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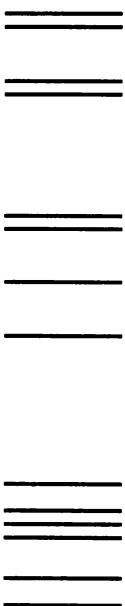
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Hmm, we wonder why Alfie is grinning that way. . . .

**THIS ONE  
WILL  
KILL YOU**





# **THIS ONE WILL KILL YOU**

**Alfred Hitchcock, Editor**

**A DELL BOOK**

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## INTRODUCTION

Visiting a friend recently, I found him unloading the contents of a number of ice cube trays onto a couch. He was preparing for a nap, he told me. In all seriousness he insisted that he intended to spend the next hour snuggled up with the frozen water.

Further interrogation revealed that he had not, as first suspected, suddenly gone woolly-headed. Rather, he had heard about a process for quick-freezing the immediately deceased, then defrosting them later, after the scientists solve the problem of bringing the dead back to life. My friend, who planned in time to take advantage of the process, was simply getting in some practice at sleeping in a cold, wet bed.

I do not doubt that the scientists will someday develop a means for reviving the dead. After all, they've produced a reasonably palatable substitute for whipped cream, so nothing, logically, should be beyond their capabilities. But is it wise to even consider bringing back the departed? Think about it. Do *you* really *want* to be brought back? Adjusting to the changed times, say fifty or a hundred years from now, might be too difficult, too much of a shock, to be worth the effort. Once revived, you might find yourself wishing you were dead.

It's a certainty, for one thing, that prices will be a great deal higher. Would you be surprised to discover fifty years from today that bread had gone up to fifteen dollars a loaf? When price rises like that occur gradually, we take them fairly much in stride. But

how would you react if you woke up tomorrow to find that the cost of living had skyrocketed that high? You'd probably drop over dead. And the effect, after lying quick-frozen for fifty to a hundred years would probably be the same. So why bother?

Even if you survived the shock of such a change, however, there would still be the practical aspects with which to deal. How would you support yourself? You couldn't hire out as a freak. Thawed-out bodies would be all over the place, a common, ordinary phenomenon. You'd be unemployed and you wouldn't have had a day's work in from fifty to a hundred years. No income at all in that time. The chances are that you'd wake up not only penniless but deep in debt. Who would have been keeping up the mortgage payments while you were snoozing away in the crypt? The tooth fairy?

Assume, though, that you're the determined sort. Being without ready cash and over your head in debt doesn't faze you. You'll go back to work, you think, and be on your feet, financially as well as literally, in no time. I wonder. By then, there probably won't be any openings in your line of work. Your line of work probably won't be being done anymore. There simply won't be any demand for elephant trainers, jockeys, linebackers and professional sword swallowers. Computers will be doing that kind of thing by then.

You may find, too, that the physical form that was popular when you passed on has become obsolete. It stands to reason that not all the scientists will have been working on reviving the dead. Some will have turned their talents to reshaping the human body, adapting it to changing conditions, modernizing it.

Since computers will be handling all the labor, mental and physical, and only a single finger is needed to punch a computer's button, humans, by then, will undoubtedly have done away with the other nine



digits. But, there you'll be, still with all ten, standing out like a sore thumb.

Noses, if not done away with altogether, will at least be in a safer place, I'm sure. Where they are now, they're constantly getting punched or sunburned or pinched. The scientists will probably put them somewhere out of the way, where they'll be safe. Behind an ear, perhaps. Or under an arm. Possibly even in a tiny pillbox, so that the nose can be quickly covered while passing through certain areas of New Jersey. But, be that as it may, you, brought back from the dead, will still have your nose in the same old place. And what self-respecting young lady of that future age, with her nose in her pillbox, will want to be seen in public with you?

The point of all this, obviously, is that there are probably times when it is best to let sleeping bodies, like sleeping dogs, lie. So, if any of the bodies in the stories that follow attempt to get up and wander off the pages, please do them a favor. Warn them that they will probably regret it.

—ALFRED HITCHCOCK



## **SIX SKINNY COFFINS**

Jonathan Craig

I guess even the toughest of us has some kind of weakness—something he won't admit to anybody else, and maybe not even to himself. With me, it's sentiment, especially when it comes to love; sad love. I'm a sucker for a sad love story. They break me up completely.

You take what happened to Denver Eddie and Sweet Alice, for instance. That story gave me the glooms for a week. What's worse, it cost me a couple hundred bucks, maybe more. I'll never forget the night I heard it. I'd like to, but I can't.

I was on my way to the regular weekly get-together of the exiles' club. We call it that, anyway. There are about two dozen of us here in Rio, I guess, and we're all what you might call expatriates. We like Brazil fine, you understand, but most of us are here for the sake of our health. I mean, it's kind of unhealthy in Leavenworth and Sing Sing and places like that, and even healthier in gas chambers and electric chairs, which is where some of us would have gone if we had stayed obvious. Anyhow, we've formed a kind of club, and once a week we get together at a private dining room in a hotel on Copacabana Beach. Mostly we just have a few drinks and swap yarns about the days when we were all back in the States.

We've got some fine boys in our little exiles' club, and some fine women too. People like Fig Lip and Johnny the Knock and Charley One and Charley Two, and Millie from Milwaukee and Slow Sue, and Willie the Weep and Seldom Seen and the Indian and

several others. Me they call the Scholar, because I finished almost two years at Hanley Miller High School.

Well, as I said, I was on my way to one of our little get-togethers. It wasn't quite dark yet, and I was just ambling along, enjoying the cool of the evening. Then I noticed this woman standing under a street lamp, eyeing me pretty closely, as if she were sizing me up. She was about sixty, I guessed, but sixty or not, I never saw a more beautiful woman in my life. At first I figured it must be the fading light, but when I got close I saw that it wasn't. She was just plain beautiful.

"Excuse me, young man," she said as I drew close. "May I speak to you a moment?" She had a beautiful voice, too—like a young woman's voice—so soft and light.

"Yes, ma'am?" I said, and waited.

"I have to trust someone with something very important," she said. Her eyes were sheened, as if she had been crying. "You have a good face. I think I can trust you. Would you do a lady a favor?"

"It depends," I said.

"It'll take you only a minute. Please say yes."

"What's the favor?" I asked.

She nodded toward a house across the street. "Someone very dear to me is over there," she said. "He's—dead. He'll be buried in the morning." She paused. "He's lying in state. The casket's open, and—and I want you to put something in it."

"You mean you want something to be buried with the body?"

"Yes. It's something that belongs to him." Her voice had begun to tremble a little. "I know how strange all this must sound to you, but it just must be buried with him. It just must be."

"Why not put it there yourself?"

"I tried, when—when I said good-bye to him."

"Said good-bye?"

"When I looked at him for the last time, just a few minutes ago. But I have arthritis. I couldn't move my arm well enough to do it."

"I see." This noncommittally.

"Please say you'll do it for me. I'll thank you all the days of my life."

"It's that important, is it?"

"It's the most important thing in the world to me. Please, *please* say you will," she begged pitifully.

"Just put it in the casket? That's all?"

"Yes. And make sure it's far enough down so that no one else will be able to see it and take it out again."

"What if somebody sees me do it? There might be trouble."

"There's no one sitting with the body. There's hardly even been anyone in there to see it. I've been the only one to go in or out in the last twenty minutes."

"What is it you want me to put in there?"

Her eyes lighted up, but there were tears in them too. "You'll do it, then?" she said, reaching into her purse. "Oh, bless you!"

"I'm still thinking about it," I said. For some reason, I was beginning to feel a little nervous.

She took a small, round, metal object from her purse and stood gazing at it for a long moment, as if she were reluctant to give it up. Then she held it out to me quickly, her eyes averted.

"Here," she said. "And please—be sure it's down in the casket far enough not to be seen."

I turned the object over in my fingers. In the failing light it looked like silver. But it was too heavy for silver—a round, thin case about the size of a lady's compact, but much thinner, and with a beveled edge that seemed to be sealed all the way around.

"What is it?" I asked.

She just looked at me, smiling, and then compressed her lips, as if she were trying very hard not to cry.

I shrugged. "All right," I said, slipping the case—if that's what it was—into my pocket. "I'll put it in the casket for you."

"Bless you," she said.

"No trouble at all," I said, and turned to cross the street toward the house she had indicated.

She'd been right about there being no one sitting with the body. The shabby living room was empty, with the only light coming from half a dozen big candles spaced around the casket. I got the casket between myself and the front window, in case the woman was watching me from across the street, and took out the metal object she'd given me for a closer look.

It wasn't silver; it was platinum. Even sold to a fence for a quarter of its worth—which is what someone in my position would have to do—it would bring *at least* two hundred dollars.

I leaned over the casket and looked down at the face of the dead man. He'd been about sixty-five or so, and from the looks of him, every one of those years had been a rugged one. There were a couple of ancient scars on his right cheek, and at some time or other in his life someone had carved off his left ear, flush against his head.

I brought the platinum case up so that it glinted in the candlelight a moment, for the benefit of the woman who might be watching from across the street, and then lowered my arm into the casket. When I withdrew my arm, I'd palmed the case, and a moment later I dropped it back into my pocket.

As they say, two hundred dollars is two hundred dollars.

When I came out on the street again, the woman was nowhere in sight. I turned right and resumed my walk toward the hotel and the meeting of the exiles'

club. It had been a fine evening to begin with, and now, of course, it was even finer.

I'd walked about two blocks when a big, open car drew up to the curb and sounded its horn.

It was Gus from Newark, one of the oldest expatriates in Rio. "Get in, Scholar," he said.

I got in beside him and he edged the car out into the traffic again. Gus was once the top arsonist in the U.S.A., one of these big, happy types who's always either laughing or just about to. Tonight, though, he wasn't even smiling.

"What's the matter, Gus?" I asked. "You look a little down in the mouth."

"I'll tell you something, Scholar," he said. "It's a good thing I don't believe in ghosts. Otherwise, I'd swear I just saw one."

"Oh? Where?"

He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Back there," he said. "Damn near made me wreck the car."

"Ghosts'll do that."

"It ain't funny."

"Who was this ghost supposed to be the ghost of?" I asked.

"A girl I knew forty years ago," Gus said. "I was just a punk then, just coming up in the rackets." He shook his head. "But it couldn't be. Hell, she hasn't been heard from in forty years."

"Who hasn't? Who're you talking about, Gus?"

"Sweet Alice. The most gorgeous redhead ever seen on the face of this earth."

"And you thought you saw her back there?"

"Yeah. Just like she'd look now, if she was still alive. Damn near as old as me, but still beautiful. I tell you, Scholar, it gave me a hell of a jolt. I ain't over it yet."

"Why didn't you stop the car and see for sure?"

"You think I didn't? But by the time I could find a place to park and get back to where I'd seen her, she

was gone. She must've got in a cab or something."

Gus was looking glummer by the second, and every once in a while a corner of his mouth would twitch, the way a man's will when he's doing a lot of thinking about something he'd rather not think about.

Neither of us said anything more until we'd reached the hotel and gone up to the private dining room where we hold our meetings. It's kind of an unusual room, because it's circular and it has this big round table in it. All the others were already there—Johnny the Knock and both the Charleys and Fig Lip and Slow Sue and Millie from Milwaukee and the Indian and Seldom Seen and Three Time George and all the rest. It was such a big turnout that some of the others had to crowd together a bit so that Gus and I could squeeze in.

It wasn't long before people began to notice how down in the mouth Gus looked.

"What's the long face for, Gus?" Frankie the Feeb called from the other side of the table. "You look all shook up—like maybe you just found out you burned down the wrong warehouse."

"If you was me, you'd look shook up, too," Gus said, and he went on to tell everybody at the table about Sweet Alice, just about the way he'd told it to me on our way over to the room in the car.

"That Sweet Alice must have been some female, for you to remember her all these years," Charley One said.

"You never saw anybody so gorgeous," Gus said. "Every man that met her fell in love with her. I even did, myself. She was what you call a fem—a fem . . ."

"Femme fatale," I said.

"Yeah," Gus said. "Femme fatale. That's what she was, all right—fatal. And there are five good men, dead forty years, to prove it. In fact, except for a lucky fluke, I'd've been dead right along with them." He shook his head sadly. "And all because of love.



It's a dangerous thing, this love. All I got to say is, don't mess with it. Love is tougher than anybody."

"You mean this girl knocked off five men?" Millie from Milwaukee asked, amazed. "She killed five guys, and damn near killed you, too?"

"No, no," Gus said. "She didn't do it herself. Not personally. I meant she was the cause of it. Her, and the way everybody fell in love with her."

"And you say she hasn't been seen or heard from for forty years?" Slow Sue asked.

"That's right," Gus said. "And neither has Denver Eddie."

"Denver Eddie?" Fig Lip said. "I never heard of no Denver Eddie."

"It was all long before your time," Gus said. "Forty years ago ain't just yesterday, you know. This Denver Eddie was a hit man and a bomb specialist. Usually he'd work both together, if you know what I mean. A real handsome young guy, and never once got hit with this love, until he come up against Sweet Alice."

"Was he one of the guys that got killed?" Silent Knight asked.

"No," Gus said. "But maybe he'd of been better off if he had been."

"I never heard anything so romantic in my life," Millie from Milwaukee said. "Imagine! Five guys knocked off, and all out of love for the same girl!"

"I had a guy jump off a bridge on account of me once," Betty C. said. "He lived through it, though."

"Shut up, Betty C.," Millie said. "Gus, this Sweet Alice is somebody I've got to hear about."

"You said it," Slow Sue said. "Let's have the story, Gus."

For a while, Gus just sat there, sort of frowning to himself, as if he couldn't decide whether he wanted to tell it or not. Then he shrugged a little, took a deep breath, and began.

"Not many of you have got any idea of how rough

it was forty years ago," he said. "Especially in Chicago. I was with the Monk Homma gang then. There was six of us, including Monk, and for a small outfit we made out real good, considering the competition."

"It's this Sweet Alice we want to know about, Gus," Millie said.

"Well, she was Monk Homma's girl friend. He had her set up in this real posh apartment and all, and if he spent a dime on her he spent a grand a week. He had this love, Monk did." He sighed. "And so what happens one day but that Monk finds out she ain't true. He went to her apartment one afternoon when she was away visiting her sister in Detroit, see, and he found this tie clip on the floor in the bedroom. It was one of half a dozen he'd had made up special, as gifts for the boys in his gang and himself. He had a real sense of humor, Monk did. He had them made out of heavy gold wire, in the outline of long, narrow coffins. *Skinny* coffins, we called them. And so, when he found this one in Sweet Alice's bedroom, he knew she'd been two-timing him with one of his own boys."

"But he didn't have any idea which one?" the Indian asked.

"No. But he figured a way to find out. He went over to the Western Union office and sent the same telegram to all five of them, signing it 'Alice', and telling each guy she'd just got back from Detroit and wanted him to come to her apartment at once on a matter of life or death. None of us was even supposed to know he was keeping her in an apartment, you see, much less know where the apartment was. So whoever showed up would be the guy that'd been double-timing him with Alice. After he'd sent the telegrams, he went back to the apartment, checked his gun to make sure he had a full load, and sat down to wait to see who would rise to the bait."

"And who did?" Willie the Weep asked.

Gus sighed. "I did," he said. "When I walked in

there and saw Monk with that .38 in his hand, I figured I had maybe another five seconds to live, maybe less."

"How come he didn't kill you?" Charley Two asked.

"He wanted to read me off first," Gus said. "That's all that saved me. He was still at it when the door buzzer went off again. And damn if it wasn't another of the boys in the gang. So then Monk had two guys to read off instead of just one." He paused. "Well, to make a long story short, what happened was that within the next ten minutes every guy in the gang had come to Sweet Alice's apartment. Monk had been expecting to trap one guy with those telegrams, but he'd trapped five."

"Wow!" Millie from Milwaukee said. "What a girl! Two-timing the boss-man with his entire gang! I mean, how romantic can you get? What happened then, Gus?"

"Well, for a while it was just a question of who would be the first to start shooting. Everybody was so mad at everybody else that nobody could hardly talk. Then all at once we stopped being mad at each other and started being mad at Alice. After all, she'd made fools and laughingstocks out of every one of us."

"Men!" Betty C. snorted. "That's just the way their minds work, all right."

"Her doing us that way sort of united us, you might say," Gus said. "We talked it over, once we finally *could* talk, and we decided Sweet Alice had to go. But after we talked it over some more, we figured that spoiling her looks might be even better. That is, you take a beautiful woman like Alice and, say, cut off her ear—well, that's the kind of punishment that lasts a lifetime.

"And that's when we called in Denver Eddie, the good-looking young hit man and bomb specialist I was telling you about. We gave him a contract to go out to Detroit and bring back one of Sweet Alice's ears."

"Good Lord," Slow Sue said. "This is just like some olden-time romance in one of those foreign countries over there in Europe or somewhere."

"Anyhow," Gus went on, "we knew Denver Eddie wouldn't be able to throw in a ringer on us—not that we figured he'd try. Sweet Alice had these tiny little roses tattooed on her earlobes, you see. Red ones, very pretty, and maybe only a quarter of an inch across. They were real works of art. We'd know for sure whether or not it was Alice's ear that Denver Eddie brought back with him to prove he'd filled the contract."

"Did this Denver know Alice at the time?" Millie asked.

"No. He just took off for Detroit with his switchblade and one of those little bombs he always carried with him, just in case somebody wanted to make a spur-of-the-moment contract with him to blow somebody up. After he'd left, Monk and the rest of us ordered a case of booze and went to work trying to forget about this love we'd had for Sweet Alice."

"Oh, that poor girl," Millie said, her eyes bright. "Oh, that poor little thing."

"Well, that's men for you," Betty C. said. "Send a maniac out to cut off a girl's ear, and then sit around getting boozed to the eyes."

"Denver Eddie was in luck when he got to Alice's sister's house," Gus said, "because the sister was away at the time."

Slow Sue leaned forward excitedly. "And then, Gus?"

"He took one look at Sweet Alice, and that was all for Denver Eddie. There he stood, with his switchblade in one pocket and his bomb in the other. Just one look at her, and he was a goner. It just shows what this love can do."

"But he had to cut off her ear anyhow, right?" Seldom Seen said. "A contract is a contract. If he didn't

cut it off, you boys would have hunted him down and killed him, right?"

Gus nodded. "That's right," he said. "But he just couldn't do it. And he wasn't the only one that had the love. It was the same way with Sweet Alice. All it took with *her* was one look, too—love at first sight, just like it was with Denver."

A waiter came into the dining room with a tray of drinks, and I grabbed off what looked like a double Scotch. I figured I'd need it, because Gus's tale was beginning to show signs of turning into one of the saddest love stories of all time. I said to begin with how it is with me and and sentiment, and how I'm such a sucker for a sad love story. It's a terrible weakness; I wish I weren't that way, but I just can't help it. I took a big gulp of the Scotch, and then another.

"What a spot to be in," Silent Knight said, after the waiter had left. "What'd Denver do? What'd *Alice* do?"

"They went in and sat down and talked about it," Gus said. "Denver told her why he was there, and how he was just as good as dead, because if he didn't come back with her ear, we'd run him down and kill him. He wasn't about to cut her ear off, you understand; he just wanted her to know the facts. And then Alice, who's got all this sudden love for Denver, says to go ahead and cut it off, she doesn't want him to get killed."

"What beautiful love!" Slow Sue said, all choked up.

"But Denver said absolutely not," Gus said. "He said he'd think of some way out. After a couple of hours, while they just sat there, holding on to each other like a couple of kids, he came up with the most fantastic idea you ever heard of. Only a crazy man would even have thought of it. Denver had very small ears for a man, see, and what he wanted to do was get one of them tattooed with a little rose, just like

Alice's, and then lop it off and send it back to us boys in Chicago."

"Beautiful," Slow Sue said. "Just beautiful. Oh, how he must have loved her!"

"He loved her, all right," Gus said. "The first thing Alice knew, she was sitting in this tattoo parlor while the tattoo artist copied one of her little roses onto Denver Eddie's earlobe."

"It's the loveliest love story ever told," Millie said, dabbing at her eyes.

I hate to admit it, but I felt like doing the same thing myself. It can be embarrassing, being sentimental, believe me. I wouldn't have wanted to say anything just then, for fear my voice would crack.

"Then Denver puts Alice in a cab and rushes her back to the apartment," Gus went on. "He sets her down in the living room and tells her to stay put a minute, he's got a little business to attend to in the bedroom. But Alice knows what kind of business he means, and the second he closes the door she runs into the bathroom and takes one of the old straight razors, like they used in those days, and slices off an ear, just as clean and pretty as anybody could ask for."

"Oh!" Slow Sue said. "What love! What love!"

"Then Alice runs out into the living room with it and yells for Denver to come see what she's done," Gus said. "But she was too late. When Denver comes in, there's blood streaming down the side of his face and he's holding his ear in his hand."

"Oh, it's too much!" Slow Sue said. "It's so beautiful I can't stand it."

"It was too much for Alice and Denver, too," Gus said. "When they saw what each one had done for the other, and all the blood, and realized how much they loved each other, they fainted. Both of them, just like that." He paused. "The reason I know all this is that me and Monk and the other boys broke into the

apartment just a few seconds after it happened."

"You what?" Frankie the Feeb said.

"We busted in," Gus said. "After we'd finished that case of booze, see, we got to wishing we hadn't sent Denver out to Detroit in the first place. We knew we'd made a mistake. We all still had this love for Alice, and we didn't want to have her looks ruined, and so we all got in Monk's car and hit out for Detroit as fast as we could go. As it turned out, we got to the apartment about half a minute too late."

Nobody said anything. It was so quiet you could almost hear the ice cubes melting in the drinks.

"And then?" somebody finally asked.

"All hell broke loose," Gus said. "We threw cold water in their faces to bring them to, and we used towels to stop the bleeding. When Denver Eddie came to, he thought the guys were there to kill him, and he jumped up and ran into the bedroom and held the door against them. I guess the delayed shock of cutting off his own ear and then seeing Alice with hers cut off must have snapped something in his brain. Anyway, that's what he did.

"As for Alice, when she came around she grabbed up Denver's ear, and then her own, and ran out into the hall, with me right behind her. I caught her just outside the door, and a couple of seconds later there was this explosion back in the living room, where we'd just been. Blew a hole in the wall not three feet from where we were standing."

"Denver Eddie's bomb?" Three Time George asked.

"Yeah," Gus said. "Denver had gone completely out of his mind. What he'd done was open the bedroom door a crack and throw the bomb into the living room with Monk and all the others." He shook his head. "Killed them all. It probably took the morgue a week to sort out the pieces."

"What about Denver, Gus?" I asked.

"He went down the fire stairs, and that was the last anybody ever saw of him."

"And Sweet Alice?"

"I got her out of there fast. By the time the law got there, we were on our way to this croaker I knew, to have him take care of her ear. He gave her a local and sewed it back on again. And all the time he was working on her, she just sat there holding Denver's ear. She wouldn't let go of it for anything. Later, when I took her to a hotel, she told me all that'd happened with her and Denver.

"She said she'd find him again someday, no matter where he was. And she kept that ear in her hand the whole time; it was enough to make your skin crawl. I made her get into bed, and then I went down to a drugstore to get her some medicine the croaker wanted her to put on her ear. When I got back to the hotel room, she was gone. That was forty years ago, and I've never seen or heard from her since."

There was a long silence, now that we all saw Gus had finished. I sat looking down at my glass. I knew now what was in that thin platinum case in my pocket, and who the beautiful woman had been who asked me to put the case in the casket with the body of the man with the missing ear.

I also knew what I was going to do with that platinum case. His body would still be lying in state, of course; it'd be no problem at all.

I didn't say anything about what I was going to do. It's bad enough being such a sentimental slob, without having everybody riding you about it.

But you know something? When I glanced around the table, I realized I wasn't the only sentimental slob in Rio that night. It's hard to believe, but there wasn't a dry eye in the place.



## THE CLOCK IS CUCKOO

Richard Deming

The first phone call came just before eleven o'clock on a bleak Monday night in February. When the phone rang Martha Pruett was already in her nightgown, sitting before the dying embers in the fireplace in a robe and with Ho Chi Minh on her lap, sipping her nightly glass of hot milk.

Ho Chi Minh made a strong protest in Siamese when she ejected him from his bed by standing up. He followed her into the bedroom, still complaining, when she went to answer the phone. Martha sat on the edge of the bed and set her glass on the bedside table. The cat made a final comment and rubbed himself against her leg.

"Hello," Martha said into the phone, as she stroked Ho Chi Minh.

A pleasantly husky feminine voice said hesitantly, "I saw this number in the personal column in the newspaper."

Martha Pruett had expected it to be one of those calls, because none of her friends would phone this late. The classified ad the caller referred to appeared daily and read: *SUICIDE prevention. 24 hour service. Confidential, free. 648-2444.* The number wasn't Martha's. It was merely an exchange number from which incoming calls were automatically relayed to the home number of whatever volunteer happened to be on duty.

Martha said in a friendly voice, "You have reached Suicide Prevention. May I help you?"

There was a period of silence before the woman

said, "I'm not sure why I called. I'm not—I mean I'm not really planning to kill myself. I just feel so blue, I wanted to talk to somebody."

The caller was one of those rare ones who didn't like to admit to suicidal impulses, Martha decided. Most potential suicides had no such restraint. The old saw about people who threatened suicide never committing it had been proved wrong long ago. Many suicides had histories of repeatedly threatening to take their own lives before they actually got around to doing it. There were cases where suicides gave no previous warning, though. The very fact that this woman had phoned the Suicide Prevention number indicated that the thought must have at least occurred to her.

Martha said, "That's why I'm here, to talk to people. What are you blue about?"

"Oh, different things," the caller said vaguely. There was another pause, then, "You don't trace calls or anything like that, do you?"

"Of course not," Martha said easily. "People would stop calling us if we did. We like to know who our callers are, but we don't insist on it. If you wish to remain anonymous, that's up to you. However, if you tell me your name, it will remain in strict confidence. You don't have to worry that I will do anything such as sending the police to haul you off to a hospital. I am here solely to help you and I won't contact anyone at all on your behalf without your permission."

Again there was a pause. Then the woman said suddenly, "You sound like a nice person. Who are you?"

This was a question Martha frequently had to parry. Volunteers were instructed never to reveal their identities to callers in order to avoid the possibility of emotionally disturbed persons attempting to make personal contact. Indiscriminately passing out your name to emotionally unbalanced people wouldn't be wise in any event, but it would have been particularly

foolish for a sixty-year-old spinster who weighed less than a hundred pounds and lived alone except for a Siamese cat.

She said, "I'm just one of numerous volunteer workers who devote their time to this work. It's more important who you are."

"Don't you have a name?" the caller asked.

"Oh, yes. It's Martha."

That much was permissible when a caller became insistent; but further insistence would be met with the polite but firm explanation that workers were not allowed to give their last names. Fortunately this caller didn't push it any farther.

"My name is Janet," she volunteered.

Martha contemplated probing for the last name, then decided going after it too quickly just might dampen their growing rapport. Instead she said, "Glad to know you, Janet. You sound fairly young. Are you somewhere in your twenties?"

"Oh no. I'm thirty-two."

"Well, from the viewpoint of my age, that's still fairly young. Are you married?"

"Yes. For nearly ten years."

"Is your husband home now?" Martha asked casually. It was standard procedure to attempt to learn just who, if anyone, was in the house with a caller.

The woman said, "He bowls on Mondays and doesn't get home until after midnight."

"I see. Do you have any children?"

"No. I had a couple of miscarriages." There was no regret in the voice. It was just a statement of fact.

"Then you're all alone at home now?" Martha asked.

"Yes."

Martha allowed a few seconds of silence to build before saying gently, "Do you want to tell me your last name now, Janet?"

There was an equal period of silence before the

husky voice asked with reluctance, "Do I have to?"

Suspecting the woman was on the verge of hanging up, Martha said instantly, "Of course not." She allowed another few seconds to pass, then asked, "What does your husband do?"

"He's a professional man." A subtle change in tone told Martha's practiced ear that the woman was suddenly becoming cagey about giving answers which might reveal her identity. Martha immediately switched tack.

"Was it some trouble with your husband which made you call this number, Janet?" she asked.

"Oh, no. Fred's a wonderful husband. It was just things in general."

Martha made a mental note that the husband's name was Fred. There immediately followed another bit of inadvertent information. In the background Martha heard, "Cuckoo, cuckoo!" followed by eleven rather sharp chimes and then another, "Cuckoo, cuckoo!"

Background noises often gave clues to the location from which a call came. Sounds from outdoors, such as traffic noises or railroad trains, were more helpful than indoor noises, but a cuckoo clock which also had chimes was rare enough to identify a house or apartment if, through other clues, you could narrow the location to a specific neighborhood. Martha was in the habit of mentally filing every scrap of information she could glean from a caller.

She said, "What sort of things are bothering you, Janet?"

"They don't seem as important now as when I decided to call you. I'm beginning to feel a lot better just from talking to you. Could I phone you again if I start to feel blue?"

"You won't necessarily get me, but someone is available around the clock."

"Oh." The husky voice sounded disappointed.

"When are you on duty? I want to talk to *you*."

"Just Mondays and Wednesdays, from eight in the evening until eight the following morning."

"Well, maybe I can arrange only to get blue on Monday and Wednesday evenings," the woman said with a nervous and rather forlorn attempt at humor. "Thanks for talking to me, Martha."

"I was glad to," Martha said. "You're sure you'll be all right now?"

"I'll be all right," the woman assured her. "You've been a big help. Thanks again." She hung up.

Martha discovered her hot milk had cooled too much while she was on the phone. She poured it into Ho Chi Minh's bowl and went to bed.

The second call came just at midnight the following Wednesday. Martha had been in bed for an hour and was awakened from a sound sleep by the phone.

When she switched on her bedside lamp and put the receiver to her ear, she heard the sharp chimes of the clock in the background tolling midnight. She waited until the final, "Cuckoo, cuckoo!" before saying, "Hello."

"Martha?" the husky feminine voice said uncertainly.

"Yes, Janet."

"Oh, you recognized my voice," the woman said with mild surprise. "I thought maybe with all the calls you must get, you wouldn't remember me."

"I remember you," Martha said. "Are you feeling blue again?"

"Awfully blue." There was a muffled sob and the voice seemed to disintegrate. "I—I lied to you Monday, Martha."

"Oh? About what?"

"When I said I wasn't thinking about killing myself. I think about it all the time. I don't know what I'm going to do."

"Is your husband there tonight, Janet?"

"No, he's out of town at the National Den——"  
She broke off and appended, "I'm all alone."

National Den. Some kind of fraternal order Martha wondered. The Cub Scouts had dens, she recalled. Perhaps her husband was on the National Council of the Cub Scouts. She must remember that.

She said, "Do you have a friend who lives nearby who might be willing to come over and stay with you for a time, Janet?"

"Oh, I couldn't possibly tell any of my friends what is wrong with me," the woman said in a horrified voice.

"What is wrong with you?" Martha inquired.

After a period of dead silence, the woman whispered, "I haven't told another soul, Martha. What's wrong with me is that I know I'm going mad."

"What makes you think that, Janet?"

"I don't just think it. I know it. I love my husband, but periodically I get this horrible urge to kill him." Her tone sank to one of despair. "Last Sunday night it went so far that I crept out of bed and went to the kitchen for a butcher knife. I was heading back for our bedroom with the knife in my hand, meaning to stab Fred in his sleep, when I came to my senses. It was that incident which made me call you the next night."

Martha's heart began to pound. This was her first contact with a caller who seemed to suffer from more than acute neurosis. This woman obviously was psychotic and would have to be handled with extreme care.

Until she retired on a small inheritance the previous year, Martha Pruett had been a social worker. Her training had given her just enough of a smattering of psychiatry to make her know she was totally unequipped to psychoanalyze anyone, particularly over a telephone. She knew there was no point in attempting to talk a psychotic out of homicidal im-

pulses. The only sensible plan of attack was to attempt to talk her caller into submitting to immediate treatment.

She said, "You haven't told anyone at all about these impulses, Janet?"

"Just you," the woman said in a broken voice.

"Your husband doesn't even suspect you have such thoughts?"

"He knows I love him," Janet said in despair. "That's why, when I'm normal, I want to kill myself. Better that I should die than kill the man I love."

"Now, there is no necessity for either," Martha said in firm voice. "You phoned me for advice, I assume. Are you prepared to take it?"

"What is it?" the woman whispered.

"You seem to be quite aware that you are mentally ill, and all the psychologists say this is the first big step toward cure. It's the mentally disturbed person who is convinced there is really nothing wrong with him who is in real psychiatric trouble."

"Don't suggest that I see my family doctor," the woman said wearily. "He happens to be my brother-in-law, and I couldn't possibly tell him what I have told you."

"It isn't necessary for either your family doctor or your husband to know you have sought treatment, Janet. You will find numerous psychiatrists listed in the yellow pages of the phone book. Or, if you prefer, I'll recommend one."

There was a considerable period of silence before the husky voice said hesitantly, "He wouldn't tell my husband?"

"You must know that doctors have a code of ethics which makes everything a patient tells them a matter of confidence, Janet. I'm not saying that whatever psychiatrist you pick may not try to talk *you* into confiding in your husband, but I will guarantee that he won't tattle on you."

The woman's tone became hopeful. "You think this one you offered to recommend might help me?"

"I'm sure he could."

"Who is he?"

"Dr. Albert Manners, in the Medical Exchange Building. I have never had a doctor-patient relationship with him but I know him quite well because he was on the board of directors of a social agency I once worked for, and I know he has a fine reputation. Do you have a pencil and paper there?"

"I can remember that all right. Dr. Albert Manners in the Medical Exchange Building."

"Will you call him first thing in the morning?" Martha asked.

"I will. I promise I will. Oh, thank you, Martha."

"When do you expect your husband home?" Martha asked, but she was speaking into a dead phone. The woman had hung up.

Martha had to get up and heat herself some milk before she could go back to sleep, because she wasn't at all satisfied with her performance. She should have wormed the woman's last name out of her. Now, if she killed her husband or herself, Martha would have it on her conscience that she might have averted the tragedy if she had been efficient enough to find out who the caller was and warn her husband.

The third and last call came at a few minutes to nine P.M. the following Monday. When Martha answered the phone, she at first failed to recognize the thick voice which said, nearly incomprehensibly, "'Stoo late. Couldn't wait tomorrow. 'Stoo late."

