe eight months. I had Sam check her out through the clinic. She was damn near terminal eight months ago. What probably happened, the boy went to see her and found her so bad off he got scared and decided to rush her to Miami. She was still in her pajamas, with a sweater over them. That way it's a human interest bit. I had Helen do it. It's page one this afternoon, boxed."

I took my worthless story, tore it in half and dropped it into the wastebasket. Sergeant Lazeer's bad guess about the identity of his moonlight road runner had made me look like an incompetent jackass. I vowed to check all facts, get all names right, and never again indulge in glowing, strawberry flake prose.

Three weeks later I got a phone call from Sergeant Lazeer.

He said, "I guess you figured out we got some boy com-

ing in from out of county to fun us these moonlight nights."

"Yes, I did."

"I'm right sorry about you wasting that time and effort when we were thinking we were after Joe Lee Cuddard. We're having some bright moonlight about now, and it'll run full tomorrow night. You want to come over, we can show you some fun, because I got a plan that's dead sure. We tried it last night, but there was just one flaw, and he got away through a road we didn't know about. Tomorrow he won't get that chance to melt away."

I remembered the snarl of that engine, the glimpse of a dark shape, the great wind of passage. Suddenly the backs of my hands prickled. I remembered the emptiness of that stretch of road when we searched it. Could there have been that much pride and passion, labor and love and hope, that Clarissa May and Joe Lee could forever ride the night roads of their home county, balling through the silver moonlight? And what curious message had assembled all those kids from six counties so quickly?

"You there? You still there?"

"Sorry, I was trying to remember my schedule. I don't think I can make it."

"Well, we'll get him for sure this time."

"Best of luck, Sergeant."

"Six cars this time. Barricades. And a spotter plane. He hasn't got a chance if he comes into the net."

I guess I should have gone. Maybe hearing it again, glimpsing the dark shape, feeling the stir of the night wind, would have convinced me of its reality. They didn't get him, of course. But they came so close, so very close. But they left just enough room between a heavy barricade and a live oak tree, an almost impossibly narrow place to slam through. But thread it he did, and rocket back onto the hard top and plunge off, leaving the fading, dying contralto drone.

Sergeant Lazeer is grimly readying next month's trap. He says it is the final one. Thus far, all he has captured are the two little marks, a streak of paint on the rough edge of a timber sawhorse, another nudge of paint on the trunk of the oak. Strawberry red. Flecked with gold.

CROOKED BONE

Gerald Kersh

THE OLD COMMANDANT had his failings, and was apt to be irritable every so often, when he had to drink a bottle or two of rum in case of fever, but he was a likable man in some ways. "What can't be cured must be endured," he would say. He was a great joker—he would always make the new arrivals welcome with "Greetings, my friends, and distinguished salutations! I am the humble servant of the Government. You are the Government's guests, so consider me as yours to command. My house is yours; make yourselves at home. Feel free to come and go as you please.

"To students of topography and natural history, our countryside is fraught with interest. The curious mountain shaped like a three-pronged tooth, which you will observe if you give yourselves the trouble of half turning your heads to the left, is, as the wisp of vapor at the summit will inform you, a volcano. It is called Cerberus, after—as I am sure it is redundant to state—the three-headed dog that guarded the entrance to the pagans' hell. Down here it is hot—up there it is hotter, without benefit of the constant humidity with which we are blessed. Dry as death! Beyond, jungle. Upon the slopes of Cerberus some of you will amuse yourselves studying geology, collecting interesting specimens of pumice stone and sulfur. In basketfuls.

"Behind you, gentlemen"—he put on the voice of a

tourists' guide, and every head turned to where he pointed —"behind you, a curiosity of nature which I beg you to consider yourselves welcome to examine at your own risk: the Raton Swamp, a salt quicksand alleged to be bottomless, leading to Sharkskin Reef, all coral and a mile wide . . ." Remember that I heard this speech four times a year for more than twenty years, and could repeat it in my sleep. "After the reef, the surf. After the surf, five hundred miles of deep sea between the reef and the islands. Some of us may improve our knowledge of chemistry panning salt at the edge of the swamp. Thirsty work; but the air is so full of moisture that one scarcely needs to pause to drink. Between sulfur and saline, and a low diet, a veritable health resort, a spa, bless my soul! Rich invalids pay cash for less.

"Now, the good God Himself," he would go on, "can't please everybody, and there will be some restless spirits among you that might grow weary of the pleasures we have to offer, and feel homesick for the great outside world. Well, my friends, the only way out of our little settlement is the same as the way in—over the river Raton, which you have just crossed in a barge. It is shallow, and I do not insult the guests of the Government by setting guards there. But I recommend anybody who has a regard for his health not to try it. Have the kindness, gentlemen, to follow me. . . ."

The guards herd the prisoners to the riverbank, and the commandant says, "In the first place, this piece of water is alive with that species of crocodile called the cayman. The cayman is a virtuous reptile—he is perpetually hungry, and yet never loses faith in man nor gives up hope, and is always vigilant. Worse than the cayman is the ratfish. We are rather proud of our ratfish. He is related to the shark and ray. . . . Ahoy, there! Bring the goat!"

Two guards drag up a goat. They pick it up by the feet. "In with it," says the commandant, and they heave the goat out into the stream. The poor creature tries to come back, but all of a sudden the water seems to boil. The goat screams and raises first one leg and then another; and everybody can see that these legs are skeleton legs now, stripped white. It falls, struggles up again. Half the flesh is gone from its head. And now a rotten log comes to life and splits in two halves full of green teeth. There is a snap,

and the water is quiet. A million flies come down over the bloodstains, and that is that.

The commandant concludes, "Zoologically interesting, no more. But of ethnological interest are the Raton Indians, who live in the jungle beyond. Consider how difficult it must be to get a livelihood in that jungle, where even the gristly flesh of poor convicts is esteemed as a delicacy! They are clever at making masks out of human skin. They like white men because they have beards—to skin and mount, as well as to eat, I mean—and have found that the human head peels better when the victim is still alive. But if the Indians don't flay and devour the lost traveler in these parts, the *tigres* will; and if he has the phenomenal good luck to escape both of these, he won't in any circumstances escape the snakes, leeches, and insects.

"So go cheerfully to your allotted tasks, be grateful to the Government for having abolished capital punishment and given you a chance to rehabilitate yourselves, and be thankful for your lot. As you will find out, this place is run on humane modern military lines, as they call them: no flogging for insubordination or idleness—only Field Punishment Number One, or Two, or Three, and so on.

"In Number One they just tie your hands behind your back and trice you up so that you are standing on tiptoe hanging from a beam, and you are left without water for twenty-four hours. No bloodshed, except what the flies draw. Number Two is simply burnishing a big sheet of rusty corrugated iron. You're on half rations until it shines like a mirror; only, the climate being what it is, the metal begins to rust in two hours, so that the job is impossible—like Number Three, which is to dig a dry trench four feet deep. Since you strike water three feet down, it can't be done. After a week or two, sentence is not canceled out but suspended, renewable at the sergeant's discretion. Number Four is solitary confinement in an underground cell that keeps filling up with water; if you don't want to drown, you pump, day and night, twenty minutes in every hour.

"So I warn you to take things as they come, live from day to day, be philosophical, and just let time pass. Remember that you're here to have your spirit broken—but don't let it happen. . . . Carry on, Sergeant, march the scum away."

I took it hard at first, working on the jungle road. That was twenty years ago; we cut the undergrowth from dawn to dark, but almost as fast as we cut it, it grew back. And we are still chopping that same brush, and still there is no road, and not likely ever to be, the thought of which drives some men mad. It is the same with the pumice quarrying; we have cut and powdered mountains of the stuff, there being no road to carry it out by, the rains simply wash away.

You must not take it to heart, but learn to laugh at it. Just be calm. As for the guards, they are to be pitied rather than hated. Consider: For you this is purgatory, and wherever you are sent, dead or alive, after this will be paradise compared to it; but *they* are here of their own free choice, and this is the best they could do for themselves!

I have been luckier than most. A long time ago I happened to notice that certain grasses growing on the edges of the swamp are good for weaving. This having been my trade, I picked some, and prepared them, and passed spare time making myself a hat—such a hat as only a man in love or a man in prison would think of taking the trouble to make for himself.

It caught the old commandant's eye, and he asked me, "How long did it take you to make that?"

"A half-hour here, a half-hour there—altogether a month, your excellency."

"How long would it take you, working full time at it?"

"A day and a half, two days, your excellency."

"How long are you here for?"

"Life, your excellency."

"Then you have all the time in the world at your disposal, you lucky man. What duty are you on?"

"The road, your excellency."

"Sergeant," he said, "take this fellow off the road and let him make hats."

So it was my good luck that I was allowed to build a hut of my own for a workshop, and make a lamp so that I could work after sundown. I wove five hats a week, and also some little grass dolls, which the commandant sold to a trader. I think he got a good price for them, for although he was not bound to give me anything, he made a practice of throwing me a few small coins for tobacco

money from time to time, most of which the sergeant took away from me. But I still managed to hide away a copper here and a copper there—it all mounts up.

In twenty years I got together over thirty dollars, which I hid in a hole in the ground, along with certain other treasures which I will tell you about presently. I might have done a lot worse. For instance, I set lines for the big white mudfish that live under the banks and make very good eating, for all they are not very pretty to look at; and sometimes I swapped a fresh fish for some dried vegetables, so that I was seldom without something tasty for my evening meal. I could have trapped birds, if there had been any to trap; but they avoided our settlement, for there was nothing for them to peck up. What is more, I was never without company.

There is no companionship on a gang. Every man is alone, wrapped up in himself, swinging the machete or heaving the dusty shovel or dragging the salt rake, too miserable to care. But, so that I could give all my time to weaving, I was always provided with some sort of assistant to cut, wash, dry, and sort the straw, and cut the little wooden pegs the dolls are woven around. Every man has his story, and out here, after a time, people find in their memories things they never knew were stored away there. Over the years I have had many assistants, some of them —like forgers, unfortunate politicians, perverted schoolteachers, and so forth—well-educated men. I learned a lot from them.

I came here ignorant as dirt, but now I could feel comfortable in any company—not as a talker, but as a listener. Cultivate this habit; it will see you everything.

With stillness and patience you can sleep unharmed among snakes and *tigres;* even the guards won't bother you; the Indians themselves will learn not to distrust you. And believe me, the Ratons are a very queer race of people, the shyest savages in the world. Even twenty years ago they only very rarely let themselves be seen; now it may be years before you catch a glimpse of one.

They are little and quick, and ever so quiet, and they live where the jungle is thickest; they paint themselves gray and green and yellow in spots and stripes, to blend with the leaves, so that they can make themselves more invisible than a stick insect, and can simply disappear—melt away

even as you look at them. They make their tools and weapons out of quartz and other hard rock from the volcano, and I have seen a Raton knife chipped out of rock crystal that was sharper than any razor. But of course iron is better, and so we used to trade with them, in the old commandant's day.

We would leave an ax or a machete on the opposite bank of the river, and go away. Soon, out of nowhere, there would appear beside it a heap of fruit and nuts, the carcass of a wild pig or an antelope. Try as you might, you could never see them leaving the stuff. You would watch and watch, and see nothing. Then, getting tired, you would turn your head, or close your eyes to yawn—and there were their trade goods. If you were satisfied, you took them away, and later they would take the machete or the ax. If not, you waited, and they added to the pile until the trade was complete.

The stuff they brought was for the officers and the guards, of course. The old commandant dealt quite fairly with the Indians—almost generously, I may say—and did his best to get on friendly terms with them. He was, in his way, a very intelligent man, and his patience was remarkable. He had picked up rumors of gold in these parts, and hoped that if there were gold the Raton might lead him to it. It was told that it took him five long years to get on speaking terms with one of them, moving slower than the hour hand of a clock, a hundredth of a hair's-breadth at a time, and a present every inch of the way!

But there was no gold; only roots and berries and some spices and a little fresh meat. All he got worth selling was a few finely made stone spear- and axheads, for the museums; not even some of their dried heads, which nothing in this world would induce them to part with. So the commandant lost interest, and trade fell off. But the Raton liked our machetes, and took to creeping into the settlement to steal them. They had no boats, and nobody knew how they crossed the river, which nobody would dare dip so much as a finger into for fear of the ratfish and the caymans. It was said that they had magic powers; a story that gathered strength as time went on, since even the sharpest-witted guard could never manage to see or hear them, but only smell them.

"This calls for two remedies," says the commandant,

"an extra-strong lock on the storeroom, and a pair of nice fierce Cacofuego mastiffs." A Cacofuego mastiff, as you know, is brave enough and fast enough to stand off a charging panther. Two of these fine dogs were brought from Gaudeama at considerable expense. Their offspring guard the storeroom to this day, and very dangerous beasts they are. They have pinned more than one prisoner, after dark, but have never yet caught an Indian. None dared to come here after they arrived.

