DELL

FIRST EDITION

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MIKE SHAYNE'S TORRID TWELVE

A CURIOUS COLLECTION OF CHARMS

A beautiful young woman—with everything money can buy—except one thing. . . .

A serious little girl—involved in the serious business of murder. . . .

Four wives—all happily married, but all to the same man . . . at the same time. . . .

An old lady—who sits in her rocking chair, rocking back and forth, back and forth, waiting for revenge. . . .

THEY ALL HAVE STARTLING TALES TO TELL. SPELLBINDING, SINISTER TALES OF INTRIGUE, MYSTERY AND . . . **SUSPENSE.**

MIKE SHAYNE'S TORRID 12

Edited by LEO MARGULIES

A DELL FIRST EDITION an original volume

Published by
DELL PUBLISHING CO., INC.
750 Third Avenue
New York 17, N.Y.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The editor acknowledges with thanks the permission of the authors or their agents to reprint the stories in this collection: "Sunday's Slaughter" by Jonathan Craig; "A Hood Is Born" by Richard Deming; "The Patsy" by Frank Kane; and "The Rites of Death" by Hal Ellson are reprinted by permission of the authors and the authors' agent, Scott Meredith Literary Agency, Inc. "Water's Edge" by Robert Bloch and "The Toy-Head Man" by Franklin Gregory are used by permission of the authors and the authors' agent, Harry Altshuler.

First Printing—December, 1961

Printed in U.S.A.

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FOREWORD

by BRETT HALLIDAY

The twelve stories in this volume have been carefully chosen by Leo Margulies, publisher and editor of the **Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine**, as the best that appeared between its covers during the first four years of its publishing life . . . prior to 1960.

I agree wholeheartedly with Leo's selections, and thus I will go farther out on a limb and say that I consider them to be as fine as any published in an American magazine during that four-year period.

There are stories here to satisfy every reading taste. If you like them tough, there's "Sunday's Slaughter" by Jonathan Craig and "The Patsy" by Frank Kane. If you're one of those readers who normally turns up his nose at "women writers," I warn you not to disregard "The Musical Doll" by Helen Kasson or "The Fifth One" by D. E. Forbes.

"Three Wives Too Many" by Kenneth Fearing is a superb example of this noted writer's fine craftsmanship, and "Death Dives Deep" I can modestly recommend as one of Mike Shayne's most interesting personal adventures . . . one of which appears in every issue of the monthly magazine.

In asking me to write this introduction to his collection, Leo Margulies insisted that I stick my neck all the way out and name my personal favorite.

Fortunately, this is not difficult for me. My vote goes unreservedly to "A Hood Is Born" by Richard Deming. This is fine writing in anybody's league. Richard Deming is a versatile and prolific writer whose name appears frequently in the top magazines, and on the covers of books. This story is quietly written and beautifully put together. It carries a terrific impact that will haunt your memory long after you put it aside. It is written with understanding and compassion around a theme that is as timely as the headline in today's newspaper.

So, Leo Margulies and I sincerely hope you'll enjoy reading every story in this collection from the pages of the **Mike Shayne Mystery Magazine**, and that it will serve to introduce those of you who are not already fans to the high caliber of fiction available to you each month in the magazine.

DEATH DIVES DEEP

by BRETT HALLIDAY

Her name was Sandra—Sandra Ames. She was young, and she was beautiful. Black hair dropped to her shoulders, and unplucked black eyebrows arched above dark eyes that stared at Michael Shayne with calm speculation.

The redhead approved of unplucked eyebrows. He liked the rest of Sandra Ames too. Only her mouth disturbed him. It was an attractive mouth, not too heavily lipsticked. But it was also a hungry mouth, and he wondered what the hunger was that twisted it so subtly as she spoke. She was young, she was beautiful, her clothes showed she had money and knew how to use it to enhance her loveliness. But she wanted something, wanted it fiercely, desperately.

"Then you've no particular prejudice against accepting such a job?" Sandra Ames leaned forward a little in the chair beside Shayne's desk. "A job where you have two employers, and must keep an eye on both, to see that one doesn't try to double-cross the other?"

The redhead leaned back, crossed his legs, and grinned at her. "No prejudice at all," he said. "Umpires do it every day of the baseball season."

"Yes, that's it." She nodded. "You'd be a sort of umpire. But you'd have to be prepared to—well, perhaps to take action if one of the two parties did try to cheat the other."

"Okay, if the possibility is recognized and made absolutely clear from the beginning," Michael Shayne told her. "Would you be one of my employers?"

Sandra said without hesitation, "Yes, I am. You'll hear from the other in about—let's see, it's five now. In about an hour."

The redhead put his hands behind his head. "Would the other party be named Captain Tod Tolliver by any chance?" he asked.

Surprise flared in Sandra Ames's eyes for an instant. "I'd rather not say yes or no," she answered. But it was obvious that she had recognized the name. "You'll still be here at six—maybe a little after?"

"I'll be here," he assured her. He stood up as she rose, and held the door for her. It was just as well, he thought, that Lucy Hamilton was taking a week's vacation, visiting a friend in New Orleans. Lucy would have misinterpreted the hunger that unconsciously expressed itself in the set of Sandra Ames's lips. He himself had no romantic illusions on that score.

She gave him a smile, not at all impersonal and for the barest instant he told himself she just possibly might be a little hungry *that* way too.

"I feel sure I'll be seeing you again soon, Mr. Shayne," she said. "After the other person has had a chance to talk to you. Until then, good-by."

When she had gone, the redheaded detective went slowly back to his desk. He opened a drawer and took out a bottle of Coronet and a glass. He filled the glass to the brim. Then, after putting away the bottle, he took out of the same drawer a small cardboard box which had come in the afternoon mail, unregistered.

From the cardboard box he took a Spanish gold piece, somewhat worn and tarnished, but still clearly showing the mint date, 1670. It had a satisfying weight in his hand and it was obviously genuine. With it there was a crudely penciled note.

Dear Mr. Shayne: Please be in yr office abt 6 pm

I may need yr help. There's more where this came from.

Capt. Tod Tolliver.

Holding the Spanish gold piece, Shayne felt his pulse beat slightly faster. He knew that beneath the waters of Florida were many fortunes in pirate gold, but most of that submerged treasure was so deeply buried in sand and coral at unmarked spots along the coast that no one would ever find it. Simple deduction suggested that Captain Tod Tolliver—whoever he was—and Sandra Ames were engaged in a treasure hunt.

But which of them was afraid of being double-crossed by the other?

An hour later, and ten miles further up the Miami waterfront, two men waited in a dingy room above a waterfront restaurant. The smell of frying shrimps, strong and greasy, filled the room with an invisible fog.

"By grab, I'm gettin' fed up with this waiting," the tall, blond man said, and yawned, lying back on an old Army cot.

The short, plump man with black hair shuddered. "After three days of smelling nothing but fried shrimps, I can't stand to look at the ocean," he said. "Stand by your rig. The girl is just leaving. The old coot is going in his shack. He may make a call."

"Three days he ain't made no call," the other said. "Why should he make a call now?"

"Who knows, Whitey?" The short man lifted binoculars to his eyes. Sitting in an old rocker just back from the window, he was invisible but could clearly see the old shack on a point of sand across the dirty water of the little cove.

In the cove itself half a dozen boats were tied up at rotting wharves, and a lone fisherman in a rowboat with an outboard was *put-putting* in toward the wharf

of the restaurant underneath them. This was a dingy backwash of the Miami waterfront life, where dimes were as important as dollars were a couple of miles away.

"We found out about this New York dame and her syndicate from putting a tap on his wire, didn't we?" Shorty argued after a moment.

Through the glasses he watched the sleek convertible pull away from the old shack, sand spinning under its tires. Driving it was a girl, tall and slender, with raven black hair that came to her shoulders. She was wearing dark glasses. The car had a New York license plate.

"Describe her to me again," Whitey said, his eyes shining. "Big black eyes that got that burnin' look in them, like she wants something real bad but ain't ever been able to find it. Long black hair a man could twist in his fingers and—"

"Knock it off," Shorty grunted. "Pretty soon you can get back to that Ireneabelle cutie in the beauty shop you keep talking about. And when we get what we're after you can take your pick of any dame in Miami. They'll be stacked three deep, waiting for you."

"That's for sure," Whitey murmured, nodding in agreement. He sat up abruptly. "Listen, Shorty," he said. "Where do we stand, anyway? I'm not so easy in my mind about this business of a New York syndicate approachin' the old coot. We'll be cut out yet. What I say is, let's just grab him and get on my boat. We'll go us a mile to sea and he'll tell us what we want to know."

"Maybe. And maybe not. He's a tough old rooster. He won't crack easy. Besides, just his telling us won't be enough. He'll have to show us."

"He could draw us a map."

"And maybe fake it? Anyway, you miss a thing like that by a couple hundred feet and you may never find

it if you live to be a hundred. We'll grab him if we have to, but first I'm hoping we'll get a break that will make grabbing him unnecessary."

Whitey rolled his eyes upward. "Treasure!" he sighed. "Sunken Spanish treasure! That's what it's gotta be, if it's worth five million dollars! Old Cap'n Tolliver has sure as hell found the wreck of an old Spanish treasure ship—"

"*Shh!*" Shorty leaned forward with the glasses. "He's in the living room, picking up the phone. Maybe this is it, Whitey."

The box on the floor beside the cot gave a buzz. Whitey already had earphones on, and Shorty came over to stand beside him. Shorty turned one earphone outward and, heads pressed together like a pair of vultures, they listened. They heard the click of a phone lifted, then a voice. "Michael Shayne speaking."

"Mike Shayne, the detective?"

"Right. Just who is this?"

"You don't know me, Mr. Shayne. I'm Captain Tod Tolliver. Did you receive something in the mail today?"

"If you're referring to a sample of antique Spanish metallurgy, yes."

Tolliver's laugh was like a string of firecrackers going off. "That's a cute way to describe it. I sent it. To get you interested."

"I'm interested, Captain Tolliver."

"There's more where that sample came from, Mr. Shayne. If you want to know the details, I'll come to see you—ten o'clock tonight. I want to hire you to help me on a little job."

"We'll talk about that when I see you. I'll be waiting for you at ten o'clock." Shayne's voice was crisp.

With a double click, the line went dead. Whitey took off the earphones.

"Now what does that get us?" he grumbled. "Now he's ringing in this Mike Shayne, the private eye. From what I've heard he's tough as raw leather, not afraid of cops or crooks."

"Luckily I've got brains enough for both of us," Shorty said. "This is the break we've been waiting for. Come on, we'll see Ireneabelle, that beauty-parlor cutie of yours. We've got a little business with her."

2

Michael Shayne lounged in his worn leather armchair, occasionally sipping brandy, and flipping the Spanish gold piece in the air, catching it as it came down. It was nine-thirty, not yet time for Captain Tod Tolliver to arrive. In the intervening hours he had learned a little about the captain, but not much. Tolliver was a retired shrimp fisherman who lived on a small income left him ten years before by an uncle in New England. He'd never been mixed up in anything unsavory. That was all.

Abruptly the redhead's apartment buzzer whirred. Shayne put the gold piece away and stood up. Tolliver was early.

With long strides the redhead crossed to the door. A small, plump man with thinning black hair stood there. He wore a pair of shiny blue pants, an old blue jacket with brass buttons, and held a battered yachting cap marked *Captain* in his hand.

"Captain Tolliver?"

"Coming aboard, Mr. Shayne," the little man said heartily. His voice sounded younger than it had on the phone. "I figgered maybe ten o'clock would be a bit late, so I caught the first tide and came early."

He stepped in and looked around as Shayne closed the door.

"Drink?" the redhead asked.

"Don't mind if I do," the small man agreed.

Shayne was reaching for the bottle and glasses when the buzzer sounded again. "I'll see who it is," he said, and opened the door.

Standing framed in the doorway was a tall man with red hair—a man who might, at a distance, be mistaken for Michael Shayne by someone who didn't know the detective well.

He had a gun in his hand. "All right, Shayne," he said. "Put 'em up and keep quiet."

Slowly Shayne raised his hands. The tall man's eyes followed them. Shayne brought up his knee sharply, and caught the other's gun hand. The hand flew up and the gun flew out of it. The visitor gave a grunt of pain. Shayne was reaching for him when the top five floors of the building fell on his head.

"Damn it, Whitey," Shorty grumbled, putting the blackjack back into his pocket and looking down at the crumpled figure on the floor. "He almost took you, and you with a gun on him! I told you this shamus lad was tough. Lucky I was right in back of him. Now come on, get out that adhesive tape. We got half an hour to get set before Tolliver gets here."

Michael Shayne opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was the electric clock on his bureau. It said nine fifty-five. He turned his head painfully, knowing he'd been sapped from behind by the short man posing as Captain Tod Tolliver. They'd taped his ankles together, taped his wrists behind his back, slapped tape over his mouth, and dumped him on his bed.

Now they were standing in front of the mirrored bathroom door. The tall man had shucked the nondescript clothes he'd been wearing and was attired in one of the private detective's Palm Beach suits. He was admiring himself while his short companion fussed with the open-necked shirt they had taken from

Shayne's wardrobe. "That's it, Whitey!" he said. "Why, hell, you're a regular man of distinction now."

The levity went out of his voice. "Now listen carefully. Tolliver'll be here in a minute. If he wants a bodyguard, you're it. If he doesn't, you suggest it."

"You just leave it to me," the other grinned. "You got brains, all right, putting a tap on th' captain's phone like you did. Now he'll take us right where we want to go. Hey!" He whirled. Shayne closed his eyes fast, but Whitey had seen him in the mirror. "Big Boy is awake!"

"He is, is he?" Shorty strode over and slapped the detective hard with his open hand. "Quit faking, shamus. We know you're awake."

Shayne opened his eyes and looked up at Shorty. Shorty nodded with satisfaction.

"You ain't hurt bad," he said. "Whether you get hurt worse depends on how you behave."

Whitey slipped a five-inch switchblade knife from his pocket and snapped it open suggestively. "Why should we fool around? Lemme slip him Little Joe here and he won't bother us none—now or ever."

"I said *wait!* No use killing if we don't have to. We'll see how things go. Now get out there. I'll wait in here with the door open, so I can listen. And you'd better lemme have the knife—just in case."

Whitey handed over the knife and went out into the other room. Shorty pulled up a chair beside the bed, snapped out the light, closed the door except for a crack, and sat down beside Shayne.

"All right, shamus," he said. "Play it smart and nothing worse will happen to you. All we want is a little information from Tolliver. You can't make any noise—but when he comes, don't even try."

He touched the redhead's throat with the point of the knife and chuckled.

There was nothing to say, and Shayne said it. In the other room he could hear Whitey pouring a drink. Beside him Shorty's breathing was slow and deep.

A minute passed. Two. Then the buzzer shrilled. They heard Whitey open the door.

"Mr. Shayne?" a voice asked. "I'm Captain Tod Tolliver."

"Come in, Cap'n, I've been expectin' you." The door shut. A chair scuffed. Springs squeaked. "Drink, Cap'n?"

"Not for me, thanks. I don't drink when I got navigatin' to do. And I reckon I've got some important navigatin' ahead of me tonight."

"Goin' after th' treasure, Cap'n?"

Tolliver chuckled. "Well, mebbe I'm going after treasure tonight. I'm not saying yes, I'm not saying no."

"That's right, Cap'n, play it safe," Whitey agreed. "I'm not meanin' to be inquisitive. But what was it you wanted to see me about?"

"I need some help from an honest detective," Captain Tod Tolliver said bluntly. "Judgin' from everything I heard about you, you're tough and you're honest."

"Thank you, Cap'n, I take that right kindly."

"Now it's like this," Captain Tolliver said. "I got a big deal in hand and I need somebody to help look after my interest, so—" He paused, as if his attention had been diverted. "Say," he continued after a moment, "Mr. Shayne, that's a mighty nice shirt you got on."

"Kind of like it myself," Whitey said.

"Yes, sir, a nice shirt." And suddenly Captain Tolliver's voice seemed a shade too hearty. "Mind if I touch it? Looks like mighty good material."

"The best, Cap'n."

Michael Shayne waited, alert. What was the unseen Tolliver getting at? He couldn't believe the caller was interested in a linen sport shirt. He strained to catch every word.

"Yes sir," Tolliver was saying, "I wish I had a shirt like that. But I tell you what, Mr. Shayne. To make my story clear, I got to go get the map. Left it in my car, just in case I decided not to hire you. But I'm convinced now you're the right man for the job, so I'm going to run down to get it. I'll be back in a minute."

"Suppose I come with you." There was undisguised eagerness in Whitey's tone.

"No, we'd just have to come back here anyway. Won't be but a minute. Don't need two to fetch a map."

The apartment door opened and closed. Beside Shayne, Shorty leaped up so abruptly that the knife he'd been holding on his lap skittered to the floor.

"God damn it!" Shorty cursed in the darkness. Letting the knife lie where it fell, he dashed into the living room. "Whitey!" his voice was thick with rage. "You let him get away, you knuckleheaded cracker!"

"Calm down, will you? He's just goin' for th' map. Th' treasure map. Once we have that—"

"Map hell! He got wise somehow. He came over and looked at your shirt, didn't he? What did he see, now? Why would that— Oh, for God's sake! It was all on account of that bird-brained beauty-shop tramp of yours, Ireneabelle. She didn't do a complete job. Come on! We can catch him before he gets very far."

The apartment door opened and slammed shut. Before their footsteps were gone down the hall, Shayne rolled off the bed. Contorting himself on the floor, he slid his taped hands down past his hips until he could draw his taped ankles through the circle of his arms. Now his fingers were in front of him.

He slid head first under the bed, scrabbling on the dusty boards with his fingertips for the switchblade knife Shorty had dropped. He hit it with his knuckles, knocked it away, found it again, and wriggled back out with the knife clasped between his fingertips.

He got to his knees, rose to a standing position, and hopped to the bureau. The top drawer was open a crack. He slid the handle of the knife inside the opening and wedged it in place by leaning against the drawer so that his weight held the weapon in place, caught between drawer and dresser.

Now he could saw the edge of the tape which bound his wrists against the sharp blade. It cut easily. The drawer held the knife firm. When he had half cut through the tape he twisted his wrists and broke the rest. Swiftly he pulled the sticky stuff free, wincing a little as it pulled off the red hairs on his forearm. Then he stooped, cut his ankles free. Taking time only to rip the tape from his mouth, he went after Captain Tolliver and the two thugs.

The elevator was in use. He went down the emergency stairs three at a time. They had at least four minutes' start on him. But if they caught Tolliver they might decide to bring him back to the apartment.

Six strides took Shayne through the empty lobby. At this time of night there was no one on duty. The street outside was empty.

Around a corner garbage cans banged. The detective raced to the service alley. Old Sam, the night maintenance man, was manhandling garbage cans to the street for the morning pickup.

"Sam," Shayne rapped. "Did you see anything just now? Two men chasing another man, maybe?"

"I sure did." Sam paused and mopped his face. "He was a-runnin' like a scared little rabbit. They caught him, too, up by the end of the block. Dragged him

into a parked car and lit out. Maybe they was just funnin'."

"They weren't funning," the redhead said grimly. Whoever Captain Tod Tolliver was, and whatever he knew, he was gone now. Whitey and Shorty had him, and by now they were miles away, lost in the maze of Greater Miami.

A bitter rage burned in him. He didn't like to be sapped in his own room. He didn't like having a client kidnaped from his place, either.

Shayne swung about on his heel and went back to his apartment.

3

Michael Shayne sloshed brandy into a glass, gulped it, and scowled. Something about Whitey had tipped off Captain Tolliver that he was a phony. There had been that business about the shirt, and Tolliver had obviously gone over to get a closer look at it. Then he'd caught on and fled. What had tipped him? Not the shirt—it had to be something to do with Whitey.

But the single look Shayne had had of him before he'd been sapped hadn't revealed anything that should make a stranger immediately suspicious. Unless it was something that didn't become obvious until he had put on an open-necked sport shirt and—

"Well, by God!" Shayne said aloud. Tolliver was a smart old bird. Whoever heard of a redhead being nicknamed "Whitey" anyway? Whitey had had his hair dyed especially for this job. But the hair on his chest had still been blond, and Tolliver had spotted it because of the open sport shirt. That was why Shorty had been sore at somebody in a beauty shop. For not doing a complete job of turning Whitey into a redhead. Deena—no, Ireneabelle.

Hell, already he was learning something about the

two thugs who had sapped him and tried to take his place. One of them was named Shorty, the other was called Whitey. Whitey had a girl friend named Ireneabelle—an unusual name—who worked in a beauty shop and had done a hurried dye job on him.

The redhead scooped up the phone and dialed. A rich, throaty, woman's voice answered.

"Hello, Mabel," he said. "Michael Shayne."

"Mike!" the voice gurgled. Mabel was forty-five, with bright orange hair. She weighed two hundred and fifty pounds and owned one of the larger Miami beauty shops.

"Sweetheart! I was just sitting here waiting for you to call!"

Shayne chuckled. Two months before a New York woman had died suddenly in Mabel's shop, under a dryer. He had proved it was because of a dose of poison her husband had slipped into her coffee, and not because of anything Mabel's operator had done. Mabel had sworn undying gratitude.

"Mabel, I need a favor."

"Ask me anything, honey." Mabel's voice was languorous. "And I do mean *anything*."

"Did you ever hear of a beauty parlor girl named Ireneabelle?"

"That's a new handle to me, Mike. I have Clara Sue and Betty-Lee, and a dozen more, but no Ireneabelle."

"She probably works in some little, cheap shop. But I want to find her and get her home address and I want it fast. Will you call all your friends in the business and ask them? And if they don't know, have them each call five friends, and keep the ball rolling until we locate Ireneabelle?"

"Just let me get started. In ten minutes the phone company will wonder what hit them. Believe me, they will!"

He chuckled again and hung up. He poured himself a stiff drink, to help ease the ache in his head, then went into the bedroom and found the clothes Whitey had discarded. They were cheap, Army-Navy store stuff, smelling of fish. The shirt didn't even have a laundry mark.

He threw them into his closet and went on into the bathroom. He ran cold water over his head, and the tenderness where Shorty had sapped him eased off. He was putting his shirt back on when the phone rang.

It was a woman who spoke when he lifted the receiver. But it wasn't Mabel.

"This is Sandra Ames, Mr. Shayne. May I speak to Captain Tolliver, please?"

"Sorry, Captain Tolliver isn't here," Shayne said, keeping his tone noncommittal.

"He's left already?"

"Some time ago."

"But he said that he'd— Did he say where he was going?"

"He didn't say."

"The captain was supposed to call me as soon as he talked to you. Did you accept his offer?"

"I didn't accept anything. We didn't have time to talk. The captain was kidnaped before I could speak to him."

"Kidnaped!" The word was a gasp. There was a long silence. Then a new voice spoke, a man's voice, high-pitched, excited, touched with an English accent.

"Mr. Shayne! Did you say Captain Tolliver was kidnaped?"

"I said kidnaped. From my apartment. By two armed men."

"Good Lord! He said he was being watched and followed but— Have you any idea who they were or where they took him?"

"If I did I wouldn't be standing here talking to you. Who are you, anyway?"

"Excuse me. I'm—I'm very upset by what you've told me. My name is Mollison, Hugo Mollison, and I—that is, Miss Ames and I—were about to become Captain Tolliver's partners in a business venture. But if he's been kidnaped— I'm afraid I'm a little incoherent."

"A little."

"What I'm trying to say is, you must do your best to find him. I'll guarantee any fee you name. Will you please take down this phone number and address, and if you find him, call us or come here with him at once?"

Hugo Mollison gave the phone number and address —a very expensive motel where the individual houses were miniature bungalows, affording both space and privacy. "Please keep in touch with me, Mr. Shayne. I'm dreadfully upset."

Michael Shayne promised to keep in touch, and hung up. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. Captain Tod Tolliver knew something that a lot of other people were suddenly very anxious to know. But unless Mable phoned soon—

The phone rang. This time it was Mabel.

"Mike, honey," she gurgled, "the girl you're looking for lives at three hundred and three Vista. Bedroom at the top of the stairs. Door's unlocked. Just hurry over and go right up. She'll be waiting for you."

He grinned at the phone. "Mabel, baby," he said, "three hundred and three Vista is *your* address. I'll take you up on that sometime, but tonight I have to find Ireneabelle."

"What's she got that I didn't have twenty years ago?" Mabel sighed. "Okay, I tried. Her name is Ireneabelle Smith and she lives at seven thirty-one Morton Street."

"Thanks, gorgeous." He hung up before Mabel could turn coy again. From his desk he took his .38 and slid it into his coat pocket. Then he went downstairs, got his car out, and headed for Morton Street.

4

It was a drab street and 731 was an old two-story stucco apartment house. He let himself into the vestibule. An almost new card in a slot under a mail box said Ireneabelle Smith was in Apartment 7. The locked door opened for one of the special keys on his chain and the redhead let himself in and went up the scuffed stairs quietly, inhaling the smell of old buildings—sweat and cooking and ammonia and decay, all blended into an essence of poverty. Silently he moved down the dim hall and by the light of a dusty bulb found No. 7. He thumbed the doorbell with urgent pressure.

There was the creak of bedsprings inside. A guarded, feminine voice whispered, "Who is it?"

He put his mouth close to the door. "I'm from Whitey. Open up."

"Just a second."

The springs squeaked again. Light footsteps crossed the floor. The door opened. The dim light showed a small, dark-haired girl clutching a cheap wrapper around herself.

"What about Whitey?" she asked.

"I can't talk out here." Shayne deliberately pushed into the room and closed the door. Ireneabelle fell back, doubt and suspicion on her sullenly pretty features. Her eyes were cold.

"That's better," he said, abruptly. "Whitey is in a jam. He wants to get his hair back again the right color. He wants to know what stuff to use on it."

"I already told him," the girl said. "The dumb

cracker, if he can't remember—" She broke off, with a sudden look of cunning. "You don't come from Whitey. Get out of here or I'll start screaming."

"Scream away, baby."

"You're a dick!" Ireneabelle shrilled. "But I ain't done a thing! You can't say I have."

"You've just been an accomplice to a kidnaping, that's all."

"No such thing. Whatever he's done, I don't know anything about it!" Panic edged her voice.

"Maybe yes and maybe no," the detective said noncommittally. "Give me a little information and I'll forget that dye job on him."

"What do you want to know?" Her tone was sullen, her gaze wary.

"His address first."

"I don't know it."

He sighed. "Okay, baby, come on down to Headquarters. Maybe your memory will be better there."

"No," she whimpered. "He lives at nine twelve Bayard. It's a shack he owns. He takes out fishing parties when he can get them."

"You know a guy named Shorty?"

"I only saw him twice. Whitey hasn't known him long."

"He live with Whitey?"

"Whitey said he was bunking with him."

"That's all, then. We won't bother you again unless you've given me a bum steer."

"It's a straight steer. But he's going to be sore at me." Ireneabelle's voice was a self-pitying whisper. "He doesn't like cops."

"He's got a reason not to."

The redhead let himself out. Bayard Street was near the waterfront. It was a rundown district where a man's business was his own private affair. The smell of gar-

bage and dead fish was in the air. The houses were shacks and at night they leaked light through the cracks between the boards. No. 912 was back from the rest, with a marine junkyard on one side and an old garage on the other. From the front no light was visible.

Shayne left his car parked half a block away and walked to 912. He waited, saw no one watching, and melted into the shadows along the board fence of the junkyard. Whitey's shack was one story, probably four rooms. Toward the rear he saw light seeping out under a drawn shade. He moved quietly back, found a rear porch, saw the shade of the window facing it up a couple of inches. Then he ducked back just in time as the rear door opened.

It was Whitey, who dredged into the old icebox on the porch, took out two bottles of beer and went back inside, slamming the door. If they were drinking beer there was no hurry. Shayne eased back onto the porch and squatted down beside the window that overlooked the grimy little kitchen.

Shorty, in shirt sleeves, sat in a kitchen chair holding the glass Whitey had just poured. Whitey was pouring a drink for himself.

"We got him here safe," Shorty was arguing. "Now we ain't going to hurry things. It's still only eleven. We'll wait until midnight to let things get good and quiet. Then we'll sneak him on your boat and head out to sea. We'll make him take us there and we'll mark the spot. You're a good diver, you can go down and check."

"How do I know how deep it is?" Whitey grumbled, gulping beer noisily. "What about them sharks and barracuda? I need me a real outfit."

"For five million bucks you can take a chance. Anyway, I read sharks and barracuda don't attack unless

they smell blood. This is how we got to do it. Mark the spot, then raise dough for equipment. And keep our mouths shut!"

"You don't think I'd gab, do you?"

"You like to talk when you're around girls. Make out you're a big shot. Well, you'll be one—if you keep your mouth shut."

Sullenly Whitey drained his beer, his thin features ugly. Shayne could see that the two were keyed up. He had an idea Whitey would keep his mouth shut because as soon as Shorty knew Captain Tolliver's secret, he'd shut Whitey's mouth for him.

"All right." Whitey wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I'll just go in, and make sure the old coot is tied tight."

He put down his glass and opened the door which led toward the front of the shack. The room beyond, a bedroom probably, was pitch dark. He disappeared into it—and Shayne saw a finger of scarlet flame slice the darkness.

The shot boomed like a cannon in the little shack. Whitey gave a gurgling scream and somewhere in the darkness pitched to the floor. The detective could hear him flopping there like a dying fish.

Shorty jumped up. For an instant he stood in the doorway, staring into the dark room, befuddled. A second shot rattled the boards of the shack. Shorty took the bullet in his chest, slammed backward across the little kitchen, hit the window sill with his hips, and the upper half of his body went through the glass. Then he lay there, bent backward in the middle, balanced on the window sill like a broken teeter-totter, blood coming down under his collar and pouring over his face.

Even before Shorty hit the window Michael Shayne was at the back door. He swept it open, stepped inside,

reached for the string and pulled out the overhead light in one fluid motion. Then he took a stride toward the doorway into the bedroom and waited, his gun ready.

The shack was completely dark now. The tinkle of broken glass had stopped, and Whitey had quit his fish-flopping. In the bedroom Shayne could hear heavy breathing. Then footsteps broke in the opposite direction. The front door slammed open and a figure darted out and away into the shadows. The redhead followed as far as the front door and stopped. His first job was to rescue Tolliver. He turned back and swept the beam of a pencil flashlight around the room.

It picked out a figure sprawled on an old daybed, bound and gagged. The light reflected from bright blue eyes in a lined, leathery face. Shayne put the light out and got out a knife. "I'm Shayne," he said, as he slashed the ropes binding Tolliver's hands and feet. "The real one this time."

He untied the gag and helped the little man sit up. Beside him Tolliver tentatively stretched his arms and legs. "That feels good," he said. "I guess you came in what they call the nick of time. Wasn't you who killed them fellers, was it?"

"No, it wasn't me. How do you feel? Can you walk?"

"Always been able to since I was a year old." Tolliver struggled to his feet. "Didn't think it was. This other feller was in here anyway five minutes, waiting, before the shooting. He whispered something to me. Sounded like he said, 'Don't worry, old man, I'm not interested in you. Just those back there.' Couldn't hear his voice real clear but it didn't sound like yours."

"It wasn't. Take my arm if you want, but let's go. We'll talk some place else."

"Always done my own navigating," Captain Tolliver said stubbornly. "Just lead the way."

"Come on."

Shayne led the way to the back door. They passed Whitey lying jammed up in a corner of the room. Shorty was still balanced on the window sill. The redhead led Tolliver through the shadows to the front of the house and paused for a look.

All up and down the street the shacks had an air of tense expectancy, as if a hundred eyes were watching. Radios and TV sets had suddenly become quiet. But nobody had come out to investigate. Nobody would, until someone surreptitiously called the police.

Michael Shayne led the way to his car, and they left Bayard Street with its dead men behind them.

5

"Good Lord!" Hugo Mollison said helplessly. He pattered across the room to stub out a cigarillo in an ash tray, and came back mopping his high pink forehead with an imported linen handkerchief. "This—this killer just slipped into the house while you were lying there, Captain, waited until one of your kidnapers came into the room, then shot him, shot the other one, and ran?"

"That's it." Tod Tolliver nodded. He sat upright on the edge of an easy chair, as erect as a bantam rooster, his seamed, leathery features serious.

Shayne sat back in an arm chair, watching them all, while Tolliver and Hugo Mollison, a softly plump man with large, mournful brown eyes, talked. From time to time his gaze went to Sandra Ames. She sat in a straight-backed chair with her fingers interlaced tensely in her lap. She was tall and full-bosomed, a fact which the light silk shantung dress emphasized. In her dark eyes, as she watched Tod Tolliver, banked fires burned.

The fifth member of the little group gathered in the

living room of one of the Flying Pelican's most deluxe units had been introduced as Pete Ruggles. Pete, with the fresh, ingenuous features and crewcut of a college boy, had straddled a chair backward and was listening with rapt attention to Tod Tolliver's account of his kidnaping and rescue.

So far Michael Shayne had said as little as possible. He preferred to listen and try to appraise the setup. No one had said exactly what the deal was that these three were making with Captain Tod Tolliver. But the idea of treasure—sunken Spanish treasure—still hung in the air.

Shorty and Whitey had believed it was Spanish treasure they were after. But they were cheap thugs who had apparently stumbled onto something without knowing what it was. And now they were dead for their pains.

The killer who had removed them from the scene gave Shayne a lot more to think about. He had shot them down deliberately, as if his only intention was to rescue Tod Tolliver. But then he had tried to take no advantage of the fact. Or had the redhead simply surprised him too quickly?

On the other hand, was he merely a random factor in the equation—some thug settling an underworld argument? So far, there weren't enough clues to tell. Hugo Mollison turned to Pete Ruggles. "What do you make of it, Peter?" he asked. Hugo was about fifty, a pouter pigeon type of man, with his pink face, high forehead, and the nervous manner of a suburbanite who finds himself mixed up in a neighborhood quarrel.

"Gosh, Hugo, I don't know," Pete said goodnaturedly. He had a deep, pleasant voice. "I mean this is, well, out of my depth. I'm along just to lend a strong back to this enterprise. Sandra is supplying the money and you the brains and me—well, thinking isn't my

strong point. Maybe Mr. Shayne has some ideas."

"Of course." Hugo Mollison mopped his forehead again. "Mr. Shayne, what do you think this murderous attack signifies?"

Shayne put down his cigarette. "Ordinarily," he said, "I'd have said somebody was interested in the captain and was keeping an eye on him, saw him snatched, followed Shorty and Whitey, and blasted them to rescue the captain. Maybe to ask him questions. But since the killer told Tolliver he wasn't interested in him, I'm assuming it was a quarrel between crooks.

"Shorty was from up north, by his accent. Whitey was a local boy, probably just on the fringe of the underworld. Maybe he did a little smuggling, something like that. My guess is, somebody had a grievance against Shorty, wanted to rub him out, and took Whitey along."

Sandra Ames let out her breath. "I hope so," she said huskily. "I couldn't bear to think there was still a third group who knew about the captain's secret. How did these two learn about it?" She looked at Tolliver. The little man seemed sheepish.

"I expect it was my fault," he said apologetically. "Last month I got a little tipsy and was having fun telling some tourists how easy it is to find lost Spanish treasure in these waters—just stringing them along, you know. Then I had to have some help navigatin' back to my shack. This Shorty fellow was the one who helped me. All these years I never let my tongue run free, but I remember he pestered me with questions until I told him some fool story and chased him out. Guess what I said told him too much, because it was right after that I got the feeling I was being watched and followed.

"Then you folks came along and proved to me you knowed what my secret was, and I figured I'd pushed

my luck too long. Too many folks all of a sudden knew too much. That's why I was willing to do business. This feller tonight who killed them two—maybe he wasn't interested in me, like he said. But I got a feeling we should do our business and get it done with, fast as possible. I just don't feel easy in my mind any more."

"Then you're ready to go ahead with our arrangements?" Hugo Mollison asked. "I was afraid—but that's wonderful. Is there still time to leave tonight?"

"There's time." Tolliver eyed the clock over the mantel. "Providin' Mr. Shayne is willing to come with me."

"Are you willing, Mr. Shayne?" Mollison asked anxiously. "There shouldn't be any danger, really. And it will be well worth your while."

"Hell," the redhead said, "I don't even know what you're asking me to do. So far no one has told me what this is all about. I can make a guess, but I don't care for guessing games. Tell me what you have in mind and I'll see how I feel about it."

"He's right," Pete Ruggles said. "Why hasn't anyone told him?"

"I guess things moved too fast this evening," Sandra Ames said. She gave Michael Shayne the full benefit of a dazzling smile. "Please accept our apologies. We forgot that you never had your interview with Captain Tolliver."

"Everybody else seemed to know my business, I sort of figured you did too," Tolliver chuckled. He seemed to be enjoying himself, like a schoolboy on a lark. "Will you tell him, Mr. Mollison?"

"By all means," the plump man said. "It's a story I enjoy telling. On September fifteenth, sixteen ninety-two, Mr. Shayne," he said, "a fleet of five Spanish galleons set sail from Havana. One of them, the flagship,

the *Santa Cristina,* had aboard it a strong room full of treasure, collected from all over South America. There were gold and silver bars. There were loose gems and gems in the form of necklaces, bracelets, fans, hair combs and many other ornaments. There were coins minted under Spanish supervision in Mexico, Peru, and elsewhere. Accounts of the time say it was more treasure than twenty men could carry.

"Well, only a day out of Havana, the little fleet was overtaken by a Caribbean hurricane. It ran before the storm, northward toward the coast of Florida. The storm struck, the fleet was dispersed. A week later three survivors of the fleet put back into Havana, badly battered. The *Santa Cristina* was not one of them. It had gone down somewhere off the Florida coast, carrying to the bottom enough treasure to pay the debts of the Spanish monarchy. In present-day figures, the value of the treasure is estimated at between ten and twenty million dollars.

"And Captain Tolliver—" Hugo Mollison paused to draw a deep breath—"Captain Tolliver knows where the *Santa Cristina* lies today. He's actually brought up some of that treasure. In fact, for ten years he has known the whereabouts of the *Santa Cristina* and he's been mining it of treasure as if it were a private safe-deposit box."

He shook his head, looking with admiration at Captain Tolliver. The little man seemed to enjoy being the center of attention.

"That's right," Tolliver said. "Once a year I go, dive down, and bring up what I need. Up till now, nobody's suspected me. But now Miss Ames and Mr. Mollison and Mr. Ruggles, well, somehow they found me out. They've made me a proposition. I'm going to show them where the wreck lies, and they'll mark it. Miss Ames is going along with me to verify I ain't fak-

ing and that the wreck and treasure are there. I'm not taking either Mr. Mollison or Mr. Ruggles because Miss Ames can verify the wreck and I don't think she'll get a sudden temptation to put old Captain Tolliver out of the picture.

"When she reports back to Mr. Mollison, I get a certified check for one hundred thousand dollars, which he's already got in his pocket. Only when I got that check in the bank do I let them chart the wreck. After that it's all theirs and my interest is over.

"I'm talking frank talk, Mr. Shayne, because we all understand each other. These look like honest folks, but in a deal like this it don't pay to take chances and I want somebody on my side. I asked around among some folks for a man who was tough but could be trusted and I got your name. That's why I called you. I want to hire you to see to it I get to bank my check and then spend it later. Your fee will be a flat ten per cent. That's the deal. What do you say?"

"Please say yes, Mr. Shayne." Sandra Ames leaned toward him. "Captain Tolliver wants to sail tonight. I think he's right. The sooner we do this, the less the chance of interference. So I hope you will accept." She smiled at him. "I'm sure you haven't a thing to fear from *me,*" she smiled.

Shayne finished his cigarette and stubbed it out. They were all looking at him, waiting. Sandra Ames's gaze seemed to be willing him to say yes. He let the wait stretch out just long enough. Then he nodded decisively.

"I'm with you, Captain," he said.

6

Michael Shayne lay back in the narrow bunk of the old charter boat, *Golden Girl,* and listened. The engines were quiet. Outside there was a small lap-lap of

water against the sides. For the last hour, up until five minutes ago, the *Golden Girl* had been pushing hard through the Atlantic south from Biscayne Bay—at least, they had started south.

They had left Miami fast. Five minutes from the time they stopped talking, they were driving to the marina where the *Golden Girl* was moored. Sandra Ames had brought two suitcases with her, one of them containing skin-diving equipment. Neither Shayne nor Tod Tolliver had returned to their rooms to pick up anything. Tolliver wanted to move fast and they had moved fast.

The detective felt the rough blanket of the bunk against his skin; having brought no pajamas, he was sleeping raw. Up on deck, he knew Tod Tolliver was crouching, probably peering into the darkness behind them, and listening.

After a few feet, past where a small doorway divided the tiny cabin into two sections, Sandra Ames was sleeping. At least, he assumed she was sleeping until he heard the door slide open.

"Mike?" Her voice was a husky, tentative whisper. "I just wondered if you were awake." She came softly into his section of the cabin. In the darkness he could see her only as a blur of white, but her perfume filled the little space, subtle and provocative. "Why do you think Captain Tolliver has stopped?"

"To listen to see if we're being followed," Shayne said.

She sat down on the opposite bunk and he could almost see her now—not quite. "Who could follow us?"

"Who knows?" He made his tone casual. "Captain Tolliver doesn't believe in taking any chances. For ten years he's made it pay off."

"Yes, of course. He's smart—very smart. I like him."

"So do I. He's almost seventy, but he's all man."

"I know. He's had a fabulous career. He started as a cabin boy in a whaling ship out of Salem, more than fifty years ago. But I didn't come to talk about Captain Tolliver."

The redhead's "Oh?" was noncommittal. He didn't think she had come to talk about the captain. Her voice held a tentative note, as if she were testing him as they talked. He wondered what she was leading up to.

"Have you a cigarette?"

"Sure." He reached under the pillow, found the pack and some matches. He raised up on his elbow and leaned across the narrow aisle, holding out the pack. She took one, leaned forward, and he lit a match. The flare showed her face only a foot from his, showed also that she was wearing the filmiest kind of nightgown, with a scarf thrown over her bare shoulders.

"Thank you." She sat back, while he lit a cigarette for himself. "Tell me, Mike, did you believe Hugo's story about the *Santa Cristina* and the Spanish treasure?"

He took a reflective puff. "Should I have?"

Sandra Ames gave a sudden, appreciative laugh. "You should have been a diplomat. Why didn't you believe it?"

"For one thing, any ship sunk in the year Hugo mentioned would be rotted away by now. It and any treasure would be hidden under a coating of coral, in these waters. You probably wouldn't even know it was a ship unless you excavated under the coral."

"I was pretty sure you hadn't swallowed it." She sounded pleased. "Hugo was positive you had. Of course it is a lie. Do you know what we're really after?"

"No. But I know it's something plenty big. Five million was the figure Shorty and Whitey were talking about."

"Not five, no. Just one. A million dollars. In United States currency."

"Oh?"

"You don't sound a bit surprised!" Sandra Ames said accusingly. She puffed on her cigarette, and the glow lit her eyes so that they seemed a deep violet. She was breathing a little faster, her bosom rising and falling beneath the filmy nightgown.

