
ALFRED
NOVEMBER 35¢
HITCHCOCK'S
MYSTERY
MAGAZINE
NEW stories
presented by
the master
of SUSPENSE

Dear Readers,

The current census shows an increase in bubble-gum-chewing and the writing of fiction. Psychiatrists tell us this is most encouraging and salubrious, indicating a release of tensions "in these troubled times." Always eager to be decidedly therapeutic, my fine publication is therefore sponsoring a short story contest that is open to everyone —the incarcerated and those not as yet apprehended. Elsewhere in this issue are the rules and the rewards. Interestingly enough, the prizes without exception are monetary in nature. For those winners, however, who are opposed to money on principle, there will be durable, embossed plastic metals.

As you know, Halloween is almost upon us. This is a holiday dangerously close to my heart. When that form of life known as children come trooping to my door in sundry disguises, demanding "trick or treat," I am ready for them, barricaded and ready. You see, I am aware that children prefer conflict of sorts to bouquets of lollipops and scatterings of chicken corn candy.

And, of course, politics has been with us right through the summer. Early in May, I turned my television set off; and when the oratory still came through the walls, I called the police.

Alfred Hitchcock

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VOLUME 5, No. 11 NOVEMBER, 1960

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

CONTENTS

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ONE POUND

by DONALD HONIG

CARL wondered if the valise looked as suspicious to other people as it did to him. Beside him on the back seat of the cab, it looked positively lethal. When he had taken it from his friends (along with his instructions) a little while ago and hailed the cab and got in and told the driver to take him to the airport, he was certain the driver could tell that the valise held a can containing a pound of heroin. That was one of the hazards of carrying something like that—its grimness seeped into you and made you look suspicious.

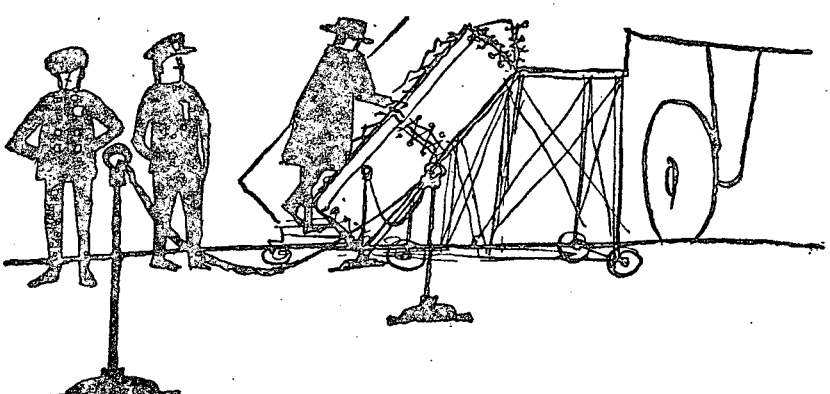
Carl told himself as they sped along the highway toward the airport that his fears were ridiculous, of course, that no one had X-ray vision. The driver's whistling nonchalance, eased him somewhat.

Arriving at the terminal, Carl got out—valise in hand. From

It's wholesome and American for a criminal to want to rise in the world, to want to get on to bigger, but not better things. And so we have our hero, Carl Luca, about to make the most of an important illegality.

gratitude (for what he didn't quite know) he was going to give the cabbie an inordinately large tip, but suddenly became afraid it would draw attention to him—one of the cardinal rules was not to draw attention to one's self—and so tipped only a quarter.

Entering the terminal, he straightened his shoulders and determined to walk as casually as he could, despite what seemed like a thousand pound weight in his hand. He went to the flight desk and inquired concerning the time of departure of his plane and then checked in his luggage—the single valise. Checking the valise was the most difficult act of all, but he felt he had no alternative. For him to insist upon clinging to it, would be certain to arouse suspicion. (He had been thinking about all these things since they had told him two days ago he was being entrusted with this mission.) So he watched the valise go riding away on the belt, through the little archway. When it was out of sight he was almost relieved, as if he were no longer responsible for it. Then he went to the waiting room and lighted a cigarette.



OF DEATH

All he had ever done for the organization, heretofore, had been to collect money from their various bookmakers. So why they had chosen him for this dangerous assignment, he did not know. Maybe because it was not as dangerous as

he thought. To their way of thinking it was probably simple. All he had to do was ride on the plane and then when he landed in Chicago give the valise to men who would be waiting for him, and then turn around and catch the next plane back. It was all so very simple, except, of course, if he happened to get caught. But there was no way for that to happen, he felt. This was a simple, uncomplicated plan.

Perhaps he was finally getting his chance. He had been in the organization for almost ten years now, and had always been deep in the lower echelons. But he had always been loyal and competent—he was sure the higher-ups were aware of this—and perhaps this assignment was in the form of a promotion, a first chance to do bigger things. After years and years of running errands and fulfilling menial jobs, perhaps he was finally getting his chance.

These thoughts were like a dream, a dream that included all the trappings: the expensive suits, the big cars, the showy women, the nods of respect from his associates. The desire to make good on his mission suddenly became a passion.

Sitting there smoking, thinking these things, Carl almost leaped out of his seat at the sight of a dozen policemen swarming through the terminal. He would have ignored caution and run out of there, but—partly because he was too terrified to move and partly because he knew, in a moment of clear, logical reasoning, they couldn't all possibly be looking for him—he remained where he was. Then, out of curiosity, he rose and pushed aside the waiting room door and sauntered out into the terminal. The policemen were standing around the desk, in their midst two distinguished old men.

"What's all that about?" Carl asked a stewardess who was just passing.

"Oh," she said, "that's the Prime Minister."

Then Carl remembered. The foreign dignitary was touring the country. He recalled having read in the morning paper that the man was going on to Chicago after having pled in Washington for assistance for his strife-torn country. He was evidently going on the same plane as Carl.

Carl breathed with relief, then congratulated himself for not panicking and running away. He would have to report this to his employers, let them know how he had handled himself in what had appeared to be a bad situation.

Feeling smug with self-confidence, he mingled with the police, a wry humor amusing him. It would be a good one to tell when he got back, how he had virtually had a police escort right to the plane. He looked at his watch and then checked it against one of the wall clocks. They would be boarding the plane shortly. He began to

feel the nervous excitement that follows the relaxation of tension.

Then it was time. The Prime Minister had gone first. The other passengers stood back and watched the police escort him across the field to the plane. The little truck had been emptied of its baggage and was coming back. Carl watched it with some satisfaction. In a few minutes he would be boarding the plane. The Prime Minister was going up the ramp now. At the door he paused and posed for photographers, a small, grave, austere man.

"I don't know why we've got to stand around waiting for him," someone behind Carl grumbled.

Then the Prime Minister disappeared into the plane and the police were coming back—with them several well-dressed men who had been there to shake the dignitary's hand. The other passengers were permitted to board then and they walked across the field toward the plane. Carl felt again that wry amusement as the police filed back past him. If they only knew what was concealed in his luggage. It would probably be worth the attention accorded to six Prime Ministers.

He went up the portable stairway and found his seat and sat down and buckled himself in. He had a window seat and from it a view of the Administration Building and the spectators' ramp. The Prime Minister was sitting up towards the front and Carl could not see him.

After about fifteen minutes, when all the passengers had been seated, Carl glanced at his watch and noted that it was past take-off time. He began to feel an uneasiness which his new feeling of importance could not quite put to rest. He cursed the Prime Minister, certain that the delay had something to do with that personage.

Then he saw two men coming across the field toward the plane. They were walking very quickly. Carl looked around. He came forward in his seat; the safety belt pulled him back, infuriating him, as though it were suddenly symbolic of some abruptly sprung trap. He unbuckled the belt and let the halves fall back around him. He was certain that he had been found out. It was their way, the law's infernal way, he was convinced, to let him think he was getting away with it until the very last moment, and then come and take him off the plane. There was no way out. He saw himself being confronted by the can of heroin, his mission a failure.

But, at the same time, he realized he was letting himself be carried away by unreasonable fears. So he waited.

The men came up into the plane. There was a murmured conversation with the stewardess. Then she came down the aisle and said:

"Ladies and gentlemen, I'm afraid there will be a slight delay in our departure. It seems," and she grew a trifle embarrassed here, smiling, "there has been a bomb scare. Would you all mind going back to the terminal while the plane is searched?"

Carl almost laughed out loud with relief. Was that all it was? Just a little old bomb ticking away someplace under somebody's seat? He got up and stepped out into the aisle and was one of the first off the plane.

"There's probably nothing to it," one of his fellow passengers said as they walked back across the field. "Somebody probably read that the Prime Minister was going to be aboard and decided to have a little joke."

"Probably," Carl said.

"I say they're foolish to print every little move these people make. It gives the practical jokers a chance."

"That's right," Carl said, smiling and most agreeable.

As he was about to re-enter the terminal, Carl happened to look back. What he saw made him stop, his body stiffening as though struck by lightning. The big, down-opening door in the plane's fuselage had been opened and several airport personnel were removing the luggage and piling it onto the small truck.

"What are they doing?" Carl asked, trying to keep the fear, the astonishment, the incredulity from his voice.

"They've got to search everything," a man said. "Don't worry, it won't take long. They're fast and thorough."

He just stood there and gaped while the others filed around him. The police passed around him again, going out to escort the Prime Minister back. Blank-faced, feeling as if his every artery had been sealed shut, Carl followed the others into a special waiting room. There, while the others sat and relaxed or griped, he stood by the window and watched the luggage as it was being unloaded.

What was he to do now? Run away while there was still a chance? That was the most appealing idea that occurred to him. But he couldn't just abandon the valise. His employers would hardly take kindly to such a course. They were extremely touchy about their merchandise, especially about any of it being lost. Perhaps there was a chance the can would not be discovered; perhaps the search would be routine and cursory. Didn't airports get these kind of warnings all the time? Perhaps the searchers had become blasé about their job, cynical and skeptical. But even if they were, the fact that the Prime Minister was a passenger upon this plane attached more significance to the warning and would make them much more thorough than usual. They would

open his bag and look through it and find the can, and they would become suspicious and would ask him what was in it. They would make him open it.

All these things kept passing through his mind as he stood at the window, the tension building in him like a fire being stoked. He felt as a man feels who is about to be sentenced. Then he realized there was but one course for him: he would have to get the valise back before it was searched and escape with it. That was what his employers would expect him to do. If he could accomplish this, they would be greatly impressed with him and congratulate themselves for having picked so astute a man for the assignment.

His future suddenly was bound up with that valise.

He went out into the terminal and over to the flight desk.

"Excuse me," he said to the girl, "but where do they do the searching of the luggage?"

She smiled. "They're probably doing it in the employees' room, next to the main waiting room."

He moved away. He paused, tried to appear casual, and then headed for the main waiting room. Entering it, he saw the door marked Employees' Room. He went to it and opened it. They were bringing the luggage in, throwing it around rather carelessly. The policemen were still with the Prime Minister and hadn't come in yet. The other door opened out upon the field. Carl closed the door behind him and stood there. Two young airport employees in gray overalls were unloading the luggage, pitching it into the room. His eyes feasted upon every piece, watching tensely. His heart burned with an exciting urgency as he realized he might get his chance

Then the two young men left the room completely. They were taking the truck back to the plane to complete the unloading. Carl moved quickly then. He pushed aside various sized and colored pieces of luggage, looking for his own blue and white valise. Then suddenly it stood before him, as incriminating as ever.