The guards almost captured one Raton, though, only a week before the dogs were brought in. He had got entangled in some baling wire, and a corporal managed to catch him by the ankle; but he kicked loose and ran. Half a dozen guns went off, and the air was thicker with buckshot than prisoners' soup is with peas, as the saying goes. They had him hemmed in, but he doubled back. I was working late by the light of a wick floating in fat when he came in, dazed for an instant even by that tiny light. With my thumb over my shoulder I made a gesture toward a heap of newly sorted straw, and he was under it like a snake, just as the corporal came in and said, "I just caught a Raton—I had him by the foot but he slipped away like a fish"—sniffing his hand and spitting—"have you seen a Raton?" I shook my head. "Bah! What kind of stinking grease do they smear themselves with?"

I said, stupidly, "Perhaps it makes them invisible."

He went away, and when things were quiet I gave the straw a poke with my foot, blew out the light, and said, "On your way, Indio."

He was the little Indian our commandant had made friends with, and he spoke our language. He said, "You help Pelototec, Pelototec help you. This bad place. You want go away, I take you. Over river. You come."

I said, "Oh yes, and be eaten up by the caymans and the ratfish and the Ratons. No, thank you."

"You take this," he said, and gave me a carved knuckle-bone on a thong. "You Pelototec brother, you take this. If Pelototec dead, his sons know. If his sons dead, his sons' sons know and no hurt, you take this and keep." It was his identity, his private seal, as you might say, and it marked the bearer of it as one with him.

Then he took from round his neck another thong, tied about a fish bladder filled with some waxy-feeling stuff.

This, he told me, was Raton medicine against all the things that live in the river. "This make you brother to cayman, so cayman no eat you." Cayman doesn't eat cayman, and the ratfish leave the armor-plated cayman alone; they know its smell and don't break their teeth on it.

What the Raton did was very simple, and not magic at all: They cut the musk sac out of the bull cayman, mixed it with rancid cayman fat and other things, and made of it an ointment with which they rubbed themselves before entering the water. And the longer it was kept in its bag, he said, the stronger the medicine got.

"You come," he said; and all of a sudden he was gone, as quietly as a puff of smoke, leaving behind him nothing but the Raton Indian smell which, now that I came to think of it, was nothing but the stink of crocodiles.

I put the bag and the bone in the same tin box with my money, which I had hidden in a hole. I had been here only ten years at that time, and had twelve dollars. But my heart beat high, because now I could see my way clear to getting away. Twelve dollars was not enough, though; I needed twenty-five or thirty to get over the border into Contrabono.

But with patience this could be scraped together.

Of patience, thank God, I always had my full share. Patience and a quiet mind. "Pacifico," my companions would say, calling me by my nickname, "how the devil does a fellow like you come to be here? Were you framed?"

And I would always answer, truthfully, "No, I was not framed. I am here for life, for robbery and murder."

"How much was it for, Pacifico?"

"A roll of American money as thick as my wrist."

"Did you have yourself a good time, at least, before they caught you?"

"I had the money in my hand for thirty seconds."

"Poor old Pacifico," my fellow prisoner might say, "you're the sort of mug that goes on the job blind, without making a plan, and gets picked up first time out."

"Thank God, that sort of mug."

"Hunger drove you to it, I suppose?"

"A kind of hunger."

Then I would shut my mouth, because my shameful little story has never seemed to me to be fit to tell. Sometimes I have envied great sinners, and would even have been

grateful for that knack some felons have of painting themselves, quite realistically, redder than hellfire and blacker than night.

What might they not make of a story like mine, if they had it to tell, but which I couldn't draw out longer than ten minutes, if I chose to talk of it! I come from Ysor in the Zamaya region. I was not ugly and not handsome; a little better off than most in that I had my skill in my craft, as well as my bit of land. Some men envied me because I was married to a good and very beautiful girl, Dolores, who loved me, and by whom I already had two sons. Was I happy? I was at peace—a little better off than I am now.

It takes a man with the spirit of man that goes upward to be happy. Mine was the spirit of the beast that goes downward into the earth, and knows neither joy nor sorrow, but only the difference between comfort and discomfort. Then my wife's cousin came to Ysor—Teresa Rojas, a widow from Riego—and she was everything that Dolores was not. Where Dolores was fair and soft as a flower, Teresa was dark and tough as an old saddle; where Dolores was deep and round, Teresa was square and flat. Dolores was clean in her person and sweetened any place she set foot in, while Teresa was a slut who carried with her a musky stink as of wild beasts. Dolores was a happy wife and a loving mother, whereas Teresa was insatiable and loveless and barren.

Therefore, when Teresa dug her dirty nails into my neck, made hooks of her hipbones and a cup of her belly, blew her tiger's breath into my face and said, "The Americans are going after oil around Gaudeama. Money will flow like water. A man like you, with golden hands, can make a fortune there. Leave that flabby madonna and come to Gaudeama with me, and let's have fun," did I answer, "What kind of a crazy man do you take me for, that you ask me to leave the likes of Dolores and bed down with a polecat?" No, I left everything to go away with Teresa, and bolts and bars could not have held me!

She was as raw, rank, and suffocating as your first mouthful of rum or tobacco, but God help you once you had got the taste for her!

Alas for my "golden hands"—my little skills—who wanted them in Gaudeama? Such strength as she left me I

spent on the splintery derricks, giving her all I earned. She was not even faithful to me, and this, in a way, was a relief to me; I had begun to believe that I must have gone mad, to run off after a creature like this. She wanted money, always money—what was I to do, I asked her—coin money, print money?

"What use are you to me? Other women have pretty things."

"I give you all I have."

"All you have, all you have! What's the use of all *you* have? Other men walk about with silver buttons on their vests, and their girls in silks and satins."

"What do you want me to do? Go out and knock somebody down for his silver buttons?"

"It would take a man to do that. Don't touch me. Go away. When I think of all I have sacrificed for you, you nobody! Go home, go home to Ysor and weave hats!"

Meanwhile she had more than her share of pretty things, which on her became ugly things; for she attracted the lowest sort of men, and what she asked for she got. I was eaten up with jealousy, but she said, "If you don't like it, get out; I'm sick of the sight of your sheep's face. Or take your knife and fight for me like a man." She loved violence; it excited her.

"I am no more and no less a coward than the next man," I said, "but I have no fight left in me. You have sucked my blood."

"You are a sheep. Go back, for God's sake, to Dolores!"

"I cannot, I am empty."

"You are a fool, without spirit."

"I am sick to the heart."

I had fallen very low, and had already taken to drinking; it was not far, now, to the bottom. Soon I would become a murderer and a thief, and then a convict—which brings me to what happened one night at Perico's.

Gaudeama is a rotten place—loose ends and castoff bits of swamp, rock, and jungle, a kind of rubbish heap of creation—but the prospect of oil had drawn all sorts of people there, and Perico did a roaring trade in his café.

It was a long, low building with a corrugated-iron roof, a room lit by hurricane lamps and furnished with chairs and tables and two dance floors, one of wood for customers

wearing shoes and the other of trodden earth for those who came barefoot. A notice at the entrance, which most people could not read, and those who could read ignored, requested clients to leave firearms with the attendant. There was a band, too—of instruments made of burros' jawbones full of loose teeth, hollow logs, gravel in empty gourds, pigs' bladders attached to whistling twigs, dried gut stretched on cane frames that made such music as may not be heard anywhere else this side of hell—to which everybody danced.

I had been drinking a cheap cactus liquor that turns cloudy when you mix it with water, but then a German with a month's pay in his pocket had come to our table and, civilly begging permission to sit with us, bought fizzy sweet wine for Teresa, and strong black beer for himself and me.

She was all smiles. I knew what was going to happen, but did not much care. He asked my leave to dance with her. I shrugged my shoulders and said, "With my leave or without it, if she wants to dance she'll dance." They added their shadows to the shadows on the walls, and I felt in all my pockets, knowing that my money was spent; nothing was there but my knife and three little copper coins.

But just in front of me several Americans in whole suits of clothes, businessmen amusing themselves seeing the low life of Gaudeama, were throwing money about in handfuls. As I looked, their leader—a great, broad man with a tremendous voice—having just paid for wine with a banknote and told the waiter to keep the change, carelessly pushed his wallet into his hip pocket; a corner of it stuck out. He wore loose clothes, but the fatness of that wallet stretched his trousers tight. I stared at it. I could not take my eyes off it. All I had to do was reach out and take it and run.

There was enough in that wallet to keep Teresa happy for a long time. My fingers itched, but stayed on the wet table top. If I had just one more drink, I thought, I'd pluck up courage. But I did not have the price of that drink, and it occurred to me that it wasn't courage I wanted, but the will to steal. I was a poor man, but well brought up, and there were two things of which I had always thought myself incapable—begging and thieving.

Oh, damned Teresa! I felt the sweat coming out on my face. To hell with her!, I said to myself, I'll go home to Dolores, that woman without stain, and ask forgiveness! I'll go now! But still I stared at that man's swollen hip pocket, thinking that, after all, one of the first saints to sup with Jesus in paradise was a repentant thief.

Then all of a sudden there came out of the cigarette smoke a little, undistinguished man in khaki trousers who, passing in front of me and moving smoothly as a fish, dipped two fingers into the big American's pocket, removed the wallet very swiftly and gracefully, and was gone in an instant. And in that same instant I assured myself that to steal is one thing, but to take loot from a thief is something else again.

Before the thought had even properly formed itself I was out of my chair and slipping through the crowd, making for the door. I caught one glimpse of Teresa, dancing, clinging to the German somewhat as a weasel clings to a rabbit, her mouth just under the ear; and I little knew that this was to be the last time I should ever see her.

Money she wanted? Money she would have!

I saw the thief dodging into the bush, keeping to the black shadows cast by the staring moon, and I smiled. There is no jungle so deep that a Zamaya man can't make his way through it, by day or by night.

My foot touched something hard—an end of rusty iron pipe, half as long as my arm. It was with relief that I picked it up in mid-stride, for I did not want to lay my bare hands on him, and hated the thought of using my knife in the dark; I did not mean to kill him.

From time to time he looked back, but he did not see me. Shortening the distance between us little by little, I crept up on him. Now he felt that he was safe, and stopped to light a cigarette. What kind of sneak thief was this, I wondered, and where did he think he was going?

Most of them dived into the rats' nest of the shantytown that was Guadeama, and took cover in a bank of blank faces all like their own. This one, all alone, was on the path that led to the Gaudeama River ford. The drink was dying out inside me, and I felt very strange, as in a fever dream. My hands did not belong to me, and the iron pipe seemed light and soft as fur. I came within striking dis-

tance at last, after four winding miles, and I was proud of my light-footedness, because he did not know I was there until I said, "Pardon me, friend."

He turned, and even as I struck him down I was pleased to see the blade of his knife in the moonlight—he wasn't unarmed. One blow would have been enough, but as he fell I hit him twice more backhanded and forehand. He lay on his face. Now what I needed was a smoke; but, having no tobacco, I put my hand in his shirt pocket and took his, which he kept in an old medicine tin; I rolled and lit a cigarette, sitting on my heels like an honest man resting between spells of work.

Very tired, then I felt under his shirt, found the wallet, unfolded it, and saw that it was stuffed with money. Now, somehow, it frightened and disgusted me.

I thought, I'll have another cigarette and then run back to Perico's, find the American, say, "Here is your money, which I took back off the thief who stole it," and hope for an honest man's reward. I didn't hear the footsteps of men approaching. Suddenly a strong light flashed into my face and something sharp pressed into my side—a little bayonet on the end of a carbine—and there stood a sergeant of carabineers and two men.

One of the men turned the body over, and said, "He's dead, Sergeant, this one," and another flashlight came on, so that I could see the face all covered with blood and jungle soil, the eyes and mouth wide open.

The sergeant took the wallet from my hand, looked inside, whistled, and said, "When thieves fall out, honest men come into their own." He cocked his revolver. "Run for it," he said to me; but I kept still. He looked into the wallet again, found an identity card, and said, "Oh, hell! This is the property of Mr. Tracy Broadribb, the oilman, and had better be returned to him intact, after all."

The man who had turned the body over said, "Sergeant, this is the one we're looking for—this is Little Geronimo."

"No!" the sergeant cried, bending down to look, while the other man tied my hands behind me, lashing my thumbs together with a cord. "Yes, by God, so it is! I thought Little Geronimo was always a loner, though. You," he said to me, "since when have you been his partner?"

I could only say, "I never saw him before in my life." They laughed at that.

A man said, "Sergeant, shall I remove the head for identification purposes?"

"That's the trouble with the likes of you," the sergeant answered. "Science is wasted on you, and you have no idea of progress. Who needs his stinking head for identification? What d'you think the Bureau of Investigation's for? We've got his fingerprints. So simply go through him for papers and what not, and then cut off one thumb. After that, roll him into the bush and let the dogs and the buzzards and the ants take care of him."