"When you've been around as much as I have, you won't be easy to surprise, either."

"Well, it's fabulous, Mike! There's a sunken German submarine, somewhere off the Florida coast. It slipped out of Hamburg just before the war ended. It had all this cash aboard, and Hugo believes it was headed for South America where Hitler was going to try to escape and go into hiding. But Hitler never got away and the submarine sank.

"The money is packed in watertight containers. Every year Captain Tolliver has been bringing up ten thousand dollars. He makes a trip north every year, because he knows it would arouse suspicion if anyone locally knew he was banking so much money. He puts the ten thousand into a bank account in New York under another name. He never takes more because that's all he needs, and for ten years nobody's guessed a thing."

"But you and Hugo and Pete found out."

"Oh, that's Hugo's cleverness. Somehow he found out that these bills from Germany were turning up. I don't know how, but he has connections. He knew the sub had gone down in Florida waters, so for three years he's been living down here, poking around, trying to find a clue. He finally learned about Tolliver's trips north every year, and this year he followed him and learned Tolliver was the man who'd found the sunken sub.

"Then he came to me and asked me to help finance an expedition to recover the money and buy Tolliver out. I said yes—it was like finding buried treasure. So it was I who went to Captain Tolliver and told him his secret was known and asked him if he wouldn't sell out to us. He's getting old, and he didn't want to worry any more about being found out, so he said yes."

"I can see his point of view," Michael Shayne said. "Once his secret was known he wasn't safe any more. He's already just missed being killed by Whitey and Shorty. He's playing it smart."

"How can you be so calm!" Sandra Ames said. She stood up, and leaned toward him. Even though he could scarcely see her, he could feel the excitement emanating from her. She hesitated, as if waiting for him to say something. Then abruptly she turned and went back to her berth and closed the door.

The redhead stared reflectively at the glowing tip of his cigarette. So far, several people had told him several lies. The sunken Spanish treasure ship had become a sunken sub carrying a million dollars in less romantic, but more negotiable, U. S. currency. The first had been a lie. Was the second story the truth?

Suddenly the throb of the engine began to shake the little boat, and the slap of waves against her body recommenced. They were under way again.

7

Sandra Ames said in a strained voice, "Why doesn't he come up?" She knelt on the splintery deck of the *Golden Girl* and stared out at the mirror-like blue surface into which Tolliver had vanished half an hour before. "Do you think anything happened to him?"

"He has air enough for an hour," Shayne said. He looked around at the empty ocean which stretched away on all sides of them. There wasn't even the smoke

of a steamer in the distance. The *Golden Girl* was anchored, and there was too little swell even to move her. The sun was only half an hour above the eastern horizon.

Where they were—except that they were probably some place east of the Florida Keys—he had no idea. They had reached this spot in the first light of predawn, anchored, and Tod Tolliver had promptly donned his skin-diving gear, slipped into the water, and submerged.

How the old captain had known that this was the spot he wanted, Shayne had no idea. But Tolliver had come here somehow as unerringly as a pigeon finds its way to its home roost.

Sandra Ames relaxed and sat back cross-legged on the deck. This morning she wore white shorts and a white halter.

"I suppose I'm just being too impatient," she said. "Cigarette?"

"Sure." He lit two, and handed her one. She inhaled gratefully as, with a swirl of water, Captain Tod Tolliver broke the surface beside the anchored boat. Sandra Ames rushed to the tail. Tolliver kicked himself to the ladder hanging over the side and pulled himself up, looking grotesque in his face plate with the tank of oxygen on his back and the floppy green flippers on his feet.

The girl caught his hand and helped him aboard. The wiry, leathery little man carried a canvas bag that looped over his wrist, and a fish spear for a weapon. The canvas sack bulged awkwardly.

Tod Tolliver slid out of his skin-diving gear and the detective took it and put it down for him. Sandra handed him a waiting towel and a robe. Tolliver rubbed himself dry, then put the robe on over the red trunks he wore.

"Mite chilly," he said, grinning at them. "Been waiting long?"

"Don't tease us, Captain," Sandra said. "Did you find the submarine? Is it down there?"

"Here." The captain swung her the wet canvas sack. "Open this up, gal, and see what you see."

With a sharp intake of breath, Sandra Ames grabbed the sack and wrenched at the drawstrings to open it. The wet canvas resisted, but presently the bag gaped open and she tumbled out a rectangular metal box onto the deck. It was a discolored gray, but did not look corroded.

"Pure aluminum," Tod Tolliver said laconically. "Keep the water out for a long time to come yet. I rigged up a tool to open it easy."

He rummaged in a long chest bolted to the deck near the companionway, and brought out something like an oversized can opener.

"I'll open it," Shayne said, and took the metal box from Sandra Ames. He turned it over and studied it for a moment. Stamped into the top were German letters and numerals.

"Just jab her in and go around the edges," Tolliver said. "She'll open like a can of sardines that way."

He jabbed the point of the opener into the metal at a corner. The aluminum cut without difficulty. In less than a minute he had cut around three sides and bent back the loose flap of metal. Inside were tightly packed bundles of green. He spilled these out onto the deck and Sandra, hovering over him, scooped one up and ripped off the paper band that encircled it.

"Ten-dollar bills," she whispered. "Look at them, Mike! And down underneath us there's a million dollars' worth of them. Maybe more!" She jumped to her feet and looked inquiringly at Tolliver. "The *K-Three Forty-One is* down beneath us?"

The captain nodded. "'Bout a hundred yards off our bow," he said. "Seventy foot of water. That's the bow, it's on a coral reef. Stern is in a hundred twenty feet. Lying on her side. Big hole amidships. Looks like she either took a direct hit from a torpedo underwater or was bumped by a free floating mine. Went down fast."

"I'm going down to see!" Sandra cried. "I've got to make sure."

She ran down the companionway to the cabin. In hardly a minute she came out, wearing a brief bathing suit and lugging a skin-diving outfit, almost new. She slid into it with practiced speed, and Tolliver helped her get the air tanks adjusted on her back.

"Don't try going inside," he warned. "There's some moray eels made a home in that submarine. You got to know just where to go or you might get trapped."

The girl nodded impatiently. "I'll take your spear," she said. "I'm a good skin-diver."

She went down the ladder at the stern, waved, then pushed off. For an instant she floated, then threw her legs in the air and dived straight down. A moment later she was gone.

"That girl's got it bad," the captain said. "Treasure fever." He cocked a blue eye beneath a bushy brow. "Sorry about lying to you, Mike. But Mollison wanted to stick to the Spanish treasure story until we actually got everything signed, sealed and delivered. If it leaked out, or if you said no, it wouldn't be took too serious. Somebody's always looking for Spanish treasure."

"No hard feelings, Captain," Shayne said easily. "I'd have played it cagy too."

"You want to dive down too?" Tolliver asked. "You can use my outfit. Plenty of air left in the tanks."

Shayne shook his head. "I've never tried skin-diving," he said. "But I know it isn't something you can

pick up in five minutes. Anyway, I don't need to see it if both you and Sandra say it's down there."

"It's down there, all right," Captain Tolliver chuckled. He stripped off his trunks and began to pull on faded khaki trousers and a khaki shirt. "One day right after the war ended I was anchored off here trying to fix a bent propeller blade. Had to get in the water and take it off the shaft and like a ninny let it drop. I sounded and found it was only seventy feet. Had a skin-diving rig on board because I used to try diving to find some of these Spanish wrecks that really are in these waters. So I went down and there was my propeller right beside this submarine.

"She lay there like a dead whale, slanting down from the coral reef, and she hadn't been there long—seaweed and barnacles had hardly started in on her. I swam around and found the hole in her side, and was just crazy enough to go in. Almost the first thing I found was a whole mess of these aluminum boxes, spilled all over—like they'd been stored right where she was blowed open.

"Further in, there were dead men lying around, and they didn't look nice—water and the fish had been working on them. Now they're just bones, of course. But that's gruesome enough.

"I backed out and just took one of them aluminum boxes along for curiosity. When I finally got around to opening it, my eyes damn near popped out of my head. I went down for a couple more, but I didn't want to take too many, because right away I could see what would happen if I started showing around too much money.

"Fact, I stowed the stuff under my shack and decided to forget about it. No use asking for trouble, and I had enough to get by on. But a spell later"—Tod Tolliver looked sheepish—"a young fellow I knew and

his wife were drowned and their kids had to go to the St. Francis Foundling Home. I went to see them and I found this Home needed money bad.

"So then I got the idea I could help 'em out. Even if this cash I'd found wasn't any good to me, it would be a godsend to the Home. So I passed around the story of coming into an inheritance from a dead brother back up north, and I went to New York and I banked ten thousand under a phony name, and I sent the St. Francis Home the cash anonymously.

"Every year since then I've made a trip north, saying it's to collect my annual inheritance. Every year I dive down to pick up just ten thousand, and that's what I deposit in New York. I figger any more might cause questions—maybe the Treasury would get on my trail or something. I had all the trouble I wanted in my life, Mike."

Michael Shayne nodded. "Then Sandra and Hugo turned up, telling you they knew what you were up to."

Tolliver passed a leathery hand over his chin. "That's right," he said. "It was right upsetting. They made me a proposition. I knew there wasn't any more peace for me unless I took it; they'd be watching me all the time to find where the sub lay. I figger to pass on to the St. Francis Home most of what I get and keep my mouth shut. 'Bout all I can do, under the circumstances."

He shook his head in perplexity. "Still can't figure how they got on my track," he muttered. "Well, I guess it don't matter how. They just did, that's all."

"Did you ever do much exploring inside the submarine, Captain?" Shayne asked. "Find any papers, anything interesting?"

"Never tried to go too far in," Tod Tolliver said. "Lot of the compartment doors are shut and I wasn't

going to fool around trying to open them and maybe get caught on the wrong side of one, if it swung shut. Of course, if it had still been war, I'd have let the Navy know where she lay, but bein' the war was over, I just figured it was my private secret. Say, what about some grub? I'm hungry, and you probably are too."

"Sounds good to me."

Captain Tolliver started for the tiny galley, then stopped. "Want to show you something," he said. "Look here." He flung open the lid of the chest from which he had taken the oversize can opener. "This is my war chest. In case anybody ever followed me and I had to repel boarders."

Shayne looked in. There, neatly mounted on brackets, was an automatic rifle with a clip already in it. The chest also held an emergency food kit, and a two-man raft with short paddles. The raft was a Navy surplus item that inflated itself when a cartridge of compressed gas was pierced.

"Never had to use them," Tolliver said. "But I was ready. Now let's see about that grub."

8

Captain Tolliver had coffee, eggs, ham and toast ready and still Sandra Ames had not come up.

"Might as well eat," he said. "No telling how long she'll stay down there. Kind of a strange world, under the ocean is. You ought to take up skin-diving. You'd like it."

"I will, one of these days," Shayne said. He took the plate and steaming coffee cup Tolliver handed him and sat down on deck. The grizzled little man sat opposite him. The sun was still not much more than an hour high in the sky, the ocean was calm, a few gulls soared in the distance. It might have been a morning at the dawn of time.

"Looks like a quiet trip," Tolliver said thoughtfully as they ate. "I been thinking some about that fellow last night who killed Shorty and Whitey. If he was just settling a feud with them, it was mighty providential for me. But if he was really interested in me, I reckon we shook him off. If nobody's followed us up to now, they ain't a-going to."

"Looks that way, Captain," Shayne agreed. He'd been giving some thought also to last night's killer. But so far it did look as if he'd just been settling some personal quarrel with Whitey and Shorty.

With a small splash, Sandra Ames surfaced close beside them. She waved, swam to the ladder, and pulled herself aboard. The redhead helped her over the rail. She came aboard dripping, a lovely mermaid encumbered by rubber flippers, oxygen tanks, face plate and rubber tubing.

She pushed the face plate up and looked at him with eyes that glowed with the fire of excitement.

"It's there, Mike!" she cried. "That enormous submarine lying there on the coral reefs, with seaweed growing over it now, and fish swimming around it. It's a wonderful, fantastic world down there and in the middle of it the submarine just waiting for us to take all that money from it."

She drew a deep breath. "I'll go dress," she said, slipping out of her skin-diving outfit and letting Captain Tolliver take it. "Now I'm hungry."

She ran down the companionway, and the leathery old captain shrugged.

"There's plenty of headaches ahead," he said. "I'm kind of glad they ain't my headaches any more. Let someone else take the risks. Me, I'm suited to be out of it."

The detective started to answer, and stopped. They both stiffened and turned their heads to look up.

Winging toward them from the north at an elevation of a thousand feet was a helicopter, moving sedately through the sky.

"Coast Guard!" Tolliver exclaimed. "Looking us over to make sure we're in no trouble. Come on, start fishing."

He grabbed a couple of old rods, stuck one in Shayne's hands, and they both sat back, letting the rods project over the side of the boat while they watched the oncoming whirly-bird.

It was definitely interested in them, for it dropped swiftly to an altitude of three hundred feet and circled them.

"That's no Coast Guard plane," Michael Shayne said tersely. "No markings."

"Nope, it's a private plane," Tolliver grunted. "Looks like one of them sightseeing planes the news service has. Sit tight, they may be just curious about us."

But the helicopter, after circling them, paused, hanging in the air like a monster humming-bird. They saw a door in the side open and something came tumbling out. It hit the water with a splash, vanished, then bobbed to the surface again. It was an iron buoy, painted bright yellow and red, seeming anchored by a long length of chain.

"By grab, they're marking this spot!" Tolliver yelled, his blue eyes blazing. "They know what we're here for. But they don't know they're tangling with Tod Tolliver now."

He threw down the fishing rod and scrambled to his chest of special supplies. He came out with the automatic rifle, checked it, and while the helicopter still hovered let go a burst at the bobbing buoy. The shots ripped the mooring open; the buoy began to sink.

"That'll show 'em!" Tolliver said with satisfaction.

He stood looking upward. The hovering helicopter turned, and the door in the cabin opened again. Shayne guessed what was coming—too late.

"Captain! Duck!" he yelled, but the sound of a machine gun chattering three hundred feet above them drowned him out. Bullets splashed in the water astern of them and then stitched a seam up the middle of the *Golden Girl*. Tod Tolliver was in the middle of the seam.

He grunted and crumpled to the deck, dropping the automatic rifle.

The lines of bullets came back and methodically crisscrossed the old cruiser. Shayne scrambled to Tolliver's side and grabbed up the rifle. Kneeling, he put it to his shoulder, aimed upward at the hovering helicopter, and let go a burst directly into the cabin.

The firing stopped. The automatic rifle ran out its clip and while he was looking in the chest for another the helicopter soared abruptly upward. As Sandra Ames came stumbling out on deck, breathless, it began to wing northward at a thousand feet or more.

"What—" she began, and saw Tolliver. "He's hurt!" she cried in alarm. "What happened?"

The detective jerked his head toward the disappearing helicopter.

"Friends dropped in for tea and games," he growled, stooping over the old man. Painfully, Tod Tolliver opened his eyes as Shayne found a spot on his neck and pressed against the artery there. The blood spurting from his shoulder close to the neck, eased but did not stop.

"Thanks, Mike," Tolliver whispered. "Guess I talked too soon. They followed me. Dunno how, but they did."

"Mike, look!" the girl cried. The redhead looked up. Five miles or more away, the helicopter was just a dot

in the sky. The dot became an exclamation mark as a long plume of smoke poured from it. The aircraft began to tumble like a falling leaf. It went down, out of their sight, leaving a trail of smoke that quickly thinned and vanished.

Captain Tolliver was trying to speak. Shayne turned back to him. The old man's lips worked for a moment before the words came.

"Leave me here, Mike," he said. "Get yourself and the girl back safe. Swing the deal—see those orphans get theirs."

"I'll do my damndest," Shayne promised.

Tolliver's breathing grew more difficult. With every breath a bubbling sound came from his throat.

He opened his mouth to say something—but the words were never uttered. His mouth stayed open and his head lolled sideways. Tod Tolliver wasn't there any more.

9

The *Golden Girl* was going down swiftly, but on an even keel. For a moment Sandra Ames seemed unable to grasp their danger.

"They killed him!" she said. "They tried to kill all of us!"

"They tried. They didn't do it. I think we finished them off, instead. Now come on. There's a rubber life raft here. We've got to get it into the water."

But without answering the girl ducked back down into the cabin. Michael Shayne jerked out the carefully packed rubber raft and punctured the inflator cartridge. The raft uncoiled like something living as it filled out, and he tossed it over the side, holding it with a rope. Sandra came back, wearing her light coat and carrying an overnight bag.

"Here, hold this rope!" Shayne said. She took it. He

scooped up Captain Tolliver's light body and ducked down into the cabin. The water was knee deep. He put Tolliver into a bunk and left him. Only when he was back on deck did he remember that he'd left his jacket, with his gun and wallet, back in the cabin. It was too late now to get them.

In the galley he found a loaf of bread and some bacon. He snatched up a jug of water, tumbled the supplies into a dish towel, and dropped them onto the raft.

"Now climb down," he said. "Here, give me that bag." Shayne took the small overnight bag Sandra was clutching and held it while she lowered herself down onto the rubber raft. Then he passed it down to her. It was heavy, and she grabbed it swiftly.

He stayed only long enough to grab the paddles from the chest, and the canvas sack into which he had put the money Tolliver had brought up from the sunken *K-341*. The deck of the *Golden Girl* was now almost awash. He simply stepped on the rubber raft, sat down and pushed them away. Behind them the old cruiser went down with hardly a ripple.

Mike picked up the paddles and handed one to Sandra. "We'll paddle due west," he said. "That should bring us to land eventually, though I don't know where. Maybe a fishing boat will see us before that."

"But we can't go without marking this spot!" Sandra protested. "We have to, so we can find it again! We can't lose everything, just when we've found it!"

"I'm open to suggestions. But right at the moment, I don't see how we can do it."

"That box!" She pointed to the emergency kit which came attached to the raft. "What's in it? Maybe there's something we can use."

"We'll see." He got the lid off the small box after a

struggle, and they both peered in. The contents were some packages of a special silver salt that precipitated salt water to make it drinkable, a couple of nylon fish lines with lures, and a small handbook, *How To Survive at Sea.*

"The fish lines!" Sandra exclaimed. "We can mark this spot with a float attached to a fish line. Look—over there. A life preserver from the *Golden Girl.* We can tie it to the fish line."

"Better than nothing," the redhead agreed. Unwinding one fish line, a hundred and fifty feet long, he attached all the sinkers in the kit, and all the hooks to one end of the nylon. "The hooks may catch in the coral," he said. "Otherwise, the life preserver will just drag the sinkers away if any wind comes up."

Then they paddled over to the life belt, floating in the oily stain that marked the *Golden Girl's* sinking. Shayne fastened the free end of the fish line to the cork preserver, and dropped the sinkers into the water. They rushed down to a depth of a hundred feet and the improvised marker floated there, tugging gently at its anchorage.

"It's a big ocean," he said. "And if we ever can find this thing again it'll be just luck."

"We'll find it," Sandra Ames assured him confidently. "Hugo will be able to. I know he will."

Shayne let it go at that. There was no use telling her that if an offshore wind came up, they might never see Hugo Mollison again to tell him about the marker.

They began paddling the clumsy rubber raft as nearly straight west as they could. An hour went by, and Sandra's hands were painfully blistered. Grimly she kept on paddling, but after two hours had to give up, tears of frustration in her eyes. Shayne continued to paddle, and a light breeze, setting shoreward came up. But even with the breeze he estimated they were

making no more than two miles an hour, and by noon, there was still no sign of the Florida coast on the horizon.

He shipped his paddle and rested. His own hands were blistered now, and he examined them tenderly. The salt water that dripped down the paddle made each paddle stroke a torture.

"We seem to be making progress no place fast," he said. "But don't worry. Men have survived for weeks on a raft like this. And a fishing boat is bound to come past sooner or later."

"I'm not worrying about that," Sandra said, her voice strained. She sat huddled close to him in her light coat—not for warmth, because with the sun overhead the day had become sweltering, but to avoid sunburn. "I've been thinking—those men in the helicopter who tried to kill us. They must be part of a gang who knows about the submarine too. That man last night—the one who rescued Captain Tolliver—he must be part of the gang. The two men in the helicopter couldn't be the only ones. There must be others. They'll be wondering what happened to the helicopter. Maybe they'll come looking for it. And if they find us while they're searching—"

She shivered slightly, and her eyes were big as she stared at Michael Shayne. He had been thinking along the same lines, but saw no point in mentioning the possibilities.

"The chances are a hundred to one we'll be picked up by a fishing boat," he said with false heartiness. "No need to worry. Let's have a bit of lunch."

He sliced the loaf of bread they had brought along, and put strips of raw bacon between the slices. They each ate a raw bacon sandwich, and washed it down with a careful swallow of water. Then Sandra Ames stretched and yawned.

"I'm sleepy," she said. "I think I'll take a nap."

She curled up, her head cushioned on the side of the life raft, and fell asleep. Shayne estimated the situation. The breeze was still moving them shoreward slowly. The sea was calm and empty. His hands were too sore for more paddling. Between one thing and another, he hadn't had much sleep the night before. Presently he curled up in the remaining space, put his arm over his eyes, and fell asleep too.

How long he slept he didn't know, but when he abruptly opened his eyes, the sun had descended in the sky quite a distance. The voice that had awakened him yelled again.

"Ahoy, the raft!"

Shayne turned, even as Sandra Ames stirred and sat up. A very fancy cabin cruiser was easing up to them. In the bow stood a short, plump figure holding a coiled rope.

"Get ready to catch a line!" the plump man called.

The redhead stared, and behind him the girl gave an excited gasp.

"It's Hugo!" she cried. "Hugo and Pete! They've found us!"

Michael Shayne rubbed his jaw absentmindedly. "Well, by God!" he said. "Damned if they haven't!"

10

The sleek cruiser knifed its way northward toward Biscayne Bay. It was full dark now and the wind had freshened. They rolled a bit as they cut through the long swells.

Shayne, wearing a sweater borrowed from Pete Ruggles, stood and smoked and watched Pete at the helm. the young man handled the helm as easily as if he hadn't spent half the afternoon in the water, skin-diving down to the sunken *K-341* again and again to

bring up more packages of bills in watertight aluminum casings.

Up forward, Sandra was sound asleep in one of the two tiny cabins. She too had spent more hours in the water, diving down to the submerged submarine after they had been rescued. For after picking them up and hearing their story, Hugo Mollison had swung the cruiser eastward, made a quick estimate of tide and wind, and then, either by superhuman good luck or uncanny navigation, found the life belt they had left to mark the spot where the *Golden Girl* had gone down and the *K-341* lay. He himself did not put it all down to luck.

Aboard the chartered cruiser he had two skin-diving outfits, and using these, Sandra and Pete went over the side immediately. The life belt had shifted a little, but inside half an hour they found the sunken sub and brought up the first aluminum box of bills. They kept on diving until dark, and now forward there were twenty of the unopened, watertight containers. Shayne estimated they each held $5,000—a hundred thousand in all.

Hugo Mollison had stayed aboard directing operations, and making a chart of the spot. At dusk he had sighted on the sun on the horizon, and then on three different stars as soon as it was dark enough, making elaborate calculations. Then they had put back the life-belt marker, replacing the fish line with an anchor rope tied to a spare anchor, and headed back for Miami. Hugo was in the cabin now, putting down the results of his observations on a chart with great care and precision.

While Pete and Sandra were diving, he had questioned Shayne about the helicopter which had sunk the *Golden Girl,* gnawing his lip uneasily as he listened.

"The attack was tied in with the killing of Whitey and Shorty last night," he said. "No doubt about it. The killer was keeping an eye on Captain Tolliver. Whoever he was working with wanted Tolliver free to lead them to the submarine. That helicopter was a smart idea. Taking off before dawn, it could cover an immense area in a few hours. Knowing what the *Golden Girl* looked like, as soon as it spotted you at anchor the pilot could feel sure you were over the U-boat. Of course, the men aboard—there must have been at least two—didn't count on the captain having an automatic rifle aboard. That was good work, Mike—I'm glad you brought them down."

"So am I," Shayne said grimly.

"Actually," Hugo Mollison went on, "that's how we came to find you. Pete and I were too keyed up just to wait for you to get back. We had this chartered cruiser and decided to head south, hoping we might meet the *Golden Girl* on the way back. We saw a plane fall into the sea, burning, and headed toward the spot. But it must have sunk because we couldn't find any traces. But we kept on, thinking we might find survivors, and when we sighted the raft we thought at first it was from the helicopter."

"I see. Lucky for us."

"Yes, finding you two was luck, and so was locating the marker you left over the U-boat. I'm sorry as the devil Captain Tolliver is dead, but I'm going to carry out my part of the deal, and pay the money to his estate."

"He asked me to handle it for him, and turn it over to the St. Francis Foundling Home," Shayne said. "Said you'd have a certified check. If you have it with you I can take it now."

Hugo Mollison did not hesitate. He reached at once for his wallet and carefully brought out a crisp green

check imprinted in red with the figures *$100,000.* It was made out to bearer.

"That's how he wanted it," he said, as Shayne folded it and put it into his pocket. "And because of the risk you took, I'm going to compensate you with an extra ten thousand. Does that seem a fair figure?"

"It sounds like a nice round figure," the redhead said. Hugo Mollison seemed satisfied with the answer.

"We're going to need your help," he said. "I don't know who was behind the attack on the *Golden Girl,* but we have to anticipate trouble. If you'll work with us until we've finished with the *K-Three Forty-One* I'll double that ten thousand."

"I'll see the job through," the detective said, and Mollison nodded.

"Good man!" he said, heartily.

Now they were no more than three hours out of Miami, and Pete Ruggles, at the helm, showed no sign of tiring. In the cabin, he could see Hugo Mollison stir. Hugo stood up, putting some folded papers in his pocket. Then he stretched, put on a jacket, and came out on deck. He stopped to speak to Pete Ruggles, then came forward to where Shayne was smoking, sheltered from the breeze.

"Well, that's that," he said with satisfaction. He put his hand into his coat pocket. "I have the U-boat pinpointed on my chart now. I could go back there blindfolded. All's well that ends well."

"It hasn't ended well for Captain Tolliver," Shayne said.

"No, of course not." Hugo Mollison shook his head regretfully. "But somehow we will avenge him. For our own safety we have to find out who was behind the attack on him. I was thinking that might be in your line."

"I think I've already got it figured, Hugo," Shayne said. "You were behind it."

Hugo Mollison's round, plump features altered. The softness seemed to vanish like a mask being taken off.

"So!" he said. "You are a better detective than I thought." His hand remained in his pocket. "And how did you come to that conclusion?"

"I was a little slow," Michael Shayne said harshly. "I'm not proud of myself. The truth is, I was pretty puzzled myself. Until this afternoon. Then when you rescued us so promptly, and found your way back to the *K-Three Forty-One* as if you were riding down a concrete road, I knew there was funny stuff going on. It wasn't too tough to figure out what."

"Indeed?" Even Hugo Mollison's faintly English accent seemed to have changed, hardened, become more guttural. "What kind of funny stuff?"

Shayne took a deep drag on his cigarette, and the tip glowed scarlet in the darkness.

"You weren't taking any chances from the beginning. You obviously gave Sandra a couple of little gadgets to take along with her last night. I can guess what they were. One of them was a miniature directional radio signaling device. She carried that in her overnight case. In fact, I found it while you were busy helping them bring up the stuff from the *K-Three Forty-One*. She started it broadcasting as soon as she got aboard the *Golden Girl*. It gave you a line on the boat at all times. All you needed was a directional radio, tuned to the right band. You have one on this cruiser which led you to our life raft, since Sandra was smart enough to bring the device along in her bag.

"The helicopter was also equipped with a directional radio that enabled it to home on the *Golden Girl*. After all, it came straight for us, and it wasn't on any search pattern at the time. It knew where it was

going. You planned for the helicopter to mark the spot and to eliminate us, because we were now superfluous and would make too many people knowing the secret. As for Sandra, she'd done her job and could be dispensed with. Being a German, you have no great sentiment about a woman you are making use of."

"Ach!" Hugo Mollison's eyes narrowed. "You are clever, Mr. Shayne. Did you guess that Sandra also had with her an ingenious little device that emits sounds under water? She took it down and left it in the *K-Three Forty-One*. We have sonic detectors which led us directly to it. That life preserver—it was just a red herring so you wouldn't wonder when we found the spot again."

Shayne shrugged. "That figures," he said. "You'd naturally take double precautions. And now you have the spot well charted. So you can get rid of me and Sandra and go back to get the rest of the counterfeit when it's convenient and no one is paying any attention to you any more."

"Ach!" Mollison said again, a little grunt of surprise. "You knew it was counterfeit?"

"That didn't take much figuring," Michael Shayne told him easily. "Hell, the Germans were printing counterfeit money long before the war ended—British and American both. Played the devil with the Bank of England for a while. It stood to reason the Nazis wouldn't have any million dollars in clean new bills by the time the war ended. They had to be counterfeit. That explained a lot of things—one of them being Tolliver's trips north.

"The captain was no fool. He took only as much of the phony as he could pass at one time. Then he sold what he bought with it, and gave the cash he collected to the St. Francis Foundling Home. If the money had been good he could have found ways to get it to them

with less trouble. And knowing it was probably counterfeit told me what you were really after. The plates. Are the plates aboard the *K-Three Forty-One* too, Hugo? Was that part of some cute Nazi scheme to set up headquarters in South America and flood the world with fake United States money? What do you figure those plates are worth to you now, if you can get them? Twenty million? Fifty?"

"A hundred million, perhaps. Who knows?" The plump man shrugged. "My friend, you are smart enough to be a German."

"I suppose that's meant to be a compliment," Shayne grunted. "Tell me, Hugo, were you in German Intelligence?"

"German Naval Intelligence," Mollison said. "Yes, I've been hunting for a clue to the whereabouts of the *Three Forty-One* ever since the war ended. I knew the counterfeit was turning up, and I knew the submarine went down somewhere off Florida. I finally became attracted to the curious pattern of Captain Tolliver's life, and realized my search was ended.

"I hired Sandra, for a pretty girl can often persuade a man, even an old man, to do something he might not do for another man. Naturally, I was gratified to have Tolliver co-operate with me willingly, but equally naturally, I had him watched at all times. It was Pete Ruggles's brother who was watching the captain last night, and who rescued him from Whitey and Shorty, not knowing you were also on the same errand.

"Pete's brother was one of the two who died in the helicopter this morning. I promised Pete he could have the pleasure of killing you, but I see I must break my promise—you are too dangerous to take chances with. So, my friend—"

Deliberately Hugo Mollison withdrew a snubnosed automatic from his coat pocket and leveled it at

Shayne's stomach. The detective took another drag on his cigarette—and flipped the flaming tip straight at Hugo Mollison's eyes.

Instinctively the plump man ducked and Shayne's hand came down jarringly on Hugo's right wrist. The gun fell to the deck. Mollison brought his head up with a butting motion and caught Shayne's chin with it. Jarred by the impact, the detective fell backward against the cabin wall, dragging the smaller man with him.

"Pete!" Hugo Mollison shouted hoarsely, then Shayne's hands went around his throat. He squeezed, and felt Hugo going limp in his grasp like a mechanical doll running down.

But Pete, abandoning the wheel, was charging for him, a glitter of steel in his hands. The smooth, schoolboy face was contorted with hatred, and the way Pete held the knife proved he knew how to use it.

Michael Shayne picked up the struggling Hugo and threw him at Pete. Pete put up his hands to ward off the hurtling figure, dropped the knife, and managed to break the force of the blow by deflecting Hugo to the side. Hugo wasn't so lucky. His body crashed to the rail, he screamed once as if his back had broken, then he whipped over the side and disappeared into the dark, foaming water.

Pete hesitated an instant as his horrified gaze followed the disappearing figure of Hugo Mollison. Shayne charged him. Pete, holding the rail for support, brought up his foot and drove it into Shayne's chest. The redhead grunted as his breath was violently expelled, and went backward onto the deck as the cruiser, with no one at the wheel, swung broadside and heeled violently to a wave.

The same movement of the deck that made Shayne lose his balance, caught Pete as he tried to follow up

the kick. With the deck slanting away behind him, Pete began running backward to keep his balance. Shayne found himself rolled against the rail. By the time he untangled himself and got to his feet, hanging onto the rail as the craft still rolled wildly, Pete was gone. Shayne guessed that he had just kept running until he brought up against the after rail, and momentum had carried him on over it into the ocean.

He pulled himself to the wheel, grabbed it, and got the boat's bow into the wind. Then he swung her around in a great circle. He made two more circles without spotting anyone in the water. Then he straightened out and turned north again.

In one of the cabins, Sandra Ames was still asleep.

11

Michael Shayne eased the boat into the ranks of craft moored in the basin of some private yacht club. He didn't know which one it was and didn't care. He spotted an empty mooring buoy, managed to catch it and secure the boat. Then he went to wake up the girl.

Sandra stumbled on deck, rubbing her eyes. "Why, we're back," she said sleepily. "Where's Hugo?"

"He got off at the last stop," Shayne said. "He had urgent business with some fish."

"What?" She gazed at him blankly. "I don't understand."

Shayne jerked his thumb. "Back there," he said. "Hugo is showing the barracuda how tough he is."

Her eyes mirrored shock. "Hugo dead!" she whispered. "And Pete? Where's Pete?"

"Pete couldn't bear to leave Hugo. No, I didn't kill them. They just abandoned ship. After trying to kill me."

"They tried to kill you?"

"They tried. It didn't work. You should be glad. Be-

cause after they killed me they were going to kill you."

"No!" Her voice was taut. "No, Hugo wouldn't have killed me! I was working with him!"

"Hugo had Whitey and Shorty killed last night. He had Captain Tolliver killed this morning, and the idea was to kill you and me at the same time and wipe the slate clean. A very efficient fellow, Hugo. That's what comes of being in the Engineers and Intelligence, both."

She shook her head, dazedly. "He was some kind of crook," she said unsteadily. "I knew he was a confidence man of some kind. But I didn't know he was a killer."

"He was a pretty good killer. For a hundred million dollars he'd have killed everyone in Miami if he needed to, and could manage it."

She took a deep breath. She adjusted fast. "You—knew he wasn't what he pretended?"

"Not at first. I knew some fancy lying was going on, but I didn't guess the truth until we abandoned ship this morning, and Hugo picked us up."

"I—I don't understand."

"Convenient little miracles Hugo worked—first finding us, then finding the spot where the sub lay. You made that possible with the signaling devices Hugo gave you. I figured your overnight case was awfully heavy when we took to the raft."

"Hugo told me it was just a precaution," Sandra Ames said desperately. "Believe me, Mike! He said it would help in case Captain Tolliver changed his mind. There were two settings. I switched to the second setting when the captain brought up the money. That meant we'd located the wreck."

"And also meant our little party could be dispensed with," the redhead told her. "You gave the signal to get yourself killed, baby."

She shook her head from side to side. "Mike," she said, "Mike, believe me, I didn't know any of this. That Hugo wasn't what he seemed, yes. It was he who stumbled onto the captain's trail, and hired me to help out. I haven't any money. I never have had. I'm just a pretty girl with no talents. But I thought he really was going to pay the captain, and everything would be legitimate. I swear I did."

Michael Shayne shrugged and started to turn. She caught his arm.

"Mike, wait! What about us?"

"What do you mean, what about us?"

"Don't you see!" She spoke urgently, the words came tumbling out, and her eyes were fever bright. "You and I still know where the *Three Forty-One* is! The money can be ours! We can recover it! Hugo charted the location."

"The chart was in Hugo's pocket when he went overboard. Whether the sonic device you planted down by the sub is still working I don't know. If it isn't, the sub may never be found again."

"But we can find it again, somehow. Mike, we have to try! All that money, waiting there for us! Mike, you can't say no!"

She slipped up close to him, so close he could feel the warmth of her body against his.

"Mike," she said, in a low, caressing voice, "all my life I've been looking for something. Now I've found it. Two things. The money on the submarine. Oh, Mike, I've wanted money so much! And you, Mike—you're the other. I've never felt anything for a man before. But I've never met a man like you. Last night, in the cabin on the *Golden Girl,* I wanted you, Mike, I wanted you to—be my lover. But I was too proud to throw myself at you. I'm not too proud now. Mike, we

can find the money and together—Mike, what happiness we can have!"

Her arm crept around his neck, her lips were parted, eager, her breathing uneven. She pulled his head down, her lips found his, clung to them for a long minute. Then Michael Shayne reached up, pulled her hand from around his neck, and freed himself.

"You're a lousy actress," he said. "You've never felt anything for a man in your life. That kiss was as counterfeit as the money back on the *K-Three Forty-One.*"

"Counterfeit!" she cried, looking at him dazed. "The money is counterfeit?"

"Just a lot of paper with green ink on it. That was something else Hugo didn't feel was worth telling you, I guess. I'm going ashore and contact the Treasury and the Coast Guard. After that it's in their laps. I have Hugo's certified check. That's going to the St. Francis Foundling Home, the way Cap Tolliver wanted. A monument doesn't have to be in stone."

"But what about me?" she screamed at him. "What about me?"

"That's up to you. If you aren't around when the Treasury men show up, I won't go out of my way to send them after you. But you may have a lot of questions to answer if they grab you."

"Damn you!" she screeched. "Damn Hugo! Damn all men, everywhere, forever and ever!"

She crumpled to the deck and began to sob, deep, bitter, dry sobs that racked her whole body. Shayne shrugged, found the aluminum tins of counterfeit that had come from the U-boat, and had cost the lives of seven men in the last twenty-four hours. He let himself down into the dinghy. As he rowed toward the lights of the club dock, he could hear the girl with the hungry lips—a hunger that would never be appeased—on the deck of the cruiser. She was still sobbing.

THE TOY-HEAD MAN

by FRANKLIN GREGORY

Murder that glorious April morning was farthest from Peter Ragland's mind as he explored the miniature park outside the inn. Near the footpath, under a pink-white cloud of cherry bloom, stood a hewn stone bench. On this, a plaque proclaimed, the great Japanese Emperor Meiji in the year of his victory over the Czar had paused to rest the imperial bottom. The present occupant was neither royal nor Japanese.

He was, the approaching Peter observed with dismay, a fellow countryman. He was plump. He was of middle age and conservative dress. And for all the festive scene about him, he presented a picture of woe as he stared bleakly across the valley at the distant splendor of Mt. Fuji. In his lap rested a small carton and its torn wrapping of bright paper.

Not until Peter was nearly upon him did this dejected man glance up, and then with a start. If he seemed about to withdraw his gaze, he reconsidered; perhaps because of Peter's manifest American look; perhaps because of inner need.

"Oh," he said uncertainly, "was that you singing in the bath this morning?"

Peter's frown was almost perceptible. At this remote inn, with its kimonoed maids and sliding doors of paper and wood, he'd hoped to enjoy just one holiday without tangling in the affairs of others.

Still, he mustered the civility to assent. "If you're kind enough to call it that."

"You carry a good tenor," the man acknowledged.

"But damn if I see what you had to sing about. Confounded Jap bath's too all-fired hot. And privacy! Isn't there any privacy in this wretched country?"

Peter, who did not think Japan at all wretched, replied: "Not very much. It's pretty crowded, you know."

He had the feeling the man was avoiding some more vexing problem.

"Its worse than Times Square," the stranger complained. "Hang it! Here I was soaking when this female traipsed in, dropped her kimono—stark naked, mind—and started soaping herself calm as you please. What are these people, immoral heathens?"

There was perplexity as well as anger in the question. Peter suppressed a grin.

"Oh, no. Amoral, perhaps. It's just—well, to her you didn't exist. And she imagined she didn't exist for you."

The stranger's gray eyes lost some of their bleakness. "What kind of make-believe is that?" he demanded. "Can't they face up to reality?"

Peter hesitated. It was always difficult to explain the Japanese character to Americans; especially to successful American businessmen who stood for no nonsense.

"Not reality as we know it," he said. "But they're very good at seeing what isn't there." As the man frowned, Peter added: "Look at it this way. They've spent centuries under harsh, suspicious masters. So naturally they've built up defenses—with evasion, deceit, No masks, what have you—until now it's second nature. They don't expect anybody to tell the truth."

The man leaned forward, his veined hands gripping the edge of the bench.

"Good God!" And half to himself, hoarsely: "I wonder—was that why John was killed?"

Peter stared at him. But the story, front-paged in the Tokyo press the day he arrived from Taiwan, had car-

ried the dateline of an obscure village he hadn't recognized. He said quietly: "Then you're John Porter's father?"

The other, still possessed by his thought, nodded abstractedly. "Henry Porter, yes."

When he spoke again, it was not to say anything remarkable; hardly more than the papers had printed. But in the jettisoned words, Peter got an impression of man baffled and confused, fighting for self-control.

"Toys," he said. "But John—in the Occupation, y'know, Marine captain—liked Japan and wanted to open our own plant here." His jaw set, reflecting original displeasure. "It's over in the next village. Happy Delight, it's called. Ha! But back home of course we're Porter Play. Perhaps you've heard of us."

As who hadn't, Peter thought. In the front rank of toymakers, Porter Play, along with Marx and Gilbert. Vaguely he recalled a mention in *Life* last Christmas—something to do with dolls.

He ticked off what the stories had said: John Porter, 27, strangled, neck broken, found in a ravine not far from the factory. Last seen by his young wife, Minerva, leaving their home on an unannounced errand at nine the preceding evening. Mr. Porter had flown out right away; sent the body and the young wife home only last Sunday.

"A man was arrested," Peter said.

"Tanizaki Hajime," said Mr. Porter. "The superintendent. Of course he denied it, but he won't say where he was. But he wasn't home." He added surprisingly: "A likable little cuss when John brought him to the States last year to learn our methods. And quite a lady's man. Damn if I see him doing it. John was as big as you."

He appraised Peter's six feet of elastic strength with approval. "Still," he added, "I'm told they all learned

judo in the Nip army. And if he took John by surprise—"

Peter said nothing. He had his own views, gained from enough college boxing and battle combat, about a good big man being better than a good little one. But John Porter may not have been a good big one.

"And I'd had such great hopes for him. I was retiring soon. Now, well, I guess I got to take over and save what I can." He seemed tired, very tired.

"I've been over there twice. Never saw such a mess. Production way off, which might be natural enough with one boss dead and the other in jail. But I think I know a calculated slowdown when I see one. And there was that strike last summer." He added hastily: "Not over wages. We pay well enough."

"Who's in charge now?"

"The oyabun. I guess you know what an oyabun is. A union leader."

Peter glanced sharply at Mr. Porter. Was it possible he did not know, or John hadn't reported, that an oyabun was so much more?

"Big fellow named Morita Ton," Mr. Porter was saying, and now a faint bell sounded in Peter's memory. He was sure the name had not been connected with labor circles.

He was still trying to place it when Mr. Porter, with a snort of savage disgust, said: "Then, just this morning, this came!"