He reached down and quickly picked it up. He looked around. No one was about. He turned and hurried back to the door of the main waiting room. He opened the door and walked straight across the waiting room, eyes severely ahead, looking at no one, a hot, giddy excitement inside his head.

Then he was out of there and walking through the busy terminal, hardly daring to breathe, no longer afraid but unwilling to permit himself to feel gratified too quickly lest his optimism prove premature. But he saw no reason why it should be so. The automatically opening doors were just ahead. He walked on the approach and the door marked Out

mysteriously and wonderfully swept out before him and he passed through and was outside.

He walked along the curb and then headed away from the terminal, trembling with excitement. He was almost glad now that the bomb scare had occurred. He hailed a taxi and got in, slamming the door hard, with satisfaction He told the driver the address and then leaned back and crossed his arms. He felt quite smug about himself.

About a half hour later, Carl was taking the elevator to a very luxurious apartment. His knock at the door was answered by a large, broken-faced man, wearing a gun holster over his shoulder.

"You back already?" the man asked.

"Yes," Carl said. The man closed the door. "Where are they?"

"In conference. You can't see them"

"It's very important."

"What's so important?"

"This," Carl said lifting the valise.

"You can leave it, can't you?"

"I have to talk to them."

The man took the valise from him. "I'll give it to them," he said. "Now get out of here. They're expecting some people."

Carl opened his mouth to protest, but it was of no avail. The man opened the door and pushed him out into the hall. Carl stood there for a moment, then headed for the elevator.

In the apartment, "they" were sitting behind a closed door at a long, shiny. mahogany table.

"I'm surprised you took a job like that," one was saying.

The other shrugged. "Why not? Their money is as good as anybody else's."

The door opened and the man with the holster came in, holding the valise. They didn't look at him. He waited a moment and then put the valise down and went out.

"Who was the fellow who took it to the plane?"

"Carl Luca. He's been a hanger-on for years. We told him it was a load of heroin for Chi. There's enough dynamite in there to blow up a dozen planes." The speaker pushed back his cuff and looked at his watch. "It should be going off about now . . ."

Carl was crossing the street when he heard the explosion. He looked up as bits of glass tinkled at his feet.

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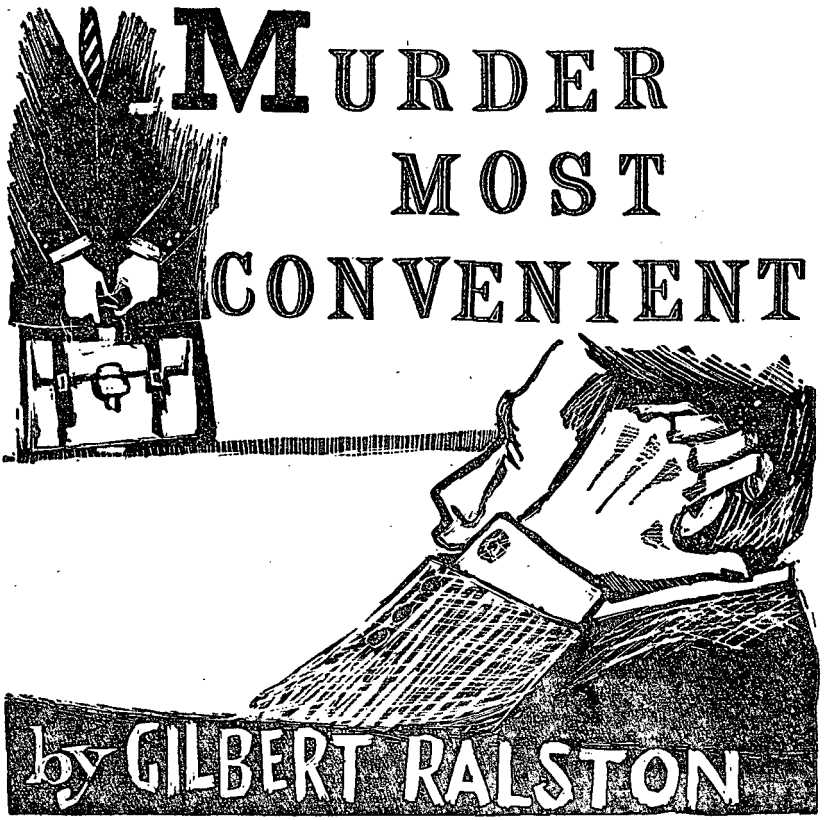


by GILBERT RALSTON

MY NAME is Jonathan Keeler Wainright. I am forty-six years of age, a widower, at present in the best of health.

What follows is the truth. I shall not embellish it, simply stating the facts as they occurred chronologically as I remember them.

A salesman is an individual who will repeat ad nauseam *that he has something decidedly excellent to sell. But, of course, salesmen must sell themselves first. This is not easy. Because this product, you see, is frequently somewhat dubious.*

Let us begin then at noon on the twenty-fifth of June, at the lunchroom counter of the bowling alley of a town called Three Forks, a typical California suburban development, without dignity, or a decent restaurant. I sat at the end seat of the counter, steeped in contemplation of happier times, picking occasionally at a weary slab of glutinous apple pie. I have always taken pride in my appearance and I must have seemed an outre and vaguely foreign figure in this decidedly inelegant lunchroom.

"More coffee, Mister?"

The gutteral croak broke in on my reverie, sending tiny flames of shock up my spine as I looked up at the counterman. I shook my head emphatically.

"That'll be a dollar thirty."

I paid the proffered check, tucking the odd two dimes under the saucer, the counterman palming them with a mumbled grunt of thanks. He was peering curiously at me as I fumbled my wallet back into my pocket, my hands clumsy with the ache to snap his turkey neck.

"Ain't you Ray Goetz?" he said.

I shook my head again.

"Funny, you look like him, sorta."

I forced a cordial smile, although the question started me. Coincidence, I thought. Use it. Use it.

"You sellin' somethin'?" he said, making a desultory effort to clean the counter with a distasteful piece of cloth.

"Argus Pools," I told him.

"What's that?"

"Swimming pools."

"Goetz building one?"

"Yes." The counterman riveted his gaze on me, birdlike in his interest. "You sure you ain't a relative or somethin'?"

"No."

"Too bad you ain't."

"Why?" I asked.

"Goetz is loaded, that's why. Load—ed!" He returned to his blue plate specials, pleased with his knowledge of the great.

It has always been my habit to consciously organize myself, to *gather* myself, as it were, before entering a commercial fray, making a soldier's survey of the terrain. I did so, before the flamboyant facade of the Goetz Realty Company. A small black beetle rested upon the walk before me. I crushed it carefully with my foot; then I made my way up the walk and through the entrance door, my bearing confident and crisp.

There were no tenants at the several desks in the large room, lending it a sterile and impermanent air, only the muted whine of the air-conditioner alive in the summer afternoon. I stood there for a full minute before my eyes became accustomed to the gloom; finally, I was able to read the

words "Ray Goetz" on the middle panel of a door leading off, sunlight bright beneath it. I was forced to *gather* myself again, the empty room playing on my nerves. Ten deep breaths, I told myself. Then knock. Low voice. Confidence. My hands still shook a little when I rapped on the door.

"Come in."

I stood in the doorway after I had opened it, staring at the man behind the massive desk. "I'm Jonathan Wainright," I said. "Argus Pools."

"Figures," Goetz replied. He seemed annoyed at my hesitancy, at the way I was staring at him. "What's eating you?"

"Someone told me that we look alike. I'm startled to find it's true. I beg your pardon."

Goetz scowled at me, examining me from head to foot, finally rising. "Have a chair, Wainright," he said, affably enough. "Over there in the light. Turn your face." He circled me then like a judge at a stock show, making little clucking noises in his throat before he sat down at his desk again. "Heard about things like this," he said. "Never thought one of them would happen to me."

"It is surprising, isn't it? The Resemblance."

We were almost the same height and coloring, except that my hair was grayed somewhat more than his. A caricature of me, the features almost matched, except that they were somewhat stronger in his case, lips and eyes almost identical. His voice was not unlike my own, except that it was uncultured, a quality exaggerated by the crude patois of his speech.

"I quit being surprised a long time ago, Wainright," he said, "but this shakes me some. It really does." He followed my glance around the room. Then he said, "Jazzy little dump, isn't it? Monument to the great American Chump." He smiled crookedly, still scrutinizing me.

"Chump?"

"That great body of installment buyers known as the common man. My dear departed customers. The great big beautiful unwashed public. The chumps." He was preening himself, spreading out the feathers of his superiority for me to examine.

"It is a handsome office." I said, looking at the black leather divan, the prints on the wall, the heavy bronze lamp in the corner.

"Not bad for a Chicago street rat," he replied, obviously pleased by my flattering appreciation. "Saw one like it in a book. Hired a character to match it for me." He reached with his left hand for a cigar out of the silver humidor behind him, lighting it clumsily from an ornate desk lighter, spitting the bitten tip onto the beige rug. (I particularly despise cigar smoke, clouds of which billowed around me as he continued.) "Fellow tried

to pad a couple of bills. So I stiffed him for his. He's still hollerin'. Guess he should have read the motto there on the desk." He pointed out a small brass plaque that proclaimed: "Do Unto Others Before They Do Unto You." I read it, knowing then that this was the enemy, always and forever the enemy.

"You own the pool company?" His words were measured now, the professional, preliminary opening skirmish.

"I'm the sales and service representative."

He looked musingly at me. "Salesman," he said. "For a pool company." He went on, mouthing his expensive cigar, the tobacco a soaked horror against his lips. "Here we sit. Twins. One up. One down. How old are you?"

"Forty-six." I was hypnotized by his rudeness.

"I'm forty-seven."

"You go to college?"

"Yes."

"Got a degree?"

"Bachelor of Fine Arts."

"Married?"

"No. Not married."

"That's the way it goes. You got a college degree and expensive tastes and I got four million dollars. You have to sell pools and I retire and have a lovely wife."

Fortunately, I have learned to control myself. I ignored what he'd said and came right to the point of my visit. "I have the contract for you to sign, Mr. Goetz," I said. "For the pool."

He looked sharply at me, a speculative look in his hard blue eyes. "What contract?" he said.

"Your secretary sent me the order. In a letter. I have it here." I drew out a copy of the letter and laid it before him.

"Don't have a secretary any more. Not here, anyway. Sold out the business two weeks ago."

I fought the feeling of disaster, knowing he was the sort who would pounce on any weakness like a cat, keeping the signs of my agitation out of my face. I remembered the order in the mail, the endless pressure from the home office to make a sale, the risk I had taken in accepting the order without a contract.

"I'm sure the work has begun," I said. I was definite, calm.

"Yes, it has," he answered. "Without a contract."

"The steel should have arrived also," I said weakly, sparring for time.

He gave me another analytical glance before he spoke. "It has."