And to show me that there were no hard feelings, he gave me a drink of rum out of a flask, put a cigarette between my lips, and said, "You'll get life. Cheer up—it can't last forever."

I bowed my head in shame and was silent, then and later, when I was tried and sentenced, and afterward while serving my sentence. "A kind of hunger," was the only reason I could give for my act.

I told my pitiful little story to only one other man, and then in very remarkable circumstances, of which I will tell you.

Alvarado was a person of culture; the kindest of friends, the gayest of companions, and the best helper I'd ever been assigned, although he never spoke of himself without disparagement. "About you, Pacifico," he would say, "There is a sort of thunderstruck sanctification." *Aie,* those beautiful rolling words! "You are a consecrated bullock, a sacrificial goat. You are Balaam's ass—to you is vouchsafed a vision of angels. An honest weaver you were and are, and shall remain, come hell or high water. Now, I am a hustler and a bum by inclination, vocation and profession." He had a pleasing laugh and fine white teeth, although he must have been forty-five yeas old, and his red beard was streaked with gray. "I have a crooked bone in me."

I said, "Who has not?"

He said, "Lots of people have not. You have not. A man with a crooked bone would rather eat the worms out of another man's plate than the beans out of his own—he gets more spiritual nourishment out of stolen shucks than honest corn. Why? Because he has a crooked bone."

"Why, Alvarado?"

"Because! I come of a decent family—respectable, honest yet not poor; my father was a lawyer. What made me

enjoy a tortilla rolled in a filthy fist in the marketplace and bought with a copper coin stolen from the poor box, rather than a well-cooked meal at table in my father's house? Why? At school I could do my studies without effort; why, then, did I prefer to clamber up a pipe, break into a room, steal a sheet of questions, and pass an examination that way? Why? The crooked bone.

"I was kicked out of the seminary, asked to leave the university, paid to go away from home and stay away. I could have been a lawyer, a doctor, an accountant, a priest. But before I was twenty-one I was forger, pitchman, abortionist, blackmailer, con man, cardsharp, and pimp. With my gifts I could as easily have sold honest stocks and shares as false stuff, but—the crooked bone, the crooked bone!"

"*Aie, aie, aie,* Alvarado!"

"Yes, *aie, aie, aie,* Alvarado. Naturally, then, I gravitated to patriotism, philanthropy, the service of my fellow men. I refer, of course, to politics. In politics, as in hell, everything is justifiable, excusable, pardonable, condonable —even laudable. Rob your father and murder your mother, and say, 'I did it for the Cause,' and all's well. I slipped up there: The way to get on, in politics, is to attach yourself to a minority that will soon become a majority—that way you get to be a hero, and find yourself in on the ground floor where the real pickings are.

"I attached myself to Carrera of the Progressive Liberals, when he was getting sucker money from abroad. According to my calculation, Carrera was a comer. But Carrera seemed to waver and weaken. He went into hiding, over the border. I sold out to the junta, just as Medina came into power, and I thought I was sitting pretty. But then came the so-called 'July Resurgence,' Carrera's *coup d'état*—he and his men came back out of the cactus like a dust storm—and I was swept away!"

"Poor Alvarado, is that how you lost your arm?" I asked him; for his left arm ended at the elbow.

"No. This"—he touched the stump—"is a misfortune, and yet in a way it is not. Lack of this limb, since I can no longer handle cards or dice to my satisfaction, has made a beggar of me. Yet I don't altogether begrudge the loss of it. Half a pair of arms is better than nothing at all, and I came

pretty close to losing arms, legs and everything—my life, I mean."

"Yes, while there's life, there's hope."

"Oh, nonsense!" says Alvarado. "Sentimental gook! As the wireworm and the scorpion, so is Man. There is no hope, no law but the law of the jungle, and no mercy but the mercy of death. It is all a traveler's story. After that comes nothing, and anything is better than that."

And he rolls a cigarette, wonderfully quick, with one snap of the fingers, and goes on, "It was like this. Carrera was in, and I was on the run, wanted 'for questioning.' So I did not wait to pick up some money I had put by, but made my getaway in my shirt and trousers, with only a handful of small change between me and starvation—a badly wanted man, and quite conspicuous because of my red hair.

"Now, as luck would have it, a swindler named Tracy Broadribb was pretending to drill a nonexistent oilfield at Guadeama, and selling shares in it. Every rascal in the country was there. So to Guadeama I fled, sure that I could make a stake there, and so escape to North America by way of Contrabono. And sure enough, first time out in a joint called Perico's, what looked like luck came my way: Tracy Broadribb himself, getting drunk with his friends, and with a wallet thick enough to choke an alligator sticking half out of his hip pocket! I said to myself, 'Oh, Geronimo de Alvarado y Guzman, the devil looks like his own indeed!'

"And I took a swift look about me. Certain things one remembers at times like these, and one thing that stuck in my mind was a certain group of people at a table nearby. There was a skinny, dark, flat-breasted woman with a horrible curved smile like a cannibal's necklace of human teeth, sitting between two men, and looking just like one of Goya's witches. The man on her left was good-looking, but haggard and empty; the other was fat and pink and full of blood, and it was him she had her eye on.

"It was something like a bad dream, my friend—but then Broadribb leaned back to laugh at something, and his pocket stood open like a satchel. I had the wallet out in an instant, and an instant later was out in the dark and making for the path that led through the bus to the river ford. I was safe, I thought. But then somebody said, 'Par-

don me'—said it, not casually, but in a tone of voice as if he really wished to be pardoned for something. As I turned, I caught a glimpse of the pale young man out of the Goya group at Perico's, ghastly in that moonlight, and then there was sunlight, and stars, and pinwheels, and comets and firecrackers as he hit me on the head.

"The strange thing was that I didn't become unconscious—I couldn't move a muscle or a nerve, or even blink an eye, but I was wide awake, as sometimes happens in these circumstances. The pale man took Broadribb's wallet. He helped himself to a pinch of my tobacco and a cigarette paper, but put the tobacco box back in my pocket very punctiliously.

"Then, as he lit a cigarette, out of the bushes came some carabineers. One of them glanced at me and said, 'Sergeant, this is the one we're looking for—this is Little Geronimo.' They took my papers, and when they cut off the top joint of my thumb for positive identification I fainted in real earnest. It wasn't until the ants stung me awake that I came to, naked in the bush, in great pain from my throbbing hand—for my thumb was festering. Which is how I lost my arm.

"But I was on record, now, as being dead, and was free as the air. And I stayed at liberty for twenty years after that, and the things I did and the things that happened to me were more terrible and amusing than the Saragossa Manuscript and the Tales of Hoffmann rolled into one. So I suppose I ought to be philosophic about getting caught at last, and having to serve ten years in this place; since I have got away with things that would have got me a thousand years in any civilized jail, and a few death sentences into the bargain, and have been living on a sort of borrowed time, after all. . . . What the devil's the matter with you? Have you gone mad?"

For I had fallen on my knees, clasped him around the waist, and burst into tears. I cried, "For twenty years I have been praying for forgiveness, and for the repose of your soul, but thank God I didn't kill you after all!" Then I told him my story, as I have told you.

He roared with laughter and said that it was the funniest thing he had ever heard in all his life. "And I see the funny side of things, too," he said. "Oh, what a joke it would be to march me up to the commandant, cut my

throat before his eyes, and say, 'This is the man I was sentenced for murdering twenty years ago. I can't be tried twice for the same charge. What now, *hombre?*' Eh?"

"Don't even think of such things," I said.

"It is all like a dream," said Alvarado. "And yet, as I was saying, although I ought to be taking things philosophically at this stage, I tell you—rather than spend ten years in this hellhole I swear I'll slit my throat!"

I said, "I thought you said that anything is better than nothing at all." He was about to make some interesting reply, but I told him, "Be calm, dear Alvarado. I'll get you out of here."

I had for him, now, such an affection as I had never felt in all my life before, a great love.

He said, "There are only two ways out of here—by air in the bellies of the buzzards, and by water in the guts of the cayman."

"Not so," I said, and told him of what Pelototec, the Raton Indian, had given me. "I have thirty-two dollars put by," I said. "Be patient a year or so while I get together five more, and we'll make our escape together." This lifted him, at first, into a high heaven of hope, and he embraced me and made me get some rum to celebrate what he called his "return to life."

You have witnessed the pleasure of a father who sees his son come out of a burning fever and call for food? Such was my pleasure in sharing a good drink with Alvarado and letting him finish the bottle. But then his bright mood clouded over, and it was, "Thirty-two dollars! I paid three times that much for a pair of shoes. Five dollars more—oh, my sweet Redeemer?—I used to tip my barber that much! And a year or so, a year or so! You talk easily of a year or so, you burro of a Pacifico; you are a lifer, resigned to this sort of thing, a hardened jailbird, a calloused soul. Can you understand what a year or so in a place like this means to a man like me?" And, "How do you know that the Indian wasn't lying? And even if he wasn't, how do you know his ointment hasn't lost its strength?"

I said, "An hour ago you were ready to jump into the river and chance it. The medicine gets stronger with age. Have faith."

"But how do you know there's enough of the stuff for two men?"

"A little goes a long way."

"Oh, if I only had my two hands and a pair of dice!"

"I can make you a pair of dice, dear Alvarado, but with whom could you play? From whom could you win what?"

"Let me look at this precious Raton medicine of yours," he said.

"All in good time, friend, all in good time." But then he took to feeling in the thatch of my hut, and in the walls, and I knew what was in his mind. But I persuaded myself that I did not want to know. We belonged to each other!

Then, one day, Alvarado, who never made a false gesture or a clumsy move in spite of his one arm, knocked over the water jar and said, with a laugh, "I am getting old. My reflexes are going."

I said, "Your reflexes are all there, Alvarado, and you are young for your forty-five years in spite of the life you have led. I know that trick." The tears trickled down my face. "Where the water settles, there's where I dug the hole; after all has soaked in, dig in the last place that stays damp. No?"

I was weighed down with a terrible loneliness. "Alvarado, listen. There's no need to steal from me. I am your friend. Let me tell you something—a man must live by a tale, a traveler's story told in the dark, a long dream. I have no hope of ever getting away from here. Why? Because to tell you the truth. I don't want to. I've been here twenty-two years, weaving my fingers to the bone, weaving my eyes out, weaving my life away. I'm not the man I thought I was, once upon a time—I'm afraid of the jungle that closes in, I'm afraid of spaces that open out, I'm afraid of new faces. And do you want to know a secret? When I have a touch of the fever, what wakes me up in a cold sweat is the dream that something drags me through a hole in a wall into bright light on an open road, and somebody says, 'Pacifico, you are free!'

"But I am an old man lost and all alone in a world of children. Imagine that." I was crying now. "Take what is buried there under the floor. It's yours. I knew in my heart that I'd never use it. I only wanted to keep you with me a little longer . . . or rather, I only wanted to keep myself from facing the most horrible fact of all; that I don't want to be at liberty."

And I covered my face.

He grasped my hand then, and said, with a break in his voice, "Pacifico, I'll stay and keep you company."

"Bless your heart for saying so," I said. "Just for a split second you meant it, and for that little moment God will forgive all your sins at last. But even as the words passed your lips the thought was going through your mind, Why didn't I knock this fellow on the head like the respectable outlaw that I am, and get him off my mind? Now I'll have to whip up a quarrel with him for my pride's sake, damn his eyes! That's what you said to yourself."

"What puts such a thought into your head, Pacifico?"

"I read you, poor child! Yes, yes, the few dollars and the other stuff are in a hole in the floor where the water has settled. I'll get them out for you—I know the feel of that hole, the way you would know the feel of the doorway to your own home, if you ever had one. Don't work yourself into a rage against me and hate me simply to justify stealing those things from me. I've told you—as far as I'm concerned, it's nothing but a dream. Take them, Alvarado, with my—"

"I know your sort," says Alvarado, through his teeth. "This is a common informer's gimmick, a dirty little lifer's trick to get a bottle of rum and a few sticks of tobacco as a reward for capturing an escaped convict. I run; you give the alarm; then make a public example of me."

"I read you right," I tell him. "You can't accept a gift in good faith. You've *got* to con and pilfer. Still, I might have plucked up courage to come away with you in a year or so—I doubt it, yet I just might have. As matters stand, go with God. The guards won't be making their rounds for another hour, and by that time you'll be over the river and in the jungle. Don't forget to smear yourself thoroughly—"

"Just as a precautionary measure," says Alvarado, picking up the stick we beat out the straw with.

I saw it coming, but had no time to guard my head.

When I came to, the commandant asked me, "What did he take out of that hole in the floor?"

I replied, "All I had—nothing much."

"There was a strong smell of Indians. Did you see any Indians?"

"No, Commandant."

"He had the luck of the devil—swam right across the river and got over without a scratch. What the Ratons will

do to him is something else again." He was an affable, educated kind of man. "Anthropology is a fascinating study."

"Yes, Commandant."