Lifting the carton from his lap, he removed the lid. Revealed was a plastic Danjuro doll—fat and egg-shaped, the sort with weighted bottom which, when tipped over, bobs up again. Some four inches high, its body was painted to represent an exotic costume of the popular Kabukiza theatre.

Peter remembered a silly Japanese joke which labeled some geishas Danjuro because they were push-

overs. Then he noticed that this doll was not of traditional type. Instead of being sealed at the stomach where the halves joined, the two half-eggs screwed together. Even more radical was the departure in the face. Instead of Danjuro's, the famous actor, the expression was outrageously comic: squint-eyes, mouth drawn at one corner in a leer which, for all its grotesquerie, yielded a tender human appeal.

"Porter Play's Best-Seller." That was how *Life* had described it.

"Only damn thing in normal production," Mr. Porter grunted. "But that's not the point." Lifting the doll from its box he touched the head. It had been twisted off, then taped back at a crooked angle to appear as a broken neck. In the box was an unsigned warning: *Mr. Poter go hom.*

Peter whistled softly. Unconsciously, Mr. Porter was massaging his throat. At last he said: "I'm no coward. I was in war myself in 'seventeen. But when you come up against something you don't understand, that's when you worry. And you can't do a blame thing. I'd already the queerest feeling I wasn't welcome. In my own plant, mind! But until this came I thought it just could be my imagination. Strange land, and forced to depend on an interpreter who might or mightn't be reliable." He eyed Peter with speculation. "Say, didn't I hear you talking Jap to the maids?"

This, Peter recognized, was an oblique invitation. And far from resenting it, he smiled at his own self-deception in thinking that ever he could survive a quiet holiday. Truth was, he sensed a much more extraordinary story than had yet appeared in print.

"Oh, yes," he said comfortably, "I know Japanese. It's a rather chameleon language, quite like the people and loaded with double meanings. If I could be of help—" He produced his card.

Most strangers, on learning Peter Ragland's identity as the famous foreign correspondent for the North newspapers, were properly impressed. It was possible Mr. Porter was, too, but sheer relief outweighed his curiosity.

"Would you?" he said, the worry receding before a pathetically eager smile. "Would you really? You can't know what it would mean—another American who knows the score back-stopping me."

They drove, in Mr. Porter's company sedan and at Peter's wish, to the National Rural Police jail where Tanizaki Hajime was held.

"Though I don't see what good it can do," Mr. Porter objected, parking the car. "I was here myself, you know, and he wouldn't even see me. Sent out word he hated our guts."

He switched off the ignition. "A fine thing, after all John did for him. The trip to America, good job, good pay, bonus at New Year's, favors for his family. Dammit! How can a man be so thankless as that? And yet it's just the reason the police think he killed John."

"The hate?" Peter had his hand on the door handle.

"More what led up to the hate. Because he'd done so well with us. They said John was Tanizaki's '*on*-man.' Now what sort of stuff is that?"

Peter relaxed in the seat. This would take some explaining. "Have you ever," he asked, "heard of Lafcadio Hearn?"

"Writer fellow who married a Nip? Oh, yes."

"It was his idea that to understand these people you have to learn to think all over again; backward, upside down, inside out."

"Hmph. I'll buy that."

"But perhaps John didn't," Peter said. "Or he'd have been less likely to heap favors on Tanizaki. You see, they're an abnormally sensitive lot. They think

that when they're born they inherit a stupendous debt from the past—to their ancestors, parents, the whole world. Then, as they go through life, these debts increase—to teachers, friends, employer, whoever helps them along. No such thing as a self-made man in Japan. Life's a joint enterprise."

"Ha?" Mr. Porter, as a self-made man himself, scoffed at a concept so utterly alien.

"These debts are *on*," Peter continued. "And to be a really virtuous man, you have to spend your life sacrificing everything you'd rather do to pay back. So naturally when somebody comes along and does you a gratuitous favor, as John did, it's that much more load to repay and you resent it."

"My stars! You don't mean it could reach the point of murder?"

"It's a pretty terrible thing," Peter said thoughtfully, "when a Japanese at last realizes he can never pay off. It's loss of face, end of the line. *On* is their guiding force. Debt. Burden. Sacrifice. You owe. You owe it to your name, for instance, to keep it spotless. That's why it's a Japanese virtue to revenge insult. And one insult is to be given something you can't pay back.

"Tied in with that is the fact you're not supposed to change stations in life. You owe it to your name to stay put. So it's just possible that, besides feeling insulted, Tanizaki figured he was getting above himself and blamed John for it."

An austere old man in black kimono, with the thinning white beard and high black skull cap of a patriarch, appeared from the jail and walked slowly down the steps. On seeing the company car, he paused in recognition and a fierce expression darkened his face. Then, abruptly, he turned and moved off.

"Tanizaki's father," Mr. Porter said. "Dammit! I can sure feel for him!"

Peter watched the old man out of sight. He had seen the type often—hard-bitten traditionalists who ruled their families with an iron fist, picking wives for the sons and husbands for the daughters.

"Tanizaki lives with him? Of course. It's the *on* he owes. And because of it, he must always obey his father's every wish."

Mr. Porter was incredulous. "A grown man like Tanizaki? It must drive these people nuts."

Peter was grinning as he stepped out of the car. "Yes, but like everywhere else, there are always backsliders."

He recalled his little lesson a few minutes later when Tanizaki, gravely accepting a cigarette, murmured, "Arigato." One of the innumerable terms for "thank you," but it also meant: "How difficult for me to become indebted to you for this; I am ashamed."

Peter knew that the solemn-faced Tanizaki also must be desperately ashamed of being under arrest. Haji, this shame was, a far greater punishment than death itself. For in death, there was nothing; finis, no hell, no heaven. But the shame was now and lay heavily on his honor.

Which was why Tanizaki's reaction surprised Peter when he urged: "But why not say where you were that night?"

Six unaccounted hours, for from the factory Tanizaki had not reached home till midnight.

"Odawara?" suggested Peter. "Maybe you have a geisha in Odawara?"

After all, if a prosperous young Japanese wanted to keep a geisha, who cared? But Tanizaki merely stared at the cell wall.

"Don't you know," Peter persisted, "that it would be so much easier if you explained where you were?"

"Then I would be let free," Tanizaki said.

"Certainly, if you proved you were somewhere else."

"In such case, no, I stay here," Tanizaki said flatly. Was there a glint of fear in those dark, slanted eyes? Fear of something on the outside so strong that it compelled him to accept the shame of arrest? Unable to penetrate the expressionless mask of this young Oriental face, Peter—quite in Japanese fashion—approached the problem sideways.

"You don't think for a moment I believe that you, a modern Japanese, would kill John-san just because he was your *on*-man?"

For the first time, Tanizaki showed interest. "Ah, so?" he said in English. "You know *on?*"

"Of course I know *on,*" Peter replied. "I'm no dumb Amerika-jin. And I know you're an honorable man. And of course you were upset because you didn't think you could ever repay John-san. But listen! There are other ways of repaying."

Tanizaki's mood seemed to alter with establishment of this first suggestion of rapport.

"Ah, so?" Tanizaki said again. What he was really asking, and what he was too proud to utter, was: "How?"

"By telling what you know."

This was a new concept to Tanizaki, repaying gifts of substance with something so insubstantial as information. And yet this American who seemed to understand Japan said it was true. There was relief in his voice when he said: "John-san insult me."

Thunder! Was he really trying to cook his goose?

"John-san refuse my advice," Tanizaki went on. "I say no, not hire the man. But there was strike, and he hire him."

"What man?"

Tanizaki put his fist to his mouth.

"I say too much. No more, thank you, please." Again

the glint of fear in his eyes, and nothing Peter could say would move him. Still, as he was leaving the cell, Tanizaki spoke once more.

"I think," he said, "the devil get in after all."

Not till they reached the factory and passed through the gate did Peter catch the significance of Tanizaki's remark.

"What a confounded time John had building it!" Mr. Porter growled, glaring at the long, one-story building. "You see where the well house is? On the south, though the American engineer insisted there was a better water supply to the west."

"Oh, yes," smiled Peter, "the south is the Prosperity side."

"So John wrote. But what's worse, the building itself should face northeast for easier access to the road. But when John objected, the contractor refused. Said if a building fronts northeast, it lets in the devil. If you ask me—"

Peter chuckled. "Just what Tanizaki meant."

They entered the plant by a wide door at the receiving platform and came into a room stocked with metal and plywood, fabric and paint—the raw stuff of the Santa Claus business. But it was a queer collection of Santa's helpers they found in the assembly shop farther on where some three hundred plump, round-faced girls in Hollywood slacks stood sullenly at long benches.

Stalled completely was a production line of toy bulldozers and fire trucks; while no battle of childish imagination would ever have gotten won were it forced to depend on the flagging output of Porter Play's jet fighters and tanks. Only the line producing the Danjuro dolls was keeping a normal pace. But even with the two dozen nimble-fingered girls at this work, the black mood prevailed, so abnormal, Peter knew, among

Japanese workers. Happy Delight was not a happy factory.

From a compression molder in one corner, a conveyor slowly delivered to the girls' benches plastic half-eggs—the dolls a-borning. Deftly the girls painted them, sent them through fast-dryers, inserted small rounded weights in the base, screwed the halves together, and attached the ridiculous leering heads. Finally, listing and tilting like so many drunken clowns, the dolls rode a terminal belt past inspectors and into the shipping room.

"Never had an item sell so fast," said Mr. Porter. "Why, the demand kept right on even after Christmas."

"Who designed it?" Peter inquired.

Mr. Porter's mouth set. Without a word he led Peter beneath a hanging fire door of steel slats into the shipping room. At a desk, and glancing up as they entered, sat a little, hunch-backed man—his neck supporting, but of human dimensions now, the same grotesque doll's head with squint eyes and lopsided leer. "I guess," Mr. Porter said quietly, "that Nature did."

Peter got the story as they walked through the plant to the main office. A puppet-maker from Kobe, one Nogami, had turned up at the factory soon after it had opened to show John Porter a model of the doll. Sensing its possibilities, John snapped up the production rights.

No thought then, of course, that the queerly appealing face was spit and image of a living human being. That little bombshell exploded some months later—after the showing of samples at the American trade shows and when it was too late to recall shipments—with the appearance of Mr. Ko.

Mr. Ko was the toy-head man.

"Libel," murmured Peter.

"Libelous as hell," rumbled Mr. Porter. "He had Morita with him, claiming the doll made him a laughing stock. Insult to his name, how'd you say it? Something like that, John wrote. And of course they were dead right. But when it came to settling, Ko wouldn't take cash. Instead, he demanded the job of shipping foreman."

"Why shipping foreman?"

"Oh, God, I don't try to understand. John thought the fellow got some sort of masochistic pleasure just being around the dolls. Of course John balked. What? Put a totally inexperienced man in charge of an entire department? So Morita pulled the strike and John gave in."

They had reached a room where girls in American dress listlessly pecked at American typewriters. As Mr. Porter pushed at a door labeled *Private,* Peter was saying: "I'd like to meet this Morita Ton."

It was not Mr. Porter who answered. "Ah, s-s-so?" The sibilance of a Japanese having the usual trouble with s's. "Him meet now, ne . . . Mist Ragran'?"

Peter turned quickly to confront, flanked by two diminutive Japanese, a great ox of a human, his breadth just short of his height. And at once he knew where in time past he'd come across not only the name, but the man himself.

They regarded each other, this monster with a sleepy grin on his full-moon face, and the tall, cool-eyed American. It was the same deceptive grin Peter remembered when last he'd seen the man as runner-up in the National Sumo Wrestling Championships at Tokyo. He had seemed like a beast then, crouching on all fours, circling and being circled by another wary gorilla before tangling in the flash match which is like no other wrestling on earth.

Reared from infancy for the sport, fattened like a

steer, hardened by exercise until the muscles were corded iron—that was the life of these brutes. And now Morita Ton was an oyabun; so much more, really, than the labor leader Mr. Porter supposed him. More gangster and strong-arm man, more the padrone, recruiting the workers and selling their labor to the factory, handling their money himself. And with all this, always a power in the local politics. That was the oyabun, and the mere fact of Morita's presence testified to John Porter's acceptance of this still common feudal system.

"I think we can talk Japanese," Peter said pleasantly.

"Ah, s-s-so?" hissed Morita. "But if me rike spek Engrish, Mist Ragran'?"

If you could, fine, Peter was tempted to say. But one is never that impolite in Japan. Instead, he said with a shrug: "Yoroshii, have it your way."

As for the "Mist Ragran'," it was perfectly obvious the police at the jail had lost no time warning of the American's interest in the case.

Morita Ton turned to Mr. Porter. "You come time just right." He grinned amiably, and nodded toward his two companions. "These good bizmen, just now we talk. We say, Happy Deright not do good. We say, may be Mist Poter rike sell. We say, we make good offer."

Mr. Porter shot a glance at Peter. "Sell out, you mean?"

Morita Ton wagged his gigantic head. "Amerika-jin not know Japan way. We make good sing. We say, we keep make toy. Poter P'ay keep sell in U.S.A."

Mr. Porter, wondering where the catch was, sat down at a desk and eyed Morita with wary speculation. God knew, he'd had little enough stomach for this foreign venture. And so much less, now, with John dead. He rubbed his neck. Funny how it ached at the

mere thought of that sinister warning. Reaching for pad and pen, he jotted some figures. For a moment he studied them, then turned back to Morita.

"What d'ya offer?"

Mr. Morita had left off smiling. His heavy lids half-veiled his eyes. "We sink, yes-s-s, two million yen, ne?"

As long as he lived, Peter would never forget Henry Porter's reaction. Slowly the blood rose in the veins of his thick neck, then spread out to suffuse his entire face. His mouth worked, his eyes bulged. Until finally, a human missile fueled by all of his recent troubles, he shot to his feet.

"Two million yen!" he exploded incredulously. "Two million lousy yen for a brand-new plant that cost eighty? Hell, that's not even six thousand dollars!"

He stepped forward and thrust a pugnacious chin into Mr. Morita's face. "So that's your game? A slow-down to soften the old boy up! Blackmail! Two million yen! Get out! Get out of my factory! You hear me? Get the hell out of here! And if I see you around again, I'll tear you limb from limb!"

And—not too curiously, perhaps, because never before had they seen a rugged American businessman in action—Mr. Morita and his henchmen decamped.

For a moment Mr. Porter glared at the door. Then, turning to the admiring Peter, he said glumly: "Well! I guess we close down for good now."

Peter Ragland paid two calls that evening: to a toy shop near the inn, and to the home of Tanizaki Hajime. With Mr. Porter, he then dined at the inn on octopus, eels, rice and bean cakes. But, though they are the greatest of delicacies, Mr. Porter firmly rejected the fish eyes. Their accusing stare as they approached his mouth, that adamantine gentleman swore, reminded him too much of Mr. Ko.

At midnight, alone, Peter returned to the factory. Admitting himself with Mr. Porter's key, he made his way through the darkened store room. He moved quietly to avoid awakening the night watchman. And if this sounds odd, it must be recorded that such are the happy relations between labor and capital in the Land of the Rising Sun that watchmen are provided with beds instead of watch clocks.

Reaching the gloom-shrouded assembly shop, Peter was not too surprised to find a rectangle of light falling through the doorway—it was surmounted by the rolling fire door—from the shipping room. Approaching cautiously, he peeked into the room and saw—

Mr. Ko, busy as a little beaver at a bench populated with dozens of Ko-headed dolls.

Fascinated at the soundness of his own reasoning, Peter watched for several moments. Then, hearing no other sound, he advanced.

"Tachi!" he ordered.

And Ko stood. He stood in an attitude of rigid fright, his queer head slowly turning.

Peter's mistake, without doubt, was the same that had doomed John Porter: he stepped into the room for a closer view of the operation. Instantly the rolling door crashed down behind him, blocking retreat. But where John Porter perhaps failed to fix his attention on Ko, Peter did not compound the error. Though tempted to glance back, he kept his gaze on the dwarf's peculiar eyes.

They seemed, but only seemed, to stare directly at him. Wheeling to follow their true drift, Peter found —creeping quietly toward him from out of the shadows —the immensity of Morita Ton. He had only time, as Morita sprang in his famous flash attack, to dodge aside.

Skilled in the art of fall and tumble, Morita scarcely

had touched the floor than he bounced, pivoted lightly and, again on all fours, watched warily for a second opening. Peter, orthodox stand-up boxer, wondered how in the devil you countered an attack like that.

Nor was Morita his only peril. Dancing about him, the pint-sized Ko pulled at his clothes, pushed, scratched, tried to trip him. And always Morita was moving in, teeth bared in a fiend's grin, ready again to spring and grapple; and Peter, carefully side-stepping, well knowing that once those powerful hands gripped him they would never let go.

His one hope was to get the man to his feet. Not for a good three years had Morita Ton wrestled professionally; and there was just the chance his great stomach had softened.

Again Ko rushed at his legs, biting, clawing. As one brushes away a gnat, Peter reached down and fetched the dwarf a cuff that sent him sprawling against the bench. The bench toppled. Dolls cascaded to the floor. A cloud of obscuring yellow dust exploded in Peter's face.

Pain whipped at his eyes. In transient blindness, he strove to keep his balance. The dust was stifling, tormenting. He fought to suppress a betraying sneeze, failed, and was aware from somewhere close of an answering curse.

The dust settled. Swimming, tear-blurred vision revealed that the table had fallen athwart the crouching Morita. Belching, red-eyed, Morita half-rose to thrust the barrier aside. And his ballooning belly formed a perfect target for Peter's looping right.

"Umph!" grunted Mr. Morita.

It was Peter's solid left that finished him.

Morita and Ko were in jail, and Tanizaki was free. But urgent messages were still flashing between Tokyo

and Washington when a small group gathered next morning about the tired Peter.

"A lot of things," he was saying, "didn't quite add up. John Porter was dead, Tanizaki in jail. So if there'd been a mere personal grudge, as the police seemed to think, everything should have been fine at the plant. Which it wasn't."

Inspector Watanabe of the National Rural Police put his hand to his mouth to suppress an embarrassed giggle. But Peter was addressing Garner, the American undercover agent from Yokohama.

"There was the slowdown, the warning to Porter to go home. And yet"—he picked up a doll—"there was no slowdown in this. Why not? Obviously, the same people who were trying to freeze Porter out had a special stake in this one item."

From his pocket Peter produced another doll, a Danjuro with the traditional actor's head.

"But that's not ours!" Mr. Porter protested.

"No, as they say in the trade I did some comparison buying last night. You see, here the two halves are sealed at the stomach. But Porter Play's are screwed together. So another big question was: why design 'em to open at all? Well, you've got your answer right there."

He nodded toward the work bench where a police assistant was still unloading the dolls: removing first the weights and the small cellophane sachets beneath them; emptying the sachets, and pouring the pure, rough-textured heroin into a container. The stuff was light tan in color.

"Practically China's trademark," Garner said. "They smuggle it in by fishing boat. But Japan's only a flag stop. There's damn little market here and the comrades need the hard currency. The trick's to get it past

customs into the States." He selected a sachet. "About half an ounce in each, I'd say."

"Worth?—"

Garner shrugged. "Not really much in Japan. Five bucks maybe just now. But when you get it Stateside and cut it with milk sugar and it gets to your junkie at three bucks a capsule—" His hand made a soaring gesture. "Three or four thousand at least!"

Henry Porter sat down heavily. "My God, my God! No wonder our sales kept increasing!"

Peter regarded him soberly. Such a rotten thing, using a child's toy. And what a black eye for Mr. Porter's firm. He could wish now he'd torn Morita apart. Still, there were others above Morita—Stateside—the big shots who'd moved in remorselessly on Porter Play's distribution setup; men whom Federal agents just as remorselessly were already tracking down through orders, invoices, bills of lading. Not until they'd nabbed every last man could Peter file his story.

"Do you think," Mr. Porter asked, "that John suspected?"

"Something at least. And nosing around, he must have walked in on Ko and Morita just as I did. Which was why he was killed. But it was all planned from the start, of course: Nogami modeling and planting the doll with John, to ease Ko into the shipping job. So Ko could load the dolls nights and code the cartons for their men in your home factory. It all fits."

Mr. Porter smiled wanly. "All but one thing," he said. *"On."*

Peter grinned. "Even that, if a bit in reverse. Certainly the police were right in thinking Tanizaki was worried about his debt to John. But not to the point of murder. His big worry was about something else. Where the local police were blind—if they really were—was in not seeing that Ko and Morita were the real

backsliders. The moment I met them, I knew they were deep in some racket."

Mr. Porter looked puzzled.

Peter explained: "Or Ko never would have submitted to such shame, and Morita would never have changed stations."

"Umm," said Mr. Porter. "Good lord, I could really use Tanizaki now."

"I've talked to him," Peter said. "I think he'll come back. I think he sees it's the only way he can ever repay his *on* to you. But you must never embarrass him by letting him know."

"Know what?"

"That you know," Peter chuckled, "where he was that night."

"But I don't."

"He was at a wedding."

"A wedding? Why the devil couldn't he say so?"

"It was his own. And the girl was a geisha. There are geishas and geishas, and this one happens to be a nice one. But you'll never convince Tanizaki's straitlaced old papa of that."

"Oh," said Mr. Porter. And he did comprehend. Only a father could, who'd had such great hopes for a son.

THE FIFTH ONE

by D. E. FORBES

There were four bodies at the bottom of the old well now. Alfred peered down into the brackish water. He couldn't see them, but he knew they were there, lying sightless and silent in their cool, wet grave.

He counted them off on long fingers. Angela, Lucille, Susan and Tessie. It had been a long time since Tessie. He drew back from the well wall and a loose stone fell, making circles in the dark water.

It had been much too long since Tessie.

He sat, his back against the enclosure, and looked up at the hot yellow sky. He hoped he wouldn't have to wait much longer. It had been so necessary. Each time he had placed their limp forms on the edge and pushed, each time he had heard the splash and looked down to see them slowly sinking beneath the surface, he had found a part of himself. A missing part.

Just before Angela he had found out what was wrong with himself. Somewhere, somebody had put him onto a merry-go-round spinning round and round and then, as he grew dizzy, the being at the controls had sped up the motion—more and more, faster and faster—until he was whirling so rapidly that the whole world was blurred and flashes of color made up all that he knew. It was then—on the merry-go-round—that bits and pieces of himself flew off into space and he was no longer whole. He began looking for the parts of himself. He found a part with Angela.

She had wide blue eyes with little gold flecks in them. She had yellow hair, parted neatly down the middle and separated into two ribboned curls at the back of her head. She had had a red mouth and a soft, yielding body.

Her voice was annoying. Like a child's, high-pitched and squeaky. At first it seemed to him that she did little more than make noises with her flowerlike mouth, but as they grew to know each other better, they began to communicate.

"I've been ill," he told Angela. "I was forced to leave the university and come home to mother, to this farm. I have been recuperating here." He took her

hand, played with the stubby fingers. She hadn't drawn it away. "But I'm much better now. I've been better since I found out about the merry-go-round."

"What was it?" she murmured in the spring breeze. "Why were you ill?"

He pressed his hands to his head. "I can't remember, exactly. I was working very hard. Mental work. Things like that happen sometimes to people who work their brains too hard. Someone gets jealous. That's when they put me on the merry-go-round."

"Who," Angela had asked, "put you on the merry-go-round? Was it your mother?"

His head began to throb and he rubbed his thumbs along his temples. His mother? No, not his mother. She had been proud of his brain, not jealous of it. She had urged him not to work so hard. "There's plenty of time, Alfred. You don't look like you've been getting enough sleep. Are you getting enough rest, Alfred?"

He had been annoyed, he remembered. "Don't be silly, Mother. I've a long way to go. I've the equipment, the ability. I must apply this ability. No matter who you are, you never get anywhere by being lazy."

Worry shadows had dulled his mother's dark eyes, but she had said no more. No—it wasn't his mother. It was someone else. If he could only see into the dark spot in his mind. But it was heavily curtained.

He put out a finger, touching Angela's pretty yellow curls. "You're very pretty, Angela."

The mouth looked haughty. "I haven't a thing to wear."

He had looked down then at the blue-checked dress. "It's an attractive dress. It suits you."

The thin voice grew into a fine line of noise. "That shows how much you know. Why do you think I bury myself out here, away from the world? I could never fit

with your fancy, educated crowd. I haven't a thing to wear."

He thought he recognized a bit of himself then, flying above him like a tattered butterfly. He reached up for it, but it swirled about and floated gently down to Angela.

Her voice was going on. "It seems to me if you're so fond of me you could prove it. I mean, after all, is it too much to ask that you apply yourself to earning a decent living rather than all this bunk about benefiting the world? Charity begins at home, you know."

He moved closer to Angela. He must get his hands on the piece of himself. It was a shining piece. He must get it back in his head. He moved his long hands slowly. Mustn't excite her. She might jump and it would flit away.

"For instance," she was saying, "there's a dance at the country club next week-end. All the right sort of people in the business world. The ones who could do you the most good. But how could we go? I haven't a single thing to wear. Not a single thing."

She wasn't looking at him at all and then his hands were almost upon the missing piece of himself. But at the last second she had seen him, and she made that annoying, bawling sound and moved. The almost grasped piece had fluttered, and started to fly away.

He had reached and squeezed, his hands hard and tight on Angela's throat. The section of Alfred stopped moving and settled down quietly on the blue-checked dress. When Angela, too, was quiet he had picked it carefully off and added it to the other parts of himself. Then there was nothing to do but consign Angela to the well.

Lucille had come out from the village with his mother. Her clothes were expensive and in the latest fashion and she had soft brown hair which curled all

around her face. His mother had been quite pleased at bringing her. She seemed to think that Lucille would be good for Alfred.

Alfred had thought so, too. The getting acquainted process had begun, a process that he hated, but had always proved quite necessary.

"I wish you would take me into the city to the theater, Alfred. It's terribly dull out here."

He had looked around in the twilight, the soft shadows, the gently rolling land. "I find it peaceful."

She had shrugged, moved her small high heels impatiently. "Peaceful for you, dull as hell for me."

A small shiver had trembled along his backbone. "Please, Lucille. I don't like to hear a lady swear. It isn't fitting."

She had laughed, a mocking, partly amused look in her eyes. "Honestly, Alfred. You are so—so stuffy and narrow-minded. People just don't say things like that any more. I sometimes think you're a throwback to the Victorian age."

He had laced his hands together, stared down at his fingers. "You mean I'm old-fashioned? Yes, I suppose I am. But you must admit that the old ways were in many cases infinitely superior to the loose morals of today. Women smoking and drinking, for example."

He had thought a peculiar light shone behind her jewel-like eyes. "Oh, yes—wicked women. Not at all like your mother." Something in her tone made him feel as though his mother needed defending.

"My mother is a lady, if that's what you mean."

Lucille had looked at him almost pityingly then. "A perfect lady. When your father walked away and left her—and you—she said nothing. She lived a life of silent atonement for some sin she felt she had committed. She thought she had committed a sin simply because your father left her."

He had thought he saw something moving in the blue sky, against the sun. "Isn't that better than weeping and raging and putting the blame on my father?"

The bright eyes stared through him. "Oh, yes, certainly. But I can just picture Alfred, the boy, asking, 'Mama, where's Father? Why did he go away?'

"And I can picture your mother replying, 'It was all my fault, Alfred. I failed him as a wife.' Implying, too, that you failed him as a son."

The blood was mounting to his temples. "She never said that!"

"Well, she made you think it, didn't she? And when you wanted her—your only parent—perfect and without blemish, she showed you the fatal flaw in her character. Noble and self-sacrificing! It would have been better if she had said, 'To hell with him. He was a selfish, egotistical brute who made my life miserable.' Then your hate and your love could have been divided properly, normally, not lying all over each other.'

He was sure then. This was a dark piece, like an autumn leaf. It would dart down almost to his outstretched fingertips. He reached for it and Lucille had put up a small girlish hand, caught it, and brought it down.

"Good heavens," she said, "what's this awful thing?"

He had moved then before she could crush it and, of course, afterward he had no place to put her but the well.

He had encountered Susan in a shop in the village. His mother had driven him into town because, with the new dark piece and the new bright piece, he was feeling much better. Susan was larger than the others had been—almost buxom in fact.

Alfred's taste usually ran to the petite, willowy type, but there was something about Susan's shrewd, penetrating gaze that made him feel she could look deep

into his mind, see the missing pieces. Perhaps she would help him search for them.

He didn't say anything to her. They hadn't been introduced and he preferred to meet her through his mother. "That one—over by the window, Mother." He whispered, looking around carefully to see that no one else was watching. "Do you know her?"

His mother looked at him oddly, he thought. But it was probably a trick of his mind. He was sure she didn't suspect about the others. His explanations had been too smooth, too convincing.

"I should like to have her out to the house. Invite her to come—for dinner."

His mother started to say something, then seemed to think better of it. She closed her thin-lipped mouth, nodded her gray head. "All right, Alfred."

He had left her then and gone back to sit in the car, content to wait for Susan.

He had been very gay at dinner, and afterward—afterward he had walked with Susan in the moonlight. He had helped her over the rough ground, taking care to seem very gallant. He had been quite sure she would appreciate it.

"So you're the brilliant Alfred Grunner." She looked at him from her sitting position against a stone wall, her clear blue eyes searching his face as if something about him disturbed and puzzled her. "You're not the kind of young man I expected you to be."

The evening air was soft as silk, and very warm.

"I'm not? What did you expect?"

Her heavy eyelids closed. Long lashes lay on her white and pink cheeks. "Someone as dry as dust with his head in the clouds. Oddly enough," the eyes opened wide, "you're a man."

His face was wearing a smile. He had a strange feeling inside him, like a brightly glowing pilot light.

"I suppose I am," he said.

She leaned closer. "And I'm a woman."

He repressed an urge to laugh. "So you are." He ran his fingers over her shoulder, felt warmth beneath the summer dress.

She bent forward, her lips brushing his cheek. "Kiss me," she said. He couldn't help it. He drew back.

"What's the matter?" she whispered, straining against him with passionate eagerness. "Are you afraid?"

His head felt heavy suddenly. "I don't think so."

She straightened up. "You mean I don't appeal to you." Her voice was harsh.

"Oh, yes," he said, "you do. *You do.*"

She smiled again. "Well?"

She leaned against his chest, her body pliable and soft. It was pleasant to move his hand along her back, run his fingers along her hairline. She shivered against him, raised her head.

He put his mouth on hers and almost instantly drew back in revulsion. He knew she could read it in his face. He fought to hide it, but he could not.

"What's the matter?" she said.

"I can't explain it," he said. "It's nothing personal." He tried to reach her hand but she pulled it away.

"I want you—God knows I do. But there's something in me—" His voice was rising now, cracking in its torment. "Something that won't let me." His voice dropped to a whisper. "That never has let me."

She was staring at him. "Never?"

He shook his head miserably. "Never."

He was surprised by her laughter. It rose from her throat and climbed up to the sky. Her body shook and between sobbing giggles she gasped, "Good God, good God."

While she was laughing he saw it. It was shimmery,

like a firefly. But it wasn't a firefly. It was a part of him, shining around her shoulders. Just before he moved she said, "I'll have to teach you," and laughed again.

She had joined the others in the well.

He had known Tessie before. She crept out—the memory of her—from the edge of the black curtain. She was not, he thought, an important memory but it was encouraging to know there was an exit slit permitting passage.

Tessie had a sad pink face, and drooping stringy hair. "I had a baby," she said. "It died."

He remembered, but he felt no pity. He had to think hard to make himself understand why he was without sympathy, and was triumphant when it came to him.

"You killed your baby," he said. "It was your own fault."

Her face contorted like a child's, all ready to cry.

"No," she said, "not my fault. Never my fault. It was an act of God."

He had shouted at her, "Don't blame God. You insisted on driving on an icy road. You insisted on drinking cocktails before you drove. Was it God who made the car swerve on the slippery curve? Was it God who held the steering wheel?" He was surprised at the rage he felt. "You deserved it. You killed your own baby."

Tears flowed down her face, but she made no protest. He watched the tears closely, tried to count them. The rage was gone now. Polite interest had taken its place.

He offered her his handkerchief. She held it to her face and from behind its folds he thought he heard her murmur: "You could have been there to drive me. You could have cared where I went, what I did."

At that instant he saw it lying on the ground. It was

black and smoking, and it looked like a piece of charred bone. But he knew it was a part of him.

She saw it at the same time, must have recognized it the very instant he did, for they reached for it together. They struggled for it, but he fought the hardest, moved by a dreadful fear that he might lose a part of himself forever. Afterward, Tessie, too, went in the well.

Sometimes in the long days that followed it seemed to him that he was almost whole again. The newly found parts seemed to move deep into his being, to shift, to fill the void. But on this day, looking down into the well, he knew that he had been deceiving himself.

He was not complete, but quite unfinished, like a cake without an icing. One more, he thought—*I must find the last one.* The crowning, the finishing touch.

"Alfred!" His mother's voice climbed over the hill, and echoed in the depths of the well, stirring perhaps the quiet ones at the bottom.

He went to her quickly, full of hope. She was standing on the porch, his mother—old and straight but without the power.

He came quietly. A car stood gleaming in the driveway. Someone was standing with his mother on the porch, talking to her. A familiar stranger—a woman small and rounded. Her hair shone like a copper cap and her face was pale and delicate. He wondered where he had seen her before, stopped at the side of the house to ponder.

Suddenly he heard his mother speak. "He's much better. Much, much better."

The other woman answered. Her voice was high, almost sharp, but there was restraint in it, too. "You were right then, even though I quarreled with you

about it. I thought I could help him. I thought I was the *only one* who could help him."

His mother said, "I didn't really help. I don't think anyone could. But Alfred himself and the peace, the solitude—yes, that was what did it. I must admit I was very worried for a while. He had some strange, almost terrifying obsessions. But they passed. Thank God, they passed."

Footsteps came across the porch and he ducked back.

"Where is he? Hadn't you better call again?"

His mother raised her voice. "Alfred! Alfred!"

He made no reply, but he thought they must surely hear the wild beating of his heart.

"How are you feeling, my dear?" His mother's voice was gentle.

The woman sighed. "All right. I'm tough, Mother Grunner."

They waited again.

"Come in the house, Louise. He goes for long walks every morning, but he should be along any moment now."

Louise. Yes, Louise. That was her name. He knew now.

She had paused and was speaking again. "You said he had strange obsessions. What were they?"

His mother hesitated. "I don't know that they're important. They've passed—"

The shrill voice sharpened. *"What were they?"*

His mother sighed. "The dolls. He wanted dolls. He gave them names, took them on walks, even talked to them. I didn't know how to refuse him, so I brought them for him."

"Are you sure he was just pretending? Is it possible that he thought of the dolls as—"

His mother made her voice crisp. "I didn't think at all. I just gave them to him. He named them Angela,

and Susan, and Lucille, I think, and—oh, yes, the last one was Tessie."

The reply was whispered. "Angela. Susan. Lucille. Teresa. Those were names we considered."

He shrank back against the clapboards.

"Don't try to figure it out, Louise. Whatever their purpose, the dolls must have helped. He managed to lose them all—to forget them. And now he's well."

"I hope so," the young woman said. "After all, it isn't as though he were the only man who has ever had to live with tragedy. And he forgot," her voice sank, "that I had to live with it, too."

He saw it, the last missing piece, multicolored and beautiful. It blew around the house and he followed it. It fell at her feet.

"Louise," he said and came forward. "Louise, my darling. I'm so glad to see you. You'll never know how glad."

She smiled with her scarlet mouth and her dark blue eyes made him think of the black water in a deep, cool well.

THE RITES OF DEATH

by HAL ELLSON

It's a hot night. We got nothing to do, so we hang around the corner. But that's nowhere.

Some more of the boys show on the scene. Nothing's happening yet.

A squad car cruises slow around the corner. The flatfoots give us a bad look. We look back at them the same, and they go on their way.

I'm set to drift off when Elmo pops up with two other studs. Elmo's President of the mob, the boss cat.

He's not too big, but a rough stud when the chips is down. Mostly he don't say too much, but his punch is deadly.

Stovepipe and Fandango is kind of new in the gang. Both on the punky side—I don't like either. Stovepipe got a mouth bigger than his head. Fandango's ain't no smaller.

"What's happening?" Elmo says to me.

"Nothing. The clock stopped."

"I saw the P. D. car up the street."

"Them cops is just taking the air, Elmo."

We're still talking when this boiler screeches up and stops on a dime. Out pops Cooch and walks toward us.

The car busts away. Cooch greets us. He got on a red china-collar shirt loud enough to blind you. This boy is always well-pressed. He's our War Counselor, but things is quiet. We got nothing special on with no other cliques.

"Where you come from, Cooch?" Elmo asks.

"No place. Me and Digger was just riding around."

"In whose car?"

"Damned if I know. Digger took a liking to it, so he borrowed it for the night."

"You should have stayed with him."

"Why?"

" 'Cause there's no excitement here."

"I already had mine driving with Digger. That's a two-headed maniac for speed. He's going to end up dead and wrapped around a lamp-post."

That brings a laugh, but it's the truth. The talk goes on about Digger. When that's finished, we're back where we started with nothing to do.

Everybody's kind of quiet. I'm bored, so I say, "Who's got any ideas for fun?"

"Let's get some chicks and go down to the clubhouse," Stovepipe suggests.

"Hell, there ain't no chicks around. Behind that, it's too hot to breathe in that funky old cellar," I tell him.

"Best is on the roof," Elmo says.

That's it. Everybody's for the idea, so we hit for Elmo's house and go on up to the roof. It's fine up there. Kind of dark and nice.

We lay around and light up. My lips is feeling dry. A cool drink is in order. "Elmo, you like beer?" I say.

"Hey, you got some stacked away?"

"Nay, but I know where some lonely bottles is to be had."

"You want to haul and get them?"

"I'm kind of lazy tonight," I say, and I nod to Stovepipe and Fandango. That's the cue. Old Elmo picks it up.

"You two studs got a job," he says to Stovepipe and Fandango.

They both pop on me, and I get on my feet ready to bust heads.

"You hear what the President says," I tell them. "You're elected. Don't do what he says, and I'll throw both of you headfirst off this damn roof."

They ain't talking now, cause they're scared. They just look at me uneasy like.

"Okay," Elmo says, "where's the beer?"

"Back of Rivera's grocery. I saw them bottles from the roof today."

"How you get to them?"

"Best way is over the fence from the other street."

"You hear that?" Elmo says to Stovepipe and Fandango. "You got the word from the man who knows."

"Yeah, I'm the best spotter around," I say. "Now get going, and don't come back without the suds if you want your heads."

There's no argument now. They take off, go down the stairs. I light up another butt and laugh.

"What's the joke?" Cooch asks me.

"Them is two real stupid studs."

"Yeah, and they don't like each other for nothing."

"That's the truth. Me, I hate both their guts."

"What you got special against them?"

"I don't like Stovepipe's long neck, and Fandango, I don't feature the way he looks at me."

Everybody laughs on that, and we wait it out for the beer. If Rivera catches them, they're both dead and buried. If it wasn't for the beer, that'd be a good idea.

Fifteen minutes passes, and there's thumping on the stairs. The roof-door busts open and them two cats is back with bottles.

There's all kind of grabbing, and Elmo blows his top. "Put them bottles down," he says. "I divide."

That's done quick. Elmo counts bottles and heads. He don't say nothing then, just hands out the loot.

First comes himself. Cooch is next. I'm third in line. There's seven bottles and eight guys. That leaves one lonely bottle between the two flunkies, and their tongues is hanging to the floor.

"Divide it any way you want," Elmo tells them.

The rest of us is already knocking off caps, lifting elbows. That beer is kind of warm, but it's a free load, so who cares?

I have me a real good swig when arguing busts out between Stovepipe and Fandango. Both want first lick at that bottle.

They're ready to fight, but Elmo cuts in, "Cool it, you studs," he tells them. "I said *cool it!*"

They shut up now, both standing like sticks, both with a hand on that bottle.

"Okay, that's better," Elmo says. "Now, you want to settle it peaceable?"

"Let 'em fight it out," I put in. "That's a better idea."

Elmo don't hold with that. "Flip a coin," he says. "Let the winner take all."

"Good enough for me," Stovepipe says. "You want to flip once for the whole?"

"I don't see why not."

Stovepipe reaches in his pocket for a coin, fetches it out.

"Call, man."

"Heads is the winner."

Stovepipe flips the coin, catches it on his palm and slaps it flat on his wrist. They both look, and Stovepipe lets out a whoop.

"Yeah, tails on top. That beer is mine."

Fandango blows his lid. Everybody laughs, and that does him in. He's so sore he busts down the stairs.

Nobody cares. We go back to our drinking. After a while, Stovepipe wanders over to the roof-edge with his bottle.

I turn to Elmo and say, "You had a right to let them two fight it out for the bottle."

"What for? It's settled."

"Hell it's settled. Fandango's going to hold that against him."

"You think so?"

"I know so. Wait and see."

"Okay, we'll see."

What I don't tell Elmo is in my mind. Being I don't like them two flunkies, and they don't like themselves, I figure to set them against each other.

About an hour later, we move down from the roof. Me and Stovepipe is last. On the way down, I say to him, "You hear what Fandango accused you of? He said you cheated him out of that beer."

"I didn't hear him say that."

"I know, 'cause you was too busy being happy."

"Yeah, how could I cheat him?"

"I ain't said you did or didn't, 'cause that ain't my business. But I thought you'd like to know."

"Thanks for the info, Johnny."

"Okay, you going to let it stand?"

"Hell, no. I'm going to put that back down his throat."

We hit the bottom of the stairs and come outside. Stovepipe busts away for the corner fast.

"Hey, where you running?" Cooch yells. "The night is hot."

"Let him go, excitement's coming. He's looking for Fandango's head," I tell Cooch.

"What for?"

"That quart of beer made him feel brave and strong. Come on and see the happenings."

We all take out after Stovepipe and reach the candy store. Stovepipe's inside already. I hear his voice above the juke.

Next thing, both of them is heading for the door. They come out on the sidewalk, stand off and do some fancy name-calling. I give them a little help and say, "Don't talk it out. Fight it out and settle the issue."

That does it. They move together, start swinging. For a couple of minutes, it's a wild fight, better than I expected. But it don't last. The squad car shows on the scene. The cops don't get out. They sit tight and let Elmo do the work.

He busts up the fight and waves to the cops. They know him pretty good, so they move off, and that's it.

There's no more fighting. To make sure, Elmo makes Stovepipe and Fandango shake. They do that, but only 'cause he says so. Otherwise, you can see they hate each other worse than ever.

The rest of the night is pretty slow, so I go move off for home early and hit the sack . . .

Saturday rolls around. It rains in the afternoon, and

I lay in the house, listen to some records, nap a little, get up again and listen to some more sounds.

By evening, I'm a pressed stud. Got on my best and standing in front of the candy store. The air's cool after the rain. It's a good night for some fun.

The mob comes around. Being there's no dance on, and nothing special set, we pass around the hat and decide to have a ball down to the clubhouse.

Naturally, the chicks hear about the party. It ain't too long before they're drifting through the door. It's all going fine. There's only two interruptions. One, some strange cat tries crashing the door. We crash him out on his head, faster than he came in.