Then she recognized the husky undertone in the thick voice. She said sharply, "Janet?"

"Yeah," the voice said. "'Lo, Martha."

"Have you taken something?" Martha demanded.

"'Stoo late. Couldn't wait tomorrow."

"Wait for what, Janet?"

"'Pointment. 'Pointment Dr. Manners. Would've



killed him tonight when came home from bowling. Better this way."

"Janet!" Martha said loudly. "What have you taken?"

"You tell Fred did it for him?" the voice said with increased thickness. "Tell 'im love 'im?"

"Where can I reach him, Janet?" Martha asked desperately. "Where is he bowling?"

"Elks Men's League. Tell 'im—tell 'im——" The voice trailed off into a somewhat portentous silence.

In the background there sounded, "Cuckoo, cuckoo!" then nine sharp chimes and again, "Cuckoo, cuckoo!"

"Janet!" Martha called, but there was no answer.

She tried several more times to rouse the woman, without success. The line remained open, however, because Martha could hear no dial tone. Even if she hung up, the connection wouldn't be broken, Martha knew, because the caller had to hang up in order to sever a connection. Martha had no idea of the electronic reason for this phenomenon, but she had occasionally in the past received calls where the caller for some reason had failed to hang up, and it had been necessary to go out to another phone to call the phone company before she could make any outgoing calls.

It therefore should be perfectly safe to click the bar up and down in the hope of rousing an operator, she reasoned. She attempted it, and the second time she depressed the bar and released it again, she was horrified to hear a dial tone. So much for her vaunted knowledge of how phones worked, she thought with dismay. Now she had destroyed all possibility of having the call traced.

She had a few clues to work on, however. The most valuable was that Janet's husband was bowling with the Elks Men's League.

Looking up the phone number of the local Elks

Club, she dialed it. After several rings a male voice answered.

"Is there anyone there who would know all the members of the Elks Bowling League?" Martha asked.

"Huh?" the man said. "Not me, lady. I'm just the bartender, and the steward has gone home."

"This is an extreme emergency," Martha told him. "Isn't there anyone there who knows your bowlers?"

"The Exalted Ruler is at the bar. I'll let you talk to him."

When the Exalted Ruler, who identified himself as Edwin Shay, got on the phone, Martha gave him her name and explained that she was a volunteer worker for Suicide Prevention.

"It is absolutely essential that I get in touch with one of your Men's League bowlers at once," she concluded. "The difficulty is that I have only his first name. It's Fred."

Edwin Shay said wryly, "The Men's League has fourteen teams, Miss Pruett, with five men on each team. Offhand I can think of three Freds."

"His wife is named Janet, Mr. Shay, and he has a brother who is a doctor. Does that mean anything to you? Do you know who he is?"

"Oh, sure," the Exalted Ruler said with recognition. "You're talking about Doc Waters. He's a dentist."

That was it, Martha thought with jubilation, suddenly understanding the puzzling remark her caller had made the previous Wednesday. The woman had probably started to say National Dental Association Convention, or something similar, before she cut the phrase short and it came out simply "National Den."

"Where does the league bowl?" she asked.

"The Delmar Bowl. What's this all about, anyway?"

"I haven't time to explain it now," Martha said. "Thank you very much for your help."

She hung up, found the number of the Delmar Bowl in the phone book and dialed it. It took a few

minutes to get Dr. Fred Waters to the phone, but finally a warm male voice said in her ear, "Yeah, Janet. What's up?"

"It isn't your wife, doctor," Martha said. "I'm a volunteer worker for Suicide Prevention. About fifteen or twenty minutes ago I got a phone call from your wife. You had better get home immediately, because she has taken some kind of pills. She passed out while I was talking to her."

"What!" Dr. Waters said with a mixture of fright and astonishment. "My wife took pills?"

"You really should hurry, doctor," Martha said. "And if it's a very long drive to your home, I suggest that before you start, you phone for an ambulance to meet you there."

"All right," he said hurriedly. "Who did you say this is calling?"

"Miss Martha Pruett. I would appreciate it if you would take down my phone number and call me back later as to how things came out."

"Of course, Miss Pruett. What is it?"

Martha read off her number.

"Got it," the dentist said. "Thanks for calling."

An interminable period of waiting followed. The suspense was too great for Martha to generate any interest in either television or a book. She busied herself by brushing Ho Chi Minh, brushing her own hair, giving herself a manicure and, in final desperation, even giving herself a pedicure.

She managed to dispose of two hours in that manner, but then she ran out of time-killing chores. She was contemplating dusting the already immaculate front room when the phone finally rang at eleven-thirty P.M.

Her nervousness had long since discouraged Ho Chi Minh from all idea of a nap on her lap, and he had retreated to a spot in the center of the living room rug. This put him between Martha's chair and

the bedroom door, so that she ran straight toward him when she raced to answer the phone. Ho Chi Minh fled to the kitchen.

Grabbing up the phone, Martha said breathlessly, "Yes?"

"Miss Pruett?" a strange male voice asked.

"Yes."

"This is Lieutenant Herman Abell of the police, Miss Pruett. Dr. Waters asked me to phone you, because he's not quite up to talking. I understand you're a Suicide Prevention worker and it was you who phoned him that his wife had taken pills."

"Yes, that's right. How is she?"

"It was too late to do anything for her. She was dead on arrival at the hospital."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Lieutenant."

"Just one of those things, Miss Pruett. We won't know until the autopsy just how many sleeping pills she swallowed, but a bottle that Dr. Waters says held three dozen is empty."

"How horrible! And she was only thirty-two."

"Were you personally acquainted with her?" the police officer asked in surprise. "I thought you people kept yourselves anonymous insofar as callers are concerned."

"We do, but I managed to pick up a good deal of information about her. We had two previous phone conversations before tonight, Lieutenant."

"Oh? This wasn't her first attempt then?"

"Well, I don't know that she made any previous attempts, but she had contemplated suicide. I would have contacted her husband before, but I was never able to worm out of her who she was, except for her first name. She never told me, even tonight. I tracked down her identity from certain clues she had dropped. I feel terrible about not worming her identity from her sooner. I might have saved her."

"Well, it wasn't your fault," the lieutenant said.

"We'll need your statement, of course, though. When could you stop by headquarters?"

"At your convenience," Martha said. "I'm retired, so my time is pretty much my own."

"Fine. I'm on the night trick and don't go on duty until four P.M. Would four be convenient?"

"All right, Lieutenant."

"Then I'll expect you at the Homicide squad room at four P.M. Just ask for Lieutenant Abell."

"Homicide?" Martha said inquiringly.

"Don't let it throw you," the police officer said with a slight chuckle. "The Homicide Squad doesn't confine itself just to murder investigation. We have a half-dozen separate responsibilities, and one of them is suicide."

"Oh," Martha said. "All right, Lieutenant. I'll see you at four tomorrow."

Martha had hoped there would be a photograph of Janet Waters in the morning paper, but there wasn't. There was merely a brief item on an inner page reporting her death from an overdose of sleeping pills and announcing that, pending further investigation, the police had tentatively listed the death as a suicide.

Martha arrived at the Homicide squad room promptly at four. Lieutenant Herman Abell turned out to be a thick-bodied, unsmiling man in his forties. Dr. Fred Waters was also there, and he made an instant impression on Martha. The dentist was a tall, lean, handsome man with thick wavy black hair and very white teeth. Martha guessed him to be in his mid-thirties.

He was not only handsome, but exceedingly charming, she decided within minutes of being introduced to him. Part of his appeal was to her latent maternal instinct, she suspected, because he was so obviously bereaved. He seemed to be literally stunned by the news that his wife had repeatedly considered killing him. Under questioning by Lieutenant Abell, he ad-

mitted that she had recently had some rather severe bouts of depression, but he hadn't even suspected psychosis.

"She always acted as though she loved me," he kept saying with rather pitiable insistence.

"She did," Martha assured him. "You'll have to face it, doctor, that your wife was simply mentally deranged."

"That seems plain enough," Lieutenant Abell confirmed. "Are you ready to make your formal statement, Miss Pruett?"

When Martha said she was, he had her dictate it into a tape recorder, had it typed up and she signed it. She included everything she could remember about all three phone conversations with the dead woman, and also her conversation with the Elks' Exalted Ruler.

The whole thing took less than an hour. The case was so obviously a suicide that the lieutenant gave the impression his investigation was routine, but Martha noted that nevertheless it was thorough. For instance, he checked by phone with the office girl of psychiatrist Albert Manners to verify that Janet Waters had actually made the appointment she told Martha she had when she made her last, incoherent phone call.

She had made the appointment. Since the doctor's receptionist said the only contact had been when she phoned in for an appointment, and that Dr. Manners had not even talked to her on the phone, Lieutenant Abell didn't bother to talk to the psychiatrist himself.

When first introduced to Dr. Fred Waters, Martha had murmured a word of sympathy and had gotten a courteous thank-you in reply. In parting, she again told the dentist she was sorry for his bereavement and, this time, got such an appreciative smile in return that it dazzled her. Since her own dentist had recently retired and moved to Florida, she made a

mental note to try Dr. Fred Waters the next time she had her teeth cleaned.

It was another three months before Martha was due for her semi-annual dental checkup and cleaning. In May she called Dr. Waters' office. The girl who answered the phone gave her an appointment for a Friday afternoon at 4:30.

Dr. Waters' office was a good seven miles from Martha's apartment. She misguessed the traffic situation and arrived five minutes late. She would have been even later if she had not found a parking place for her little sports car right in front of the office building. The dental office being on the first floor saved the time of waiting for an elevator, too. She entered his office out of breath at exactly 4:35.

The young red-haired receptionist smiled away her apology and offered one of her own. Dr. Waters was running late with his appointments and probably couldn't take her until five.

"I may have to leave before he gets to you," the girl said in further apology. "I'm going away for the weekend and have to catch a six o'clock bus. If I do have to leave, I'll give you your chart, and you can just hand it to the doctor when he takes you."

"All right," Martha agreed.

The receptionist invited her to have a seat.

It was a typical dentist's waiting room, moderately well furnished with leather-covered easy chairs and a sofa, and with a table containing an assortment of out-of-date magazines. Martha found a women's magazine she hadn't read and settled back to wait. The receptionist, behind the counter running the length of one wall, was doing some kind of desk work.

Ten minutes after Martha's arrival the silence was suddenly broken by a single, "Cuckoo!" followed by three sharp chimes, then succeeded by another, "Cuckoo!"

Martha glanced up at the wooden clock on the wall in time to see the bird pop out for the second "Cuckoo!" then disappear again. Could this be the same clock she had heard in the background each time Janet Waters had phoned her, she wondered? That had cuckooed twice before and after chiming the hour, but perhaps this one did too, and cuckooed once only on the quarter hours.

Clearing her throat, Martha said to the receptionist, "Miss, do you happen to know if Dr. Waters has a clock at home similar to the one you have here?"

The receptionist said politely, "I've never seen Dr. Waters' home. I've only worked for him a little over two weeks."

"Oh," Martha said, and subsided.

Several moments passed in silence, then the girl looked up again. "It may be that they have, and that's why they put this one here. I wish they hadn't, because it drives me crazy, sounding off every fifteen minutes."

Martha said puzzledly, "What do you mean *they* put it here?"

"Dr. and Mrs. Waters, when they were married."

"But they were married ten years ago, weren't they?" Martha said, confused.

The redhead smiled at her. "I mean his current marriage, Miss Pruett. They were only married a couple of weeks ago. That's how I got this job, because Joanne was his previous receptionist."

Martha was mildly shocked. He certainly hadn't waited a very decent interval before taking a second wife. *Men*, she sniffed to herself. *After all his show of bereavement.*

The redhead was saying, "Joanne had the clock at her apartment, and of course when she moved from there to Dr. Waters' home, she had no place to put her furnishings, because his home was already fur-



nished. She sold most of her things, but she brought a few of the smaller items here."

The girl went back to her work. Martha stared up at the clock while a series of astonishing thoughts ran through her mind. If all those calls had come from the apartment of Dr. Waters' former receptionist instead of from his home, quite obviously it had not been Janet Waters to whom Martha had talked; and the fact that this same receptionist had become the second Mrs. Waters so soon after the death of the first added a sinister element.

This thought so staggered Martha that she didn't realize how long she had been sitting there mulling it over until the clock sounded again. This time all doubt was removed from her mind, because it cuckooed twice before chiming five times, then cuckooed twice again.

At that moment the door from the inner office opened and Dr. Fred Waters ushered out a male patient.

"Make Mr. Curtis another appointment for next week, Ruby," the dentist said to the receptionist. "Then you can leave, because I know you have to catch a bus. I'll close up."

He turned to glance at Martha and a startled expression crossed his face. "Oh, hello there," he said. "I didn't realize you were my last appointment. Ruby likes to surprise me."

The remark caused the receptionist to glance curiously from Martha to the dentist, but she made no comment. She merely handed him a large card and said, "Here is Miss Pruett's chart, doctor."

After a brief glance at it, Dr. Waters said to Martha, "Sorry to have kept you waiting, Miss Pruett. Come on in."

Beyond a jerky nod, Martha had made no response to the dentist's greeting, but no one seemed to notice. She rose and rather woodenly preceded him into the

treatment room. She sat in the dental chair, allowed a bib to be tied around her neck, and obediently opened her mouth.

"Hmm," the dentist said after a brief examination. "Exceptionally fine teeth for your age." He smiled down apologetically and amended that to, "I mean for any age."

He started to work with a scraper and a pick. Fortunately the nature of dental treatment prohibits conversation, because Martha couldn't have thought of a word to say to him. Time passed in silence. She knew when fifteen minutes had passed, although it seemed much longer, because the cuckoo clock sounded the quarter hour.

Only seconds later, at a moment when Martha was seated erect to rinse out her mouth, there was a light rap on the door, then it immediately opened. A strikingly beautiful blonde of about twenty-five stood in the doorway.

"Oh, excuse me, honey," she said in a husky voice. "I assumed your last patient would be gone by now."

She was starting to pull the door closed again from outside when Martha blurted, "You must be Joanne."

The woman paused to gaze at her inquiringly. Dr. Waters' expression denoted doubt as to whether he should introduce the two women or simply request the blonde to wait outside.

His patient took the decision out of his hands by announcing, "I'm Martha. Remember me, Joanne?"

The blonde's face lost all expression. Dr. Waters' turned pale. The woman pushed the door all the way open again and studied Martha with pursed lips.

"You sound as though we had met before," she said with an assumed air of puzzlement which failed to fool Martha in the least. She could tell by the woman's expression that she had recognized Martha's voice as instantly as Martha had recognized hers.

Martha said coldly, "Only over the phone. What a

remarkable murder plan! You managed to establish through a totally disinterested witness that Janet was a psychotic who had committed suicide, when the poor woman was probably entirely normal." She looked at the dentist. "How did you give her the pills before you went bowling, doctor? In her coffee?"

Belatedly, she knew that this verbal outburst had been unwise when she saw how both of them were looking at her. Sliding from the dental chair, she undid her bib and draped it over the chair arm. "I guess I'll be going," she said nervously.

The blonde Joanne remained centered in the open doorway. In an unemotional voice she said to her husband, "Accidentally giving a patient an overdose of anesthetic won't help your professional reputation, but it wouldn't hurt as much as a murder trial."

The dentist gazed from his wife to Martha and back again with an expression of desperation on his face.

Martha said to the woman in the doorway, with a mixture of fright and belligerence, "You had better get out of my way."

Ignoring her, Joanne said to Dr. Waters, "You have no choice. It'll pass as an accident. It's happened in other dental offices."

Dr. Waters came to a decision so suddenly he took Martha by surprise. Grasping her frail figure by both shoulders, he threw her back into the dental chair.

Despite her age and small size Martha was as agile as an eel, and now she behaved like one. She writhed and kicked and twice nearly broke loose from the man's grip before he finally subdued her by lying across her legs and holding her shoulders down with both hands. She had to give up then, because he was nearly double her weight.

"You know how to use the gas," the dentist said to his wife. "Get the mask over her face while I hold her down."

A moment later a conelike rubber mask with gas hissing from it was clamped over Martha's nose and mouth. She shook it loose by violently shaking her head from side to side, but then Joanne grasped her beneath the chin with one hand and held her head immobile while she firmly reset the mask in place with the other hand.

Martha held her breath. She could feel the gas cooling her cheeks as it was forced from both sides of the mask by her refusal to breathe. She could also feel the pressure of Joanne's right thumb on her cheek alongside the mask.

Martha's lungs were on the verge of bursting and she was ready to capitulate by taking a deep breath when the hurried voice of the receptionist said from the open door, "I left my bus ticket in my desk, doctor. I have to rush——" There was a pause, then, "What——"

Dr. Waters started so violently that he released his grip on Martha's shoulders and half rose from his position across her body. Joanne started too, less violently, but enough to relax momentarily the pressure of both hands.

Martha jerked her head to one side and used the exceptionally fine teeth Dr. Waters had admired to bite his wife's thumb nearly to the bone.

With a yowl of pain, the blonde dropped the face mask and staggered backward. Martha drew both knees to her chest and pushed the dentist away by placing her feet in his stomach and shoving. He reeled across the room to crash into an instrument table.

Martha bounced from the dental chair and sped past the astonished redhead in the open doorway.

She was thankful that the dental office was on the first floor, because she had to gulp air into her starved lungs while she was running, and she probably would have collapsed if she had been required to race downstairs. Desperation made her good for a short sprint,

though. She was outdoors, into her car and had the engine started before there was any sign of pursuit. As she shot away from the curb, she spotted Dr. Waters in the rear-view mirror, just emerging from the building.

Martha headed for police headquarters.

## PLAN 19

Jack Ritchie

"You realize, of course," Warden Brincker said, "that besides the solitary confinement, you will lose your movie privileges for six months?"

"Oh, jiminies," Big Duke said.

Warden Brincker sighed. "After all, Duke, you *did* escape from here and remain at large for almost a year. It isn't that I *want* to do these things, but regulations are regulations."

"Sure, sure," Duke said. "No hard feelings."

"I'm glad you're not bitter," Brincker said. "I want you to realize that it's nothing personal."

Big Duke looked at the ceiling.

Warden Brincker turned to me briefly. "Would you hand me Duke's file, Fred?"

"Yes, sir," I said.

Eleven months before, Big Duke and four of his buddies had broken out of our prison. Big Duke was the only one who had been picked up so far. In San Francisco he'd made the mistake of getting himself arrested for assault and battery. When the police there ran a routine check on his fingerprints, the truth came out and he had been returned.

The warden's intercom buzzed and he flipped the switch. "Yes?"

"The medical officer wants to talk to you about some requisitions," the voice from the box said.

"I'm busy right now," Brincker said. But then he thought it over. "Okay, I'll be right out."

He left the office to Big Duke, the guard, and me.

Big Duke looked me over. "I'll swear the con suit you got on is tailor-made."

I straightened a few papers on my desk. "I have a few friends in the tailor shop and they do me favors occasionally."

"How do you steer it through the laundry and get it back again? Don't a neat suit like that stand a good chance of sort of accidentally getting lost?"

I brushed a few eraser crumbs to the floor. "I have a few friends in the laundry too."

Big Duke laughed. "A real operator, huh? You old-timers got it made. How long you been in here?"

"Twenty-two years," I said.

"How long you got to go?"

"Some time yet. The sentence was 199 years."

"Ever think about breaking out?"

I glanced at the guard for a moment. "Who doesn't?"

Warden Brincker came back. "Now, Duke, we want to get a few things straightened out, for the record—like your escape from here."

Big Duke shrugged. "Sure."

"Apparently it was quite simple? You merely attached a home-fashioned grappling iron to one end of a rope, tossed it over the wall, and then the five of you climbed up and over?"

"That's the way it went," Big Duke said.

Brincker frowned. "Naturally we re-created the entire episode after we found the grapple. It is true there is a *blank* spot, so to speak, at that particular point so that the guards in the nearest two towers cannot see the *foot* of the wall. However the *top* of the wall is in plain view from both towers, and the

guards swear they didn't see the five of you go over."

"You forget it was raining cats and dogs," Big Duke said. He patted his shirt pocket, probably looking for a cigarette, but there weren't any. "And besides, your guards are human, aren't they?"

"Well . . . yes."

"So are they really going to stand there with their eyes moving 180 degrees, back and forth, back and forth, all the time? No. They'll look in one direction for a while and maybe start to daydream. So we watched for that to happen and when it did, we tossed up our rope and pulled ourselves out."

The warden rubbed his neck. "Of course that's possible, and it *did* happen, but I still think that you were incredibly lucky."

Big Duke grinned. "That's what life is, a lot of luck."

After Duke had been taken away, the warden sighed. "I suppose I'm too sensitive, but I always seem to take it personally when one of my boys escapes." He reached into his desk humidor for a cigar. "Don't I try to run a happy ship, Fred?"

"Yes, sir," I said. "You've received any number of awards and citations from your colleagues in the field. And didn't you receive an honorary Doctor of Laws degree from West Colorado Agriculture and Mining last week?"

"I know. But I think the real measure of my success should be gauged by the way the men feel about me *in here*."

"All of us respect you, sir," I said. "We know you have our interests at heart."

He nodded. "I can go anywhere I want in this prison unarmed. I don't even have to have a guard accompany me. I'm perfectly safe, in the shops, in the yard, and even in the darkness of the movie theater."

"Yes, sir," I said. "The men realize and appreciate

the fact that you show nothing but first run movies here. What are we having tonight, sir?"

"*Mary Poppins*," Brincker said. "Except for the bean."

I put Duke's files back into the filing cabinet. "Bean? What bean, sir?"

"In the prison theater," Brincker said. "When the lights go out, somebody invariably throws a bean at me. I know it's a bean because one of them missed my head once and bounced off the seat in front of me and right back into my lap. Fred, somebody out there doesn't like me."

"There's one rotten apple in every barrel, sir," I said.

Brincker agreed. "We've got to face the fact that the world isn't perfect."

That evening in the mess hall, the menu consisted of meat loaf, stewed tomatoes, canned peaches, coffee, and bread. When I first came here I did not much care for stewed tomatoes, but now I'm getting rather fond of them.

After we were locked in our cells for the night, Hector, my cellmate, hung up his cap. "Another day, another dollar." He used a plastic drinking cup to water the pot of petunias.

I took off my shoes and slipped into moccasins. "Big Duke came back today. He says they really got over the wall just by throwing that grapple."

Hector shook his head. "Very unscientific."

I agreed. "We'll never do anything as primitive as that when our time comes."

We had one of the outside cells of the tier and Hector looked up at the darkening day. "Snow flurries again."

I nodded. "Spring is late this year."

Hector squinted at a wedge of geese crossing the sky. "This is the time of the year when it gets me



most, when I see the geese flying wild and free and winging their way south."

"Hector," I said, "I believe they go north in spring."

"Well, whichever way it is," Hector said. "When I see them flying wild and free and winging their way, it really depresses me. Being in a cage like this, I mean."

"Don't let it wear you down, Hector," I said. "We'll be out of here before long, or I miss my guess."

He pulled down the small shade. "You're right, Fred. And I think Plan No. 18 is the answer."

"I'm positive it is," I said. "The trouble with the other seventeen is that they depend too much on specific conditions. Everything has to be just exactly right and we haven't been lucky in that respect."

"Right," Hector said. "But I'm positive we finally hit it with Plan 18. It's straightforward and simple. No tricky variables."

At the end of May, Big Duke got out of solitary, and Warden Brincker saw him again.

Brincker has eliminated the darkness, bread-and-water routine from solitary. You now have light, you receive a balanced diet, except there is no dessert, and you are limited to two library books and one magazine a week. A lot of the old-timers feel that solitary just isn't solitary anymore and something has passed from this world.

Big Duke looked well and rested.

"How are you, Duke?" Brincker asked.

"Just dandy. When do I get back to my job in the woodworking shop?"

"Well, now, Duke," Brincker said, "I'm afraid things aren't quite that simple. There are rules and regulations, you know. First, of course, you'll have to put in six months in the laundry. That's standard procedure for all newcomers, and since your escape and return, you fall into the newcomer category."

"Sure, sure," Duke said. "Six months in the laun-

dry. And then I get back into the woodworking shop?"

Brincker smiled apologetically. "There are priorities and seniorities to consider too, Duke. After your tour of duty in the laundry, you are placed on the Open List. The labor pool, in other words. This means that we assign you to wherever your services are needed and the places will undoubtedly change from time to time. Only after two years in the Open List are you allowed a choice of jobs."

Duke didn't look at all happy. "Two and a half years in all?"

Brincker nodded. "And even then I couldn't *guarantee* there'll be an opening in the woodworking shop. I understand that most of the men working there now are with us rather permanently."

Brincker had Big Duke's file on his desk and he turned over a few pages. "Frankly, Duke, I don't see why you're so anxious to get back into the woodworking shop."

Duke's eyes flickered. "What do you mean?"

"According to your General and Mechanical Aptitude Test score and its interpretation by our new computer, we feel that you would be much happier in the electric shop."

Duke's eyes drifted toward the window. "I don't give a damn what the machine says. I like woodworking."

Three weeks later Duke appeared in the warden's office again, this time because he'd been put on report for forging a pass and attempting to get into the woodworking shop.

Warden Brincker clicked his tongue. "Frankly, Duke, I'm a bit disappointed in you. Forging a pass is a rather serious thing."

Duke didn't look particularly contrite. "I just wanted to see the old place again."

The warden's phone buzzed and he picked it off the

cradle and listened. He turned to me. "It's the Personnel Section. Who was it you recommended for that library job?"

"Peterson, sir."

"Are you sure he can handle the job?"

"Yes, sir. He's a good worker."

Brincker resumed his conversation with Personnel and okayed the transfer of Peterson from the hemp shop to the library.

When Brincker hung up, he faced Duke again. "I'm sorry, Duke, but I'm afraid it's back to solitary for you."

That didn't seem to bother Duke too much, or if it did, he didn't show it. He studied me for a few seconds before he turned and preceded the guard out of the office.

Late in June, our baseball season started with the opener against Wickman Penitentiary. Hector and I were seated in our favorite section along the first base line, when I noticed Big Duke get up from his seat and work his way toward us. He sat down beside me and watched the next play.

The Wickman batter reached for a slider and rapped it deep into the hole. Leoni, our shortstop, fielded it cleanly and made the long throw to get the runner at first.

Duke took the toothpick out of his mouth. "Nice throw."

I nodded. "Leoni's got a good arm and he's going to be with us for a while, a good long stretch."

Duke looked at me. "You got a lot of influence around here, ain't that right?"

"We got a good chance of keeping the pennant for the next couple of years," I said, "if we can just keep the team together."

"What did it take to get Peterson transferred from the hemp shop to the library?"

"Peterson really deserved the job," I said. "And the warden respects my judgment, I guess."

Duke worked on the toothpick again. "What's the going rate? I mean what changes hands? Like money?"

Hector had been listening. "Which Peterson is he talking about, Fred? The one that made them hand-tooled wallets that you sold to the visitors for a sixty percent commission?"

Duke smiled. "I don't have any money, and I'm not too handy with leatherwork. But maybe I got something you might like, and that's a way to get out of here."

"Me and Fred been cellmates for fifteen years," Hector said, "and we worked up eighteen foolproof, absolutely perfect methods of escape."

Big Duke grunted. "So how come you're still in here?"

"Well, the thing is that we got to first have exact conditions," Hector said. "Like in six of our plans, for instance, it has to be raining."

"It never rained here?" Big Duke asked.

"Well, sure," Hector said. "But it has to rain in the *afternoon*. On a legal holiday."

Duke flicked away the toothpick. "In fifteen years it never rained on the afternoon of a legal holiday?"

Hector nodded. "But the legal holiday has to be on a Friday so that we have a long weekend. That's very important, or the whole plan collapses. Once it rained on the afternoon of a legal holiday, but it was a Thursday. That's the closest we ever got."

Big Duke grinned slowly. "Any tunnels on your list?"

"We got two," Hector said. "But besides getting them dug, it would have to be a night without a moon and the temperature . . ."

"That's enough, Hector," I said. "We don't want to give away all our secrets."

Duke turned his attention exclusively to me. "I can get you out of here, and you don't have to wait for rain or a legal holiday or the right temperature."

I smiled. "By throwing a grapple over the wall?" I shook my head. "That's not for me."

"The hell with the grapple," Big Duke said. "That was window dressing, a big red herring."

I studied him for a few seconds and then turned to Hector. "I'm a little thirsty so I'm going to the bubbler for a drink of water. Keep your eye on the game and tell me what happened when I get back."

"You can depend on me," Hector said.

I sidled along the seats to the aisle and went down the wooden stand to the bubbler. Big Duke followed. I had my drink and moved to a relatively isolated spot beside one of the stands. Duke drank too and then joined me.

We watched a pop fly caught in the infield. Then Duke spoke again. "The five of us worked six months on the tunnel, a real work of art, with shoring the whole length, and even a string of electric lights. We got to feeling proud of the job and that set us to thinking—why should anybody else know about the tunnel at all? Even after our escape? Suppose we were caught later and shipped back here? Why couldn't we use the same tunnel *again* to get out? So before we made our break, we arranged to have the grapple and rope hanging on the wall to make it look like that was the way we really got out."

I thought about that. "I suppose the tunnel starts somewhere in the woodworking shop?"

Duke nodded. "You get me transferred there, and we can both get out of here."

My eyes followed a line drive single to left. "Getting you transferred to the woodworking shop will take a lot of doing. I don't think I could swing it in less than a year."

"Then forget the transfer," Duke snapped. "Get me

a pass. All I need is about five minutes and I'm gone."

The tunnel probably started from the lumber supply room, I thought. That seemed the most logical place.

Duke seemed to read my mind. "The tunnel's in the woodworking shop, like I said, but it don't have signs pointing to it. I'm the only one in here who knows exactly where it is and how to get to it. If anybody decides to use it, he'll have to take me along."

"I'm not trying to monopolize your tunnel," I said. "When I go, you go. And vice versa."

Duke was satisfied. "All right. The sooner you get us the pass, the sooner we get out."

"Not so fast, Duke," I said. "If we're going to do any escaping, we're going to go about it in the right way. And the right way will take at least another month, possibly two. I've got to get things organized."

"So what's to organize? We just crawl through."

"And start running in our nice little gray suits?" I shook my head. "You and the others were lucky you got away with it the last time, but I don't intend to depend on luck. I think it might help considerably if we were wearing civilian clothes when we leave here, and have wallets with legitimate-looking identification papers."

Duke accepted that, but then he thought of something else. "Just you and me make this break? Nobody else?" he said quizzically.

"We take Hector along," I said.

Duke's eyes narrowed. "If you tell him about this everybody inside the walls will know about it in a week."

"I don't intend to tell him anything at all," I said. "Until the last minute."

During the next few days I had talks with my friends in the tailor and printing shops, and they promised to see what they could do.

It was almost three months later, however, before

I deemed everything ready for our escape.

Warden Brincker left the office at one-thirty that afternoon. He was due to attend a conference in the city and would not return until early in the evening.

At the window, I watched his car pass through the gates and then went to his desk. I made out a Class A pass for myself, two limited passes for Hector and Big Duke, and two Request Forms. Through the course of years—with Brincker's permission—I'd signed his name to so many passes and other papers that should a signature ever be questioned, it would probably be Brincker's own.

I found Hector in the prison vegetable garden, hoeing around cabbages. The guard in charge of his detail didn't bother to look at my pass, but he did glance at the Request Form that I handed him.

"So the warden's own garden needs weeding and he wants a man to do it?"

I nodded. "I think Hector will do."

Hector seemed pleased as we walked away. "Weeding the warden's garden is a pretty important job."

I waited until we turned a corner and then stopped. "Hector, we're getting out of this prison right now."

He blinked and his mouth opened slightly. "You mean *escape*?"

"That's right, Hector. The time has finally come."

Hector looked up at the sky a bit uncertainly. "Well, it *does* look like it's going to rain, and the temperature is about right, but it isn't a legal . . ."

"Never mind about that now, Hector," I said. "Just listen." I handed him a pass. "I want you to go to the woodworking shop. Use the C Street entrance. Ed Berger is on guard there. Even if he doesn't ask you, just mention that you're going to see the civilian superintendent in the furniture section about a table the warden's having refinished and that since it's at the other end of the building, you'll be leaving by the D Street exit."

"Why should I do that, Fred?"

"So that Berger won't come looking for you when you don't come back out his way. Now, Hector, once you're inside the woodworking shop, find the lumber storage room, and when nobody's looking, you slip inside, find yourself someplace to hide, and wait."

"All right, Fred," he said. "I'll do like you say."

It was beginning to drizzle now. Hector pulled his cap down over his forehead and shuffled off.

I had no difficulty in extracting Big Duke from his job at the laundry.

We stopped at the prison tailor shop to pick up the three packages Elmer Henning, the Chief Inmate Tailor, had stored away for us. They contained our civilian clothes, wallets, identification papers, and even some money.

At the woodworking shop, Berger regarded the boxes we carried with only faint interest. "What's inside, Fred?"

"Upholstery fabric," I said. "The warden's wife is having a davenport and some chairs redone."

When Duke and I managed to slip unseen into the lumber storage room, Hector came out of hiding.

My eyes went about the large room with its stacks of raw lumber. "I suppose your tunnel begins under one of these piles of boards?" I shook my head. "Really, Duke, I don't see how you got away with it at all. Surely one of the routine inspections by the guards should have turned it up."

Duke grinned and climbed up to the top of one of the stacks. "The best place to start a tunnel is in the ceiling."

He pressed at two of the plasti-board sections with his fingertips, and a rectangular section of the ceiling flipped back.

Hector and I lost no time in joining Duke atop the lumber.

"This wing is over a hundred years old," Duke



said, "and the walls are solid brick. When they electrified and installed steam pipes, they had to run the cables and pipes out in the open. To make things look neat after they were through, they covered up the mess with a false ceiling."

Duke pulled himself up into the hole. He took the packages we handed up, and then helped Hector and me join him. Once we were all in the crawl space, Duke replaced the section of ceiling. There was complete darkness for a few moments until Duke turned on a bare electric light bulb.

On hands and knees, we followed him to the thick wall. Duke and his friends had burrowed into it and down—much like coring an apple. We descended to a small room beneath the foundations of the building. They had used it as a storage area for their materials, and it was the point from which they had begun the tunnel proper. They had painstakingly scooped away dirt and carried it back up to the false ceiling for storage.

We rested inside the small room for a few moments. "The tunnel goes under the walls and comes out in a little gully just outside the walls," Duke said. "Once we get out, we just follow the gully for a hundred yards or so to the woods, and then we're on our way."