"Even in the lowest types there is something of the divine spark. The Eskimos of the far north, armed only with bone spears, slay whales. The natives of the African jungles converse over huge distances by means of drums. The debased blackfellows of Australia invented the boomerang, the woomera, and a national language. The North American Indians converse in deaf-and-dumb gestures. The Ratons, we are told, have a kind of system of diplomatic immunity, and are said to issue *laissez-passers* of carved bone, the lucky possessor of one of which may pass unharmed, even guarded through the most dangerous forests."

"Indeed, Commandant?"

"But I have never seen one of these bones, and neither, to the best of my knowledge, has anybody else. Yet they are believed to exist; and woe betide the foolhardy fellow who tries to get by carrying another man's passport!" He contemplated me again. "He was your friend and comrade, and he robbed you, eh? You shared your rum with him, and he cheated you?"

"No, no, Commandant."

"Your head is confused, I see. Well, no doubt he was working out his destiny. Without a Judas there could have been no Crucifixion."

So five years passed, and whatever money I made I spent, saving nothing. Then somebody discovered that there was a great number of sapodilla trees hereabout. From the sapodilla comes chicle, of which chewing gum is made; and huge sums of money are spent every day on this strange stuff.

Nothing stops civilized men when great matters are at issue. Do we need a level? We abolish a mountain. A canal? We stamp out yellow fever. Chicle gum? Out go the Raton Indians from their forests, and with a vengeance. They could pick us off easily, but when they started shooting their poisoned darts at chicle company men, a major of Rangers came in with a punitive expedition.

And that was a great day for the anthropologists, and other men of science, who accompanied the expedition and had their headquarters in some houses we built for them

near our own officers' quarters. Carriers came in bearing baskets full of all sorts of primitive curiosities—weapons, idols, paintings, jewelry, and, most important of all, the Raton tribal treasure of dried heads, some of them hundreds of years old and others quite fresh.

There were also some prisoners, both male and female. Raton women are a curiosity, too, their faces being bound tight at birth so that their noses never grow. The idea of this was to make them undesirable to other tribesmen. But such is the nature of man that, before long, this horrible deformity was considered a mark of beauty, and they were doubly sought after.

One day one of our guards came to my hut and said, "The commandant wants to see you. He says there's an old pal of yours there you'll be glad to meet again."

I followed him to the ethnologists' shed, and very strange it looked and smelled, lined now with racks of human heads, masks, and wizards' cloaks, over which some men in glasses were stooping, attaching labels. The commandant was not there, but between two soldiers there squatted on the floor a very old and wizened Raton. Feeble as he was, they had a rope round his waist, of which each soldier kept hold of one end. I knew him at once.

"Pelototec," I said.

"Who say my name?"

"You were in my place long ago," I said. "I hid you under the grass. You gave me some medicine and a little bone."

He said, "No. You say what is not." And he fumbled at a string around his neck and held up that carved knucklebone which I knew so well. As he turned his face toward me, I saw that his eyes were white as milk: He was stone blind. "You no brother to Pelototec. Pelototec make brother to go free . . . many, many, many sleeps away. Make him brother to Raton; one heart, one spirit." He felt the carvings in the knucklebone, smiled faintly, and said, "This me, this my brother."

I lied, he told me—he had been blind many years, but was not easily fooled. He was a chief among his people, and a great doctor. He knew what was what. The man to whom he had given this bone, and the cayman medicine, had been captured in the forest by his young hunters, and

brought to Pelototec, who could not see him but knew him at once—for who else could carry that seal?

His name was Pacifico, and he remembered very well everything that happened on the night he helped Pelototec to escape. . . . Ah, my little Alvarado—trust you not to miss a trick! I thought. Knowing my story by heart, seeing that the old man was blind, he had saved himself explanations by simply declaring that he was Pacifico, rescuer of Pelototec, brother to the Raton, on the run and headed for Contrabono and liberty.

"I gave my brother his want," the old man said. "He go free."

Here a gentleman in glasses said to me, "The Raton have no actual word for freedom. They have one word, *uaxot,* which signifies safety, victory, not being hungry, needing no sleep, having sexual gratification, and well-being in general. Pronounced with emphasis on the diphthong *ua,* it means 'death.' With emphasis on the *axo,* it means 'long life.' Emphasize the *ot,* and you say 'me' or 'self.' "

"Uaxot," the old man said, touching his breast. "*Uaxot!*"

The gentleman went on, "It is contrary to etiquette to let a stranger go, and against taboo to let him stay. So this old person probably feels that he has done the man he refers to a very special favor, keeping him in the family by drinking the ashes of his heart mixed with that palm wine which induces strange dreams. A sort of savage sacrament."

I stammered, "I understood the commandant to say these bones were, so to speak, a passport to safety."

"In a ghostly sense, so they are."

The commandant came in then, and said, "Ah, Pacifico, here's a friend of yours." He ignored Pelototec, beckoned me to one of the racks, and picked up a dried head by its red hair. "There, my friend—he who laughs last laughs best."

"Oh, poor Alvarado!" I said, and covered my eyes. And I cried, "Good God. I am a simple man; if it was, after all Your will that I be the instrument of Alvarado's doom, was it merciful or necessary to make such an operation of it?"

The commandant said, "Why, I'd give a year's pay to see a few of my friends' faces on these racks!"

Now I have told you my story. This year the Government declared an amnesty for all prisoners who had served twenty years or more.

The commandant tells me that I am free. I say to him, "Free for what, your excellency? Here I have work, food, drink, tobacco, shelter. Must I go begging on the roads?"

He replies, "My friend, this is not a charitable institution."

So, with all the facts before you, will you have the goodness to help me word an appeal to the governor, asking that in consideration of nearly thirty years of exemplary conduct, and having regard for the fact that I was never guilty of the crime for which I was sentenced in the first place, I be kindly permitted to spend the remainder of my days here?

SOLDIER KEY

Sterling E. Lanier

Everyone in the club, even those who disliked him, agreed that Brigadier ("not Brigadier General, please") Donald Ffellowes. R.A., ret., could tell a good yarn when he chose. He seemed to have been in the British Army, the Colonial Police and M.I.-5 as well at one time or another, and to have served all over the globe.

People who loathed him and the English generally, said all Colonial Police tales were lies, that he was a remittance man, and that his gift for incredible stories was a direct inheritance from Sir John Mandeville, the medieval rumor-monger. Still, even those who denounced his stories the most loudly never left once he started on them. If Ffellowes was a liar, he was an awfully good one.

Mason Williams, who was one of those who resented Ffellowes as both British and overbearing, had instantly ordered stone crab when he saw it on the club's lunch menu. Of the eight others present at the big table that day, only one besides Williams had ever had stone crab, but we all decided to try it, that is, except Ffellowes.

"No, thank you," he repeated coldly, "I'll have the sweetbreads. I don't eat crab or any crustacean, for that matter. I used to love it," he went on, "in fact I ate crab, lobster, langouste, crawfish and shrimp with the best of you at one time. Until 1934 to be exact. An unpleasant

and perhaps peculiar set of circumstances caused me to stop. Perhaps you would care to hear why?

"Now, I couldn't get it past my mouth, and if I did I couldn't swallow it. You see, something happened. . . ."

His voice trailed away into silence, and we could all see that his thoughts were elsewhere. He stared at the snowy tablecloth for a moment and then looked up with an apologetic smile. He waited, and not even Williams seemed anxious to interrupt.

"I've never told anyone about this, but I suppose I ought, really. It's a quite unbelievable story, and not a very nice one. Yet, if you'd like to hear it?" he queried again.

An instant chorus of affirmation rose from around the table. We were all men who had traveled and seen at least something of life, but none of our tales ever matched what we extracted from Ffellowes at long intervals.

"Wait until after dinner," was all he would say. "I need a good meal under my belt and some coffee and a cigar before this one."

The rest of us looked at one another rather like boys who have been promised a treat, as indeed we had. Williams grunted something, but made no objection. His denunciations of the British always came *after* Ffellowes' stories, I noticed.

When we were settled in our leather chairs in an alcove of the huge library, with cigars drawing and coffee and brandy beside us, Ffellowes began.

"Did any of you ever sail the Caribbean in the pre-War period? I don't mean on a cruise ship, although that's fun. I mean actually sailed, in a small boat or yacht, touching here and there, calling at ports when you felt like it and then moving on? If not, you've missed something.

"The dawns were fantastic and the sunsets better. The food from the galley, fresh fish we'd caught ourselves usually, was superb, and the salt got into our skin, baked there by the sun.

"Islands rose up out of the sea, sometimes green and mountainous like Jamaica, sometimes low and hidden by mangroves and reefs like the Caymans or Inagua.

"We called at funny little ports and gave drinks to local officials who came aboard and got tight and friendly and told us astonishing scandals and implausible state secrets, and finally staggered off, swearing eternal friendship.

"And then at dawn, we hoisted anchor, set sail and checked our charts, and off we went to see what was over the next horizon because there was always another island."

He paused and sipped his coffee, while we waited in silence.

"I had three months' leave on half pay at the time due to a mixup; so Joe Chapin and I (he's dead a long time, poor fellow, killed at Kohima) chartered an island schooner at Nassau and hired two colored men to help us work her and cook. They were from Barbados and wanted to get back there, and that suited us. Badians were good seamen and good men, too. One, the older, was called Maxton, the other, Oswald, and I've forgotten their last names. We told them to call us Joe and Don, but it was always 'Mistah Don, Sah' to me, and 'Cap'n' to Joe, because he was officially captain on the papers.

"Well, we sailed along south for a month or so, calling here and there, picking up news and having fun at this port or that, until we got to Basse-Terre on Guadeloupe. We were ashore having a few rums in the bar with the port officials when we first heard of Soldier Key.

"Any of you ever hear of it? Well, you won't now because it's gone. The people are anyway. The big hurricane of 1935 smashed it more than flat, and I'm told the few people left were moved by the British government. I checked up later on and found they went first to Dominica and then elsewhere, but there weren't many left.

"At any rate, the French customs officer we were drinking with suggested we look in at Soldier Key if we wanted an unusual, what you call 'offbeat,' place to visit.

" 'Messieurs,' he told us, 'this is a very strange place. You will not, I think, call twice, because few do, but I do not think you will be bored. These people are British like yourselves, and yet the island has no British official in residence, which is odd. They have an agreement with the government of Dominica that they govern themselves. Twice a year comes an inspection, but otherwise they are alone, with none to disturb them. Curious, is it not?'

"We agreed it sounded mildly strange, but asked why we should bother going at all?

" 'As to that,' he said, 'you must suit yourselves. But you English always seek new things, and this place is a

strange one. The people are, how you say it, *forgot* by everyone. They trade little, selling only *langouste* (the spiny lobster) and the meat of green turtle. They are good seamen, but they call at few ports and avoid other fishing boats. For some reason, they never sell the turtle shell, although they could catch all the shell turtles they wish. I cannot tell you more, except I once called there for water when on a cruise and the place made me feel discomfortable.' He paused and tried to convey what he meant. 'Look, these Key of the Soldier people all belong to one church, not mine or yours either. To them, all who are not of this communion are damned eternally, and when they look at you, you feel they wish to speed the process. A funny place, Messieurs, but interesting.'

"He finished his rum and stood up to go. 'And another thing Messieurs,' he said, 'all people of color dislike this place, and there are none of them who live there. Again, interesting, eh? Why not try it? You may be amused.'

"Well, after we got back to the boat, we hauled out our charts and looked for Soldier Key. It was there all right, but it was quite easy to see how one could miss it. It lay about two days' sail West by Northwest of Dominica, and it looked like a pretty small place indeed. The copy of the *Mariner's Guide* we had wasn't really new, and it gave the population as five hundred (approximately) with exports limited to lobster and imports nil. A footnote said it was settled in 1881 by the Church of the New Revelation. This, of course, must be the church to which our little customs official had been referring, but I'd never heard of it, nor had Joe. Still, there are millions of sects all over the place; so that meant nothing, really.

"Finally, before we turned in, Joe had an idea. 'I'm certain someone has some reference books in town,' he said. 'I'll have a dekko tomorrow morning, first thing, shall I?'

"Well, he did, and about noon, when I was considering the day's first drink in the same waterfront bar as the night before, he came in with a small volume, very worn-looking in his hand.

" 'Look at this,' he said, 'I found it in the local library; been there forever, I should think.'

"What he had in his hand was a slim black book, written in English, cheaply bound and very tattered, with brown pages crumbling at the edges. It was dated London, 1864.

and was written by someone who called himself the Opener of the Gate, Brother A. Poole. The title of the book was *The New Revelation Revealed to the Elect.*

" 'One of those island people must have left it here on their way through,' I said, 'or perhaps some fisherman lost it. Have you looked at it?'

"We read it aloud in turn, as much as we could stand, that is, because it was heavy going, and it was really a very boring book. A good bit of it came from Revelation and also the nastier bits of the Old Testament, and practically all of it was aimed at warning Those Who Transgressed.