A wino is next. Them guys can smell drink-stuff a mile. Elmo punches him on the jaw. Me and Cooch drag him out to the sidewalk and leave him there.

The party continues like nothing happened. It's real cool. There's a run on the drinking stuff, the hat is passed again, and more is sent out for.

But fun is with the chicks. Ain't none of them angels, but none is tackheads either. We don't never allow dog-faces in the clubhouse.

Me, I take them as they come. All is the same to me. Play the field and never get burned is what I figure.

But there's this Tabby. For my money, she's the best around. She's kind of tall, kind of light, kind of thin. Got them melting kind of eyes.

I dance with her first. It's just dancing, no talking and no kind of monkey business.

That's the way it always is with her, only this time, she holds a little tighter, comes a little closer and gives me that staring business.

I catch that and let it pass. Next dance is with somebody else. That's to cool her off.

She got cat eyes, watching me dance with China. The whole record slides, and she don't stop looking.

I play up to China, lay it on thick. That pays off when I go back to Tabby.

She's so damn jealous she can't answer when I ask her to dance. I grab her wrist, pull her up and make her.

After a while, I say, "What's biting on you, Tabby? You sore about something?"

"No."

"That's a lie."

"Okay, why you bother to dance with me?"

" 'Cause I like the way you dance."

"That's all?"

"I like other stuff about you, baby."

"Is that the same line you gave to China?"

"Hell no, nothing like that."

"It looked to me that way, the way she was cuddling up."

"That's her personality. She likes to cuddle. Plus, she goes for me."

"Then why you bothering me?"

"Maybe I prefer you."

That's the bombshell. She don't know what to say to that. I let it sink in good and deep.

Finally she says, "You only said maybe."

"You know I mean more than that, Tabby."

"Yeah, maybe you do, and maybe you don't."

"Hey, why you talk like that?"

" 'Cause you're a known playboy. You fool around, but you're all lies to the girls."

"Sure, 'cause I don't like none of them. But with you, it's different."

That kind of talk's got to hit, and it does. She gives me a small kind of smile, and I know I got her on the run.

"You really mean all that?" she asks me.

"Well, talking ain't going to prove it."

"What does?"

I got to show so I pull her closer. She got a real small kind of waist, nice to hold. I kiss her ear, put my lips on her neck.

That seals it. She been kind of stiff. Now she comes in real close without no help, snuggles up like we going to be married by morning.

We dance out a couple of records like that and then sit it out with a beer.

What I noticed before, I notice again. Stovepipe and Fandango both have eyes for Tabby.

She's so blind for me, she don't see nothing. But my mind's working overtime. I don't know why I hate them two guys, but I do. Behind that is all this fussing with Tabby.

It's set now. Just got to wait for the moment to be ripe.

Stovepipe helps out by walking over and asking Tabby for a dance. She looks at me to see how I feel. I'm naturally burned, but I cool it and say, "It's okay, Tabby."

She kind of don't want to, but she can't do nothing about it. So she gets up to dance.

I keep one eye on them, the other on Fandango. Fandango looks fit to bust. That's fine. Something's got to happen out of that.

The record ends, and Tabby comes back to me. Stovepipe is with her, and he got that real hungry look now, like he tasted a bite and wants all.

He plays it real cool, thanks Tabby and thanks me, like I done him something.

A new record comes on, and I catch hold of Tabby. We dance and don't talk for a while.

Finally, I say, "How was Stovepipe?"

"What do you mean, Johnny?"

"Did he behave himself?"

"He didn't do nothing out of the way."

"He might, 'cause he's liking you."

"Tough! I don't like him."

I laugh on that and say, "After all, you can't blame him. You're so pretty, and he ain't got no steady."

Tabby gives me a funny look, like she's figuring what this is all about and can't get to the answer.

"Why you talking up for him?" she finally asks me.

" 'Cause he's a friend of mine. That's all. So you be nice to him."

I get a real popeyed stare on that and no answer.

"You hear me talking?" I say.

"Yeah."

"Okay, good."

We dance out the record and sit down again. I spot Stovepipe watching, like he's figuring on asking Tabby for another dance. Across the room is Fandango with a greedy look in his eye.

He's the hungrier, so he moves first. Two seconds later, he's standing in front of me and Tabby with a silly look on his face, like he don't know what to do with himself.

I put him at his ease and say, "You want something, Fandango?"

He moves his head like a rooster, and the words don't come for him at first. He's all screwed up. Finally he gets it out.

"You mind if I dance with Tabby?"

"Hell, no," I say. "It's all right with me, friend."

That goofs Tabby. She looks at me like I've gone crazy, so I tell her, "It's all right, baby. It's only a dance he's asking for. He ain't going to bite you."

Tabby gets up on that and closes with Fandango. It's a cool record. I watch them. Fandango can't dance for crap.

I look across the room and watch Stovepipe. That

boy is watching with daggers. It's like I figured. He's on the jealous side.

It's all working out pretty. When the record goes off, Tabby comes back to me. Fandango's grinning so big his face is like to split.

"Thanks, man," he says to me.

"Don't mention it."

I look away and light a cigarette. He takes the hint and moves off.

Tabby's sitting next to me. Got that funny look on her face again, like she's putting things together. Another record's on.

"You want to dance this one with me?" she asks.

"Naw, let it slide. You want some beer?"

"I'd rather dance, Johnny."

"Well, I'm going to have me a beer."

I get up, walk off and catch me a can of that stuff. When I come back, Tabby looks kind of worried.

"Something wrong?" I say.

"Not exactly."

"Yeah, something is. Tell it."

"Okay, since you say you go for me so strong, how come you don't mind me dancing with others?"

"You want a true answer?"

"I don't want no lies."

"Okay. One is, we ain't married yet. Second, if my friends ask for a dance, there ain't no harm in that. I don't expect you to turn them down."

"But I don't care to dance with them."

"Does that mean you don't want to?"

"I didn't say that, Johnny."

"That's the way it sounds. But that's okay. Have it any way you like it."

I say that real cool, stand up and finish off the can of beer. After that, I just walk away and leave her there.

China's not dancing. I walk up and ask her to dance. She obliges. This is a real slow number playing, and one thing about China. She know how to do like a snake with them slow discs.

I'm all for that, and we do some real grinding. At the same time I keep watch on Tabby from under my eyes.

Man, she's fit to be tied. The number ends, I give China a pat and grab me another can of beer. When I got half it down my gut, I feel somebody tug on my arm. It's Tabby. I swing around and say, "Hey, you want something, girl?"

"I want to talk to you, Johnny."

"Yeah, go ahead. My ears is open."

"You ain't sore at me, are you?"

"Sore at you? Naw."

"Then why you going for China so strong?"

"Maybe 'cause she appreciates me more than you do."

"Yeah, how could she when she's for anybody?"

"And you're for somebody?"

She drops her eyes on that and don't answer.

"Say what you mean then, girl."

"You know I'm liking you Johnny."

"That don't seem so when you start right off telling me the score and all that."

"I'm sorry, Johnny."

"Okay."

"Then everything's like before?"

"Yeah, baby, it's all like before."

"You want to dance?"

We move together, but it ain't dancing she wants. That's just an excuse to be in my arms. She holds tight, like nobody can get us loose.

The situation's all mine. I ain't too bad, either, 'cause having Tabby is a nice feeling.

A little later, Stovepipe comes back to ask for a second dance. He's just as stupid and a little bolder this time, but not enough for me to slap him down.

"May I have the pleasure of another dance?" he says to Tabby. He even gives a little bow to make it real fancy. Then he says to me quick, "You don't mind, Johnny?"

"Not at all, friend."

This time Tabby knows what to do. Maybe she don't like it, but she gets up and closes with Stovepipe.

Meanwhile, Fandango's dancing with a skinny rat named Skippy, but his eyes is on Tabby and Stovepipe. That's okay. Things is building up.

I go for another beer. China's got a can and swigging at it. She sees me and says, "Johnny, you playing around. You shouldn't do like that?"

"What do you mean, China?"

"I don't know exactly. But you're playing. What are you after?"

"Nothing but some more beer, baby."

"Yeah, you're kind of rushing Tabby."

"That could be."

"What for?"

" 'Cause she ain't the worse to be around."

"Then why you hanging around me?"

"You're not so bad yourself."

"You figuring on playing both of us?"

"Naw, I only danced with you to make her jealous. I'm for Tabby, and that's the way it is."

"Yeah. I wonder."

"You wonder what?"

"It ain't like you to fall deep unless you changed your stripes."

"Maybe I changed then, China. That could be."

She laughs and lifts her can of beer. Maybe she's believing me, maybe she ain't, but who cares?

I leave her and go back to my seat. There's another record playing, and Stovepipe and Tabby are dancing it out. That's two in a row for Stovepipe. I look around and see Fandango. That cat's fit to be boiled.

Seems like the time is ripe, so I move over to him, ask him what's wrong.

"Nothing, Johnny."

"Don't give me that stuff. You're ready to blow your stack. But I know what's eating your heart."

Fandango gives me this stupid look like nobody's supposed to know nothing.

"Yeah, your friend, Stovepipe is hogging all the dances. What's wrong that you don't cut in on him?"

"You don't mind if I do?"

"Why should I? It's up to Tabby. You want to know something? She favors you over him. She's kind of soft on you."

This time he gives me a real stupid look, like he can't believe his hearing. "Yeah? You're jiving me."

"The hell I am. That's the truth, 'cause Tabby told me it herself. She don't like Stovepipe's guts. So, like I say, you ought to cut in and do her a favor."

He laps that up like milk, lifts his shoulders and looks across the room at Stovepipe. Next second, he's marching at him. Soon as he reaches Stovepipe, he taps him on the shoulder.

That's the fuse going. First, I can't hear what's being said, but I don't have to. I know. He's trying to cut in, and Stovepipe don't go for that. He's still holding Tabby. That don't last. He's got to let her go. A lot of loud talk busts out. Everybody listens in.

Talk turns to action. Fandango is the maddest and hits out first. Both of them start punching but they're kind of wild. Not much damage is done, 'cause Elmo and some others jump in and bust it up.

Elmo gives them hell for fighting in the clubhouse

and boots both their cans. "You want to fight so bad, turn it on outside, not in here."

Most everybody's for that, including Stovepipe and Fandango. So they go out to the street. The rest of us follow. It's a good fight, real wild. Yeah, they beat on each other till they can't raise their arms no more.

A crowd of big people come around. This fat lady starts hollering fit to kill, so Elmo steps in again and stops the fight.

Stovepipe and Fandango is both busted up. They ain't in no mood for partying now, so they take off.

The rest of us go back inside. Tabby comes to me and asks me what they was fighting about.

"You don't know?" I say.

"No, Johnny."

" 'Cause of you."

"Me?"

"Yeah, you. You mishandled things, let one dance more than the other."

"I didn't mean for them to fight."

"What you meant and what happened is two different items, girl. You ought to know better."

"I'm sorry, Johnny."

"It's too late for that, baby. They're my friends and you made them clash, so that's it."

"That's what?"

"The finish. That means you and me go our separate ways like before."

Tabby looks at me stupid, like she don't dig. I got no time to explain further, so I turn away. There's a good record on. China is across the room. I walk over, grab her and start dancing . . .

A week later, things bust out between Stovepipe and Fandango again. That's to be expected. Them two got to come to a decision, one way or another.

Nothing happens. They beat on each other and fight

to a draw. It's the same reason, too. They're both after Tabby. Both want to own her.

By this time, Elmo's kind of tired of all this crap. First thing he does is call a meeting and bring us all together.

We go to the clubhouse, and when everybody's there, he calls for quiet and lays down the law, does it cool.

"You all know why this meeting is called?" he says.

Everybody knows but Stovepipe and Fandango. They're too stupid, so Elmo tells them, "You two ought to know best of all. Seeing as you don't, I'm here to tell you this. I don't like fighting among ourselves. That ain't no good for the club. But fights got to be—if they settle things. You two ain't settled nothing, far as I can see. You been beating on each other for some no-decision stuff. Is that true, or ain't it?"

Stovepipe and Fandango nod.

"Okay, since you two ain't settled your differences, how about making it a showdown?"

"Whatever you suggest," Stovepipe says.

"How about you, Fandango? You want to settle for good?"

"I don't see why not, Elmo."

"Okay, then you both willing?"

"Yeah, what's the plan?"

"A fight to the finish."

"I'm for that, Elmo."

"How about you, Fandango. You in favor?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, this is it. Come on."

We move out of the clubhouse and walk to the river. It's five blocks over. Nobody's talking.

Elmo looks around. "Okay, there's nobody to interfere. Now's your last chance to pull out."

"Pull out of what?" Stovepipe says. "What are we supposed to do?"

"You going to have it out in the water. The loser don't come back."

"Hey, that's kind of crazy."

"It ain't so crazy. This way, nobody gets blamed. It'll look like an accident. Now, who's chickening out, and who's staying with it?"

Stovepipe is scared now. So is Fandango. They look at each other and look at us. We're all around, waiting.

"Hey, both is chicken," I say. "Look at them. They getting green."

The others start jiving them, too. Yeah, they sick and scared to death, ready to pull out, but it's too late.

"Ready?" Elmo says.

Stovepipe and Fandango look at him and nod.

"Okay, strip to your drawers and pop in that water. You swim out ten strokes and face each other. That's the only rules. After that, it's no holds barred."

Elmo looks around again. There's nothing to interfere. Stovepipe and Fandango stare at each other. They don't look sore now. They're just scared as hell.

Stovepipe makes the first move, starts unbuttoning. Fandango follows. They strip down, walk to the bulkhead and get set to dive.

"Okay, ready?" Elmo says. They nod, that's all. "Ready. *Jump!*"

There's a double splash, and all of us turn away. Nobody's supposed to witness what happens, so we move off fast and hurry back to the clubhouse.

It's kind of hot, so we send out for drinks. When they come, nobody's in the mood for the stuff but me.

Everybody's waiting, not talking. A half hour goes by, and the door busts open.

In walks Fandango. That's a surprise to me. I figured Stovepipe to take him, but it didn't happen that way. Yeah, that's a blip, 'cause I bet a dollar on Stovepipe. That means I'm out a buck.

THE PATSY

by FRANK KANE

Johnny Liddell pushed open the frosted glass door that bore the gilded legend *Seaway Indemnity Company* and walked without haste into the lushly carpeted anteroom. A blonde in a tight-fitting green sweater sat tapping away at the keys of a typewriter, taking excessive care not to fracture the polish on her nails. She looked up as Liddell walked in.

"Mike Davis in?" he asked.

The blonde nodded. "Who shall I say?"

"Johnny Liddell. He expects me."

The blonde consulted an appointment pad on her desk, frowning slightly. "So you're a detective?" She studied the heavy shoulders, the square jaw and the thick hair flecked with white. "I thought all private detectives were skinny guys like William Powell."

She got up from her desk, and moved toward the small gate in the waist-high partition. The sweater failed to disguise the fact that she had assets like the Chase Manhattan Bank, and when she walked the sway indicated they were just as liquid.

"Davis's office is the third door down the corridor," she said. She stood so he had to brush past her to get through the gate. She held it open for him, grinning up at him saucily.

"Remind me to come peek through your keyhole sometime," he told her in passing. "Right now I'm twenty minutes late."

The blonde wrinkled up her nose, shrugged. "I'll be around."

Liddell walked down the corridor, stopped in front of a door that was labeled SEAWAY INDEMNITY—*Investigation Bureau*. He pushed open the door and walked in.

Mike Davis stood at the window against the far wall, staring down into 51st Street, twenty stories below. He turned at the sound of the opened door, his battered face twisting into a grin. "Better late than never," he said. He crossed the room, his hand extended in front of him.

"You want people to be on time, you'd better get rid of that traffic stopper in the outer office," Liddell said, grinning. He pumped the man's hand, and tossed his hat at a coat tree. "It sounded important."

Mike Davis had been an amateur boxer, and had made the early mistake of trying to trade his silver watches and medals for a regular Saturday night purse at the Ridgewood Grove. A scrappy little port-sider from Coney Island who showed a curious disaffection for ending the fight before the tenth round had changed his mind. The left hander's hook had also changed the contour of Davis's nose and eyebrows. He peered at Liddell from under lowering brows.

"How busy are you, Johnny?" he asked.

Liddell shrugged. He walked over to the leather armchair near the desk, and dropped into it. "The usual. We've been running down a Portchester kid who tried to parlay the fact that she was Ed Sullivan's neighbor into a movie career. We just located her working in a drive-in in L.A. Soon's we turn her over to her old man I'm finished."

He dug a cigarette from his pocket, and stuck it in the corner of his mouth where it waggled when he talked. "What's the job you're peddling?" he asked.

"A weirdie, Johnny." Davis walked over to the desk, jabbed at a button on the base of the phone, held it to

his ear. "Pull the package on Robert Horton and bring it in; will you, Lee?"

He dropped the receiver back on its hook, and returned to his chair. "We had this one marked closed as a hit-and-run job. But now we're not so sure. Before we pay off we'd like to be."

A short, fat man walked in, and dropped an envelope on Davis's desk. He favored Liddell with an incurious glance, and walked right out again.

"What changed your mind?" Johnny asked.

The insurance man emptied the contents of the envelope on his desk, scowling a little. "The guy's sister-in-law—a Mrs. Sally Horton." He picked a flimsy from the pile on his desk, ran his eyes over it. "She says it was murder."

"She know who did it?"

Davis rolled his eyes from the paper up to Liddell's face. "Yeah. She says it was her husband."

"Any reason why Horton should kill his brother?"

"Two. First, he was the beneficiary of the insurance policy. Second, his wife says he knew she was trading him in for the brother-in-law as soon as she could get a divorce."

Johnny Liddell followed the dusty looking hall carpet to the second apartment from the rear. A tarnished 2B was stenciled on it. He knocked, his eyes wandering idly up and down the dismal hallway as he waited for some sign of life behind the door. When it was finally opened, he was surprised by the woman who stood in the doorway.

She was strictly not the run-down apartment house type. Her burnished copper hair was piled on the top of her head, and her face was devoid of any make-up except for the sensuous red smear that was her mouth. She wore a sheer dressing gown that made only an in-

different attempt to hide her full-blown charms.

"You want something, or are you just taking in the sights?" she asked, staring at Liddell with bland eyes.

"I'm looking for a Mrs. Horton. A Mrs. Sally Horton."

She permitted herself a brief inventory of the man's thick shoulders, rugged face. "That's me," she conceded. "Who're you?"

"Name's Liddell. I'm an investigator for the insurance company."

"How nice for you." She stepped aside. "Come in." As she flattened against the wall for him to pass, her bosom jutted against the robe. "I wasn't expecting company, but it's no more gruesome than usual."

The living room furniture made a pathetic effort to brighten the dullness of the small room, but didn't quite make it. The carpet that covered most of the floor was beginning to show signs of wear. A pile of papers lay beside the couch, a half-finished highball on the coffee table.

Liddell tossed his hat on a small table in the foyer, and ambled into the living room. "Nice place you've got here."

"It's a dump and you know it," the blonde complained. She walked over to the table, and picked up her drink. "I was just having a short one. Join me?"

"Bourbon if you have it."

Sally Horton headed for the small kitchenette, her full hips swaying smoothly against the fabric of her gown. When she returned with a bottle and glass, the effect was equally satisfying from the front. She set the glass down on the coffee table, and tilted the bottle over it. "You work fast." She glanced up at him through her eyelashes. "Your company, that is."

"I don't get many complaints. The company, that is."

The blonde grinned at him, handed him the glass. "Maybe you haven't been dealing with very particular people."

"Are you particular?"

Sally Horton shrugged and pursed her full lips wryly. "Very particular."

Liddell held his glass up in a toast. "Then I'll try to be extra good in your case." He sipped the bourbon slowly, savoring its taste. "Now about this brother-in-law of yours. You don't think it was an accident?"

"I know it wasn't. My husband killed his brother."

"You haven't told the police?"

The blonde dropped into a chair. As she crossed her legs the gown fell away exposing a wide expanse of leg and thigh. "Not yet. I wanted to know where I stand. On the insurance, that is." She sipped at her glass, giving him the full effect of her eyes over the rim. "Bob was insured for twenty-five thousand dollars at double indemnity. If my husband did kill him, do I get the insurance?"

Liddell considered that for a moment. Finally he said, "I guess so. Certainly your husband wouldn't have any use for it where he'd be going."

He dropped onto the couch, pulled a folded sheet of paper from his inside pocket, found a pencil. "Suppose you tell me what you think happened and I'll take it from there."

"It's like I told the man over the phone. George was violently jealous of Bob. When he found out I was going to get a divorce so that Bob and I could get married, he acted like a crazy man."

She drained her glass, leaned forward with startling effect to place it on the coffee table. "He threatened to kill us both."

"You intended to divorce him?"

The blonde shrugged. "Why not? You think I'm go-

ing to spend my whole life in a trap like this?" She stared around the room with a shudder of distaste. "He promised me the world and this is what he delivers."

"Let's get to last night—the night your brother-in-law was killed."

Her eyes had returned from the survey of the room, and she was looking directly at Liddell again. "George and Bob went out drinking together. I thought they'd made it up. But the next thing I knew there were a couple of cops here asking George to go down to the morgue to identify Bob's body. They said he had been killed by a hit-and-runner."

She rubbed the palms of her hands up the sides of her arms. "As soon as they left, I went down to the garage. The whole right fender of the car is dented in. It wasn't that way yesterday."

Liddell scowled thoughtfully, scribbled a few notes. "You have a private garage?"

The blonde nodded. "Around the corner. It comes with the apartment. It's got Two B on the door."

Liddell transferred the information to the paper, replaced it in his jacket pocket. "I'd like to take a look at the car."

"Why not? You'll need the key." The blonde got up, and headed for one of the doors off the living room. She disappeared inside. A moment later she called to him. "I can show you the garage from here. Come on in."

Liddell drained the glass, set it back on the table. He walked to the door. It was a bedroom. The blonde stood by the window, the light outside silhouetting her full body.

She glanced at him over her shoulder, her eyes challenging. "What are you waiting for?" She watched him cross the room to where she stood. "How long does it take for a formal identification?"

Her lips looked warm and wet, he could smell her nearness. "Long enough."

She moved closer to him, until he could feel her against his chest, her breath on his face. "I told you I was particular," she told him huskily. She tilted her face up, her lips worked against his mouth. He slid his arm around her waist. She melted against him. . . .

Lieutenant Vince Sullivan of Homicide sat behind his unpolished desk, his heels hooked on a half open drawer.

"Looks like that was a good tip you handed up, Johnny," he conceded. "We just got a flash from the F car on the Horton case. The Hortons' jalopy got its fender banged in some place. If the boys in the lab can tie it to the dead guy, we've got it all wrapped up."

Liddell dug a cigarette from his pocket, tapped it on the desk. "How long will it take to get a make on the car?"

Sullivan shrugged. "By tonight for sure. They picked some paint particles out of the dead guy's clothes. If that matches up with the paint on the car and they can match up the dirt that got shaken loose from under the fender, they'll tie it up."

The phone on the desk buzzed. Sullivan grunted, and dropped his feet to the floor. "Yeah?" He listened to the voice on the other end for a moment in silence, his lips tightening. Then he said, "Okay, bring him in." He dropped the receiver on its hook, and looked at Johnny. "They're bringing in George Horton. Want to stay?"

Liddell nodded. "Yeah. I'd like to hear his story."

George Horton had the look of a defeated man. Graying bristles glistened on the point of his chin, and his eyes were watery, buttressed by discolored sacs. He had a petulant mouth that was drooping at the mo-

ment, a receding chin. He tried to work up an air of resentment but didn't quite make it.

"What's all this about?" The watery eyes hopscotched from the man behind the desk to Liddell and back. "I've a right to know."

"Just got a couple of questions to ask you, Horton," Sullivan told him calmly. "About your brother."

"You mean I ought to have a couple of questions to ask you about my brother. Like for instance what are you doing to get the guy who did this?"

"We think we've got the guy who did it," Sullivan grunted. *"You."*

The air wheezed out of Horton's lungs, his knees sagged. "Me? You're crazy. Why would I kill my own brother? How could I?"

Sullivan nodded to a chair. "Sit down." He waited until Horton had slumped into it. "Your brother was heavily insured, and you're the beneficiary. Right?"

"That was his idea. Not mine. He's had that insurance for years. I'm down on my luck, sure—but not enough to kill my own brother for his insurance. That's crazy."

"You were jealous of him."

"Why would I be jealous of Bob?" The perspiration was gleaming damply on Horton's forehead and upper lip now. He swabbed at it with his sleeve. "Bob and me have always been good friends."

"Maybe. But not since your wife started shining up to him."

"Sally? She don't mean anything by it. She's just the friendly type—"

"Didn't you threaten to kill them both when she told you she was going to divorce you to marry Bob?"

A nerve started ticking under the other man's left eye. "Whoever gave you that ridiculous idea?"

Sullivan reached into his drawer, pulled out a stick

of gum, and denuded it of its wrapper. "Your wife," he said.

"No. She couldn't have. All right, I'll admit we've had some fights about Bob. But we made them all up. We were all good friends again."

He looked from Sullivan to Liddell as though pleading for belief. "Why, that's what we were celebrating last night. Would we be out on the town together if we were mad at each other?"

"Where was this celebration taking place?" Liddell put in.

"A half a dozen places, I guess. We ended up the night at Louis's place down in the Village."

The lieutenant leaned forward, consulted some notes on his desk pad. "The body was found on the side street off Louis's place at about four-thirty this morning." He looked up at the unshaven man. "When did you drive your car last?"

Horton licked at his lips. He tried for a moment to match the officer's stare, but failed at it. He dropped his eyes. "I don't know. Over the weekend, I guess."

"Not last night?"

The unshaven man shook his head. "We didn't need a car for pub crawling. We just went from place to place."

Sullivan leaned back. "And you ended up the night at Louis's place. You leave together?"

"You know we didn't. Bob got a call. He said he had to go out for a few minutes, that he'd be right back with a big surprise." Horton shrugged. "I waited a few minutes, then I got curious and I followed him out. He was no place around. At least, I didn't see him."

"You go back into Louis's?"

Horton shook his head. "I began to feel not so good —so I headed for home. I figured maybe Bob had done the same thing."

Sullivan looked past the man in the chair to the uniformed officer who stood by the door. "Take Horton downstairs and get his statement. Then book him."

"For what?" Horton wanted to know.

"Suspicion of vehicular homicide."

The officer tapped Horton on the arm. He got up, followed him out of the room. "What do you think?" Sullivan wanted to know after the door had closed behind them.

Liddell grunted, crushed out his cigarette. "Pretty thin story. He makes no attempt to explain the crushed fender although he must know we've already had a look at it."

The homicide man pulled himself out of his chair, walked over to where a water cooler stood, humming to itself, and helped himself to a drink. He crushed the paper cup in his beefy fist, tossed it at the waste basket. "He's hooked and he knows it. What's the sense of wiggling when you're really hooked?"

"Yeah. What's the sense?" Liddell stared at the homicide man for a moment. "How do you figure it happened?"

Sullivan shrugged, walked heavily back to the desk, sank into his chair. "Probably he followed Bob out, caught up with him and started arguing. Maybe he clouted him and knocked him down. Then he ran over him."

"The fender?"

"Okay, so it didn't happen that way. He went looking for Bob with the car. Maybe he got this crazy idea when he picked Bob up with the headlights." The homicide man snapped his finger. "Could have happened just like that."

Liddell considered it, nodding. "Could have, at that." He got up, stretched, yawned. "I'll check back with you if there's anything new on our end."

"Where you going?"

"I think I'll drop by Louis's place and have a talk with that bartender."

"How so?"

"I think I've got an idea who that call came from."

Sullivan grinned. "Horton's wife?"

Liddell nodded. "Yes, it figures."

"Right. That even gives us the motive. George Horton must have recognized his wife's voice, figured Bob was going to meet her and saw a way to get rid of his competition once and for all. And pick up a wad of insurance dough at the same time. Buy it?"

Liddell grinned. "It's hard to resist."

Johnny got to Louis's place in about twenty minutes. It was an overcrowded, smoke-filled boîte three steps down from the sidewalk on Bellevois Street in the Village. Johnny Liddell descended the three steps, and stood in the doorway until his eyes became accustomed to the gloom. A long bar ran the length of the room. It was almost filled with low talking leftovers from the cocktail hour, and overhead a thick pall of smoke stirred sluggishly in the draft of the open door.

Liddell found himself a place at the end of the bar, waved down the bartender and ordered a bourbon on the rocks. He watched while the man behind the bar made a production of tilting the bottle over the glass.

"You on until closing last night?" Liddell asked. He permitted the barman to see the denomination on the folded five he held between his fingers.

The bartender seemed to have difficulty pulling his eyes away from the bill. "Yeah, I closed up last night."

"George Horton and his brother were in here until almost closing?"

"They were my last two customers."

Liddell nodded. "George leave much after his brother?"

The barman scratched at his scalp with his index finger. "Seemed pretty much as if they left almost together. Don't rightly recall. I was busy polishing glasses. One minute George was sitting here alone, the next minute he was gone."

The bill changed hands, the bartender tucking it into his vest pocket.

"One more question. That telephone call Bob got. Did you recognize the voice?"

The bartender looked around, dropped his voice. "Look, I don't want to start any trouble—especially since Bob's dead. But I recognized that voice, all right." He looked around again to make sure no one was eavesdropping. "It was Sally Horton."

"You're sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. I should know her voice well enough. She's in here almost every day."

He held up a hand to a patron at the other end of the bar who was demanding service. "Be right back." He shuffled to the far end of the bar, drew a fresh glass of beer for the impatient customer, then returned to Johnny. "Whatever she told Bob sent him scuttling out of here. Poor guy! If he only knew what was waiting for him."

Liddell looked up from his drink. "What do you mean by that?"

The bartender shrugged. "He was goin' to his death, the way it worked out, wasn't he?"

Liddell frowned, considering it. "I guess you could say that."

The bartender suddenly reached over, lifted Liddell's glass, and swabbed the bar dry with a damp cloth. "Talk of the devil, here she is now. Sally Horton."

The blonde stood in the entrance to the bar, conscious that she was the cynosure of all eyes. She wore a nile-green knitted suit that left little to the imagina-

tion, and her hair had been pulled back from her face to a bun that lay in the nape of her neck. Her face was still devoid of make-up except for the brilliant lipstick.

From where he sat, Liddell could almost see the start of surprise on the girl's face when she recognized him. But she managed a forced smile and headed for him. Not too rapidly, though. Twice she stopped to exchange words with men at the bar.

Finally she snuggled in alongside him. "This is a surprise. Do you come here often?"

Liddell shook his head. "My first time." He took two cigarettes from a pack, lit them, passed one to the girl. "How about you?"

She sucked a lungful of smoke from the butt, and let it dribble from half-parted lips. "I like the place. I've been dropping by on and off since before I was married."

She looked around the boîte. "This is where I met George, matter of fact. I got the impression he was a big businessman from the way he'd spread money around. I soon found out differently. It was rent money."

Without being asked, the bartender slid a perfectly white martini across the bar. "Thanks, Louis." She winked. She tasted it, and smiled. "Louis is the only bartender I'd permit to make a martini for me." She eyed Liddell over the rim of the glass. "You didn't tell me what you're doing here."

Liddell pinched at his nostrils with thumb and forefinger. "You didn't tell me you called Bob here last night?"

She sipped at her drink, avoiding his eyes. "Was that important?"

"That depends. It sent him running out of here. Like the bartender says, not knowing what was waiting for him."

The girl swirled the liquid around in her glass. "I asked him if he had told George about the divorce." She pouted. "He was almost as scared of George as I was. But he promised that last night he was going to tell him."

"Why did he leave George right after the call?"

The blonde shrugged. "We'll never know now, will we?"

Liddell took a long, deep drag on the cigarette, dropped it to the floor and crushed it out. "I wonder." He drained his glass, set it back on the bar. "I'll be seeing you again?"

"You know where I live."

He nodded, brushed past her. He had scarcely reached the bar before she had moved over and was in animated conversation with another man at the bar.

For the next few hours, Johnny Liddell wandered throughout the neighborhood surrounding Louis's place. He charted the one-way streets, canvassed the type of businesses, talked to the cops on the beat, to bellhops at the rundown hotel a few blocks down Bellevois Street from the entrance to the bar.

The following morning, he called Lieutenant Vince Sullivan at headquarters to ask for a meeting with George Horton present, at which time he would prove that Horton had been responsible for his brother's death. The meeting was set for four o'clock.

George Horton was already in the lieutenant's office when Johnny Liddell walked in. On his arm, he brought Sally Horton.

Horton still hadn't shaved. His clothes were crumpled and he looked up with bloodshot eyes as his wife walked in, then glared from her to Liddell. "You haven't wasted much time. Either of you."

The blonde ignored him, but had the quick good sense to favor the lieutenant with a smile.

"Bring a chair for Mrs. Horton," the lieutenant snapped at the uniformed officer on the door. While she was being seated, he turned to Liddell. "You didn't tell me you were bringing anybody. What are you doing, selling tickets?"

"There are some points that Mrs. Horton can clear up. I thought it would be best to have her along."

Sullivan nodded grumpily, and dropped back in his chair. "Okay, let's get this underway. You said you could prove Horton killed his brother."

"He's a liar. I didn't kill Bob, I tell you." Horton had started out of his seat, but he was quickly and roughly shoved back into it by the officer.

Liddell reached for the pack of cigarettes on the lieutenant's desk, helped himself to one. "I didn't say Horton killed his brother, Vince." He stuck the cigarette between his lips, and touched a match to it. "I said he was responsible for his brother's death."

"Stop making a production out of it," Sullivan growled. "Do you have something to tie him to it or don't you?"

Liddell exhaled twin streams of smoke from his nostrils. "Sure. The fact that he had his brother insured for twenty-five grand double indemnity."

"What's new about that? That's the motive. Right?"

"Right."

Sullivan stared at him. "You mean you put us to all this trouble just to tell us something we knew? You said—"

"I said he was responsible for the death. But he didn't kill him." He turned to the blonde. "You did, baby."

The blonde's lower jaw sagged, and her face went deathly white. "You must be completely nuts."

Sullivan studied Liddell's face for signs of a rib. "That's a pretty broad statement, mister," he said.

"I hope you have something more than snow dreams to back it up."

"You're not going to listen to him, are you?" Sally swung on the man behind the desk. "I was at home miles away when it happened. Ask Louis, the bartender. He'll tell you I called Bob there just a few minutes before Bob got hit."

"How do you know when he got hit? He could have just gotten it before he was found. He might even have been lying there ever since he walked out of the tavern."

"Contents of the stomach and degree of digestion put the time at right about when he left Louis's place," Sullivan pointed out. He was eying the blonde steadily. "She couldn't have gotten from her place down to where he was hit in that length of time."

"She didn't call from home," Johnny said. "I did a little checking of the neighborhood around the bar. The only place she could have called from was a little rundown hotel just up a block or so from the bar. I had a talk with the night clerk and I don't think we'll have any trouble on a make. He doesn't see many pretty blondes walk in from the street to make a phone call at that hour."

The blonde licked at her lips. "None of this is proof. It's all a frameup."

"Why should Liddell try to frame you, Mrs. Horton?"

"He—he tried to make a play for me. I wouldn't go for it."

Liddell grunted. "That'll be the ever lovin' day." He turned to Horton who was staring with disbelief at his wife. "She has been making a play for your brother, pretending that if she could get rid of you, she'd marry him. He went for it."

"She never would have married Bob. I knew that."

"Of course not. Sally likes pretty things too much to tie herself to another guy who couldn't buy them for her. But the insurance money would. She planned to get her hands on that money and get rid of you at the same time by framing you for Bob's murder."

"You can't prove it was murder." Sally almost screamed the words. "All right, I was there. But it was an accident. I—I got blinded by the lights. I didn't see him until it was too late. I got scared and—"

"I don't know if they'll be able to pin a first-degree one on you, baby," Liddell said. "But even if it's murder two, or manslaughter—just sit up there and think of George, the patsy, spending the fifty gees you were so anxious to run your fingers through. So very, very anxious."

He walked to the door, turned with his hand on the knob. "And if you're beginning to feel sorry for her, George, just think of the fun she'd be having spending that loot while you were waiting to get fitted for the hot seat."

WATER'S EDGE

by ROBERT BLOCH

The fly-specked lettering on the window read *The Bright Spot Restaurant.* The sign overhead urged *Eat.*

He wasn't hungry, and the place didn't look especially attractive, but he went inside anyway.

It was a counter joint with a single row of hard-backed booths lining one wall. A half dozen customers squatted on stools at the end of the counter, near the door. He walked past them and slid onto a stool at the far end.

There he sat, staring at the three waitresses. None of them looked right to him, but he had to take a chance. He waited until one of the women approached him.

"Yours, mister?"

"Coke."

She brought it to him and set the glass down. He pretended to be studying the menu and talked without looking up at her.

"Say, does a Mrs. Helen Krauss work here?"

"I'm Helen Krauss."

He lifted his eyes. What kind of a switch was this, anyway? He remembered the way Mike used to talk about her, night after night. "She's a tall blonde, but stacked. Looks a lot like that dame who plays the dumb blonde on television—what's-her-name—you know the one I mean. But she's no dope, not Helen. And boy, when it comes to loving. . . ."

After that, his descriptions would become anatomically intricate, but all intricacies had been carefully filed in memory.

He examined those files now, but nothing in them corresponded to what he saw before him.

This woman was tall, but there all resemblance ended. She must have tipped the scales at one-sixty, at least, and her hair was a dull, mousy brown. She wore glasses, too. Behind the thick lenses, her faded blue eyes peered stolidly at him.

She must have realized he was staring, and he knew he had to talk fast. "I'm looking for a Helen Krauss who used to live over in Norton Center. She was married to a man named Mike."

The stolid eyes blinked. "That's me. So what's this all about?"

"I got a message for you from your husband."

"Mike? He's dead."

"I know. I was with him when he died. Just before,

anyway. I'm Rusty Connors. We were cell-mates for two years."

Her expression didn't change, but her voice dropped to a whisper. "What's the message?"

He glanced around. "I can't talk here. What time do you get off?"

"Seven-thirty."

"Good. Meet you outside?"

She hesitated. "Make it down at the corner, across the street. There's a park, you know?"

He nodded, rose and left without looking back.

This wasn't what he had expected—not after the things Mike had told him about his wife. When he bought his ticket for Hainesville, he had had other ideas in mind. It would have been nice to find this hot, good-looking blond widow of Mike's and, maybe, combine business with pleasure. He had even thought about the two of them blowing town together, if she was half as nice as Mike said. But that was out, now. He wanted no part of this big, fat, stupid-looking slob with the dull eyes.

Rusty wondered how Mike could have filled him with such a line of bull for two years straight—and then he knew. Two years straight—that was the answer—two years in a bare cell, without a woman. Maybe it had got so that, after a time, Mike believed his own story, that Helen Krauss became beautiful to him. Maybe Mike had gone a little stir-simple before he died, and made up a lot of stuff.

Rusty only hoped Mike had been telling the truth about one thing. He had better have been, because what Mike had told Connors, there in the cell, was what brought him to town. It was this that was making him cut into this rat-race, that had led him to Mike's wife. He hoped Mike had been telling the truth about hiding away the fifty-six thousand dollars.

She met him in the park, and it was dark. That was good, because nobody would notice them together. Besides, he couldn't see her face, and she couldn't see his, and that would make it easier to say what he had to say.

They sat down on a bench behind the bandstand, and he lit a cigarette. Then he remembered that it was important to be pleasant, so he offered the pack to her.

She shook her head. "No thanks—I don't smoke."

"That's right. Mike told me." He paused. "He told me a lot of things about you, Helen."

"He wrote me about you, too. He said you were the best friend he ever had."

"I'd like to think so. Mike was a great guy in my book. None better. He didn't belong in a crummy hole like that."

"He said the same about you."

"Both of us got a bad break, I guess. Me, I was just a kid who didn't know the score. When I got out of Service, I lay around for a while until my dough was gone, and then I took this job in a bookie joint. I never pulled any strong-arm stuff in my life until the night the place was raided.

"The boss handed me this suitcase, full of dough, and told me to get out the back way. And there was this copper, coming at me with a gun. So I hit him over the head with the suitcase. It was just one of those things—I didn't mean to hurt him, even, just wanted to get out. So the copper ends up with a skull-fracture and dies."

"Mike wrote me about that. You had a tough deal."

"So did he, Helen." Rusty used her first name deliberately and let his voice go soft. It was part of the pitch. "Like I said, I just couldn't figure him out. An honest John like him, up and knocking off his best friend in a payroll stickup. And all alone, too. Then

getting rid of the body, so they'd never find it. They never did find Pete Taylor, did they?"

"Please! I don't want to talk about it any more."

"I know how you feel." Rusty took her hand. It was plump and sweaty, and it rested in his like a big warm piece of meat. But she didn't withdraw it, and he went on talking. "It was just circumstantial evidence that pinned it on him, wasn't it?"

"Somebody saw Mike pick Pete up that afternoon," Helen said. "He'd lost his car keys somewhere, and I guess he thought it would be all right if Mike took him over to the factory with the payroll money. That was all the police needed. They got to him before he could get rid of the bloodstains. Of course, he didn't have an alibi. I swore he was home with me all afternoon. They wouldn't buy that. So he went up for ten years."

"And did two, and died," Rusty said. "But he never told how he got rid of the body. He never told where he put the dough."

He could see her nodding in the dimness. "That's right. I guess they beat him up something awful, but he wouldn't tell them a thing."

Rusty was silent for a moment. Then he took a drag on his cigarette and said, "Did he ever tell you?"

Helen Krauss made a noise in her throat. "What do *you* think? I got out of Norton Center because I couldn't stand the way people kept talking about it. I came all the way over here to Hainesville. For two years, I've been working in that lousy hash-house. Does that sound like he told me anything?"

Rusty dropped the cigarette stub on the sidewalk, and its little red eye winked up at him. He stared at the eye as he spoke.

"What would you do if you found that money, Helen? Would you turn it over to the cops?"

She made the noise in her throat again. "What for? To say, 'Thank you,' for putting Mike away and killing him? That's what they did, they killed him. Pneumonia, they told me—I know about their pneumonia! They let him rot in that cell, didn't they?"

"The croaker said it was just flu. I put up such a stink over it, they finally took him down to the Infirmary."

"Well, *I* say they killed him. And *I* say he paid for that money with his life. I'm his widow—it's mine."

"Ours," said Rusty.

Her fingers tightened, and her nails dug into his palms. "He told you where he hid it? Is that it?"

"Just a little. Before they took him away. He was dying, and couldn't talk much. But I heard enough to give me a pretty good hunch. I figured, if I came here when I got out and talked to you, we could put things together and find the dough. Fifty-six gees, he said—even if we split it, that's still a lot of money."

"Why are you cutting me in on it, if you know where it is?" There was an edge of sudden suspicion in her voice, and he sensed it, met it head-on.