Staring at the hole before us, I voiced some claustrophobic misgivings, but Duke reassured me. "There's a light bulb burning every thirty feet and for a tunnel, it's pretty roomy. No actual belly-crawling."

Duke got on his hands and knees again, and pushing one of our boxes in front of him, disappeared into the opening. I followed and Hector came at my heels.

The time spent crawling seemed interminable, especially during those periods when Duke's form blocked out the burning bulb ahead, and Hector's body did the same for the one behind.

Eventually, however, I smelled sweet, rain-fresh

air, and emerged into the open. Hector appeared close behind me. We were indeed in what could be called a gully and its over-hanging lip shielded us from the sight of the guards on the wall, and the drizzling rain.

Duke re-covered our exit with brush. "Who knows, someday maybe we'll be using the tunnel again."

When he finished, Hector and I followed him along the muddy bottom. By the time we reached the sanctuary of the woods, it was raining fairly steadily.

Duke took shelter under a large pine and ripped open the box he carried. "I hope there's a raincoat."

"Of course," I said. "I think of everything."

Duke managed to make the transition to civilian attire in less than two minutes.

He snapped down the brim of his hat, turned up the collar of the raincoat, and grinned. "All right, boys, from here on everybody's on his own." He waved a hand and disappeared into the driving rain.

Hector was having a little trouble buttoning his shirt. "Are you sure these things fit, Fred?"

"Of course. You were measured, weren't you?"

He wiped some water off his face with a sleeve. "It's raining."

"Of course it's raining," I said. "I can see that much."

"I mean it's cold."

"So it's raining and it's cold," I snapped. "Put on your raincoat and hat, and stop your grumbling."

He did as he was told. "I didn't expect it would be this way."

"What way?"

"Raining and cold," Hector said. "And windy. Awfully windy."

I was ready to go now. "All right, Hector, let's move on."

I took about a dozen steps before I realized he wasn't following me. I turned.

Hector stood where I'd left him. The hat was on his head, but he still clutched his prison cap.

"Damn it, Hector," I said. "Come on."

He didn't move.

I went back to him and tried to take the cap from him, but he clung to it. He stared straight ahead, his eyes wide.

"Hector!" I shouted. "What's the matter with you?"

His lips moved. "They're having sweet potatoes for supper tonight, Fred. I've always liked sweet potatoes. Don't have them often."

The wind gusted suddenly, and I turned to face it. Ahead of me, a solid sheet of cold rain hid the world I'd left twenty-two years before.

What was it really like now?

I shook Hector's shoulder. "There's nothing to be afraid of out there. No lions. No tigers. Just people. What can people do to you?"

He looked at me. "Everything," he said. "Everything."

After supper in the mess hall, Hector and I joined the formation marching to the movie theater. We filed in to our regular seats.

"Do you think they'll find the tunnel?" Hector asked.

"I don't know," I said. "But they still don't know how Big Duke escaped."

"We won't get into any trouble, will we?"

"No. I'll manage to cover up for us. I have a little influence in here."

"Maybe a whole lot, Fred," Hector said. "You're a pretty important man. You can fix it, Fred."

I smiled slightly. Yes, in here I was a pretty important man. Out there I would be nothing.

"The real reason I decided to crawl back," Hector said, "is because it wasn't right. Using somebody else's tunnel, I mean. Not one that we dug ourselves."

"Sure," I said. "That's the way I feel about it."

"I just thought of another plan," Hector said. "I'm going to call it Plan 19."

"Catchy title," I said, but without malice.

"Basically it's simple," Hector said. "Very simple. But it needs a little work."

The house lights went out and the newsreel began.

I searched for a familiar silhouette and then took the bean blower out of my pocket. I put a bean into my mouth and blew.

"Did you get him?" Hector asked.

"Dead center," I said.

I eased the laces of my shoes and relaxed. It was good to be back where I belonged.

## **THE MISOPEDIST**

**James Holding**

I don't like kids. You wouldn't either if you were in my shoes, which happen to be size ten, prison issue.

Until the South Side job, I could take kids or leave them alone. I had nothing particular against them. On the other hand, I wasn't exactly on the point of tears because I had none of my own, especially with me not married.

Anyway, kids were the farthest thing from my mind when Lieutenant Randall came over to me in Tasso's Tavern that night, where I was sitting at the bar beside a girl named Sally Ann.

I didn't know who he was then, of course. He had on a dark blue suit, a striped tie and a white button-down shirt. He also had on a bland friendly manner that promised nothing but kindness and understanding. Nobody would have thought he was a cop.

He was, though. I found that out right away when he flashed a badge on me and told me his name. "And you're Andrew Carmichael, aren't you?" he asked me politely.

Without thinking, I said, "Yeah."

He nodded. His odd yellow eyes looked at me with what could only be gentle affection. "Good," he said. "Then I'd appreciate it if you'd come downtown with me for a little talk, Mr. Carmichael. Would you mind?"

Mind? Who wouldn't mind under the circumstances? I was only halfway through my second martini; my left hand was resting companionably on Sally Ann's thigh beneath the bar. "Now?" I said. Surprisingly, a certain hoarseness roughened my voice. I cleared my throat.

"Now would be fine," said Randall. He leaned forward and looked past me along the bar at Sally Ann. "Will you excuse him for a while, Miss?"

Sally Ann brushed my hand off her thigh, said, "With pleasure. Whatever he's done, I had nothing to do with it. I just met the jerk fifteen minutes ago for the first time."

That's how it goes. Romance dries up fast when a cop appears.

Randall said, "You want to finish your drink?"

I'd lost interest in my martini. "No," I said, and stood up. Randall towered over me. "I'm ready, but it would be nice to know what you want to talk to me about."

Randall grinned. It was a boyish, happy grin despite the unblinking yellow eyes above it. "No reason to keep it secret," he said, and herded me out of Tasso's Tavern ahead of him to a police cruiser parked at the curb. Randall held the back door open for me. When I got in, he climbed in beside me and nodded to the uniformed driver up front. The police car surged away from the curb. "What we want to

talk to you about," Randall said, "is a little matter of counterfeiting, Mr. Carmichael."

Counterfeiting. I exhaled a long breath, said, "I thought counterfeiting was a federal thing, Lieutenant?"

"It is. Except there's a local angle in this case, and we're handling that. See what I mean?"

I didn't, but it wasn't important now. The skim of ice that had formed over my nerve centers when I first felt Randall's big hand on my arm began to melt. If it was counterfeiting Randall had on his mind, that let me out. I was home free, and I'll tell you why.

I know a little bit about most things. My fund of general knowledge is perhaps bigger than average, if you want the truth, but when it comes to counterfeiting, I'm nowhere. I don't even know how to spell it.

Phony bills and coins never had the slightest attraction for me. In fact, the very idea of fake money has always repelled me. I'm too fond of the real stuff to mess around with cheap substitutes. That's why I was able to breathe easy again the minute Lieutenant Randall mentioned counterfeiting. It just couldn't be me they wanted—not for counterfeiting.

If the lieutenant had said "armed robbery" now, I might have been worried. For armed robbery, especially the bank variety, was something I *did* know about. I'd robbed eighteen branch banks in the last couple of years without a hand being laid on me or even a breath of suspicion drifting in my direction.

I was proud of my success. After all, bank robbery is a demanding line of work. It takes careful planning, courage, intelligence and a fine sense of timing—in addition to a system, of course. For bank work, you need a system, one that takes a million little things into account but stays simple and uncomplicated just the same. That isn't easy; not when you have to think about armed guards, silent alarms,

concealed cameras, patrolling police, hysterical tellers, and a whole potful of unpredictable factors like that; not to mention the big decisions, like which teller in the target bank will be easiest to intimidate; which bank to knock over at what time of what day; and even—this may strike you as strange—how big a score you want to make.

Yes, that's important. At least, it is in my system. I confine myself to a relatively modest take on each job. Just the contents of a single teller's cash drawer, that's all, no more, no less. It's quick, it's clean, it's unimportant to the banks and their insurance companies. A few hundred bucks stolen? A couple of thousand even? Forget it, Charlie. It's peanuts. Just be damn sure you lock up the vault tonight where the big stuff's kept!

See what I mean? You can toss a lot of little pebbles into a pool without stirring up much fuss, but heave in one two-ton boulder with a big splash and all hell breaks loose.

My system, what the cops call an MO, was good, I admit it. Our local newspapers and broadcasters had been calling me The Whispering Bandit for two years now, and nagging the police to do something about catching me, so far without result because I stuck to throwing those little pebbles, the frequent small hauls. They suited me fine. Who needs a fortune? Not me. A few hundred a month besides my honest pay kept me comfortably supplied with all the martinis and Sally Anns my heart desired.

So you can see why Lieutenant Randall's mention of counterfeiting relieved me. You can understand, too, why I was calm and unworried when I faced him across the battered desk in his dingy office at headquarters. Since my conscience was clear, I leaned back in my wooden chair and waited for him to open the ball.

He offered me a cigarette. When I refused, he lit

one himself and leaned down beside his desk to drop the paper match into his wastebasket. Then he said, "It's very good of you to cooperate like this, Mr. Carmichael. Believe me, I appreciate it."

I shrugged. "Am I cooperating, or am I under arrest? Are you charging me with anything, Lieutenant?"

He seemed genuinely shocked. "Under arrest? Charged with anything? You've misunderstood me, I'm afraid."

"You said you wanted to talk to me about counterfeiting, didn't you?"

"Sure." He puffed smoke. "And so I do." He coughed. "I don't inhale," he informed me virtuously. "About this counterfeiting thing, I got a call from Tasso's Tavern this evening. They reported that a counterfeit bill had been passed at their bar so I naturally took a run out there to check into it. Sure enough, somebody had laid a phony bill on Tasso's bartender."

"That's tough on Tasso," I said, "but what's it got to do with me?" I was getting fed up with this foolishness.

"You were there," he said reasonably, "weren't you? Sitting at the bar with your young lady?"

"You know I was. Is that any excuse for making me waste my evening like this?"

"I'm not 'making' you waste your evening." The lieutenant's voice was hurt. "I asked you—politely—if you'd mind coming downtown for a talk, and you agreed quite readily. Is that coercion? Or is it voluntary cooperation?"

"All right, it's cooperation—but a damn waste of time all the same."

"I'm glad that's settled," said Randall.

"Nuts." I blustered a little. "Do me a favor, will you? As long as I'm here, pump me dry quick and get it over because this is the last cooperation you'll



ever get from me, and you better believe it. Don't you know that you can't push honest citizens around as though we were criminals?"

Randall grinned. "I've got news for you, Mr. Carmichael. We can push honest citizens around as much as we like. It's the criminals we have to treat with the utmost gentleness and respect. If you don't believe me, ask the Supreme Court." He ground out his cigarette in a stained tray on his desk, then he lifted his eyes to me. "The bartender at Tasso's Tavern," he said, "pointed you out to me as the customer who passed the counterfeit bill."

That really surprised me. It disturbed me some, too, and I thought back to my interrupted session at Tasso's bar with Sally Ann. I remembered paying for our drinks with a used fifty—President Grant's picture on the bill had been wrinkled and dirty—and the bill could have come into my possession in only one way. To Randall I said incredulously, "Me?"

He nodded. "The barman said it was the only fifty buck bill he's handled this week."

I know now that I should have owned to the fifty; told Randall I won it in a floating crap game or at the racetrack or some place equally untraceable. Instead, I made a bad mistake. I put on an air of amused relief and said, "A fifty! Then the bartender has to be dead wrong about who gave it to him. I haven't even *seen* a fifty buck bill for ten years, let alone spent one, Lieutenant!" I called on the truth to convince him. "I'm a short-order cook in MacDougal's all-night restaurant, working the midnight-to-eight shift. You know many short-order cooks with fifty buck bills to throw around?"

"No," Randall murmured, "can't say I do. The barkeep was pretty sure he remembered you giving it to him though."

"He couldn't have remembered if his own grandmother gave it to him, not in Tasso's tonight. The

joint was really jumping. You see it yourself. They were lined up three deep at the bar. The bartender was too busy to remember anything."

Randall gave a reluctant shrug. "Could be," he said. "Anyway, that's why I asked you to come down for a talk."

I said, "Sure, Lieutenant. No hard feelings, now that you've explained. If you want to know for the record, I paid for our four drinks, Sally Ann's and mine, with a five buck bill and gave the barkeep half the change for a tip." I said this boldly; it would be the bartender's word against mine. Leave Sally Ann out of it. When she was drinking, she never noticed anything except her own reflection in the backbar mirror.

Randall dropped his eyelids over his cat eyes and sighed. I think it was the first time I'd seen him blink. His face looked entirely different with those yellow eyes covered. "Well, then," he said, "if you didn't pass the fifty, maybe you can still give me a little help, Mr. Carmichael."

"I'll try."

"Give me the names of anybody else you knew at the bar in Tasso's tonight. *Somebody* passed that fake fifty and I've got to find out who it was. If you can give me a couple of names to start on . . ." He paused hopefully.

I shook my head. "Only one I knew was that girl Sally Ann, and she didn't even tell me her last name. You know how it is. Go into a bar for a drink and ask a babe to have one with you, just for company? Maybe the bartender can help you."

Randall gave another sigh. "I hope so."

I stood up. "All right if I blow now?"

He waved a hand. "Sure. But I'll drive you back. It's the least I can do." He glanced at his watch. "I'll be free to leave in about five minutes, if you want to wait."

I didn't want to wait. I wanted to get away from Randall's yellow eyes and his false politeness just as soon as I could; and I certainly didn't want to go back to Tasso's Tavern. I said, "Never mind, thanks. I'll catch a cab."

"Suit yourself," he said. Then, on a different note, "I'm really counting on that *particular* fifty buck bill, Mr. Carmichael, do you know it?"

"Counting on it?" I said. "For what?"

"To lead me to The Whispering Bandit," Randall said.

I stiffened all over. For a second I was afraid to turn my head for fear it would creak. "The Whispering Bandit? You mean the bank robber the papers keep talking about?" The words were hard to get out.

"That's the one," Randall said. "A two-bit thief who's got crazy-lucky eighteen times in a row."

I eased myself back into my chair, interest and animation in my face. With not a trace of his insult to me and my system showing, I asked casually, "How could a counterfeit fifty dollar bill lead you to a bank robber, Lieutenant? That doesn't make sense to me."

"Oh, it does in a way, considering the off-beat scheme we're trying right now . . . out of desperation, you might say." He sucked his lips, fixed his eyes on a cobwebbed corner of the ceiling. I waited for him to go on, trying not to look anxious.

Finally he said, "It's a childish scheme. Really childish. It probably won't work at all. How could it? In the first place it was dreamed up by an amateur, not even a cop. A nosey reader sent the idea in a letter to the president of the last bank The Whispering Bandit robbed."

I kept quiet, not doing much breathing.

"A nutty idea," Randall went on, "but I was willing to try anything to get the newspapers off my back." He shot an uncertain look at me. "As long as

you've been inconvenienced by it, Mr. Carmichael, I guess maybe you're entitled to hear what the deal is—if you're interested."

"I'm interested," I said. "Everybody in town's interested in The Whispering Bandit."

"Don't I know it! Well, the thing is, that fake fifty dollar bill at Tasso's is a kind of a trap."

I felt cold on the back of my neck. I turned to see if the office door behind me was open. It wasn't.

"A trap?" I repeated.

He nodded. "You've got to understand that we know the MO of The Whispering Bandit pretty good by this time."

"What's an MO?" I thought I ought to ask.

"Method of operation. Like The Whispering Bandit always speaks in a whisper to disguise his voice during holdups, for instance. Always works alone. Changes his appearance for every job. Takes only one drawer of cash at each heist. Makes his raids during the noon hour at small isolated branch banks in a geographical suburban pattern that's pretty well defined now, after eighteen robberies. Stuff like that, that's part of his MO. Do you follow me?"

"Yes, but not about the counterfeit fifty."

"I'm coming to that. Once we know the regular MO of The Whispering Bandit, we can kind of figure ahead of him a little, can't we? Take a rough guess at what banks he'll be hitting next and, even more important, what teller in any bank he's likely to point his Woodsman target pistol at, and ask for the money in her cash drawer."

"You're kidding," I said.

"No, I'm not. It's all part of his pattern. It's always a girl teller that he holds up, never a man; and it's always the *prettiest* girl teller in the bank."

I stared at him. He was telling me things about my system that I didn't even know myself. "How come the prettiest teller?" I asked, fascinated.

Randall laughed shortly. "The guy's probably a psycho, gets his jollies from scaring pretty girls with a gun. How do I know? Anyway, that was the basis of our counterfeit money trap for him."

"The pretty teller bit?"

"That, and the list of branch banks we figured he might hit next. See, we just picked out the prettiest teller in each of those possible branch banks; or the teller, rather, that The Whispering Bandit would think the prettiest, judging from his past selections. Then we fixed up a little bundle of money for her to keep in her cash drawer at all times, separate from her regular cash. It was just a few genuine tens and twenties, with two counterfeit fifties we borrowed from the Treasury boys mixed in. Used money, understand; not banded, just loose in the drawer, but never to be touched unless The Whispering Bandit showed up. Too, we fixed it with every one of those girl tellers that *if* The Whispering Bandit showed up at her window some noontime, she was to give him all the money in her cash drawer immediately and without arguing—especially the stack that had the two fake fifties in it. You begin to see the plot, Mr. Carmichael?"

"Sure," I said out of a dry throat. "Then I suppose you passed the word that counterfeit fifty dollar bills were showing up around town, and warned stores and bars and places to watch out for them. Right?"

"Right."

"Well." I managed a small grin. "So that's why Tasso's bartender called you so quick tonight."

"Yep. That fifty he took in rang all the bells. I thought we had The Whispering Bandit at last, because there were two fake fifties in the loot he lifted two weeks ago from the South Side branch of the Second National and this was one of them. No doubt about it."

I felt sick. *Two* fake fifties; then the other one was

still under the mattress in my room at the fleabag hotel where I lived. I've got to get out of here, I thought in a panic, I've got to get home quick, I've got to burn that damned bill, I've got to leave town . . .

Randall's telephone rang. He picked it up and listened to a tinny voice on the other end, nodding his head from time to time. When he hung up, he said, "That call concerned you, Mr. Carmichael."

"Me?" I said.

"Couple of my boys have been visiting your room," the lieutenant's tone was almost apologetic, "and I'm afraid Tasso's bartender was right about who passed the fifty, Mr. Carmichael."

Words of doom! Casually said, but doomsters all the same. I flipped. My voice went up three notches. "Visiting my room!" I yelled.

Randall held up a hand placatingly. "All in order," he said. "They had a proper warrant for the search. In fact, we've had the warrant ready for a month—all except for filling in your name." He coughed. "Tasso's bartender came up with that when he called to report the fake fifty. He knew your name, it seems, because somebody called you on the bar telephone at Tasso's once, and when the bartender asked if Andrew Carmichael was in the house, you took the call. Remember that?"

All too well. The cold feeling on the back of my neck was spreading downward between my shoulder blades. I tried to think.

Randall didn't give me much chance. He went right on. "Once we had your name, it didn't take us five minutes to find out where you lived, fill in the blank warrant, and start my boys over to your hotel. Then I came out to Tasso's."

"You said I wasn't under arrest!" I sounded shrill, even to myself. "You said I wasn't charged with anything."

"You weren't. Not then, but you are now."

I did the best I could. "You got me here under false pretenses, Lieutenant. You've questioned me without my lawyer being present or informing me of my rights. You've deprived me of my constitutional——"

Randall closed his eyes again. "I did nothing of the sort."

"You did. You've questioned me. You've accused me, at least by implication, of being The Whispering Bandit. You've tried to trick me into confessing."

"Oh, no." He reached into a desk drawer and brought out a compact tape recorder. "I think this tape will confirm that most of the questioning was done by you, and most of the confessing, if any, done by me, when I told you about our little trap for The Whispering Bandit."

When had he switched on that tape recorder, the smooth devil? When he reached to discard his first burnt match in the wastebasket?

I gave it another try. "You were deliberately holding me here while your men searched my room."

"That I admit," he said, bland as cream. "And don't you want to know what they found there?" I didn't answer, so he went on, "I'll tell you. Item: one counterfeit fifty dollar bill stashed with genuine currency under the mattress and with a serial number that identifies it as one of the two false fifties stolen two weeks ago from the South Side branch of the Second National Bank. Item: three pairs of contact lenses, various colors. Item: three hair pieces, three sets of false eyebrows, two sets of false mustaches and beards, matching colors. Item: one Colt Woodsman revolver. Item: a complete file of local newspapers detailing exploits of The Whispering Bandit, going back more than two years." He looked at me sadly, and clicked his tongue. "Shall I go on, Mr. Carmichael?"

Miserably I shook my head.

"Now you get your lawyer," Randall said. "Now we charge you with multiple armed robbery offenses. Now the Supreme Court steps in to assure you tender loving care. Because now, Mr. Carmichael, you're sure as hell going to spend a little time in the sneezer as The Whispering Bandit!"

I didn't doubt it. I said, "Very smart, Lieutenant. Very clever. Quite a gag you've pulled on me, I'll admit."

"It's not my gag. I told you that." He opened the middle drawer of his desk, making a show of it. "I've got the original letter here that suggested the idea." He pulled out a single sheet of paper. "Here it is. Would you care to see it?"

He held it out to me. Automatically, I took it and read the few lines scrawled on it in pencil:

Dere Mr. Presidant of the bank:

I know a way to fool The Whispring Bandit. When he holds up your bank, you could give him play money instead of reel money. Thank you.

Richard Stevenson, Age 9

I tossed the letter back on Randall's desk. He looked at me and his expression was hard to read. "The bank president started an account at his bank for young Richard Stevenson in the amount of five dollars," he told me. "Wasn't that nice?"

"Great," I said. Then I began to laugh.

Do you blame me for not liking kids?



## FAIR SHAKE

John Lutz

They were in the commissioner's office at headquarters. Snodman, B.S. in liberal arts, number one in his police academy class, ex-debating team captain and regional chess champion, adjusted his black horn-rimmed glasses with his little finger and peered down at the slip of paper the commissioner had handed him:

I know everything about my marks  
At least I know enough  
To catch them always unawares  
They're never up to Snuff

"Crude," Snodman said. "What does it mean, sir?"

"I've seen them before," Commissioner Moriarty said. "They're the work of a man the underworld calls 'The Snuffer'."

"A professional assassin, sir?" Snodman asked, looking at Moriarty through emotionless blue eyes. It had always intrigued Snodman, the fact that a man named Moriarty would be decreed by fate to be a police commissioner and look so like the fictitious Sherlock Holmes would have looked, with lean hawk nose, shrewd gray eyes, even smoking a pipe the stem of which was at least slightly curved.

"Possibly the greatest hired killer the police have ever run up against," the commissioner said. "Rumor has it that he works for the syndicate no more than once a year and receives at least fifty thousand dol-

lars a job. I personally know of six jobs he's definitely completed in various cities."

Snodman, who smoked a pipe himself, placed the stem between his thin lips and reached for his tobacco pouch. "How can you be so sure they were all the work of this . . . Snuffer, sir? *Modus operandi*?"

The commissioner smiled. "It is his M.O. that he is proud of. It varies with every job. In Chicago, concerning the sports fixing racket, it was an exploding basketball; two years ago Hans Greiber, the passport forger, was found drowned in one of those little German cars filled with water; and surely you remember when Joe Besini, who was going to turn state's evidence against the syndicate, was found smothered by a hot pizza."

"Gruesome," Snodman said.

"Anchovies, too." Commissioner Moriarty shook his head reminiscently. "The fact is that in each of these cases the victim knew he was marked for death and had police protection. In each of these cases The Snuffer warned the victim with one of these little poems. A highly developed sense of fair play, if you ask me."

"Yes," Snodman agreed, shifting position in the leather office chair so that his trousers wouldn't become too wrinkled. He was one of the best dressed detectives on the force, and he was proudly aware of it. "I suppose every attempt has been made to trace him through the poems," he said.

The commissioner nodded. "As you can see, they're in hand-printed ink on cheap stationery. The paper is too common to mean anything and Handwriting Analysis can't make anything out of the simple printing except that it's the work of a careful, precise individual, which I could have told you."

Snodman wrinkled his still youthful brow. "But why on earth does he send the poems? Doesn't he

realize they merely increase his chances of being caught?"

The commissioner leaned over his desk. "Fair play, Snodman. The psychologists say that he's so clever and supremely confident that his conscience compels him to give his victims warning. They say that The Snuffer wants to preserve his anonymity yet boast about his work, so he writes poems. Some of them are quite good."

Snodman, who fancied himself something of an expert on literature, wanted to disagree with his superior but thought better of it. Besides, he was curious as to why the commissioner was filling him in on this subject, so he sat patiently and waited for his boss to get to the point.

"The point is," Moriarty said, biting on his curved pipe stem, "that a man named Ralph Capastrani has agreed to testify next month before a Senate Subcommittee hearing on organized crime. We thought it was a hush-hush thing, but kept Capastrani under protection anyway. Then, this morning, I received this poem in the mail."

"Does Capastrani know anything about it, sir?"

"No. We don't want him to die of worry before the hearings. We're taking every precaution to keep The Snuffer from earning another fortune from the syndicate. Capastrani is under guard in a room at the Paxton Hotel, just two blocks from here. We moved him in this morning." The commissioner paused for effect and pressed his fingertips down onto the glass desk top. "Starting in ten minutes, your job will be to guard him."

"I'm honored you have the confidence in me, sir," Snodman said, actually rather insulted that the commissioner should think he would have a hard time outwitting the composer of these jingling trivialities.

Commissioner Moriarty smiled his Holmes-like smile. "You are one of the most highly educated men

on the force, Snodman, and in the few years you've been with us you've proven yourself to be an efficient and hardworking policeman. Few men of your caliber choose policework as a profession, and your dedication is unquestioned. I can think of no man on the force who would have a better chance of outwitting The Snuffer."

Snodman took this deluge of compliments with aplomb.

The commissioner picked up a silver letter opener and neatly opened one of many letters on his desk. "Capastrani is in room twenty-four on the third floor," he said by way of dismissal. "I'll be over later myself to check on things."

Snodman rose casually and took his leave.

Suite 24 was small and sparsely but tastefully furnished. Shades had been pulled over the third floor, ledgeless windows; heating and air conditioning ducts had been blocked and the comfort was being inadequately supplied by a rented window air conditioner; food was brought up three times a day by a room service waiter who was duly searched before being admitted. Outside the door to the hall stood an armed patrolman; outside the door to the bedroom sat Snodman; inside the bedroom lay Capastrani, sleeping peacefully. Suite 24 was invulnerable.

Obviously Capastrani, a squat, hairy individual, had faith in his police department, for almost all of his time was occupied by sleeping and eating; but then, besides listening to the monotonous watery hum of the air conditioner, there really wasn't much else to do in suite 24.

Snodman's mind dwelt on how much the syndicate would pay to have Capastrani killed. It dwelt on Commissioner Moriarty and his thorough knowledge of The Snuffer. The commissioner had even consulted a police psychologist. Snodman had seen the gleam in the commissioner's eyes as he'd discussed the cunning

assassin, and he was sure that Moriarty had dedicated himself to foiling or even capturing The Snuffer. A policeman's dream, Snodman said to himself, smiling.

The long day went by without event. The patrolman outside the door had changed when the three o'clock shift came on. Capastrani had emerged from his room only to eat a late breakfast and lunch, which he'd wolfed down before returning to stretch full length and fully clothed on the bed. Snodman had read a travel magazine three times. He yawned and looked at his watch: five o'clock.

At five forty-five he was speaking frantically into the telephone to Commissioner Moriarty. "You'd better come over here right away with a lab man, sir. I think somebody tried to poison Capastrani!"

Within five minutes the door to suite 24 flew open. Snodman's police revolver was out of its shoulder holster in a flash, but he relaxed as he saw it was the commissioner and a lab man. They looked in surprise at Snodman's revolver as Wilson, the uniformed patrolman guarding the hall, closed the door behind them.

"It's all right," Commissioner Moriarty said. "We should have knocked."

Snodman slipped the revolver into his suitcoat pocket. "Have a look at this," he said, pointing to the tray of food that room service had brought up for Capastrani's supper. To the lab man he said, "I think there's arsenic on the steak."

"I'm glad you called me personally," Commissioner Moriarty said. "You did the right thing."

Snodman smiled. "I knew you had a special interest in the case," he said. "I thought you'd want to come right over."

The commissioner nodded soberly. "That's why I chose a hotel only two blocks from headquarters."

The three of them leaned over the tray of food. "You can't see it now," Snodman said, "but there

were traces of white powder on the underside of the steak when it was brought up. Most of it's dissolved in the juices by now."

The commissioner picked up the plate and sniffed. "What made you suspicious?" he asked, replacing the plate.

Snodman shrugged. "A hunch. And I thought there was a peculiar odor about the steak."

"Check it out," the commissioner told the lab man. Then he drew Snodman over to the sofa to talk with him.

"Capastrani know about this?" Moriarty asked.

Snodman shook his head. "He's still asleep. I was going to wake him when supper came."

"Hmm," the commissioner said. "I don't understand how anybody could have slipped arsenic into that food. I toured the kitchen this morning and checked out the help myself. They're all trustworthy, long-time employees."

"Maybe somebody was bought," Snodman suggested. "The Snuffer would be able to afford it."

"Good point," the commissioner said. "Does Capastrani eat steak every night?"

"It's a standing order with room service. That's just the sort of habit The Snuffer would take advantage of. You said he studied his future victims carefully before each job."

"I didn't say that," the commissioner said. "He did—in his poem."

The lab man, a studious looking young fellow, walked over to them. "There's arsenic on the steak," he said. "I checked the salt, pepper, ketchup, coffee, even the cream for the coffee. Everything on the tray besides the steak is okay." Then he held out the slip of paper in his right hand. "This was stuck to the bottom of the steak plate, sir."

The commissioner took it, unfolding it slowly as Snodman watched closely. They read:

I am quite sure my little trick  
Nicely stilled your Pigeon's song  
'Cause a little bit of arsenic  
Never hurt a soul—for long

The commissioner crumpled the poem and put it in his pocket. Then he turned to the lab man. "You can go now," he said. "On the way out tell the kitchen to send up another steak, and this time you stand right there while it's cooking."

"Right," the lab man said, and walked briskly and efficiently out of the room to implement his orders.

"We won't tell Capastrani about this," the commissioner said to Snodman. "He doesn't even know The Snuffer is after him. There's no point in rattling the state's star witness."

"Yes, sir," Snodman said.

The commissioner stretched his lean body. "You've been cooped up in here all day," he said to Snodman. "Why don't you go out for a while and get a bite to eat and some fresh air. The patrolman's outside the door, and I'll stay here myself and keep an eye on things until you return."

"Thank you, sir," Snodman said with appreciation. "To tell you the truth, I was about to ask that little favor myself. I could sure use some fresh air and a change of scenery." He walked to the door and paused. "Is there anything I can bring you, sir?"

"No, no thank you." The commissioner seemed almost eager for Snodman to leave. "Take an hour if you want, Snodman."

"Why, thank you, sir." He stepped into the hall and softly shut the door behind him.

Just after Snodman had left, room service arrived at the door with Capastrani's new steak. The commissioner let them in, examined the steak, made sure the patrolman in the hall was alert, then went into the bedroom to awaken Capastrani.

As he first emerged from sleep the squat little man was shocked to see the commissioner. Then he blinked his eyes a few times and recognized him. Without a word, he looked at his watch and rose from the mattress to leave the bedroom and eat supper.

With a smug little smile, the commissioner sat on the sofa and watched as Capastrani settled himself before the tray. Apparently the little man had been sound asleep and was completely unaware of the recent occurrence. Capastrani sprinkled salt and pepper liberally on his steak and buttered a roll. Then he unscrewed the cap on the ketchup bottle and tipped it. As was not unusual, nothing came out. He shook the bottle a few times, gently, then shook it harder. He was holding it upside down, looking at it curiously, when the force of its explosion blew out the entire third floor west wall.

As the ominous sound of the explosion reached police headquarters two blocks away, Snodman leaned back in his desk chair in his tiny office and smiled. He drew the genuine ketchup bottle from his shoulder holster and placed it in his bottom desk drawer. Then he picked up the slip of paper on which was the poem he'd just compulsively jotted down, tore it into tiny pieces and let the pieces flutter down into his wastebasket. For all his cleverness, the one thing he couldn't do was write poetry. Still, bad as they were, even in his lifetime his little jingles might yet achieve a certain degree of fame.

## ITEM

Henry Slesar

"It was the craziest thing," the woman on the stretcher said. "Me and my husband Milton were having



breakfast this morning, around ten o'clock because Milton likes to sleep late on a Saturday. And as usual, he was half-man and half-newspaper; I didn't see his ugly face for the whole meal. Then all of a sudden, he acts like a bomb went off. He jumps up, tears an item out of the paper, and shoves it into his pocket. Then he runs to the hall closet, gets his hat and coat, and busts out of the house like a rocket. Not a word, you understand, not a single word about where or what. The next thing I know it's eleven-thirty, and I hear the front door opening. 'Milton?' I says, going out to the hallway. Sure enough, it's Milton, and what do you suppose he's doing? He's pointing a gun at me! I thought he was kidding, and was I surprised when he pulled that trigger and *bam*. My gosh, a bullet feels just like a hard slap, did you know that? I don't suppose I'll ever wear this dress again, will I?"

"Take it easy," the police interne said, slitting the cloth shields from the rayon sleeves. "You've lost some blood, but the bullet only struck the fleshy part of the arm. You're a lucky woman, Mrs. Hanley."

"Lucky?" she snorted. "With a husband like mine?" She turned her dull gray eyes towards the lieutenant. He was on the phone, talking quietly. When he hung up and came towards her, he looked like a diagnostician with bad news.

"Sorry to tell you this," he said, "but a prowler car spotted your husband on Grand Street and ordered him to halt. He didn't listen, unfortunately. I'm afraid he's dead."

Mrs. Hanley's face did a muscle dance. Then it relaxed, with a sigh of either relief or acceptance. "Poor Milton," she said. "I suppose you want to know about him?"

"Yes," the lieutenant said.