"But there were stranger parts of it, based apparently on Darwin, of all people, and even some Jeremy Bentham. All in all, a weirder hodgepodge was never assembled, even by your Aimee Semple McPherson or our own Muggletonians.

"The final summing up of the hundred pages or so, was a caution, or rather summons, to the Faithful, to withdraw from the world to a Secluded Spot at the first opportunity. Judging from what we had heard, Soldier Key was the Secluded Spot.

" 'It would be fascinating to find out what a gang like this has done in seventy years of isolation, don't you think?' said Joe. I agreed. It sounded like giving a new twist to our trip.

"Well, we weighed anchor that afternoon, after a farewell drink with our customs friend, and his last words intrigued us still more.

" 'Have you any weapons on board?'

"I answered that we had a shark rifle, a .30-30 Winchester carbine, and a Colt .45 automatic pistol.

" 'Good. I think less well today than I did last night of having directed you to this place. There are strange rumors among les Noirs of Soldier Key. Send me a card from your next port, as a favor, eh?'

"We promised and then said goodbye. Once clear of the harbor, we plotted a course and then told the two crewmen where we were going. The reaction was intriguing.

"Maxton, the older, looked rather glum, but Oswald, who was a six-foot black Hercules, actually forgot his usual respectful terms of address.

" 'Mon, what you go theah fo'? They not good people theah; wery bad people on Soljah Cay, Mon!'

"When Joe and I pressed them to say why exactly they disliked the place, they could not, or would not, give us any answers, except that no one went there from other islands and that the folk were unfriendly, especially to colored people.

" 'Come, come, Oswald,' said Joe finally, 'there surely must be something you are not telling us.'

"The man stared at the deck and finally mumbled something about 'Duppies.'

"Well, you know, this made us laugh and that was an error. Duppies are West Indian ghosts, evil spirits, and are objects of fear among all British West Indian Negroes from Jamaica to Trinidad. When we joshed these two men about them, they shut up like oysters! Not one further word could we get out of them about Soldier Key. No, that's not right. I got one more thing a day later.

"Oswald was fishing with a hand line from the stern at a time when I had the helm. I had asked him idly what he was using for bait.

"He reached into a metal pail beside him and pulled out a huge black and grey snail's shell about six inches across. 'Soljah, Mistah Don, Sah.' I noticed he held it gingerly, and I suddenly saw why. The owner of the shell was not the original snail at all, but a weird-looking crab, with great orange and purple claws, too large for its size, beady eyes on stalks and a mass of red spiky legs. In fact, it was the northern hermit crab, simply grown huge and aggressive in the tropics. Its claws snapped and clicked as it tried to reach his fingers, and then he dropped it back into the pail.

" 'They are many of thom where we go, Mistah Don, Sah, wery many of the Soljahs.'

"So here was the reason for the name of the island! I had been speculating to myself as to whether the British had ever had a fort there, but the explanation was much simpler. Hermit Crab Island! Under this new name, it made all the vague warnings of our French friend seem quite silly, and when I told Joe about it later when we changed watch, he rather agreed.

"We made our landfall in a trifle under three days, due mostly to light airs, you know. The island was flat, only about seven miles long and two wide; so it would not have been a hard place to miss, actually. We came steadily in

from the East, took down sail and started the auxiliary engine, because there was a circular reef marked on the charts as extending almost completely around the island and it only had a few navigable openings.

"It was evening, and the sun was on the horizon when we saw the first lights of the island's only town. There was a hundred-yard passage through the reef, marked clearly as showing seven fathoms opposite the town; so we brought the schooner in until we were no more than fifty or so yards off-shore.

"The town lay in a semicircle about a shallow bay. There was a broken beach, with bits of low cliff about five feet above the water, which we could just dimly make out. I say dimly because it was now completely dark and there was no moon, only Caribbean starlight, although that's pretty bright.

"We switched off the engine, anchored and watched the town, because it was the oddest-appearing port we had ever seen. There wasn't a sound. A few dimmish lights, perhaps half a dozen, burned in windows at wide intervals, but no dogs barked, no rooster crowed, no noise of voices came over the water. There was a gentle breeze in our rigging and the lapping of wavelets on the hull, and that was all.

"Against the sky at one point to the left, we could see the loom of some tall building, and we thought that this might be a church, but what we were to make of this silence baffled us. Night, especially the evening, is a lively time in the tropics, in fact the liveliest. Where were the people?

"We debated going ashore and decided against it. I say 'we,' but I assure you our crew wasn't debating. They had made it quite plain earlier that they were not going even if ordered, not even in daylight.

" 'This is a bad place, Cap'n,' said Oswald to Joe. 'We do not wish to discommode you, Sah, but we don't go on thot land, at all, Sah, no!'

"And that was that. So, we set anchor watch and turned in. A few mosquitoes came out from shore but not many, and we fell asleep with no trouble at all, determined to solve the mystery of the quiet in the morning.

"I was awakened by a hand on my arm. I blinked because it was still pitch-black out, and I looked at my

watch. It was two A.M. Against the stars I could see Joe's head as he stooped over me.

" 'Come on deck, Don,' he said, 'and listen.' Even as he spoke, I was conscious that the night was no longer completely quiet.

"On deck, the four of us, for the two crewmen were up too, crouched in the cockpit, and we all strained our ears.

"The sound we were hearing was quite far off, a mile at the very least from the volume, but it was unmistakably the sound of many human voices singing. To us, it sounded like a hymn, but the tune was not a familiar one.

"After what seemed about twenty-three stanzas, it stopped, and we listened in the silent night again. Then, there came a distant shout, somewhat sustained, and again silence for a moment. Then the rhythmic mass cry again, but longer this time and seeming to go up and down. It went on this way for about ten minutes, first the silence and then the noise of human voices, and I tried without success to make out what was going on. Joe got the clue first.

" 'Responses,' he said, and of course, that was it. we were listening to something very like a psalm, chanted by a lot of people, a long way off, and naturally we couldn't hear the minister at all, but only the antiphony.

"After a bit, it stopped, and after fifteen minutes or so we turned in again. Now we knew why the town was quiet. All the people, apparently including the babies, were celebrating a church service somewhere inland. The Church of the New Revelation seemed to go in for midnight services.

"Well, we woke at six A.M. to a typical blazing Caribbean morning and also to a visitor. Standing on the edge of the deck coaming was the hatless figure of a man, staring down at Joe and myself out of pale blue eyes.

"He was about sixty from his looks, clean-shaven and sallow, with thick white hair and a gaunt, peaked face. Not especially impressive until you studied the eyes. Ice blue they were, and so cold they gave me a chill even in the ninety-plus heat on deck.

" 'What do you want here?' he said, with no other introduction at all. 'We seek no visitors. This island is dedicated to the Lord.'

"I introduced Joe and myself, but he paid no attention.

I noticed his shabby but clean white suit, shirt and tieless stiff collar as he stepped down into the cockpit. Behind him, I saw a little skiff tied to the stern in which he had rowed himself out.

" 'Look!' he said suddenly, an expression of disgust crossing his features. 'You are bringing pollution with you. You slay the helpless creatures of the Lord!' With that he reached down and seized the bait bucket and emptied Oswald's bait, three of the big purple hermit crabs, over the side in one convulsive heave.

" 'Now, I say, just a moment, now,' said Joe, letting annoyance show through. 'Exactly who are you, and what's this all about? We've tried to be polite, but there are limits. . . .'

"The cold eyes swept over us again, and their nasty glint deepened. 'I am Brother Poole, son of the Founder. You would call me the Pastor, I suppose. The government of this blessed place is in my keeping. Once again, I say, who are you and what do you want?'

"Joe answered peaceably enough and re-introduced us, but he had obviously been doing some thinking while he listened to Poole.

" 'We just wanted to get some water and a little food,' said Joe, 'and some fresh fruit, before we go to Dominica. No law against going ashore on your island, is there?' He added, 'Isn't this British territory? Doesn't the Dominican governor ever allow people ashore here?'

"It was quite obvious that he had given Brother Poole something to chew on, you know. Whatever Poole's powers were on the island, he wasn't used to having them challenged. And it was evident from his hesitation that he didn't care for the remarks about the British or Crown government. You could see his bony face working as he grappled with the problem. Finally, something he must have thought was a smile struggled to get through. Frankly, I preferred his previous expression. A sanctimonious whine also crept into his hard voice.

" 'I regret my sharpness, gentlemen. We have so few visitors, mostly fishermen of loose morals. I am the guardian of our little Eden here, and I have to think of my flock. Of course, you can come ashore, and buy what you need. I only ask that you kill nothing, do no fishing while here, out of respect to our law.'

"We stated we had no intention of killing anything and said we'd come ashore after we cleaned up and had breakfast. He climbed back into his boat, but before he cast off, turned back to us.

" 'Please see that those two black heathen stay on your schooner. Their presence is not wanted on our island, where they might corrupt our people.' A good share of the original venom had come back in his speech.

"As he pulled away, I turned to Maxton and Oswald to apologize, but it was unnecessary. Their faces were immobile, but also, it seemed to me, a shade paler under their natural darkness. Before I could say anything, Maxton spoke.

" 'Don't worry about us, Sah. We hov no desiah to enter in thot place. It is of the utmost dislike to us, I ossuah you, Sah.'

"Well, Joe and I shaved, and put on clean clothes, and then rowed our dinghy into the empty dock. There was only one, and that one small. A lot of fishing boats, all under twenty feet, were moored to buoys and also pulled up on the sloping beach, where it existed, that is.

"The town lay before me to observe, as Joe was doing the rowing, and I had a full view from the stern. It looked pretty small, perhaps fifty houses all told, plus the one church we had spotted the night before, a steepled white thing with something metallic, not a cross, on the steeple, which caught the sunlight and reflected it blindingly.

"The houses were all white stucco, mostly palm-thatch-roofed, but a few with rusting tin instead, and all set on short stilts a foot or so off the ground. You could have duplicated them on any other island in the Caribbean.

"A few coco palms grew here and there and some shortish trees, mostly in the yards of the houses. Behind the town, a low green scrub rolled away, the monotonous outline broken only by a few of the taller thatch palms. The whole place lay shimmering in the heat, because not a breath of air moved.

"And neither did anything else. A white figure on the end of the dock was Brother Poole, identifiable at long range as waiting for us. But behind him the town lay silent and still. Not so much as a dog or chicken crossed a yard or disturbed the dust of the white roads. It was, if anything more eerie than the night before.

"We nosed into the dock, and Poole leaned down to catch the painter Joe flung up to him. We climbed up as he was securing it to a post. Then he stood up and faced us.

" 'Welcome to Soldier Key, gentlemen,' he said. 'I hope I did not appear too unfriendly earlier, but I have a precious duty here, guarding my flock. Although you are not of the Elect, I know you would not wish to bring disturbance to a pious community, which has cut itself off from the dross and vanity of the world.' He turned to lead us down the dock without waiting for an answer and threw another remark over his shoulder. 'The governor of Dominica has given me magistrate's powers.'

"The carrot and the stick, eh! Joe and I exchanged glances behind his back.

"At the foot of the dock, Poole turned again, the cold eyes gleaming in the sunlight. I presume you wish to see our little town? You will find it quiet. This is a festival of our church, and all of our people rest during the day to prepare for the evening service, by fasting and by prayer. I would be doing so too, but for the duties of hospitality, which are paramount.'

"I had been trying to analyze his very odd accent since I'd first heard it. It was not West Indian, but a curiously altered Cockney, flat and nasal, something like the worst sort of Australian, what they call 'Stryne.' I thought then, and still think, that I know exactly how Uriah Heep must have sounded.

"As we walked up the silent main street, which lay dreaming in the white heat, our feet kicking up tiny clouds of coral dust, I suddenly saw something move in the shadow of a house. At first I thought it was a cat, then a large rat, but as it moved, it came momentarily into a patch of sunlight, and I stopped to stare.

"It was a soldier, a hermit crab, but enormous in size, at least a foot long, its naked body hidden in and carrying a huge conch shell as it scuttled clumsily along. As we came abreast of it, its stalked eyes seemed to notice us, and to my surprise, instead of retreating, it ran out toward us and stopped only a foot away. Its great orange and purple claws looked capable of severing one's wrist, or a finger, at any rate.

"Poole had stopped too, and then reaching into his

pocket, he pulled out a linen bag from which he extracted a strip of dried meat. He leaned down, do you know, and placed it in front of the crab. It seized it and began to shred it in the huge claws, passing bits back to its mouth, where other smaller appendages chewed busily. It was as thoroughly nasty a sight as I'd ever glimpsed. Also, I wondered at the meat.

" 'That's a monster,' I said. 'How on earth do you tame them? I had no idea they grew so big. And I thought you ate no meat?'