"Because, like I told you, he didn't say enough. We'd have to figure out what it means, and then do some hunting. I'm a stranger around here, and people might get suspicious if they saw me snooping. But if you helped, maybe there wouldn't be any need to snoop. Maybe we could go right to it."

"Business deal, is that it?"

Rusty stared at the glowing cigarette butt again. Its red eye winked back at him.

"Not *all* business, Helen. You know how it was with Mike and me. He talked about you all the time. After a while, I got the funniest feeling, like I already knew you—knew you as well as Mike. I wanted to know you better."

He kept his voice down, and he felt her nails against his palm. Suddenly his hand returned the pressure, and his voice broke. "Helen, I don't know, maybe I'm screwy, but I was over two years in that hole. Two years without a woman, you got any idea what that means to a guy?"

"It's been over two years for me, too."

He put his arms around her, forced his lips to hers. It didn't take much forcing. "You got a room?" he whispered.

"Yes, Rusty—I've got a room."

They rose, clinging together. Before moving away, he took a last look at the little winking red eye and crushed it out under his foot.

2

Another winking red eye burned in the bedroom, and he held the cigarette to one side in his hand so as to keep the light away. He didn't want her to see the disgust in his face.

Maybe she was sleeping now. He hoped so, because it gave him time to think.

So far, everything was working out. Everything *had* to work out, this time. Because before, there had always been foul-ups, somewhere along the line.

Grabbing the satchel full of dough, when the cops raided the bookie joint, had seemed like a good idea at the time. He had thought he could lam out the back door before anyone noticed in the confusion. But he had fouled that one up himself, and landed in stir.

Getting buddy-buddy with that little jerk Mike had been another good idea. It hadn't been long before he knew everything about the payroll caper—everything except where Mike had stashed the loot. Mike never *would* talk about that. It wasn't until he took sick that Rusty could handle him without anybody get-

ting wise. He had made sure Mike was real sick before he put real pressure on.

Even then, the lousy fink hadn't come across—Rusty must have half-killed him, right there in the cell. Maybe he'd overdone it, because all he got out of him was the one sentence before the guards showed up.

For a while there, he had wondered if the little quiz show was going to kick back on him. If Mike had pulled out of it, he'd have talked. But Mike hadn't pulled out of it—he had died in the Infirmary before morning, and they had said it was the pneumonia that did it.

So Rusty was safe—and Rusty could make plans.

Up till now, his plans were going through okay. He had never applied for parole—believing it better to sweat out another six months, so he could go free without anybody hanging onto his tail. When they sprung him, he had taken the first bus to Hainesville. He knew where to go because Mike had told him about Helen working in this restaurant.

He hadn't been conning her as to his need for her in the deal. He needed her all right. He needed help, needed her to front for him, so he wouldn't have to look around on his own and arouse curiosity when he asked questions of strangers. That part was straight enough.

But, all along, he had believed what Mike told him about Helen—that she was a good-looking doll, the kind of dame you read about in the paperback books. He had coked himself up on the idea of finding the dough *and* going away with her, of having a real ball.

Well, that part was out.

He made a face in the darkness as he remembered the clammy fat of her, the wheezing and the panting and the clutching. No, he couldn't take much more of that. But he had had to go through with it, it was part

of the plan. He needed her on his side, and that was the best way to keep her in line.

But now he'd have to decide on the next move. If they found the dough, how could he be sure of her, once they made the split? He didn't want to be tied to this kitchen mechanic, and there had to be a way.

"Darling, are you awake?"

Her voice! And calling him "darling." He shuddered, then controlled himself.

"Yeah." He doused the cigarette in an ash tray.

"Do you feel like talking now?"

"Sure."

"I thought maybe we'd better make plans."

"That's what I like, a practical dame." He forced a smile into his voice. "You're right, baby. The sooner we get to work the better." He sat up and turned to her. "Let's start at the beginning—with what Mike told me, before he died. He said they'd never find the money, they couldn't—because Pete still had it."

For a moment Helen Krauss was silent. Then she said, "Is that all?"

"*All?* What more do you want? It's plain as the nose on your face, isn't it? The dough is hidden with Pete Taylor's body."

He could feel Helen's breath on his shoulder. "Never mind the nose on my face," she said. "I know where that is. But for two years, all the cops in the county haven't been able to find Pete Taylor's body." She sighed. "I thought you really had something, but I guess I was wrong. I should of known."

Rusty grabbed her by the shoulders. "Don't *talk* like that! We've got the answer we need. All we got to do now is figure where to look."

"*Sure.* Real easy!" Her tone dripped sarcasm.

"Think back, now. Where did the cops look?"

"Well, they searched our place, of course. We were

living in a rented house, but that didn't stop them. They tore up the whole joint, including the cellar. No dice there."

"Where else?"

"The sheriff's department had men out for a month, searching the woods around Norton's Center. They covered all the old barns and deserted farmhouses too, places like that. They even dragged the lake. Pete Taylor was a bachelor—he had a little shack in town and one out at the lake, too. They ripped them both apart. Nothing doing."

Rusty was silent. "How much time did Mike have between picking up Pete and coming back home again?"

"About three hours."

"Hell, then he couldn't have gone very far, could he? The body must be hid near town."

"That's just how the police figured. I tell you, they did a job. They dug up the ditches, drained the quarry. It was no use."

"Well, there's got to be an answer somewhere. Let's try another angle. Pete Taylor and your husband were pals, right?"

"Yes. Ever since we got married, Mike was thick with him. They got along great together."

"What did they do? I mean, did they drink, play cards or what?"

"Mike wasn't much on the sauce. Mostly, they just hunted and fished. Like I say, Pete Taylor had this shack out at the lake."

"Is that near Norton's Center?"

"About three miles out." Helen sounded impatient. "I know what you're thinking, but it's no good. I tell you, they dug things up all around there. They even ripped out the floorboards and stuff like that."

"What about sheds, boathouses?"

"Pete Taylor didn't have anything else on his property. When Mike and him went fishing, they borrowed a boat from the neighbors down the line." She sighed again. "Don't think I haven't tried to figure it out. For two years, I've figured, and there just isn't any answer."

Rusty found another cigarette and lit it. "For fifty-six grand, there's got to be an answer," he said. "What happened the day Pete Taylor was killed? Maybe there's something you forgot about."

"I don't know what happened, really. I was at home, and Mike had the day off, so he went downtown to bum around."

"Did he say anything before he left? Was he nervous? Did he act funny?"

"No—I don't think he had anything planned, if that's what you mean. I think it was just one of those things—he found himself in the car with Pete Taylor and all this money, and he just decided to do it.

"Well, they figured it was all planned in advance. They said he knew it was payroll day, and how Pete always went to the bank in his car and got the money in cash. Old Man Huggins at the factory was a queer duck, and he liked to pay that way. Anyway, they say Pete went into the bank, and Mike must have been waiting in the parking lot behind.

"They think he sneaked over and stole Pete's car keys, so, when he came out with the guard, Pete couldn't get started. Mike waited until the guard left, then walked over and noticed Pete, as if it was an accident he happened to be there, and asked what the trouble was.

"Something like that must have happened, because the guy in the parking lot said they talked, and then Pete got into Mike's car and they drove off together. That's all they know, until Mike came home alone almost three hours later."

Rusty nodded. "He came home to you, in the car, alone. What did he say?"

"Nothing much. There wasn't time, I guess. Because the squad car pulled up about two minutes after he got in the house."

"So fast? Who tipped them off?"

"Well, naturally the factory got worried when Pete never showed with the payroll. So Old Man Huggins called the bank, and the bank checked with the cashier and the guard, and somebody went out and asked around in the parking lot. The attendant told about how Pete had left in Mike's car. So they came around here, looking for him."

"Did he put up any struggle?"

"No. He never even said a word. They just took him away. He was in the bathroom, washing up."

"Much dirt on him?" Rusty asked.

"Just his hands, is all. They never found anything they could check up on in their laboratories, or whatever. His shoes were muddy, I think. There was a big fuss because his gun was missing. That was the worst part, his taking the gun with him. They never found it, of course, but they knew he'd owned one, and it was gone. He said he'd lost it months beforehand but they didn't believe him."

"Did *you?*"

"I don't know."

"Anything else?"

"Well, he had a cut on his hand. It was bleeding a little when he came in. I noticed it and asked him about it. He was halfway upstairs, and he said something about rats. Later, in court, he told them he'd caught his hand in the window-glass, and that's why there was blood in the car. One of the windows was cracked. They analyzed the blood, and it wasn't his type. It checked with Pete Taylor's blood-type record."

Rusty took a deep drag. "But he didn't tell you that when he came home. He said a rat bit him."

"No—he just said something about rats, I couldn't make out what. In court, the doctor testified he'd gone upstairs and cut his hand open with a razor. They found his razor on the wash-stand, and it was bloody."

"Wait a minute," Rusty said slowly. "He started to tell you something about rats. Then he went upstairs and opened up his hand with a razor. Now it's beginning to make sense, don't you see? A rat *did* bite him, maybe when he was getting rid of the body. But if anyone knew that, they'd look for the body some place where there were rats. So he covered up by opening the wound with his razor."

"Maybe so," Helen Krauss said. "But where does that leave us? Are we going to have to search every place with rats in it around Norton's Center?"

"I hope not," Rusty answered. "I hate the damned things. They give me the creeps. Used to see them in Service, big fat things hanging around the docks. . . ." He snapped his fingers. "Just a second. You say, when Pete and Mike went fishing, they borrowed a boat from the neighbors. Where did the neighbors keep their boat?"

"They had a boathouse."

"Did the cops search there?"

"I don't know—I guess so."

"Maybe they didn't search good enough. Were the neighbors on the property that day?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Sure enough. They were a city couple from Chicago, name of Thomason. Two weeks before the payroll robbery, they got themselves killed in an auto accident on the way home."

"So nobody was around at all, and Mike knew it."

"That's right." Helen's voice was suddenly hoarse. "It was too late in the season anyway, just like now. The lake was deserted. Do you think . . . ?"

"Who's living in the neighbors' place now?" Rusty asked.

"No one, the last I heard. They didn't have any kids, and the real estate man couldn't sell it. Pete Taylor's place is vacant, too. Same reason."

"It adds up—adds up to fifty-six thousand dollars, if I'm right. When could we go?"

"Tomorrow, if you like. It's my day off. We can use my car. Oh, darling, I'm so excited!"

She didn't have to tell him. He could feel it, feel her as she came into his arms. Once more, he had to force himself, had to keep thinking about something else, so that he wouldn't betray how he felt.

He had to keep thinking about the money, and about what he'd do after they found it. He needed the right answer, fast.

He was still thinking when she lay back, and then she suddenly surprised him by asking, "What are you thinking about, darling?"

He opened his mouth and the truth popped out. "The money," he said. "All that money. Twenty-eight gees apiece."

"Does it have to be apiece, darling?"

He hesitated—and then the right answer came. "Of course not—not unless you want it that way." And it wouldn't be. It was still fifty-six thousand, and it would be his after they found it.

All he had to do was rub her out.

3

If Rusty had any doubts about going through with it, they vanished the next day. He spent the morning and afternoon with her in her room, because he had

to. There was no sense in letting them be seen together here in town or anywhere around the lake area.

So he forced himself to stall her, and there was only one way to do that. By the time twilight came, he would have killed her anyway, money or no money, just to be rid of her stinking fat body.

How could Mike have ever figured she was good-looking? He'd never know, any more than he'd ever known what had gone on in the little jerk's head when he suddenly decided to knock off his best friend and steal the dough.

But that wasn't important now—the important thing was to find that black metal box.

Around four o'clock he slipped downstairs and walked around the block. In ten minutes, she picked him up at the corner in her car.

It was a good hour's drive to the lake. She took a detour around Norton Center, and they approached the lake shore by a gravel road. He wanted her to cut the lights, but she said there was no need, because nobody was there anyway. As they scanned the shore Rusty could see she was telling the truth—the lake was dark, deserted, in the early November night.

They parked behind Pete Taylor's shack. At sight of it, Rusty realized that the body couldn't possibly be hidden there. The little rickety structure wouldn't have concealed a dead fly for long .Helen got a flashlight from the car. "I suppose you want to go straight to the boathouse," she said. "It's down this way, to the left. Be careful—the path is slippery."

It was treacherous going in the darkness. Rusty followed her, wondering if now was the time. He could pick up a rock and bash her head in while she had her back to him.

No, he decided, better wait. First see if the dough was there, see if he could find a good place to leave her

body. There must be a good place—Mike had found one.

The boathouse stood behind a little pier running out into the lake. Rusty tugged at the door. It was padlocked. "Stand back," he said. He picked up a stone from the bank. The lock was flimsy, rusty with disuse. It broke easily and fell to the ground.

He took the flashlight from her, opened the door and peered in. The beam swept the interior, piercing the darkness. But it wasn't total darkness. Rusty saw the glow of a hundred little red cigarette butts winking up at him, like eyes.

Then, he realized, they *were* eyes.

"Rats," he said. "Come on, don't be afraid. Looks like our hunch was right."

Helen moved behind him, and she wasn't afraid. But he had really been talking to himself. He didn't like rats. He was glad when the rodents scattered and disappeared before the flashlight's beam. The sound of footsteps sent them scampering off into the corners, into their burrows beneath the boathouse floor.

The floor! Rusty sent the beam downward. It was concrete, of course. And underneath . . . ?

"Damn it!" he said. "They *must* have been here."

They had—because the once-solid concrete floor was rubble. The pick-axes of the sheriff's men had done a thorough job. "I *told* you," Helen Krauss sighed. "They looked everywhere."

Rusty swept the room with light. There was no boat, nothing stored in corners. The beam bounced off bare walls.

He raised it to the flat roof of the ceiling and caught only the reflection of mica from tar-paper insulation.

"It's no use," Helen told him. "It couldn't be this easy."

"There's still the house," Rusty said. "Come on."

He turned and walked out of the place, glad to get away from the rank, fetid animal odor. He turned the flashlight toward the roof.

Then he stopped. "Notice anything?" he said.

"What?"

"The roof. It's higher than the ceiling."

"So what?"

"There could be space up there," Rusty said.

"Yes, but . . ."

"Listen."

She was silent—both of them were silent. In the silence, they could hear the emerging sound. It sounded at first like the patter of rain on the roof, but it wasn't raining, and it wasn't coming from the roof. It was coming from directly underneath—the sound of tiny, scurrying feet between roof and ceiling. The rats were there. The rats and what else?

"Come on," he muttered.

"Where are you going?"

"Up to the house—to find a ladder."

He didn't have to break in, and that was fine. There was a ladder in the shed, and he carried it back. Helen discovered a crowbar. She held the flashlight while he propped the ladder against the wall and climbed up. The crowbar pried off the tar-paper in strips. It came away easily, ripping out from the few nails. Apparently the stuff had been applied in a hurry. A man with only a few hours to work in has to do a fast job.

Underneath the tar-paper, Rusty found timbers. Now the crowbar really came in handy. The boards groaned in anguish, and there were other squeaking sounds as the rats fled down into the cracks along the side walls. Rusty was glad they fled, otherwise he'd never have had the guts to crawl up there through the opening in the boards and look around. Helen handed him the flashlight, and he used it.

He didn't have to look very far.

The black metal box was sitting there right in front of him. Beyond it lay the thing.

Rusty knew it was Pete Taylor, because it had to be, but there was no way of identification. There wasn't a shred of clothing left, or a shred of flesh, either. The rats had picked him clean, picked him down to the bones. All that was left was a skeleton—a skeleton and a black metal box.

Rusty clawed the box closer, opened it. He saw the bills, bulging in stacks. He smelled the money, smelled it even above the sickening fetor. It smelled good, it smelled of perfume and tenderloin steak and the leathery seat-cover aroma of a shiny new car.

"Find anything?" Helen called. Her voice was trembling.

"Yes," he answered, and his voice was trembling just a little too. "I've got it. Hold the ladder, I'm coming down now."

He was coming down now, and that meant it was time—time to act. He handed her the crowbar and the flashlight, but kept his fingers on the side of the black metal box. He wanted to carry that himself. Then, when he put it down on the floor, and she bent over to look at it, he could pick up a piece of concrete rubble and let her have it.

It was going to be easy. He had everything figured out in advance—everything except the part about handing her the crowbar.

That's what she used to hit him with when he got to the bottom of the ladder. . . .

He must have been out for ten minutes, at least. Anyway, it was long enough for her to find the rope somewhere. Maybe she had kept it in the car. Wherever she got it, she knew how to use it. His wrists and

ankles hurt almost as much as the back of his head, where the blood was starting to congeal.

He opened his mouth and discovered that it did no good. She had gagged him tightly with a handkerchief. All he could do was lie there in the rubble on the boathouse floor and watch her pick up the black metal box.

She opened it and laughed.

The flashlight was lying on the floor. In its beam, he could see her face quite plainly. She had taken off her glasses, and he discovered the lenses lying shattered on the floor.

Helen Krauss saw what he was staring at and laughed again.

"I don't need those things any more," she told him. "I never did. It was all part of the act, like letting my hair go black and putting on all this weight. For two years now, I've put on this dumb slob routine, just so nobody'd notice me. When I leave town, nobody's going to pay any attention either. Sometimes it's smart to play dumb, you know?"

Rusty made noises underneath the gag. She thought that was funny, too.

"I suppose you're finally beginning to figure it out," she said. "Mike never meant to pull off any payroll job. Pete Taylor and I had been cheating on him for six months, and he had just begun to suspect. I don't know who told him, or what they said.

"He never said anything to me about it beforehand —just went downtown with his gun to find Pete and kill him. Maybe he meant to kill me too. He never even thought about the money at the time. All he knew was that it would be easy to pick Pete up on payroll day.

"I guess he knocked Pete out and drove him down here, and Pete came to before he died and kept saying

he was innocent. At least, Mike told me that much when he came back.

"I never got a chance to ask where he'd taken Pete or what he'd done with the money. The first thing I did, when Mike came home and said what he'd done, was to cover up for myself. I swore it was all a pack of lies, that Pete and I hadn't done anything wrong. I told him we'd take the money and go away together. I was still selling him on that when the cops came.

"I guess he believed me—because he never cracked during the trial. But I didn't get a chance again to ask where he hid the dough. He couldn't write me from prison, because they censor all the mail. So my only out was to wait—wait until he came back, or someone else came. And that's how it worked out."

Rusty tried to say something, but the gag was too tight.

"Why did I conk you one? For the same reason you were going to conk me. Don't try to deny it—that's what you intended to do, wasn't it? I know the way creeps like you think." Her voice was soft.

She smiled down at him. "I know how you get to thinking when you're a prisoner—because I've been a prisoner myself, for two years—a prisoner in this big body of mine. I've sweated it out for that money, and now I'm leaving. I'm leaving here, leaving the dumb waitress prison I made for myself. I'm going to shed forty pounds and bleach my hair again and go back to being the old Helen Krauss—with fifty-six grand to live it up with."

Rusty tried just once more. All that came out was a gurgle. "Don't worry," she said, "they won't find me. And they won't find you for a long, long time. I'm putting that lock back on the door when I go. Besides, there's nothing to tie the two of us together. It's clean as a whistle."

She turned, and then Rusty stopped gurgling. He hunched forward and kicked out with his bound feet. They caught her right across the back of the knees, and she went down. Rusty rolled across the rubble and raised his feet from the ground, like a flail. They came down on her stomach, and she let out a gasp.

She fell against the boathouse door, and it slammed shut, her own body tight against it. Rusty began to kick at her face. In a moment the flashlight rolled off into the rubble and went out, so he kicked in the direction of the gasps. After a while, the moaning stopped, and it was silent in the boathouse.

He listened for her breathing and heard no sound. He rolled over to her and pressed his face against something warm and wet. He shivered and drew back, then pressed again. The unbattered area of her flesh was cold.

He rolled over to the side and tried to free his hands. He worked the rope-ends against the jagged edges of rubble, hoping to feel the strands fray and part. His wrists bled, but the rope held. Her body was wedged against the door, holding it shut—holding him here in the rank darkness.

Rusty knew he had to move her, had to get the door open fast. He had to get out of here. He began to butt his head against her, trying to move her—but she was too solid, too heavy, to budge. He banged into the money box and tried to gurgle at her from under the gag, tried to tell her that she must get up and let them out, that they were both in prison together now, and the money didn't matter. It was all a mistake, he hadn't meant to hurt her or anyone, he just wanted to get out.

But he didn't get out.

After a little while, the rats came back.

MOONFLOWER

by HOPE FIELD

I never knew loneliness before coming here to live with Jim. I never knew a loneliness like this that gnaws into the vitals like a hunger.

It's wintry March weather. The fields are frozen and after the stock is fed and the house tidied there's naught to do till supper time. And after supper—there's only Jim.

I've reread the two books in the parlor and I know the new nineteen hundred and year one seed catalogue by heart. It's easier reading than the Bible, what with the pretty pictures and all. There's a beautiful new moonflower vine in it that I'm going to order.

I've heard tell that moonflowers are bad omens and death comes certain sure to the house round which they're planted. Only I can't believe that anything so white and lovely as the moonflower could bring death. Or maybe I want death to come to this house. . . .

If anyone had told me I'd be feeling this way about Jim Skaggs when we were first betrothed, I'd have said they were plumb daffy. I was jay proud and carried my head high as the topmost tree on Old Gauley. I'd got me a man with a fine log cabin and a room on second story!

Mom did caution me against marrying with him. "You ought to wait for Matt Parker to come back for you," she said, gentle like always.

At that name my blood was cold in me. "He'll not come back."

Matt Parker was my chosen one since I'd been

woman grown. We'd plighted our troth before he went off to Charleston City saying he'd come back for me before first frost was on the ground. But he'd been gone for nigh a year, and no word from him the last six months, and everyone casting pitying glances at me and saying behind my back that I was jilted sure.

"He'll not come back," I said again, hard of voice and hard of heart.

Mom answered soft. "Wait for Matt. Don't marry this man who's come a stranger to us."

I said quick that the Lord had surely smiled on me to send such a good man and a good provider.

But mom just shook her head. "You can't tell the worth of a man till you've been with him alone. You've got to see the look in his eyes when he's eating and after he's been hunting. You've got to note how he handles joy and how he stands up to sorrow."

I should have hearkened to mom. I should have listened to my own knowing heart. But my folks were mountain poor, and a great family of us. I was a woman, well past my fifteenth year. And Jim Skaggs was the catch of all Martin County, West Virginia, after he bought up the old Huddleston place and cleared the rocky slopes and built his fine cabin with a room on second story.

Jim had a jolly way with folks. He made me feel then like a pretty bubble and I floated in rare air until his cabin door closed on us the night we wed.

And still away from here Jim is exactly as he used to be. He laughs and cozens up to everybody till the girls do envy me my lot. . . . It's only pa who looks at me queer sometimes after he's been off talking to Jim alone. Pa's mouth is straightened and his eyes fretted as though I might be sickening with fever.

Then I wonder what it is that Jim's been telling him, and suspicion is like gallwood in me. For I have

not changed. *It's Jim!* And that's what makes it so hard. Nobody knows what Jim is really like, except me and my dog, Ripper.

If only someone would come spying at the window when Jim comes in from working the farm, they'd see. Ripper growls low and goes over into a corner of the kitchen, never taking his yellow eyes off Jim and never a wag of his tail.

Ripper, who's seventy pounds of muscle and strength —Ripper feels the fear of Jim that's in me and Ripper has anger clean through him.

Jim comes in without washing up at the tin basin and sits down to the table all earth and sweat and he says, "I got the west field cleared for planting."

I smile. "Good, Jim." I keep busy about the stove, turning the sizzling ham in the spider, shaking the hominy grits. I dish up the food before him and fill his cup with strong coffee. His shoulders are lowered, fork already in hand, his elbows on table, head thrust forward.

"Jenny," his voice not going up or down but all one pitch. "I got the west field cleared for planting."

I don't dast show him my face. I open the oven door and bring out crackling bread all light and golden.

His mouth is crammed with victuals. I see the food as he chews. He swallows and before the next loaded fork reaches his mouth he says it again.

"Yes, Jim, you've already told me." And Ripper hears the worry that's in my voice and pads softly across the wide walnut boards and stands in close to me keeping his eyes on Jim.

Jim's face pinches and he almost snarls at Ripper, but he's silent till he's finished. He gets up, turning over the chair and at the kitchen door he turns.

"I'm starting on the south field this afternoon."

When I don't answer he says it again, all steady and too meaningful for something that has so little meaning. "Jenny, did you hear me? I said I'm starting on the south field this afternoon."

"I heard you," I say quiet and tight. As the door closes I say it again, and louder, "I heard you the first time," and I almost scream it, "I always hear you!"

Jim was going to Ansted for the day to lay in seed and provisions. He asked me if there was anything I wanted.

"A piece of ribbon? Or mebbe you'd fancy a sweetmeat?"

It was so unlike Jim that I was startled.

"Well, Jenny. I'm waiting."

"No, thank you, kindly," I said. And in truth, the only thing I'd wanted in a long time were the moonflower vines, and I had them already planted around the house with window panes over their delicate sprouts, keeping them from the frost.

But Jim's asking had given me pause. It made me wonder if maybe I weren't the one at fault. Jim was good to my family. I knew he'd given my brother Henry a store-bought watch. Jim was well thought of by our neighbors. And certain sure before our marriage I was ready enough to please him.

Maybe the trouble was that I'd stopped trying to please Jim entirely!

The fire was cozy and the room cheerful after he left. Ripper slept beside my rocking chair, his powerful muscles twitching, and I smiled, knowing that in his dreams he'd just run a lynx to cover. I am the only being that Ripper loves, and it is a fine thing to be chosen god by such a creature.

Folks have many natures and a dog but one. A dog has little thought of self. When I nursed the sick shivering bundle that was Ripper back to health, using a

remedy made from the barks of chestnut mixed with some lobelia seed, tending him night and day till the sickness was out of him, my greedy brother Henry saw what a fine animal Ripper was going to be and started making a great fuss over who was going to own him.

But Ripper had already made his choice and would take orders from no one but me. He had been out of Matt Parker's best bitch, and Matt helped me teach him the ways of the wood and field and Ripper never once spooked at the sound of the gun. He never once shrank at smell of cougar. He is a born killer of wild beasts. Only he's never liked the smell of Jim and only tolerated him on account of me, even when we were courting.

Jim and I used to talk together then, and I'd be concerned in what he told me, instead of just listening with numb patience as I do now. I used to ask him why he'd left home to move into this harsh and rocky land amongst strangers, and if he didn't have a sweetheart waiting for him back home.

He'd answered the last question, "And iffen I have, don't you have a sweetheart you're waiting for, Jenny?"

"Matt Parker is gone for good," I said sharp.

"I'm mighty pleased to hear that." He smiled. "I'm sorta counting on him not ever coming back to claim you."

Jim used to be so natural like. "We'll have the rest of our lives to just sit by our fire and I'll tell you all that happened at home and why I moved in here with strangers, Jenny."

I must have hurt Jim so cruel the night we were wed he can no longer speak to me of what's in his heart. But I wanted to die of shame! I who love to breathe the air of morning, I who love to see and feel the wondrous things of God's world, I wanted to die

that night. And the way I carried on must have made Jim wonder what manner of woman he'd wed!

Maybe that's why he goes off to Ansted when he's not working the farm and stays the whole day through, lounging round the general store and talking to folks he must find more amiable than me.

But now I am more used to the strange ways of man and almost have put away my shame. And certain sure I do not want to die now—not even when the distaste and fear of Jim comes up in my throat so it's like a choking.

I must try to be kinder to him and more patient. Men are queer creatures and their passions like the dark winter's night. And I, being woman, must accept them without questioning.

Perhaps if I keep on praying, a child will be the reward of my forbearance. All the evil will go out of Jim then and he'll be different.

I whistled Ripper up from his dreams of hunting and stroked his long soft hair. I felt as though the sun had driven through and into me, piercing my darkness with hope. I tossed another hickory log onto the fire and listened to the sizzle and the crackling as the wood warmed, grew hot and burst into flame.

Everything has to be given time for warming.

I decided to fix something extra nice for Jim's supper. Something that he'd really relish like candied yams and salt pork with rich cream gravy. I hadn't thought of cooking fine for quite a spell. Maybe when Jim tasted the special victuals he'd know I was trying to please him.

Ripper's hackles rose and he growled fierce and low. He'd caught the smell of Jim heading home. Sure enough, it wasn't long till I heard the rattle of the buggy as it crossed the wooden planks over Gitah Creek.

Then I had a talk with Ripper who understands me better than any human ever has—lessen it were Matt Parker. I told Ripper it was our fault—his and mine—that Jim acted the way he did.

"We must let him handle us and not let on when our hairs begin to rise and bristle," I said.

Ripper's ears pointed and he began to pant, which let me know he understood.

Then Jim threw open the door and walking with his heavy, slow tread came across the threshold. Ripper did not growl at him and I reached down to give him a grateful pat. My own voice was light and cheery, "Hello, Jim!"

Jim dumped the store goods on the table and came over to stretch his great hands in front of the fire. He took out his pipe and tobacco, shook the bowl full and pushed it down tight.

I was thinking how homey this was—the way it ought always to be between man and wife. It seemed to me that even Ripper was going to give Jim a wag of his tail and maybe stick his nose up into Jim's hand, and the rays of the sun could not outnumber my joys.

Jim rolled a long piece of paper into a spill. He leaned down and lighted it from the fire and pulled in on his pipe till the tobacco was glowing red. But he held the spill between thumb and finger till I thought he must burn himself.

I watched with wonder—about to cry warning—when Jim dropped the spill a-purpose straight down onto Ripper's back.

I couldn't speak. I couldn't move. Nor could I yet believe it. Ripper's silky coat caught fire quickly, burning along like dry grass fire. I came out of my stupor fast and grabbed my dog up to me, rubbing out the fire against my body. .

Then I looked up at the man I had married. He was standing smoking his pipe, a smile at the corners of his mouth.

We said no word. There was no word to say. He had done this thing with grim intent and I knew my hopes of the day were as dandelion fuzz in a high wind.

I went to the kitchen with Ripper at my heels and gently rubbed lamb's grease over his burned skin. I was treating my own reddened belly when I knew that Jim was standing in the doorway.

"Where's my supper, Jenny?"

I cooked food in silence and silently he ate. After, he said, "Come to bed, Jenny."

I threw Ripper's rug behind the cookstove. He took the side of my hand in his mouth, nuzzling it before he flopped down, all the time eying Jim with strange red eyes.

I followed Jim up the stairs. We undressed. Jim was full of lust and I bore it patiently while he spent himself, thinking all the while of the Bible's teaching.

I waited till Jim's breathing told me he slept. Then I crept from bed slow, inch by inch, making no sudden shift lest the springs sing out and waken him. My knees touched the cold floor and I eased my body out.

Then I heard his slow, even voice, "Come back to bed."

The lust was strong in him again, and I thought my own thoughts as countless women have done till the bad time passes. Vengeful thoughts, then praying for forgiveness, praying hard, but still the vengeful thoughts were pressing.

I waited till I was very sure that Jim was deep in sleep. His snoring was loud indeed and I jumped from the bed and dressed. I raced down the stairs, and out into the kitchen to get Ripper up, cautioning him to make no sound.

We were starting out the back way when I remembered the great whine of the hinges, so we went through to the front.

In the black stillness, Ripper let out a sudden growl and my heart began to thrash about like a fresh-caught fish.

I reached my hands out to find the door, but instead of wood, my hands touched flesh. A triumphing, mocking laugh came from Jim. "Come back to bed, Jenny."

Ripper growled low and fierce and full of hate. I had only to say the command for him to leap straight for Jim's corded throat and I could almost hear the tearing sound Ripper's teeth would make as they slashed skin. How many times I'd heard it when Ripper went for the throats of wild beasts.

I had only to say the word. . . .

"Come back to bed, Jenny."

My whole being was sickened. "No," and again, stronger, "no. Let me go, Jim!"

"Where would you go, Jenny?"

"Home. I'll go home to mom."

"You want to go home?" he said, reasonable and sort of surprised. "Then I'll dress and take you." He flung wide the front door. I could see him standing large in his nakedness, his flesh shone dark as a pine tree in the light of the moon. "Wait for me, Jenny."

He went up the stairs and Ripper and I ran out of the house, cutting across the cornfield to the lane. The moon was high and every frost-tipped stubble of the old corn stalks twinkled like morning stars.

We were free! But even after Ripper and I reached the road, I felt the terror and the fear of all trapped things.

We ran like deer when a forest fire's behind them. We were away up the hill when I heard the clopping of

hoofs on the road behind and I knew the uselessness of running any more. We'd breathed our breath of freedom and it was over. I stood quite still, waiting till the buggy came alongside.

"Get in, Jenny."

I climbed in, feeling nothing. Nothing at all. But instead of turning round as I was sure Jim would do, he kept on over the hill that led to pa's house, Ripper loping alongside.

"What you going to tell your pa about this, Jenny? Whatcha going to tell him?"

Out there under the stars, riding toward home, some hope came back to me. "What'll I tell him? I'll tell him you tried to kill Ripper!"

"Now, Jenny. What kind of crazy talk is that? You know a coal sparked out and fell onto your hound dog. You know your dog always does lay in too close to a fire."

He sounded so reasonable. I could just see pa's eyes on me as I tried to tell him the truth. I started to cry.

"What's wrong with you, Jim? What've I done that you should act like this?"

And when Jim answered I knew the thing that ailed him.

"You got yourself another letter from Matt Parker. You got another letter from him."

But I'd had no word from Matt in nigh a year. . . . I'd had no word since Jim Skaggs had moved into Martin County! I saw it plain. Jim had paid my brother Henry to steal my letters—and after we were wed, he just stole them himself.

The buggy drew up sharp before the stoop of our house. I jumped out and ran through the door with Ripper close behind. We ran through to the parlor where mom and pa always sleep in the big old feather

bed. I was crying then something awful and calling for mom.

She had me safe in her arms and pa sat up and lighted the oil lamp. His voice was mighty roiled.

"What's all this rumpus going on in dead-of night?"

Mom was holding onto me close and clucking soft like she used to do when I was ailing. After a little I told them I was coming home.

"You've got yourself a home, daughter," pa said, speaking steady like he would to a fretted colt. "You be a married woman, married in the sight of God and man."

"I can't live with him longer, pa!"

Pa got out of bed with his striped cotton night shirt over his long drawers. Even in these garments he still was high in pride.

"What's your husband done to you, daughter?" And when I could not tell he turned and went out to the buggy. It wasn't long before he came back. "Has Jim ever laid hand to you, Jennifer?"

I shook my head. "But he talks so strange and he repeats—"

Pa was full of wrath. "*Talks!* It's come to a pretty how-de-do when a man can't talk! Shame to you, daughter. Now get on home with your man or I'll give you a thrashing you won't forget, even though you're woman growed and married."

Mom could only reach out her old worn hand and take mine.

Pa must have noted the trouble in my eyes for he gentled a mite. "If you were alone, we'd take you in. But this is between man and wife, daughter. And what God hath joined together, let no man put asunder! Now take your dog and get on back with your man."

Ripper followed me. I climbed in beside Jim, my

shoulders sagged as though laden with a thousand sacks of grain.

"Giddy up, Nellie," Jim sang out. As we reached the top of the hill, he said real slow, "Where would you go to, Jenny? Where would you go?"

I looked out into the clouded moonlight at Ripper running alongside. He was black and hoary as a wolf, his muscles all smooth and powerful.

After a while I said, "What you fixing to do to us, Jim?"

His voice was cold as winter's wind. "What am I fixing to do? Now, that there's a mighty interesting question." His voice rose to shrill. "I'm going to break you proper, that's what. I'm going to break you like a woman needs to be broke."

He would break me, all right. That I knew for true. He'd have me old and cringing before the crops were in.

The sound of his laugh froze my bones. "Got Ripper figured too! I'm gonna get me a great big club for him and let you watch it."

We were in the lane and I could see the fine log cabin with the moon shining down right pretty on it, and I thought it was sort of sad that I'd planted all those pretty moonflowers. Come June and they'd be blooming, all drowsy with their own sweet smell, and who now would see their blooming?

Jim was looking out at Ripper and I could feel the killing lust and hate mounting in him.

Only Ripper too had reason to hate. And Ripper was trained at killing wild beasts.

And God knows tonight I would not stay him. . . .

I reckon death does come certain sure to the house round which moonflowers are planted. It would come tonight.

A HOOD IS BORN

by RICHARD DEMING

When the Rider Fork and Hoe Company moved its plant from Philadelphia to Brooklyn, it adopted the simple, expedient course of laying off most of its workers and rehiring new ones in Brooklyn. But it not only kept its key men, it moved them at company expense.

That's how it happened the move didn't separate Rick Henderson and his best friend, Junior Carr. The fathers of both boys were shop foremen for Rider.

Before the move, Rick got a lecture from his father on the subject of juvenile gangs. Big Sam Henderson had been reading the newspapers.

"We'll be living in a nice section of Brooklyn," Big Sam told his son. "Only a couple of blocks from Prospect Park. But Brooklyn ain't like Philadelphia."

"How's that?" Rick asked.

"Here this gang stuff is only in the slums. Near as I can figure from the newspapers, Brooklyn's got it all over. Even in the nice sections the police have plenty to worry about."

Rick gave him a confident grin. "Don't worry about me, Pop. I can take care of myself."

He had reason for confidence. At sixteen Rick Henderson was five feet eleven and weighed one hundred and eighty pounds. He was first-string fullback on his high school football team and president of the boxing club. Though he wasn't a brawler, he'd had his share of teen-age fights, and had yet to lose one.

Big Sam said, "I'm not worrying about you getting

beat up. I'm worrying about you hooking up with one of these gangs."

Rick looked at his father with amazement. The circle Rick moved in did its best to emulate what it thought was college-level behavior. He belonged to a national high school fraternity, unrecognized but tolerated by the school, and he and his fraternity brothers wouldn't have dreamed of being seen in public with a girl who didn't belong to one of the national high school sororities. In its own estimation Rick's circle was a highly sophisticated group which tended to look with patronizing amusement at all other levels of teen-age society.

"One of those teen-age black leather jacket outfits?" Rick asked with raised eyebrows. "That's for the movies, Pop. What would I be doing with a bunch of squares?"

"Well, you just mind what I say," big Sam said gruffly. "There's gonna be no juvenile delinquents in this family. I had to be sure you'd understand that."

Beneath his gruffness there was relief. Big Sam had confidence in young Rick's judgment. But with all the stuff in the papers about juvenile crime, a parent couldn't be too careful.

Rick described his conference with his father to Junior Carr. They both had a good laugh over it.

"Boy, what parents can't think of to worry about," Junior said. "Guys like us getting tied up with one of those punk kid Apache-haircut outfits. Wonder if Iota Omega has a chapter at the school we're going to?"

Junior Carr was as tall as Rick, but only weighed a hundred and thirty pounds. He was too light for athletics and too uncompetitive to go out for less strenuous school activities. His high school fraternity was the most important social activity in his life.

"No," Rick said regretfully. "I looked it up. Had

some fellows in other frats check their chapter lists, too. I don't think they have any fraternities there."

"Maybe we can start a chapter," Junior said with an air of hope.

Rick's family settled in a four-room flat on Sterling Place, a quiet street of uniform-looking apartment buildings and small neighborhood stores. It wasn't Brooklyn's finest residential section, but neither was it shabby. Aside from the fact that most people in the area lived in apartments instead of individual houses, it didn't differ from the middle-class residential sections of any big city.

Junior Carr's family rented a flat just around the corner from the Hendersons, on Underhill Avenue.

The move took place over a weekend. It was Sunday evening by the time both families were settled enough for the boys to have a chance to look over their new neighborhood. Immediately after dinner they met in front of Rick's apartment building.

Instinctively they headed for Flatbush Avenue, the nearest main street. After wandering down to Grand Army Plaza without seeing anything more interesting than a subway entrance, they turned around to explore Flatbush in the opposite direction.

Flatbush Avenue in this section is a heavily traveled street dotted with taverns and small stores. Rick and Junior glanced into each place they passed. Neither was consciously looking for anything in particular. They were merely exploring. But subconsciously they were searching for companions their own age. They found them near Atlantic Avenue, in a combination soda fountain and candy shop named the Cardinal Shop. The place was crowded with teen-agers.

In tacit accord they entered the shop and stood look-

ing around. There were no vacant seats at the soda fountain and no unoccupied booths.

The customers ranged in age from about fifteen to eighteen, and there seemed to be twice as many boys as girls. For the most part the boys wore well-pressed slacks and either sweaters or jackets, with an occasional sport coat and open-necked sport shirt. The girls all wore skirts and loose sweaters, flat-heeled pumps and bobby socks. The dress was a little more casual than Rick and Junior had been accustomed to in Philadelphia, but they instinctively recognized the group as kindred souls. This was the high school "popularity" crowd.

Rick and Junior felt a little overdressed in their neat suits, white shirts and neckties.

A few couples were dancing to a juke box playing rock-and-roll. The remainder sipped soft drinks, carried on noisy conversation punctuated by much laughter, or wandered about the place from table to table. Everyone seemed to know everyone else there.

It seemed such a happy scene that Rick and Junior grinned with spontaneous pleasure. Then their grins gradually faded as the other customers began to notice them.

It started at the soda fountain. A youngster of about sixteen glanced their way, elevated his eyebrows and said something to the boy next to him. He in turn stared at Rick and Junior, then passed the word on. Within a fraction of a minute everyone at the counter had swung round to gaze at them silently.

The reaction spread from the counter to the booths. All conversation stopped. The dancers halted, and they too joined in staring at the newcomers. One of the boys who had been dancing went over to the juke box and shut it off by pulling out the cord.

Junior glanced around uneasily. Rick's face began

to redden with a mixture of embarrassment and anger. A blond boy of about Rick's size, but probably a year or so older, lazily rose from a booth and moved toward them. He didn't exactly swagger, but there was the confidence of authority in his movements.

The thin, bald-headed man who was tending the fountain, and who apparently was the proprietor, scurried from behind the counter to head off the blond boy.

Raising placating palms, he said, "No trouble now, Max. Not in here."

Max paused long enough to give the bald-headed man a reassuring grin. "We ever give you trouble, Pop? If anything builds, we'll take it outside."

Junior whispered, "We better get out of here, Rick."

Rick's gaze jerked to him. He didn't say anything. He merely stared at Junior until the latter uneasily averted his eyes.

Then Rick faced the blond boy again, gazing at him in challenge.

2

The blond Max brushed past Pop and unhurriedly closed the rest of the gap between himself and the newcomers. Other boys drifted behind him from the counter and from the booths, until more than a dozen formed a semicircle around Rick and Junior. None of them said anything. They merely waited for Max to speak.

Dismissing Junior with one contemptuous glance, Max ran his eyes estimatingly over Rick.

"You guys are a little off your turf, aren't you?" he inquired.

Rick gaped at him steadily as he thought the question over. "What's that supposed to mean?" he asked finally.

"You're no citizens. What makes you brave enough to come this side of Atlantic?"

Again Rick struggled for the blond boy's meaning. Eventually he said, "You think we're from overseas? Foreigners, or something?"