I pointed to the pages on the desk. "Here's the contract," I told him. "It's a simple purchase order. I marked the place for you to sign." My calmness and force were having some effect on him. He reached for the pen in the holder in front of him, hesitated.

"I want to read it first," he said, flicking a contemptuous finger at the document.

"Please do," I replied.

"I want to read it *later*. Later tonight." Goetz was measuring me again, the speculative glimmer still in his eyes.

"It would be gratifying," I said, "if you could read it now, Mr. Goetz. I have an engagement in Los Angeles tonight. It's a long drive back." It was a mistake to press him, the cheap little power complex craving a victim, hungry for an audience.

"Mr. Wainright." Even the way he pronounced my name had become a subtle insult. "You supposed to service this deal?"

I nodded.

"Service it then." Suddenly he grew affable again, his ego evidently sufficiently well fed for the moment. "Come to the house for dinner. I'll read the contract and sign it tonight."

I balanced future hours of this game of cat and mouse against another miserable meal in the bowling alley. "All right, Mr. Goetz," I said. "I should be delighted to come to dinner."

Goetz pointed to the contract. For the first time I noticed that the middle fingers of his right hand were bandaged. "Fold that for me," he said. "I have a sore hand. Caught it in a piece of machinery. Chewed the tips of two fingers off."

"I'm sorry," I replied.

Goetz looked at me, amusement touching his lips. "No you're not, Wainright. Right now you hate my guts." He smiled, silkily. "But I'm not such a bad fellow when I get my own way. You'll get over your gripe."

He was mistaken.

There was an elongated convertible parked in front of the building,

chromed, blatant, expensive. Goetz paused a moment near it, fishing awkwardly for the keys with his injured hand. He turned to me again.

"You got a car, Wainright?"

"In the parking lot at the bowling alley," I said.

"Leave it there. Get in."

He drove with a flourish, tooling the big car expertly through the streets of Three Forks, impatient and agressive with the less opulant traffic. I examined him covertly as he drove, cigar clamped in his teeth. This is the way, I told myself. This is how it is done. Assurance. Arrogance. The acceptance of superiority without question. "Get a load of this toy," he said, reaching for a telephone under the dash, then placing a call to his home through the mobile telephone operator.

The Goetz residence crouched at the top of a rolling hill, overlooking the town, a fenced and manicured show-place, flat-roofed, red-bricked, heavy with glass and modernity.

"One hundred and fifty thousand bucks," he said, as we got out of the car.

"Charming," I replied.

Goetz turned to me, a twisted smile hovering around his lips. "Come off it, pool salesman," he said. "You hate it. You're the quiet New England type. If I gave it to you, you wouldn't live in it. You'd sell it to another hustler like me and find yourself a quiet little cottage full of nice, conventional mouldy furniture."

"Perhaps I would," I said.

"C'mon in."

The interior of the house was incredibly, unbelievably beautiful. I remember my feelings of shock as we entered the living room, my feet slipping deliciously into the velvety pile of the wall-to-wall carpet, the cool touch of muted music somewhere in the background. The room was done in gentle grays and black, sparsely and tastefully furnished, an occasional spray of flowers a colorful accent against the otherwise unadorned walls. Goetz did something to a hidden electric switch behind a set of white drapes. whispering them aside, uncovering a wall of glass which ran the full length of the room. I saw the patio stretching away from the house, and beyond that, the ugly scar of the excavation for the swimming pool.

"Sit down, Wainright," Goetz said. "I have a couple of calls to make. I'll go and tell my wife you're here."

He departed at once, leaving me free to give my attention to a Chinese screen in a corner of the room unable to keep my fingers from caressing the luscious lacquer, tracing the intricate design.

"Do you like my room?"

Spinning in the direction of the sound, for a moment I was without poise, having been startled by

the voice of the dark woman standing there.

"I'm Mina Goetz," she said. "You do look like him."

"Jonathan Wainright," I said. "I came about the pool."

"I know," she replied. "He told me." She waited calmly for me to speak again. Part Indian, I thought, Mescalero—perhaps Comanche.

"It is a lovely room," I said. "Did you do it?"

She was impassive, weighing her reply. "Yes," she finally said. "It's easy, when you have anything you want to work with."

"It's never easy. Not really."

"Don't flatter me, Mr. Wainright. I'm not used to it." She moved quietly into the room. "Please sit down. Will you have a drink?"

"No, thank you."

"There are cigarettes beside you." She moved to the wall switch, closed the drapes. "I like that better. It filters the light. Besides it shuts out that awful hole your men made." She curled up on the chair across from me, sinuously winding her legs into a comfortable position, the light playing on her high cheek-bones, sculpturing her face. Ubasti, cat-woman, ready for the blood.

"Tell me what you do next."

"Tomorrow we put the steel in. It's like a basket. In the afternoon we spray in the cement."

"Spray it in?" She was making conversation, covering her scrutiny of me with questions.

"It's a new system," I said. "Squirts concrete out of a hose. Like a fire hose. Then we plaster, and the job is done."

"And then what?"

"We put the water in while the plaster is still wet. Whole job takes only a few days."

"How did you happen to get into this business?" She asked.

I told her a little about my back ground. She was an exceedingly good listener, although I found her remarks somewhat conventional and ordinary.

"Where are your people?" she asked, finally.

"They died some years ago. I was an only child."

"I'm sorry. And your wife?"

"I am a widower." Hesitating before following her lead, I decided to risk it, caution giving way to curiosity. "How long have you been married?" I asked.

There was a decided pause before she replied. "Three years," she said. I could see the shadow cross her eyes as she spoke. "Three years," she said again.

"Makes it sound like thirty, doesn't she?" Goetz was standing in the doorway, a drink in his bandaged hand, "C'mon, let's eat." He moved toward the dining room, his eyes hot and savage as they flicked across his wife's face.

I turned to wait by the door for her. She was standing in the mid-

dle of the room, her dark face placid, only her eyes alive as she watched her husband leave the room. She moved then, as though consciously willing herself to move.

Ray Goetz stood at the head of the table, the drink already at his place, a maid hovering nervously in the background. He motioned me to a place. "Sit down, Wainwright." It occurred to me with some interior amusement that this was the fourth time the man had ordered me to a seat. "Have a drink."

Drinking at the dinner table has always seemed to me to be an abomination.

"Better have one. Part of your contract." Goetz could not abide a refusal of any request.

The silvery voice of his wife broke into the building tension. "Don't press it on him, Ray," she said. "Some people don't like to drink at dinner."

"So they don't," said Goetz. "So they don't." He took a deliberate swallow of his drink. "You know something?" he said. "Mrs. Goetz doesn't like to drink at dinner either. That is, she doesn't like for me to drink at dinner. I have a very stylish wife, Mr. Wainright."

My eyes went from one to the other, searching for a clue to the relationship between them. She was smiling sweetly, her even teeth bright in the candlelight.

"My husband is a drunken pig, Mr. Wainright," she said, her gentle voice calm as she began her dinner. Goetz rose out of his seat, his face murderous. "Sit down, Ray," she said. "Eat your soup."

Force coupled with gentility is power. Mina Goetz had depth, more than Ray Goetz could ever understand. Also I had begun to sense a fact which should have been obvious from the very beginning. Ray Goetz loved his wife, and was rendered desperately helpless by her. She could hurt him, and did several times before the interminable dinner faltered to a close, Goetz glowering and affable by turns, filling his whiskey glass again and again. Mrs. Goetz and I covered up our reaction to his condition with small talk, carefully engineered by my hostess, for whom my admiration continued to grow.

In many respects I found the situation captivating. I've always been titillated and intrigued by violence of any kind, and so I found our efforts to keep the conversation going an exciting counterpoint to the unpleasantness of my host and client. It was fatiguing, however, and I felt relieved when we moved to the living room for coffee. For a moment I envied the servants their escape, as I heard their cars going down the drive; then I thought of the days of peace the eight hundred dollar commission for the pool would buy for me. The peace I'd have until the next

time, of course. Until the next Goetz stood in my way.

"How are your fingers?" I asked Goetz, searching for a safe subject of conversation.

"They hurt some." He waved the glass in his hand. "This stuff makes a good anesthetic."

"Would you like me to look at them?" Mina asked.

"Let 'em alone. Practice on the poor."

Goetz went back to his drink. I must have looked questioningly at her.

"I was a nurse once," she said.

Goetz was weaving over her, his slack mouth gone hard again. "You want to know why I asked him here?"

"Yes," she said, "if you want to tell me."

"Wanted you to see what you might have got for yourself," he said. "Look at him! Fancy clothes. Fancy college. I've been pushing him around all day and he hasn't got the guts to tell me off."

I'd risen to my feet. The little vein began to throb in my temple, a rhythmic thump, thump, as he went on.

"Looks like me, doesn't he? Doesn't he? Except for one thing. He ain't got two dimes to rub together!" He stood over me, his drunken face a loose sneer. "He stands there taking this—for a commission, for a two-bit commission!"

I could feel his rage now, a pleasant tingle in my fingertips. *Aria da Capo,* I thought. Song of the end. This is the way. Always, Always . . .

Mina Goetz's voice cut into my concentration.

"Ray, stop it," she said. "Stop it, now!"

"Sure, I'll stop it! I'll stop it!" He reached into his coat pocket. "Here's your contract, pool salesman!" He threw it on the floor. "Take it. Go on, take it. And get out!"

The scene was a tableau for a moment, Mina standing to one side, Goetz raging and dominating the room, my head swirling, swirling. After a moment, I stooped to pick up the contract.

"It's not signed, Mr. Goetz." I said, making my voice as calm as possible.

"And it's not going to be signed, pool salesman."

I tried again, patiently, the little shocks going through me now, again and again. "You can't do that, Mr. Goetz. Why, I've the signed order from your secretary."

"My secretary? She's long gone, Mr. Wainright." He was spitting my name now. "Nobody but an idiot starts construction without a contract."

The waves were coming now, rolling up from my feet, slowly, slowly. "Do you mean you're not signing, Mr. Goetz?"

"Get out," he told me.

"I'll pay it, if he doesn't, Mr.

Wainright." Mina Goetz said.

Goetz turned on her savagely. "No, you won't baby. I got you tied up. All tied up. You couldn't buy him a hamburger if he was starving."

The waves swept over me, calming me, soothing me. I *gathered* myself again. Goetz was glaring at me. It was wonderful, exhilarating. I faced him for the last time. *"Fattura della Morte."* I said. *"Fattura della Morte."*

"Get out!" he shouted.

I struck him, solidly, on the chin and mouth, relishing the impact of my fist. He went down, pausing for a moment on all fours, his bloodied mouth working, his eyes insane. It was good to be alive again, focused, feather-light. I struck again as he rose to his feet, a short chopping blow to the solar plexus. He would have been easy, even without the liquor. I stopped his clumsy rush with the cut to the windpipe, tripping him without difficulty, sending him crashing elaborately into the ornate coffee table.

Mina Goetz was holding the door open. "Get out of here," she said. "Run!"