" 'They are not *tame,* as you in the gross world think of it,' said Poole sharply. 'They are our little brothers, our friends, as much a part of life as we, and all units of the great chain live here in peace, some higher, some lower, but all striving to close the great circle which holds us to the material earth, at peace, yet in competition, the lower sinking, failing, the higher mastering the lower, then aiding. It is all a part of—' His whining voice rose as he spoke, but then suddenly stopped as he realized that our expressions were baffled, unmoved by the exposition of his extraordinary creed. 'You would not understand,' he finished lamely, and pocketing the still unexplained meat, he turned to lead us on. We followed, glancing at one another. Behind us, the huge crab still crunched on its dainty, clicking and mumbling.

"Wrapped in thought about Poole and his religion, I really didn't notice that we had come to the town square, until I almost ran into Joe, who had stopped in front of me.

"Before us now stood the church we had glimpsed earlier, a massive, white-stuccoed structure with a pointed spire. As I looked up, I could see by squinting that the shiny object on the steeple was, indeed, not a cross. It was a huge crab claw, gilded and gleaming in the sunlight!

"My jaw must have dropped, because Poole felt it incumbent on himself to explain. 'We have abandoned the more obvious Christian symbols,' he said. 'And since our friends, the soldiers, are the commonest local inhabitants, we choose to symbolize the unity of all life by placing their limb on our little place of worship.'

" 'Rather! I can see it's their church,' said Joe pointing 'Look there, Donald.'

"As he spoke, I saw what he had seen first, that the

shadows around the base of the church were moving and alive—alive with the great hermit crabs.

"Large, small, and a few immense, they rustled and clanked in and around the coral blocks which formed the base, and the scrubby bushes which flanked the blocks, a sea of shells, claws, spiny legs and stalked eyes.

"Poole must have seen that we were revolted, because he moved on abruptly, leaving us no choice except to follow him. As we moved, I heard a distant human sound break the hot silence for the first time that morning, the sound of hammering. It came from our right, toward the edge of town, and peering down a sandy street in that direction, I thought I could identify the source as a long shedlike structure, about a third of a mile away.

" 'I thought everyone had retired to pray?' said Joe at the same moment. 'What's that hammering?'

"Poole looked annoyed. I never met a man less good at disguising his feelings, but since he normally never had to while on his island, it must have been quite hard to learn. Finally his face cleared and the spurious benevolence gained control.

" 'A few of the men are working on religious instruments,' he said. 'We have a festival coming: we call it the Time of the Change, so there is a dispensation for them. Would you like to see them at work?'

"Since the silent town had so far yielded nothing of interest except the soldiers, which we loathed, we said yes.

"We came at length to one end of the long building, and Poole held aside a rattan screen door, so that we could go in first. A blast of frightful heat hit us in the face as we entered.

"Inside, the building was one long open shed, lit by vents in the walls, and by a fire which blazed in a trench running half the length of the structure. Several giant metal cauldrons bubbled over the fire, with huge pieces of some horn-like material sticking out of them.

"Over against one wall were several long benches, and at these, a number of bronzed white men, stripped to tattered shorts, were furiously hammering at more pieces of the horny substance, flattening it and bending it, forcing it into huge wooden clamps and vises and pegging it together.

"As we watched, several of them stopped work and

seized a huge piece of the stuff, and dragging it to the fire, dumped it into one of the giant pots. No one paid us the slightest attention, but simply kept working as though driven by some frantic need, some internal pressure. The whole affair was most mysterious.

"I stepped close to one of the pots to see if I could learn what it was they were working on, and as I looked I saw, to my amazement, it was tortoise shell.

"Now, a hawksbill sea turtle, the only known source of shell, seldom grows one much over a yard long, you know. The pieces these men were working on must have been made with many dozens of them at least. What on earth were they doing?

"Poole, who had been surveying our bewilderment with a sardonic smile, decided to mystify us further. Tapping Joe on the shoulder and pointing, he started walking down the length of the long shed, skirting the fires and workmen, but ignoring them.

"His goal was the far left-hand corner, which we now saw had a palm-thatch curtain extending from floor to ceiling, masking what lay behind.

"With the air of a second-rate showman on his unpleasant face, he pulled on a rope and drew the high brown curtain aside. 'Behold our aim, gentlemen. Here is a fitting offering that we make for the altar of the Most High!'

"What we saw was certainly worth more than a little showmanship. Before us, poised on seven or eight large sawhorses, was a giant, gleaming shell, as if some colossal and quite improbable snail had washed up from the deeps of the sea. Golden, mottled and semitranslucent, it towered over our heads, and must have been at least twelve feet in diameter from the great opening in the base to the peak of the spiral tip. As we drew closer we saw that the whole marvelous object was artificial, being made of plates of overlapping tortoise shell pegged so cunningly that it was hard to see any joint. At one place on the side, a large gap showed where the work was not yet complete. Obviously, this was why the silent, half-naked workers were toiling so industriously. It was a very beautiful and awe-inspiring sight, if still a mysterious one.

"Poole drew the curtain closed and stood with his arms in his coat pockets smiling at our amazement. 'That's one

of the most beautiful things I've ever seen,' I said, quite honestly. 'May I ask what you do with it when it's finished?'

"Some strong emotion flashed for a second across his face, to be replaced by a bland expression of benignity. 'We set it afloat on a large raft, surrounded by offerings of fruit and flowers,' he said. 'An offering to God, to be swept where He wills by the waves and winds.'

"Seeing our incomprehension at the idea of so much hard work going to waste, he elaborated, still smiling in his sneering way. 'You see, it takes a long time to make the shell. The whole community, our whole little island, participates. Men must catch turtles. Then they must be killed, as mercifully as possible, the shell cured in a special manner and so on, right up until the final work. Then, when we gather at the ceremony of departure, all our people share in the delight of speeding it forth. We feel that we send our sins with it and that our long labor and offering to God may help our souls to Paradise. A naïve idea to you, cultivated men of the great, outside world, no doubt, but very dear to us. My father, of blessed memory, the Founder, devised the whole idea.'

"Actually, you know, the idea was a lovely and reverent one. It reminded me of the Doge of Venice marrying the Sea, and other ceremonies of a similar nature. Brother Poole must have spent some time indeed on the composition of his tale, for it was quite the pleasantest thing we had heard about the island.

"While he had been speaking, we had passed out of the shed into the glaring sunlight, which seemed cool after the inferno we had left behind us.

"As we stood blinking in the sun, Poole turned to us with the false benignity now vanished from his face. 'So, gentlemen, you have seen all there is to see of our little town. There is an important religious festival tonight, the launching of our offering. I must ask you to purchase such supplies as you need and leave before this evening, since non-believers are not permitted here during our holy night and day, which is tomorrow. I can sell you any supplies you may need.'

"Well, we had no reason to linger. Personally, as I said earlier, I had taken a profound dislike to the whole town and particularly to Brother Poole, who seemed to embody

it, as well as actually to direct it. We walked to the wharf, discussing what we needed on the way. Poole seemed ready to sell fruit, bananas, mangoes and papayas, as well as bread, at perfectly honest prices, and offered us fresh water free of any charge at all.

"Only once did any hardness come back to his voice, and that was when I asked if any spiny lobsters, *langouste*, were for sale.

" 'We do not take life here,' he said. 'I told you earlier of our rule.'

"Joe could not help breaking in with an obvious point, although he should have known better when dealing with a fanatic.

" 'What about the turtles. You kill them for their shells and presumably eat the meat. And what about the fish you catch?'

"Poole looked murderous. 'We do not eat meat,' he snapped. 'You would not understand, being heretics, unaware of the Divine Revelation, but the turtles' deaths are allowable, since we beautify our offering to God with their shells. The greater cause is served through a smaller fault. Also, the fish are set aside to us as our portion, although a sinful one. But what is the use of explaining these holy things to you, since you have not seen the Light?'

"After this, he declined to say anything else at all, except to wish us a good journey in a furious voice and to add that our purchases and water would be on the dock in an hour. With that, he stalked off and disappeared around a corner of the street. Upon his departure, all movement ceased, and the town dreamed on, neither sound nor movement breaking the noon silence. Yet we both had the feeling that eyes watched us from behind every closed shutter and each blank, sealed window.

"We rowed back to the schooner in silence. Only when we climbed aboard, to be greeted by Maxton and Oswald, did our voices break out together, as if pent up.

" 'Appalling character, he was! What a perfectly hellish place! Did you feel the eyes on your back?' et cetera.

"Only after settling down and disposing of lunch, which the men had thoughtfully made in our absence, did we seriously talk. The conclusion we reached was that the British government and the local administration in Dominica needed a good jolt about this place, and that it ought to

be thoroughly investigated to find out just how happy the locals really were about Brother Poole and his hermit crab church. Other than that, we decided the sooner we left, the better.

"During lunch we had seen some of the locals, all whites, manhandling a cart down on the dock, and unloading it. We now rowed ashore and found two large, covered baskets of fruit, half a dozen loaves of new bread, and an old oil drum of water, which looked and tasted clean and fresh. We also found Poole, who seemed to appear out of the air and accepted the previously agreed-on payment for the food. When that was over and we promised to return the water drum after putting the water in our tank, he came to his official business again.

" 'Now that you have water, you can leave, I suppose,' he said. 'There is no further reason for interrupting our holy festivities?' His arrogant whine, half command and half cringe, was on the upsurge. It annoyed Joe as well as me, and his answer to the order, on the face of it, was quite natural, really.

" 'We'll probably use the land breeze this evening,' said Joe. 'Of course, we may decide not to. Your bay is so pretty. We like to look at it.'

" 'Yes,' I added, picking up his cue. 'You know how we yachtsmen are, passionate lovers of scenery. Why, we may decide to stay a week.'

"Of course we were only trying to get a rise out of the Reverend Poole, but he had absolutely no sense of humor. Yet he realized that we disliked him quite as much as he did us. His eyes blazed with sudden rage, and he half-lifted one hand, as though to curse us. But another expression crossed his face first, and the mask dropped again. He must have suddenly realized that he didn't have a pair of his co-religionists to deal with.

"Without another word, he turned on his heel and left, leaving us sitting in our rowboat staring at one another.

"We got the water, bread and fruit out, and I rowed back and left the empty oil drum on the dock. The town still lay as quiet as ever in the sun, and no breeze disturbed the few coco palms. From the pier, I could see no sign of any movement further in, and the harbor was like a mirror, on the reflection of which our schooner and the small, anchored fishing boats hung motionless in the heat.

"Back aboard again, I conferred with Joe, and then we told the two crewmen we would leave on the evening land breeze. The harbor was deep enough so that tide made no difference. We could have used our engine, of course, but we hated to do so when sails would do the work. Aside from disliking engines, as all who sail for pleasure do, we always thought of emergencies, when the fuel might be desperately needed.

"Oswald and Maxton brightened up when we said we were going, and had we left right then, I'm sure they would have offered to row, or swim, for that matter. Their dislike of Soldier Key had never been plainer.

"The afternoon drifted on, and again the tropical night came quickly, with no real evening. But there was no wind. The expected land breeze simply didn't appear. When this happens, one can usually expect it to come around midnight or a little after in these waters, although I have no idea why. We'd had it happen before however, so we waited. Since we had anchor lights on, we were perfectly visible from shore, but tonight no lights at all showed there. There was no moon, but brilliant starlight, and we could see the outline of the shore and the loom of the buildings behind, as silent as ever.

"We decided to leave one man awake to look for wind, and the rest would turn in all standing, that is, dressed, not that we wore much but shorts. We could raise sail in no time. Oswald said he was not sleepy, and so he got the job.

"I don't know why I should have wakened at midnight. There was still no wind, and we had all been sleeping on deck. I looked at my watch, cast my eye along the deck to Maxton's and Joe's sleeping forms and then went aft to find Oswald. He wasn't there, so I looked forward again. No sign of him, and the starlight was clear enough to see from bow to stern. There was no use waking the others on a false alarm. I got up and dropped into the cabin, gave it a quick once-over, and then came out of the forward hatch and went quickly aft to the stern. No Oswald.

"I woke the others quietly, and explained the situation in a few words. From the moment I spoke, none of us had any doubt as to what had happened. Oswald had never left voluntarily. Someone, or something, with human motivation, had plucked him off the schooner as easily as you gaff a fish and even more quietly, and the purpose and the

strength had come from the silent town, from Soldier Key.

"We discovered afterwards that it had been easy for them. Several swimmers approached as silently as sharks and one of them had clipped Oswald over the head with a club as he sat with his back to the rail. Then, without a sound, he had been lowered into the bay and towed back to shore. Why they left the rest of us I shall never know, but I suspect that they simply had got cold feet. Or perhaps Poole thought we'd be reluctant to report our loss. By the time we got back with help, he could always plead ignorance and say that we had done the poor chap in ourselves. He of course would have this whole island to back him up. As a second purpose, I think he wanted us out of there and this was perhaps a last warning. Well, if that were so, he had made a mistake.

"Without anyone's having to speak, all three of us went below and began to gather weapons. I took the big Colt automatic pistol, because it was my own, Joe the .30-30 carbine and Maxton simply tucked his cane knife, a big machete, without which most West Indians feel undressed, in his belt. Then we collected ammunition and went aft to our dinghy. I hauled the painter in without even looking until the cut end came into my hand! I had not noticed its absence on my earlier check, but the Key men had cut it adrift.