A feminine titter from a rear booth broke the silence hovering over the room. It rippled from youngster to youngster like a wave, then died away. None of the boys in a semicircle around Rick and Junior so much as smiled. The blond Max said without expression, "A comedian, huh?"

Rick said hotly, "I just don't know what you're talking about. What you mean, this side of the Atlantic? We were born here."

Max's eyes narrowed. But not menacingly. A look of comprehension began to grow in them. "Atlantic Avenue," he said. "Aren't you Purple Pelicans?"

Rick's anger began to fade as his puzzlement increased. He said, "You're talking Greek, fellow. I never heard of Atlantic Avenue. And what's a Purple Pelican?"

Max's expression underwent a subtle change. He was still authoritative, but the threat disappeared from his manner. In a merely condescending tone, he said, "Where you live, man?"

Rick considered whether to answer or tell him it was none of his business. Finally he said with a touch of belligerence, "Sterling Place."

Max hiked an eyebrow, then turned to give Junior an inquiring look.

Junior licked his lips. "Underhill Avenue," he managed.

Max said, "How come you're strangers, then?"

"Because we just moved in today," Rick snapped. He added in a more temperate tone, "From Philadelphia."

Max ran his eyes over the semicircle of faces around him. He said indulgently, "Why push it? They didn't know."

"Didn't know what?" Rick inquired.

"You're living on Prospectors' turf now," Max explained. "It's a club. The Cardinal Shop's our personal, private spot. Non-citizens don't come in without an ask."

"Who's a non-citizen?"

"You don't read the lingo too good, do you, man?" Max said. "A citizen's a club member. Don't they have clubs down Philadelphia way?"

"We belong to a fraternity," Rick told him. He pulled aside his coat to show the pin on the breast pocket of his shirt. "Iota Omega Upsilon. The I.O.U.s."

A tall, lean boy of about eighteen in the semicircle snickered. "Fraternity boys. Pour me a cup of tea, Mother."

Some of the others grinned. Their grins faded to expectant expressions when Rick stared unblinkingly at the lean boy. The boy gazed back at him with equal steadiness.

A feminine voice broke the silence. "Why don't you invite them to stick around, Max?"

Everyone glanced around at the red-haired girl who had come up behind the group. She was about Rick's age, slim and ripe-looking, with green eyes and delicate features. She was regarding Rick with unconcealed interest.

The lean boy growled, "You keep out of this, Pat."

"Why?" the redhead inquired. "You don't own this place." Moving into the group, she looked up at Max. "They look like nice boys, Max. Ask them to stay."

Max glanced from her to the lean boy. He seemed to be amused. "Got any objections, Artie?"

Artie moved forward to glare down at the redheaded Pat. "Butt out and go back to your booth," he ordered her. "This is man business."

Elevating her chin, Pat said, "You don't own me either, mister. I was talking to Max." She glanced back at the blond leader.

Max shrugged. "It's all right with me if they want to stay. You're on your own, Artie."

He looked from Artie to Rick, and his amusement seemed to grow. The air of expectancy increased in the rest of the crowd.

Artie swung to confront Rick. "You better blow," he said stiffly. He jerked a thumb at Pat. "This is my witch."

"Was, you mean," Pat said loudly. "I told you nobody orders me around."

After glaring at her for a moment, Artie said to Rick, "You heard me, stud. You gonna take off?"

Rick ran his eyes over the circle of faces, let his gaze settle on Max. He wasn't quite certain of what was expected of him. If Artie was pushing for a fight, Rick was willing to accept the challenge. But not if the entire group meant to pitch in on Artie's side. In that case, he and Junior would be lucky to get out of the place alive.

Reading his thought, Max said amicably, "Nobody'll gang up on you, man. It's strictly between you and Artie."

That was enough assurance for Rick. Facing Artie, he said belligerently, "You want me to leave, fellow, you put me out."

Abruptly Artie did an about-face and marched toward the rear of the shop. Customers spread to make a path for him. Rick gazed after his retreating back in surprise.

Max grinned at the expression on Rick's face. "He's

not walking away from you," he said. "We don't fight in here. He's just heading out back."

Even as Max spoke, Artie jerked open a back door and stalked outside. After a momentary hesitation, Rick followed. Junior and the rest of the crowd trailed after him. From the corner of his eye Rick saw the bald proprietor standing behind the counter wringing his hands. But the man made no move to stop what was going on.

The rear door led into a back yard enclosed by a high board fence. A street light in the alley cast a murky glow over it. Artie stood in the center of the yard, stripping off his cloth jacket.

Rick came to a halt three feet from the other boy. The crowd formed a circle around them. Artie tossed his jacket to one of the boys in the surrounding ring. Rick slipped out of his coat, located Junior's pale face in the crowd and tossed the coat to him. He rolled his sleeves to his elbows.

Max stepped forward as referee. He said to Artie, "Fair fight?"

Artie gave a stiff nod and Rick asked. "What does that mean?"

"Like in the ring," Max explained. "No knives or knucks, kicking or gouging."

Rick said, "That's the only way I ever fight."

"You're lucky Artie wants it fair, then," Max told him dryly. "He's pretty good with his feet and thumbs." He held out a hand palm up to Artie. "Give, man."

Reaching into his pants pocket, Artie brought out a switchblade knife and laid it on the extended palm. Rick's gaze followed it fascinatedly as it disappeared into Max's pocket. He wondered what he would have done if Artie hadn't agreed to make it a fair fight. The thought made his stomach lurch.

Max backed into the crowd. "Whenever you're ready," he said.

Rick conquered the queasy feeling in his stomach and examined his opponent with a practiced eye. Artie was as tall as he was, and looked bone hard. He probably weighed only about one sixty-five, though, which gave Rick a fifteen-pound weight advantage.

Under ordinary circumstances Artie's age might have been a psychological advantage, for at sixteen boys tend to regard eighteen-year-olds as grown men. But Rick's high school boxing instruction, rudimentary as it was, tended to put him at ease when facing boys of any size or age. He'd put enough older boys on the floor of the school gym not to be impressed by his elders.

Artie moved forward in a boxer's stance and feinted with a left. Ignoring it, Rick expertly caught the following right on his left forearm and countered with a solid hook to the jaw. Artie took two backward steps and sat heavily.

A mixed murmur of admiration for Rick and groans for Artie came from the crowd.

Scrambling to his feet, Artie made an enraged rush at Rick, swinging a roundhouse right as he came in. Rick stepped inside of it and landed a crashing one-two to Artie's jaw.

Artie sat again. This time he remained seated, dazedly blinking his eyes.

Again there was a murmur from the crowd. Several boys and girls shouted encouragement to Artie to get up. When it seemed apparent after some moments that Artie either was incapable, or unwilling to get to his feet, Max stepped forward and gave Rick's shoulder a congratulatory slap.

"You know how to handle your dukes, man," he said. "Shortest fight we've had around here yet."

Then the crowd was milling around Rick, patting his back and offering congratulations. Someone helped Artie to his feet and thrust him forward. Sullenly the older boy offered his hand to Rick in token of admitted defeat, Rick shook it gladly, suddenly so exhilarated by the adulation he was receiving that he actually felt affection for his recent opponent.

Then he was moving back into the Cardinal Shop surrounded by the admiring throng. To his surprise he found the redheaded Pat clinging to his arm. She was carrying his coat.

3

The rest of the evening was as pleasant a one as Rick had enjoyed in some time. Social acceptance is important at any age. At sixteen it's crucial. And Rick found himself accepted as an equal by the entire group. Junior Carr found acceptance too, simply because he was with Rick.

The boys and girls were all from families of about the same economic level as Rick's and Junior's. The redheaded Pat's father was the pharmacist manager of a chain drug store. Artie, whose last name Rick discovered was Snowden, was the son of a subway guard. Max's surname was Jelonek, and his father was a liquor salesman.

Rick found that it was accepted by everyone present, including the defeated Artie, that Pat was his girl for the evening. They sat in a booth across from Junior and a good-looking Italian boy of about fifteen named Salvatore Bullo, who went by the name of Duty.

Pat's full name was Patricia Quincy and she, like Rick and Junior, was a high school sophomore.

Pat explained that every boy present was a member of the Prospectors, which got its name from Prospect Park, the approximate geographical center of the area

the Prospectors claimed as its own turf. There were a lot of other members who weren't present, she added. Altogether the club had about a hundred and fifty members, plus a girl's auxiliary of about a hundred. She said that Max Jelonek was the president.

"What is it? Just a social club?" Rick asked. "Sort of like an unchartered fraternity?"

"I guess you could call it that," Pat said. "It's the thing everybody who is anybody belongs to. A boy from around here who doesn't get asked in is nowhere. The Prospectors run everything."

"You mean in school?"

Duty Bullo laughed. "In school and out, man. You want to make the football team, you better be a Prospector first. You got a yen to work on the school paper, you don't ask your school adviser. You ask Max. Outside of school you get the urge for some witch, she wouldn't look at you unless you're wearing the belt."

"What belt?" Rick asked, looking puzzled.

Duty unzipped his jacket to display a brown elastic belt with a silver buckle bearing the raised symbol of a pickax. Rick and Junior examined it with suitable respect.

"How do you get in this club?" Junior asked.

"You don't, unless you're asked," Duty told him. After a moment of general silence, he added generously, "Most all-right guys are eventually asked. You guys already got a good in. I mean Max letting you stick around tonight and all."

Pat gave Rick's arm a squeeze. "Don't you worry," she whispered in his ear. "They'll ask you in."

It was midnight when the group began to break up. Rick offered to walk Pat Quincy home, and got a surprised look in return. Apparently she had taken it for granted that he'd walk her home, and considered the offer superfluous.

Junior and Duty left with them. A moment after they got outside the Cardinal Shop, Max, Artie and another boy who went by the nickname of Eightball came out too. Max called to Rick and his companions to wait, as they were all going the same way.

They walked along Flatbush Avenue in a group, Max and his two companions leading the others walking two-by-two behind them. Rick and Pat brought up the rear.

Pat's family lived in an apartment at Grand Army Plaza, only three blocks from Rick's new home, but about a dozen blocks from the Cardinal Shop. When they started out, Rick was in a pleasantly exhilarated mood. Considering that it was his first night in new surroundings, he'd been a pretty fair social success. He was surrounded by new friends who represented the cream of local teen-age society, and he had an attractive girl on his arm.

Then his mood began to change. The three boys in the lead suddenly got the whim of monopolizing the sidewalk. There weren't many pedestrians out at this time of night, but what few there were got the treatment without regard to age or sex. Max and his two friends deliberately drove everyone they met into the gutter. Linking arms, with Max in the center, they spread the width of the walk and bore down inexorably on everyone coming the other way.

An elderly man was the first forced to scurry off the curb into the street to avoid being run over. Next was a pair of middle-aged women, who scrambled aside making indignant noises and glaring after the trio.

Pat and Duty seemed to find the exhibition hilarious. Rick was only embarrassed. Junior seemed uncertain how to react. A fixed smile settled on his face, but it was a forced one.

"Showoff" behavior had been held in contempt by

Rick's sophisticated Philadelphia set. But there was nothing he could think of to do about the situation, except endure it. He was in a new environment now, and was in the minority. He sensed that any objection on his part would lose him the esteem he had so far managed to gain.

They were almost to Sterling Place when they encountered a pedestrian who refused to give ground. He was a burly, middle-aged man who looked as though he might be a truck driver. Planting himself squarely in the center of the walk, he awaited the approach of the arm-linked trio with a belligerent expression on his face.

The three boys didn't slow down a bit. They strode straight into the man. Just as they reached him, the man lowered one shoulder to butt Max in the chest.

Things happened so fast, Rick could barely follow them. The three boys unlocked arms. Artie grabbed the man by one shoulder and Eightball grabbed the other. Jerking him off-balance, they forced his head downward just as Max brought up a knee.

Max's knee connected with the man's face with a sickening crunch. He went over backward, blood streaming from both nostrils. He was in a seated position on the sidewalk when Artie's foot lashed out to catch him on the jaw. As the blow stretched the man out flat, Eightball jumped onto his stomach with both feet.

Then all three boys were running down Sterling Place. Rick stood still in stunned disbelief at the vicious attack on a total stranger. Junior's mouth hung open.

Duty reacted next. Without a word he raced away after the other boys.

Pat tugged at Rick's arm. "We'd better get out of here," she said fearfully.

Without stirring, Rick slowly looked around. Across the street a couple and a lone man had stopped to peer their way. A passing car slowed to a stop and the driver in it craned to see what was going on.

Junior suddenly broke into a run up Sterling Place, leaving Rick and Pat alone.

The lone man on the opposite side of the street started to cross over. The man with the woman left her alone to cross too. Pat tugged at Rick's arm again.

"We didn't do anything," Rick said indignantly. "Run, if you want. I'm staying here."

He bent over the unconscious figure on the sidewalk. Pat looked around fearfully, but she stayed.

4

The lone man from across the street was the first to reach the scene. As Rick rose from his examination of the unconscious man, the newcomer said, "What happened? A mugging?"

"I don't know," Rick said. "Just a fight, I think. You saw as much as I did."

The other man from across the street arrived then, and the driver of the car got out, leaving his car double-parked. Both stood staring at the prone figure.

"He's really out cold, ain't he?" the driver commented.

Rick said, "He's hurt bad. Somebody ought to call an ambulance."

The man who had left his woman companion waiting across the street said, "There's a tavern over there. I'll call the cops."

He recrossed the street, took the woman's arm and both of them entered the tavern.

By the time a police radio car arrived, a considerable crowd ringed the unconscious man, most of it from the tavern from which the police had been

called. Rick took Pat's hand and quietly led her up the street. The police, busy questioning bystanders, took no notice of their departure.

They were a block away before Pat breathed a sigh of relief and lost the strained expression she had been wearing.

Giving Rick's hand a squeeze, she said admiringly, "Boy, wait till the bunch hears about this in school tomorrow. You'll get invited in for sure."

"Hears about what?" Rick asked.

"How you bluffed it out. I never saw such nerve. Standing right there and talking to those men just like you didn't know any more about what happened than they did. They never even suspected we were with the bunch that beat him up." Pat smiled approval.

With a sense of shock Rick realized that Pat had entirely misinterpreted his motive in refusing to run. He had stayed partly because he hadn't done anything wrong and refused to run because of another's act, partly because he didn't want to desert an injured man until help arrived. Pat seemed to think he had stayed through sheer bravado, to demonstrate to her that he could face down the other witnesses. She thought he had simply been attempting to prove that he could "get away" with things.

He didn't enlighten her. He couldn't without sounding stuffy. Furthermore, he found himself enjoying the admiration in her voice.

The next day in school, when the story got around, Rick didn't correct the misapprehension either. Between classes and during the lunch period, he met many other members of the Prospectors. All had heard of the incident, and all had admiring comments to make.

The story grew in passage. By the close of school the

version was that Rick had stood his ground even after the police arrived, and had straight-facedly described the victim's assailants, giving totally wrong descriptions. Rick found himself the hero of a living legend.

Heroism to this new group, he gradually realized, consisted of outmaneuvering constituted authority. He saw evidence of this all around him. Daring little bits of misbehavior were performed all day long, right under the noses of teachers. There was no purpose in them other than to run the deliberate risk of apprehension and punishment. Boys who succeeded in harassing their teachers most, yet managed to go undetected, drew the most admiration.

The commonest trick was a bit of mild vandalism known as "flashing," which was breaking light bulbs in their sockets. The usual weapon was a rubber band and a paper clip. Generally this was practiced in the halls between classes rather than in class, for then the corridors were so full of students, it was impossible to tell from which direction a missile came.

A bulb would explode just as a teacher passed beneath it, often showering him with glass. When he glared around, most students would be moving sedately along the hall, engrossed in conversation with companions, others would be bending over drinking fountains or reading the bulletin board. None, apparently, ever saw or heard a bulb burst.

Max was particularly expert at flashing. He could hit a bulb at fifteen paces without breaking stride.

No one Rick talked to seemed concerned at how badly the victim of the beating had been hurt. When he continued to get non-committal and indifferent replies to his questions as to whether anyone had heard, he stopped asking. It wasn't until that evening, when he found a brief mention of the incident on an inside page of the paper, that Rick learned the injuries

hadn't been serious. The victim was described as having a broken nose and facial lacerations. The only description of his assailants he had been able to give was that they were all teen-agers.

At eight-thirty that evening Junior again met Rick in front of the latter's apartment building. Together they walked to Grand Army Plaza and picked up Pat Quincy.

When Rick asked what she'd like to do, she said, "Let's drop by the Cardinal Shop."

"Will it be all right?" Rick asked. "I mean, Max didn't say anything at school today."

"After the way the bunch took to you today, you're practically a Prospector," she assured him. "It's just a matter of formality to vote you in at the next meeting."

"When's that?" Junior asked.

"Thursday's meeting night. Meantime, you don't have to be outcasts. We'll have to ask Max if it's all right to come in, of course. But nobody's likely to make a big thing of it."

Pat proved to be right. At the Cardinal Shop Rick and Junior stood self-effacingly just inside the doorway while Pat went to get permission from Max for them to join the group. Max came over and clapped both boys on the shoulders in a gesture of welcome.

"Draw up a Coke and sit down, studs," he said.

The evening was a repetition of the first. Inside the Cardinal Shop there was no sign of the constant showoff behavior the group engaged in outside of it. Possibly this was because here there was no constituted authority to revolt against.

The bald-headed Pop was more in the status of a tolerated servant than a proprietor. The Prospectors had so taken over the Cardinal Shop that they, not

Pop, ran the place. He had no authority either to order anyone out, or to permit in anyone not approved by his clientele. Max settled any disorders, and there was a remarkable lack of disorder. It occurred to Rick that if the teachers at school operated on the same psychology Pop used, their discipline problem would be solved.

During the evening Max called Rick and Junior aside for a private conference. "The guys and I have been talking you men over," he said. "I'm planning to put you up for citizenship Thursday night."

Rick said, "Swell, Max," and Junior said, "We sure appreciate that."

"You got to be voted in, of course, but nobody's been talking against you."

"How about Artie?" Rick asked.

"He'll be all right. Maybe he's a little peeved about you taking over his witch and beating him in a fight, but you got to give a reason for a blackball. This is a democratic organization. You can't give a personal reason like that. It has to be something really against the candidate, like being chicken or squealing on a member."

Rick said, "I see."

"Of course you'll have to do a chore before you get in."

"What's that mean?" Junior asked.

"Just something the club picks for you to do. To prove you're worthy to belong. Sort of an initiation stunt."

"Like what?" Rick inquired.

Max waved a vague hand. "Might be anything. But don't worry. When we really want a stud in, we don't pick something so hard he can't make it. It's only when some of the guys are a little against him that we really make it tough."

Rick went to bed with mixed feelings that night. He was proud of having been chosen for membership in the Prospectors so quickly after arriving in the neighborhood. But he was a little disturbed by the members' pattern of behavior. It was so totally different from that of his Philadelphia fraternity crowd.

He also wondered a little uneasily what his chore was going to be.

5

The next morning at breakfast Rick announced rather proudly that he'd been asked to join the Prospectors. His mother smiled vaguely and said, "That's nice, dear."

His father said, "What in the devil is the Prospectors?"

"A club," Rick told him. "The top organization around here. All the important guys belong."

"Yeah?" Big Sam Henderson said. "Connected with the school, is it?"

"Well, not exactly. Most of the fellows are in school. But it's not sponsored by a school adviser or anything."

"Who is it sponsored by?"

"By itself," Rick said. "It's just a club. Sort of like an unchartered fraternity."

"What are the dues?"

Rick creased his forehead. "Gee, I never asked. I don't know if there are any."

"What does the club do?" his father asked.

"Do?"

"What's its purpose?" Big Sam asked. "Every club has some purpose. Rotary's a community service, for instance."

"It's not like Rotary," Rick said impatiently. "It's just a club."

His father said, "You don't seem to know much about the organization."

"I know it's the biggest thing around here," Rick told him. "You don't understand. It's really something to be asked in so soon after moving here."

Big Sam merely grunted and dropped the subject.

But that evening after dinner he had more to say on the matter. He called Rick into the front room for a discussion. "I asked around at the shop about this Prospectors Club you want to join," he told Rick. "You know what it really is?"

"What you mean?" Rick asked.

"It's a kid gang," Big Sam said bluntly. "Half the kids in it have juvenile records. The cops are after them all the time."

Rick stared at him. "Who told you that?"

"Men at the shop who have lived in this neighborhood all their lives. It's about the toughest bunch in this whole section. They're nothing but a bunch of juvenile hoods."

Rick looked at his father with genuine astonishment. "You got a wrong steer, Pop. I know these guys. They're all just ordinary fellows from the same kind of families as ours. Max Jelonek, the club president, is one of the biggest wheels at school. He's even on the Student Council."

"I know all about him," Big Sam said grimly. "He's got a file as thick as your head down at the police juvenile division. He's been pulled in for questioning on vandalism and assault so many times, every cop on the force knows him by his first name. You stay away from that bunch."

"But it's just a club," Rick protested.

"Club, hell," said Big Sam, who rarely swore. "Don't you know all these kid gangs call themselves clubs? Ever heard of the Purple Pelicans?"

"I've heard it mentioned," Rick admitted.

"That's another so-called club over the other side of Atlantic Avenue. Every so often your little social organization has a rumble with the Purple Pelicans. They set up a war on some vacant lot and go after each other with chains and tire irons and shivs, and sometimes with a gun or two. Just for kicks. Did you know that a Purple Pelican youngster was killed four months ago? Plus a couple of dozen others ending up in the hospital."

Rick said faintly, "They don't seem like that kind of guys."

"Well, they are. And now that you know, you stay away from them. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," Rick said even more faintly.

Shortly afterward, when Junior Carr stopped by for him, Rick relayed what his father had told him. Junior absorbed it in wide-eyed silence.

"You think he got the right dope?" Junior asked finally.

"Sure," Rick said in a morose tone. "All this time we've been fooling around with a rumble-starting teen-age gang."

Junior said tentatively, "Wouldn't they be sore if we didn't join now, Rick? I don't want these guys mad at me."

Rick only looked at him.

Junior said in a defensive tone, "I don't mean just because they might beat us up. But look how the Prospectors run everything. We'd be right out in the cold. Probably Pat would even drop you."

Rick frowned at this. "Let's go over and talk to her about it," he suggested.

When they picked up Pat, Rick told her he had something to talk about, and suggested they all walk over to Prospect Park instead of going to the Cardinal

Shop. They found a bench in the park, and after they were seated with Pat in the middle, she looked at Rick expectantly.

"It's about the Prospectors," Rick said. "My dad says it isn't a club, it's just a teen-age gang."

Pat's eyes widened. "You told your father about the Prospectors?" she asked in a shocked voice.

"Why not?" Rick inquired.

"None of the fellows tell their parents they belong, Rick. My folks would kill me if they knew I belonged to the auxiliary. You just don't do that."

Rick said glumly, "It is just a gang then, huh?"

"It's a club. It's not like those things you read about over in Harlem. Nobody in the Prospectors goes around stealing hubcaps or skin-popping. We're a straight club."

Rick was silent for a moment. Then he said, "Pop says Max Jelonek has a juvenile record a mile long."

"Pickups on suspicion," Pat said contemptuously. "The cops have got nothing better to do. He's never taken a fall."

Rick said, "The police don't keep picking up innocent people on suspicion."

"Oh, Max feels his oats once in a while. But it's all in fun. He never does anything really bad, like stealing."

"Yeah," Rick said dryly. "Just beats up strangers and busts up property. And sets up rumbles with the Purple Pelicans."

Pat said petulantly, "You're talking like a detached worker."

"A what?"

"A street-gang worker. One of those busybodies who's always coming around, trying to get the guys to organize ball teams and stuff. Look, Rick, you can't fight City Hall. You're either for the Prospectors or

against them. And around here, if you're against them, you're dead."

Junior said on a high note, "What do you mean, dead? Explain it, will you?"

Pat glanced at him. "Out of everything. Like Duty Bullo explained the other night. You wouldn't have a friend in the world."

"Oh," Junior said with a touch of relief.

Pat said earnestly, "Believe me, Rick, you'll get in trouble talking like that. You're in now. The guys all like you, and you could be the most popular fellow in the club. But you sound off the way you're talking now, and you'll end up talking to yourself. Because you won't have any friends to listen to you."

"Including you, Pat?"

Pat stared at him a moment before answering. Then she squeezed his arm and said confidently, "You won't be a schmoo. You won't be silly enough to kick your chance of getting in. Not when you're right on top of the heap."

Rick let the subject drop. Later the three of them stopped by the Cardinal Shop for a time. But Rick didn't enjoy himself. He kept thinking of what his father had told him.

He also kept remembering the conversation he'd had with his father just before they left Philadelphia, and his amused question, "What would I be doing with a bunch of squares?"

6

On Thursday football spring training started. Rick reported for practice and got a favorable reception from both the coach and members of the squad. The coach examined his sturdy frame with an approving eye and looked quite pleased when he learned Rick had been a first-string fullback in Philadelphia. He

was greeted with equal enthusiasm by the regular squad members, all of whom turned out to be Prospectors.

Max Jelonek reported for practice too. Rick learned that the previous season Max had been a substitute quarterback on the first team.

There was no scrimmage this first day. The coach merely put them through some hardening exercises and had everyone hit the tackling dummy a few times. He sent them to the showers at four p.m. with the gruff announcement that real training would start the next day.

As they were dressing in the locker room, Max said, "Tonight's meeting night, Rick."

"Yeah," Rick said.

He'd been thinking about the Prospectors almost constantly since his conversation with his father. He still hadn't decided what to do. Trained to obedience, it was against everything he'd been taught since birth to go against his father's express order. On the other hand, he'd never before been in a situation such as this, where obedience meant almost certain social ostracism.

He had thought of discussing the whole problem with his father, but had decided against it. He sensed that Big Sam's reaction would be simply, "You don't want to be accepted by kids like that anyway. Find some friends you can respect."

Which, like most adult solutions to teen-age problems, would be meaningless advice. In the end, he had simply tabled the problem.

Rick stayed home that evening. Junior came over for a time and they did some homework together. They didn't, as had become their custom, walk over to see Pat for a while.

Friday during the lunch period Rick finally had to

face the problem of what to do about the Prospectors. Max called him and Junior aside.

"You're in, studs," he announced with a grin. "Unanimous votes for both of you."

"Gee, that's swell," Junior said a little uncertainly, and looked at Rick.

Rick merely nodded.

"Your chore is a little tougher than I thought it would be," Max said apologetically. "Sort of a sop to Artie. We let him pick it, and I guess he's a little burned at you, Rick."

Junior asked, "What is it?"

"Well, you've heard of the Purple Pelicans, haven't you?"

Rick nodded and Junior said uneasily, "Sure. Over the other side of Atlantic Avenue."

"Uh-huh. They meet on Monday nights. Got a basement clubroom they've fixed up. With a half dozen street-level windows."

"So?" Rick asked.

Max grinned again. "The windows will probably be locked, but a hunk of brick can fix that. You studs are going to drop a couple of stink bombs in the middle of their meeting."

Junior attempted an appreciative smile that came out more mechanical than enthusiastic. Rick remained silent and expressionless.

"Well, what you think, man?" Max asked Rick.

Rick said slowly, "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why do you want to bust up their meeting? What's the purpose?"

Max frowned. "I told you the other night. To prove you're worthy to be Prospectors."

"What's worthy about tossing stink bombs?" Rick inquired. "Any five-year-old kid can toss a stink bomb

and run. Why not something that proves something? Like swimming the Hudson River?"

Max's frown deepened. "We pick the chore, man. Not you candidates."

"I don't even know these Purple Pelicans," Rick said with the beginning of anger. "They never did anything to me. An initiation stunt is one thing. We both had to pull stunts to get in Iota Omega. But we didn't have to hurt anybody else. I'm not going to toss stink bombs at a bunch of strangers."

"You are if you're going to be a Prospector," Max told him coldly.

Rick said flatly, "Then I'm not going to be a Prospector," and walked away.

Junior didn't follow him. A few yards away Rick glanced back over his shoulder. Junior gave him an embarrassed look and averted his eyes.

By the time school ended, Rick's ultimatum had spread all over the school. When he met Pat in the front corridor after the last period, she was upset.

"Why did you talk to Max that way, Rick?" she inquired breathlessly. "Didn't I explain how important it is to get in the club?"

"That's stuff for twelve-year-olds," Rick told her coldly. "Who wants to belong to a club that childish?"

"You mean you're not going to apologize?" she asked, wide-eyed. "Rick, fellows *beg* to get in the Prospectors."

"I don't," Rick said shortly.

Turning his back, he stalked off to the locker room to change into football clothes.

Max and several of the other squad members were there ahead of him. Silence fell when Rick entered, and everyone looked at him. Rick began to change into his suit. Max presently said, "Rick, do you want to be a Prospector?"

"No," Rick said. "And I'm not going to change my mind."

Max studied him for a time. Finally he said, "Nobody we ever asked turned down the chance, Rick."

Rick said, "I guess there's a first time for everything."

Max glanced around at the other boys. There was a general shrugging of shoulders. No one said anything further to him, either in the locker room or later on the field. He was simply ignored. The coach ordered scrimmage today. He picked out two teams and placed Rick at fullback on the offensive team.

On the first play, with one of the halfbacks carrying the ball, Rick was blocked by three opposing players, an unnecessary amount of attention for a backfield man who wasn't carrying the ball. An elbow grazed his jaw and a knee caught him in the groin, knocking the wind from him. There was a five-minute time-out for Rick to recover.

On the next play he was clipped from behind by Max, who was playing left tackle on Rick's own side. Rick limped back into position with a thoughtful expression on his face.

On the third play Rick carried the ball. He ended up on the bottom of a pileup, where the coach couldn't see the chopping right that caught him alongside the jaw. It was Max who swung the right. He buried his nose in his arms to avoid a cleated foot swinging toward his face and caught it on top of the helmet. When the tangle of players finally rose and let him climb to his feet, he was half-dazed.

He was also angry. Shaking the cobwebs from his brain, he got set for the next play, a quarterback sneak.

The instant the ball was snapped, Rick moved into action. He made no attempt to take out any of the

opposition. Taking a running leap, he landed on his knees in the middle of Max's back before the tackle could start his charge into the opposing line.

The air whooshed out of Max as he hit the ground belly-down with Rick's full weight on him. Rick was instantly up again and rushing forward in a crouch. His right elbow crashed into the jaw of an opposing lineman and knocked him flat. His foot caught another in the crotch. The coach's whistle was blowing furiously when he dropped the next nearest man who happened to be his own center, with a right to the jaw.

"What the devil do you think you're doing, Henderson?" the coach screamed at him.

"Quitting," Rick said bitterly, and walked off the field toward the showers.

7

Junior Carr came over to see Rick that night, but they didn't go out anywhere. Junior seemed a little nervous about even being inside with Rick.

"You'd better straighten things up with Max, Rick," Junior pleaded. "You don't want the Prospectors down on you."

"The devil with them," Rick said.

"Look, Rick, *I'm* going to join."

"It's a free country," Rick said shortly.

"But we're friends. We've always been in everything together."

"We can still be friends," Rick told him. "I'm just not joining that bunch of squares."

When Junior left, discouraged, Rick walked over to see Pat. He found her on the verge of tears.

"Rick, why do you have to be so stubborn?" she asked. "Look, even after what happened at football practice today, Max would accept an apology. I talked to his girl on the phone. He likes you, Rick."

"Don't go intervening for me," Rick said. "I've made up my mind, and it's final."

Pat dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief. "Don't I mean anything to you?"

"Of course," he said. "You're my girl, aren't you?"

"Not if you turn down the Prospectors," she said tearfully. "I couldn't be."

"Why not?" he demanded.

"You don't know what it will be like," Pat said in a plaintive voice. "Nobody will even talk to you. If I went with you, I'd get the same treatment. They might even hurt me."

"Hurt you?" he asked without belief.

"Hasn't it occurred to you that you might get beat up, Rick? Don't you see it's the whole club you'll be up against? Maybe they'll only ignore you and make everybody else ignore you too. They wouldn't jump you without Max giving the word, and probably he won't because he likes you. But he might, and then you could get really hurt. You can't fight a hundred and fifty boys."

"One at a time, I could."

"It wouldn't be one at a time," she said wearily. "People the club's down on don't get a fair fight."

Rick contemplated this thought without enthusiasm. He remembered the knife Max had taken from Artie, and his stomach lurched again.

"I don't want to get you in a jam," he said stiffly. "I guess this is good-by, huh?"

"Unless you change your mind."

"Then it's good-by," Rick said.

Rick's ordeal didn't really start until Monday, because over the weekend he simply stayed home. In answer to his parents' questions as to why he was mooning around the house, he said he had studying

to do. But most of the time he watched television.

He didn't hear from Junior.

On Monday he got his first taste of what it meant to offend the Prospectors. First, Junior didn't appear as usual to walk to school with him. At school he was greeted by blank stares from everyone, including non-members of the club. Apparently the word had gone out that he was taboo, and even non-members were afraid to violate the taboo.

Every time Rick encountered Junior Carr, his friend turned fiery red and hurried off in another direction. When he ran into Pat, she looked as though she were going to cry and averted her eyes.

On Tuesday he sat alone in the cafeteria during the lunch period, his back to a table containing Max, Junior and a number of other Prospectors. From the overheard conversation he gathered that Junior had performed the stink-bomb mission alone, and it had been a huge success. There was a good deal of hilarity over the discomfiture of the Purple Pelicans.

By the end of the week Rick had stopped listening in classrooms, had stopped studying and spent his evenings dully staring at the television screen without seeing it. His parents discussed calling a doctor.

Saturday night he got a phone call from Junior Carr.

"Listen, Rick," Junior said. "I'm taking a chance phoning you like this, but we were always friends, and I wanted to tip you off."

"Yeah?" Rick said without much interest.

Junior spoke with a tremor.

"You know I didn't want to give you the treatment, Rick. I *had* to."

"Sure," Rick said. "I'm not blaming you."

Junior's tone turned a trifle relieved. "I'm really sorry about the way things happened, Rick."

"It's not your fault," Rick said.

"What I'm calling about is that the word is out to clobber you, Rick. Artie's been talking it up, and Max finally gave in. Rick, you got to be careful."

"Yeah," Rick said. "Thanks, Junior."

He hung up the phone and went back to stare at television.

The warning didn't particularly frighten Rick. He was in too comatose a state to be much concerned about anything. It didn't really penetrate that he might be in actual physical danger until he was confronted with it on the way home from school on Monday.

They caught him in the center of a block only two blocks from his home. As he passed the alley mouth, eight of them poured out of it and formed a semicircle around him. Artie Snowden was in the lead.

Rick backed against the brick side of the building next to the alley mouth and warily examined the ring of faces.

Artie said with enjoyment, "How'd you like your face parted, stud? Down the middle?"

His hand came out of his pocket encased in a set of brass knuckles.

Rick might have attempted to slug it out even against the impossible odds if it hadn't been for the knife another boy drew. His stomach lurched when he heard it click open and he saw the gleam of the seven-inch blade.

His stark terror saved him. Lowering a shoulder, he plowed between Artie and the boy next to him as though he were hitting a defensive line. He knocked both boys sprawling and was racing up the street, carrying his books like a football, before the rest of the group realized their quarry had escaped.

Rick ran all the way home and tumbled onto the front-room couch gasping. His mother glanced in from

the kitchen, gave him a vague smile and said, "You're home early, dear." She disappeared into the kitchen again.

Rick sat without moving for a full half hour. Then he lowered his head into his hands and sat that way for another twenty minutes. When he finally raised his head again, there was an expression of defeat on his face.

Going to the phone in a corner of the living room, he dialed Pat's number.

When she answered, he said in a blurred voice, "Rick, Pat. You think Max might still accept an apology?"

"Oh, Rick," she said happily. "I'll call his girl right now and get her to find out."

The appointment was for ten p.m. Rick didn't go inside the Cardinal Shop. He stood looking through the plate-glass window until he was noticed from inside.

Max came out with Artie Snowden, Eightball and Duty Bullo. He gave Rick an amicable smile.

"You got something to say, man?" he asked.

Rick gulped. In a low voice he said, "I'm sorry about everything, Max. I'd like to get in the club, if you'll still have me."

Max said indulgently, "Sure, boy. Some of the guys are sore, but me, I like a stud with guts. That charge you made on the football field was real cool."

Rick said nothing, merely waited abjectly.

"You got no objections to the chores we assign now, huh?"

Rick shook his head.

"Only thing is, now it's not going to be so easy," Max told him. "The guys are pretty burned up. A lot of them say no—no matter what chore you pull."

Rick waited in silent subservience.

"Only way we could talk them around was to give you a really tough chore," Max went on. "It's not going to be as simple as tossing a stink bomb."

Rick said fervently, "Anything you say, Max."

"Well, the stud who's war counselor for the Purple Pelicans is getting a little big for his pants. He got sore about Junior's stink bombs and brought some of his boys over for a raid last night. Caught a couple of our citizens alone and put them in the hospital. Right on our own turf."

"You want me to fight him?" Rick asked.

Max grinned genially. From his jacket pocket he produced a small-caliber pistol, then dropped it back again. "We want you to burn him, Rick."

Rick stared at him with slowly growing comprehension. "You mean kill him?" he finally asked in a husky voice.

"You got the scoop," Max said.

Rick stared from one face to another. Artie brought out his set of knuckle dusters, examined it interestedly and put it away again. Eightball flipped open a knife, shut it and dropped it back in his pocket. Duty merely grinned at Rick.

"See what we mean?" Max asked. "It's either all the way, or not at all. Take your choice."

Rick swallowed and his eyes made the circle of faces again. "Do I have to decide right now?" he managed.

"Take your time," Max said generously. "We'll give you till midnight."

Doing an about-face, he re-entered the Cardinal Shop. The other boys followed him in.

Rick stood for a long time staring at nothing. Then he turned and staggered off like a drunk.

He walked the streets for two hours. At midnight he came back to the Cardinal Shop.

THE RIGHT KIND OF A HOUSE

by HENRY SLESAR

The automobile that was stopping in front of Aaron Hacker's real-estate office had a New York license plate. Aaron didn't need to see the yellow rectangle to know that its owner was new to the elm-shaded streets of Ivy Corners. It was a red convertible; there was nothing else like it in town.

The man got out of the car.

"Sally," Hacker said to the bored young lady at the only other desk. There was a paperbound book propped in her typewriter, and she was chewing something dreamily.

"Yes, Mr. Hacker?"

"Seems to be a customer. Think we oughta look busy?" He put the question mildly.

"Sure, Mr. Hacker!" She smiled brightly, removed the book, and slipped a blank sheet of paper into the machine. "What shall I type?"

"Anything, anything!" Aaron scowled.

It looked like a customer, all right. The man was heading straight for the glass door, and there was a folded newspaper in his right hand. Aaron described him later as heavy-set. Actually, he was fat. He wore a colorless suit of lightweight material, and the perspiration had soaked clean through the fabric to leave large, damp circles around his arms. He might have been fifty, but he had all his hair, and it was dark and curly. The skin of his face was flushed and hot, but the narrow eyes remained clear and frosty-cold.

He came through the doorway, glanced toward the

rattling sound of the office typewriter, and then nodded at Aaron.

"Mr. Hacker?"

"Yes, sir," Aaron smiled. "What can I do for you?"

The fat man waved the newspaper. "I looked you up in the real-estate section."

"Yep. Take an ad every week. I use the *Times,* too, now and then. Lot of city people interested in a town like ours, Mr.—"

"Waterbury," the man said. He plucked a white cloth out of his pocket and mopped his face. "Hot today."

"Unusually hot," Aaron answered. "Doesn't often get so hot in our town. Mean temperature's around seventy-eight in the summer. We got the lake, you know. Isn't that right, Sally?" The girl was too absorbed to hear him. "Well. Won't you sit down, Mr. Waterbury?"

"Thank you." The fat man took the proffered chair, and sighed. "I've been driving around. Thought I'd look the place over before I came here. Nice little town."

"Yes, we like it. Cigar?" He opened a box on his desk.

"No, thank you. I really don't have much time, Mr. Hacker. Suppose we get right down to business."

"Suits me, Mr. Waterbury." He looked toward the clacking noise and frowned. *"Sally!"*

"Yes, Mr. Hacker?"

"Cut out the darn racket."

"Yes, Mr. Hacker." She put her hands in her lap, and stared at the meaningless jumble of letters she had drummed on the paper.

"Now, then," Aaron said. "Was there any place in particular you were interested in, Mr. Waterbury?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. There was a house at the

edge of town, across the way from an old building. Don't know what kind of building—deserted."

"Ice-house," Aaron said. "Was it a house with pillars?"

"Yes. That's the place. Do you have it listed? I thought I saw a 'for sale' sign, but I wasn't sure."

Aaron shook his head, and chuckled dryly. "Yep, we got it listed all right." He flipped over a loose-leaf book, and pointed to a typewritten sheet. "You won't be interested for long."

"Why not?"

He turned the book around. "Read it for yourself."

The fat man did so.

AUTHENTIC COLONIAL. 8 rooms, two baths, automatic oil furnace, large porches, trees and shrubbery. Near shopping, schools. $75,000.

"Still interested?"

The man stirred uncomfortably. "Why not? Something wrong with it?"

"Well." Aaron scratched his temple. "If you really like this town, Mr. Waterbury—I mean, if you really want to settle here, I got any number of places that'd suit you better."

"Now, just a minute!" The fat man looked indignant. "What do you call this? I'm asking you about this colonial house. You want to sell it, or don't you?"

"Do I?" Aaron chuckled. "Mister, I've had that property on my hands for five years. There's nothing I'd rather collect a commission on. Only my luck just ain't that good."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you won't buy. That's what I mean. I keep the listing on my books just for the sake of old Sadie Grimes. Otherwise, I wouldn't waste the space. Believe me."

"I don't get you."

"Then let me explain." He took out a cigar, but just to roll it in his fingers. "Old Mrs. Grimes put her place up for sale five years ago, when her son died. She gave me the job of selling it. I didn't want the job—no, sir. I told her that to her face. The old place just ain't worth the kind of money she's asking. I mean, heck! The old place ain't even worth *ten* thousand!"

The fat man swallowed. "Ten? And she wants seventy-five?"

"That's right. Don't ask me why. It's a real old house. Oh, I don't mean one of those solid-as-a-rock old houses. I mean *old*. Never been de-termited. Some of the beams will be going in the next couple of years. Basement's full of water half the time. Upper floor leans to the right about nine inches. And the grounds are a mess."

"Then why does she ask so much?"

Aaron shrugged. "Don't ask me. Sentiment, maybe. Been in her family since the Revolution, something like that."

The fat man studied the floor. "That's too bad," he said. "Too bad!" He looked up at Aaron, and smiled sheepishly. "And I kinda liked the place. It was—I don't know how to explain it—the *right* kind of house."

"I know what you mean. It's a friendly old place. A good buy at ten thousand. But seventy-five?" He laughed. "I think I know Sadie's reasoning, though. You see, she doesn't have much money. Her son was supporting her, doing well in the city. Then he died, and she knew that it was sensible to sell. But she couldn't bring herself to part with the old place. So she put a price tag so big that *nobody* would come near it. That eased her conscience." He shook his head sadly. "It's a strange world, ain't it?"