"Well, Milton was a pretty ordinary guy in most ways, but I never saw such a man for squeezing a

nickel. I guess that was the real cause of all the trouble between us. I mean, Milton was so tight that he hadn't bought a new pair of shoes in six years, and the suit I'll bury him in is at least nine years old. Listen, you want to see something kooky? Take a look in the basement. Milton's got the biggest ball of tinfoil you ever saw in your life. He's got boxes full of string and a crate full of soda bottle caps. Don't ask me what for, maybe he was going to retille the roof with 'em. I never saw a man so cheap.

"Anyway, we've been having fights about money for years. I tried to stretch his miserable salary as best I could; me, I'm the national bake-off champion when it comes to leftovers. But every once in a while, I *had* to spend some money on myself. I mean, a woman needs a new hat or dress now and then or she goes to pieces.

"Well, things got pretty bad in the last few months. We were having some real fights about money, Milton and me, and he was getting tighter by the day. Once, after a hot argument, I walked out and came back with half a dozen bundles from a woman's shop. I must have spent fifty dollars, just to spite him, and he got so worked up he was frothing at the mouth. He would have thrown things at me, but he was too cheap to break anything.

"I guess the fight we had yesterday was the last straw. I never had much sales resistance, and a vacuum cleaner salesman came to the door with a real smooth talk. Before I knew what I was doing, I signed an agreement for their fanciest cleaner with all the trimmings. The bill was around a hundred and sixty dollars, and when I told Milton about it, he looked at me sort of peculiar and didn't say a word. Not a word. I should have realized that was the kookiest thing he could have done, and started to worry. Instead, I didn't give it another thought. And look what happens."

"I see," the lieutenant said. "But what I want to know is, what was the newspaper item your husband clipped? The one that got him so excited?"

"I don't know," Mrs. Hanley said. "I never got a look at it. It must have been really something."

"Is that paper still in the house?"

"Yes, but it's all torn up."

"Harry," the lieutenant said, turning to a patrolman, "search the apartment for that newspaper, and get me another edition of the same issue. Find out what item Hanley removed."

"Yes, sir," the patrolman said.

They had it in their hands an hour later.

"What is it?" Mrs. Hanley said eagerly.

"It's an ad," the lieutenant said. "An advertisement from a sporting goods shop."

It read:

"GUN SALE. Were \$18.95, now \$11.95."

## **CURTAIN SPEECH**

Ed Lacy

Detective Jimmy Davis' first case as a member of Homicide Squad was the hit-and-run killing of a 51-year-old woman, Mrs. Hanna Sands. Jimmy told Acting Lt. Wintino, "Dave, it may sound like I'm making a 'thing' of my first homicide—but this *wasn't* any accident, it's premeditated murder! At 1:08 A.M. a witness saw the deceased start across Carson Avenue, which is wide enough for six lanes and deserted at that hour—few cars. The witness saw the sedan coming fast at Mrs. Sands. She was in the middle of the avenue, started to run for the opposite side. Now get

this, Dave, the witness claims the car *deliberately* crossed into the uptown traffic lanes—to run Mrs. Sands down—then veered back to the downtown side . . . raced off!”

“Could be a drunk, a guy—or woman—asleep at the wheel, their car got out of hand . . .”

“No, sir, the witness is positive the car *followed* the victim to the wrong side of the avenue!”

“This sharp-eyed witness see the driver, get the license number?”

“Not exactly, it happened too fast. But he’s certain it was a late model Buick and the license plate started with a K. Naturally I’m checking that out now and . . .”

“Where’s this alert witness?”

Detective Davis looked out the dirty window of the Squad room as he said, “I’m the witness, sir. I was leaving my mother’s house last night, approaching Carson Avenue, on my way to the bus, when . . .”

“*You’re the witness?*” Lt. Wintino yelled. “Jimmy, you think we’re playing cops-and-robbers here? Why didn’t you tell me you . . .?”

“Dave, I know it looks like a production, my first case, and me the only witness, but . . . I still think it’s murder one! I ran over to Mrs. Sands—nothing I could do for her—she was a bloody corpse. No other cars on the avenue, so I couldn’t take after the Buick. . . .”

“Until we know for sure otherwise, this is a hit-and-run deal!” Lt. Wintino snapped. “Remember, we try to solve those, too!”

“Sir—Dave, don’t treat me like a kid. Listen: There’s something fishy about this. Mrs. Sands was an operator in a dress factory, made good wages. She lived in a small apartment near Carson Avenue—separated from her husband for a long time. The superintendent of the house told me Mrs. Sands had been living there for over 15 years, and the super

never saw Mr. Sands. This is the odd part: day before yesterday a guy was around asking the super if Mrs. Sands had any kids, close relatives, a husband—the fellow said he was checking for an insurance company, that Mrs. Sands was about to take out a policy. Now, to quote the super, this guy looked ‘Like a private-eye right out of a movie! Tall, rangy, young guy, big through the shoulders, wearing a trench coat, hat pulled down over his eyes, talked hard.’ I checked Mrs. Sands place of employment, she never said anything about taking out a policy, was covered by her union insurance, didn’t need any more. . . .”

“Jimmy, I’m not this interested in the life story of any 51-year-old babe, even a live one. What’s this add up to?” Wintino asked, impatiently.

“Coming to that, sir. The super’s expression, ‘Like a private-eye right out of a movie!’ sticks in my mind. For a routine policy check an insurance company usually sends out some old duck, a retired type. There’s more: last night—the super saw this same joker in the trench coat call for Mrs. Sands—they got into the guy’s car, an old MG roadster, drove off. A couple of hours later, Mrs. Sands was dead.”

Wintino rubbed his crewcut. “Now it starts to shape up . . . maybe. An insurance investigator wouldn’t be taking her riding. . . . Maybe a boyfriend?”

“Then why the questions to the super the day before about whether or not Mrs. Sands had kids, a husband?” Jimmy asked.

“A cautious boyfriend,” Dave said, smiling.

Detective Davis shook his solemn face. “No, sir, that doesn’t fit, either. Mrs. Sands wasn’t any beauty, just a middle-aged woman who always came directly home from work, looked at TV, went to sleep early. Not the type to start going with a guy half her age.”

“Keep digging. Try to find the hubby, Mr. Sands—maybe he looks like a movie dick,” Dave told him.

Detective Davis was back in the office shortly after lunch. "Dave, I've found the car—abandoned half a mile from the scene. Headlights broken, blood and Mrs. Sands's hair and bits of her clothing all over the bumper. All prints rubbed off, too. The car was stolen from a dentist living a few streets west of Carson Avenue. Dentist is sure he parked the car outside his house at 10:30 P.M. Obviously, this trench-coated 'movie dick' had a fight with Mrs. Sands . . . she jumped out of his MG, started walking home. Trench-coat stole the Buick, ran her down, left the death car and took off in his sports roadster. I been asking around, where the abandoned Buick was found—so far haven't come up on anybody who saw an MG there. I . . ."

"What about Mr. Sands?"

Reading from his notebook, Jimmy said, "He left Hanna Sands about 18 years ago, lived on the Island with a nurse named Irene Parks. Harry Sands was a lush and six years ago the sauce reached his liver—he died. I've had a long talk with Miss Irene Parks. She's 44 years old, claims she never saw the wife—the dead woman—but she's bitter at her for refusing to give the husband a divorce. When Harry Sands died, he willed everything he had—a thousand buck policy—to Miss Parks. But Hanna Sands, still his legal wife, got her widow's share. All this, Irene Parks says, was handled by lawyers, the women never met. Besides, she has a perfect alibi; on duty in a hospital the night of the killing."

"What did the late Henry Sands do for his pork chops?"

"Nothing mostly, kind of an intellectual bum. He was a reporter when he married Hanna Sands—wrote a novel which made a little money—about 25 years ago. He met Irene and left his wife. The nurse was practically supporting him—now and then Sands got a job as a copywriter for ad agencies. Generally each

job lasted only a few weeks, due to his lushing."

Lt. Wintino sighed. "No motive, nothing but a fat zero to work on."

"At least we know it's murder! A hard-working, middle-aged woman goes riding with a stranger and . . ."

"He couldn't have been such a stranger if she went out in his MG. About all you can do now is shake out the deceased's private life."

"Just what I'm doing," Jimmy said. "Don't worry, Dave, I'll collar this movie detective type!"

At the end of a week Detective Davis was forced to report no progress, place the case in the Open File, along with other unsolved killings.

Although Detective Davis was busy on other cases, he kept going back to the Sands file in his spare time, working on it so much Lt. Wintino told him one day, "Take it easy on this Sands thing, kid. We never close a homicide until it's solved . . . in time we'll get a break and . . ."

"I know, Dave, but it's just that . . . well, I saw it with my own eyes, and I don't go for any perfect crime bit, so . . ."

"Neither do I, Jimmy. But you have nothing to work on here, not even a smell of a motive. You have to keep at this on your own, okay, I'm all for eager-beavers; went through that stage myself. But if you're going to worry over every unsolved killing we come up against, you'll be wearing a double-breasted strait jacket! Remember, in the long run, time is on our side, not on theirs."

Some ten months after Hanna Sands lost her life, Jimmy had a rugged day walking up and down miles of steps going through tenement after tenement, trying to find anybody who had heard a shot in a kid gang killing. In the evening he nearly went to sleep on his feet—waiting with his wife to see a new movie the critics had snowed under with praise, calling it the

work of one of America's "angry young men," and the "first of the new Hollywood wave." When they finally got inside during the middle of the movie, Jimmy dozed off a few times, unable to catch the story line.

As they were riding the bus home, his wife said, "That Marlon Smith will be bigger than Orson Welles—what a genius! Most novel idea I ever saw in a movie—each day an entirely new life for the girl—starting off every day, in her mind, as a newly born child, and by evening she's in her old age. Why, in a week's time we saw seven different lives and . . . Jimmy Davis, are you listening to me?"

"Yeah. So that was the plot—no wonder whenever I awoke, I thought I was seeing a new picture. But—there was something on the screen which rang a tiny bell in my head. Wish to hell I could remember what it was."

"I'm glad we stood in line to see this picture—I mean, I feel as if I was in on motion picture history. Vilma Anders was an extra until now—this will make her an overnight star. Think of Marlon Smith—pure talent! Enough faith in himself—an unknown cowboy actor—to produce, write, and direct this avant-garde picture on a shoestring budget. I read where Smith is a perfectionist, put in years working on this. He's in town for a TV interview, on his way to . . . Are you dozing off again, Jimmy?"

"No, hon, merely thinking. One of those times when I was half-asleep, there was this something on the screen. . . ."

"Waste of time going out with you, when you're groggy."

"Especially at \$2.50 a seat."

"If this ever comes to the neighborhood theatres, we'll see it again. A movie in four dimensions, with a theme so original that . . ."

Jimmy suddenly sat up, grabbed her hand. "Hon!



When they were flashing the credits on the screen—I was just closing my eyes . . . didn't it say this was based on a novel by Harry Sands?"

"Think so. I never pay much attention to the credits. Who is . . .? Oh, isn't he the husband of that woman who was run down by a car?"

Jimmy stood up, rang for the bus to stop. "Dear, you go on home. I want to talk to Harry Sands's girl friend."

"At this hour?"

"She's probably on duty at the hospital. I'll be home soon."

Detective Davis was drinking coffee with Irene Parks in the hospital kitchen 25 minutes later. She said, "I'm so glad Harry finally received recognition—how I wish he was alive to see his success! Always told me he'd written his guts into that book. He started hitting the bottle because it never received the fame he felt it deserved."

"They say the picture is making a bundle. Who will get Harry's share, Miss Parks?"

"I had my lawyer look into that—nobody. The book is in public domain—whatever that means—the copyright expired. However, due to the picture being a hit, a paperback book outfit's reprinting the novel and I'm to get two thousand bucks."

"Shouldn't Hanna Sands' estate get that money?"

"Why? I was named in Harry's will, not her. Logically, or legally, or any other way you want to view it, the money is mine—I supported Harry for most of his life. I'm not kicking, I loved him. Besides, my lawyer says that since the book is in public domain, the paperback company doesn't *have* to pay anybody a dime. They're only paying me to avoid the nuisance of a lawsuit, and because my signature—a beneficiary of Harry's estate—will prevent any other publisher from bringing out the book. Don't you think it's only fair I get the money?"

"I guess so," Jimmy said, finishing his coffee.

The following morning he was in the office of a lawyer specializing in copyright. The lawyer said, "A copyright runs for 28 years and must be renewed, within the 28th year. According to the phone call I made to the Library of Congress, Sands's copyright wasn't renewed, so the novel is in public domain, for anybody to . . ."

"Renewed by whom? Sands died years ago."

"A wife, or child, would have inherited the copyright, could have renewed it."

"How about a girl friend? Could Sands have left the copyright to her, instead of his wife?"

"As long as he was still legally married and childless, only Mrs. Sands could have renewed it."

"Did the copyright expire ten months ago?"

"No—seven months ago."

"And anybody could find out if the thing had been renewed, merely by phoning or visiting the Library of Congress?"

The lawyer nodded. "I don't understand why the police are . . .?"

"Tell me one thing more," Jimmy cut in. "The picture opened last week. You know about these things—how long does it take from the time they start shooting a picture until it reaches the theatre screen?"

"Impossible to say, sometimes years. Depends on the producer and director. I'm told Marlon Smith actually shot all the scenes in a record time of 12 days. If he rushed the processing, the editing, he could have had it ready for exhibition within a few months."

"Any idea what it cost Smith to make the picture?"

"There's a fantastic rumor afoot he made it for *under* \$60,000."

"Since Smith was a two-bit cowboy extra, where did he raise that kind of loot?"

The lawyer laughed. "Once he had his distribution set, banks would have stumbled over themselves try-

ing to loan him money. I would have backed him, gladly. On a \$60,000 nut—for a full-length picture—profit is a sure thing. This picture will gross several millions, but even if it had been a flop, it still would net at least a \$100,000 here and abroad. Tell me, how come the police are interested in the picture business?”

“Maybe you’ll see why in the evening news,” Jimmy said.

In the Homicide Squad room Jimmy told Lt. Wintino, “I know Marlon Smith’s a celebrity and there will be a hell of a backfire if I’m wrong, but I’m positive he’s our boy! Remember the super’s description of a guy who looked like a movie dick? Smith is the perfectionist type actor, so if he were playing detective he’d get himself up like the movie version of a dick!”

Dave nodded. “I’m awaiting a call from the Hollywood police. If they report Smith owned an MG ten months ago, we’ll pick him up on suspicion.”

An hour later, when Hollywood affirmed Smith once had an MG, Jimmy Davis brought the actor in. Furious, Smith refused to say a word, except to demand the right to call his lawyer.

Dave and Jimmy grilled him, but the actor sat there glaring at them in complete silence. Wintino motioned for Jimmy to follow him outside the interrogation room.

Jimmy said, “This guy’s as tough as a professional crook. Once he calls his lawyer, he’ll be out of here, and the egg will hit the fan. Looks like I put you in a mess, Dave.”

“Maybe. We can stall phoning his lawyer for another half hour or so, but unless we get some kind of admission from him, we’ll be in trouble—his publicity men will eat this up, plaster the department all over the headlines. I’m going to try something . . . might even call it a new kind of Third Degree. I’ve borrowed a TV camera from the city station—we’ll see

how long an actor can remain silent in front of a camera. If this doesn't work, we'd better start reading the help-wanted ads fast and furiously!"

When the camera was set up, Smith was seated facing the red 'ON' light above the lens. Lt. Wintino told the actor, "Since you're a public figure, and this will certainly be in all the papers soon, I see no reason to hide our questioning. This interrogation is being televised—taped—to show the public no force is being used. I ask you again: Do you still claim you never saw Mrs. Hanna Sands? Didn't talk to her the night she was killed? Didn't take her for a drive in your MG? Didn't call on the janitor of her apartment house the day before that, pretend you were an insurance investigator? He's on his way here now."

For long seconds Marlon Smith sat facing the TV camera. It was almost as if the actor and the camera were staring each other down.

Wintino was about ready to call it quits, when Smith's handsome face seemed to go to pieces. He shut his eyes, then opened them, stared boldly at the lens: threw back his head—sensitive face the picture of tragedy.

In a low, clear voice, projecting with dramatic emphasis, Marlon Smith said, "Yes, I killed her—in self-defense! I lost my head, went crazy at the thought of my long dream ending in a nightmare! I've wanted to dramatize Harry Sands's story ever since I read it in a little literary magazine, while I was in high school. I—alone—saw it as the perfect motion picture. Years later I wrote Mr. Sands—asking if I could buy an option on the screen rights. The magazine was long gone, my letter was returned by the post office. In 1957 I started writing the screenplay, casting, tried to get backing—God, I worked and literally starved for years! Then, some eleven months ago, when I finally was on the verge of raising the necessary funds—I was in Washington, D. C., and went to copyright my

screenplay. I figured the magazine copyright had expired, if there ever had been one. It was only then I learned Sands had *also* expanded the story into a novel, some years after the magazine piece was published. I never even knew there had been a book—until then.

“The book copyright still had several months to run. While I knew Sands had died, I had to find out if there was a wife, or children, so I thought up the insurance dick bit. I did the right thing—offered Hanna Sands 10 percent of the gross for the movie rights. She flatly refused, demanded ten grand *cash*. You can see my situation. I’d explained to her about the copyright—once she renewed it, I’d be bogged down raising ten grand for her, never get the backing for my picture if it was known I didn’t have a clear title. I begged her to take a percentage, offered to write out an agreement there and then. I even offered 20 percent, but this stupid clod, this greedy little woman, refused. Then she jumped out of my car. I saw my work, my life, all fading into oblivion because of her greed! I . . . I don’t know what I did . . . then. I dimly recall finding an unlocked car . . . running somebody down . . . as in a bad movie. But you see it truly was self-defense . . . of my artistic life, of my talent and integrity, of my dreams! A dream can be more important than life itself. . . .”

Smith’s voice faded to a dying whisper. Jimmy Davis found himself ready to applaud, only snapped out of it as Lt. Wintino barked, “Type up that confession, have him sign it! This show’s over.”

## **HIS BROTHER'S CAPER**

Richard Hardwick

For several years Curt Pennington's existence had been one of acute frustration. Now he was desperate. The frustration remained, however, because his problems could be so easily solved if his brother Ethan would only bend a little.

But there was no chance of this happening, so Curt went again to his sister for stop-gap aid. He found Norma in her usual place, the east veranda of the stately old Pennington home. He pulled a wicker rocker alongside hers and sat down.

"Sis . . ." he began hesitantly. "Sis, I need a couple of hundred to tide me over. I was wondering if you could let me have it. I'll pay you back as soon as I can."

Norma Pennington lowered her knitting to her lap and looked at Curt. She was thirty-one years old, two years younger than Curt himself, yet she treated him as though he were a child. In some ways, Curt was exactly that. Physically, he was a tall, handsome young man, but even now he wore the petulant expression of a six-year-old who has been denied an ice cream cone. The analogy extended, for Curt's ice cream cones were such things as Benjie Nix, the gambler, who would take no more of Curt's bets until he squared some of the money he owed, and Curt with a red hot tip on the second at Jamaica. Another was Charlene Norrell, who did not consider any free form of entertainment as being entertainment at all. There were other things—new clothes, a hi-fi, a sports car, a trip to Las Vegas. No indeed, the best things in

life to Curt Pennington were definitely not free.

"You haven't been gambling again, have you, Brother?" Norma asked reproachfully. "You know what Ethan says about that."

"To heck with Ethan!" He hiked his chair a bit closer. "Can you let me have the two hundred, Sis? I swear I'll pay you back! When this nag comes in I'll be in high cotton——" He had not meant to let that slip, and he tried to amend it. "Actually, I won't be betting the money. My bookie's putting the pressure on me and I've got to get up some money today or ——" He let it trail off ominously, trying to gauge Norma's reaction from the corner of his eye.

"Or what?" she asked stiffly.

He shook his head. "I'd rather not spell it out for you, Sis," he said gravely. "Anyhow, it's really Ethan's fault. He knows I can't possibly get along on an allowance of fifty a week."

"It's really for your own good, brother. Ethan is only thinking of your best interest."

"Really?" he said archly. "And I suppose he was really thinking of your best interest when he ran Charlie O'Toole off."

A flicker of pain crossed Norma's plain features and a tear formed in each eye and dribbled down her pale cheeks. Quickly, Curt reached out and took her hand.

"I'm sorry, Sis. That was a rotten thing to say." But no matter what Norma had convinced herself lay behind Ethan's summary dismissal of the only serious suitor she ever had, to Curt it was arrant snobbery. The O'Tooles, even if Charlie was an up-and-coming criminal lawyer, were simply not the kind of people the Penningtons were, and the result was that poor Norma sat by the hour on the veranda or in the garden knitting sweaters and socks instead of little things for little O'Tooles.

The incident had characterized Ethan Pennington,

to whom the name of Pennington was virtually a fetish. Individual Penningtons were expendable, existing only in relation to what they might add to or detract from the family name. There were no outstanding Penningtons now, the last having been the paternal grandfather, who had accumulated considerable wealth and had firmly established the family as top drawer in Carl County and the town of Carlsburg. There had, unfortunately, been a number of Penningtons at the other end of the scale over the years, with the penchant for waste and high living. Ethan had taken it upon himself to keep this sort of activity down and to keep the family escutcheon unsullied.

The eldest child of Traver and Elise Pennington, Ethan, at the age of forty-one had gone so far as to have his own father committed to an institution when it appeared that the old man's excesses were imperiling both the Pennington fortune and name. In the ten years since that, Ethan, as sole trustee, had assumed the helm of the good ship Pennington, and had steered it circumspectly through the reefs and shoals of life.

There were just the three of them in the immediate family now—Norma, Curt, and Ethan. Curt was the incipient black sheep. Norma, in her initial shock over the O'Toole affair, had come perilously close to swaying over to Curt's point of view, but the constant reminders of family duty and responsibility put forth by Ethan eventually cemented her to her rocker and knitting.

"Perhaps you should do as Ethan says," Norma went on, "and take a position in town. Then you would have money to do the things you want." It was as if she were sitting on Ethan's knee having the words spoken for her.

"I've tried to explain to you, Sis," Curt said, "that I have absolutely nothing against work, per se. What



I cannot understand is why I should take some lousy job with a bank or a brokerage when Ethan is sitting on a pile of money that rightfully is as much mine as anybody's!"

"The money mightn't be there at all but for Ethan," Norma reminded him.

Curt nodded his head. "I know all about that. But when Ethan had us sign those commitment papers, you have to admit he made it sound a lot different than it really was. And when he got his hands on everything, his very first move was to put you and me on a lousy fifty dollar a week allowance."

"I get along very well on mine."

"But you don't do anything but sit here!" He was on his feet, waving his arms. "There's a world out there, Norma! A world that's alive and vibrant, full of lights, places to see, things to do, and that Ethan——"

"Did I hear my name mentioned?" The French doors pushed open and a paunchy, well-dressed man stepped out onto the veranda and riveted Curt with a pale green eye.

"Yes, you did! Father used to give me a thousand a month, and you said I'd get even more if I went along with you and had him put in a . . . what was it you called it? . . . a rest home!"

Ethan Pennington's heavy lips twisted in a momentary smile. "I hope you learned a business lesson from that, Curt. A verbal contract carries no weight."

"I thought of it as your word, not a contract."

"As eldest heir and trustee of the estate, it is my duty to protect the assets and conserve the income. You live here without cost, and it seems to me fifty dollars a week is ample pocket money. Perhaps," he added with pointed emphasis, "*more* than adequate. Eventually it may take a reduction to wean you away from your bad habits."

"What you consider my bad habits," Curt put in peevishly, "I consider—well, my personal hobbies,"

"Hobbies?" Ethan said, his eyebrows rising. "What a quaint euphemism for gambling, drinking, carousing, and running around with loose women! I often wonder if the name Pennington means anything at all to you."

"It would mean a lot more if I could sign it at the bottom of a check!"

"Made out to that gambler, Benjie Nix?" Ethan suggested. "Or to that Norrell woman? I don't want to hear anything more on the subject!"

He turned on his heel and stalked back into the house. Curt stared after him, his jaw clenching impotently, then he sat down again and leaned toward Norma. "How about it, Sis? Just two hundred, I swear you'll get it back."

Charlene Norrell was a contemporary of Norma Pennington's, but there the similarity ended. Charlene was tall, sultry, and exceptionally well put together. She ran a little dress shop called the *Bon Ton* located on Main Street in Carlsburg next door to a cocktail lounge, the Pump Room. When she closed her shop at six that afternoon, Charlene stepped next door and sat at a dark corner table where Curt Pennington had been sitting morosely since midafternoon awaiting her arrival.

"No luck with Ethan, huh?" she said.

He shook his head. "Norma let me have a couple of hundred. I gave Benjie half of it on account, and got the other hundred down just in time to hear my nag come in a poor last."

The bartender brought Charlene's regular drink, a champagne cocktail, to the table and placed it before her. She took a sip and patted Curt's hand. "That's too bad, honey. There's a swinging bunch going up to the mountains this weekend. The snow's still good, I hear. Skiing ought to be great."

Curt had been gazing down into his half-filled glass

of beer as though he might find there some harbinger of good tidings. Now he looked up at Charlene. "Are you going?"

"Sure I am, baby! You know how I love the mountains."

"Eddie taking you?"

She nodded. "I wish it were you, Curt. I really do. But without any money, well—the lodge and the food and drinks and everything——"

"Yeah, I know."

"I don't know why you put up with that tightwad brother of yours. I really don't."

"What choice have I got?"

She took another sip of her champagne and after a moment said, "I've been thinking about some of the things you've told me about him. It seems to me you could put the bite on him without him getting wise."

He bent his head, frowning. "How?"

"Well, suppose you told him you were in some kind of big trouble, that you had to have ten grand to square it. You said he's a nut about keeping the family clear of scandal."

He sighed. "No dice. I've thought of that myself. Ethan saw right through it. He wanted proof, and that was that."

Charlene pushed her glass aside and leaned toward him, lowering her voice. "Then show him proof." She paused long enough to take a surreptitious glance around the room. "I'll blackmail you. It's that simple."

Curt rubbed his chin uncertainly. This was a new angle. "It would have to be very convincing. Ethan may be a snobbish ass, but he's no fool."

"We'll make it more than just convincing, we'll make it real."

"Real? But I haven't done anything you could blackmail me for."

Charlene finished off her champagne cocktail.

"Then *do* something! Honestly, Curt, there are times when you are terribly dense."

"Now, look, Charlene, you don't expect me to go out and—and kill somebody, or rob a bank or something—"

"Of course not, silly! This would be just between the two of us. For instance, there's no secret around town that you always need money, that Ethan won't give you enough to get by on. So, just suppose you stole some checks and forged a signature on them?"

"Whose checks?"

"Do I have to spell out everything for you?" she said impatiently. "I doubt if it would seem strange to Ethan that you were able to get your hands on the *Bon Ton* checkbook, would it? You could also steal some of my canceled checks and copy my signature. I could find out about it, and tell Ethan it would cost ten thousand to keep you from being prosecuted and, more important to him, to keep the Pennington name from being dragged through the courts in a forgery trial."

Curt had always been vaguely aware that Charlene was not simply good to look at, that beneath that chic coiffure there dwelled a genuine brain, and now he was certain of it. "You know," he grabbed up his glass and finished off the beer, "it just might work, at that!"

She smiled and stood up. "I'm going to the powder room, honey." With red-nailed fingers she pushed her purse across the table. "It just happens that my checkbook is in here, also this month's bank statement with my cancelled checks."

She walked away, swaying prettily, and disappeared through the door marked *Ladies*. Curt stared at the bag for a moment, then let his gaze wander about the room. The bartender was facing the other way, washing some glasses, and people at other tables were engrossed in conversation. He reached out

slowly, snapped open the purse and dipped his hand inside. He took several checks from the back of the checkbook, and the cancelled check with which Charlene had paid her last month's electric bill, and tucked it all into his inside coat pocket.

"Petel!" he called to the bartender. "Bring Charlene another cocktail, and switch me over to Scotch."

Ethan stood sternly at the high windows of his study, hands clasped so tightly behind him that the knuckles were white, and stared blindly out at the sun-drenched garden. "All right, Curt, let's go over it again in detail, and so help me, if you're trying to put something over on me I'll——"

"I swear I'm not!" Curt stood in the center of the somber, book-lined room, arms stiffly at his side as an errant pupil might stand in the headmaster's presence. "I just didn't think Charlene would do this."

"Then you did forge the check and cash it?"

"Yes."

Ethan sighed and turned slowly until his eyes locked on those of his brother. "You cashed it at this . . . this honky-tonk?"

"The Pump Room, Pete knows me. He didn't question the check then, but he showed it to Charlene when she got back from a weekend trip. Well, she paid him for it and came to me. She said it would cost ten thousand to keep me out of prison for forgery." He threw his hands out. "I never thought she'd do this. I knew she'd get sore when she found out, but——" He could see very clearly in Ethan's face that his brother was not thinking as far ahead as prison, but only as far as the trial, the newspapers, and the notoriety.

"Curt," he said, "how could you get into something like this!"

"I kept telling you I needed more money. I was in a real tight spot. You wouldn't listen to me, and

some gamblers were beginning to get nasty about some money I owed them, so——”

Ethan's sigh was both tremulous and exasperated as he faced around again to the window. After a long silent interval he said, "Tell the Norrell woman I want to see her."

"Charlene?" Somehow he had not expected this. "You want to see Charlene?"

"Her name is Norrell, you idiot!" Ethan bellowed. "Pick up the telephone and call her right now! Tell her——" He raised his arm and looked at his watch. "Tell her to be here in an hour, at one o'clock sharp!" He spun around once more, his eyes blazing with anger. "I'd rather you weren't here, Curt. I'd rather handle it without your help."

"But she's blackmailing *me*," Curt said. "She might think something's fishy if I tell her you want to see her."

"Do as I say. Call her."

"You don't know her, Ethan."

Ethan's arm came up and the forefinger quivered toward the telephone. "*Now!*"

"She's very high tempered——"

The finger began to shake violently, and Curt stepped quickly to the desk and snatched up the phone.

It was half past one by the clock behind the bar. Charlene had been with Ethan for thirty minutes now, and Curt nervously poured the rest of his second beer from the bottle into the glass, wondering what was happening out at the house.

"Want another one?" Pete inquired, swishing his bar rag lethargically.

"Not yet." He tried to focus his attention again on the racing form lying on the bar.

Pete put the rag aside and tapped the page with a blunt finger. "That nag right there, now there's one

to keep your eye on. Anybody with a few bucks in his jeans would do well to lay it right on the nose in the third tomorrow."

"Bay Rum?"

"That's the nag, Bay Rum."

"That's a sucker bet," said a small, thin character who eased onto the stool beside Curt. The bartender made a disgruntled noise and moved away. The little man slapped Curt on the back. "Hiya, boy!"

"Hi, Benjie."

"So this is where you get your hot tips, from a glass jockey?"

Curt shrugged. "What difference does it make?"

The little gambler chuckled. "You know something, Curt? If you had enough dough, I could retire in two years."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Only that you're the best sucker in my book. I like you, boy! I really like you!"

Curt glanced up again at the clock. Quarter till two. What was taking so long? he wondered. "You say Bay Rum is a sucker bet, Benjie? Why not prove it by letting me ride for twenty-five?"

"To win?"

Curt nodded. "Right on the nose."

Benjie cut his eyes around furtively, then took a little notebook from his pocket and made a notation. "You're on." He slipped the book back into the pocket. "Oh yeah, Curt. There's a big crap game set for next week. Think you might be able to round up some dough?"

The phone rang behind the bar and Pete answered it. He motioned to Curt. "It's for you. You here?"

It would be Charlene—or Ethan. He nodded quickly and moved down to the end of the bar and picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Curt!" It was Ethan. "Get home right away!"

"What's the matter?"

"Never mind that! You just get here!" The phone at the other end slammed down.

Through the study window beyond Ethan, Curt could see Norma strolling aimlessly in the garden, and even in his own agitation he felt a pang of regret for his sister.

"I simply do not understand how you, a *Pennington*, could become involved with a woman like that!"

"What happened?" Curt asked.

"What happened! She merely doubled her outrageous demand, that's all! She sat right there at my own desk, grinning like the cat that ate the canary, and told *me*, Ethan Pennington," he seemed to swell at the sound of his own name, "that I would pay her twenty thousand dollars within three days or she would take the check to the county solicitor!"

"I tried to explain to you, Ethan," Curt said. "The trouble with you is you never listen to anybody."

"Well, I won't pay it!"

Curt scuffed at the carpet. "I don't blame you. I deserve the worst. Throw me to the wolves. I'm no good, Ethan, we both know that."

"There you go thinking only of yourself again! You are a Pennington!"

"Yes," Curt nodded repentently. "I am a Pennington."

"Maybe I should have listened to you. Do you think there may be a chance you could get that—that woman to agree to the original figure?"

It was the first time in memory that Ethan had admitted he might have erred, or that Curt, of all people, might be able to do something to rectify it. "I'll try, Ethan." He straightened and with a serious expression, placed his right hand over his heart. "For the good name of Pennington."

Out in the garden he saw Norma lean to sniff an



early rose, after which she sighed heavily and opened her knitting bag.

"You should have seen him! Practically foaming at the mouth!" Curt doubled over the table with laughter. He was sitting in a dark booth in a road-house several miles outside of Carlsburg so they would not be seen together.

"It doesn't strike me as being particularly funny," Charlene said calmly. "In fact, it was the reaction I expected. I've got him over a barrel and he knows it. He's the type to foam at the mouth when there's nothing else that can be done."

Curt's laughter subsided, became a smile, grew uneasy, and faded. "You—you meant to say *we've* got him over a barrel, didn't you?"

She had begun to buff her nails, and she gave a little shrug. "Look at the facts, then tell me what you think I meant."

He stared at her in the semi-darkness, his mouth hanging open. He saw a new side to her, that she was not only smart, and good-looking—in a hard sort of way—but she was completely perfidious.

"Then you planned it this way, did you?" he said, the flat sound of his own voice seeming to characterize his stupidity. "You're really going to blackmail Ethan? You're going to cut me out?"

"Certainly I'm not going to cut you out, sweetie!" she said, as if offended by the suggestion. She examined her nails carefully, even though they were scarcely visible in the gloom. "Of course, you won't get quite as much."

"How much?" he broke in, straining to control himself.

"Five thousand."

"Five? While you get fifteen? What if I go to Ethan and confess the whole thing?"

"What good would that do, baby? I do have the

check, you know. And you did forge it. It would just be your word against mine as to how it happened."