Our eyes met and held while I shook my head. The room was caught in a static moment of time, unreal, a ballet scored with violence. Careless, I assumed Goetz was unable to continue. I turned just in time to avoid the direct force of his next lunge, his right hand grasped a metal statuette which had rested on the table. For a moment we circled each other, Goetz turned animal, the effects of the liquor lost in fury. He lunged at me again, bringing down the statuette with crushing force on my shoulder, the pain beyond memory, a streak of fire. I struck him again and again with my good left arm, hard, to the face, to the body, trying desperately now for the killing cut to the back of the neck, terribly handicapped by my injured shoulder. I managed the kick to the ulnar nerve area of the arm which forced him to drop the statuette. But he leaped at me again, maddened fingers clawing for my throat. We fell, Goetz's face a nightmare before my eyes, as I felt the inexorable pressure on my throat. I fought for breath, for vision, still hearing the animal sounds, the endless cursing that poured from his lips. Out of the whirling red haze I could see the man's wife standing over us, the statuette raised high above her head, saw her bring it down once and then again, Goetz going limp upon me as she did so. I crawled from under him and staggered to my feet. Mina Goetz was looking down at the still form of her husband, her eyes wide, her breath coming in great gulps, the bloody statuette still in her hand.

"I hate him," she said. "I hate him."

I leaned over the table, *gathering* myself again, forcing strength into my exhausted body. When I looked up, the woman was on the floor beside her husband, her hands busy and professional. She held me with her eyes.

"He's dead," she said. "I killed him."

I crossed over to Goetz and turned him over, feeling for a pulse as did so.

"He's dead," she said again. "I know."

"What do we do now?" I asked her.

"Sit down. Rest. Let's rest first."

It was a singular moment. I was intrigued by the reaction of the woman. And I was surprised that she had not given the body of her husband a second look after assuring herself that he was dead, that she had made no protestations of sorrow or of concern, that she simply sat, thinking calmly, her long fingers quiet in her lap.

"We must notify the police," I said.

"We can't," she said. "What will you tell them?"

"The truth. What happened."

She shook her head. "We can't. I killed him. You killed him. That's all we can say."

"We could say it was self defense."

"They wouldn't believe it."

"I suppose not," I said and, strangely enough, felt amused.

"Bury him," she said, turning her warm brown eyes on me. "Bury him. In the bottom of the excavation for the pool. Tomorrow they'll put the concrete in. He'll never be found."

"They'd find out," I said. "Sooner or later they'd find out. They always do."

"Only in fiction," she said, and stood up quickly. It were as though she'd come to a decision.

"What do you suggest?" I asked.

"The obvious. Take his place." She was suddenly very animated, pleading. "You look like him. Take his place."

"It's impossible."

"You wanted an opportunity. Take this one. Everything could be yours. Everything. There'd be no trouble about the business. It's already sold. We were going away as soon as the pool was in. I could close everything out on the phone. Nobody would ever know. Nobody, just you and me."

"Where would we go? I've no money."

"We were ready to leave. There's money here. Enough. Tickets—passports—everything." She came close to me then, talking, talking, the pattern growing. "It's just your hair really. We could dye it. People don't notice things closely. It could be ours, all of it, the money, the house, everything. If we report it, we get nothing. Not even the money. Bury him. Take his place. I'll help you."

I weighed her statements care-

fully. I have a certain talent for masquerade, but this one required the coolest logic. It was a chance, a long one, fraught with danger and difficulties, but filled with drama. Perhaps this swung the scales for me. "You'll have to help me," I said.

She was at my side in an instant, her hand on my arm. "I'll help you. It'll work. You'll see."

My torn coat was left in the living room while we walked to the excavation, my shoulder numb, but less painful, which assured me that there was no serious damage.

"There's a shovel in the rear of the house," she said. "The workmen left their tools."

It was a luminous California night, moonlight flooding the bottom of the hole, turning the ugly excavation into a magic place. The digging was not difficult, the soft earth easily moved aside. Suddenly, I turned to her. "I thought of something else," I said. "The fingers. He had two injured fingers. People must know about it."

Her face was elfin in the moonlight. "I'm a nurse," she said. "I can do it. It was just the tips." Her lips were avid now, the wet tongue flicking in and out. "I was treating him. I have some novocaine. You won't feel it."

"You're a little mad," I said to her.

"Perhaps. A little." She was smiling at me, gently. "It will all be worth it."

Together, we dragged the limp and bleeding body to the hole, rolling him in face down, covering him carefully, pounding the loose soil into its old contour again, spreading the residue carefully over the bottom of the excavation. I made a last examination while she held the light.

"Now," she said. "Now we are committed."

"Yes," I replied. "We are committed."

"Come into the kitchen."

I was reeling with fatigue. "No," I said. "Not yet." She was hard, definite, as she led me into the house. "You can sleep afterwards."

"Can you do it?" I asked. "Are you sure?"

"I was a surgical nurse, a good one," she answered. "I can do it. Just don't watch."

I woke from a drugged sleep hours later, her face a cameo over me, the memory of the night before a collage of wild color and blurred movements. Disoriented, for a few moments I fought reality. There was a deal of pain, my shoulder aching where Goetz had hit me, a number of other miscellaneous contusions making themselves felt. I looked curiously at my hand, suddenly recalling the scene in the kitchen the night before, the hypodermic and the knives, the hospital smell. Now the bandages were evidence that it had all been real.

"Hurry," Mina Goetz said.

"We've work to do." She pointed to a bedroom window. A truck was standing there, two workmen beginning the construction of the steel basket for the pool.

"Will they dig?" she asked.

"No. There'll be just the steel to put in."

"How long before the cement man comes?" she asked.

"Four or five hours," I said, "Maybe more."

"They'll expect you to supervise?"

"Only the steel work. The others are specialists."

"Go out there now. Do your job. For the last time." She smiled, a little secret smile. "Keep your bandaged hand in your pocket. They mustn't see it. I'll have a cup of good, hot coffee for you in the kitchen."

Dressing was a painful and awkward process, my injured shoulder and hand making it very difficult to shave. She was in the kitchen when I entered, a charming breakfast set out for me. It was the first decent meal I'd had since coming to Three Forks, a pleasant start to an eventful day.

The inspection of the pool proved routine, although I had some difficulty keeping my eyes from returning time and again to the shallow end where the body lay. Fortunately my bandaged fingers began to ache, giving me a point of concentration while the steel workers built the basket for the pool and every now and then walked over the grave.

Mina was beside me when the truck left the house, our indiscretion covered with a net of steel. "It's almost over, Jonathan. Almost over." It was the first time she had called me by my given name. "When you go in that door again, you'll start a new life. You'll have a new name and a new life." She stopped me at the door, both her hands on my shoulders. She kissed me, gently, her lips soft against mine. "You're Ray Goetz now," she said. "Rich, retired, and married." Early that afternoon the cement machine started its work, spraying the layers of cement on the skeleton of steel.

"What do they do next?" Mina asked.

"They plaster it in a few days, then fill it with water. Then we may swim, if we wish."

There are a hundred little things which go to make up the public memory of a man. I listed them as carefully for the Goetz that I was to become as for the Wainright I must erase. Mina was also busy; she dyed my hair, dressed my fingers which hurt abominably, and rummaged through the wardrobe to find clothes to fit me. As Wainright, I made a call to the Argus Pool Company, resigning without notice, taking a pleasant moment to annoy the management with a politely acid criticism of their product. Mina mailed the last of my

business correspondence, returning the contract for the pool with a check in full, carefully signed, proving most adept at this minor forgery. (Actually, it is remarkably easy to forge an acceptable signature, if all the related documents are correct.) I had no family within reach, nor did Goetz. This simplified and helped. My furnished room in Los Angeles was canceled by mail, my clothes and personal effects stored through an obliging moving company. Mina dismissed the servants, and I kept out of sight while they grumbled their gratitude for a month's salary in lieu of notice.

Day in and day out, Mina helped me with my study, patiently pounding in knowledge of Goetz's background, reading and re-reading the records of his investments and banking affairs which she produced from the desk in the study. It was really a surprisingly simple chore. Goetz had arranged all his affairs for retirement and, inasmuch as his investments were for the most part in real property, there did not seem to be any difficulties which could not be surmounted. There were no visitors, except an occasional deliveryman, each of whose services, Mina stopped as of that date. Gradually, the personality and background of Goetz became clear to me, the cloak more easily worn, the part I was playing as definite as an actor's role and as easily assumed.

The first test of my ability came on Monday of the second week, when I appeared at the local bank to deposit several routine checks received in the mail. People are essentially unobservant, and providing that the pattern of a personality is not changed or violated, a masquerade such as the one in which I was engaged is practical and possible. I did ordinary things, on several subsequent visits to town, progressing from one small public chore to another slowly and easily, grafting the idea of the new Ray Goetz over the town's idea of the old, and by the middle of the third week had genuinely begun to enjoy my new existence, spiced as it was with danger, and made whole by the comfort and pleasure I had begun to take in Mina.

We had scheduled our departure for the end of the third week, feeling that we had sufficiently planted the idea that Goetz was still alive. (I took extraordinary pleasure in bathing in the pool, a cosmic jest which Mina did not appreciate.) It was a gracious period of my life, filled with music and laughter and the promise of better things to come. We prepared for our trip with care, first the careful scheduling of trains (I am nervous about flying), then the delightful chore of arranging the stops for our Grand Tour, Paris, Rome, Madrid, Stockholm, Copenhagen.

Perhaps the peak of my enjoyment of this adventure came on

our departure night, when we sat in the living room, a staid, wealthy American couple about to take a year's vacation. I thought then of the rare pattern of the past few days, the odd and interesting beginning, the exciting climax, the wonderfully managed but uncontrived ending which somehow still remained too simple—and unsatisfactory from a dramatic viewpoint. As we sat and waited for the taxi to take us to the station it amused me to think of other endings I might contrive. I thought of Wainright, the man I had destroyed, and of Goetz, the man I had become, and how easy it would be for me to slip back into the character of Wainright again, picking up the threads of his life where it had stopped only three weeks before. To do so I would have to remove Mina, a simple matter in her present absurd and childish state of trust. A scarf properly applied, the body left in the bedroom, and the authorities on a merry chase for the absent but nonexistent husband—a wonderfully baffling puzzle. But there was the matter of my fingers, and above all the vast quantity of wealth which I was enjoying. It was an impractical idea, the contemplation of which ceased with the ringing of the doorbell announcing the arrival of the cab.

I smiled at Mina and opened the door to find two men on the porch, the first of them performing that idiotic and theatrical gesture of all police officers, showing me a metal badge, mumbling the usual formula. Mina was standing by the bags, her face a living question. I believe I carried the opening conversation off splendidly, seating them, offering them a drink.

"I'm Ray Goetz," I said. "This is my wife, Mina. What can we do for you?"

"I see you are leaving, Mr. Goetz," the tall one said. "We'll be brief. Sorry to bother you."

"Please go ahead," I said. "We have allowed a little extra time."

"We are looking for a Mr. Jonathan Wainright," the tall man said.

"He's not here," I told him. "That is the name of the gentleman who came to put the pool in for us three weeks ago."

"When did he leave here?" the tall man asked.

"On Friday, June 26th, as I remember," I said, hesitating appropriately.

"Do you remember the time?"

"About five o'clock in the afternoon. I remember, because I took him to town. The clock on the bank read five twenty-five as I dropped him off at the bowling alley."