"Yes," Waterbury said distantly.

Then he stood up. "Tell you what, Mr. Hacker. Suppose I drive out to see Mrs. Grimes? Suppose I talk to her about it, get her to change her price."

"You're fooling yourself, Mr. Waterbury. I've been trying for five years."

"Who knows? Maybe if somebody *else* tried—"

Aaron Hacker spread his palms. "Who knows, is right. It's a strange world, Mr. Waterbury. If you're willing to go to the trouble, I'll be only too happy to lend a hand."

"Good. Then I'll leave now. . . ."

"Fine! You just let me ring Sadie Grimes. I'll tell her you're on your way."

Waterbury drove slowly through the quiet streets. The shade trees that lined the avenues cast peaceful dappled shadows on the hood of the convertible. The powerful motor beneath it operated in whispers, so he could hear the fitful chirpings of the birds overhead.

He reached the home of Sadie Grimes without once passing another moving vehicle. He parked his car beside the rotted picket fence that faced the house like a row of disorderly sentries.

The lawn was a jungle of weeds and crabgrass, and the columns that rose from the front porch were entwined with creepers.

There was a hand knocker on the door. He pumped it twice.

The woman who responded was short and plump. Her white hair was vaguely purple in spots, and the lines in her face descended downward toward her small, stubborn chin. She wore a heavy wool cardigan, despite the heat.

"You must be Mr. Waterbury," she said. "Aaron Hacker said you were coming."

"Yes." The fat man smiled. "How do you do, Mrs. Grimes?"

"Well as I can expect. I suppose you want to come in?"

"Awfully hot out here." He chuckled.

"Mm. Well, come in then. I've put some lemonade in the ice-box. Only don't expect me to bargain with you, Mr. Waterbury. I'm not that kind of person."

"Of course not," the man said winningly, and followed her inside.

It was dark and cool. The window shades were opaque, and they had been drawn. They entered a square parlor with heavy, baroque furniture shoved unimaginatively against every wall. The only color in the room was in the faded hues of the tasseled rug that lay in the center of the bare floor.

The old woman headed straight for a rocker, and sat motionless, her wrinkled hands folded sternly.

"Well?" she said. "If you have anything to say, Mr. Waterbury, I suggest you say it."

The fat man cleared his throat. "Mrs. Grimes, I've just spoken with your real-estate agent—"

"I know all that," she snapped. "Aaron's a fool. All the more for letting you come here with the notion of changing my mind. I'm too old for changing my mind, Mr. Waterbury."

"Er—well, I don't know if that was my intention, Mrs. Grimes. I thought we'd just—talk a little."

She leaned back, and the rocker groaned. "Talk's free. Say what you like."

"Yes." He mopped his face again, and shoved the handkerchief only halfway back into his pocket. "Well, let me put it this way, Mrs. Grimes. I'm a business man—a bachelor. I've worked for a long time, and I've made a fair amount of money. Now I'm ready to retire

—preferably, somewhere quiet. I like Ivy Corners. I passed through here some years back, on my way to—er, Albany. I thought, one day, I might like to settle here."

"So?"

"So, when I drove through your town today, and saw this house—I was enthused. It just seemed—right for me."

"I like it too, Mr. Waterbury. That's why I'm asking a fair price for it."

Waterbury blinked. "Fair price? You'll have to admit, Mrs. Grimes, these days a house like this shouldn't cost more than—"

"That's enough!" the old woman cried. "I told you, Mr. Waterbury—I don't want to sit here all day and argue with you. If you won't pay my price, then we can forget all about it."

"But, Mrs. Grimes—"

"Good *day*, Mr. Waterbury!"

She stood up, indicating that he was expected to do the same.

But he didn't. "Wait a moment, Mrs. Grimes," he said, "just a moment. I know it's crazy, but—all right. I'll pay what you want."

She looked at him for a long moment. "Are you sure, Mr. Waterbury?"

"Positive! I've enough money. If that's the only way you'll have it, that's the way it'll be."

She smiled thinly. "I think that lemonade'll be cold enough. I'll bring you some—and then I'll tell you something about this house."

He was mopping his brow when she returned with the tray. He gulped at the frosty yellow beverage greedily.

"This house," she said, easing back in her rocker, "has been in my family since eighteen hundred and

two. It was built some fifteen years before that. Every member of the family, except my son, Michael, was born in the bedroom upstairs. I was the only rebel," she added raffishly. "I had new-fangled ideas about hospitals." Her eyes twinkled.

"I know it's not the most solid house in Ivy Corners. After I brought Michael home, there was a flood in the basement, and we never seemed to get it dry since. Aaron tells me that there are termites, too, but I've never seen the pesky things. I love the old place, though; you understand."

"Of course," Waterbury said.

"Michael's father died when Michael was nine. It was hard lines on us then. I did some needlework, and my own father had left me the small annuity which supports me today. Not in very grand style, but I manage. Michael missed his father, perhaps even more than I. He grew up to be—well, wild is the only word that comes to mind."

The fat man clucked, sympathetically.

"When he graduated from high school, Michael left Ivy Corners and went to the city. Against my wishes, make no mistake. But he was like so many young men; full of ambition, undirected ambition. I don't know what he did in the city. But he must have been successful—he sent me money regularly." Her eyes clouded. "I didn't see him for nine years."

"Ah," the man sighed, sadly.

"Yes, it wasn't easy for me. But it was even worse when Michael came home because, when he did, he was in trouble."

"Oh?"

"I didn't know how bad the trouble was. He showed up in the middle of the night, looking thinner and older than I could have believed possible. He had no luggage with him, only a small black suitcase. When I

tried to take it from him, he almost struck me. Struck *me*—his own mother!

"I put him to bed myself, as if he was a little boy again. I could hear him crying out during the night.

"The next day, he told me to leave the house. Just for a few hours—he wanted to do something, he said. He didn't explain what. But when I returned that evening, I noticed that the little black suitcase was gone."

The fat man's eyes widened over the lemonade glass.

"What did it mean?" he asked.

"I didn't know then. But I found out soon—too terribly soon. That night, a man came to our house. I don't even know how he got in. I first knew when I heard voices in Michael's room. I went to the door, and tried to listen, tried to find out what sort of trouble my boy was in. But I heard only shouts and threats, and then . . ."

She paused, and her shoulders sagged.

"And a shot," she continued, "a gunshot. When I went into the room, I found the bedroom window open, and the stranger gone. And Michael—he was on the floor. He was dead."

The chair creaked.

"That was five years ago," she said. "Five long years. It was a while before I realized what had happened. The police told me the story. Michael and this other man had been involved in a crime, a serious crime. They had stolen many, many thousands of dollars.

"Michael had taken that money, and run off with it, wanting to keep it all for himself. He hid it somewhere in this house—to this very day I don't know where. Then the other man came looking for my son, came to collect his share. When he found the money gone, he—he killed my boy."

She looked up. "That's when I put the house up for sale, at seventy-five thousand dollars. I knew that,

someday, my son's killer would return. Someday, he would want this house at any price. All I had to do was wait until I found the man willing to pay much too much for an old lady's house."

She rocked gently.

Waterbury put down the empty glass and licked his lips, his eyes no longer focusing, his head rolling loosely on his shoulders.

"Ugh!" he said. "This lemonade is bitter."

THREE WIVES TOO MANY

by KENNETH FEARING

Richard C. Brown gazed in contented speculation across the breakfast table at the plain but pleasant face of his wife Marion. He was aware not only of her companionable silence, but savored also the cozy perfection of the tiny alcove, in fact, the homey restfulness of the entire bungalow.

For a moment, he almost regretted the need to leave this suburban idyll on the outskirts of Camden, and Marion, in order to reach his home in Newark by nightfall, and to be with Bernice, his fourth and most recent wife, at the usual hour. But he knew that domestic peace, to say nothing of his own safety, depended upon the most rigid adherence to his fixed routine.

Bernice, a natural and vivacious blonde, was much younger and very much prettier than Marion, whose tightly combed hair showed an unmistakable tinge of gray in its otherwise inky darkness. Marion, in fact, was the wife Richard had who was as old as himself. When he married her, he had rather felt he was making a reckless gamble.

But now, after four years—no, come to think of it, five years—he felt she had turned out extraordinarily well. Whereas Bernice, he had to face it, still couldn't cook, after almost a year of marriage. Her cooking, like her disorderly housekeeping, would probably never improve.

Still, she was lively, and decorative, though by no means as gorgeous as the ripe, still magnificently cream-skinned and red-haired Lucille. Lucille was his first wife, and although nowadays she was showing more and more ill temper, especially when she drank, he was still very fond of her, and they still maintained their original home in Hartford.

He would be seeing her, on schedule, three days hence. After that, came the turn of the dark, brooding, capricious Helen, his second, in a suburb of Boston. Helen was a little extravagant. She always had been. But what were a few faults? They were only to be expected. After all, he probably had a few himself.

So Richard C. Brown speculated, as he often did, weighing the pros and cons of this life he led.

Had he chosen wisely in selecting matrimony as his profession? Richard frowned, faintly, and softened the harsh phraseology of the question. He hadn't *chosen* it, exactly. He had drifted into it, beginning as an ardent, even a romantic, amateur. It was so easy to get married that he had not even thought of that vulgar word, bigamy, until some time after he had already committed it.

But after two ceremonies, with a third impending—his match with Marion—yes, by then he had realized he was launched upon a special type of career, one that might have certain risks attached, but one that also, with care and prudence, offered rich rewards.

"Richard? Is that what's worrying you?"

Richard returned his attention to Marion, suddenly

aware that her voice echoed a whole series of remarks he had not quite caught. Richard smiled, genuinely surprised. "Worrying me, dear?"

"For a minute, you were frowning. I thought perhaps your mind was on that offer to buy the house and lot. It was such a *big* price the broker offered, I could hardly believe it. I thought maybe you regretted turning it down. I wonder if you did it just on my account, even though you thought it was really a mistake to pass up the chance. Was *that* it, Richard?"

Richard was still more surprised—honestly surprised, and deeply touched. "No, nothing's worrying me," he said, in affectionate rebuke. "Least of all, that proposition to sell. I'd forgotten all about it."

Marion, pouring him a second cup of coffee, pursued the subject to its logical end. "Because, if the offer is still open, and you think we ought to sell, I'll sign. Our joint title to the deed, I mean. Perhaps you thought I sounded unwilling before. But that was only because I didn't really understand what a wonderful price we were being offered."

Richard was mildly amused, but still more moved. The offered price had been quite good, certainly, but by no means high enough to justify the nuisance of finding or building another place, then moving and getting established.

"No," he said firmly. "I'm quite happy here, and we won't think of selling, unless you've changed your own mind, and that's what you want yourself." With large and patient generosity, he emphasized the point. "Since I have to be away so much, on business, I've always felt any decision about the house should be mainly up to you. That's why I insisted, from the first, that title to the property should be in both our names."

He did not add, though he privately noted the fact

and gave himself a good mark for it, that this was one of his fixed rules for lasting success in marriage on a mass basis. Never play the domestic tyrant, he often told himself. Let the little woman—whichever one it was, though Lucille and Helen were hardly little—make most of the household decisions, or at least imagine she made them. It kept her happy and, whenever he had to make an important move, made her all the more amiable in deferring to him.

Sometimes, at moments like this, Richard wished he had some friendly, professional colleague with whom he could talk over the finer problems of, say, quadruple and concurrent matrimony. But this could never be. Richard did not doubt that superior operators, like himself, were in existence. But they were not readily to be found—any more than he himself was.

There were only two types of repeaters the public ever heard about, and Richard disdained them both. On the one hand, he was no idiot Romeo who married seven or eight pretty but penniless young things, usually in the same region if not the same city, and inevitably came to grief on some absurd but mathematically predictable mischance. Love was the key-word to describe this type, love and carelessness.

Then there was the other well-publicized practitioner, the sinister Bluebeard who, having married for money alone, then proceeded to do away with . . . No, this gruesome technique so revolted Richard he shrank even from thinking about it.

Marriage should be undertaken only for money *and* love. Richard imagined himself giving this sage advice to some earnest young man who might appeal to him for guidance, before choosing this specialized vocation as his own lifework. Marry for money *and* love, and never relax one's careful attention in fostering each, that was what Richard would tell the acolyte.

Quite carried away by the thought, Richard crumpled his napkin and slapped it down beside his breakfast plate in brisk, executive encouragement. Of course, there were hundreds of other facets to such a career, minor perhaps, but highly important. There was the choice of employment one should pretend to have, for instance, the changes of identification that would never overlap, and . . . Richard sighed, abandoning these thoughts as idle. After all, there was no young man seeking his counsel. In the nature of things, as long as he remained successful, there never would be.

"Richard? Don't you want to look at it? Just to be sure before they install it and lay the cement?"

He realized that Marion had again been talking for some time, unnoticed. It irritated and vaguely frightened him that he was not observing his own precept to pay careful attention. "Of course, dear." He groped, but expertly. "Why, aren't you satisfied?"

"Oh, I suppose the furnace people ought to know the best place for it. They must install hundreds of auxiliary fuel tanks. But if you'd just look, to make sure. Maybe you'll think it ought to be somewhere else."

He remembered now. It was a domestic trifle, an improvement in the heating system. He nodded, glanced up at his wristwatch and stood up. "I'll do it right now. Then I'm afraid I've got to be going."

"Do you have a lot of calls to make today, Richard?"

"Lots," he said, cheerfully, and proceeded to overwhelm wife number three with a torrent of details. "Elite, Paragon, Acme, three or four Eat-Rites, two Welcome Inns. That's just between here and Trenton. I hope I'll reach there by evening. But with the list of restaurants I've got to see—about twenty-five to thirty a day—I'm not sure just where I'll be tonight. Or, for that matter, in the next ten or twelve days. Eleven

days, to be exact," he added thoughtfully. "Now, let's see the tank."

On the way to the basement, Richard collected his hat, overcoat and suitcase. He set the suitcase down in the kitchen, then followed Marion through the door that led downward. At least, he went two-thirds of the way down the wooden steps, intending, from that barest possible display of interest, to give full approval to her arrangements.

Standing on the lower part of the stairway, he could see most of Marion's basement. This basement belonged to Marion, because all of its appointments were hers, whereas the Hartford basement had a bar, which made it both his and Lucille's. Besides the assorted laundry machines, and the door of the small partition that formed Marion's photographic dark-room—her one hobby—he saw that a slit-trench affair had been drilled through the cement floor and dug out of the dank earth beneath. Beside it stood the new tank, not yet lowered into place, and a bulky, unopened sack of some ready-mixed cement.

Richard had now seen enough to give either his approval or criticism, if any, with suggestions. He still inclined toward approval, as easier and quicker.

"It looks all right to me," he said.

Marion peered up at him, anxious and pathetically helpless. "Are you sure?" she asked.

Richard's reply was a little short. As a matter of fact, there was a hazy something he did not like at all, seeing Marion like that, innocent and graying, a little too trusting, standing beside that gaping hole.

"Quite sure. It's just where I would have—" He broke off, acutely disturbed by the phrase he seemed to be using, and without knowing why. He changed it to, "It couldn't be better if I'd chosen the place myself."

He turned quickly and went back up the stairs, with Marion following. Somebody, Richard darkly felt, was being in rather poor taste. But who? That mound of loose dirt, and the bag of cement besides. There was something about the scene that was not only vulgar, but oppressive.

He had placed his suitcase down beside the kitchen's outside door when Marion reappeared. She smiled brightly, but his spirits did not lift. Unaccountably, he had another obscure association of ideas. For some reason—for no logical reason—his mind turned to a certain crude, lurid, seamier side that less successful members of his calling undeniably used, to the shadowy half-world of Lonely Hearts clubs, matrimonial bureaus, and throbbing exchanges. Let there be a particularly messy explosion in the realm of matrimony, and the odds were even that one of those Lonely Heart clubmen, or clubwomen, was in back of it.

Richard held such strong views against agencies of this type that he couldn't abide mention of them, not even in jocular vein. It was one of few subjects upon which he had, at one time or another, quarreled with several of his wives. With all of them, in fact. About divorce, too, he was quite strict. It could easily undermine his career.

"Have you got your sample case, Richard?" Marion asked.

"It's in the trunk of the car," he told her. "I've got everything. You don't need to come out."

"Well . . . ?"

"This is the fifth," he reminded her. "I'll be back for dinner on the evening of the sixteenth. Meanwhile, I'll phone you from time to time and, if anything comes up, you can reach me through the New York answering service."

"All right, Richard. Have a good trip."

"Thank you, dear. Take care of yourself and, above all, don't worry that beautiful head of yours about trifles. Just relax. Let *me* do all the worrying."

They kissed, warmly. Then he picked up his suitcase and went down the driveway to the garage. It was a fact, he reflected, that all the worrying *was* left to him. Marion probably did not appreciate just how much worry there was.

Neither did Bernice, nor Lucille, nor Helen—none of them. But, under the circumstances, he couldn't ask, he couldn't even hint, at the credit he really deserved for the many detailed responsibilities he bore.

However, these added cares were not too heavy—they were hazards of his career. Backing his coupé down the driveway, Richard's moodiness was already gone. In front of the house, he looked up and waved to Marion, now standing in the open doorway, her striking figure undimmed by a simple house-dress. She waved affectionately in return.

His was a full, engrossing life, he decided as he drove along. Some people might even think it fascinating, if not too much so, imagining it filled with dreadful risks. There *was* a small element of danger, of course. But this only added zest. It offered the faint, tang-laden pinch of adventure, without which, really, his regulated life would be unbearably placid. It was long since far too well rehearsed.

2

Three hours later, shortly before noon, Richard C. Brown passed temporarily out of existence.

The loss of identity required less than a minute. It took place in a busy railroad checkroom in Philadelphia. It required only the time to check in his salesman's sample-case and order-book—Speedie Sandwich Co., Automatic Cutters, Precision Knives. Then all

that was needed was to take out a similar sample-case and order-book for his next incarnation, as a salesman of cosmetic novelties.

He had entered the checkroom in the name of Richard C. Brown. Under that name, he had actually made three lackadaisical stops at three widely separated restaurants that morning. At one of them, he had actually been forced to make a sale, as his order-book showed.

When he came out of the checkroom, he was Robert D. Brown. In that identity, he would make two or three torpid calls at drugstores during the afternoon, plus a few more during the next three days. That was part of the schedule—the most tiresome part, of course. It was a waste of time. But it was time indispensably given up, he felt, to protect his best interests in so many roles.

The business concerns for which he sold—or, at any rate, with whose products he traveled—were small and specialized. No high-pressure salesmen competed for their exclusive territorial rights. The owners of these companies might wonder what type of paralysis afflicted the slow-motion Brown, but, from their standpoint, paying him only on a commission basis, even a few sales were better than none.

As for Mr. Brown, he had other fish to fry. Far more important matters demanded his time and intelligence.

As always, when he made the change from one identity to another, he paused before the first mirror that caught his eye. The hesitation was brief, hardly more than a flicker—it was as though he half expected to find revealed, literally, a new and totally different man. It was as if he expected to see features even more forceful and magnetic, if that were possible, than they had been before.

This time, the mirror was a rectangle in a vending machine. Robert was a little disappointed that the re-

flection showed no marked change. His face, in spite of its forcefulness, was smooth, oval, a little asymmetrical, just as Richard's had been. The magnetic eyes that peered back at him from beneath wisps of sandy eyebrows were still pale-blue and gray, much like those of an alert rooster. Even the hair—he removed his hat to make sure—was a downy pink, and still scarce.

Robert D. looked like Richard C. He also looked like Raymond A. Brown of Hartford, and Reynold B. Brown of Boston. In any identity, for that matter, he knew that he resembled a great many men people find it hard to remember.

Then what made him so irresistible to women?

Robert shrugged, puzzled but complacent, and moved away. Probably, he decided, when he stared hard at himself in the mirror, his inner personality simply went into aloof, sensitive retirement.

It was convenient, of course, that his appearance was not too remarkable. It was much, much safer, to be inconspicuous. He looked like any respectable, married, thirty-nine-year-old businessman, hard-working and moderately successful—and why shouldn't he? The description was true.

There was only one detail in this picture of himself that did not quite satisfy him. His success, in a highly speculative investment field, was far too moderate. At least, it had been thus far, in the fifteen years since his first marriage, when Lucille's financial assets gave him the means to begin dealing on a large scale in his favorite securities.

The securities he bought were betting slips, in the horse-racing market. Brown—all four of him—did not exactly play the horses. It had long ceased to be play. He studied, he computed, he doped according to the rules of his system, and then made shrewd investments. It was full-time employment, too. No system is so per-

fect it can't be improved, he often told himself, after which, he set about computing and doping some more, seeking to plug up all possible leaks, leaks that stubbornly reappeared in his formulae.

On his way to lunch, the real start of his business day, he bought every form-sheet and newspaper with information about the fluctuations that would take place that afternoon, as soon as the tracks opened. In the quiet restaurant where he dined, he was a familiar figure, with his charts, his notes, his record-books.

The waitress who set his place asked him, "Feeling lucky today, Mr. Brown? I could certainly use a long shot, myself, if you've got something sure."

Questions like this made him wince, inwardly, as hopelessly amateurish. How could anyone speak of luck, a long shot and a sure thing, all in the same breath? But he smiled amiably and tried not to sound condescending.

"Maybe. If I find something really hot, I'll let you know."

But the waitress scarcely heard him, her mind skipping ahead on a more facetious tangent. "What I wonder about customers doping the horses. Well, maybe you can. But I'd like to see you try something tough, like making book on people. Be honest, Mr. Brown, sometimes you can't even figure your own wife."

Brown began a firm reply. "On the contrary," he said, and then just as firmly stopped.

Without even asking, or caring, *which* wife the waitress had in mind, the subject was taboo. It was a sore point, besides. He had been about to state that just the opposite was true. His wives ran true to form, he had found, and he only wished—how deeply and painfully he wished!—he could say the same for horses.

But the subject was too distressing to talk about. It would be unwise to speak with too much authority.

By this time, the waitress had given him a menu, and gone.

It was a fact, though—and a sad one—that, as Raymond A. Brown, he had suffered reverses in his first two years of marriage with Lucille, and they had cost him nearly all of the $27,000 with which she had opened their joint bank account. Joint bank accounts, like joint ownership of property, Brown regarded surely among man's finest inventions. There had been a dark period when, if Lucille had thoughtlessly written a check, it was quite possible that their marriage might actually have exploded.

Fortunately, he had grown very fond of a new and recently widowed acquaintance, a lady well worthy of becoming his wife. This was Helen, and she had brought a comfortable $40,000 to her joint bank account with Reynold B. Brown. The name, like the initial, was chosen as an orderly help to Brown's memory—at that time, he had had no intention of working his way through the alphabet. So, with Helen's unconscious but timely backing, he had recapitalized and refinanced all around. Naturally, of course, he had devoted his own added insight toward a few final, vitally necessary improvements in the system.

These improvements had helped—but not enough.

His losses had been considerably slowed down. Investments that showed splendid results almost equaled those that failed. There was one year, indeed, when his accounts showed that he had broken practically even.

All the same, his resources were again depleted when he met Marion, and she, too, was welcomed into the firm—though not in those exact words. Her $18,000 contribution to a joint bank account with Richard C. Brown had been modest, but timely and, for a while, it seemed as though the tide had finally turned.

But it hadn't turned enough—not quite. He met the gay, ornamental, chaotic Bernice, and there came a day—the day he learned she had recently inherited $20,000—when he asked her, too, if she would like to be his helpmate. This was how he became Robert D. Brown, sitting among the financial guides and investment paraphernalia spread out on the table of a quiet Philadelphia restaurant.

This was why he regretted that his success, thus far, had been so moderate. The tide had now, at last, definitely turned. But there were still precarious days, uncertain weeks, ahead.

This was why, while he concentrated on his chops and salad and coffee, he also pondered the mysteries of the alphabet. Would there ever be a Rudolf E. Brown? If so, what would the fellow's wife be like? He couldn't help wondering.

He finished lunch and, afterward, went on with his calculations, making the serious decisions of the day. When he had them, as he paid the bill and tipped the waitress, he remembered something.

"Bold Magician in the sixth at Bowie," he told her. "That's today's best."

"What?"

It was apparent she had forgotten their earlier talk. Brown merely repeated the name of the horse, smiling with professional reserve.

He had a lot to do that afternoon. Place his bets—collect on yesterday's single winner—call on three or four drugstores with those tiresome cosmetics. This last he considered a waste of time, save for use as an alibi he hoped he would never need.

3

It was seven o'clock that evening when Brown arrived at the big, solid apartment building in Newark,

where he and Bernice had established residence. He did not like it, though he felt no fear at sight of a police prowl-car, an ambulance and other official cars, drawn up before the entrance, with a knot of spectators gathered in solemn curiosity on the walk outside.

But he could not down a wave of uneasiness when he exchanged a nod with the elevator man, then received a sudden, startled glance of recognition, quickly veiled and averted. The attendants usually spoke after one of Brown's trips—and his suitcase showed he was just returning from one. Now they ascended in silence to the fourth floor.

He saw why, when he stepped out. The door of his apartment was open. Beyond it, he saw men obviously in authority, men in uniforms, men in plain clothes, even one man in white. Something unscheduled had occurred, and that alone spelled danger. But this was more than unusual—it was grim. Fright followed his first consternation, then panic, then dread.

Rigidly controlling himself, he walked through the small foyer of the apartment and halted in the middle of the living room. A uniformed police lieutenant looked at his suitcase, then at him. The lieutenant's stare was sympathetic, but, at the same time, it openly and carefully studied his face. "Mr. Brown?" he asked.

"Yes. What's the matter?"

"Bad news, I'm afraid. It's your wife." The lieutenant paused, letting this register. Brown gave no reaction, except to put down his suitcase, then urgently and fearfully wait to hear more. "I'm Lieutenant Storber. Your wife is dead."

Brown gave a stunned, disbelieving echo. "Bernice dead? She *can't* be. What happened?"

The lieutenant made indirect reply with another question. "Did your wife have any reason to commit suicide, Mr. Brown?"

"Suicide?" Brown's astonishment was a spontaneous, total denial of the idea. "That's impossible. It's silly. Why, she just bought another . . . No, it's out of the question."

"She just bought another *what,* Mr. Brown?" the lieutenant asked him gently.

Brown answered mechanically, but his features began to come apart. "Another cookbook. Would a person who did that ever think about . . . ? It was a thick one, too."

"We know. We found it in the kitchen."

Brown's knees seemed to become unfastened, and the lieutenant helped him as he sagged into the nearest chair.

"I tell you, there must be a mistake," he insisted weakly. "You haven't investigated thoroughly enough. You'll have to look around some more. When did it happen? *How?"*

The lieutenant sighed, took out a notebook. An interne emerged from an adjoining room, one used as a lounge and library. Not seeing Brown, he spoke to two men in plain clothes who were giving the living room a cursory inspection.

"D.O.A.," said the interne. "It looks to me like a stiff dose of cyanide in a cocktail, probably a sidecar. That's up to the medical examiner's office. But I'd say she drank it quick, and death was practically instantaneous. At a guess, it must have been six or seven hours ago. Around noon."

The interne went out, and the lieutenant sighed, flipped open the notebook, found a pencil.

"That's about it, Mr. Brown." The perfunctory words were filled with commiseration. "We just got here, ourselves, following a telephone call from some woman, probably a friend or neighbor we haven't yet located, and that's what we found. Your wife in the

next room, with one empty glass—hers! Out in the kitchen, where she must have mixed it, cyanide in the bottle of brandy. No sign of a visitor. Nothing disturbed, apparently. She left no note, which is a little unusual. But you'd be surprised how often they don't."

"I don't believe it," Brown protested hotly. "She didn't kill herself. She couldn't. *Never!*"

The lieutenant sighed again, and his voice was soothing. "I know how you feel. But that's the way it hits everybody, when it's close to them. Because, if you realize a person is depressed and despondent, then something is done about it, more likely than not, and it never gets as far as this. There are other times a person gets into a suicidal frame of mind and doesn't tell anybody. When that happens, naturally nobody believes it, at first."

"I'll *never* believe it," said Brown firmly. "You've got to look into this. This is something else. It's *got* to be."

"Oh, don't worry, we'll dig into it," the lieutenant assured him heartily, but without much personal conviction. "We won't drop this until we're completely satisfied. Now, where have you been this afternoon, Mr. Brown?"

Brown's surprise was genuine. "Who—*me?*"

"Yes, you. We'll begin with you. Where were you around twelve or one o'clock, for instance?"

"Having lunch in a restaurant in Philadelphia," said Brown readily. He supplied the name of the place. "I was there for almost two hours. The waitress ought to remember me—she asked for a tip on the races, and I gave her Bold Magician. After that, I made several business calls at drugstores. My order-book is in the car downstairs. It shows where I stopped."

The lieutenant was nodding, making only the briefest of notes. In spite of his shock and grief, Brown

realized that the schedule to which he had adhered so rigidly was indeed paying off, in a serious emergency. He had never anticipated an emergency quite so drastic and dreadful. But now that it was upon him, the plan was there, a safeguard against the exposure of his illegal marriages, against even the possibility of suspicion in this present trouble.

Local newspapers, the next day, carried three- and four-paragraph stories on inside pages about the apparently impulsive, macabre suicide of Mrs. Robert D. Brown. There were pictures of the twenty-eight-year-old Bernice. One caption read: *Beauty Drinks Death Cocktail.* Stories mentioned Mr. Brown, who had not been at home, as a salesman traveling for Glamor-Glo Cosmetics.

Bernice had two older sisters, one of them married. These, with the brother-in-law, helped Brown with the few arrangements that had to be made. The brother-in-law confided in Brown, and Lieutenant Storber.

"To tell you the truth, I'm not surprised. Bernice was always moody and different. Most people wouldn't notice, but there were little things gave her away, to anyone who had his eyes open."

She was buried on the third day, at a quiet service. Brown came back to the apartment afterward, but there was nothing for him to do. He made arrangements to have the furniture stored and to terminate his lease. Then he packed his personal suitcase. It was the third day. He was due in Hartford that evening, at seven o'clock. Lucille would be expecting him—as Raymond A. Brown, salesman for a firm that manufactured smokers' accessories.

Brown felt better after the change-over. Lucille might have her faults, but, tactfully handled and ignoring her sudden outbursts of temper, she could also be

a wonderful tonic for the nerves. Bruised and shaken as his were, after the last three days, he needed an influence that would restore his normal poise and self-confidence.

Therefore it was strange, and more than frightening, when he arrived at his modest, two-story Hartford home that evening, to find a police prowl-car parked in front of it, along with others whose official look he knew too well. The newly familiar scene was only too familiar.

He felt that this was a motion picture he had seen before. He hadn't liked it the first time, but now he was plunged, in a single moment, from uneasy disbelief to numb horror. This couldn't be happening—not again—not to him. But it *was* happening. It didn't help, for some reason it was only worse, much worse, that this time he knew all the lines by heart, including his own.

"Mr. Brown?"

"Yes. What's the matter?"

"I'm afraid I have bad news for you, Mr. Brown. It's your wife. I'm Lieutenant-Detective Todd. Your wife is dead."

"Lucille? Dead? She can't be. It's impossible. It's silly. This whole thing is silly. What happened?"

"Did your wife have any reason for taking her own life, Mr. Brown?"

"Lucille kill herself? *No*—absolutely not. That's out of the question." Brown's repudiation, this time, came from more than spontaneous grief. There was black suspicion behind it. "There's no chance she committed suicide, Lieutenant. None!"

The lieutenant's sympathy was partly habit, but he showed a trace of real curiosity, as well. "Why do you say that, Mr. Brown? How can you be so sure?"

Brown opened his mouth to tell him why. It could

not be coincidence that two of his wives, unknown to each other, had died by their own hands within a matter of days. But he checked himself in time. The mere existence of his surplus marriages, if exposed, spelled ruin.

"It wouldn't be like her," he said lamely. Then he collected his shattered wits and marshaled the solid facts of his alibi.

They were good enough for Lieutenant-Detective Todd. The widower had been having lunch in a quiet restaurant, fifty miles away, at the hour Lucille drank a cocktail, an old-fashioned this time, loaded with cyanide. She had been alone in the house, in the downstairs bar. The bottle of liquor used in the drink also held cyanide.

An old, dusty tin of the substance had been found among the hand-wrought bracelets, brooches and costume novelties in which Lucille dabbled, as a hobby. Again, there was no note. But Lieutenant Todd told Brown that this happened more often than most people thought.

Three days later, the same iron-clad story satisfied Detective-Inspector Casey of the Boston police, who was inquiring into the bizarre suicide of Mrs. Reynold B. Brown, housewife, of that city. Though hard-boiled, Casey and his fellow-officers were deeply touched by the protests of the bereaved husband that Helen couldn't, wouldn't and didn't knowingly drink that deadly old-fashioned. Again! Their investigation would be thorough, but did Brown have any cold facts to support his refusal to accept suicide as the obvious conclusion? Anything at all except his intuition?

Brown did, indeed, have one overwhelming fact, but he was not in any position to offer it. Some unknown party or parties had a profound grudge against him and his wives, and was methodically carrying it to the

extreme limit. But who? Of more immediate importance, who would be next?

The answer to the last question was simplicity itself. When they buried Helen, and Brown tried to pull his tangled thoughts together, he was at least able to perform a problem in elementary arithmetic—subtraction, unfortunately. By ruthless annulment—he hated to call it murder, in an affair so personal—he had only one wife left, Marion, in Camden.

As to the method used in breaking up his happy homes, Brown had little doubt. Some inconspicuous person, a casual friend, even a complete stranger with some plausible tale, had in each case called upon the victim when she was alone. At some point, the hostess would suggest cocktails, and, when she had poured them, her attention must have been diverted long enough, or, perhaps, she had been decoyed from the room, while the fatal drink was prepared.

After that, it was easy. Thoroughly wash, then replace the second cocktail glass. Put some more cyanide in the already open bottle, then unobtrusively depart. To the police, each case was no mystery, because it stood alone. Only Brown knew there were three, that they were linked and what the link was. Only Brown and—a murderer.

But who had such a fanatical resentment against Brown, the happy home-builder, and his uncomplaining wives? It occurred to him that he might somehow have come to the notice of an avenging misogynist. Some crank who hated not only women but marriage, especially wholesale marriage. That, he thought, might well be it. Brown, personally, had few close friends. He had, as far as he knew, no enemies.

After Boston, his regular schedule called for a restful, relaxing two-day trip back to Camden and now, in spite of serious misgivings, he set out for the city on

the Delaware. He was worried about Marion, among a lot of other problems. He had forgotten to phone her, immersed as he was in so many tragic details. He wondered if he should call her now, with a peremptory warning not to drink any cocktails with anybody, no matter who?

He decided against it. For one thing, Marion never drank cocktails. He had never known her to drink anything alcoholic, not even beer, and she ought to be invulnerable to the only technique the killer seemed to know.

For another thing, if he did phone, any strange injunctions of that sort would be awfully, awfully hard to explain.

4

At seven o'clock on the evening of the sixteenth, the day and the hour he was expected, Brown rolled to a stop at the curb before his house in Camden. It was with relief that he found room to do so. The street was curiously empty of police and other too-familiar official vehicles. Marion met and greeted him at the front door, just as he reached it.

"Richard, darling!" she said, with warmth.

Even as they kissed, he spoke without thinking, from habit. "Yes. What's the matter?"

"Nothing—why should there be? Did you have a nice trip?"

Brown recollected himself almost with a start. He shook his head and, at the same time, nodded, achieving a circular motion that might mean a lot, but was intended to signify nothing. He went on into the living room and, for a moment, stood in the middle of it, looking around. It, too, seemed rather empty, unpopulated as it was by hard-eyed but sympathetic detectives.

Could it be that the nightmare was over? He won-

dered. Though the riddle might never be solved—and Brown realized all too well that an official solution would be most inconvenient—the devastation, at least, might have ended. A simple armistice, in fact, with no more casualties, might be the best, the most congenial finish possible, all around.

Brown's eyes were caught by an array of pamphlets, magazines, circulars, brochures, he had never seen before, certainly not on the table of his own living room. But their titles told him with ghastly clarity what they were—*Harmonious Hearts, Why Wait for a Mate?, Cupid's Catalogue, The Widow's Guide.* Literature from a host of Lonely Hearts Clubs, that blight of amateurism upon a lofty profession. What were they doing here? Who put them there, in the first place?

He took a deep breath to bellow an enraged question, but changed his mind. He looked at Marion, who smiled brightly in return, as composed as ever. Tonight, however, she seemed even more composed. Suddenly, Richard did not want to hear the answer to his unspoken question. At least, he did not want to hear the right answer, and he was almost certain this was the answer she would give.

Let the little woman have her secret foibles, Brown decided. Silence was truly golden.

"Are you tired, Richard?" she asked. "Shall I mix us some cocktails?"

Us? Brown sagged into the nearest chair, missing the firm, encouraging support of Lieutenant Something-or-other, in Newark. But he managed a nod, even ventured a cautious query.

"Thanks, honey. Only I thought you don't drink?"

Marion's reply was forthright and cheery. "Oh, I do now. It came over me, maybe I've been missing something. So I forced myself to experiment with a cocktail here and there, just now and then, these last few

days. And I found I enjoyed them. A little drink never hurt anyone, at least, not me. What would you like, an old-fashioned? A side-car?"

Brown was not aware that he had any preference, but Marion had already moved to perform the mixing. While the sound of ice-cubes, glasses and a serving tray clattered pleasantly from the kitchen, he thought hard about some of the phrases she had used. They were poorly chosen, no doubt about it.

Unless, of course, they were well-chosen, and intended to be. Had she meant, actually meant, a certain nerve-wracking interpretation that could be placed upon her words? An old-fashioned—or a side-car. These suggestions all too closely resembled bull's-eyes.

He looked at the table, again read a couple of obscene titles. *The Widow's Guide.* What widow? *Why Wait for a Mate?* This had a horribly impatient ring.

Brown remembered something suddenly and stood up. Marion emerged from the kitchen, bearing the tray with glasses and shaker as he entered it, like a sleep-walker, and crossed to the basement door. He went down the wooden steps, and looked.

Sure enough, the hole for the fuel tank was still there, unfilled. So was the bag of cement. But the new tank was gone. There was the door to Marion's small but well-stocked darkroom. Didn't photographers often use certain potent chemicals?

From upstairs, through the floor of the living room, he heard the muffled, steady rattle of ice in a shaker. After a full minute of thought, he turned around and went back up.

The drinks were poured and waiting, and the scene, to the eye alone, was a study in domestic peace. Marion sat in the center of the lounge, before a low stand holding their drinks. Opposite her was the large chair he favored, when at home in Camden.

"I made old-fashioneds," said Marion, superfluously. "Try yours, Richard. Tell me if it's just right."

Just right for what? Still standing, Richard glanced once at the glass placed next to his chair, then at his packed suitcase, resting where he had left it beside the door.

"Tell me all about your trip," Marion coaxed. "Don't look so upset. After all, nothing terrible happened, did it? To *you,* I mean?"

The question sounded both leading, and commanding. He answered it. "No."

"Then *do* sit down and stop worrying. You look positively haunted, like some fugitive from justice. As if the police might link you with a lot of old crimes, any minute, and then they'd be looking for you everywhere, year after year, no matter where you went, or how you were disguised. Relax, Richard. Sit down."

He sat down, but he didn't relax. The horrible picture she had painted was—or could be—far too logical.

"It's that job of yours," Marion declared, maternally. "Traveling, I mean. The Speedie Sandwich Company asks too much, expecting you to cover such a wide territory. I think you ought to tell them that, hereafter, you'll confine yourself to just this area—our area. Don't *you* think you should—Richard?"

Richard guessed, from the tone of her voice, that a nod was expected. He delivered it. But what he was actually thinking about was the tap of a cop's hand on his shoulder, in Florida maybe, or even Alaska, arresting Raymond-Reynold-Robert Brown for the murder of three wives.

"And I'll keep all your books and accounts for you," Marion informed him, with relentless kindliness. "Those petty details can be a burden. Hereafter, you can let *me* do all the worrying about them."

For a moment, Brown wondered whom she was

quoting, but then he envisioned the vast scope of her co-operation and the disaster it spelled. He would not only have to sell those confounded gadgets, but close scrutiny of his accounts would disclose, and foredoom, any further operations of the whole Brown speculative system.

Now she was off on some other subject altogether. It was strange, Marion never used to be much of a talker.

". . . so that's what I told the men from the company. They should take back the fuel tank until you finally decided, and, in the meantime, leave things the way they are. Have you tasted your drink, Richard? Come on, try it." She lifted her own glass, and exclaimed, with spirit, "Bottoms up."

Did he really have that dismal choice, between hopeless flight and his own basement?

"No, thanks," he said, desperately, making the choice.

"Oh, don't be silly! Here, try a sip of mine." She leaned forward, as though to proffer a taste, and the next moment he found she had pressed her glass into his hand. "*You* keep it. I'll take yours."

It was a most understanding gesture, a most reassuring gesture—temporarily. Marion drank with zest. Richard took a sip. Nothing happened to either of them.

Minutes later, Marion was demanding his attention again.

". . . so, if you decide differently, Richard, any time you want, you can change your mind," said Marion.

"Decide?"

"About that hole downstairs."

"Oh, yes."

"Whatever you want. It's up to you."

SUNDAY'S SLAUGHTER

by JONATHAN CRAIG

There was a large knothole in one of the boards near the roof of Henry Ferris's barn. It was in the north wall, just beneath the eaves, and it gave Henry an unobstructed view of his orchard, and of the oblong knoll just beyond. The knoll was not on Henry's property—it was part of the Kimberly place—and it was where Colleen Kimberly came, every Sunday afternoon, to set up her easel and her canvas chair, and paint the things she saw around her.

Colleen was old Sam Kimberly's only daughter, and she was the prettiest girl Henry had ever seen. He had begun noticing her about a year ago, when she just turned seventeen, and he hadn't really been able to think about much else ever since. Colleen had blond hair like rain-washed wheat, and blue eyes that looked almost black until you got close to her, and, lately, her figure had filled out until it made Henry hurt just to look at her.

Henry was looking at her now, with the help of a ladder pushed against the wall of the hayloft and an old brass-cased spyglass. This was the hottest day they had had all summer, and Colleen had hiked up her skirt, to make herself a little cooler. Henry grinned slyly, wondering how fast she'd pull that skirt down again, if she knew he was watching her.

"It'd come down damn fast, I'll bet," he said aloud. He often talked to himself, working alone so much. "And, oh!—wouldn't she blush, though!" He shifted the spyglass to his other eye and adjusted the focus, so that he could see the play of the slanting sunlight

across the almost imperceptible golden down on Colleen's tapering thighs. *If she only knew I was up here!* he thought. *Man, if she only even suspected!*

He had talked to Colleen twice. The first time had been five weeks ago, when he had driven himself so nearly crazy in the hayloft that he'd felt he simply had to be closer to her. He had crossed the orchard and ambled over to the knoll, and stood watching her paint for a long time, before she noticed him at all. When she did, she didn't seem to mind his being there. She didn't even seem surprised. She had just smiled at him and gone back to her painting of a plum tree.