"However, this actually didn't put us back a bit. Still without speaking, but all three purposeful, we began to rig a float for the weapons out of small line and four life preservers. We had it done and ready to move in less than two minutes and were about to slip over the side when Maxton suddenly caught us by the arms and put a hand to his ear.

"As we listened in the quiet dark, a noise, almost a vibration, began to come over the water. It was a sound we couldn't identify, a strange sort of muffled rustling or shuffling sound, and Joe and I looked at each other in the starlight, absolutely baffled. Maxton whispered in our ears.

" 'Dot is feet. Dey move somewheah.'

"Of course he was quite right. We were listening to the whole town on the move, the rustle of hundreds of feet scuffing through the coral dust of the streets. Where they were going we didn't know, but we began to drop into the water, because this silent march almost certainly meant no good to Oswald. We all three knew *that,* somehow. I

took the lead, carrying the pistol out of the water, so that we should be armed upon landing. Behind me, Joe and Maxton swam, pushing the little raft with the rifle, the spare ammo, our shoes, and two canteens. Joe had added something else, but I didn't find that out until later.

"I swam for the edge of town way over on the left, well away from the dock or the boats, since I had to assume that if they had posted a sentry he would be placed at that point. It apparently was quite unnecessary, but we had to try to outguess them at every point, and we still thought these people rational. I tried not to think of sharks, which I dislike.

"As we swam, I listened for the sound of footsteps, but it had died away, and this lent new urgency to our efforts. In a very short time, my feet grated on the coral beach, and keeping the pistol poised, I waded ashore, the other two behind me. Joe had the rifle at ready now, and Maxton had drawn his machete.

"There was no sign of movement. We had landed just on the outer edge of town, the last house looming about two hundred feet to our right. Not a sound broke the silence but faint insect humming and the splash of ripples breaking on the narrow beach.

"After listening a minute, we put on our shoes, then divided the ammunition and the canteens. I saw Joe stick something else in his belt, but I was concentrating so hard on listening that it really didn't register.

"We placed the life preservers above the high-water mark under a bush and moved into the town, guns at ready. If the town were quiet by day, it was dead that night. This was a town presumably inhabited by living people, but not a murmur of life came from any of the shuttered houses. At each corner, we stopped and listened, but we could hear nothing. Nothing human, that is. Twice I almost fired at rustling shadows and faint clanking noises, only to realize that it was only the hideous crabs from which the island took its name.

"The church was our goal, by unspoken agreement, but when we reached the square, it loomed silent and unlit in front of us. The central door was wide open, and we could hear no movement from the black interior. Wherever the people were, it was not there.

"Moving on, we struck a broader street, one which led

away from the water inland. As we paused in the shadow of a tamarind tree, Maxton suddenly held up a hand and dropped to his knees. I couldn't make out what he was doing, but he stood up in a second.

" 'This dust has been kicked up wery recent. I think the people come this way, many people.'

"I couldn't smell anything, but Joe and I knew we didn't have his perceptions, and we had no other clues anyway. Besides, we had heard the marching feet, and they had gone somewhere, and then there was the singing of the previous night, too.

"Keeping on the edge of the road, we went inland, walking quickly, but very much on the alert. The road left the town, which wasn't too big, remember, after about two hundred yards and cut straight into the scrub, in the direction of the center of the island, as near as we could make out. At about fifteen minutes walk from the town, we learned that Maxton was right. We were deep in the shadowy scrub now, not a jungle, but the thick, low thorn bush of most West Indian islands. The road still ran straight and smooth ahead of us, a dim, white ribbon under the stars. Only insect noises broke the silence.

"Suddenly, we all halted. Not far off, a half mile at a guess, a sound had erupted into the night. We had heard it before, not so loud, on the previous night and recognized it at once for the mass chorus of human voices in a chant. It came from ahead of us and to one side, the left.

"Our pace quickened to a trot, and as we ran we listened, trying to pinpoint the noise. It was some sort of service, because we could hear the sound die into silence and then start again. As we drew closer to the source, we began to hear the single voice which led the chant, high and faint, and then the muffled roar that followed from the congregation.

"It was only the voices that saved us from missing the path. The trees had increased in height, and shadowed the road a good deal, so that we should have overshot the left fork if we hadn't been watching for it. Even then, Maxton was the only one to spot it, and he suddenly signaled us to turn into what looked like a dense bush. Following him, we broke through a screen of vegetation, which gave way so easily that we realized that it must have been dragged there after cutting. And there was a road again, narrower

but still plain and well-trodden. Some old habit of caution must have led them so to mask their path. We now moved at an increased speed.

"Ahead of us, the voices swelled in another chant, but we could not as yet distinguish words. The single voice was silent. As the noise increased, so did our caution, and we slowed our pace, since we had no wish to burst unexpectedly into the middle of some gathering of goodness knows what.

"All at once, we could see light ahead through the trees, a flickering, reddish glow which lit the path far better than the dim starlight. We eased down to a slow walk and advanced cautiously.

"The light grew continually stronger as we went on, reflected back from our faces and the boles and leaves of the thorn bushes and palmettoes. The sound of voices was almost deafening now, and we were searching so hard for a sight of a guard or sentry, we paid no attention to the words, which were blurred in any case.

The trees suddenly thinned before us, and stooping low, the three of us crawled abreast of their edge and peered into the open, keeping well behind the screening branches, and off the road, which suddenly appeared to vanish. When we reached the last line of bushes, it was easy to see why. We were gazing down into an immense pit.

"We were on one edge of an enormous hole in the ground, quite round and perhaps seventy feet deep. It was rimmed with greyish limestone rock, level at the edges, to which point the bushes grew, all around.

"At our feet, the path, now very narrow, wound down a steep slope to the smooth floor of white sand below. One side of the natural amphitheatre, for such it was, was banked up into lines of crude seats, sloping to the open floor of packed sand. The width of the whole place must have been at least two hundred yards in diameter, if not more.

"The entire population of Soldier Key, now silent, was sitting on the banked seats of this private arena, gazing at the scene before them with rapt attention. We had an excellent view of them, which made up in completeness for what we had missed earlier. Every man, woman and child, perhaps two hundred or more, was stark naked, clothed only in garlands of flowers and flower necklaces. Every single

living soul on the island must have been there, and not a sound came from even the smallest baby at its mother's breast, or the oldest crone. I could see no colored people, but only whites. Apparently the creed of the New Revelation was not valid for any but Caucasians.

"Inching forward to get a better look, we were able to see what held their attention. Two great bonfires burned on the floor of the pit, and between them Brother Poole, the Shepherd of his people, was moving about. As naked as his flock, his scrawny white body gleaming as if oiled, he was capering in a strange way around three objects on the sand, between the fires.

"In the center, golden in the firelight, lay the immense shell we had seen earlier in the workshed in town. No holes now marred its perfection, and it lay gleaming and wonderful on one of its sides, the opening facing us as we watched.

"On either side of the shell, dwarfed by its bulk, were two bound human bodies! One was Oswald. He was not only bound but gagged. As far away as we were, we could see his eyes roll and the muscles under his dark skin strain as he tried to break his bonds. The other figure was that of a white girl, perhaps fifteen or so from her build. She lay silent and unmoving, but I could see that her eyes were open. Around the three, the shell and the bodies, Brother Poole danced and waved his hands, as if in some maniac's parody of a benediction. Although he was otherwise quite nude, he wore a strange necklace, of some hard, purplish objects, which bounded and shook as he moved. So silent were the people that even as high as we were lying, I could hear the click and rattle of them. The sound jogged my memory, until I suddenly realized why it was familiar. He was wearing a necklace of hermit crab claws and the noise was just as if some of them were scuttling about.

"I stated that the pit was circular. The floor was level, sloping up on one side to the packed earth seats of the people, and on the other side to the limestone walls. Nothing grew on these smooth walls, excepting only in one place, directly opposite the seats, where dense canopies of some creeper hung down, half obscuring a great triangular opening or cleft in the rock, about twenty feet in height and at least that wide near the base. Pressed against the cliff to one side of this hole, was a massive, now open door

or gate, made of bulky timbers in a heavy frame. It was hung on great iron hinges driven into the rock. Could this be the Gate of which Poole claimed to be the Opener, I wondered? In front of the hole, and a little to one side, there was a still pool of water, probably a spring. Directly across from us, a path similar to that below us wound up the cliff face and vanished into the dark fringe of foliage at the top.

"Brother Poole suddenly ceased his capering and raised both hands. He was now facing the dark opening across the arena, and to this he addressed his invocation. I cannot at this date give it word for word, but roughly it went rather like this:

> 'Oh, Lord of Majesty, Incarnation of Survival, Manifestation of Nature and its struggle, Devourer of Sin and the Flesh, have mercy upon us.'

"Behind him a roar arose as the crowd repeated the last line, '. . . have mercy upon us.' He continued:

> 'Have mercy, Oh Thou, Shelled in Adamant. Of Thy mercy, accept our offerings, a new home for Thy greatness, new life for Thy limbs, new viands for Thy table. Enter now upon Thy new home and partake of Thine offerings.'

"This rather unpleasant parody of a communion service seemed extraordinarily unreal, it was so fantastic.

"In the red light, Poole's gaunt face, now drooling slightly, assumed an air of repellent majesty. Much as he disgusted me, the creature did have a certain hypnotic power at that moment. He believed in what he was doing. Behind his back, his audience sat rapt and expectant, all of them, old and young, leaning forward in the same tense pause of anticipation. As he ceased to speak, time almost seemed to stop, and he held his hands out, facing the opening in the rock wall.

"Joe broke the spell, pushing the rifle at me and snatching the Colt from my limp hand.

" 'Stay here and cover us,' he hissed. 'Maxton and I are going down.'

"The two of them moved like cats, breaking from the

scrub and racing down the path below me with driving steps. My brain cleared and I aimed the loaded rifle at Poole. If anybody went, he certainly would be the first.

"Maxton and Joe were on the sandy floor of the pit before anyone even noticed them. Joe had a clasp knife in one hand and the pistol in the other, and he flashed behind Poole's back and stopped to cut the girl's bonds. Behind him, Maxton was doing the same for Oswald with the edge of his machete.

"A chorus of screams from the crowd announced that not all of them were in a trance, but none of them moved. I refocussed on Poole, but he still faced the cave, apparently lost to the actual world, entranced in an ecstasy of religion.

"Then, I caught a flicker of movement from the corner of my right eye and risked a glance in that direction. What I saw made my rifle fall with a thud to the earth.

"Framed in the entrance to the cleft was Horror incarnate. Poised on giant stalked legs, monstrous, incredible, gleaming in the firelight, stood the Soldier of Soldier Key, the Living God of Brother Poole and his awful church.

"The giant purple and orange claws, the larger of the two at least six feet long, were held in front of the mass of clicking, grinding mouth parts. From the stalked eyes held out ten feet above the ground, to the great, red-pointed legs, jointed and barbed with three-inch spines, there stood complete and perfect a hermit crab that must have weighed not less than a thousand pounds.

"As it moved slowly forward from the mouth of its private cave, the dragging shell which covered its soft body and rear end became visible, and I saw the true reason for the labor of the whole island. It, the shell, was made of tortoise shell, still recognizable although dirty and scarred, and although enormous, it was obviously too small. The soft body bulging from the opening must have desperately needed more room. The purpose of the new and larger shell, which still lay sparkling on the sand, was now clear. The god was to have a new house.

"As all this flashed through my mind, I recovered my wits and snatched up the rifle again. It was as well I did, because now things were starting to break down on the pit floor.

"Emerging from his trance, Poole had turned around

and had seen before his dumbfounded eyes his sacrifices no longer neatly tied up but actually escaping. Joe had the limp body of the girl over one shoulder, and Maxton was aiding Oswald to follow in the direction of the foot of the nearer path, just beneath my own position.

"With a shriek, Poole summoned his nude worshippers to the assault. 'Blasphemy! Slay the desecrators of the shrine! Kill them, in the sight of the Living God!'

"With a roar, the whole mob poured off its earth benches and rushed for the three figures which ran slowly across the sand. Poole stood where he was, his hand raised in a curse, his face now wholly evil, working with madness in the firelight. Behind him some few yards, that unbelievable crustacean had paused, immobile, like a bizarre statue, motionless save for the moving, twitching mouth parts.

"I think to this day we would have been dead men, but for two factors. Joe, heavily burdened, Maxton and Oswald were still thirty feet from the path's entrance. Behind them, the horde of frantic, raving islanders were no more than a hundred paces. I had begun to shoot, forgetting Poole, firing at the foremost men instead, and hitting at once, but it did no real good. Those behind simply leapt the prostrate bodies and came on. One rifle simply could not stop this gibbering, animal horde. But something else could.