"Why there?" said the tall one.

"He said he left his car there." (I could only bemoan my stupidity. But it had seemed perfectly safe to leave the Wainright car in

the bowling alley parking lot, adding one more bizarre note to the disappearance of Jonathan Wainright, but I had forgotten that abominable counter man, whose memory of a stranger was the undoubted cause of this visit from the minions of the law.)

"Has something happened?" Mina asked.

"Just a routine disappearance, Mrs. Goetz. The car is still there. At the bowling alley. He never picked it up. Did he say anything to you that might indicate where he was going?"

They were being professionally casual. "No," I replied. "He finished his supervisory job and left. I assumed he was going back to Los Angeles."

"Why did he leave his car in town?"

"He met me at the office. I asked him to dine with us and saw no reason why we should take two cars. He stayed here over night, supervised the construction of the pool, then left."

"Why did he stay here?"

"He was a pleasant enough fellow. We had a spare guest room."

"We're not questioning your motives, Mr. Goetz, just trying to get a little information. How did you get back to town?"

"In my car. Down the Country Club Road." I felt secure now, the danger averted.

"What time was that?" The tall one was doing the talking, while his shorter companion was busy with his notes.

"We left at five o'clock."

"You're sure of the time?"

"Quite sure. I remember checking my watch."

"You left here at five o'clock on Friday, arriving at the parking lot at what time?"

"Five twenty-five, by my watch."

"We are trying to pinpoint the time as precisely as possible."

"The clock on the bank read five thirty as I went by on my way back here."

"You returned the same way?"

"Yes."

"You're sure of the time, Mr. Goetz?"

"Positive."

They rose to leave. The tall one looked at me for a moment, casually. "Mr. Goetz."

"Yes."

"What did Wainright look like?"

"Rather like me, I thought."

"Yeah. We saw the picture."

They were both eyeing me now. "Would it be possible for you to take a later train?"

"Inconvenient, but possible." I was superb. "Why?"

"We would like you to come to the station and write out a statement."

"You are insisting?"

"Might as well tell you. It's kind of important we find that fellow Wainright."

"Is there something you haven't told us?" Mina asked.

The tall officer stopped to hold the door for me. "Yeah, Mrs. Goetz. Two things." I savored the pulsing feel of the room while Mina waited for her answer. "Wainright's a pathological killer. We have three fugitive warrants for him."

Mina, her eyes wide, looked from me to the officer. She was never more beautiful.

"Who did he kill?" she said, the words choking their way out of her throat.

"His wife, among others. Real name is Keeler—Jonathan Keeler. Sometimes he tags the name Wainright onto that."

Mina was rigid, her hands shaking, her face turned up to mine like a flower in the sun, searching, searching. I smiled at her.

"You said there were two things," she said.

The short officer answered this time. "Yes, Ma'am, there is another problem. We'd like Mr. Goetz to explain how he got to the bowling alley with Wainright that Friday at five o'clock on the Country Club Road."

"I've already explained it," I said.

"Not well enough, Mr. Goetz. There was a truck overturned on that road that Friday. Big, trailer truck. Had the road blocked from three to six."

Mina was past speech as I turned at the door.

"Good night, Mina," I said.

I shall always remember her face, as the complex web of circumstances drew tight around her. Fascinating, really fascinating.

My own position was ridiculous to say the least. They were polite enough to me when they took me to the station, even apologizing for the necessity of taking my finger prints, then maintaining the tradition of all police departments, keeping at me and at me, repeating in a hundred ways the same dull questions, over and over, annoying me to a point of distraction. I am not a patient man, nevertheless I bore this endless repetition for nearly two hours, feeling a sense of relief when at long last I asked for and received the proper equipment to write this account, which I have done as carefully and accurately as my recollection would permit.

I am somewhat regretful about making further difficulties for Mina Goetz, but after all the whole thing was her idea.

Signed,

Jonathan Keeler

I shall not be my usual suave, witty, charming self in introducing this drama. I shall merely say that in bringing it to you I have been clever, enterprising and commendably compassionate.

by MANN RUBIN

NIGHT OF AN

DARCY waited until the guards had finished shaving his legs and the Chaplain was seated across from him, ready to open the Bible, before making his move. He had five minutes before the Warden would arrive.

The gun he withdrew was a small, rusty automatic that had been smuggled to him three weeks previously by a friend, who had stood by him all through his trial and later through his long ordeal to escape the chair, through twelve years in a six-by-six cell on Death Row.

Darcy clicked off the safety-latch to let them know he desired their attention. The two guards were piling his last supper leftovers on a tray and the Chaplain was adjusting his glasses, when the low, metallic sound scraped through the cell like sand-paper. Their three heads turned simultaneously.

"I'm sorry, gentlemen," said Darcy, "but your astonishment has some foundation. This gun's loaded. Please cooperate and no one'll get hurt."

Fred, the older of the two guards, was the first to recover. His body trembling, he raised his hands, forgetting the half-filled coffee cup he was holding so that it smashed to the floor, splattering his pants with liquid stains. He looked positively abashed, as if he had suddenly caught his best friend kissing his wife.

"You're crazy. You'll never get away with it."

"We'll see," said Darcy unperturbed. "Let's just wait and see."

Next it was the Chaplain, a tall, white-haired man with a calm, un-

theatrical manner. Darcy had found him to be extremely well read and a fine conversationalist; he hoped the man would offer no difficulty.

"Put the gun down, William. You don't have a chance."

"Please, Chaplain, stay out of this. You know me well enough by this time to realize I've weighed and reweighed every detail of this move. Under the circumstances, I know exactly what my chances are for what I want to do."

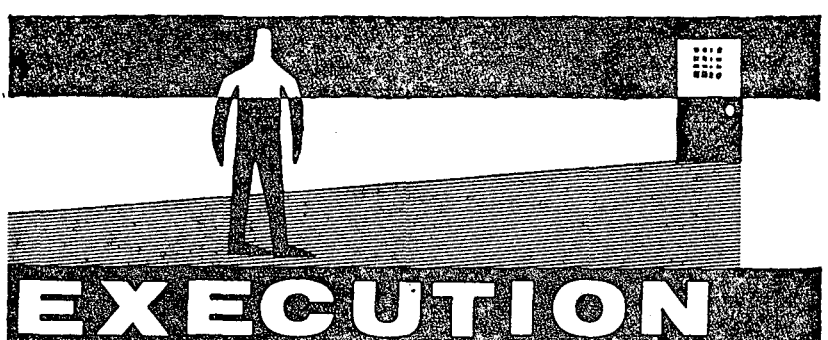
A flicker of movement caught the corner of Darcy's left eye and he turned abruptly, the gun so tightly held it seemed a part of his own flesh. It was Brick, the younger guard, the one Darcy felt might be the most trouble. A big, likeable farmboy, he took pride in his assignment, and through the years had treated Darcy more like a personal friend then a condemned murderer. This relationship plus the total improbability of a convict on Death Row having a gun, had created the laxity that had made it possible for Darcy to get the gun.

Young Brick stood posed, ready to spring into action, more out of hurt then anger; tears welled in his eyes.

"Don't be a fool," warned Darcy.

"You dirty louse!" screamed the boy. "I trusted you! Now I see you're everything they said! They should have killed you years ago!"

"Don't think they didn't try," said Darcy, grinning, rising. He waved the gun menacingly. "Okay,



all of you. Back against the far wall. And keep your hands in sight at all times. When I finally leave here, I don't want your blood on my hands."

They obeyed him in silence, their eyes continuing to stare bewilderedly at the violence of his action. Each felt personally betrayed. Darcy sensed this, and he sincerly wanted them to understand he wasn't acting out of a sudden impulse or whim.

"If you're interested, that coffee pot near my bed is still warm. Also let me recommend the French pastry."

They ignored his offer.

He shrugged, took a cigarette from his shirt pocket, lit it, and still keeping in the shadows, moved to the front of his cell, where he could observe both ends of the outside corridor without being seen. It was a familiar sight after twelve years, so that even a cursory glance told him all was running according to plan. On the left was the heavy steel door through which the Warden would eventually come, and on the right, twenty-five yards farther down, was the small green door that opened into the execution chamber.

His eyes paused on one other object in the immediate area, a telephone resting on a wooden table half-way between his cell and the execution room. He knew the phone was hooked up on a direct line to the Governor's mansion. He had heard it ring many times for many men, just as he had heard its silence pronounce final doom on an equal number of men, who walked past it to the green door—never to return. Tonight, it was the most vital instrument in Darcy's plan, on it depended the success or failure of his entire operation.

"What's the time?" he asked over his shoulder.

"You have less than ten minutes," answered the Chaplain, his voice solemn, unforgiving.

"When do you make your break?" asked the young guard.

"Be patient."

"You'll be caught."

"Perhaps."

"I hope they give you a good long fry for this one."

"I'm touched by your sentiments."

He stumped out his cigarette; nothing tasted right tonight. He looked toward the Chaplain.

"What about you? Don't you have two cents to add?"

"You said you didn't want my advice."

"Even so, I can read your eyes. You're so disappointed in me. I haven't followed the rules, haven't conformed to the etiquette expected of someone who's lived twelve years on Death Row. Where's my sportsmanship, my school loyalty?"

"I'm not going to condemn you, William. It's your life. You must know what you're doing."

"That's right, Chaplain. It is my life. Every miserable second of it. I owe nothing to nobody. That's why my mind's made up. This is the night I go."

Silence again. Eyes studying him, puzzled, remote, frightened.

"But what if the Governor calls? What if there's a reprieve?" someone asked.

Darcy laughed cynically. "You mean like last time?"

"Yes," said the Chaplain, sud-

denly emotional as if he sensed a weakness in Darcy's armor. "Exactly like last time, and the time before that, and all the other times before that. I think the authorities of this state have been most lenient with you."

"I agree. Most lenient."

"Then give them another chance."

"No. Tonight I call the shots."

He paced silently in front of them. Outside a light rain was falling, but the wind was heavy and dark, brooding clouds cruised the sky making the night blacker than usual. He wondered what people were doing in New York, Chicago, San Francisco. One thing they could always say about him, he was big city all the way; he loved jazz and glitter and a fast pace. That was why the twelve years had been such a nightmare. It was like being buried alive, pebble by pebble, until nothing was left alive in you, not even memories.

He lit another cigarette. Again it was dry and burned raw against his throat. He coughed, flung it away. His palms were sweating like leaking faucets; his nerves felt stretched beyond the confines of his body. What a fool he was; he'd never be able to carry it off, not in a million years. He cursed himself, cursed the endless days of torture and hopelessness which drove him to the brink of this crazy precipice.

Suddenly, came the sound he'd been listening for, the unclasping of the steel bolt on the cell block door as it slid ponderously back from its locked position; the Warden was arriving.

"Darcy, for the last time—"

"Shut up!"

He took a deep breath, his gun cautioning his prisoners for absolute silence. This was it, the last piece in the jig-saw puzzle. Now if only they followed the same procedure that had been followed all the other times. He listened for the tell-tale footsteps.