Curt's mouth moved silently, like that of a fish suddenly plucked from its environment and deposited on land. "But you and I *agreed*——"

He broke off then, remembering some recent words of his brother's, doled out with an appropriate smirk, having to do with the worthlessness of verbal contracts.

"You'll get your five thousand," she said. "Now then, you go back to big brother and tell him the talking is over. Tell him it's pay up or——" She smiled sadly and reached across the table to pat his hand.

This was a bit strong, he thought. Even Ethan might balk at twenty thousand. No—no, he wouldn't. He would probably cough up more than that if he saw a nasty scandal looming.

Curt went back to the house and told Ethan the price could not be changed. As he expected, the news merely served to put Ethan into a towering rage.

After a period of storming up and down the study, while Curt stood respectfully to one side, Ethan came to a halt in the center of the room. "It's obvious," he said in a strained voice. There was a peculiar look about him, a sort of simmering deep in his eyes, that Curt had never seen before.

"What's obvious?"

"That this woman will not stop at this. This will go on, *ad infinitum*." He looked at his younger brother, a strange grin on his face. "Curt, there is only one thing to do about this."

"I'm not sure I follow you," Curt replied uneasily. The whole thing had started so simply, so utterly ordinary, the way two follows one, or C follows B. It had gotten badly sidetracked somewhere along the line. All Curt had wanted was a taste of the life to

which he considered himself entitled. He did not like that gleam in Ethan's eye; he did not like it at all.

"Then listen carefully," Ethan went on, somewhat in the manner of Norma when she was quietly chastising him, and explaining a one syllable word. "This Charlene Norrell fully intends to make her living out of this stupid mistake of yours. Our only alternative is to make her life a short one."

It took a moment to sink in, and then Curt took a step backwards and put his hands palm out toward his brother. "Wait a minute! You're not suggesting we *kill* Charlene, are you?"

Ethan shook his head. "I'm not suggesting that *we* do anything of the sort. I'm suggesting that *you* do it. After all, it was your stupidity that got us into this blackmail situation."

It was like an echo, in reverse, of what Charlene had said. The whole business was like a little snow-ball rolling down a long snow-covered slope, getting bigger and bigger all the time. Curt had never in his wildest dreams imagined it would come to this. "I—I couldn't kill anybody, Ethan."

"A Pennington does not say he cannot do something."

"But *murder*?" Even as he brought the word itself out into the open, it seemed to lose some of its harshness. Charlene had, after all, double-crossed him in the most despicable way. Whatever she got, she would deserve.

"Look at it as self-defense, Curt," Ethan said. "This woman is threatening us all. She is threatening the Penningtons!"

It was Curt's turn to pace the room, which he did for several minutes. Then he stopped, tightened his lips, and looking his brother in the eye, nodded. "You're right, Ethan. We can't have that, can we?" Through the window, in the lazy sunshine of the garden, he saw Norma sitting and reading a book. "It

isn't as though it were for my sake alone, but for yours and Norma's as well, isn't it?"

Ethan smiled paternally. "I hoped you'd see it that way, Brother. Now then, shall we get down to details?"

"By all means."

"Good. I'd say the best way to do it would be to shoot her."

"That sounds reasonable. Charlene lives outside town in a sort of remote area where the neighbors are far enough away so that a shot mightn't be heard."

"Of course, you'll need a gun."

"Naturally," Curt said. "I seem to remember that father had a revolver. Whatever happened to it?"

I keep it in my safe there," Ethan replied, rubbing his chin. "But I wonder if it would be wise, using that one."

"It wouldn't be nearly as wise to go out and buy one, and then have Charlene turn up shot the next day."

"I suppose you're right," Ethan admitted. He went around the desk to the safe, glanced over his shoulder to be certain Curt was far enough away so as to be unable to read the numbers, then twirled the dial. He removed a revolver and a box of shells and closed the safe. "You'd better try shooting it before you—well, before. It's been a long time since it was fired."

Curt nodded, took the pistol and slipped it into his waistband. "What if there's a slipup, Ethan? Suppose the police suspect me? A murderer would be a worse blot on the family name than a forger. Shouldn't I arrange some kind of alibi?"

"Why? What could go wrong?"

"I don't know. But just in case something does."

"Well, all right." He thought for a moment. "When do you want to do it?"

"Tonight's as good as any, I suppose."

"Then I'll be here in my study all night. If you need to explain your whereabouts, I'll say that you were with me, that we were going over some family business. How does that sound?"

Curt scratched his head. "I guess it's okay."

"Then it's all set?"

"I think I ought to have the money, Ethan. Suppose she's hidden the check someplace and I can't get it? I may have to pay her off this time."

A look of sudden suspicion darkened Ethan's features. "I don't know about that."

"It's my neck, Brother. They give people the electric chair for murder, you know."

"But twenty thousand——"

"We could put it back in the bank tomorrow."

Finally, Ethan came around. "All right. You wait here. I'll drive into town and get the money."

Curt went into town himself later. He had half a dozen beers at the Pump Room, talked to Benjie Nix for a time, and then he phoned Charlene and told her that Ethan was getting up the money.

"He wants me to bring it out to your house tonight. Does eleven o'clock suit you?"

"Any time you say, honey. And Curt, why don't you pick up a bottle of champagne on your way? We can celebrate."

"Sure thing." He touched the pistol under his coat. "See you tonight."

Norma Pennington was in the garden knitting a sweater for Curt when she saw the car pull up in the drive. She did not know the young man at the wheel, but she knew old Tom Coggins, who sat beside him. Tom had been police chief in Carlsburg as far back as she could remember.

He climbed out of the car and came toward her. "Morning, Miss Norma," he said, touching his cap. "Ethan home?"

"Is—is something wrong, Chief Coggins?"

He removed the cap and touched his brow with his handkerchief. "Afraid so. Charlene Norrell got herself murdered last night."

"Charlene!"

"I'd like to have a word with Ethan, if I might."

"I—I'll tell him you're here." She backed away, then turned and ran into the house.

Ethan was in the study poring over a sheaf of papers when she burst into the room. "The police, Brother!" she gasped. "That—that woman friend of Curt's—she's been killed!"

Ethan rose slowly. "Where are they?"

"Who? Where are who?"

"The police, you nincompoop!"

She pointed vaguely. "Outside, in the garden. Chief Coggins and another one."

"And where is Curt?"

"Still asleep, I imagine. I heard him come in about four-thirty this morning. I—I think he'd been drinking."

"No doubt. Go get him. Tell him to come here at once. I'll go out and speak to the chief."

The door opened and Coggins and the younger officer entered. "I took the liberty of coming in, Ethan," the chief said.

Ethan was obviously annoyed, but he merely nodded. "Go on and get Curt, Norma," he said.

The police chief scratched his neck uncertainly. "She tell you what we're here about?"

"Something about the Norrell woman being killed. I suppose you know that Curt wasn't the only man she ran around with."

"Someone mention my name?" Curt came into the study wearing a robe and a bleary-eyed expression.

"You needn't say anything," Ethan said. He turned to the chief. "Curt and I worked all night

right here in this room, from nine o'clock until just an hour or so ago. He——"

"I'm afraid that won't do, Ethan," the chief said. He held his hand out toward the officer, who took a revolver from his pocket and gave it to the chief. "We found this gun outside her house. Looks like the killer might have dropped it. It's registered to your father, Traver Pennington, but he's been put away—I mean, he's been in a hospital for the past ten years, hasn't he?"

"That's the gun you keep in the safe, Ethan!" Norma exclaimed.

"You keep out of this, Sister!" he snapped. He frowned at the chief. "I stick by what I said. My brother and I were here, in this very room, all night."

Curt grinned crookedly and shook his head. "Wish I could go along with that, Ethan, but I'm afraid I can't. Seems the chief picked me up last night about two o'clock."

"That's right," Coggins put in. "We raided a big crap game at Benjie Nix's place and Curt was one of the boys we hauled in. They'd all been there since about eight. The medical examiner says Charlene was killed some time around midnight."

"The money," the young cop whispered to the chief.

"Yeah. Ethan, did you draw a pretty sizable sum of money out of the bank yesterday?"

Ethan puffed up. "What the devil are you getting at?"

"Can anybody vouch for your whereabouts last night about an hour before and after midnight?"

"My whereabouts?"

The chief shrugged. "Your gun, the money—maybe she was trying to blackmail you, Ethan."

Curt stepped forward and positioned himself between the policeman and his brother. "We Penningtons stick together, Chief Coggins. I know Ethan's

rights, even if he doesn't. He doesn't have to answer these questions without benefit of counsel." He turned to his brother and smiled bravely. "Chin up, Ethan. I'll get you the best lawyer money can buy!"

Then, seeing Norma cowering near the doorway, he thought this might be a very good case for Charlie O'Toole.

## **THE SHUNNED HOUSE**

Robert Edmond Alter

The abandoned Yost house has stood in shunned isolation for nearly two hundred years. Like some dead thing left over from the Silurian ending and waiting abjectly for eternity, it stands deep in the tangle-woods not far from Oneida Lake.

Local superstition has always claimed that it is haunted, but some of our more modern waggish minds refer to it as a "sick house." One way or the other, hardly anyone ever goes near it, children live in dread of it, and Hon Schuyler has repeatedly said that even the foxes and rabbits shun its vicinity.

Built by Hans Yost in 1768, it followed the popular colonial lines—the enormous peaked roof with two stories and dormerless attic, the usual Georgian doorway and Ionic pilasters. Yost and his family enjoyed their sturdy home for seven years; then, when the Revolutionary War began, they fled to Albany to escape the Indian raids. They never returned.

Two years later when Sillinger led Burgoyne's right wing in a flank attack against the Mohawk Valley, his quartermaster appropriated the deserted mansion for a supply dump. And that was what gave rise to the legend of Sillinger's Gold.



Benedict Arnold routed the British commander and his army with a classic stratagem and sent them packing in a panic. They departed in such an hysteria of haste that they left the quartermaster and his men behind, and that night a gang of drunken Continentals and their Seneca allies surrounded the Yost house and proceeded to massacre the handful of Britons.

It was a very sorry affair. The British were unarmed and tried to surrender, but the savages wanted scalps and the Continentals were too drunk to care. You listen to the old wives' tales around these parts and you'll begin to believe that on certain nights when the wind moans from the northwest you can still hear the piteous cries of Sillinger's quartermaster and his men wailing for mercy in the lonely woods.

But old wives or not, the legend of Sillinger's Gold was based on a foundation of fairly firm facts. Everyone knew that a British army in those days traveled on sterling which was entrusted to the quartermaster's keeping. Obviously neither he nor any of his men had escaped with the cash, and the Continentals and Indians who had massacred them and commandeered their supplies had uncovered no evidence of it; so what had become of Sillinger's Gold?

"It is still there," said the old wives and the old men and the young children. "Still out there in the woods in the old Yost house, guarded by the ghosts of Sillinger's murdered men. Listen! Hear it? Hear their cries in the wind?"

When I was a young boy there were times, at night, I swore I could hear their cries. And once, when I was eleven, I was certain that I heard more than a ghostly cry. I was positive I had heard the crunching chop of a tomahawk. That was the day I entered the forbidding old mansion for the first time.

My best pal Joe Turpin and his sister Gert and I had gone fishing in the creek along Yost woods; but

they weren't biting that day and we didn't know what to do with ourselves until Joe made the foolish suggestion, "Let's go take a peek at that old Yost house."

"Well . . ." I said doubtfully.

Gert slapped a hand to her mouth and looked big-eyed at us. "Oh, we don't dare!" she said in a stagy whisper.

It must have been her presence that prompted me. She was ten, had honey-colored hair and a pug-nose, and I thought she was beautiful. Joe thought she was a pain so I never told him how I felt about her. I wasn't actually sure just what I felt, but I was downright convinced that I had to show off in front of her.

"Why not?" I said. "I don't give a hoot about those old ghosts."

So we went. I led the way into the tanglewood, all thickety with witch hobble and devilclub and grotesque oaks, thinking I must look something like the fearless Henry Stanley when he set out to find Dr. Livingstone in the wilds of Africa.

Suddenly we caught our first glimpse of the stark house through the interlacing of gnarled old trees. Tall grass and weirdly misshapen weeds grew in the long neglected yard, and all at once the morbid strangeness of this sinister vegetation and the eldritch atmosphere of the dilapidated house struck all three of us like a slap and we stopped dead in our tracks.

"What're you stopping for?" Joe asked me, nervously.

"What're you?"

"Well, the old windows are all boarded up. We can't get in."

I was secretly relieved, but I felt I had to give Gert further evidence of my daring. I said, "Well, that old cellar there is open. C'mon, let's look."

The storm doors on the cellar stairs had long since

fallen in, and we stood in the weedy yard and stared down into the quiet black pit.

"Betcha a dime you don't dare go down there alone," Joe said.

I didn't have a dime to bet and I didn't want one that badly, but Gert was still goggle-eyeing me and whispering, "Oooh don't, Phil! You dasn't." So I had to.

"You're on," I muttered, and I started down the old mossy stone steps with my fists clenched and with my heart booming in my ears.

It was a vast cobwebby place, lighted only by the small broken panes of windows which peered in from the upper ground level and filled with a massed wreckage of decaying chests, stave-sprung kegs and things like spinning wheels which twenty decades of deposit had shrouded and festooned into monstrous shapes.

The cool still air had a dank noxious odor, and ghastly looking pale fungus growths were in the hard earth floor. Hundreds of them had rotted and turned slightly phosphorescent, and they glowed like witch fire, while all around them on the damp dark earth was a cloudy whitish pattern of mold.

I was only there a moment, only long enough to take a fearful look around. Then I heard something go *t-chok*.

It was a small echoing sound and it seemed to come out of a hollow distance, out of that awful clammy earth. A moment later it went *t-chok* again, and all I could think of was those long-ago tomahawks splitting the skulls of Sillinger's screaming men.

Then I was long gone too, back up the squelchy steps and through the opening and into the bright fresh day, past my two gawk-faced friends and running, running fit to bust a lung, straight for the woods with Joe and Gert right after me, Joe yelling

and Gert emitting little gaspy shrieks and me shouting back at them.

"I heard 'em! I heard 'em tommyhawking each other!"

We didn't stop running till we reached the creek, where we threw ourselves on the pebbly shore and lay there to let our wind catch up to our bodies. About then a gun went *plamm* somewhere downstream.

"Must be Hon Schuyler," Joe gasped.

It was. He came tramping along in a couple of minutes, with his gun over his shoulder and a dead rabbit tied to his belt. Hon was about twenty-four at that time, a rangy, tanned, energetic cuss who wasn't very book-bright because he had never gone in much for schooling. But he was a wizard in the woods, and would have made a fine Indian scout had there still been a use for such an anachronism.

"Was that you kids I hearn yelling in the woods?" he asked, grinning at us. "You flushed this hare right acrost my path."

"Phil saw the ghosts in the Yost house, Hon!" Gert told him.

"I didn't say I saw 'em," I said. "But I heard something."

Hon told us to wait there, and he went into the woods toward the Yost house. He was back in about twenty minutes and said that all he had seen or heard were rats.

"You kids better stay away from that old dump," he admonished us. "Most of those old timbers and boards are so rotten they're like to fall in at any minute. I know your dad would sure light up if he heard you was fooling around there, Phil."

That was the truth. My dad was the sheriff, and he often said the county ought to tear down the Yost house before some kid broke his fool neck playing there.

"I don't aim to tell him," I said, "if nobody else does."

Hon grinned at me. "Okay. Let's just keep it a secret among the four of us. But after this, find a safer place to play."

Joe and I didn't return to the Yost house until we were fifteen, and we wouldn't have gone then if it hadn't been for Harold Edmonds.

He was a new boy who had moved from New York City and he thought he was something special. Joe and I didn't like him much. He was always putting on airs about what a grand place the city was and sort of making us feel like a couple of country bumpkins.

So one day we said to him, "Yeah, but you don't have a two hundred year old haunted house in the city."

That interested him and he wanted to know all about it, so we told him the story of the massacre and Sillinger's lost gold. Harold scoffed and said it was just a granny tale to frighten little kids. He said to me, "You don't really believe you heard a tomahawk, do you? I mean, *really*?"

"Well," I said defensively, "I don't know what it was I heard. All I know is I heard *something* and it was somewhere in that cellar. You're so darn brave, whyn't you go in there and look for yourself?"

"Sure. I'm willing. But you'll have to show me where it is, if you've got the guts."

Well, we had to go back then because he had called us on it. We led him through the woods and across that weirdly vegetated yard and up to the pit-like cellar, and said, "Down there."

Harold kicked a loose pebble down the cellar steps and grinned.

"You two gonna come with me, or stay up here and hold hands?"

I didn't look at Joe, but I suppose he must have

felt the same way I did. I would be doubly darned if I'd let that smart city boy put me down. I shouldered by him and led the way without a word.

It was still the same dank, humid cellar with the repulsive fungi growing out of the dirt floor; yet somehow its nameless air of desolation didn't seem as sinister to me as it had the first time I was there. There is a big difference in your mental approach to any situation between being eleven and being fifteen. Having two people with me made a difference too.

Joe showed a botanical interest in the fungus growths, which he called "corpse weeds." Harold wandered off into the darker recesses of the huge cellar on an inspection tour of his own. I had a half-believing mind on Sillinger's Gold, so I waded into the wreckage of chests and barrels and broken-legged furniture, and gingerly pawed through moldy clots of old rotted clothes and other clammy shapeless things which long ago must have been discarded to the cellar by the Yost family.

I had burrowed down to an old decaying chest which had some letters engraved on its side, and had rubbed off enough of the grime with the heel of my hand to read *St. Leg*—when Harold called out.

"Hey you guys, look here! There's a secret passage behind these shelves."

Joe and I went down to the north end of the cellar where Harold was standing with a lighted kitchen match. A tall case leaned wearily away from the cobble wall, and just behind it was a narrow five-foot-high opening. The fluttering match flame showed us earthen walls ribbed with thick oak studs and timber beams.

"Must be the escape tunnel," Joe said.

"What's that?" Harold asked.

"Don't you know anything? Folks used to build 'em under their houses years ago in case of an Indian attack. If they couldn't fight off the redskins from the

house, then they'd use their escape tunnel and come out somewhere in the woods behind the Indians and get off with their scalps."

"I wonder where this one goes?" Harold said, peering into the dark claustrophobia-breeding tunnel. "What say we follow it? I've got plenty of matches."

Joe and I didn't know where the spooky hole in the wall went, and we didn't want to know. According to legend, a few of the quartermaster's men had tried to flee through the tunnel on the night of the massacre, but the Continentals who had surrounded the house were local boys who knew about the secret passage, and some of them had been waiting in the woods at its issue. They had driven the Redcoats back into the tunnel with their bayonets, back into the tomahawks of the drunken howling Indians.

"Uh-huh," I said. "Most of these old tunnels aren't safe. The timbers are all rotten and liable to cave in."

Harold grinned that infuriating grin of his at me. "No guts, huh? You two would make a fine pair of girls."

"Go ahead, big man," I snapped at him. "Let's see you go through it."

"Think I won't? Watch me."

We watched him edge around the sagging old case, bend down and enter the crowding tunnel, the match in his hand casting a spastic orange light on the crumbling dirt walls. The light drew away from us, growing smaller, smaller, and then it was gone.

Joe and I fooled around in the cellar for another twenty minutes waiting for him to come back; but he didn't, so we decided to leave.

"That big city jerk probably thinks he's pulling a fast one on us," Joe said. "He's probably hiding in the woods to see if he can scare us. Let's get out of here."

I was ready. The dust and cobwebs were beginning to give me an unhealthy feeling. I had the sensation

that my clothes and skin were turning clammy and that I was wholly unclean.

We went outside and started beating the bush for Harold, tramping through the woods, searching, calling his name, for three hours. By then dusk was hurrying through the trees, and we turned toward home. Joe kept insisting that Harold had played a trick on us, that he was at home that very moment laughing at us, knowing we would be running around in circles in the woods looking for him.

I wasn't so sure. I had that morbid feeling of something gone wrong, and I didn't quite know what to do about it. I phoned Harold's parents as soon as I reached home. They were already in a state of anxiety so I had to tell them what had happened. I didn't tell them we had last seen Harold in the Yost house; I just implied that we had lost track of him in the woods.

My father organized a search party that night, and a whole raft of men and teen-age boys began to scour the woods with lanterns and flashlights. I went along with them. Hon Schuyler was one of us, of course, because he knew those woods coming and going; around nine o'clock I had a chance to speak to him alone, and I told him about Harold going into the escape tunnel.

Hon growled, "Ain't you kids been warned again and again to stay clear of that old house?"

"I know, Hon, but he insisted. You think he might have been caught in a cave-in?"

"Could be, but no sense in getting the rest of 'em riled up about it till we know for sure. I'll slip off and give a look."

The next day was a school day, and the men sent all us teen-age boys packing for home at midnight. That was when I saw Hon again. He took me aside and told me he had been through the tunnel but hadn't found Harold.



"He come out into the woods all right," Hon said, "because I seen his footprints just inside the exit. But I lost 'em in the leaves. Anyhow, if I was you and Joe, I'd keep it under my hat about you boys going into the Yost house. You'll just get in Dutch with your old man if he learns."

"Sure," I said. "Joe and me won't say anything."

They found Harold Edmonds the next day. I mean they found his body. It was in the river and he had been drowned. There was a bump on the top of Harold's head, but the coroner figured it was probably caused by a tree stump or a boulder in the water.

The decade that followed Harold Edmonds' death went by like a wind for me. I went away to college when I was eighteen, and after that I served my hitch in the army. I had just turned twenty-five when I finally returned home.

My dad was after me to get into the county district attorney's office to start some kind of political career for myself. Though I really didn't want the job, I decided to take it for a while because it would give me an opportunity to make certain contacts and to understand better the rather ambiguously defined legal aspects governing a certain private enterprise I had in mind.

I had been acting as the DA's man for almost a year when a second tragedy occurred in our town. My boyhood chum, Joe Turpin, was murdered.

Some kids found the body on the bank of the creek bordering the Yost woods. There was no doubt in our minds that it was murder, for Joe's throat had been sliced wide open and the wound had half decapitated him.

"Not a knife slash," the coroner said. "It was made by a broad-bladed instrument, and the blow was delivered in a straight thrust. Could have been an ax, or even a shovel."

I went to see Joe's sister, Gert. She had married a local man and Joe, who hadn't gotten around to marriage himself, had been renting a room from them.

"Did Joe have any enemies you know of, Gert?"

"No, certainly not. Everyone around here had always liked Joe. You know that, Phil."

"Well, do you have any idea why he went into the woods yesterday? Was he going hunting or fishing or what?"

Grace looked down at her folded hands in her lap and shivered.

"It sounds awful when I think of it now; Joe told me he thought he would take a hike in the Yost woods and, just kidding, I said to him 'Better not go near the Yost house or the tomahawks will get you.' He laughed and said he just might look in there and see if he could find Sillinger's Gold."

She put a fist to her mouth and held it there, then started to cry softly, and I put my arm around her.

"And then," she sobbed, "and then that terrible thing happened to him, to his . . . just as if it really was . . ."

"All right, Gert," I said gently. "Try not to think about it now. Just leave it up to us. We'll get to the bottom of it."

I had an idea that I was already very close to the bottom of it. I went back to the office, got a .38 revolver, put it and a flashlight into my pockets, and set off for the Yost house.

Nothing about the old house seemed to have changed. The weatherbeaten front door with its broken fanlight and wormy pediment was still standing, still tightly guarding its old guilty secrets. I plowed through the weeds and went down the cellar steps.

Splashing the flashlight over the moldy earthen floor, I went around the rotting remains of barrels, chests, and other ruined furniture, and followed the dripping stones of the north wall down to the de-

crepit case that guarded the tunnel. I paused at the burrowlike opening of the escape tunnel, listening.

*T-chok . . . t-chok . . .*

He was in there digging, as he had been for years. I smiled when I thought of all the countless hours he had spent looking for something that wasn't there. I squeezed behind the shelves, crouched down and started into the tunnel, moving ahead blindly and cautiously, seldom flashing my light for fear he might see it.

It was a horrific place. I felt like a mole burrowing into the infinitely abysmal earth. The quick shooting flickers I made with my flashlight shone eerily along the tunnel of caked loam that stretched and curved ahead, and showed me shallow pocky holes all along the mildew-tainted hard earth floor where he had been digging.

A sudden bright glow illuminated one of the convolutions of the tunnel directly ahead of me. I stuffed my flashlight into my pocket and drew the .38, then moved up a few feet and peered around the turn in the tunnel.

A lantern was blazing on the ground, and Hon Schuyler was hunkering over it, digging at the dirt with a short-hafted shovel. I stepped into the light.

"I had a hunch it was you all along, Hon," I said.

His head shot up and he nearly clobbered himself on one of the low crossbeams. The up-flood of lantern light cast a demoniac glow over his tense wild-eyed face as he crouched in front of me, holding his shovel like a rifle at port arms. He licked his lips before he spoke.

"Too bad you had to butt into this, Phil."

"You mean because now you'll have to fix me like you did Harold Edmonds and Joe? How come you didn't try to make Joe's death look like an accident too?"

Hon grinned. "Because Joe wasn't as easy to han-

dle as the Edmonds kid." He gave the shovel a significant heft. "I had to use this on Joe. I didn't want to, but what else could I do? He heard me digging in here and caught me at it. I've spent too many years looking for Sillinger's Gold to share it with anybody, Phil. And I'm close to it now, hear? I *know* I am."

"No," I said, "you're not."

"Whatta you mean, I'm not! It's got to be in this tunnel. I've ransacked through the rest of the house dozens of times and I know it ain't there. The quartermaster's men came through here the night of the massacre, didn't they? But when they seen they couldn't get out they must've buried the gold here somewhere."

"No, Hon. It's gone. It's been gone for years."

His eyes went a little crazy. "You're lying! You're trying to trick me! You want it for yourself!"

I opened my mouth to tell him, but he never gave me the chance. He took a sudden vicious broadstroke with his shovel at the .38 in my hand. I sprang back, banging my spine and head shockingly on a stud and beam, and didn't even have a chance to raise the gun as he came bounding toward me with that damned square-bladed shovel leveled for a slicing thrust at my throat. I simply fired point-blank from the hip.

The .38 made an explosion that must have echoed all through the bowels of the earth, and I cringed, expecting the tunnel to cave in. Crumbling dirt rained on my bowed back, but the old timbers held, and when the smoke cleared I saw Hon on his back with his head by the lantern. He didn't seem to realize he had been shot.

"It—it *is* here, I know it is," he gasped. "Once I—I even found a couple of old sovereigns right here in the tunnel."

I crouched beside him. His eyes had a queer glassy look.

"They probably dropped out of Sillinger's chest

when I started to lug it through here ten years ago, Hon. It was all decayed and coming apart. I was afraid you might be hanging around outside, so I intended to use the tunnel to get into the woods; but I didn't have the nerve then to go all the way through. I finally took a chance and hauled it up to the yard."

Hon was trying to see me but his eyes kept going out of focus.

"You—you——"

"Yes. I've had the gold hidden in the woods ever since I was fifteen. I couldn't decide what to do with it because the treasure trove laws are so vague I was afraid I might have to forfeit half of it to the state. But a couple of months ago I found a man who will take it off my hands at a fair price, and no questions asked."

"Lying—you're lying!"

"It's the truth, Hon. I found it in the cellar the day you killed the Edmonds boy. Joe didn't notice it, so I kept my mouth shut and came back for it the next day while everybody was looking for young Edmonds. It had been right there in the cellar ever since 1777, shoved in amidst that heap of junk. It even had his name on it."

"No!" Hon's voice croaked. "I—I pawed through all that junk years ago. There wasn't any chest with Sillinger's name. Just old clothes and——"

"You should have gone to school longer, Hon. We learned in the eighth grade that 'Sillinger' is only a local contraction of his proper name: Barry St. Leg-er."

But the information came too late for Hon. He no longer had a care in this world.

## **DON'T CALL IT MURDER**

C. B. Gilford

They sat very still and silent in the living room of the apartment, the wife and lover, as they waited for the husband.

She was small, petite, with perfect ivory skin, long, lacquered black hair, and a tiny slant to her green eyes. She wore a negligee, through which the round contours of her body were suggested.

The man wasn't noticing, however. He was lean in face and body, and bronzed. His brown hair matched his eyes, and was damp and matted. He sat there in his shirtsleeves, his jacket and tie thrown on a chair nearby. In his right hand, awkwardly, nervously, he held a gun, a small, black, .32 calibre automatic.

The tiny Oriental clock in its jade case on the mantel broke the silence, chiming like silvery temple bells.

"It's nine o'clock," the man said. "Shouldn't he be here by now?"

"Tony darling," she reminded him, "his plane wasn't even due till eight-thirty, and it's forty minutes from the airport. And you really don't have to hold that gun all the time."

"I don't want him to come crashing in here and get the drop on me," Tony said.

"We'll have to move into the bedroom when he comes anyway."

"I know, I know." He didn't look at her, but sat staring at the rug.

"He's supposed to catch you making love to me," she went on. "Bruce could be here any minute now. We'd better go to the bedroom and get set, I guess."

He followed her obediently. In the almost dark room she crawled onto the bed, propping herself on one elbow, thrusting up the curve of one hip. But Tony didn't even look at her. He sat on the edge of the lounge chair, his wrists on his knees, the automatic dangling limp.

"You don't look very ready to use that gun," she accused him.

"I don't feel very ready," he said. "I've never killed a man before."

"Who has?"

"Not many have killed a man in cold blood and I don't like it."

"Darling, it will hardly be in cold blood. Bruce has announced, practically to the world, that he'll kill you if he ever finds us together again. That makes it rather self-defense, I think. If we ever want to be together, we'll have to kill him."

"There are other ways out."

His mood was one of black fear. She hoped Bruce's plane wasn't too late, that Tony could hold together till Bruce arrived. She was afraid too, but she was bolstered by a hatred that Tony couldn't share. She had often felt the weight of Bruce's fist.

"What are the other ways out?" she asked.

He refused to answer, or even to look at her.

"Do you mean that you could simply leave and hand me back to Bruce as if nothing happened?"

He sat staring at the gun.

"Tony, is that what you'd prefer to do?"

She glanced at the little clock on the bed table. If Bruce's plane had been on time, his taxi could be pulling up at the front door now.

"Tony, we know there's a risk, some small risk anyway. But we agreed that anything worthwhile is worth taking a risk for. Dozens of people know that Bruce has threatened you. They also know that he has a permit to carry a gun, that he always carries it, that

he even takes it in his luggage when he travels. They also know that Bruce gave me that .32 for protection when he's gone. And they would fully expect a man to shoot back if somebody's shooting at him. That's all you'll be doing, shooting back. Who will ever know that you shot first, that afterwards we put Bruce's gun in his hand and fired off several shots?"

Tony turned savagely on her, and then with a quick movement, tossed the gun on the bed beside her. "If you think the gun is the right thing," he challenged her, "you use it."

She didn't touch the thing. "It was you he threatened, darling, not me. It would be you he'd shoot at, so it would be you who would shoot back."

He got up from the chair, crossed to the window, and looked out. "No sign of him yet," he announced.

"Take the gun," she said. "You're the one who's going to use it."

He faced her, a tall shadow in the near-darkness. It seemed that he might as easily attack her as their intended victim. "There's one thing you forgot," he said.

"What's that, darling?"

"You know when your husband is due to arrive home. Yet you entertain your lover at that time. It will look as if you wanted to be discovered . . . wanted a shooting to happen . . ."

She shook her head.

"Why wouldn't it?" he demanded.

"Of course we both know that he's expected. But we love each other very much. So tonight we were saying at least a temporary good-bye. Being so passionate about each other, we simply lost track of the time. You know how passion is, darling."

He turned away from her again, went back to his post at the window. Time went slowly. Finally he said, "There's a cab stopping at the entrance."

"You'd better take the gun," she told him.



"There's a man getting out. It could be Bruce. He's coming into the building."

"You have no choice now, Tony. If you don't kill him, he'll kill you."

He left the window and came to the edge of the bed, looming above her. "I'm a fool," he said. But he took the gun.

They had left the lights on in the living room. There was a light in the hall too, but the bedroom remained dark. It was the way they had planned it. Bruce would have to come from brightness into darkness. The man with the gun, hiding in darkness, would have every advantage.

She saw Tony moving to a position behind the lounge chair and crouching down there. "Darling," she whispered across the shadows, "don't hesitate. You know that Bruce wouldn't."

In a few seconds there was a sound at the front door. They heard the door open, then close again. Then there was silence for a moment. Bruce was hesitating, and it wasn't like him to hesitate. Angela could picture him. His broad shoulders, his whole squat body tense, his bulldog face thoughtful.

But Bruce did the unexpected. Instead of coming after her, he only called. "Angela!"

She didn't know quite what to do. But she didn't answer. Bruce had to be lured back here. He must not be killed in the living room.

"Angela!" The summons was sharper this time. But still she refused to answer.

"Angela, I know you're there. And you have that lad of yours. I recognized the car in the driveway."

She almost screamed her anger aloud. Why did Tony have to be so stupid? Did he want to warn Bruce, to give him a chance?

"Angela," Bruce went on finally, "I don't particularly care to look at that disgusting tableau in there. I'd much prefer you'd come out here. Really, you

needn't be afraid. I'm not in the least surprised, and I'm not angry. I simply don't care. I've come to that point. So we have things to talk over."

Bruce wasn't fooling anybody. This was a trap of some kind. Bruce did care. He was clever, but not a very good actor.

Nor, in the end, was he overly patient. He came at last, walking quickly, oblivious of the possibility of ambush. When he turned the corner in the hallway, they saw him for the first time. He was still wearing his hat and topcoat. When he got to the threshold of the bedroom he stopped, his wide shoulders nearly filling the doorway. His right hand reached inside the room, groping for the light switch. Evidently he didn't have his gun.

For a second, while her husband searched for the switch, Angela was near panic, fearing that Tony had lost his nerve. She wished now she had stayed close to him, so that if necessary she could take the gun herself.

But then simultaneously, as Bruce found the switch, the gun roared. Light flooded the room, just in time for them to see the shock and surprise on Bruce's face as the bullet hit him. It had been a well-aimed shot, or at least a lucky one. Angela saw the little black hole in the left breast of his topcoat. Then the whole body sagged to the floor.

She went to him quickly. He had fallen on his face, but she managed to turn him over a little. There was scarcely any doubt that he was dead.

She glanced up at Tony. He was standing motionless, the gun still aiming at the place where Bruce had stood. His face was blank, frozen.