"Above the howling of the pack and the bark of my rifle rang out a scream so awful and agonized that I can still hear it in my sleep. No one could have ignored that dreadful cry. With three exceptions, everyone halted to see the cause.

"Brother Poole had momentarily forgotten his god, but his god had not forgotten him. As he stood there launching curses and hellfire, the monster, irritated no doubt by all the noise and movement, had come from behind and now clutched him in its titanic, larger claw, as firmly as its little brothers would hold a grasshopper. Suddenly, with no apparent effort, it simply closed the claw, and before our eyes, the two halves of the screaming Shepherd of the Island fell to the sand in a fountain of blood.

"The three below, however, had not halted nor seen this sight, but were now steadily coming up the path. I resumed my ineffective rifle practice, for with fresh screams

of rage, the mob of worshippers surged forward again, and began to gain. But Joe changed that.

"He halted and allowed Oswald and Maxton to run past. Dumping the girl, who had never moved at all, to the ground, he reached for his belt and pulled out a bulky metallic object which I now saw for the first time in the firelight. It was the schooner's flare pistol.

"Aiming at the center of the oncoming crowd, he fired straight into them, and then the flare exploded somewhere in the mass in a blast of white incandescence. At the same instant, I had a stroke of genius, and almost without thinking, I shifted my sights and squeezed off a shot at that incredible horror, the Soldier, aiming directly for the center of the head, and just over the grinding mouth parts.

"In the twin lights of the flare and the still-blazing fires, I caught a glimpse of Hell. Blackened figures writhed in agony on the ground, and others, their hair ablaze, ran aimlessly about, shrieking in pain and fright. But this was not all. My bullet must have wounded the soldier in its tenderest parts. Raising its great shell off the ground and snapping its giant claws, it rushed at the nearest humans in a frenzy, not gripping and holding, but instead slashing and flailing about with its colossal pincers. That a creature of its bulk could move with such speed was a revelation to me, of an unsought kind. I remember seeing a screaming child crushed flat by a great leg.

"I was no longer firing, but simply watching the base of the path with one eye and the terrible scene below with the other. In only a few seconds, Maxton's and Oswald's heads appeared just below me, as they climbed panting from the inferno below.

"A little behind them came Joe, unloading as he ran and checking his backtrail as he paused at the bend in the path. The girl was gone.

"I rose and covered the path behind them as they reached level ground. 'That lunatic girl got up and ran back into the crowd,' gasped Joe. 'To hell with her. Let's get out of here.'

"With me to the rear covering the retreat, we stumbled off down the track to the main road. In a minute the edge of the cliff was lost to view, and only the red glow on the leaves and the appalling sounds remained to tell us of what

we had left behind. Breathless with shock and fright, we ran on at our best speed under the stars and trees until we reached the road and only a far-off wailing came to our ears.

"As we ran, I tried to make some sense out of what I had seen. In only a few moments, a maze of jumbled thoughts poured through me. How had that incredible thing been grown? How long had it lived? How many people had died to feed it? As the sound of anguished voices died away, my brain simply gave up, and I devoted myself to breathing and moving. Thinking back now, I believe that somehow, through their insane religion, the islanders had created a miracle of biology, taking a tiny animal and forcing its size somehow until no natural sea shell would contain it, and then building artificial ones to house its increased growth. But now, of course, no one will ever know the answers.

"There was no pursuit, I may say. The whole population of the island had been in that shambles of a pit, and we simply walked, for we could no longer run, back to the town and along the beach to our piled and tied life preservers. Within an hour of leaving the Amphitheatre of the Crab, we were climbing wearily over the side of the schooner. It took us only a few minutes to start the engine and get in the anchor, and then we were underway. Checking my watch, I found it was 4:30 A.M., although it seemed that a week had gone by.

"At blazing dawn, the island was only a faint blur on the horizon, which soon sank into the sea, leaving us feeling that we had been in a bad dream.

"No, we never called at Dominica. The four of us talked it over and decided not to.

"Look here, you fellows, we had probably killed, at a minimum, twenty or so souls, directly by flare or gunfire, and more still through the agency of the Soldier. By the time any representatives of the law arrived, what evidence would they find in our favor? Whatever governing group or person took over from Poole would have the whole island behind him on it. Who would believe our story! No one.

"No, we did nothing, at least at the time. We sent an anonymous letter to the Colonial Office and a copy to the

Dominican Administrator later on, saying nothing at all about giant crabs, but demanding an inquiry into voodoo murders and local affairs generally. I have never heard that anything came of it, and as I told you earlier, the people were almost wiped out by the hurricane of the following year.

"But I don't eat lobster or crab. It came too close to being the other way round, you see? Anyone care for bridge?"

Williams managed to grunt. We would hear from him later on, no doubt.

If you enjoy the macabre, the unexpected . . . here are gems of death and horror from the world's most unfettered imaginations.

ALFRED HITCHCOCK presents:

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S DEATH BAG
COFFIN CORNER
DOWN BY THE OLD BLOODSTREAM
GAMES KILLERS PLAY
GET ME TO THE WAKE ON TIME
HAPPINESS IS A WARM CORPSE
A HARD DAY AT THE SCAFFOLD
I AM CURIOUS, BLOODY
MORE STORIES FOR LATE AT NIGHT
MORE STORIES NOT FOR THE NERVOUS
MURDERS I FELL IN LOVE WITH
MURDERS ON THE HALF SKULL
NOOSE REPORT
ROLLING GRAVESTONES
SCREAM ALONG WITH ME
SKULL SESSION
STORIES NOT FOR THE NERVOUS
THIS ONE WILL KILL YOU
TWELVE STORIES FOR LATE AT NIGHT
SLAY RIDE

DELL BOOKS 75c

If you cannot obtain copies of these titles from your local bookseller, just send the price (plus 15c per copy for handling and postage) to Dell Books, Post Office Box 1000, Pinebrook, N. J. 07058. No postage or handling charge is required on any order of five or more books.

Biggest dictionary value ever offered in paperback!

The Dell paperback edition of

THE AMERICAN HERITAGE DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

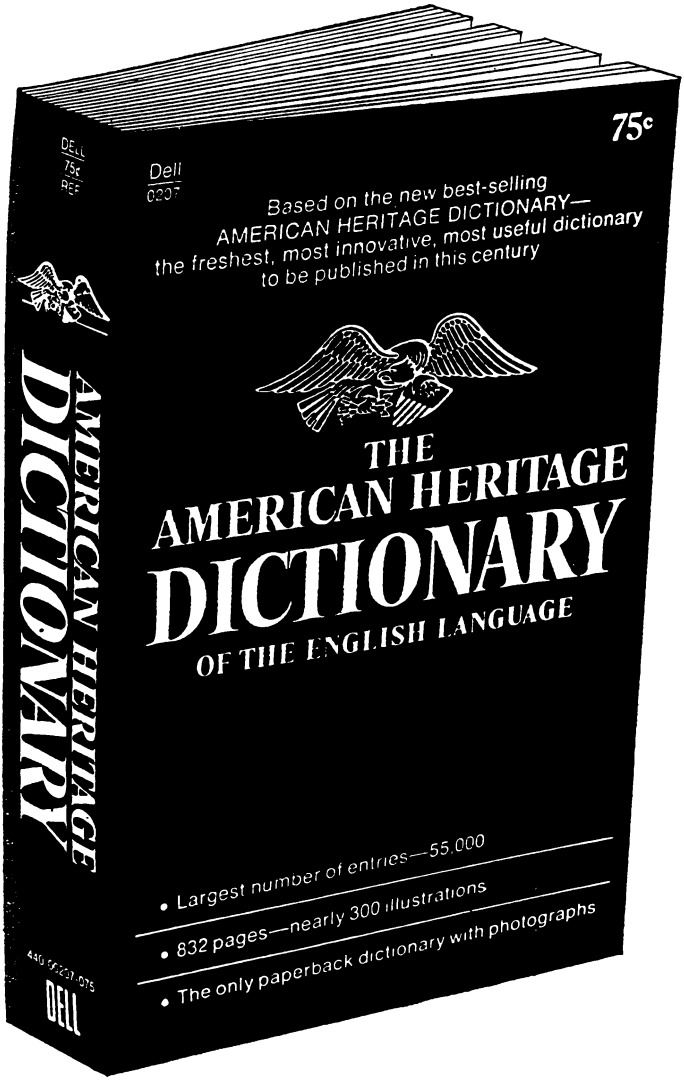
- Largest number of entries—55,000
- 832 pages—nearly 300 illustrations
- The only paperback dictionary with photographs

These special features make this new, modern dictionary clearly superior to any comparable paperback dictionary:

- More entries and more illustrations than any other paperback dictionary
- The first paperback dictionary with photographs
- Words defined in modern-day language that is clear and precise
- Over one hundred notes on usage with more factual information than any comparable paperback dictionary
- Unique appendix of Indo-European roots
- Authoritative definitions of new words from science and technology
- More than one hundred illustrative quotations from Shakespeare to Salinger, Spenser to Sontag
- Hundreds of geographic and biographical entries
- Pictures of all the Presidents of the United States
- Locator maps for all the countries of the world

A DELL BOOK 75c

If you cannot obtain copies of this title from your local bookseller, just send the price (plus 15c per copy for handling and postage) to Dell Books, Post Office Box 1000, Pinebrook, N. J. 07058. No postage or handling charge is required on any order of five or more books.


75¢
DELL
75¢
REF
Dell
0207
Based on the new best-selling
AMERICAN HERITAGE DICTIONARY—
the freshest, most innovative, most useful dictionary
to be published in this century
THE
AMERICAN HERITAGE
DICTIONARY
OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE
• Largest number of entries—55,000
• 832 pages—nearly 300 illustrations
• The only paperback dictionary with photographs
AMERICAN HERITAGE
DICTIONARY
DELL

HOW MANY OF THESE DELL BESTSELLERS HAVE YOU READ?

1.	**SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE** by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.	95c
2.	**RICH MAN, POOR MAN** by Irwin Shaw	$1.50
3.	**A WHITE HOUSE DIARY** by Lady Bird Johnson	$1.95
4.	**THE SENSUOUS WOMAN** by "J"	$1.25
5.	**SUCH GOOD FRIENDS** by Lois Gould	$1.25
6.	**SUMMER OF '42** by Herman Raucher	$1.25
7.	**THE DEVIL'S LIEUTENANT** by M. Fagyas	$1.25
8.	**THE HUMAN ZOO** by Desmond Morris	$1.25
9.	**VECTOR** by Henry Sutton	$1.25
10.	**DELIVERANCE** by James Dickey	$1.25
11.	**THE AMERICAN HERITAGE DICTIONARY**	75c
12.	**THE DOCTOR'S QUICK WEIGHT LOSS DIET** by Irwin Maxwell Stillman, M.D., and Samm Sinclair Baker	95c
13.	**HOW TO TALK WITH PRACTICALLY ANYBODY ABOUT PRACTICALLY ANYTHING** by Barbara Walters	$1.25
14.	**SURROGATE WIFE** by Valerie X. Scott as told to Herbert d'H. Lee	$1.25
15.	**THE BODY BROKERS** by Robert Eaton	$1.25

If you cannot obtain copies of these titles from your local bookseller, just send the price (plus 15c per copy for handling and postage) to Dell Books, Post Office Box 1000, Pinebrook, N. J. 07058. No postage or handling charge is required on any order of five or more books.

26 Weeks on the New York Times Bestseller List!
"Terrifying, suspenseful, mind shattering."
Washington Post

DELIVERANCE

by James Dickey

This novel, by one of America's finest poets, is a tale of violent adventure and inner discovery. Four men embark on a canoe trip down a wild section of a river in the heartland of today's South. When two of the group are attacked viciously and perversely by mountaineers, a mildly adventurous canoe trip explodes into a gruesome nightmare of horror and murder.

"The limit of dramatic tension . . . a novel that will curl your toes!" *The New York Times*

Soon to be a major movie.

A DELL BOOK $1.25

If you cannot obtain copies of this title from your local bookseller, just send the price (plus 15c per copy for handling and postage) to Dell Books, Post Office Box 1000, Pinebrook, N. J. 07058. No postage or handling charge is required on any order of five or more books.

ALFIE WATCHES THE CLOCK

People often are surprised to see Alfred Hitchcock staring for hours at a clock with a most peculiar smile on his face. No, Alfie has not gone cuckoo. He's merely contemplating the inspiring idea that every second there's another violent crime somewhere. Alfie has the work he loves cut out for him as he continues on his quest to bring you the absolute tops in macabre mystery. And once again he's bagged his limit of deadly delights in a dazzling collection of tales by such masters of menace as:

Jack Ritchie
Melville Davisson Post
Craig Rice • Joe Gores
John Keefauver • Sax Rohmer
Sterling E. Lanier • Mike Marmer
John D. MacDonald • Andrew Benedict
Michael Zuroy • Lawrence Block • M. S. Waddell
Gerald Kersh • Harold Q. Masur • David Alexander