Always in the past the Warden entered alone, conferred quietly for several minnutes with Darcy and the Chaplain, while the two guards on duty remained in the background, and then the Warden signaled an official within the Execution Cahmber to admit the large entourage of reporters and State dignitaries, who wished to witness his death, to a special room on the other side of the electric chair, where they could observe his final moments in soundproof comfort.

It was usually at this point that the Governor would call, granting Darcy another stay. His audience would leave, his guards and the Warden would congratulate him on his good fortune, and he'd be returned to his cell to await the outcome of new legal maneuvers, new protest marches, new headlines denouncing him as the vilest, blackest murderer ever to appear in the annals of crime.

He waited. Outside, just beyond

his vision, the cell block door swung open, shadows danced along the corridor walls, a flurry of excited whispers came to an abrupt halt, the heavy door creaked on its hinges and swung shut. Darcy pressed deeper into the shadows. Everything depended on the pattern being repeated detail for detail.

More silence. Perspiration dripped from his chin. The men across from him stayed motionless, listening as attentively as he for the first shuffling of feet. Would it be one or many?

Then a single pair of footsteps reverberated across the corridor. The Warden had entered alone. Perfect. Darcy breathed again, smiled fleetingly at his prisoners.

In a matter of seconds he saw the bulbous shape of the Warden come in view. He was a plump man, who moved slowly and took great pride in the progressive way his penitentiary was run.

"Good evening, Darcy," he said.

"Good evening, Warden," replied Darcy, and showed the gun. "Nice of you to join the party."

The plump man bleached white; he was already standing inside the cell, where his excess weight made any thought of agile heroics utterly impossible.

"Where. . . ?"

"Let's just say it came from outer space, Warden. What's important is that I'm holding it, and six bullets are in it."

"You must be out of your mind."

"Possibly."

"Damn it, Darcy, don't you realize there's an army of people here tonight? Reporters, cameramen, prison authorities, picket lines; even the state militia's been called out this time. You'd never get two feet beyond this cell block without someone spotting you and giving the alarm."

"I'm aware of that."

"Then give up this ridiculous idea. Spare a lot of innocent bloodshed."

"I've no intention of hurting anyone."

"Then give me your gun."

"Not till I'm over the hump."

"Three minutes to eleven, William," said the Chaplain. "What can you hope to gain at this point?"

"Don't you know yet? Don't any of you know?"

They stood staring at him, a mere three feet away, their faces blank, puzzled, openly hostile. Darcy wanted to yell his heart out, and shake them until at least one felt the pain and terror gnawing his insides. Twelve years he'd lived with it, and how pathetic it was to find this private legacy of fear still nontransferable.

The Warden stirred restlessly; the heat was getting to him, and he was thinking more of his reputation now than of the immediate circumstances.

"I'll be the laughing-stock of the country once this gets out. I say we've got to rush him." He took a step forward.

"Warden, please," said Darcy, "don't make me do something we'll both be sorry for later."

The Warden wiped a hand across his red, perspiring face. He glanced at the two guards hopefully.

"You with me, boys?"

"A minute. Another minute," pleaded Darxy, edging back along the wall. His heart was beating hard against his chest.

"Why? What's going to happen then? You expecting help?"

"Maybe."

"He's bluffing, boys," said the Warden, attempting another half-step forward. "Rush him, when I give the word."

Darcy reached the furthest corner of his cell, felt the cold, ungiving steel of the bars penetrate his cotton shirt; this was the end of the line.

The two guards, nervously inched forward, closing their ranks. The air was stifling, noiseless.

"Listen to me," shouted Darcy. "'Twelve years I've been in this hell—"

"Brick, you get him from the left," said the Warden. "And you hit from the right, Fred."

"Okay, I robbed a bank and a man was killed."

"Leave the middle for me, boys," said the Warden.

"Some believed the killing was accidental. Some didn't. Me—I don't know anymore. Whether I intentionally pulled the trigger or whether it accidentally fired when I was overpowered from behind, is, after twelve years, hazy in my mind . . ."

The three men moved in on Darcy, slowly, carefully.

"You understand, I can't remember what I was feeling when the gun went off. No image from the past focuses. But what does that matter. What's important is that a jury found me guilty, a judge sentenced me to death, and—"

It was then that the first sharp, jolting ring of the telephone struck, reverberated up and down the length of the entire cell block. It shattered all other sounds, all other motions, it reached each of the men like a blast of clean air.

The Chaplain reacted first. "Thank God," he said relieved, and stepped forward, his hand outstretched to receive Darcy's gun.

"No," said Darcy firmly, the weapon remained clutched in his fist tighter than ever.

The Chaplain stopped dead.

The phone rang a second time.

"Darcy, it's the Governor. It's your reprieve," fumed the Warden, pushing the others out of his way as the phone rang a third time. "Hell, he's saved you again. Let me go answer it."

Darcy kept the gun leveled at the plump man's forehead.

"You move another foot and I'll kill you, Warden. I swear it."

"You damn fool," wailed one guard.

"How long you think he's going to keep ringing?" screamed the other.

"Get him, boys. He's out of his head. This time let's get him," commanded the Warden, and started to charge forward.

An arm reached out, gripped his wrist, holding him in check. It was the Chaplain.

"Wait. I think I understand. This is his breakout. This is the way he, as an individual, has chosen to go." He looked toward Darcy for confirmation.

"Chaplain, you and me talk the same language. Thanks." Darcy smiled appreciatively.

The Warden pulled free of the Chaplain's grasp, studied both men quizzically. "You're as crazy as he is," he told the Chaplain. "If I don't get to that phone, he pays with his life."

"I'm afraid it's out of our hands," said the Chaplain sadly. He nodded to Darcy. "Go ahead, William, explain."

In the background, the phone continued to ring. Darcy lit a cigarette, blew out the smoke leisurely, like he had all the time in the world.

"Like I was saying, Warden, I hold no malice toward anyone. Right or wrong, I was convicted and sentenced to die. Over and over again I've prepared myself for that finality. Nine times I've gotten ready, and nine times, at the last possible moment, I've been spared."

"So why are you complaining?"

"Because suddenly death is easier to face, then living from vacuum to vacuum. That's dying piecemeal, and I can't go through it again. Don't you understand, even murderers have their breaking point. Don't doom me to another eternity of living hell. Give me the justice I was condemned to, not this torture rack of endless nothingness. I'm not a puppet. I won't let myself be used by an ambitious governor in an election year to keep his name in the headlines. I want out. I want out the way it was decided by my peers. Please, Warden, don't answer that phone. This time let the Governor dangle, let him know the meaning of a lost cause; let him wait, and wait . . ."

In the corridor the phone rang another four times, then went silent. For a long while no one moved or spoke, each seemed oblivious of the others, as if isolated by an inner wall of private thoughts and memories too personal to speak of.

"It's over," said Darcy, finally, lowering the gun. "He'll call your office and a couple of other places before trying this line again. On the other hand, there's the possibility he might call right back."

He waited but still the others didn't respond.

"Well, Warden? Do we proceed as scheduled?"

"You can't mean it?"

"If I didn't, don't you think I would have used this on myself long ago?" He gazed at the gun, then, holding it in the flat of his hand, cautiously extended it toward his captives.

"I told you I was expecting help. Yours. For you see, in truth, I'm somewhat of a coward. Please, just say the right word."

The Warden hesitated, rubbed again at his fat, glistening face, and tried to catch the eye of one of the others. No one turned; it was to be his decision alone. He took a deep breath and strode closer to the cell window. For a few moments he listened to the raging wind and watched a fleet of dark clouds sweep across an already black horizon. After awhile he turned.

"A bad night," he murmured. "Wind's like a sledge-hammer. Bet it's knocked down phone lines all over the state." He glanced at his watch, then up at Darcy. "Anyway, I never did cotton to our Governor. Not once in all the years he's called here, has he ever asked who he was talking to."

He winked, crossed back to Darcy, hesitated a second time, then quickly lifted the gun from his hand. In a moment he'd emptied the chambers and pushed the weapon deep into his own pocket. For a time they faced each other without speaking.

"So long, boy," said the Warden, finally. "Gonna miss you. You played a good game of checkers."

"There'll be others," said Darcy.

"I suppose." Abruptly he turned, pushed open the cell-door, stepped into the corridor and signaled to the official inside the Execution Chamber to admit the impatient crowd of press and witnesses. He looked a last time at Darcy, saying, "Anytime you're ready."

Darcy straightened his clothes, kicked off his shoes. The two guards touched his shoulder as they proceeded him out the door. The Chaplain came forward, gently took his arm.

"Pray, Chaplain."

"For your soul, William?"

"For my soul—and for that phone not to ring again," said Darcy, and followed the others into the corridor.

The phone remained silent.

POLITICS is SIMPLY

BY JACK RITCHIE

HERMIONE is a woman of noble proportions, resembling, in part, a grenadier sergeant who has not exhaled in twenty years. "I haven't the slightest desire," she said, "merely to exchange one blackmailer for another."

"Of course not, Madam," I agreed. "And your fears are groundless. I am a man of honor and never in my entire career have I resorted to blackmailing one of my clients. I confine myself strictly within my talents, inclinations, and profession. In short, I murder, and that is all."

We had a table in Lustow's, where the waiterships are hereditary and the ceilings distant. Hermione is the widow of the late Senator Abner Trotter. Three years ago she married Frederick Combs and he is now running for Congress in the sixth district.

She came to a decision. "Very well. I think you're the man for the job. At least Mrs. Berling recommends you highly and that is good enough for me."

The Mrs. Berling she referred to is a charming lady who has been deprived of three of her husbands in the last seven years. She is one of my more consistent and therefore profitable customers.

"The man I want you to dispose of is Edmund Pelletier," Hermione said. "Or at least that is the name he uses. He has a suite in the Parkinson Hotel. Number 239."

"Do you have any particular time preference for his death? Most of

MURDER

my clients like the protection of a solid alibi."

"This isn't going to be quite so simple," Hermione said. "You've also got to obtain and destroy the evidence he uses for his blackmail. I leave the method to you."

"Pelletier is blackmailing you?"

She almost snorted. "No one could do that to me and get away with it. My husband is his victim."

"Ah, yes," I said. "He's running for Congress."

"He ought to make it too," Hermione said firmly. "He has a good speaking voice and he looks fine on television. That's why I married him in the first place. He's a little simple, but we manage to conceal that fact by having him talk slow. Gives voters the impression that he's thinking every minute."

The waiter brought Hermione her steak. Rare, of course. I myself prefer a steak so well done that the blood of the abattoir does not readily come to mind.

"Why is your husband being blackmailed?" I asked.

Hermione stated the fact without the slightest trace of embarrassment. "Frederick was a jewel thief before he married me. Of course I wouldn't have married him if I'd known that."

"Naturally not."

"The morality of the thing doesn't bother me a bit," Hermione made clear. "But I *am* infuriated that the blundering idiot made the mistake of getting caught at it by this Edmund Pelletier about four years before I married him. I didn't know that either until three weeks ago."

I mellowed my tongue with a sip of wine. "May I ask how you happened to meet Frederick Combs?"

"He came to a great many of my parties when Abner was still alive. Probably to steal jewelry, I imagine, but I usually keep mine in a safe deposit box at the bank. After Abner died, I looked around for a suitable replacement and Frederick happened to be there."