She stepped gingerly over the body, ran into the living room. Bruce always carried his gun in his smaller suitcase. She knew exactly where, because she had packed it for him so often, always in the same place, right in . . .

Then she nearly screamed. There was no baggage. She looked around wildly. Then, preposterously, behind chairs and the sofa. Nowhere! Again she wanted to scream, but clapped her hand over her mouth to stop it.

Perhaps the luggage was still in the waiting taxi outside. What could she tell the taxi driver though, to get him to surrender the suitcase? She ran to the window, peered through the slit between the drapes. No taxi. Nothing out there. The street was dark and deserted, the atmosphere ominous.

She walked slowly, deliberately, back to the bedroom. "His gun isn't here," she announced.

For a moment Tony didn't seem to comprehend. "What do you mean, it isn't here?"

"He always carried it in his small bag. But he didn't bring any of his luggage."

"But you said . . ."

"You saw him get out of the cab," she snapped. "Why didn't you tell me he didn't have any luggage? He must have been telling the truth about not caring anymore. He must not have intended to stay in this house."

"Well, where is his luggage?"

"He had to bring it with him on the plane, so maybe it's still at the airport."

"The airport! Ye gods!"

"We can go there and get it if we have to. Bruce would have the claim checks . . ."

Tony hadn't waited for her to finish. He was already bending over the body, digging through the pockets. Keys, money, handkerchief, every other kind of thing came out. But no claim checks. Tony sat back on the floor, breathing heavily, his whole body trembling visibly.

"He must have sent his bags to a hotel," Angela said after a moment. "If he didn't intend to stay here, he would have to stay somewhere."

Tony turned up his sweating face to her imploringly. "Then we can get it," he began.

"If we knew which hotel," she told him. "If it were London or Paris or anywhere else, I'd know which hotel it would be. But a man never stays at a hotel in his hometown."

They stared at each other, but without love or desire now. Instead, their eyes locked with a shared terror, which tended to focus inward, not outward toward the once-loved one.

Tony was dripping with sweat. His shirt was wet with it. And he was trembling violently. "What can we do?" It was a whimper, a moan, emanating from a whipped cur.

Angela had the insane desire to kneel by Bruce, to shake him awake, to tell him that she didn't love him; that though he had hit her, he was a man at least . . . she needed the protection of a man.

"Angela," Tony was begging her, "you've got to think of something."

He was disgusting. He had no intelligence, no self-control. He was throwing all his weight on her shoulders, to carry with her own.

But her brain finally functioned. "If Bruce couldn't have attacked us with the gun," she said suddenly, "maybe he could have with something else."

"With what?"

"With his bare hands," she suggested bitterly. "Bruce was twice as strong as you are. He could have killed you without any weapon."

The insult didn't matter to him. "Can we make it look like we had a fight?" he asked her.

"Why not? Bruce came at you. He would have killed you, but you managed to get to the gun and you shot him. We've got to tear up the room to make it look like there'd been a fight . . ."

Again he started to follow her instructions before she finished giving them. She let him do it all. He

raged through the bedroom like a destructive manic. The lamps went crashing to the floor. 'So did all the things on her dressing table. The chairs were overturned. The drapes came half off their rods, hung crazily from the windows.

"Is this all right?" He had stopped and turned to her like a small child, for approval.

She had watched him with cold calculation. Now, looking at the scene of devastation, she knew instinctively it was not enough.

"So Bruce wrecked the room," she said. "But there isn't a mark on you . . ."

He stared at her, first with puzzlement, then with incredulity.

"Bruce attacked you, not the room."

"But how . . ."

He stood motionless while she crossed and picked up one of the fallen lamps. She poised it for a blow at him.

"No," he said. "No . . ."

"It's this or the electric chair," she told him.

She aimed the lamp at his head. For a second he stood there, an unwilling victim. Then at the last moment he raised his arm just enough to divert the blow slightly. Even so, the base of the lamp grazed his cheek and sent him reeling back against the wall. He leaned there, dazed, and a tiny trickle of blood oozed from his mouth.

She dropped the lamp and surveyed him. Would the police believe them now? Just one blow? A thimbleful of blood? "Why did you try to dodge?" she asked him furiously.

"You could have killed me," he wailed.

But she felt no sympathy for his pain. "We've got to make it look like Bruce could have killed you," she said. "And it doesn't, yet. A lamp isn't a deadly enough weapon, that's all there is to it."

She rushed out of the bedroom, stepping over the

corpse without hesitation, and ran to the kitchen. She fumbled among the knives there, finally selecting the biggest. She took it back to the bedroom.

Tony screamed an oath at her when he saw what she had. He hadn't moved away from the wall. He cringed against it now, his eyes on the knife.

"Bruce could have killed you with this for sure," she said. "Nobody could doubt a knife."

"What are you going to do?"

"You've got to bleed, you idiot," she told him. "You've got to bleed."

She went at him slowly, purposefully. But he wasn't going to submit, she saw. He was going to try to elude the knife as he had tried to elude the lamp. All right, it would appear more authentic that way.

"Bruce was going to miss with the gun," he argued desperately. "Why couldn't he have missed with the knife?"

"You coward," she lashed him. "You stinking coward."

She lunged once. He tried to step aside and at the same time catch her wrist. But she had known he would do that. So she aimed the knife for his arm, not his chest as Bruce would have done. The point caught him just below the elbow. Then the very act of flinging up his arm did the rest of the work for her. The blade plowed up his biceps almost to his shoulder.

When the knife went spinning out of her grasp, she didn't try to retrieve it. She merely stood back calmly, surveying the damage. Tony was looking at it too, in fascinated horror. It was only a surface wound, but the blood was flowing freely, all the way down to his fingers, then dripping onto the carpet.

"All right," she said, "that looks better."

Very slowly he looked away from his hurt, and toward her. His face was savagely contorted. "You like it, huh?" he asked her.

"Yes . . ."

"I'm glad of that, Angela." There was the same hysteria in his voice as in his eyes. "But why am I the one who has to take the punishment? Why did Bruce attack just me?"

"Because you're the one he threatened to kill," she reminded him sharply.

He shook his head. "But when he came in and saw us together, he'd get mad. He wouldn't remember he'd threatened just me. He'd go after you too."

For the first time she saw his new intent. "Bruce would never have tried to hurt me," she lied.

"But we're sharing this murder, Angela," he insisted. "I pulled the trigger on dear Bruce, but it's our murder, not just mine. Now I think we ought to share all of it."

He walked to where the knife had fallen and picked it up.

"No!" She tried not to scream.

"We want to make it look right, don't we?" he went on, mocking her, of course.

"What are you going to do?"

"You've got to bleed," he said, using her words again.

There was nowhere to go. He was already between her and the door. The knife was in his hand, raised menacingly.

But he would not do it. She told herself he wouldn't. He loved her smooth flesh too well to cut it with a knife.

"Tony, please . . ."

"Share and share alike, darling."

He was on her then, shoving her back flat against the wall. His left forearm pinned her neck and both her shoulders, his body smothered hers. His right hand was free with the knife.

"Not my face, Tony!"

But he wasn't her pliable, obedient Tony any more.

He was mad—a wounded, bleeding mad dog.

“Don’t you see, darling? Bruce might resent your being so beautiful. He might try to spoil your beauty. A good touch, don’t you think?”

She felt pain in her cheek. And perhaps it was the pain . . . or the terror of disfigurement. But whatever it was, it gave her small body a sudden strength, enough to throw him back and away from her.

She moved from then on entirely by instinct, blindly, without stopping to find reasons. The gun was on the floor among the debris from the dressing table. She dived for it, got her hands on it. But she wasted no time in trying to regain her feet. Instead she merely rolled over and pointed the gun at Tony. And she kept on pressing the trigger till there was only an empty click.

The room was still pounding with the echoes of the shots when she heard another sound. Knocking. A loud, insistent knocking at the front door. But her brain didn’t respond immediately. She didn’t know of anyone who would be at her front door at this time of night.

“Tony,” she said mechanically.

And then she remembered. Tony was there where he had fallen across the bed, and there was a gathering red stain on the sheet, progressing down the side of the bed like a slow waterfall. He didn’t move or answer her.

*How can I explain all this?*

The problem galvanized her mind, engaging all of its attention, so that nothing else could intrude. She was entirely alone in this world of her own with two corpses. Think . . . concentrate . . .

My poor face . . . No, forget your face . . . No, no, it has to be explained. Who did it? Tony, yes . . . His fingerprints are already on the knife . . . But who stabbed Tony? . . . Bruce, of course . . . Bruce did all the stabbing . . . Bruce’s fingerprints then . . . Get the



knife from Tony and put it in Bruce's hand . . . and put his fingerprints . . . But what about the gun? . . . Who shot Tony? . . . Not herself . . . She was only a bystander . . . The cause of all this, but only a bystander . . . Give the gun to Tony . . . He shot Bruce . . . But who shot Tony? . . . Whose fingerprints should be on the gun now?

The problem was a complicated one. When the front door splintered open, and then when a puzzled cop was standing in the doorway, watching her strange maneuverings, she turned to him for help.

"Should I take the gun out of Tony's hand?" she asked him. "No, no . . . Does it have to seem that I shot anybody? . . . But I didn't . . . Tony was wounded and he killed Bruce with one shot . . . Shall I wipe off my fingerprints and give the gun back to Tony? . . . Does my face look awful . . . ?"

## **COMFORT, IN A LAND OF STRANGERS**

Michael Brett

From his shabby midtown hotel room Vernon Dross looked down into a lighted storefront across the street. He could see the fortuneteller at work. The dark-haired woman in a long, brightly colored dress with low neckline beckoned to a man passing by. The man stopped, glanced about with uncertainty, then sheepishly stepped into the store and handed over his dollar. Dross thought that he was a man who believed he was on a great lark in the sinful city, only he wasn't going to find it there. More likely, the woman would hold his hands and stand very close as she read his palm. He'd be so engrossed that he would not see the skillful hand that darted from behind the

drapes, nor would he detect the gentle tug as his wallet was taken from his pocket.

It was amazing how few of the victims went to the police to lodge complaints. Probably the reasons for their reluctance were shame that they had been taken and the risk of disclosure of their foolishness to their wives. They were types for whom Vernon had no sympathy; fools asking for trouble. They were empty people trying to fill up their empty lives by seeking the pleasures of the world and not knowing how to go about finding them.

He turned away and went to his clothes closet and looked at the assortment of clothes with some amusement. On the right there were gray chino slacks neatly hung and matching shirts with the monogrammed name of the garage where he was employed as a parking attendant. A raincoat served to separate the chinos from his dress clothes. His eyes traveled to the expensive, hand-shaped suits. He chose a dark blue and laid it across the bed with care, then selected a pair of fine English-made shoes. He went to the bureau for a white shirt and a silk tie and placed them carefully next to the suit. He walked back to the bureau.

Vernon Dross stared back at him from the silvered glass. Vernon Dross, a slight, faded, forty-five-year-old man with a totally undistinguished face, a man no one had really looked at, or really seen, in years. The eyes smiled perceptibly.

Vernon Dross knew who he really was.

He moved away from the mirror and stepped over to the window and lifted it. It was a cool, dark night with a steady, light rain. Clouds blackened the moon. It was the kind of night in which a man could do many things. He could lose himself, or if he wanted, he could even find a degree of comfort. It was out there, waiting.

He shut the window quietly. Now that he had de-

cided to go out, he could hardly wait to get out of his room. He dressed quickly and then went to the top drawer of the bureau for a huge zircon ring which he placed on the small finger of his right hand.

Then he descended three narrow flights of stairs to the lobby. The hotel clerk was a predatory bird with a harsh, savage beak and twelve strands of hair plastered down across his shiny pate.

He glanced up from his desk and smiled. "Stepping out again, Mr. Dross? She must be something for you to get all dressed up. Why don't you bring her around, so we can get a look at her?"

A woman companion stood in a darkened corner. She was a face with a hank of hair and she wore a purple bruise on her left cheek. She mustered up a ghastly smile for Dross' benefit. "How you doin', handsome?" she said.

"Can't stop," Dross said, smiling. "Got work to do," and he moved on.

"If you need any help with her, just let me know," the clerk called after him.

Vernon went out into the rain and walked cross-town. It was eleven-fifteen. Some of the theaters were already emptying. A multitude of unknown people thronged the street. Bits of conversation, laughter, the smell of perfume surrounded him. He felt the people choking him. He strode quickly and purposefully toward his destination.

It was a bar with subdued lighting, carpeting on the floor and no television. A walnut room divider, shoulder high and banked with artificial flowers, separated the bar from the dining room. The bar was busy. The bartender wore a short red jacket and a black bow tie and cummerbund. The customers were well-dressed.

He found a spot and the bartender came over and set a coaster down. He smiled. "Good evening, sir. What'll it be?"

Vernon specifically requested and was served a brand of twenty-five-year-old brandy. He sipped, enjoying the fine bouquet. There was no rush. He knew he'd found the right place for his purpose.

It was a short wait and there was a shifting of places at the bar and not unexpectedly the glamorous brunette sat down beside him. Vernon moved his chair to give her more room and she smiled and whispered, "That's all right, sir." She gave him a bold look of appraisal.

Despite himself he almost laughed at her; a bargirl set to hustle drinks for the house. She was so obvious with her tight-fitting, beaded, shimmering white dress. Her hair looked as though she had just stepped from a beauty parlor.

She pretended to make an effort to catch the bartender's attention, but he studiously avoided her and concentrated on another customer at the far end of the bar.

Vernon drummed the bar casually with his ring hand and out of the corner of his eye he noted that her eyes were on the zircon. Vernon said pleasantly, "He's very busy." He coughed in imitation of a slightly embarrassed man. Then he said, "Please don't think me forward—I'd like to buy you a drink."

She gave him a gleaming and totally rehearsed smile. "Well, thank you."

Vernon extended his hand without looking at the bartender and snapped his fingers. Instantly the bartender approached. "Yes, sir."

"What would you like?" Vernon said to the brunette.

She giggled. "You'll be sorry you asked. I drink champagne."

Vernon ordered the finest in the house and the bartender brought sauterne and charged Vernon two-fifty for it.

"How is it?" Vernon said to the brunette. "Good year?"

"Excellent," said the girl. They introduced themselves. She was Allegra and he was Wallace Crawford, a diamond merchant.

"I thought as much," she said. "I've never seen anything as lovely as the ring you're wearing."

"It's my stock in trade," he said modestly. He showed off the ring. "This one's worth fifteen thousand dollars." He gave a polite laugh. "You wouldn't expect a man who deals in diamonds to wear an inexpensive ring."

"I guess not." She moved closer. "Diamonds have always fascinated me," she said, and glanced into his eyes with a look filled with special promise.

Vernon stared at her. She had all the trappings of pleasure around her. She clothed herself in false promises. Dross hated her, but, simultaneously, he felt the urge strengthen.

Her disappointment was huge when he told her that he had to get back to his hotel across town, back to his waiting wife. "I've had a heavy supper," he said. "I'm going to walk it off. Back home where I come from I do lots of walking."

She applied gentle pressure to his arm. "Don't leave. It's so early. We could have lots of fun, Wally."

"I'm sure we could." He glanced at his watch. "Tomorrow's a big day for me. I've got to be up early."

He bought her another drink and then he went out into the night, walking slowly through the darkened, empty streets, listening. He heard nothing for two blocks, and then he heard the footsteps behind him. It was one man. You could always tell. One man looking for a victim. The girl back in the bar had dispatched a hunter to track him down. The zircon had done it.

Vernon sighed. Perhaps if somebody had spoken to that girl years ago, before she had decided to em-

bark on her cheap, shoddy career . . . Perhaps if somebody had warned the man who was following him that there was peril in the darkness . . . Perhaps if he himself, Vernon Dross, hadn't known what it was like to stand stock still on a cold, dark, misty night in Korea, listening, really listening to the footsteps of the enemy, cautiously making his way. . . . The thing was that the enemy had never expected Vernon Dross to be standing there, waiting. It was the surprise element that always did it.

Now the footsteps were much closer.

Vernon slowed because of a man walking up ahead. When the man turned a corner, Vernon began to walk much faster. There was the outdoor parking lot near the corner and Vernon knew that the cars were unattended after midnight. Vernon was in the lot, waiting, crouched, silent and low behind a car.

It took him back to the long, dark nights in Korea, when he'd gone out on his own private patrol missions without his company commander's approval or permission. For some reason his body trembled. He searched for the knife he had under his belt and held it in his right hand. It was the same weapon with which he'd killed three careless enemy soldiers on those unauthorized search-and-destroy patrols.

The footsteps on the wet pavement were very close now. The anticipation of the man coming around the corner added a pleasant dimension to the work.

The shadow stepped into the lot. He was in an upright position. It was typical of the overconfidence and stupidity of the thug that he should enter this way with the street light shining over his shoulder and outlining him. It was a mistake. He'd been following a mark, a slight, middle-aged, well-dressed man with what he thought was a fifteen-thousand-dollar diamond ring on his hand. He wasn't expecting resistance from his victim.

He couldn't see Vernon until it was too late. Ver-

non sprang from his crouched position and thrust the knife into his stomach.

There was a sharp intake of breath, followed by a metallic clang as an iron pipe fell from the attacker's hand. He clutched his belly and collapsed, dying, on the concrete. Vernon knelt and removed the man's wallet. He felt, with further satisfaction, the sheaf of bills inside and then, without counting them, transferred the wallet to his pocket.

Vernon saw no one when he peered up and down the block. He went off unhurriedly toward his hotel. Vernon felt the same sense of exhilaration he always knew when it was over. He saw people who walked hand-in-hand, laughing in the rain. They didn't give him a second glance. He smiled and reaffirmed what he had known all his life. When a man is alone in a land of strangers, he looks for comfort wherever he can find it.

## **WHERE CREDIT IS DUE**

Hal Ellson

It was Sunday afternoon, but the Black Cat was rocking, bar and tables crowded, the regulars present to a man; a big day, with four more hours of eating and drinking before the first bull would explode across the arena on the outskirts of Montes. Behind the bar, Pancho patted two wineskins filled with Spanish red and white. "To toast the bulls," he laughed.

"As if we need it," Fiala replied, lifting his tequila.

"It should be a good one today. A top matador from Spain and two of our best."

Fiala lifted his glass again, and a hand touched his

arm. "Ah, Domingo. Going to the bullring with us?"

Solemnly Domingo shook his head and put out his hand. A ring of odd design lay on his palm. "Could we talk outside, Victor?"

An odd request, but Fiala shrugged and they went out to the sidewalk. The sun was hot, street deserted.

"My work," Domingo said, bouncing the ring on his palm. "Twenty years ago I sold it to Juan Montanez. Remember him? According to rumor, he ran off with a woman." The ring flashed in the sun now as Domingo raised it between thumb and forefinger. "Interested?" he said, squinting through it.

An old story buried in the dust, let it rest. Besides, it was a good show at the arena today, and Fiala wasn't on duty. "Perhaps tomorrow," he began, then stopped, seeing the hurt in Domingo's face. "You're positive it's Montanez' ring?"

"Don't I know my own work, Victor?"

"All right. So you have the ring you sold Montanez who disappeared twenty years ago with a woman. You want to make something of that?"

"You might. Odd, isn't it, that no one knows the woman who vanished with Montanez, or if she ever existed. And now, twenty years later, the ring shows up?"

At four-thirty in the plaza de toros—Luis Sequera, Jesus Cordorva, Jaime Bravo—three top matadors . . . Fiala sighed. "Odd," he admitted. "How did you obtain the ring?"

"Alvarez, the guide, brought it to my shop."

Fiala nodded. The sun was too hot out here, his friends enjoying themselves behind the thick walls of the Black Cat; the sound of their voices and music drifted to him.

"You'll see Alvarez?" Domingo asked.

"After the bullfight. I don't want to miss it."

"Many thanks."



"For what?"

"Montanez was my friend. I never believed that story about the woman. Perhaps we'll know the truth now."

Twenty years later? Fiala shrugged. "My drink's waiting for me."

"Enjoy it. Here, you may need this." Domingo handed him the ring and turned on his heels.

"What's wrong, Victor?" Pancho asked when Fiala sat down at the bar.

"Nothing yet."

"Still going with us?"

"I wouldn't miss it." Montanez gone twenty years; odd his ring showing up. What did it mean? How did Alvarez come by it? The answers could wait. He nodded to his glass. Pancho obliged with the best tequila and a small Carta Blanca to chase it.

Four-fifteen; the hands of the clock behind the bar pointed the hour. It was time to leave for the arena. "Finish your drinks," Pancho warned. "I'm locking the doors."

Glasses were quickly emptied, chairs pushed back; cars lined the curb outside. A gay crowd of inebriates piled into them. Pancho locked the cantina doors and with the wineskins slung over his shoulder, walked unevenly to the curb to slide into a seat beside Fiala. A wild ride ensued through empty Sunday streets to the arena. The sun was blood-red in the west, the stands stained with the same violent hue, the crowd moving in, band playing. Pancho unslung the wineskins. "A toast to the band!" Steady hands guided the Spanish red and white, open mouths took the jetting wine.

"Your turn, Victor."

Deaf, Fiala was staring at a man who had just stepped from a car.

"Victor?" Pancho held out the wineskin, but Fiala turned his back and walked away.

"Senor Alvarez."

"Ah, Victor. A ticket to the fight?"

"I have mine." Fiala opened his hand. The ring flashed on his palm. "You sold this ring to Domingo?"

"Yes. Anything wrong?"

"Perhaps. Where did you get it?"

"I bought it from Francisco Marti for a hundred pesos."

"Cheap for a ring like this."

"He needed the money for the lottery. He was desperate."

"Where do I find Marti?"

"He was at the office when I left."

"Many thanks." Fiala turned away. His friends had gone to their seats in the stands. Only Pancho was waiting at the gate. "I thought you were running out on us, Victor."

"Too hot to run. I'm walking." Fiala took the wine-skin from Pancho, lifted it, opened his mouth to a jet of Spanish red. "Good!" He handed back the wine-skin and wiped his mouth. "My regards to the bulls. See you tonight—perhaps."

"I knew something was wrong, but I thought you were off today."

"What I thought," Fiala answered, and headed for his car.

A fast drive brought him to the guides' headquarters. Marti stood outside the door. Fiala greeted him and displayed the ring. "You sold this to Alvarez?"

"I did. So?"

"I'd like to know where you got it?"

"I bought it for fifty pesos."

"Somebody must have been desperate. Who was the seller?"

"Three shoeshine boys in the big plaza. One did the talking, but they were all in on the deal. They steal the ring from somebody?"

Fiala shrugged. "Don't know. Do you think you

can point out the boys?"

"If they're around."

A short walk through a narrow street brought them to the plaza. Marti nodded. "There they are."

Up ahead, in the shade of a sour orange tree, three unoccupied boys squatted on their shoeshine boxes. Fiala thanked the guide and went on alone. His shadow fell over the three boys before they were aware of him, the ring flashed in their faces. "All right, where'd you get this?" he said. "Better talk, or you're all in trouble."

Dark Indian faces turned to him without expression. "You." Fiala jabbed a finger at the tallest of the trio. "Come on, out with it."

A pair of black eyes in the round face of the boy stared back at him. Fabricating a lie, or too frightened to speak? "The truth, or you don't work the plaza anymore."

"Senor, we found the ring."

Fiala shook his head. "The truth."

The three boys exchanged glances, no question of their being frightened. "Senor, we found the ring," the boy repeated.

"Where?"

"In the plaza."

The expected reply, but not the truth; get rough with the kids. "You stole the ring. Come on to headquarters. All of you."

The threat worked. The smallest boy found his tongue and said they found the ring in a cave.

"Ah, now it's a cave. Don't give me that."

"It's true. We were looking for arrowheads to sell to the tourists."

"And where is this cave, little fellow?"

"In Buzzards Canyon."

A neat little explanation, but why the original lie? And what was the ring doing in the cave? Fiala glanced at his watch. It was a half-hour drive to the

canyon, plenty of time before nightfall. "All right, we're going to the cave."

Silence, the black eyes widened with fear; something wrong, or had he trapped them in another lie? "Come on, up on your feet."

Three reluctant boys rose from their boxes, picked them up and off they went to Fiala's car. As the detective opened the door for them, the smallest boy suddenly turned and fled. Let him go. His two companions looked up, and the taller said, "He ran because he's afraid to go to the cave."

"Why? Is something there?"

"A skeleton, senor."

A good road took them out of the city. Twenty-seven minutes across the desert and they entered the canyon. In the gray light there, and the silence, the road narrowed between naked precipices and then vanished. Fiala drove on over the bed of a dried-up stream. Presently the canyon widened again, and a grove of trees rose up before them.

"This is the place, senor."

Shadows lay thick in the grove, nothing moved, the silence was ominous. Fiala stepped from the car. The boys followed; the taller one pointed to a steep slope covered with scrub and Fiala shuddered. Climbing the iron stairway at headquarters was bad enough, but this. . . . The two boys led the way, nimble as goats, and he followed, his fifty years a burden, but somewhere above was the cave, and a skeleton, Montanez?

The ascent continued. His legs ached. He looked up and saw no sign of the boys. Had they tricked him and run off? "Hello!"

His voice echoed across the canyon, then just above him his guides appeared, staring wide-eyed. "Here, senor," the tall one said.

Stones rattled down the slope as he made his way to the boys. When he reached them, both were star-

ing at the entrance to the cave. So, they hadn't lied. He drew a flashlight from his pocket. There was a four-foot high opening to the cave, and darkness beyond. Were there snakes in there? For a moment Fiala hesitated, then stooped and went in.

Twenty steps and he stopped, and there on the floor of the cave, stark white against the pale limestone, lay a skeleton. Montanez? Something sparkled in the beam of the flashlight. He bent down, picked up a belt buckle and a pair of dice. Nothing else. He shook his head, turned the beam back on the stark-white bones, then retreated from the cave.

Shadows were falling across the big plaza when the car reached Montes. Fiala thanked the boys and gave each of them a five-peso note. It was too late to go back to the bullring. He shrugged and put his hand in his pocket. Out came the buckle and dice. The initials J. M. were on the buckle; interesting. Next, he examined the dice and drove off.

The Black Cat had reopened, and loud voices came from inside. He stepped through the side door.

"Ah, Victor, you miss it. What happened? What's her name? You ran out on us."

Shrugging off the verbal bombardment, Fiala went to the bar, and Pancho shook his head. "The best, and you had to run off."

"My regrets, but . . ." Fiala took the dice from his pocket and handed them to Pancho. "Your opinion of these."

Pancho weighed them, frowned, rolled them across the bar. Seven turned up. An accident, rule of chance, or what? Pancho made a face. "Loaded," he said. "So?"

"I wanted you to confirm what I thought."

"That's all?"

"That's all."

"You must have had an interesting afternoon."

"Very."

"What are you drinking?"

"A small Carta Blanca. I'm in a hurry."

"You'll die with your boots on," Pancho said, and opened a bottle.

Fiala ignored the glass and emptied the small bottle in a swallow. A telephone directory lay at the end of the bar. He picked it up, found Domingo's home address and headed for the door. Cries of dismay from the tables followed him out. He climbed into his car and drove off. Ten minutes later he knocked on Domingo's door.

After a short wait Domingo answered and invited him into the patio. "A drink, Victor?"

"Thanks, but I haven't the time. I need some information from Montanez' wife."

"If it's about her husband, she won't discuss him. But perhaps I can help."

"You remember when Montanez disappeared?"

"Yes. We had lunch together that day. It was a Thursday. Friday we were going to the Festival of San Marcos, something he'd never miss, but he didn't show up." Domingo shrugged. "The next night I heard the rumor about him running off with a woman. A lie, of course."

"Why do you think it was a lie?"

"Because I'd have known if he was involved with anyone to that extent."

"But there was a woman?"

"Many, but none meant anything to him."

"Perhaps he meant something to one of them, a jealous woman. She could have . . ."

"There were no affairs, Victor. The women were all paid for, a different one each time, so . . ."

Fiala nodded. "A Thursday when you last saw him. Friday you were going to the Festival of San Marcos. Why wouldn't he have missed it?"

"A whole week of gambling. He always looked forward to that."

The dice found with the skeleton . . . Fiala touched the pocket where they nestled. "So Montanez liked to gamble?"

"Oh, yes."

"And liked to win?"

"What man doesn't?"

"Some try to make sure they do."

"Are you suggesting Montanez cheated?"

"He may have."

"If he did, I never knew about it."

"There's much we never know about our friends."

"What are you getting at?"

"If he was caught cheating, there would have been an argument. The argument could have ended seriously."

Domingo sat still, very pale now. "Thursday night," he finally said. "Every Thursday without fail the dice game at Garcia's ranch."

"He went there after you saw him that last Thursday?"

"I don't know, but we can find out. He usually drove there with Justo Trevino. I'll phone him and——"

"No, I'll see Trevino myself. Many thanks."

Justo Trevino's son opened the door to Fiala. No, his father wasn't at home, but he might be found at the Three Kings, a cantina close to the municipal building. Fiala knew it well. A hole-in-the-wall frequented by a wild crowd, the place was roaring when he entered it. Trevino had been in and left with a group for the Seville.

Fiala drove there and entered the restaurant. It was an off-hour and only one table was occupied; four men, well in their cups, sat around it, and four mariachis stood by, playing Green Eyes while the inebriate diners accompanied them. Fiala waited till they finished, then approached and asked for Trevino.

"He was here and left with a friend," one of the diners explained. "It was barbecued goat, or a barbecued girl for him. He settled for the girl."

"Where can I find him?"

"At Senora Gongora's. Know it?"

Fiala nodded and headed for the door, while behind him the musicians began to play the anthem of the city; stirring music, a big day, bigger night. *I missed the bullfight*, he thought. *And right now I could be at the Black Cat. My day off. A joke. What am I doing? Twenty years ago Montanez vanished. His skeleton, ring, buckle and dice? A ladies' man. Did a jealous girl do him in—or a set of loaded dice send him to eternity?*

"Senor." A tall man in sombrero bowed and opened the door to Senora Gongora's. There was mud outside, but a fancy setup within, good bar, private rooms with unique features for jaded gentlemen; and pretty girls, of course. Fiala glanced at them and asked for Trevino. The barman nodded discreetly to a handsome gray-haired drinker. Fiala approached him and introduced himself. He was sorry for the inconvenience, but he needed information.

Drunk, but agreeable, Trevino stepped outside. "And what is it you wish to know, senor?" he asked.

"You were a good friend of Juan Montanez?"

"A very good friend."

"Twenty years ago he disappeared, but perhaps you remember the dice games at Garcia's ranch?"

"I remember."

"Good. Now the last time you saw Montanez was at the ranch?"

"Yes. We drove there together."

"That night did anything happen, such as an argument or fight?"

"I left early, senor, but I don't believe anything happened. We were all good friends, and——"

"Who else was at the ranch that night? Their



names and where they live."

"Basilio Mendez, Juan Espada, Gregorio Diaz. You know where to find Garcia. Mendez lives somewhere in Rosario. Espada and Diaz? I've lost track of those two."

"Many thanks, I'll find them. Enjoy yourself." Fiala returned to his car. Four names in his notebook, ring, dice, and buckle in his pocket, the skeleton in the cave—a good day's work. He drove off, stopped at the Black Cat, changed his mind about going in and went home.

"You don't live here anymore?" his daughter snapped as she opened the door.

"A busy day." He grinned, and went in to the patio to his favorite chair under the avocado. Slumping into it, he looked up. Aurora was facing him. "No, I wasn't at the Black Cat," he smiled. "And I missed the bullfight. I've been working."

"On your day off?"

"Something important came up."

"No wonder you looked tired. You must be hungry."

"Thirsty. You can bring me a cold one."

"Better if you went to bed."

"A pleasant thought, but I've got to make arrangements for tomorrow. And now if you don't mind, the beer. . . ."

Two cold beers and he dozed off under the avocado. With the first light of day a mourning dove awoke him. The house was silent. He left it, stopped for coffee across from headquarters. Two cups, a cigarette, and he walked into headquarters. Captain Meza was at his desk. Fiala briefly explained about the skeleton and asked for two men and a jeep. They were granted him and off he went on the grisly chore of guiding the policemen to the cave. Leaving them, he returned to headquarters.

Chief Lopez had just arrived and was, as usual, in

a black mood, but he perked up when Fiala told him what he'd dug up. "A murder committed twenty years ago." Lopez shook his head. "How did you get your horns into that one?"

Fiala's explanation, the circumstances which led to the finding of the ring, its identification, and discovery of the skeleton weren't enough for Lopez. "How do you know Montanez was murdered?" he asked. "And if he was, how do you expect to pin down the murderer at this late date?"

"Fortunately, I know where Montanez was and what he was doing the night he vanished. I also know who he was with, and those parties have a little explaining to do."

Lopez smiled and shook his head. "All they'll say is that they remember nothing, and after twenty years who could doubt them? No, Victor, you're going to blow this one."

"If they don't remember, but I'm quite sure they will. If Montanez was murdered at the ranch, they'll have a story to cover themselves."

"In that case," Lopez shrugged, "you won't be able to pin them down."

"Except for the ace I have up my sleeve."

"And that is?"

Fiala glanced at his watch. "I'll tell you later. There's work to be done." He turned and went out the door, walked down the corridor.

Garcia, Mendez, Espada, Diaz—The four who'd last been with Montanez; Garcia was available, Mendez in Rosario. Captain Meza could have him picked up. Espada and Diaz were the doubtful ones. Fiala stopped at Captain Meza's desk and asked to have Mendez brought in and held in isolation. "I'll be back with the other suspects," he added.

"You're moving fast. What's it all about?"

"Later for that," Fiala answered and hurried out the door and on to Domingo's shop. The jeweler pro-

vided him with the information he needed. Espada had died; Diaz ran a barber shop across the street from the Seville.

Fiala left, picked up Diaz and delivered him to headquarters. Next came Garcia, who demanded to know why he was wanted. "You'll know soon enough," Fiala told him and brought him in.

The skeleton taken from the cave in the canyon lay in the morgue. Garcia and Diaz were secluded in separate rooms. A few minutes past noon Mendez was brought in from Rosario.

"Three men and a skeleton," Captain Meza said. "Ready for the inquisition, Victor?"

"After I have my coffee."

"Ei, you were in a big hurry earlier."

"I still am, but let those three fellows bite their nails for a while. It'll help." Fiala smiled and left for the Blue Moon cafe and his coffee. In a half-hour he returned and questioned the three suspects separately. As Lopez had predicted, their memories were faulty. They remembered nothing.