"That's real pretty," Henry had said. "It sure enough looks just like an old plum tree, all right." It was hard for a man to know exactly what to say to her, Henry reflected. Folks hereabouts said Colleen wasn't quite bright, and that that was the reason her pa didn't send her to the high school in town, and wouldn't let her go out with boys.

But hell, folks hereabouts were always saying mean things like that, especially about girls as pretty as Colleen. Why, they had even said *he* wasn't bright, too. He had heard it said more than once—just as if a man could run a farm like this one, year after year, and take care of a wife who was paralyzed from the waist down and all, unless he was pretty bright.

Hell, he was brighter than any of them! They were just jealous of him, because he was such a damn good farmer, that was all. Just like they were jealous of Colleen, because she was so pretty.

Colleen hadn't answered him when he complimented her painting of the plum tree. He stepped closer and squinted at the canvas, and nodded slowly. "Yes, sir," he said. "It sure looks like that old plum tree'll be popping out with fruit any minute now. It's a right nice piece of work, miss."

The girl had smiled up at him and made another dab with her brush. "Thank you," she said. "I—I've been working on it for a long time." It was then Henry saw that her eyes were really blue, instead of black, the way they had looked through the spyglass.

"Must get mighty lonesome for you sometimes," he said. "I mean, the way your pa keeps you penned up here, so tight and all." Colleen had stopped smiling, and her eyes seemed a little cloudy.

"Me, I get pretty lonesome too," Henry said. "I don't get off the place more'n two, three times a month." He paused. "What with my wife being an invalid and all, I have to stick pretty close."

Colleen had nodded solemnly and lowered her brush. She sat very still, and a sudden fragment of breeze brought Henry the sweet, slightly dizzying girl-scent of her.

"If it wasn't for your pa and my wife," Henry went on, "you and me might . . ." He broke off, his mouth suddenly dry. "I mean, we might—well, go to a church supper or something. Maybe even to a movie in town."

The girl tilted her head to look up at him. "But you *have* a wife," she said.

"Maybe not for long, though," Henry said, trying to sound casual. "The doc says she hasn't got much of her row left to hoe."

Colleen nodded, her face almost expressionless.

Henry swallowed hard, trying to get the dryness out of his throat. "If—if something happened to her, and if I could make it right with your pa . . . I mean, would you . . . ?"

The girl frowned thoughtfully for a moment, then raised her brush again and concentrated intently on the addition of some foliage to her plum tree. "If things were different," she said. "If they *really* were, I might."

Henry had wanted to say more, much more, but he

had been physically unable to talk. He had stood beside the girl a full minute before he realized he'd have to get away from her, before he lost control of himself and did something he'd be sorry for. This should have been one of the happiest moments of his life, he thought bitterly as he trudged back to his own farm. But it wasn't—it was one of the worst.

Things wouldn't get any different, he knew—not for months and months, maybe even years. Martha might linger for God knew how long. Meanwhile, there wasn't a thing he could do. The property was all in Martha's name, even down to the rakes and hoes. He could leave Martha, sure—but what then?

All he knew how to do was farm. If he went somewhere else, all he'd be was a hired man. This way, at least, he didn't have to take orders from anybody except Martha—and he had his spyglass and his knothole in the barn wall.

The second time Henry talked to Colleen he had seen her father approaching before he'd been on the knoll more than a minute or two. But he had satisfied himself that he could have her, if it weren't for Martha. With Martha dead, and Colleen and he safely married, there wasn't anything Colleen's pa could do.

Today, Henry had spent almost two hours watching Colleen through the spyglass, and now the longing for her had become too strong to bear. He took one last look at the firm, sunbathed thighs beneath the hiked-up skirt, then climbed back down the ladder and hid the spyglass in the hay. . . .

The pickup truck pulled into the yard, just as Henry came through the barn door. There were two bloodhounds in a cage on the back of the truck, and the white lettering on the door of the cab read, *Sheriff's Office—Miller County*. Riding in the seat beside the driver was Constable Jim Weber, from town. Weber

and the other man got out and walked over to Henry. Weber carried a double-barreled shotgun crooked in his arm. The other man carried a rifle.

"Afternoon, Henry," the constable said. "This here is Deputy-Sheriff Bob Ellert. Bob, this is Henry Ferris. That was his field you was admiring so, up the road a ways."

"Afternoon, Sheriff," Henry said.

The deputy nodded and crossed his arms. He was a big man, even bigger than Constable Weber, and he looked hot and uncomfortable in his khaki uniform with the leather leggings and heavy Sam Browne belt. "Hotter'n the hinges themselves, Mr. Ferris," he said.

"That's for sure," Henry said. "I been looking for it to rain. A good rain'd cool things off a bit."

"There's another one loose, Henry," the constable said.

"What?" Henry said. "Oh—you mean from the asylum?"

"Yeah. And this is a mean one, Henry. He's one of these maniacs. He got him a meat-cleaver out of the kitchen somehow, and killed a guard with it and got loose. Next thing we hear, he's taken the cleaver to old Mrs. Kurtz, over Lordville way. Cut her up like side-meat."

"I swear," Henry said. "You think he's somewhere around here?"

"He just might be," the deputy sheriff said. "We're beating the whole county for him. The Sheriff's Office and the State Police, and all the local peace officers, like Jim here."

"We're warning everybody," the constable said. "We're phoning some of them, and calling on the ones that ain't got phones. How's your wife, Henry?"

Henry sighed. "She's just the same, Jim, just the same."

"That's sure a pity," the constable said.

"You see this maniac, Mr. Ferris, you call the constable," the deputy sheriff said. "And don't lose no time about it, either. That man chopped up two women before they put him away, and he's chopped up two more people since. God knows where he'll stop, unless'n we get him fast."

"He killed them with a hatchet," the constable said. "The ones he killed before they put him away, I mean. I don't know why they didn't just up and hang him, the way they should of done. Hell, putting a maniac like that in an asylum is just plain stupid!"

"That's a fact," the deputy sheriff said. "You won't have any trouble recognizing him, Mr. Ferris. He's a big, tall old boy, with a face would scare hell out of almost anybody. He's got him a face like a shovel."

"That's right," the constable said. "I seen his picture."

"He's almost all jaw, that old boy is," the deputy sheriff said. "Little scrunched-up forehead and crazy eyes, and this great big jaw jutting out there, just like a goddamn shovel."

"Yeah," the constable said. "It hangs out there like a cowcatcher on a train." He patted the stock of his shotgun. "I got this old lady loaded up just right for him, too. I got me bird shot in one barrel, and buckshot in the other. If I holler halt, and he don't do it, that birdshot ought to slow him down mighty fast. And if the birdshot don't, the buckshot sure'r'n hell will. It'll slow him down permanent!"

"I got my gun loaded the same way," Henry said. "I been laying for some chicken thieves."

The constable nodded. "Just don't go shooting him, without you give him a chance to surrender, though." He turned slightly to wink at the deputy sheriff. "Ain't that right, Bob?"

The deputy grinned. "Sure," he said. "We got to give him his just rights, like they say in the book."

Henry grinned back, knowingly. "I'll give him everything that's coming to him, don't worry."

The constable patted the stock of his shotgun again and turned toward the pickup truck. "Well, we got to be rolling, Henry. There's a lot of folks down the line, haven't got phones. We got to warn them."

Henry was reluctant to give up his company so soon. He rarely had callers at all, much less for interesting reasons like this one. "I sure wish you could stay and pass the time of day," he said hopefully.

"Some other time, Henry," the constable said, climbing into the truck. He opened the door on the other side for the deputy and leaned back against the cushion. "Give my best to the missus," he said. The deputy waved to Henry and started the motor.

Henry watched the truck circle around toward the rutted road that led up to the blacktop, and then he walked slowly toward the house and went inside.

Martha was sitting in her wheelchair near the front door. She was pouring herself another tablespoonful of the patent medicine the doctor had told her was completely worthless. She paused with the spoon halfway to her mouth and scowled at Henry accusingly.

"Where've you been all this time?" she demanded, in her thin, whining voice. "A body could die ten times over, for all you'd care."

Henry said nothing. He watched Martha swallow the medicine and pour another spoonful. She was only twenty-seven, but she looked at least twenty years older than that. Since the stroke that had paralyzed her legs, she had seemed to wither away slowly, day by day, until Henry could scarcely remember exactly what she had looked like when he married her.

Martha had been no raving beauty even then, Henry

often reflected, and only God knew how he had had enough stomach to marry her, even to get his hands on her farm. That was just the trouble—he'd never got his hands on it at all. Martha had let him work it for her, but she had kept it in her own name. He'd never own so much as a square inch of it, until she died. The best he had been able to do was hold out a little of the egg money.

Martha swallowed the second spoonful of the medicine, grimaced and screwed the cap back on the bottle very carefully.

"Folks are talking about your never going to church, Henry," she whined. "And about your working so much in the barn on Sundays. It isn't right."

"That barn ain't no affair of theirs," Henry said. "And how am I supposed to go to church? I'd be gone three hours or more. Then you'd really holler, for sure."

"Not about your going to church, I wouldn't."

"Then, why do you nag me so about being out to the barn?"

"That ain't the same thing at all, Henry, and you know it."

"It sure looks like the same thing to me, by God! It's me not peeking in on you every five minutes that gets you riled up so much, not where I am."

"That's another thing," Martha said. "What in the world *do* you do out in that barn, every blessed Sunday? It appears to me you spend more time out there on Sundays than you do all week put together."

Henry stared at her, wondering whether he should tell her about the maniac being loose, just to change the subject. No—it would only set Martha off on a lot of damnfool questions, and he didn't feel like talking to her any more than he had to. He didn't even want to look at her.

He turned, left the house again and climbed back up in the hayloft. The visit by the constable and the deputy sheriff had almost made him forget about Colleen Kimberly, out there on the knoll beyond the orchard, but now he had an urgent need to look at her again. It would be painful, but it was something he had to do. He hoped she'd still be there—that sun was getting plumb brutal, especially if you were one of these real fair-skinned people, like Colleen.

She was still there, Henry found. She had shifted around on her canvas chair, so that she was facing the barn. The unconscious display of bare legs was more provocative than anything Henry could remember.

"Oh, Lord!" he said to himself in the stifling heat of the hayloft. "What makes me torment myself so?"

He lowered the spyglass a moment, to wipe the sweat from his face—and it was then that he saw the man in the orchard. The man was traveling at a fast lope, and, in his right hand, he carried a large meat-cleaver.

Henry stared at the cleaver, and then at the man's huge, undershot jaw. "It's that crazy shovel-face maniac," he said aloud. "It's him, surer'n all hell! He's running through the orchard that way, so's he can cut around the house and come in the front door."

Henry came down the ladder fast, smiling broadly. There was no fear in him, no hesitancy. He knew exactly what he was going to do, and the thought pleased him.

You talk about your warm welcomes, he thought. *I'll give you one, mister. I'll give you one you ain't never going to forget. 'Course, you won't have long to remember it, but you sure'n hell ain't going to forget it.*

He ran to the shelf where he kept his shotgun, jerked the gun from its leather case, and crept to the barn door.

The man with the cleaver was at the far end of the orchard now, crouching down, watching the house from behind an apple tree. Even from this distance, and without the spyglass, Henry could see the crazed look in the big man's eyes.

He's a mean one, all right, he reflected. *He should of been hung to begin with, like the constable said. Just look at him standing out there, thinking about how he's going to chop somebody up with that cleaver....*

The thought echoed and re-echoed in Henry's mind. Suddenly he began to sweat even worse than he had in the hayloft. He put the thought into words. "Chop somebody up . . ." he whispered to himself.

Well, why not?

Martha was there in the house, wasn't she? And helpless in her wheelchair, wasn't she? The maniac would kill her with that cleaver—that was sure. And all Martha could do was scream.

Suppose he waited till she screamed, Henry reasoned, and *then* ran into the house with his shotgun? He'd be too late to save her, wouldn't he? She'd be dead, and he could blow the maniac's head off. Then he would have the farm all to himself.

The farm—and Colleen Kimberly.

He could have the girl too, by God! Her pa would be glad to get her off his hands, if he could marry her to a widower with all the land Henry was going to have. It was all so clear, so easy, so sure. Nobody would think a thing about it. He could hear them now—"Old Henry is out in his barn, see, and he hears Martha scream out, and he grabs up his shotgun and comes running, but he's too late—that maniac has already killed her."

Henry knelt in the shadow, just inside the barn door, and waited for the lunatic to make his dash for the

house. The man moved cautiously around the apple tree, then suddenly broke into a run. But not toward the house—he was racing off in the opposite direction, toward the elm grove just this side of the blacktop.

Henry sprang out of the barn and sprinted after him. *No, you don't!* he thought. *Oh, no you don't! You can't cut out on me now, mister. I can outrun you any day in the week.*

He caught up with the man, in the elm grove. The lunatic slipped and fell, and scrabbled to his feet again —too late. Henry shoved the barrels of his shotgun into the crazed face and pulled one of the triggers.

The sight of the man's face and head sickened Henry, but only for a moment. Almost before the man's body struck the ground, Henry had whipped out of his shirt and wrapped it around the man's head. Even so, he couldn't prevent considerable blood from spilling on the ground. He swore. If the constable or that deputy sheriff should come nosing around out here, a little blood could be just as dangerous as a lot.

He worked rapidly and coolly, knowing the shotgun blast might bring a curious neighbor to investigate. He scooped dried grass and leaves over the place where the blood had spilled. Then he pushed the handle of the meat-cleaver into his belt, hoisted the dead man to his shoulder and picked up the shotgun. And, though he staggered a little under the man's weight, he was able to move toward the house at something close to a run. . . .

Martha's eyes rounded, and her face blanched, and her hands clawed at the arms of her wheelchair. "*Henry!*" she gasped. "Henry, what—"

It was the last thing she ever said. Henry used the cleaver with all the practiced skill of a hundred butcherings. Then he pointed the shotgun at the wall and fired the second barrel.

He didn't look at Martha, as he ripped the blood-soaked shirt from the dead man's head and ran to the bedroom. By God, he thought, killing people was easy as hell, once you set your mind to it. He stuffed the bloody shirt into the bottom compartment of his fishing tackle box and pushed the box to the rear of the shelf in the closet. Then he took a clean shirt from the bureau and buttoned it up the front on his way back to the crank phone in the parlor.

This time he did look at Martha, and he smiled a little as he asked the operator in town to ring the constable for him. He was thinking about the way the sun had shimmered on Colleen Kimberly's thighs. It was going to be hard to keep the happiness out of his voice when he talked to the constable, hard to sound the way the constable would expect him to sound.

"Constable Weber left word he'd be at the Shanley place a while," the operator told him. "I'll try to ring him there for you."

"He got her, Jim!" Henry yelled, when the constable's voice finally came on the wire. "That maniac! He's done killed Martha with a cleaver! . . . Yeah, I got him, but it was too late. I seen him out in the elm grove, up by the road, and I snuck up there and fired a barrel to scare him into surrendering, but he took off like a goddamn rabbit. . . .

"No, I didn't have the craw to kill him right then. I should have, God knows, but I just couldn't do it. He got away from me. I come back to the house—and there's poor Martha laying there, all chopped to hell and gone, and this crazy bastard coming at me with his cleaver. I just barely had time to get my gun up and pull the trigger. . . .

"Yeah, that's right. He circled around me out there, somehow, and come back to the house."

Henry let his voice break. He sobbed for a moment,

then went on raggedly. "If'n I'd been another minute sooner, I could have saved her. It was all my own fault, by God, Jim. . . .

"Yes, it was too. . . .

"Yeah, I'll stay right here." He hung up, shook a cigarette from his pack and strolled between the bodies toward the door.

It was so easy, he thought—so damned easy. He walked out on the porch and leaned back against a post, to wait for the constable. It wouldn't be much of a wait, he knew—the Shanley place was less than half a dozen miles away.

He had just started to strike a match to his cigarette, when a flash of color in the elm grove caught his eye. He froze, staring at Colleen Kimberly, while the flame crawled up the match and burned his fingers.

How long had she been there? What might she have seen? He dropped the match, flicked the cigarette away and strode toward her. For a moment, he thought she meant to turn and run away, but then she stood still and leaned back against a tree trunk, to wait for him.

He stepped close and nodded to her. "What are you doing up here in the grove, Miss Colleen?" he asked.

She smoothed the blond hair back from her forehead and smiled up at him shyly. "I heard the gun," she said.

"You just get here?" he asked.

She bobbed her head and pressed her back a little closer to the tree trunk. "I thought maybe you'd had an accident," she said softly. "Like my Uncle Carl had that time he shot himself in the foot."

Henry drew a deep breath. "You was worried about *me*? Is that what you mean, Colleen?"

She looked away from him and moistened her lips. "Yes. And I kept wondering why you never came back to the knoll. I waited and waited."

Colleen was really a very small girl, Henry noticed, now that they stood face to face like this. Small and perfect and all woman—and almost his. It seemed the wrong time to be telling her about Martha, but it had to be done.

"Something pretty awful has happened here, Colleen," he said. "Did you hear about the maniac that got loose from the asylum?"

She shook her head. "I've been out on the knoll all afternoon, and everybody else is visiting in town."

"He was here," Henry said. He paused. "He was here—and he killed Martha."

Colleen sucked in her breath sharply. "He killed her?"

"Yeah," Henry said. "With a meat-cleaver."

She was staring at him. "He killed your wife?"

Henry nodded, and, for some reason, the look on the girl's face made him feel a little uneasy.

"With a meat-cleaver?" she asked. "Some man killed your wife with a meat-cleaver?"

Henry bit at his lip. For the first time since he'd talked to Colleen on the knoll that day, he was beginning to understand what folks meant when they said she wasn't quite bright. She was so pretty to look at that a man didn't notice anything else at first.

But there *was* something wrong with her, he realized now. Her voice was clear and sure, but it was like a little girl's—like a little girl reading words from a book she didn't understand, saying the words properly without knowing what they meant.

There was something about Colleen's eyes, too. They never showed any expression at all—at least none to speak of. Like right now. Colleen didn't look one way or another. She just stared at you, or smiled at you, and all you saw were those beautiful blue eyes with their long, sooty lashes, and all you could think about

was how pretty they were. You thought so hard about the eyes themselves, you never even noticed that they never had any thoughts in them, that they never said anything.

Colleen smiled at him and gestured toward the house. "In there?" she said. "He killed her in there?"

Henry didn't say anything. A moment ago he had been sweating. Now he felt cold.

Colleen shook her head wonderingly, then glanced toward the blacktop. "Somebody's coming," she said. "I'd better get back before they see me. Pa wouldn't like it a bit, me being over here this way."

The deputy sheriff's pickup truck was already turning off the blacktop. The cage with the two bloodhounds in it rattled and slid toward the tailgate.

"No use going now," Henry said. "It's too late." He moved away from her and waited for the constable and the deputy to climb out of the truck. He couldn't afford to think any more about Colleen now, he knew. He'd have to watch every word he said, be on guard for every question.

The constable came up to him, his face compassionate. "Henry!" he said. "Good Lord, man, what a terrible thing! What a terrible, terrible thing to happen!"

Henry nodded, pretended to struggle for words a moment, then looked away.

"Leave him be, Jim," the deputy said. "He won't be feeling like doing any more talking than he has to."

"Sure, Henry," the constable said. "You just take it easy now. Me and the sheriff'll just take a look inside." He glanced at Colleen and frowned. "Your pa know you're over here, girl?"

She shook her head and smiled at Henry, and Henry got that cold feeling again. "Pa isn't home," she said. "Henry, do you remember what you told me that day over on the knoll? About going to a movie in town?"

Henry stared down at the ground, trying to keep back the panic. "Maybe you'd best go home now, Colleen," he said. "Your pa may be home."

"I never been to a movie," she said quietly. "Never once in my whole life. Pa would never let me." She was studying Henry's face, and beginning to frown at what she saw there. "You promised me, Henry," she said. "You said that if something happened to your wife, you and I could go to the church suppers and the movies. Don't you remember, Henry?" She stopped, and now the blue eyes held a sheen close to tears.

The constable glanced sharply at the deputy; then both men looked at Henry, with eyes grown suddenly narrow. No one said anything. The seconds pounded away for a small eternity, and then, abruptly, Henry realized that the only sound in the elm grove was his own rapid breathing.

At last, Constable Weber cleared his throat. "You look just a little sick, Henry," he said. "Maybe you'd best go inside and stretch out a while."

Henry walked the mile it took to pass the constable, and the second mile it took to pass the deputy, and walked into the house on legs that threatened to collapse beneath him at every step.

They suspect me, he thought. *They suspect me—and pretty soon they'll know for sure. They ain't fools—now that they've got their suspicions they'll keep at it till they know.*

He picked up his shotgun, reloaded it from the box of shells in the kitchen and carried it with him into the bedroom. He was still cold. He took off his shoes and socks and lay down on the bed and pulled the sheet up over him, keeping the gun beside him, pressed close to his body.

He listened to the sounds of the constable and the deputy, as they came into the house and moved about

in the parlor. He listened to them leave again. He listened to the grating sound of the bloodhounds' cage being opened, then to the deep voices of the dogs themselves. He heard them, up in the grove for a long time, making the sounds bloodhounds always did, when they were trying to pick out a scent. Then he heard the grate of the cage again, and the sharp click, as someone secured the hasp on the cage door.

Then, for a long time, there was no sound at all, until he heard the clump of boots across the floor in the parlor, and along the hall to the bedroom. He lay very still, hardly breathing at all, the shotgun still held tight against his side.

The constable and the deputy came in and shut the door, and stood staring at him. Outside, one of the bloodhounds bayed sadly, then was still.

"Henry," the constable said, not meeting Henry's eyes. "Henry, we know what you done." He took a heavy breath and let it out slowly. "It was the girl that got us started," he said. "The girl, and what you said about loading your shotgun with birdshot in one barrel and buckshot in the other, just like I told you I'd loaded mine."

"That man was killed with buckshot," the deputy said. "But you said you killed him out there in the parlor. That lead in the wall out there isn't buckshot, Mr. Ferris—it's birdshot. The *buckshot* was fired out there in the elm grove. We picked some of it out of a tree trunk." He paused.

"And we found that blood out there, too. Those leaves should have been scattered around even, not all bunched up like that in one place." He waited, watching Henry's face expectantly.

Henry tightened his grip on the shotgun and said nothing.

The deputy shrugged. "We know just how you did

it, Mr. Ferris," he went on. "We even took the dogs up there to the grove. They knew the scent they was after all right, but they couldn't come near the house, because the man never did. Once we knew you'd done him in, up there in the trees, and carried him down here to the house, we knew all we had to know."

The constable's face was gray. He shook his head slowly. "Henry," he said softly, "I've known you all my life. I just thank God I don't have to take you in."

The deputy took a short step forward. "It's my territory out here, Mr. Ferris," he said. "I'll ask you not to give me any trouble."

Henry looked at the deputy, but his vision went through him and beyond him, and he smiled at the play of sunlight on Colleen Kimberly's curving thighs, as she sat there on the knoll beyond the orchard.

He was still thinking of her, when he put the shotgun barrels in his mouth and pressed both triggers with his toe.

THE MUSICAL DOLL

by HELEN KASSON

The doll turned slowly, its china arms spread, its hard toes stretched taut in the immemorial position of ballet. The tiny music box beneath her played a sad, nostalgic tune. Minor notes tinkled down, then up, then down again through three weeping phrases. Then the box was silent for a moment while the doll kept turning, until the faint little tune began again. It was a gypsy song but, because of the small mechanism, it held no gypsy joy—only hopelessness and a heartbreaking melancholy.

The walls of the room were covered with unframed pictures, experiments in color, style and feeling, groping and unrealized. They might have been dream experiences which, for an instant, the dreamer had understood but had been unable to recapture on awakening.

In one corner stood an easel supporting a half-finished picture of interblending planes, while on a tray at its base lay a palette smeared with daubs of paint and poppy-seed oil from an overturned can.

The little girl with the honey-colored pigtails sat on a chair in front of a flat-topped desk, her round amber eyes fastened solemnly on the dancing doll, her body moving in a small circle which continued for a moment even after the notes slowed and finally stopped. She stared thoughtfully, then picked up the box, wound it and set it back on the desk again.

The tune started once more, a little faster now, yet still without gaiety, still mournful. The slightly off-key notes cascaded down and up and down again in weird, disconsolate sequence.

For a moment longer she let her eyes follow the ballet doll in its ceaseless turning. Then, remembering, she looked at the clock on the wall. She arose, walked across the room to a table on which a telephone stood, picked up the slip of paper which lay beside the receiver and dialed a number.

"Hello," she said, in a thin and reedy voice. "Is this the Police Station?" The tinkling notes sounded in counterpoint behind her, making her voice seem even thinner for an instant.

"My name is Betty Lorman. I live at nine hundred and twelve River Lane, River Hills." Holding the slip of paper with one hand where she could read from it, she added, "Please send a policeman over. Someone is dead." She hung up the receiver, replaced the slip on

the telephone table and crossed the room, past the outstretched body on the floor, and back to the desk where the doll still turned.

Three minutes later, when the knock sounded, she was still watching the doll. For the third time the notes were slowing. She picked up the music box and twisted the key on its bottom a few times before she arose, and went to open the door.

Immediately the room was filled, both with the bodies of the two policemen (they were close to six feet tall) and with their involuntary recoil. One was young and one was old, but against the duality of the small child and the inert body they stood as one, aghast and incredulous, unable even to admit to consciousness, as yet, the incongruous tinkling tune to which the doll still turned in its interminable dance.

Tom Wallace, the old Inspector, pushed the child behind him, shielding her with his big body from the corpse with its bullet-pierced chest and glazed, half-open eyes. "'Phone in the report, Burns," he murmured, and walked with her to the chair in front of the desk, sat down on it and drew her onto his lap.

The notes from the music box slowed and died. The sound of dialing scraped unevenly and then Burns's low, almost whispering voice took over.

Betty reached toward the musical doll but Wallace stayed her hand, covering it with one of his own big ones. With the other, he stroked her honey-colored hair back from her forehead.

"Who is it, child?" he asked.

"My Uncle Bob."

"Who killed him?"

Her eyes strayed toward the music box. He was startled to see how calm they were. "He died from natural causes," she said evenly.

"Who told you to say that?" The words came in

harsh staccato, though he had not intended that they should. "You're only about ten, aren't you?"

"I s'pose so. Daddy didn't believe in counting years. He always said Mother was younger than I was."

"All right. Even at ten you ought to realize that being shot through the heart isn't dying from natural causes."

He let go of her hand to remove his hat. The moment it was free, she reached out and picked up the doll.

"Put that thing down!" He snatched it from her.

"Give it back. Give me back my doll!" Tears filled her amber eyes as she lunged futilely for it, her tiny arm reaching no farther than his elbow.

"So you *can* get excited," Wallace said. "Not about a dead man but about a doll. What's the matter with you, anyway?" His voice softened a little. "Your uncle's dead. Didn't you like him?"

"Of course I did. We played games—Uncle Bob and Mother and I."

"Not your Daddy?"

"No, Daddy was different. I felt *safe* with Daddy. Please give me my doll!"

"I found this, sir." Marty Burns handed the slip of paper from the telephone table to Wallace.

"Lakeview five five-thousand." The old Inspector read aloud, his voice growing huskier and more disbelieving, until finally, at the end, he was whispering in a sort of breathless protest against the words. *"Is this the Police Station? My name is Betty Lorman. . . . Someone is dead."*

"So they left this paper with you," Wallace said, "and told you to wait a certain length of time, and then to call the police. How long did they tell you to wait?"

"Two hours." The child's nose twitched with the ef-

fort to keep from crying. "I wish I could hold my doll!"

She grasped it eagerly as he brought it within reach and, for a moment, let one hand lie on the stiff tulle skirt, as a blind man in a strange room might rest his hand against a wall to draw confidence from its solidity before he ventured further.

"Don't wind it, though," the Inspector said, holding Burns where he stood beside them with a faint, almost unnoticeable flicker of one eyelid. "Tell me about Mother and Daddy. What do they look like?"

"Daddy looks like me," the child said. "Only he's round and a lot taller and his hair's thin in front. Not as tall as him, though." She looked up at the young policeman who, even under her child's eyes, flushed and twitched self-consciously.

"And he isn't as tall as Uncle Bob either, or as dark," she concluded.

"Good. And Mother?"

"Soft like a kitten. With sky-blue eyes and hair like black clouds. Curly, not ropy like mine."

"Is that the way Daddy described her?" Wallace asked, dismissing Burns with another twitch of his eye.

"Daddy, or Uncle Bob. I can't remember. Anyway, it's the way she *felt*."

"I guess Uncle Bob was Daddy's brother, not Mother's."

She nodded, fastening her eyes again in that still, almost expressionless concentration on the doll, not seeming to hear either the rasp of the dial under Burns's finger or the spare, pointed words, the first-fired arrow of the hunter which, even if it missed its mark, would land somewhere and so change, however infinitesimally, the pattern of things as they now existed. "All right. Where did they go?"

"It doesn't matter. They said you'd take care of me."

"Scheming, heartless devils!" The words burst from the old Inspector. "That's what they are. To leave a child—" For only the second time since they had come into the room, his words were addressed to Burns.

When the call had come to Police Headquarters in the thin, child's voice they had, of course, thought it was a hoax. But the Inspector was through for the day and so was Burns, so they rode over to River Lane together just on the one chance in a hundred that it wasn't some teen-ager holding her nose and making her voice high and talking through a handkerchief stretched over the mouthpiece in an effort to get some friend—or enemy of the moment—into trouble.

The Inspector and Burns hadn't yet been out on a case together—Burns was pretty new in the department—and the difference in age and rank, added to their lack of knowledge of each other, had kept conversation at a minimum.

Betty set the doll firmly on the top of the desk, turning to look fully for the first time at Wallace. "That isn't true," she said angrily. "You said that because you think I was scared, because you think they shouldn't have left me with Uncle Bob. But I *wasn't* scared. Death is nothing to be afraid of."

"Who told you that?" For a moment Wallace forgot he was talking to a child. "The same person who told you to say your uncle died from natural causes?"

She nodded. "Daddy. But he didn't say exactly that. He said Uncle Bob died as the natural result of a chain of events."

"And did he tell you who killed him?"

"He didn't have to," she said. "I knew."

"Well, who?" Wallace asked, staring hard at her.

"We all did."

Wallace drew a deep and exasperated breath. Across the room Burns stared thoughtfully at a blue painting

in a blue frame—either undersea or stratospheric—then shrugged and opened a door which led to one of the bedrooms off the living room.

"Look, honey," Wallace said. "I have a little girl of my own who was your age once. She looked a little like you, too—only she was blonder. And she used to sit on my lap a lot. Just like this.

"Did you ever sit on your Daddy's lap, and put your head against his chest?" He put one big, hairy hand over her face, almost covering it, and pressed it back. "And did you ever, then, talk about things you'd never talk about when you were sitting up looking at him? And weren't those things the true things, because you couldn't possibly say anything that wasn't true when you were leaning back against him, hearing his heart beat under your ear?"

"Yes," she said softly. "Only Daddy told *me* the true things then."

"Tell me some of them. Tell me some of the true things Daddy told you."

"That I was strong. That I could take care of Mother. That I shouldn't be afraid of anything—not even death."

"And then, after Uncle Bob died," Wallace asked gently, "did Daddy tell you to tell me you had all killed him?"

"No. I knew we had. Because I knew I'd helped to start it."

"But who fired the gun?" Wallace demanded, "and why?"

"That doesn't matter. It was when I switched the letters that counted. And that's part of 'why.' "

"... Tess! Tess! I've won First Prize!"

She yawned, opening her pink mouth so the white little teeth showed, close-set and sharp, like a frame

around a picture of her tongue; then burrowed deeper into the soft nest of quilts and pillows.

"What?" she asked dully.

"The picture. The Fellows Contest. I've won it! Only," he paused, his wide forehead wrinkling, "the check isn't here."

She roused slightly. She was fully dressed. It was late afternoon but she had been drinking and had gone to bed to sleep it off.

"You didn't win," she said, "and you never will. Why don't you give up trying?"

"This time I did! Here's the letter. It's addressed to me, see? Mr. P. Lorman—" He started to hand it to her, then withdrew it suddenly and carried it to the window, snapping the shade to the top with such force that it twirled around until the circle at the end finally stopped it.

Her laughter started slowly, only a faint titter at first, but it grew deeper and turned raucous, gaining impetus and strength, until, at the end, she was rolling on the bed. She raised her knees to her chest, then flung her legs straight, beating her feet and holding her aching stomach.

"That kid," she spluttered. "That kid'll do anything for you. . . ."

"Uncle Bob left the letter saying *he'd* won," Betty said, "and I erased the *R,* so that it looked like a *P,* and then I opened Daddy's envelope—it wasn't stuck tight—and saw that he only got Honorable Mention. So I put Uncle Bob's letter in and glued it shut again.

"I thought it would make him happy," she said. "I'd forgotten about the check. And it did make him happy for a minute. But that just wasn't worth the awful way he felt when he found out what I'd done. And it wasn't worth the awful fight he had either."

"With Uncle Bob?" Wallace asked. "Was that this morning?"

"No, with Mother, because Mother laughed. And it wasn't this morning. It was a long time ago."

"Well, let's get back to this morning. Did you go to school today? Was Uncle Bob lying there on the floor when you got home?"

"Yes, he was dead when I got home," Betty said. "You don't have to be afraid to say the word. Daddy was here and he talked to me and then they gave me the note to read over the telephone and they kissed me and they left."

"You said *Daddy* was here, and then *they* kissed me. Where was Mother when you got home?"

Before she answered, Betty sat up straight, taking her head away from Wallace's chest. "Mother was here," she said after a moment. "In the bedroom."

"And was Mother upset?"

"Yes. So was Daddy. But this morning she was happier than she's ever been."

"Now put your head back," Wallace pressed gently against her face, "and tell me everything that happened since you got up this morning. You washed your face and brushed your teeth and . . ."

"I'm all dressed, Mother. May I have breakfast now?"

"Give her breakfast, Peter. I'm sick."

"What's it from this time?"

"What's it ever from? Rotgut."

"Why do you drink it?"

"Why do I drink it? he asks. I drink it to escape, that's why!"

"To escape what, Tess? Your guilty conscience? Because you told me Betty wasn't mine?"

"It's the truth."

"Why do you need to torture me, Tess? You and I both know she is."

"Because you're so damned virtuous. You don't drink, you don't smoke—and you don't understand people who have to."

"I understand you, Tess. You're a baby with the devil in you and you've never learned to walk."

"What are you talking about?"

"It doesn't matter. I'm going to leave you."

"Leave me? You can't, Peter!"

"I can. It's the only way I can win. The only thing *I can win—aloneness."*

"Aloneness? Peter, I need *you! I wouldn't be* anything *without you. Peter . . . Peter . . . please."*

"Did you ever love me, Tess?"

"Darling, I did. I do! I've grown up now and I do."

"Have you really, baby? Prove it!"

"I will. . . . I lied about Betty. . . . She's yours, ours."

"Of course, I belonged to all three of them," Betty said.

"Anyway, Mother *and* Daddy came out and got my breakfast and while I was eating we laughed and had fun and Mother looked beautiful and happy."

"And then, when you got home from school you found Uncle Bob was dead. Didn't you cry? Didn't you feel bad? Didn't you ask why your Daddy killed him?"

"We all cried. We hated to have him dead. But we knew why he *was* dead. When something's in your way it has to be removed."

"Even something you love?"

"You can love something or someone and it can still be in your way."

"All right. How was Uncle Bob in Daddy's way? Did he live here? Was it too crowded?"

"No, he boarded down the street. He wasn't really-

truly in the way. Not like a chair you keep falling over all the time or a door that opens in front of your toy chest, so you can't get at it, or a winter coat that you never wear that's hanging in front of all the other things you do wear—or a—or a—"

"I get it," Wallace said shortly. "He wasn't really-truly in the way, but he wasn't just-pretend in the way either, or else your Daddy wouldn't have had to kill him. His body wasn't in the way, but some of the things he said or did or thought were in the way. In the way of your Daddy's happiness?"

"That's right. That's exactly right."

"Good. Now, let's get down to business. *How* was he in the way of your Daddy's happiness?"

"He kept winning things."

"*Winning* things!" Wallace repeated incredulously.

"Yes. When he and Daddy were young, Uncle Bob won a scholarship. So he went to college."

"I see. And Daddy didn't?"

"No. And then, I told you how Uncle Bob won first prize in the art contest. I can't figure why. It was only some old flowers. Daddy's picture was better. 'Death Riding a White Rat.' "

"Good Lord!" Wallace said. "Well, anyway, what else did Uncle Bob win—that your Daddy wanted, I mean?"

"I don't remember them all. An electric clock once, but we already had one. Anyway, it was more of a *feeling* Daddy had.... Oh, and then a long time ago, there was a girl. At first, I thought it was Mother, until I realized Daddy had won *her*."

"Of course," Wallace said slowly, the wrinkles beside his old eyes hardening into the semblance of rutted stone.

Burns came out of the bedroom holding two pieces of a torn scarf. "I found this, sir."

"Uncle Bob gave that to Mother," Betty said, and slid off the Inspector's lap.

"What of it, Burns?" Wallace's voice sounded tired and far away.

"It has been torn wilfully." Burns looked very young as he stood there with the red and blue silk pieces trailing from his hand, and a little worried, because he was afraid he was going to say something presumptuous.

Betty turned the music box over and wound it. Once more the sad little tune rose and descended, through the three weeping phrases, stopped for a moment and then began again, while the doll, its arms outstretched, turned endlessly.

"I've been listening to you talk to the little girl," Burns said, "and I thought you did a fine job of it. I wish I could talk to children that way. But I can't, because I'm not married or anything and I was an only child and I've never had experience with children. They frighten me, to be completely honest about it."

The lines beside the old Inspector's eyes softened just a little, or changed somehow infinitesimally from rutted stone to a gentler, more flexible series of wrinkles—a series which might have been started long ago by too much smiling. It was true, he did understand children, having had four of his own. And he did understand young policemen, having had many more than four of them around him. So he said, "What is it you're trying to tell me, Burns? What's bothering you?"

"Only this, sir. As I said, I'm not married, and I guess I'm sort of romantic. I've been thinking how it would be if you loved a woman and if that woman was—well, partly a child."

He paused for a long while to let the flush which had come to his face recede, and then he said, "And I've been listening to the little girl talk. And somehow

she isn't just like a child. So if the man were sort of a father type and his wife treated him like a parent—if she lied to him and was glad when bad things happened to him, as some children are, I understand, or think they are anyway—well then, if this man had to make a choice, he might choose to protect the woman who was a child rather than the child who was a woman.

"Because the chances are, the woman would always be a child, while the little girl had a chance of growing up into a real woman. And maybe, the man thought that a little unhappiness and experience and responsibility would help the child grow into a *better* woman. Then too, the child has a whole life ahead of her in which to forget and learn and be happy, while the woman who is a child has only *now* and not much left of that."

"I don't follow you," Wallace said a little brusquely. "What are you getting at?"

"I guess I'm not making much sense. I'll try again, though maybe it isn't even worth the saying. When I found the torn scarf and Betty said her uncle had given it to her mother, it made me wonder."

Burns stopped short and mopped his forehead, certain he had overstepped the bounds of rank.

The music box ran down and, in the new silence, Burns felt Betty's eyes on him. He met them for an instant. They were alert, expectant, waiting in a sort of suspended stillness. Strangely, she did not move to rewind the box.

"Go on," Wallace said. "It made you wonder what?"

"I know you've sort of taken it for granted that the man killed his brother," Burns said apologetically. "But from what Betty said about her mother's being so happy this morning—it occurred to me that maybe that happiness was jeopardized later. You see, the

mother knew that as long as her husband's brother was alive, her husband would never *feel* himself to be top man. And her husband had to feel important if they were going to live in that safe, fairy-book world. Then too, maybe if there weren't another child-adult around —like Betty's uncle—to show her husband up, she wouldn't have to drink."

"It's all very neat," Wallace said wearily. "So the husband took her away to protect her at the expense of Betty—because he thought Betty was young enough to throw it off and his wife was *too* young. But you're just guessing, Burns. The torn scarf is nothing. She might have torn it in a fit of anger. That doesn't mean she killed the man who gave it to her."

"I know, sir. There's no real proof." Burns looked across at the child and, for a moment, their eyes clung together across the empty air. "But Betty knows," he said.

Betty set the music box down carefully without taking her eyes from Burns's face, but she kept one hand on it, as if it gave her comfort. "We all did it," she said. "But Mother fired the gun."

Burns opened his other hand and laid four torn pieces of paper on the desk before Wallace. "I found these too, sir."

The old Inspector bent his head to fit the scraps together. There was only one sentence, written in ink, dated that morning. *"Being of sound mind, I leave all my worldly goods to my daughter, Betty Lorman."* It was signed, *"Robert Lorman."*

"It may or may not be true," Burns said. "Betty's mother may have asked him not to come around any more and, out of spite, he threatened to show it to the husband."

"Good thinking, Burns."

"Well, I figured, sir, that the father being the kind

of man he was—a father to both his wife and his child—if *he* had killed his brother, he'd have gone off alone. There'd be no reason for him to take his wife then. He'd have left her with Betty."

"All right." The old Inspector looked tired. "It's all very neat, but what's the difference? They'll probably both get caught. It's difficult for two people to escape the law forever."

"There's one way they could, sir," Burns said. "If they were dead," he added softly.

The old Inspector's eyes could not have been more startled if he had not spent most of his life looking at death and the perpetrators of it. "No," he said.

"They only killed their *bodies,*" Betty whispered. "Daddy told me that was all, that I shouldn't feel alone." Her eyes were glazed, as if she were thinking—or praying.

"But to leave a child—" the Inspector said.

Before he spoke, Burns looked at Betty. Her eyes were fastened on him in a sort of tense concentration, as if she were willing him to say or do something.

"He prepared her," Burns said. "He made her strong. He hoped someone would take her. As a matter of fact," he cleared his throat and hesitated, but only for an instant. "If you'll give me time . . . if I can find someone who'll have me . . . I wouldn't mind . . ." His voice trailed off.

The music box started playing. It was wound tighter and the tinkling notes sounded less off-key, and somehow the tune sounded only tenderly nostalgic now.

"I thought you were afraid of children," Wallace said gently.

"I was, until now." Burns smiled at Betty and, surprisingly, a dimple appeared in his left cheek.

"Well, yes, I'll give you time," the old Inspector said. "And meanwhile, I have a wife already. . . ."

"T" FOR TROUBLE

When a guy's been around enough — hit all the wrong places just at the wrong times — he knows what trouble means with a capital "T." And the guy best suited to that "T" is the chairman of the trouble-shooting board — redheaded, brandy-drinking Michael Shayne, Private Eye. Michael Shayne, who makes crime his business.

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