"A lonely woman needs love?" I suggested—a bit doubtfully.

"Love, nothing." Hermione was emphatic. "I'm a woman with drive and I find that the best outlet for that sort of thing is through a husband. I worked Abner Trotter

Politics is a word not ordinarily spoken in the presence of children. There are those who would even ban it from polite society. That it has a place in this fine bi-partisan publication is therefore quite obvious.

from the State Assembly into Washington. And if the fool hadn't killed himself in an automobile accident four years ago, he would have been in the national convention this July as a favorite son, at least."

She dipped a square of steak into the mushroom sauce. "After Abner died I did some inquiring and found that Frederick Combs came from one of the best families. Second voyage of the Mayflower. He graduated from Yale with a Gentleman's 'C', and at that point apparently his family ran out of money and Frederick was forced to resort to his wits—such as they are. But I didn't know about that last part until he came to me three weeks ago with the request that his allowance be increased."

Hermione cut through her steak. "I take care of all of Frederick's bills and allow him three hundred dollars spending money a month. He is well-fed, clothed, and occasionally liquored. In private and at home, of course. A man in politics must always be suspected of sobriety even by drinking voters."

She sipped coffee. "I demanded to know why Frederick wanted his allowance increased and he fumbled about so with feeble excuses that I knew there was more than met the ear. I immediately lowered the boom—so to speak—and after five minutes of questioning he broke down and told me the whole sordid story of his stupidity." Her face became thoughtful. "Frederick breaks so easily."

Her eyes cleared. "Frederick has been paying two hundred dollars a month to this Edmund Pelletier for the last eight years."

From what I knew of blackmailers, that presented an item of interest. Invariably their demands increase. "The sum was consistent? Through all those years?"

"Yes. However now this Pelletier wants three hundred dollars a month."

"Pelletier waited until *now* to ask for three hundred? Surely he must have known that Frederick married a wealthy woman."

Her face became grim. "He probably realized that I would have thrown Frederick out of the house before paying a cent."

"But now?"

"But now I've spent three years grooming Frederick for our future responsibilities. Three years of toil and construction. I would find it insufferable to toss all that out of the window and have to begin all over again with someone else."

"Surely you can afford to pay Pelletier three hundred a month?"

"Of course I can. But that isn't the point. Besides the obvious possibility that Pelletier will become increasingly greedy, I must also consider the fact that I simply cannot have Frederick vulnerable to any kind of scandal. I cannot have his past catch up with him just as he is about to step into higher things.

The evidence against Frederick must be destroyed and the blackmailer must also go because he knows about Frederick's indiscretions."

I tasted my dessert. "Very well, madam. I shall accept your commission. My usual fee is twenty thousand dollars."

She regarded me with eyes that had seldom conceded right-of-way.

"I do not haggle," I said stiffly.

Finally she nodded. "Twenty thousand it is."

That being settled, I relaxed a bit. "Does your husband know that you plan to have Pelletier done away with?"

"Of course not. Frederick would faint at the very thought of violence." She became thoughtful again. "I do like to mold putty, but now and then I do wish that Frederick would give me just a little bit of resistance."

I left Hermione a little after six and took a taxi to the cocktail bar in the west sixties where I had another appointment.

Frederick Combs occupied one of the extreme rear booths. He finished his drink and ordered for two when I sat down opposite him.

"I've had a great deal of trouble finding you," he said.

"I'm sorry, but I travel a great deal and I do not find it advisable to advertise for business in the newspapers."

Frederick Combs was approximately my age and had just the faintest touches of gray at his temples.

"I finally had to go to Mrs. Berling again," Frederick said. "She had your current address."

"Dear Mrs. Berling," I murmured. "I consider her my eastern representative."

The waitress brought us drinks and departed.

"There are times when I believe that murder doesn't pay," Frederick said gloomily.

"You've got to look at the bright side of things. It keeps one mentally healthy."

"I thought that my troubles were over when I had you get rid of Senator Trotter."

The Senator had been one of my more successful and prestigious assignments. Not a suspicion that his death had been anything but the result of a simple automobile accident.

At the time Frederick had not chosen to reveal his motive for the elimination of the senator and I always respect my client's reticence about such matters. Now, however, all things were abundantly clear.

He sipped his drink. "The whole thing seemed so simple. I would simply step into the senator's shoes, lose an election or two, and then Hermione would get discouraged and allow me to enjoy the expensive leisure I've been bred to. But Hermione won't *let* me lose an election."

"It really shouldn't be so diffi-

cult. A careless public word here and there and you can manage to antagonize the entire electorate."

He almost whitened. "You don't *know* that woman. Entirely ruthless. It would be worth my life to do anything so obvious."

He glowered at his glass. "Do you know exactly what she has in store for me? After I win this election I've got to try for the Senate. And eventually she wants me to throw out the first baseball of the season at Griffith Park."

He tapped the table with a forefinger to emphasize his points. "I unequivocally *detest* politics. I am subjected to an endless parade of chicken and pea dinners; I am forced to endure television inquisition by panels of revoltingly bright college children; I live in perpetual fear of committing myself on any issue of importance. I've had to give up polo for golf. Hermione maintains that voters simply will not cotton to a polo player."

"But still," I said. "Hermione does have ten million dollars."

He laughed bitterly. "She limits me to an allowance of three hundred a month. And Edmund got two hundred of that. Now he wants three hundred."

"Emund?" I asked innocently. "Who's he?"

Frederick shrugged. "He's been blackmailing me for years."

"Ah," I said. "And you want to get rid of him? That's why you called me?"

Frederick appeared genuinely surprised. "Get rid of Edmund? Good heavens, no. It isn't worth killing him yet. Wait until he asks for a thousand."

"Then why did you call me?"

Frederick quickly tossed off his drink. "I want you to dispose of Hermione. Make it look like an accident."

"I invariably do. When do you want this to happen?"

"The sooner the better. Why not tonight? Around eight-thirty. I'll be on television and will have an impeccable alibi if I need one."

That was a bit too soon, I thought. I had to get rid of Edmund Pelletier first and collect the twenty thousand from Hermione. "How about next Tuesday?"

Frederick was disappointed. "Are you sure you can't squeeze it in somehow before that? It shouldn't require more than an hour or two."

"I'm sorry, but I'm swamped with work and behind as it is. Next week is the best I can do."

He reconciled himself with another drink.

"There is the question of payment," I said. "I don't suppose you have money?"

"As soon as Hermione's estate is settled, I'll see that you get twenty thousand."

"Are you reasonably certain that you're in her will?"

"Well, no," he admitted. "But as her husband I occupy a favorable position."

I dislike working on speculation, but I agreed to accommodate him.

I left him ordering another drink and went on to the Parkinson Hotel. I pressed the buzzer beside door number 239.

The girl who answered had light hair, violet eyes, and a welcoming smile. "Why, if it isn't Mr. Rodney Boland. I'd recognize you anywhere."

Very few people know my name. Naturally I prefer it that way. "I'm sorry, but you have the advantage of me."

"We've never met," she said. "My name is Madelaine Wesley. But I've seen your photograph."

"Impossible," I said firmly. "I never allow my picture to be taken. Never."

"It was an enlarged candid camera shot that Mrs. Berling had framed. The picture was taken when you attended one of her garden parties. I really do believe that she has a crush on you."

Confound that Mrs. Berling, I thought. I would have to get that photograph before she showed it to the entire city.

"And now that I see you personally," Madelaine said, "I can understand why. You look as though you can barely tolerate people. Women just love that."

She stepped back. "Do come in."

I hesitated. "Perhaps I have the wrong suite? I came to see one Edmund Pelletier."

"You don't know him?"

"No. We've never met."

She smiled. "Then you are here to murder him?"

"My dear girl," I said stiffly. "Whatever gave you such a fantastic idea?"

"But I know all about you. Mrs. Berling told me everything. Everything. She's quite proud of you."

"How much is everything?" I asked dubiously.

"That your profession is murder and that you're very good at it."

I sincerely felt like strangling Mrs. Berling.

"But please come in," Madelaine said again. "You *do* look as though you could use a drink."

"It would be most appropriate at this time."

The rooms were well-furnished and vases of flowers were placed here and there.

She made a drink and brought it to the chair I had taken.

"Is this Edmund Pelletier's suite?" I asked.

"You've come to the right place, but I'm afraid that you're too late."

"Too late for what?"

"To murder Edmund," she said brightly. "The poor man passed away two weeks ago."

I took a generous swallow of the drink. "And just who are you? Besides being Madelaine Wesley, I mean."

"I'm Edmund's widow, but I've reassumed my maiden name. I've inherited Edmund's business."

"Business?"

"Yes. Blackmail. Edmund left a whole card index file of names and all kinds of evidence in a safety deposit box. Mostly films. Edmund had a way of actually taking motion pictures of people when they were . . . doing things they shouldn't be." She smiled again. "So I imagine that actually I'm the one you really want to kill."

"Is that so?"

"Of course. Obviously one of Edmund's clients has decided that he will no longer tolerate being blackmailed." She sighed. "I don't know why everybody seems to think it's quite all right to murder blackmailers. They're people just like anybody else and they perform a useful function. Do you realize that if it weren't for blackmailers, a lot of people would wander blithely through life *unpunished*? The blackmailer is the dispenser of justice to those who would otherwise escape the consequences of their acts. He is every bit just like a judge in court who collects fines and costs."

There did seem to be an element of reason in her contention. So many of the more esoteric professions are sadly maligned. I, for instance, have often felt that I have made the world a much better place in which to live by judiciously decreasing the population.

"Now let me see," Madelaine said thoughtfully, "Of course you cannot expect to kill me at this moment. I have the evidence against your client safely locked up and should I die, I have made arrangements that all should be revealed to the eager public."

Frankly, I doubted if what she said was true. Blackmailers seldom actually make such arrangements. They merely imply that they have made them as an insurance to a longer, more lucrative life. It is considered bad form to be vindictive from the grave. However, it is still unwise to act on the assumption that what is proper is always adhered to. Here and there you will find a blackmailer with absolutely no sense of ethics.

"So therefore," Madelaine continued, "Your opening gambit will be an attempt to *buy* the evidence from me? Isn't that right?"

It was.

She smiled. "However, even if you did succeed in purchasing the evidence, you would kill me anyway. Isn't that right? Otherwise your client would have sent a lawyer. But he *did* send a murderer."

The girl had a keen mind.

"By the way," she said, "just who *is* your client?"

Since we were in the process of possible negotiation, there was no need for me to be coy. "Frederick Combs."

"Ah," she said reflectively, "he's running for Congress, isn't he?"

"The fact has obviously come to your attention, since you have taken the opportunity of increasing your demand from two to three

hundred dollars at this particular time."

Madelaine shook her head. "But that isn't the reason at all. Edmund always emphasized that a blackmailer who gets greedy kills the golden goose, besides also tempting his victim to violence. And so once Edmund and his victim reached an agreement, Edmund left the figure as it was, in perpetuity."

"His perpetuity, evidently."