A bad start? Perhaps. But it was the end that counted in this business, and Fiala already detected a chink of light in the dark. Mendez appeared very nervous and unsure of himself, so Fiala decided to renew the questioning by starting with him. First, he called Lopez from his office.

"Got something?" the Chief asked when he appeared at the room where Mendez was held.

"Not yet, but——" Fiala turned to Mendez who had come to his feet. Fiala beckoned him to sit, then lighted a cigarette. "Now we'll begin again," he said. "Perhaps you recall the night we spoke of before. No? Nothing happened. A friendly dice game at Garcia's ranch and all of you went home to bed."

"That's right."

"That being the case, you're wondering why you're being questioned."

"I am."

Fiala nodded. "If you'll please come this way, you'll learn why."

The skeleton from the cave lay on a crude table in the mortuary. Worried, Mendez stared at it, then raised his eyes.

"Recognize him?" Fiala asked. "No? Well, let me inform you. An old friend of yours, Juan Montanez, or what remains of him, and the reason you're here."

"The reason I'm here?"

"Ah, still a bad memory, *senor*. Montanez was murdered at the ranch. A friendly dice game that ended in death. You look at me strangely. I see I must convince you. Here, look at this, the silver buckle with Montanez' initials. Hold it, and these." Fiala dropped a pair of dice in Mendez' hand. "Remember them? They caused all the trouble. No? Then what of this?" Fiala held up the ring Domingo had given him. "Hard to forget such a ring, isn't it? It belonged to Montanez, who ran off with a woman. But did he? Murdered men don't run, they're carried. Montanez was carried up a slope in Buzzards Canyon and hidden in a cave. Do you remember the cave?"

Silver buckle, dice, ring, nor the skeleton itself when he confronted it, none of these made an impression on Garcia. According to him, nothing had happened at the ranch. Confronted with the same items, Diaz, too, insisted that nothing had happened.

Nothing? Fiala had the three men brought together into the same room now. He nodded to Garcia and Diaz. "These two still have bad memories," he said to Lopez, "but fortunately *Senor Mendez*, after reviewing the remains of Montanez, recovered his."

"Then something happened at the ranch?" Lopez said.

"An argument. Montanez was accused of cheating with the dice and attacked his accuser, who happened to be Senor Garcia. The others went to Garcia's aid, a violent struggle followed which ended with the death of Montanez. Naturally everyone was frightened, and what did they do? Go to the police? No, they hid the body in a cave and spread the rumor that Montanez ran off with a woman."

Lopez nodded and turned to Garcia. "Is this true?" he asked. "Or do you still say——"

"It's true," Garcia put in quickly. "We panicked and agreed to hide the body, but we didn't deliberately kill Montanez. We were drinking and Montanez went wild. We subdued him, let him up, he drew a knife and——"

"You drew one," Fiala put in, "and that knife finished him. Of course, you had to defend yourself. But it was your idea to hide the body. You talked the others into believing they were equally guilty."

"I didn't have to talk them into anything, senor."

Fiala ignored the remark and said, "You were gambling for big stakes that night, and you were lucky with the dice. Then something went wrong. Montanez began to win, and you accused him of cheating."

"He admitted it."

"And accused you of doing the same thing."

"He had to say something to excuse himself."

"Beating around the bush," Lopez interrupted. "I think everything's clear now. We know what happened at the ranch."

"An accidental killing?" Fiala shook his head. "No. Montanez was deliberately murdered, and Garcia was clever enough to induce the others to help him hide the body. That way he knew they wouldn't talk. He was also responsible for the rumor that Montanez

ran off with a woman. He——”

Lopez held up his hand and cut Fiala short, then nodded to the door. They stepped into the hall, and the chief shook his head. “Victor, you may be right about Garcia, but it’s only an opinion. An unpremeditated killing, that’s all I can see.”

“And that’s all I saw till last night, when I learned the old watchman at Garcia’s ranch vanished the same night Montanez did. Interesting, isn’t it? Two men disappear from the same place at the same time and no one thinks anything about it. Why not? Because the killer did his work well. He tagged the rumor on Montanez about running off with a woman and it was accepted as the truth. As for the watchman, he was a poor peon with no family, so no one was concerned about him.”

“But what makes you think he was murdered?” Lopez asked. “Because he vanished?”

“Because he was at the ranch. He must have witnessed the murder.”

“So did Mendez and Diaz,” Lopez pointed out.

“They were more than witnesses. At least they believed they were, and they agreed to a pact of silence. But the watchman had no reason to keep silent, and that made him dangerous. For that reason he was murdered.”

“Twenty years ago, if it did happen. Do you expect to find another skeleton and, if you do, how can you prove it’s the watchman’s and that he was murdered?”

Fiala shrugged and smiled wryly. “Now where would the second skeleton be hidden? In the same cave? Why not? If it’s there, we don’t have to prove anything.”

“If it’s there.”

“I think it is. If not, the matter can be taken care of simply enough.”

“It can?” Lopez said, raising his brows.

"Very easily," Fiala answered without explaining, and glanced at his watch. "Can I treat you to coffee?"

"Now?"

"Why not? I think we have it wrapped up. If Captain Meza will tend to the details. . . ."

After coffee and a cigarette at the Blue Moon, Fiala and Lopez returned to headquarters. "Everything ready?" Fiala asked of Meza.

"Everything's ready."

"Good. Have Mendez brought in first."

Mendez was brought to a small room next to the mortuary, questioned and taken away. Diaz followed. Garcia came last, and Fiala pointed to the skeleton lying on a table, an unnecessary gesture. Garcia had seen it; his face was turning green.

"The remains of Ernesto Gonzalez," said Fiala. "The watchman at your ranch who vanished the same night you knifed Montanez. We found his skeleton back in the cave. Shall I continue, senor, or do you remember?"

"I remember," Garcia whispered hoarsely. "I killed him because——"

Fiala held up his hand and nodded to Captain Meza. "If you'll please take down his confession."

"Certainly. This way, senor." Meza opened the door and led Garcia away.

"You tricked him," Lopez said when the door closed. "But I don't understand. Where did you dig up the second skeleton?"

"The second one?" Fiala said innocently. "That's Montanez'. It was shifted in here when we went for coffee. A gamble, but it worked."

Lopez shook his head and grinned. "Clever. You're too much for me, Victor."

"Credit where credit is due," Fiala answered. "If it hadn't been for Domingo recognizing that ring and, of course, those three shoeshine boys. . . ."

## VARIATIONS ON AN EPISODE

Fletcher Flora

"This one," said Marcus, "is fancy."

Bobo Fuller, deliberately spaced the maximum distance away on the seat of the police car, stared gloomily out the window at the passing buildings. They were moving through sparse traffic at an almost leisurely pace, and the siren was silent. This, to Fuller, was a violation of proper procedure, almost an offense against propriety. Two cops going to a murder, in his opinion, should be going at high speed with siren howling. But Marcus, unfortunately, believed that should be left to the ambulances and the fire trucks. After all, there was no great rush. The scene of the murder was secured in status quo by uniformed patrolmen, sent early to the scene, and it was certain the corpse wasn't going anywhere. High speeds made him nervous, Marcus said, and sirens made his head ache.

"Fancy how?" Fuller asked.

"As I get it," Marcus said, "this guy named Draper was asleep in his bed this morning, and someone walked in and stabbed him."

"That doesn't sound fancy to me. It sounds simple."

"I didn't mean fancy that way. It happened to a fancy guy who lived in a fancy place. That's what I meant."

"Thanks." Fuller's voice was tainted just enough by bitterness to register his animus while sustaining diplomacy. "It's nice to be informed. Was this Draper married?"

"He was."



"Where was his wife when he was getting stabbed?"

"A good question, Fuller. At the first opportunity, let's ask her."

They had turned, meanwhile, onto a broad boulevard split down the middle by a raised medial strip which was planted with bluegrass and evergreens, in an area devoted largely to apartment buildings and hotels. They stopped in front of a hotel, the Southworth, and got out. In spite of a bronze name plaque and a canopy from curb to entrance, the place was not really so fancy. What Marcus had meant was that the Southworth was undoubtedly expensive. This conviction was in no degree weakened by the resplendent doorman who held the door open for them.

"It's on the fifth floor," Marcus said over his shoulder as he crossed the lobby to the elevator, with Fuller trailing. "We'll go right up."

Getting out on the fifth floor, they went down the hall and around a corner to 519. Marcus opened the door, already slightly ajar, and entered a short hallway created by the protrusion of a bathroom, which was immediately on his right. A few feet farther on, he came into the bedroom of a two-room suite. Again to his right, headboard flush against the interior wall of the bathroom, was a double bed. Beside the bed, staring down as if bemused by death and the prospects of heaven, was a gray, dehydrated little man with a stethoscope hanging out of his side coat pocket. The stethoscope was just dressing, a kind of professional emblem in support of the caduceus. The gray little man had not needed it, for the man on the bed, the object of his bemused stare, was as clearly dead as a knife driven into the soft hollow at the base of his throat could make him. He had bled a lot, and the blood had soaked the front of his white silk pajamas and spread in a great stain over white cotton sheets. The

gray little man looked up at Marcus with curiously angry eyes.

"Hello, Marcus," he said. "You're running late."

Marcus walked around the bed and stopped beside it in the narrow clearance between the bed and the wall. Fuller remained on the other side, behind the medical examiner, and surveyed the carnage with a forced air of detachment. It was Fuller's secret shame that the sight and smell of blood made him queasy.

"Sometimes I do." Marcus, returning the stare of blind eyes, resisted a desire to close them. "He certainly bled a lot, didn't he?"

"You generally do when your throat's cut."

"How long has he been dead?"

"Since seconds after he was stabbed."

"When was he stabbed?"

"Not long ago. Say around nine o'clock. Shortly before he was found."

"Who found him?"

"Should I know? I just pronounce them dead, Marcus. You're the cop."

"Right. He was sleeping when it happened, sleeping on his back. How did whoever did it get in here? These hotel doors lock automatically when they're closed. You can't open them from outside without a key. Don't bother to answer, Doc. You've already told me that I'm the cop."

Marcus, sacrificing a handkerchief, reached down with a faint fastidious feeling of revulsion and extracted the knife, carefully preserving in the process the fingerprints which he was convinced would not be there.

The knife was a common kitchen paring knife. It was of poor quality, but plenty good enough and sharp enough, for all that, to peel a potato or trim a steak or cut a throat. You could buy it, or one like it, in thousands of hardware stores or department stores

or dime stores. In brief, it was impossible to trace or to identify as the property of any person. Were knives like this available in the hotel kitchen? If so, it would be at least a beginning, but Marcus, the perennial pessimist, bet bitterly that they weren't.

He had been aware all the while of voices and movement in the room behind him, the second room of the suite. Now, abruptly, carrying the knife in the handkerchief, he went through the communicating door. A couple of technicians were working expertly at their scientific hocus-pocus. One of the pair of patrolmen who had arrived first on the scene was standing by the hall door. Marcus, with a wave of a hand to the technicians, approached the patrolman. The latter identified himself and, at Marcus' request, gave a report so brief and orderly that it had apparently been arranged and edited in his mind beforehand for the purpose of making a high efficiency rating. It did, in fact, and Marcus mentally noted it.

The patrolman and his partner had received at nine-twenty the radio message which had sent them to the Southworth. They were cruising nearby and had arrived at nine-twenty-seven. They had found the hotel manager, a Mr. Clinton Garland, fresh from the chamber of horrors, maintaining a resolute guard in the hall outside the bedroom door. The body had been discovered by a hotel maid who had come in her regular routine to put fresh towels in the bathroom. The maid had set up a howl that had reached in relays to the manager's office, and he had come at once in the company of the captain of bellboys, who had been dispatched to summon the police. The patrolmen, arriving, had relieved the manager of guard duty. Nothing, subsequently, had been touched until the invasion of investigators.

"Where," asked Marcus, "is his wife?"

The patrolman looked stricken, realizing at once

that he had, in his orderly and edited report, been guilty of an egregious omission. "Wife, sir?"

"Right. Wife. He had one, you know."

"As a matter of fact, sir, I didn't know."

"I take it, then, that she hasn't been in evidence since you got here?"

"No, sir. No wife."

"No matter. We'll turn her up in good time. Where's the manager now?"

"Waiting in his office on the ground floor. He was pretty badly shaken up. I thought it would be all right to let him go."

"You did everything fine. Now you and your partner better get back on patrol."

Marcus turned back into the room and put the paring knife in its cotton nest on a table near a technician who was methodically dusting for prints.

"You can check the handle of this," he said, "but you won't find anything."

He walked back through the communicating door into the bedroom. The medical examiner had gone, but Fuller lingered.

"Have a look around, Fuller, and see what you can come up with. Odds are you won't find anything that means anything, but I guess we ought to try." Marcus, speaking, reached the hall door. "I'm going down to see the manager. I'll be back up pretty soon."

He went out, and Fuller began looking for something that meant something.

Marcus, however, did not go directly down to the manager. He was delayed, almost before he started. In the hall, he was arrested by a sudden sharp hissing sound, rather like the warning of a startled snake, and he saw that the door across the hall had opened far enough to allow the passage of what appeared to be the decapitated head of somebody's grandmother. It had white hair parted in the middle and drawn back on both sides of the part into a bun; an avid

little face, full of wrinkles, with a tight little mouth that looked very much like another wrinkle with teeth; rimless glasses slipped down the bridge of a pointed nose, and behind them, peeping over the rimless glass with an effect of slyness, a pair of alert, inquisitive eyes. Marcus thought wildly of a wicked wren.

"Did you hiss?" he asked politely.

She nodded briskly and darted a glance both directions in the hall, seeming thereby to invite Marcus into a conspiracy. "Is it true?" she whispered.

"It may be," Marcus said. "Is what true, precisely?"

"Is Mark Draper dead?"

"He is."

"Murdered?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

The white head nodded again. The bright eyes glittered over glass. "Small wonder."

"Oh? You think so? Why?"

"Some people are born to be murdered." The whisper was now barely audible. "And some people are born to be murderers."

"That's an interesting theory. I'd be pleased to hear you develop it."

"I know a thing or two. I do indeed."

"I shouldn't wonder."

"I have an instinct. I feel things."

"Madam, instinct is not allowed in a court of law. However, when supported by adequate evidence, it may prove useful in an investigation. May I come in?"

"Please do."

She widened the crack in the door just enough for him to slip through, then quickly and quietly closed it behind him. The conspiratorial atmosphere, Marcus thought, was really becoming a bit absurd.

"Permit me to introduce myself," he said. "Lieutenant Joseph Marcus."

"I'm Lucretia Bridges. Won't you sit down?"

They looked at each other across five feet of green carpet in a room which betrayed itself by the presence of many small additions of whatnot, obviously personal, as a place of permanent residence. Lucretia, clearly, was no transient. She was one of a swelling company of hotel dwellers.

"You have a theory," Marcus said. "Also an instinct. I'm interested in both."

Her white head bobbed, and again Marcus was wildly reminded of a wicked wren.

"Mark Draper," she said, "was no better than he should have been."

"Most of us aren't."

"He drank and he gambled and he kept late hours."

Marcus, who was guilty of the first and the last, although not the second, clucked disapprovingly. "Is that so?"

"It is. Moreover, he was a wastrel, and he didn't work."

Marcus' cluck was somewhat more genuine now. He himself was not guilty on either of these counts, being far too poor to afford them. "If he didn't work, how could he afford to maintain residence in a place like this? It must be very expensive."

"It is. He had money. He inherited it, more than he could spend in a lifetime, wastrel though he was. Why else do you imagine that sly little baggage married him?"

"Baggage?" Marcus made a rapid mental adjustment. "Oh, yes. His wife, of course."

"She's much younger than he was, years and years. Disparity in ages makes for a bad situation. It invites trouble."

"How so?"

"I was never unfaithful to Mr. Bridges. Never!"

"That's commendable, I'm sure. Mrs. Draper, you think, was unfaithful to Mr. Draper?"

"I know what I know."

"Instinct?"

"I have eyes. I see what's going on."

Marcus didn't doubt it. Witnesses, however, to be of value, must be somewhat more specific. "What did you see? When did you see it?"

"Comings and goings. Mr. Draper was gone much of the time, you see. He didn't work, but he was forever off somewhere, and she was always having callers. In the daytime, mind you. I always think it's so much more shameful in the daytime, don't you?"

Marcus had no preference, day or night, but he repeated his useful cluck. "So flagrant," he said.

"Exactly. I could drop a few names that would surprise certain folk." She waited for Marcus' cue.

"Surprise me."

"That young Mr. Tiber who lives on the floor above, Jerome Tiber. He was most brazen of all. As you said, so flagrant. I'm certain that she had given him a key."

"To her room?"

"She must have. I've seen him enter, bold as brass, without knocking."

"That's interesting. That's very interesting, indeed."

"He wasn't the only one, however. There are those, so to speak, who have keys by right of position."

"Such as?"

"Well, I'm sure that Mr. Clinton Garland visited her far more often than was necessary."

"The hotel manager?"

"There is simply no occasion, I mean, for a hotel manager to go to a guest's room so frequently. And that bell captain, Lewis Varna. One would think Dolly Draper spent half her time thinking up one pretext or another to get him to her room."

"Her tastes, if I understand your implications, were remarkably catholic."

"It's more to the point, I think, to conclude that she had no taste at all."

"She seems to be missing this morning, incidentally. Do you happen to know where she is now?"

"I'm sure I don't," Lucretia Bridges said, then added with a monstrous improbity that took Marcus' wind away, "I am one who strictly minds her own affairs."

The shock of it brought him to his feet. He had acquired enough food for thought, in any event, to tax his mental molars. He looked around and tried to think of a graceful exit line. "You have a pleasant room," he said. "Do you live here as a permanent guest?"

"Yes. I find residing in a hotel so convenient. I've been here nearly ten years, since shortly after Mr. Bridges died."

"He must have left you well off."

"Indeed he did. Winston was a wonderful man, poor dear. He died so suddenly. No warning whatever. We were just beginning dinner, and he fell right over into his soup. There was no time even to fetch a doctor."

"Well, thank you for your help, Mrs. Bridges. It's possible that I may want to talk with you again."

"I am at your service," said Lucretia, and followed Marcus to the door, where he said good-bye. As he passed through, she had, woman-wise, the last word.

"When you find Dolly Draper," she said, "you must be on your guard. She is quite deceptive, and appears to be what she is not. I tell you she's a bad woman. She's *evil*."

The ancient and ominous adjective seemed to hang in the air and repeat itself in whispers. The hall, as Marcus walked down it toward the elevators, seemed suddenly colder and darker than it was.

Mr. Clinton Garland, surrounded by walnut paneling, was waiting behind his walnut desk. He was im-



peccably dressed, his hair was all present and sleekly brushed, and his face, properly composed for a tragic occasion, was handsome enough to qualify him as the moderator of a TV quiz show, although a bit long in the nose. As he rose and extended manicured fingers, Marcus could detect that Mr. Garland had taken a very large drop for his nerves.

After introductions Marcus said, "This is bad business."

"Indeed it is," Garland said, retrieving his hand after token contact. "It will do the Southworth no good, Lieutenant. No good at all."

"It didn't do Mark Draper any good, either."

"It's dreadful. Simply dreadful. Whoever could have done such a monstrous thing?"

"We'll try to find out. I'm hoping you can help."

"I'll do what I can, of course, but I'm afraid it will be very little."

"Perhaps," said Marcus, "you will just tell me about your own part in the affair."

"Certainly. I was right here in my office, discussing several routine matters with Lewis Varna, the bell captain. When the news reached the lobby, one of the bellboys reported it to the desk clerk, and the desk clerk brought it immediately to me."

"What time was that?"

"I'm not sure. I was naturally so distraught by the news that I failed to make proper note of things. It was after nine. Before the half hour, I think. Sometime between."

"Never mind. Go on, please."

"Well, Lewis and I rushed up, of course, and I went into the room and verified the report." Garland repressed a shudder. "So much blood! It was dreadful. Simply dreadful."

"Which room did you enter?"

"Which room? Why, the room in which Mr. Draper had been stabbed, of course."

"I thought you might have entered the adjoining one."

"No, no, I went directly from the hall into the bedroom."

"Was the door closed and locked?"

"If it were closed, it would automatically be locked. It wasn't. Poor Mrs. Grimm, the maid, had rushed into the hall screaming and had left the door standing open behind her. What a dreadful experience for the poor soul!"

"Draper was apparently sleeping when he was stabbed. Do your maids enter the bedrooms of your guests when they are sleeping?"

"Certainly not. However, Mrs. Grimm had encountered Mrs. Draper on the floor below about half an hour earlier, and Mrs. Draper had told Mrs. Grimm that Mr. Draper was sleeping late, but that it would be quite all right to slip in quietly and change the towels. As a matter of fact, Mr. Draper was chronically a late sleeper, and it was understood that the maid could slip into the bathroom when necessary. After all, our maids must perform their services."

"Where was Mrs. Draper going when she encountered the maid on the lower floor? Do you know?"

"She was in the company of Mrs. Bryan Lancaster, who occupies a two-room suite on that floor with her husband. Mrs. Draper and Mrs. Lancaster met the maid just as they were descending the stairs. They had been up in Mrs. Draper's suite and were walking down to Mrs. Lancaster's. The maid saw them enter."

"You seem to have a fair number of permanent guests in this hotel."

"That's true. We rather cater to them. Our rates are not excessive for the comforts and services offered."

"Naturally. Anyhow, I'm delighted finally to have crossed the trail of Mrs. Draper. I've found her rather elusive."

"Elusive? Not at all. She has been in Mrs. Lancaster's suite all this while. After she heard the news about her husband she was prostrate, of course. Simply prostrate. What a dreadful thing to happen to the poor little thing! Mrs. Lancaster has been taking care of her."

"What's the number of Mrs. Lancaster's suite?"

"Four hundred twenty-one. I trust, if you must talk with Mrs. Draper, that you will be considerate."

"I am always," said Marcus, "considerate of everyone." He fished for a cigarette, found one and lit it. "What did you do after seeing the body?" he continued.

"I sent Lewis Varna to summon the police, and I remained in the hall outside the door until the police came. Then, with their permission, I came back here. I was limp. Simply limp!"

"I know. It was a dreadful experience. Where is the maid now? I'll need to talk with her."

"I have her standing by. Lewis Varna, too. I was certain that you'd want to see them sometime."

"Good. I'll see them together. Two birds, you know, with one stone."

Clinton Garland left the room, and was back in less than two minutes with Lewis Varna and Mrs. Grimm. The former was a slender, swarthy young man with black curly hair, courteous but not deferential, who undoubtedly would be attractive to the ladies. The latter was a small woman, almost dainty, neatly uniformed in crisp white. Her hair was going gray, but her face still retained a smooth, youthful quality, and her throat, in the vulnerable area beneath the chin, its taut elasticity. Marcus was surprised. He had expected, somehow, someone canted sidewise from carrying a mop bucket.

Lewis Varna, at Marcus' request, reported first. His report was concise, and it supported in all significant details the prior report of Clinton Garland. Which might mean, Marcus realized with the de-

tached skepticism of his trade, that the pair had told separately the simple truth, or that they had, on the other hand, plotted their stories in the ample time that had been allowed them. Marcus was invariably skeptical of any pair who alibied each other so neatly, especially, in this case, a pair who carried pass-keys. Still, the alibi was not airtight. There was, after all, the crucial time *before* Garland and Varna met in the office for their discussion of hotel matters.

"Let's see," Marcus said casually. "You and Mr. Garland were right here together when you first heard the report of the murder. How long would you say you had been here?"

Varna got the point. So did Garland. Their eyes met, struck sparks, and passed, but Varna's expression did not otherwise alter. He remained a perfect picture of candor, as one who was willing to accept the digressions of a police investigation, but recognized, nevertheless, the basic absurdity of them.

"It's hard to say. We were not, of course, particularly conscious of time. What would you say, Mr. Garland? Half an hour?"

"There was quite a number of things on the agenda," Garland. "Half an hour would be a conservative estimate. Nearer forty-five minutes, I'd say."

"I see." Marcus turned to Mrs. Grimm. "Madam, you had a trying experience."

"It was a shock. A terrible shock."

"Have you sufficiently recovered to talk about it?"

"I'm all right now, thank you."

And she did, indeed, seem quite composed. She stood erect with her feet together and her hands folded in front of her. Her eyes, with the proper deference of a servant before masters, were fixed on an imaginary spot somewhere over Marcus' head.

"You entered the bedroom shortly after nine, I understand. Is that correct?"

"It must have been. I'm not positive."

"The medical examiner estimates that Mr. Draper was murdered around nine. You must have just missed a scene more shocking than the one you saw."

"I try not to think of that, sir."

"Right. Nothing to be gained from magnifying horrors. Did you see anyone near the door before you entered?"

"No, sir."

"Anyone in the hall at all?"

"No one."

"You went in to change the towels in the bathroom, I believe. Were you also going to change the sheets on the bed?"

"No, sir. Mr. Draper was sleeping late. I had seen Mrs. Draper on the floor below, and she told me it would be all right to slip into the bathroom quietly."

"Did you, indeed, change the towels?"

Mrs. Grimm thought for a moment, then slowly shook her head.

"Now that you put the question, sir, I don't believe I did. It was the shock, you see. I'm rather confused in my mind about things."

"Understandably so. Just tell me briefly what you did after seeing the body of Mr. Draper."

"I screamed and ran from the room and down the hall. I must have screamed several times, and my head was spinning. At the elevator, I ran into a bell-boy who had just come up from the lobby. He helped me to a vacant room and put me on the bed there. The guest had checked out early, you see, and the door was standing open. A few minutes later, when I was not so faint, I thought that I had better see Mr. Garland at once, but when I went into the hall again, I saw Mr. Garland standing guard outside Mr. Draper's door. I didn't wish to go near that room again, so I came down here and waited. That's all, sir. That's all I can remember."

"Very good. Thank you, Mrs. Grimm."

"Are you finished, Lieutenant?" Garland asked.

"For the present, yes."

Garland nodded at the bell captain and the maid.

"You are free to go now."

They left, and so, after a polite word of parting with the manager, did Marcus.

He rapped lightly beneath the neat chrome numbers: 421. A mnemonic gem, second number half the first, third number half the second. Remember the first, you got them all.

The mnemonic gem retreated as the door swung inward, revealing a young man wearing a gray cardigan. He had thick brown rebellious hair, a slightly crooked nose, and an expression that was, all in all, inordinately cheerful for the circumstances.

"Mr. Lancaster?" Marcus queried.

The young man grinned and shook his head. "No such luck. Old Bryan's off doing his daily stint. Tiber's the name. Jerome Tiber."

"Oh? I'm Lieutenant Marcus. Police. I'm looking for Mrs. Mark Draper."

"This is as far as you go, Lieutenant. Dolly's here, safe and sound, although, as you will understand, a bit upset. I must say that you've been an unconscionable time getting to us. We've been waiting for you."

"Well, here I am at last. Now where is Mrs. Draper?"

"Come in. I'll get her for you."

Marcus entered. On a low table before a sofa stood a silver pot that emitted the aromatic odor of hot coffee. Beside the pot, a cup, half full, sat in its saucer. Marcus sat on the sofa, smelled the coffee and coveted a cup.

Jerome Tiber, at the communicating door, spoke cheerfully into the adjoining room. "Dolly, my darling, your sins have found you out. You had better emerge and face the consequences."

In response to this airy summons, two young wom-

en came into the room. One of them was rather tall, with bright red hair, and had about her the firmly benevolent attitude of one who is determinedly giving aid and comfort to someone else. This one, Marcus guessed rightly, was Mrs. Bryan Lancaster.

The other, then, was Dolly Draper. Marcus, rising to meet her, was aware instantly of a feeling to which he should have, at his age, developed immunity long ago. Tenderness? Affinity? The faint siren singing of September Song? Say, for decency's sake, fatherliness. For Dolly Draper, who was surely at least in her middle twenties, looked to be in her late teens. And she was small; small and slim with an innocently seductive body now poured into a white cashmere sweater and a pair of red slacks. Her hair, which was the soft yellow color of ripe field corn, was little longer than a contemporary male folk songster's. Her eyes were grave and gray. She sat down on the edge of a straight chair and folded her hands on her knees. She did not seem grieved. She seemed only infinitely sad.

"Damn it, Jerry," said the red-headed Mrs. Lancaster, "please don't be quite so cheerful. It's absolutely obscene."

Tiber, undaunted, waved a hand and made a little bow. "Gloom accomplishes nothing. 'The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ . . .' You know the bit, darling. One must have a philosophical attitude, I say. Besides, I must add, someone, however reprehensible his method, has done me a service. He has, in brief, removed my competition."

During this remarkable speech, Dolly Draper sat quietly with her grave gray eyes turned on the speaker, and the faintest shadow of a sad and tender smile touched her pink lips. "Darling," she said, "I know you mean well, but you musn't say such things. It isn't proper."

"It's obscene, that's what it is," said the redhead.

"Jerry, mind your manners."

"What? Oh, yes. Introductions are in order. Mrs. Draper, Mrs. Lancaster, Lieutenant Marcus. Lieutenant Marcus, as we have anticipated, is of the police. Since we are clearly to be on familiar terms in this business, I suggest that we abandon formality at once. If you choose, Lieutenant, you may call these alliterative ladies Dolly and Lucy."

Marcus did not choose. "Mrs. Draper," he said, "this is a grim affair, and I understand that it must be very difficult for you. I'm sorry."

"I feel much better now." She smiled sadly at her folded hands. "I suppose, now that the shock has worn off, that I'm not even particularly surprised."

"Oh? What do you mean by that?"

"Well, to be truthful, poor Mark was really a rather disagreeable man, and he was always running around to all sorts of places and associating with all sorts of undesirable persons."

"What places? What persons?"

Dolly Draper lifted her hands in a helpless little gesture, and immediately folded them again. "I don't know, actually. Just places and persons."

"Didn't he ever take you with him?"

"Oh, no. I don't care for such places and persons."

"Mrs. Draper, men are seldom murdered simply for being disagreeable."

"On that score," said Jerry Tiber, "you can make an exception of old Mark."

"Shut up, Jerry," Lucy Lancaster said. "Lieutenant, why do you keep looking at the coffee pot? Would you like a cup?"

"No, thank you," Marcus lied.

"Nonsense. Of course you would. I can tell by the way your nostrils twitch. Jerry, get a cup for the lieutenant."

"There isn't a clean one. Room service only sent up three, and we've used them all."



"Well, I'm sure there's no insurmountable difficulty. Go and rinse a cup in the lavatory."

Jerry went obediently, with reasonably good grace, and Marcus, feeling uneasily that he was somehow not controlling the situation, turned his attention again to Dolly Draper to revive the case at hand.

"Are you suggesting," he said, "that an outsider slipped into the hotel and murdered your husband?"

"Perhaps a guest. A transient. I suspect he's checked out and gone by this time."

"That's possible, of course. But how did he get into the room?"

"I suppose he came through the door. Isn't that how one usually gets into a room?"

"Usually. In this instance, I don't see how. Mrs. Draper, the door of the bedroom was locked. So was the hall door of the adjoining room. How would a transient guest, not possessing a key, get into either room of the suite?"

"Is that a problem? I would say, offhand, that Mark let him in."

"Your husband was sleeping when he was stabbed."

"Was he? How do you know?"

Marcus started to respond and stopped suddenly before making a sound, his mouth open in the middle of a rather foolish expression. Which was, for Marcus, extraordinary.

"He looked as if he'd been sleeping," he said finally, and the words limped in his own ears.

"If you care for my opinion," Dolly Draper said, "you have started off with a very large assumption that may be wrong. Anyone could arrange a body on a bed so as to make it appear to have died sleeping."

"Have you heard that he was stabbed at the base of the throat from the front?"

"I've heard that, yes. It was a cruel thing to do to poor old Mark."

"How in the devil could someone have approached

your husband with a knife and stabbed him neatly in such a spot when he was awake and erect and aware of what was going on?"

"Did I say he was erect? I don't believe I did. When Lucy and I left my suite this morning, Mark had a terrible headache. He was so beastly about it, grumpy and all, that he was simply intolerable. That's why Lucy and I decided to move down here to her place. Before we came, however, I gave Mark a sedative and sent him back to bed. If someone came to the door soon after we left, before the sedative had taken effect, Mark would have let him in, and then, if it was someone he knew well, he would have lain back down and closed his eyes. It's quite possible, you know, to carry on a conversation while lying on your back with your eyes closed. As a matter of fact, he has often done it with me. He was always having severe headaches in the morning, often from hangovers, and he frequently lay in bed while I was up and about, and we would talk, and all the while his eyes would be closed. It's better for a headache, of course, if you keep the light out of your eyes."

Marcus, who was not without experience himself, was forced to concede the point. He looked at Dolly Draper with a kind of growing wonder.

"It's a reasonable explanation," he said. "Do you have any idea who may have called on your husband this morning after you left?"

"Oh, no. It was quite impossible to know who might call on Mark, or when, or why."

"We must at least conclude that the purpose this time was murder."

"Must we? Maybe not. Maybe it was something that was incited and done on the spur of the moment."

"I doubt it. I doubt if anyone, unless he plans to use it, goes calling with an ordinary kitchen paring knife in his pocket."

"Was that what poor Mark was stabbed with?"

Imagine it, Lucy, an ordinary kitchen paring knife!"

Thus summarily challenged, it remained unknown if Lucy Lancaster's imagination was equal to the occasion. At that moment, carrying a rinsed cup on a saucer, Jerome Tiber came back into the room. He poured coffee into the cup and handed it to Marcus.

"There you are, Lieutenant. Compliments of the house."

"Thanks," Marcus acknowledged, then turned to Lucy. "Why did you go upstairs to Mrs. Draper's suite so early this morning?" he asked.

"It wasn't particularly early. It was just after eight o'clock. Do you imagine that we are all the indolent rich or something?"

"Excuse me. Why did you go?"

"Because Dolly called me on the telephone and asked me, that's why. She wanted to show me a silver cigarette box she bought yesterday afternoon. It plays 'Smoke Gets in Your Eyes' when you open the lid."

"I thought it was rather clever," Dolly said. "Cigarettes and smoke in your eyes and all that, I mean."

Marcus was not diverted. "And shortly afterward you decided to come down here?"

"We were practically forced to," Dolly said. "We were going to have our coffee there, but Mark behaved so abominably and kept shouting at us to keep quiet and everything, that we left."

"On the way here, I understand, you met the maid in the hall."

"Yes. The maid who always does our rooms."

"And you told her that it would be all right if she slipped in and changed the towels in the bathroom?"

"I didn't think it would disturb Mark. He'd had the sedative, as I said, and I was sure he'd be asleep again by the time the maid got around."

"I've talked with the maid. She says she saw no one near the bedroom. If your husband admitted some-

one to the room, he was gone before the maid got there."

"Well, murderers seldom stick around after committing murder, do they?"

Marcus was compelled to admit that they seldom did. He decided also that he had stuck around as long as it was profitable. He drained his cup, set it aside, and rose to his feet. "Thank you very much," he said. "It's time I was getting on to other things. I'm sorry to have intruded."

"Are you going back upstairs?" Jerome Tiber wanted to know.

"That's right."

"I'm going that way. I'll just drop you off if you don't mind."

Marcus didn't mind. In fact, he welcomed the chance to get the remarkable Jerome Tiber a few minutes alone. Having said good-bye to Dolly and Lucy, they departed together.

"I understand," said Marcus, "that you and Mrs. Draper are what some may call good friends."

"I'm working at it," Tiber said cheerfully.

"It has even been suggested that you have a key to her door."

"A key? Nonsense. Why should I need a key? If the coast was clear, as they say in the cheaper thrillers, Dolly could always give me a ring and extend an invitation. I had no wish, believe me, to wander in on old Mark with a hot key in my hand." He stopped and shot Marcus a startled glance. "Are you by any chance implying, Lieutenant, that I could have admitted myself this morning and done old Mark in?"

"One has to explore the possibilities."

"Well, you may have guessed that I wasn't exactly one of old Mark's fans, but on the other hand I wasn't his mortal enemy either. Dear as little Dolly is, she isn't worth the risk. Suggested by whom?"

"What?"

"Who suggested that I might have a key?"

"Someone who claims to have seen you enter without knocking."

"Never mind. It must have been the old witch across the hall. When Dolly invited me down, she sometimes left the door slightly ajar. It expedited matters."

"I see."

They had climbed the stairs to the upper floor, and now they paused for a breather before Jerome Tiber continued his ascent.

"Well," he said, "I suppose we must part here. Friends, I hope. I don't suppose you'd be willing to let me come along and poke about the murder scene a bit?"

"No."

"I thought you wouldn't. Well, no matter. It's just that I have such a morbid curiosity. Good sleuthing, Lieutenant."

Jerome Tiber went on up the stairs, and Marcus, lingering, heard him begin to whistle softly as he went.

Fuller was at a window with his head out. He pulled it in and turned as Marcus entered. Marcus, however, veered off into the bathroom.

Mrs. Grimm's memory, he saw, had served her well. The towels in the bathroom had been used, and there were no fresh ones in evidence.

On the wide surface into which the lavatory was sunk, among a variety of jars and bottles, was a clear plastic container of capsules. Marcus, examining it, satisfied himself that the capsules contained the sedative which Mark Draper was reported to have taken, then went into the bedroom. Fuller was still standing by the window. The police ambulance had come and gone, and the body of Mark Draper was no longer on the bed. Marcus, who was not fond of bodies, was relieved.

"There's a narrow ledge," Fuller said. "Outside, a narrow ledge below the windows. It would be a risky

trick, but a man could conceivably inch his way along it. The window was unlocked."

"Oh." Marcus seemed abstracted. "I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"As you said, too risky. Not only of falling, but of being seen from the street. Besides, how could anyone coming in that way be sure that Draper was in bed and asleep at nine o'clock in the morning? For that matter, how could he be sure that Mrs. Draper wasn't here?"

"I didn't say I had all the answers." Fuller's voice was abrupt, almost harsh. "It's just something to think about."

"Oh, right, Fuller. Any signs of a search in the room?"

"Nothing apparent."

"Anything seem to be missing?"

"Nothing obvious. We'd have to ask Mrs. Draper to be sure."

"I don't think it will be necessary. Draper wasn't killed by any burglar. That's plain."

"It is? I admit it doesn't look likely, but how can you be so sure? The ledge isn't *that* narrow."

Marcus' air of abstraction still pertained. He stood by the bed and pinched his lower lip and stared at the floor. He seemed for a moment not to have heard.

"I'm sure," he said after the moment had passed, "because *I know who did kill him.*"

Fuller, trained by experience in stoicism, said quietly, "That's very interesting. Maybe you wouldn't mind telling *me.*"

"Not yet, Fuller, not yet." Marcus perked up, as if he were brushing the whole vexing business from his mind. "Because I don't know *why*. I can't for the life of me see *why.*"

He turned toward the door abruptly. "Come on, Fuller. We might as well get out of here. There's nothing more at the moment to be done."

In Fuller's opinion, there was, on the contrary, a lot to be done. There was, for example, a murderer to be arrested. If, that is, Marcus actually knew the murderer's identity. Personally, Fuller doubted it. To put it kindly, Marcus was merely trying to measure up to some exaggerated image he had of himself. Behold the great detective! To put it less kindly and more honestly, Marcus was a liar.

Fuller didn't venture the accusation, but his conviction was supported by what happened in the next six days. Indeed, so far as Fuller himself was involved, nothing happened at all. Marcus, for two days, was around headquarters. He had a session with the chief and another session with the chief and the district attorney together. He spent quite a lot of time on the telephone discussing with someone something that Fuller wasn't privileged to know and couldn't get into position to overhear. Then Marcus disappeared. He simply dropped out of sight. To all appearances, Mark Draper had been judged expendable. His murder, apparently, incited no concern.

Then, after four days, Marcus reappeared. He simply turned up again. Fuller, invading his office in the afternoon of the fourth day, found him sitting slumped behind his desk looking across it silently at Mrs. Grimm, who was sitting erect in a straight chair with a purse gripped in her lap. The knuckles of her hands were white. Her face was like a stone.

"Oh, Fuller, there you are," Marcus said. "I've been asking for you."

"That's considerate of you," Fuller said. "Where have you been?"

"Why, I've been all over, Fuller. Both coasts and back. On the Draper case, you know. Incidentally, you remember Mrs. Grimm, I'm sure. Or did you ever meet her?"

"I didn't."

"You know who she is, don't you? Well, meet her now. Mrs. Grimm, Sergeant Fuller."

Fuller nodded at Mrs. Grimm. Mrs. Grimm did not nod or speak. She did not move.

"Mrs. Grimm," said Marcus, "is the murderer of Mark Draper."

Fuller sucked in his breath, held it until his chest hurt, and then released it in a long sigh, barely audible. Taking a step forward, he leaned heavily against Marcus' desk. "Is that so?" he said.

"Unfortunately, it is. Isn't it, Mrs. Grimm?"

Mrs. Grimm didn't answer. She did not move.

"I would be interested in knowing," Fuller said slowly, "how you reached this conclusion."

"Oh, it was plain enough, Fuller, from the beginning. You were right, you know, when you said this case didn't sound so fancy. It wasn't. Mrs. Grimm had a passkey. Mr. Draper was sedated and presumably asleep. Mrs. Grimm simply admitted herself to the bedroom, stabbed Mr. Draper in the throat, and then, after a brief delay which permitted Mr. Draper to get good and dead, rushed out into the hall screaming murder." He smiled benevolently.

Fuller looked with wonder at Mrs. Grimm. Mrs. Grimm did not move or speak.

"How," asked Fuller, "did you know?"

Marcus sighed and built a little tent of fingers on his stomach. "Mrs. Grimm came, presumably, to change the towels. But the towels had not been changed. Mrs. Grimm explained it by saying that she was naturally too distraught by what she found on the bed. Good enough. But what would most women do if, carrying an armload of towels, they came suddenly upon the body of a murdered man? I submit that they would throw the towels all over the place. Anyhow, as they screamed and ran, they would at least drop them. Did you see any towels on the floor, Fuller?"



"No," said Fuller, "I didn't."

"Let it go. That wasn't the big point, at any rate."

"What," asked Fuller, "was the big point?"

"You saw the room, Fuller. You saw how it was shaped. The bathroom is constructed in the corner, next to the outside hall, leaving between the bathroom and the opposite wall a short, narrow hallway. In the bedroom, the bed was placed against the interior wall of the bathroom. Around the corner, that is. *Mrs. Grimm could not possibly have seen the body of Mark Draper unless she walked on into the bedroom.*"

"So," said Fuller, "she couldn't."

"And there was absolutely no reason why Mrs. Grimm should have done so. She was merely going to change the towels. She had been instructed, moreover, to slip in and out quietly so as not to disturb Draper. Instead, she went right on into the bedroom. Does that sound sensible to you, Fuller?"

"No," said Fuller, "it doesn't."

"Neither did it to me. I decided that Mrs. Grimm could bear investigation."

Again Fuller looked with wonder at Mrs. Grimm. Still Mrs. Grimm did not move or speak.

"Why?" said Fuller. "Why?"

"Why indeed? As usual, Fuller, you come directly to the heart of things. Unless Mrs. Grimm was a homicidal maniac, which she wasn't, there had to be some kind of reasonable motive. Had Draper fleeced her at one time or another? Had he, perchance, ruined her daughter or destroyed her husband? I was led, you see, to all sorts of melodramatic speculations. Anyhow, that's where I've been the last few days, Fuller. I've been on the backtrail of Mrs. Grimm, and I dug up, I must say, a couple of rather, ah, enlightening episodes."

"What episodes?"

"Out on the west coast three years ago, Mrs. Grimm, then calling herself Mrs. Foster, worked as a

maid in the private home of a well-to-do young couple. One afternoon, while the wife was away, the husband was shot and killed at close range with his own rifle. Mrs. Grimm, who was present, reported that he had been preparing to clean it and had shot himself accidentally. Circumstances aroused some suspicion, but the case, for lack of evidence to the contrary, was eventually closed as accidental death.

"But as you know, Fuller, I have a littered mind. There was one element in the case that reminded me vaguely of another case I'd read about, and after awhile I remembered just what it was. On the east coast some six years ago, a wealthy young husband was knifed to death in his home, presumably by a surprised prowler. The wife was spending the night with a friend, but the maid was in the house and testified to what had happened, prowler and all. Again suspicion was aroused, but the bulk of the evidence seemed to support the story. Case closed, and you are right as rain, Fuller. The maid, I discovered, although she called herself Mrs. Breen, and later called herself Mrs. Foster, was no one but the woman who now calls herself Mrs. Grimm."

Whatever her name, she was made of stone. If she heard, she gave no sign. Whatever she felt, she felt in secret.

"And still," said Fuller, "I don't see why."

"Don't you, Fuller? Neither did anyone connected with those two cases. But I do. I see and I understand because all three cases, those and ours, have a common denominator. In each case, *the young wife was away and securely alibied.*"

Abruptly, almost angrily, as if he wanted suddenly to be done with the matter as quickly as possible, Marcus stood up and walked to the door that opened into the next office. He pushed the door open and stepped back. "Come in, Mrs. Draper," he said. "Your mother needs you."

"A mother and daughter team of professional murderers!" Fuller exclaimed.

"That's what they were. Daughter, damnably attractive, marries a reasonably rich man. Mother, in good time, is hired as a maid. Later, exit husband. Still later, much money inherited, including insurance. Later still, reunion of mother and daughter in another place far removed. Plush living, bright prospects of many husbands to come, routine repeated. In our case, there was a slight complication. Draper insisted on living in a hotel, so Mother had to get a job on the staff and work herself onto the right floor. She managed. Mother was clever."

"They were making a career of it!"

"Well, don't let it shake you too much, Fuller. It's been done before by others. Most of them have been poisoners. One of them, you may recall, was a chronic husband who kept drowning his wives in bathtubs. This time, at least, we had some refreshing variations."

Fuller looked at Marcus with surprising, if somewhat grudging, respect. You must, he conceded, give the devil his due.

"Tell me something," Fuller said. "The simple truth?"

"Nothing else. It is my code."

"You suspected Mrs. Grimm from the beginning. That's clear. Did you also suspect Dolly Draper?"

"I did."

"Why?"

"Because she's evil."

"Oh, come off. How could you possibly have known that?"

"I knew because a woman named Lucretia Bridges told me so. To everyone else she was poor little thing, sweet little thing, dear little Dolly. Not to Mrs. Bridges. You know why? Because like reacts to like, and one dog always smells another."

"If you want to know what I think, I think that's crazy."

"Nevertheless," Marcus said, "I'd give a pretty penny to know what was in old Winston's soup."

## **VOICE IN THE NIGHT**

Robert Colby

For two nights there had been thundershowers and since it never seemed to work very well when it rained, he had been moody and tense, violently caged within himself and the empty house. Perched atop a hill in the isolation of three high-walled acres, the house was an elegant straggle of stone and wood hunched down in a cloister of giant trees.

Broodingly confined to it, he lounged about in one room or another, reading and watching television (a set in every room), or occasionally took a swim in the regulated, tepid water of the glass-sheltered pool. Despite the frigid breath of central air-conditioning at work to dispel the dense humidity of late summer, during the night he lay in a damp huddle of sleeplessness. The urge had come upon him again and now it consumed even his sleep.

Monday evening came with a pure sky after a day of searing sun. Monday was a good time. People settled down after the weekend and seldom made plans for a Monday night. He fixed an early dinner of leftovers from the refrigerator, then barely touched a morsel. At six-thirty he went to the study, seated himself behind the desk and rubbed his hands together gleefully.

He placed the heavy phone book before him and

opened it at random. His finger idly roved a column, paused, continued slowly: *Landrith, Landuf—Landrum!* A good, solid name, Landrum. There were Landrums, *Albert, Bruce, Dewey, Edward . . . Ed Landrum?* Fine. Just right! He printed the name boldly on a sheet of paper, closed the phone book, once more opened it carelessly.

His finger came to rest on the name Henderson. There were dozens of Hendersons, nearly three columns. When in doubt, begin at the beginning. Skip *Henderson Adrian C*, forget *Henderson Agnes B Mrs.* How about *Henderson Alice?* Let's see if we can get a winner with Alice. He wrote the number down and then dialed it.

A woman answered. She sounded eighty, going on ninety. The grandmother? "Hello there! May I speak with Alice, please?"

"What's that?"

This one forgot the ear trumpet! "Alice. Alice Henderson!"

"This here is Alice speakin'."

"Sorry, wrong Alice." He dropped the receiver. A real dud. Well, you couldn't expect to make it on the first try. He never had. Anyway, with every failure the excitement mounted. The first thrill came with the hunt. Now he dialed an Arline Henderson. A man growled at him and he erased the connection.

Barbara Henderson wasn't home. Lucky Barbara! He dialed Beatrice. After a while she came on like one foot out the door. She had a hard, pushy voice.

"Bea? Is that you, Bea?"

"Yeah. This is Bea. Who's this?"

"Bet you'll never guess."

"You wanna play games, try solitaire!"

"Well, it's been a long time, Bea. I'm not being cute, I just wanted to see if you still——"

"I shoulda known," she cut in. "It's Bernie! Right?"

He chuckled. "Okay, I confess. It's Bernie. I

realize it's short notice, Bea, but I thought maybe you might——"

"Listen, Bernie," she said in a muted, deadly voice, "know what you are? You're a creep. I don't go out with creeps. Where you staying this time, Bernie? At the zoo? What's your cage number in case I change my mind?"

He snorted. "You got a great sense of humor, Bea. Too bad we can't get together. I had a big night planned for us." He turned her off with a thumb on the crossbar.

The Bea Henderson types were poison. For this you had to snare one that was soft and pliable and not very bright. In one way or another the rest fizzled, but he stuck with the Hendersons until he got to Victoria.

"Vicky? Is that you, Vicky?"

"Yes—this is Vicky." This was a young one, late twenties or first thirties, maybe.

"It's been a long time, Vicky."

"Well, who is this?" she said. "I—I can't seem to place you."

"Can't place me? And to think that only a few years back you placed me first, Vicky."

"Heavens!" Nervous giggle. "You're putting me on the spot."

"Kinda fun though, isn't it?"

"For you, maybe. Have a heart. Who *are* you—pretty please?"

Man, this one's a dilly! Made to order. "Ahh, c'mon, give it a whirl. You always were a good sport, Vicky. I'll give you a clue. I'm either Bill, Joe, or Dave. Check one out of three." He didn't care. If that didn't work he'd bang the phone and spin the dial for a live one. Sooner or later . . .

"You serious? Bill, Joe, or Dave?"

"Dead serious."

"Mmm, let's see. I know a couple of Bills, but

they're pretty recent." Pause. "Hey, you're not Walter Buckley, are you?"

Wow, a real brain! "Honey, you can't find a Walter in Bill, Joe, or Dave."

"Of course not!" Peevishly. "He just came into my mind, that's all."

"Well, I'll admit you're getting close. Say, whatever happened to Walt?"

"Walter? Last I heard he was working for some law firm and going around with that tacky Jane Vogel."

"You're kidding! Jane Vogel, huh? I never could stand her type."

"You and me, ditto. I hope they got married, they deserve each other. Are you married?"

"Would I be calling?"

"Mm. Were you *ever* married?"

"Was. Got a divorce."

"Well, join the club!" Long pause. "I don't know any Joes and I only know one—Ahh, *now* I've got you. You're Dave Mosby!"

"At last! And for shame. How could you forget?"

"Dave! Is it really you, Dave?"

"Yours truly, Dave Mosby."

"After all this time!"

"Lotta water, Vicky."

"How long is it—five years?"

"More like six, I'd say."

"You and Betty got divorced?"

"Yeah, can you beat it? Well, that's the way it goes."

"Did you know that I had divorced Clint?"

"Heard a rumor. That's why I called."

"How sweet!"

Careful with this one, baby; it's loaded. "So what happened after you said bye-bye to Clint? Move in with a girl friend?"

"Nope. Rented my own little apartment and went back to work. That's how much Clint is doing for me.

You still selling insurance for—what's the name of that outfit?"

Think fast! "Got my own agency now, Vicky. I'm part of it, anyway. Big agency." He pulled the sheet of paper toward him. "This friend of mine, Ed Landrum, a guy with truckloads of dough, took me in with him."

"Marvelous."

"Want you to meet Ed. His wife and kids, too."

"That would be nice."

"I'm staying with Ed. He has this big house, really a showplace."

"My! What part of town would that be, Dave?" she questioned.

When they asked, he couldn't avoid the truth. They rarely asked and anyway, especially when they lived alone, it didn't matter. "Crestview Gardens," he said.

"Really? Oh, that's the living end. I'll bet you couldn't get a house there for under seventy-five thousand."

"A hundred and up; mostly up."

"And you're staying there in Swankville?"

"Just for the time being. Recovering from an accident."

"Oh, dear!"

"Cost me a fractured leg—in three places."

"How terrible for you."

"Not really. It's healing great, but I can't get out for a while longer. Pretty dull. Lonely, too. Will you come visit me, Vicky? Meet the Landrums, see how the other half lives?"

"I'd love to!"

"Come tonight, then. Ed's still down at the office with some paperwork and I could ask him to pick you up."

"Tonight? Well, I don't know. Working gals have to get their beauty sleep."



"Just for an hour or two. Whatta you say, Vicky? Old time's sake?"

"Honestly, Dave, what a rush job! I feel as if I don't quite know you anymore. You seem different somehow. More mature . . . older."

"We don't get any younger, Vicky."

"How old *are* you now? Let's see, you were——"

"I stopped counting. How old *are you* now, Vicky?"

"Just add five or six years."

"Oh, you are a coy one. Well, let me ring Ed, see if he can drive you up here. Get right back to you, okay?"

"You don't think he'll mind?"

"Ed? My best friend! Just give me a minute to arrange something."

He rang off and then waited three minutes. "Ed says it's a deal," he reported. "But would you mind meeting him in the lobby of the Winston Plaza? It's close by the office. He'll send a cab to your apartment at eight sharp."

"Well——"

"Sit near the desk in the lobby."

"How will he recognize me?"

"I painted a nice picture for him, but better tell me what you'll be wearing so I can pass it on to him."

"Nothing fancy?"

"As you are, Vicky."

"I'll be wearing a green silk dress with a gold chain belt."

"Cab'll fetch you at eight, then. And listen, I can't wait to see you again, Vicky!"

The instant he put down the phone he began to snicker. He couldn't seem to stop.

At five minutes to eight he was waiting in an obscure corner, where there was a view of the entrance and the desk. It was a crazy gamble. Sometimes he caught a real dog, in which case, being as yet uncom-

mitted, he could leave the dope squirming on the hook and spin the dial another night.

He never went in person to pick them up, never used the same meeting place twice, and always sent the cab by phone. Still, there was an element of risk which gave him an exquisite sense of excitement.

Vicky Henderson, in the green dress with the gold chain belt, arrived at ten past eight. She stood near the desk a moment but after a quick glance about, sat down primly and then began a fussy examination of her makeup, head cocked as she viewed herself in the mirror of her compact.

Her voice hadn't lied about her age. She was looking back on her twenties from no great distance, but in all other aspects she failed to match his vague conception. He had imagined her to be tall and blonde, while she was short and dark-haired. She had tiny features. A receding chin gave her face a look of incompleteness. Her eyes were wide and solemn, with long, fake lashes. She had a cute little mouth, however, and for one so petite, an astonishingly good figure.

He was pleased. She was better than most. She would do very well.

He went right up to her then, stood peering down at her with his odd little smile as she let the compact fall back into her purse and looked up.

"Hello there," he said. "You must be Vicky, and I'm Ed Landrum."

Though she quickly recovered and offered him a flickering smile, she had been startled. They always were because, while one side of his face was quite handsome, the other somehow just missed the boat as a perfect match. It was almost as if he were two people in one face. Few things gave him such a kick as to let it come as a shock, watching them coil inside, as if ready to run. Perhaps they would, too, if not for his

polite manner, the expensively tailored suit, and the Dave Mosbys waiting.

"I'm so happy to meet you, Ed," Vicky cooed, overdoing it to reimburse for her initial reaction. Standing, she bravely delivered her hand to his own. "So nice of you to go to so much trouble."

"Not at all. Anything for old Dave. He's my closest friend. Shall we go?"

With a gentle pressure against her elbow, he guided her rapidly from the lobby and into the street, now becoming dusky as the last light seeped from the sky. She was such a shorty she had to double-time to keep up with him.

The car was a gleaming, pearl-gray Bentley. While she drooled over it, he started the motor, closed the windows and adjusted the air-conditioning. They slid away.

"It's such a hot night," she said in a minute. "How good to ride in such a lovely, cool automobile."

He smiled from one side of his face, accelerated and needled swiftly through traffic. She kept yanking nervously at her skirt and poking at her hair.

"Have you known Dave long?"

"It seems like I've known him all my life. Actually, it's been only a couple of years." Tell them anything. The idiots are dying to believe.

"You met Betty, of course."

"Yes. Oh, yes! Too bad. I was fond of Betty. So was Joyce."

"Joyce?"

"My wife. You'll meet her presently."

"Dave said you have children."

"Bobby, he's seven, and Gloria, she's nine."

"Seven and nine," she mused. "Kids are cute at that age."

"Delightful." He offered her a cigarette but she refused with a shake of her head. He plunged the dashboard lighter.

"I lost complete track of Dave. Did he and Betty have kids?"

"No."

"I'm glad."

"Are you?" He turned onto the parkway and settled comfortably in his seat. He had it made.

"Well, I mean, if two people don't get along, it's always lucky when they don't have kids."

"How true," he said, and brushed a cigarette ash from his trousers. "I never thought of that." He almost laughed.

She leaned against the door and studied him, with her chin cupped in her palm. "You seem like such a nice person, Ed."

"Think so?"

"Mind if I ask how—how it happened?"

"How what happened?"

"You know, your face."

"Most people don't mention it."

"Oh, now, did I offend you?"

"No, I like girls with enough guts to come right out with it."

"Tell me, then."

"Vietnam. I was a captain, infantry. A shell fragment blasted a chunk out of my head and pulverized one side of my face."

"Did they use plastic surgery to——"

"Sure, but they didn't have much left to work with. Since then I haven't been very popular." He laughed bitterly. "Especially with the girls—until I met Joyce."

"Oh, now, I don't really think it's so bad as all——"

"Don't hand me that, you hear! I hate liars and phonies! Why don't you just say I look like a damn freak or keep your silly mouth shut!"

She gasped. "Well—I—I didn't mean—I was just trying to be——"

"That's it, you were just trying to be—but you didn't make it, did you?" He stared at her briefly. The

skin under one eye dropped, giving it a look of baleful malevolence.

"Maybe you'd better take me back home, Ed. Just tell Dave, 'Some other time'. Okay?"

He didn't answer; not until he swerved from the parkway and began to climb into the hills of Crest-view Gardens.

"I'm sorry," he said, and wasn't at all sorry. "I come unglued now and then but it doesn't mean anything. Nothing personal. You understand?"

"Of course," she replied stiffly. Then, warming after a moment, "It's not your fault, it's mine. I'm just plain dumb, that's all."

"Yeah, sure." You're dumb all right, baby, he told her in his mind.

They wound up and up and came to a high, red-wood gate. There was a gadget on a post. He stuck a square of plastic into its mouth and the gate swung open, closing behind them.

"How clever," she said.

From here the ground rose gently in a vast carpet of lawn and shrubs and ancient, towering trees, all shrouded in darkness. Out of this darkness, at the crest of the slope, loomed the long silhouette of the house. Its dim, curtained lights winking distantly through the trees, it had somewhat the appearance of a ship in the night.

"Oh, my!" exclaimed Vicky. "What a fantastic place! So beautiful and yet so—I can't find the right word—lonely, I guess. It's like when you pass through that gate, you enter another world."

He was listening to the cry of his thoughts and heard her distantly, as if from a faraway station, badly tuned. He hurled the big car up the drive, brought it around in front of the house and pulled up sharply, doused the lights, killed the motor.

"C'mon," he said, "Dave'll be waiting." Moving ahead of her, he eyed the big door and stood poised

on the threshold until she had passed inside. Then he closed the door.

The splendid, cavernous living room, bleakly lighted, was cool as a deep cellar. Heavy drapes had been pulled across sealed windows. A silence like some guarded secret clung to the place.

He listened. "They must be down in the playroom with the kids," he said. "Watching TV, I expect. Let's go and see."

Vicky smiled unevenly, then followed him toward the rear of the house, through an enormous kitchen to a door which stood open. Light sprang from below, casting a pale radiance over wide, carpeted stairs which curved down to a cheerfully paneled basement.

"How very pleasant," she said as they descended. "It's not at all like those damp, gloomy cellars you find in most houses."

"Joyce won't allow the kids to romp and scream all over the house," he explained, "so I had this sound-proof playroom constructed and stocked it with the sort of sturdy junk that can't be soiled or damaged very much."

"How does Dave manage these stairs with a broken leg?" she asked, glancing back over her shoulder with a frowning concentration.

"He doesn't. There's a lift, an elevator; runs top to bottom."

"How really grand for him."

"But I thought you could handle one little flight." (See? I have all the answers, lover.) Chuckling, he moved off down the corridor, pausing at a door which he opened casually. Light fell from the room and the strident sound of a television was sending voices above a moody underline of background music.

He stood aside and she stepped in. The door closed behind them with a click.

Gay tiles covered the floor. The walls and ceiling were ornamented with juvenile designs in gaudy col-

ors. The empty, windowless room contained a daybed with a corduroy cover, two leather chairs and a couple of standing lamps. The portable television, in full swing, eyed the room from a corner shelf.

As she glanced about, Vicky's mouth parted slightly and in her saucer eyes with the long, fakey lashes, there was the first shadow of fear.

"Why, there's no one here," she declared. "Where is everybody? Where's Dave?" She turned. "Ed? Why don't you answer me? Is this some sort of—Listen, what *is* this?" she bleated hysterically.

He leaned back against the door and smiled his odd little smile in which only half of his face seemed to take part, and Vicky screamed.

Shortly after seven the next evening, Detectives Linwood and Mallick were seated in the apartment of Miss Rena Whalen, who lived on the floor above Vicky Henderson.

"Now," said Linwood, "let's take it right from the beginning, Miss Whalen. How long have you known Vicky Henderson?"

"Going on three years," said Rena Whalen, a heavy-set blonde with a round, fleshy face and pouty lips. "We work in the same office and I found Vicky an apartment here after she got her divorce."

"And you drove her to work every morning and brought her back every evening, right?" inquired Mallick, who was taking notes.

"Yes, that's right. She doesn't have a car and we split the gas, the expense, that is. This morning I went down at the usual time and banged her door, but she didn't answer. So then I went back up and called her on the phone. I figured, you know, maybe she was in the shower or something. But I couldn't reach her on the phone either, and I went on to the office.

"I kept calling her all day long and then late this afternoon I got the manager to open up and see if she

was sick or something. Everything was nice and neat, but no Vicky. Her bed hadn't even been slept in."

"Is it unusual for her to be away all night?" Linwood asked.

"Very unusual. I mean, it just never happened before in the time I've known her. She's not at all that sort of girl. Decent and reliable, you know."

"But," said Mallick, "you knew she had gone out with this uh, Dave——"

"Mosby," Rena supplied. "She wasn't exactly going out with him, she was just visiting him. He couldn't leave the house because he had a broken leg from an accident. Vicky said he was staying with some rich friend, in Crestview Gardens."

"And how did Vicky happen to tell you this?" asked Linwood.

"Well, I dropped in on her about—oh, sometime before eight, it was—and she told me. She was all excited. This Dave was an old flame and he just phoned right out of the blue. She hadn't heard from him in five, six years."

Linwood said, "And what was the name of the man this Mosby was supposed to be staying with?"

"Landrum. Ed Landrum. I didn't remember the name but Vicky had written it across the top of a magazine by the phone. So I look it up in the book and sure enough there's an Ed Landrum and I call him and I ask him, so where's Vicky? 'What Vicky?' he says, real dumb, you know. He never even heard of Vicky Henderson. What's more he doesn't live in any Crestview Gardens; he lives out southside in Dumpville."

The two detectives exchanged glances and Mallick said, "Well, we'll go over and have a little talk with Mr. Ed Landrum. And meanwhile, I'll have them check on this Dave Mosby." He stood. "We'll get back to you in the morning, Miss Whalen."

Rena nodded. "So whatta you think, officer?"



"I think," said Mallick, "that it's very much like a case we had last summer; and who knows how many others, where there wasn't someone like you around to furnish a clue."

Rena moistened her puffy lips. "So what happened in that other case?"

"In a nut," said Mallick, "the girl made a date with some guy on the phone. She went out to meet him and never came back."

He was in the study, furiously dialing. As a rule he would let a week or two pass, but it was to be the last night and so far he had called dozens without success, skipping all over the book at random. Presently, he was dialing a Mildred Perry. She came on with a rich, eager voice.

"Millie? Is that you, Millie?"

"It certainly is!"

"Guess who? Millie, after all this time you'll never believe it . . ."

Shortly before nine the two detectives were down at headquarters discussing the case. "This is a beaut," said Mallick, who had just completed a call to Chicago. "A stone-wall deadend, just like the one last summer. Mosby can't be lying, he and the wife have been in Chicago a year and a half. Landrum and the missus had guests to the house last night for bridge, they tell us. And you can bet your bottom buck the guests will clear him. So where does that leave us?"

"Somewhere in Crestview Gardens," said Linwood.

"Ahh, c'mon now, Harry. The kinda people who live up in Crestview Gardens don't play deadly phone games with lonely women. That was just part of the gag, a little sugar on the bait. He pulled that one right outta his hat."

"Well, maybe," said Linwood, "although money doesn't buy sanity if you're a kook. Still, I don't dig

that Crestview bit myself. No sense at all. This guy is a weirdo, probably operates from a booth."

"If he kept at it all year 'round," said Mallick, "we might have a chance to grab him. But evidently he hangs it up until summer. Does that tell us anything?"

"Sure," said Linwood. "In winter he goes south with the rest of the cuckoo birds."

While the detectives argued the question, the subject of their conversation stood with Mildred Perry at the edge of that hushed living room in Crestview Gardens.

"Quiet as a tomb," he said. "Guess they went down to the playroom with the kids. Well, then, Millie, let's go have a look . . ."

Just after dawn he tidied up the house, then went down to the playroom. After he mopped the linoleum floor and wiped every surface clean, he made a thorough search, inspecting corners, peering around and under the skimpy furniture. A good thing, too, because beneath the daybed he found Vicky Henderson's gold compact. It had broken open and there was a smear of powder on the floor. He erased it with a damp cloth and put the compact into his pocket.

He went outside and began to hike over the sloping expanse of lawn, which had recently been manicured by a team of gardeners under his supervision. Far to the rear of the house he came in time to a dense stand of trees, an unspoiled woodland, left for its scenic value. He entered these woods, crossed a rustic bridge over a stream and walked on until he came to a spot so thickly populated with tangles of tall trees that, even under a summer sun, it was a place of twilight and shadow.

He began to hunt about the area until he spied a rock to guide him. Some twenty paces beyond the rock he paused and, after a squinting scrutiny of the ground, kicked aside some leaves and brought a trow-

el from his pocket. With a perverse sense of order, he buried the compact in the precise location.

Restoring the leaves, he straightened and dropped the trowel into his pocket. "There you go, Vicky," he murmured, "just in case your little nose gets shiny."

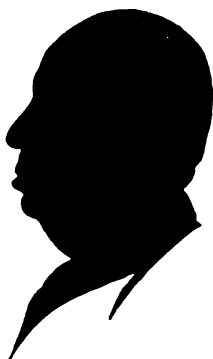
As he returned from the woods, the sun had taken a firm hold on the rim of the sky. Moving in another direction, he came at last to the tiny caretaker's cottage close by the gate. In the cottage he shaved the left half of his face, took a leisurely shower and fixed his breakfast. Soon, after a glance at his watch, he donned an immaculate gray uniform, adjusted the visored cap in the mirror, offered himself a twisted half-smile of disapproval, and went out.

He strolled up the hill to the four-car garage and rolled out the long, deep-blue limousine. Parttime caretaker and full-time chauffeur; well, it was a job, and in the summer, when the "family," complete with its entourage of servants, embarked for Europe and the house on the French Riviera, there were certain fringe benefits. Now the summer was gone, in a couple of hours they would return, and the routine would begin again.

Down at the gate he braked and gazed back toward the woods. For a space, welling up like bitter champagne, there was in him a curious, bubbling triumph; but as he drove away, a voice in some long disconnected part of him began a screaming in his head.

*I hope they catch me, cried the voice. Oh, God, I hope they catch me!*

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