"Well, yes," she admitted. "But I still intend basically following his dictum. However, first there must be an initial adjustment. You see, Edmund failed to allow for the flexible dollar, and such an oversight can hurt as time passes. Edmund's levy on Frederick Combs, for instance, was based on the purchasing power of a dollar eight years ago. But a dollar isn't worth what it used to be. The country is in the throes of a rising spiral of inflation. So while I ask three hundred of Combs now, it is merely to re-establish the true base on which both parties agreed and is actually the equivalent of two hundred dollars eight years ago."

The woman had a point there. Twenty thousand dollars today did seem to me to buy a bit less than it used to. I would have to begin asking twenty-five in the future.

"After this initial adjustment," Madelaine said, "I'm basing any increases—or decreases—on the national Cost of Living Index issued monthly by Washington. As a matter of fact, I was just figuring next month's payments when you knocked. For September, Combs will be required to pay three hundred dollars and seven cents."

Everything seems to go up, I thought sadly. "How many other people are you blackmailing?"

"Fourteen. Edmund was a hard worker, at his craft." She glanced at her watch. "I do believe that I read in the paper that Frederick Combs will be on television tonight. *Meet the Journalists.* Would you care to listen?"

I was comfortable in my chair, my drink was mellow, and I did have a curiosity to see how Frederick performed. "If you wish."

We suffered through the last seven minutes of a western before *Meet the Journalists* appeared.

The moderator made the introductions and as the camera swung from face to face I thought I detected some trepidation on the features of the four man panel. Combs, on the other hand, looked remarkably happy. He had an amiable grin for everyone.

The first question was asked and it became clear why Frederick was so moronically blissful. Evidently he had lingered at the cocktail bar until the last possible moment before leaving for the studio.

His voice was slurred and he took considerable time grasping the questions, much less answering them. I noticed that the moderator was perspiring.

Madelaine looked at me. "You don't suppose Combs is . . . ?"

"To the gills."

After five minutes, Frederick got the hiccups.

"Oh, dear," Madelaine said. "I imagine that thousands of people are watching."

"Possibly millions."

And then Frederick Combs fell off his chair.

In his defense, I must say that he did it with considerable aplomb. And apparently he found the floor comfortable, for he lay smiling beautifully and exhibited no discernible intention of rising.

The moderator made frantic gestures toward the camera and in a moment the screen became blank. A travelog on the Swiss Alps followed almost immediately.

Madelaine switched off the set. "That ends that political career."

It also put an end to my hopes for twenty thousand dollars from Hermione. She would now certainly throw Combs out of the house and whether he was blackmailed or not no longer concerned her.

I sighed for the lost twenty thousand and began thinking about the still attainable twenty thousand Frederick had promised me for disposing of Hermione. I would have to act before there was a change in her will or a divorce.

"Has this ruined the purpose of your visit?" Madelaine asked.

"I'm afraid so."

"Well, anyway," she said soothingly. "Have another drink."

The next morning I was busy planning the immediate demise of Hermione when there came an imperious knock on my hotel room door.

Hermione's color was high and she stalked into the room, a furious Valkyrie bursting with vengeance. "I want him shot!"

I had no doubt whom she was referring to.

Her eyes sparked with anger. "Three years of hard work and the fool's ruined it in ten minutes."

"Please sit down."

But she remained standing. "Fifty thousand dollars for his hide nailed to the door!"

I hoped she was speaking figuratively, though from the nature of her temper she left some doubt.

"You could divorce him?" I suggested, but I offered that cheaper alternative only because I was certain her mood would not tolerate it.

"No," she said firmly. "He might sue me for support and he has a case. He's *got* to go."

It was hardly necessary to weigh Hermione's offer against Frederick's paltry inflation-ridden twenty thousand dollars. "Very well, I'll arrange some kind of an accident immediately."

"I don't even want it to *look* like an accident," she stated emphatically. "I want him shot."

Some of my clients do have their

whims and I try to adjust to them. Certainly for fifty-thousand.

"It must be done tonight," Hermione said. "And I want the job done directly at the front gate of my estate."

I grasped the symbolism of her demand immediately. She had been cruelly wronged and she wanted Frederick sacrificed on her doorstep, so to speak.

"There is a gatehouse there," Hermione said. "But I have given the gatekeeper and his wife a vacation. The area will be isolated. Frederick is seeing his campaign managers tonight—to withdraw from the congressional race, of course—and he will return at ten. When he stops his car and gets out to open the gate, I want you to shoot him."

"You are certain he will be there at ten?"

The set of her jaw was firm. "He still obeys orders from me. Drunk or sober."

I don't particularly enjoy rush jobs, but I nodded. "You will provide yourself with some kind of an alibi?"

"I'll be in the house with a friend or two when we hear the shot."

At nine that evening, following Hermione's directions, I drove the winding river road until I found the entrance to her place. I parked my car a hundred yards beyond and returned to the gatehouse. The windows were dark, but to satisfy myself I knocked on the door and even tried the knob. The place was locked and apparently deserted.

From the viewpoint of geography the setting was ideal. The area was innocent of passers-by and the lights of the main house were barely visible behind the pampered forest grounds. However I did not like a moon so full. Nor did I care for the light which illuminated the entrance.

I stepped into the bushes shadowed by the gatehouse and waited for Frederick to appear.

No traffic passed my stand until approximately five minutes to ten, when light beams flickered around turns and a hyperthyroid sedan appeared, slowing at the entrance. The vehicle stopped in front of the lighted gate and Frederick, after a bit of difficulty, got out of the driver's seat and swayed forward. He began fumbling at the gates.

I made certain that Frederick was alone, and then stepped out behind him. I do not believe that he even heard me.

His death was swift. One shot in the back and Frederick was efficiently exempt from any further political activity.

I returned to my car and after a mile of driving I tossed the revolver out of a window. That night, I slept well, as I do after a successful night's work, and my dreams were pleasantly monetary.

At one o'clock the next afternoon, the knock I had been expecting came at my door.

But Hermione Combs was not alone. She was accompanied by Madelaine Westley, and they were both smiling.

Needless to say, I entertained a premonition that something unpleasant was certainly about to happen.

"When I want medical services," Hermione said, "I go to a doctor."

I failed to grasp the purpose of that statement.

"When I want a murder, I go to a murderer."

Granted, I thought, but shall we go on?

"And when I want to blackmail somebody, I go to a blackmailer." She smiled with incredible self-satisfaction. "So naturally I went to see Edmund. But, of course, Edmund was dead. So I turned to Madelaine for help."

"Edmund taught me all those technical things," Madelaine said proudly. "About cameras, lighting, angles, and such."

"I am definitely pleased to state that you are photogenic," Hermione said.

"I developed the films last night," Madelaine said. "And we ran them. Your left profile is your best."

"My dear ladies," I said patiently, "would you trouble yourselves to make some sense?"

"When Frederick ruined everything," Hermione said, "I immediately determined that he was deadwood and must be done away with."

"I hope my services were satisfactory?"

"Eminently. Madelaine and I were in the gatehouse garret when you murdered Frederick. We had two cameras running—just in case one strip of film didn't turn out too well."

I'm afraid that my mouth dropped, though I do pride myself on self-possession. "You have *films* of me murdering Frederick?"

"Black and white," Madelaine said. "I don't know much about color photography. And besides, I don't think the gatehouse light was bright enough for them."

"We're going to blackmail you," Hermione said happily.

My smile was agony. "My dear Madam, you are insane."

"Not for money, of course," Hermione said.

I folded my arms. "Just what is it you want of me?"

She regarded me with frightening fondness. "I need a replacement for Frederick and I think you'll do perfectly. You will marry me and run for Congress."

I sat down. I remembered my philosophy professor who maintained that we must accept the inevitable with dignity and calm. He broke his neck five years ago when he calmly jumped out of a hotel window during a minor fire. Everyone else took the elevator down and survived.

"Just who has these films?" I asked.

"I have," Hermione said. "In a safe deposit box that will be opened by my lawyer if I should meet an untimely end."

That eliminated my only avenue of escape.

"I will see that you get the fifty thousand dollars for disposing of Frederick."

A feeble consolation, under the circumstances.

"And after we're married, you will receive three hundred dollars a month as an allowance."

"A thousand," I said firmly. "I am not putty."

And by being firm that became our agreement.

Hermione tells me that our future prospects are excellent. First the House of Representatives and then on to the Senate.

And in the July convention of 1972, if there is a dead-lock—say on the third ballot . . . ?

Well, who knows.

I now play golf. Not well, but often.

You Are Invited to Enter

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

MYSTERY MAGAZINE'S

SHORT STORY CONTEST

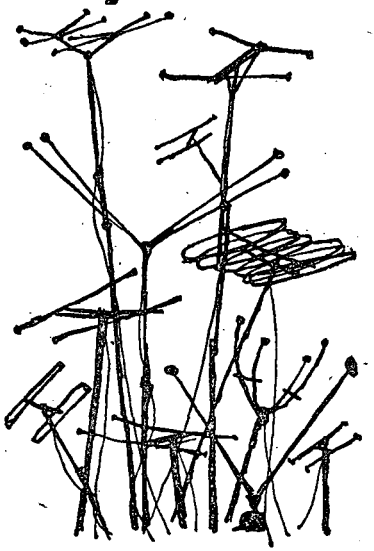
SEE PAGES 76 & 77

30,000,000

THIRTY million television viewers saw the reenactment of my crime Sunday evening.

I'm sure they were entertained. Its high standards have made *Tales Of Suspense* the most respected weekly thirty minutes in television. Last Sunday's production was superb, as usual.

The murder was neatly executed. The ending had a twist. No one suspected the murderer, but then in the final seconds there was a hint that his future held a terrible doom for him. This hovering calamity was also beautifully ironic because the villain had no inkling of what was in store for him.

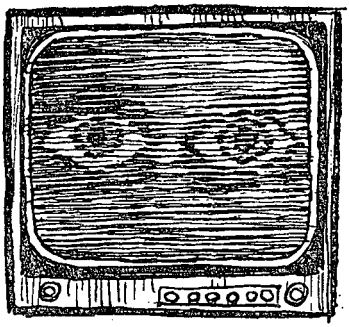


Along with 29,999,999 other people I tuned this show in and settled in a comfortable chair to enjoy myself. The opening scene, at a rambling resort hotel beside a lake, annoyed me. The annoyance became irritation, and as details of setting and incident piled up, the irritation turned to apprehension.

By the middle commercial break, I was afraid for the show to continue and reveal everything else about the murder I'd committed. And I was more afraid of switching the television set off. I told myself that the latter part of the show would surely be different, departing from the memory that, until this moment, I'd been sure I shared

Detectives watch mystery shows on TV. The following morning their behaviour, as a consequence, is more dramatic and interesting—though it is not broken into by commercials. Murderers also swell the murder-mystery viewing ranks, for they are always out to learn whatever they can.

WITNESSES



BY TALMAGE POWELL

with no other living human being.

But the memory returned, to the picture tubes in thirty million homes, and in a dry-mouthed state I watched it to its end.

How had they known?

With a bad case of the shakes, I heard the closing music swell to full volume. The credit lines began to roll across the screen, the names of unseen people whose brains and energies had conceived the story and made its production possible.

I don't believe in mind-reading, people with supernatural gifts, or other such hogwash. But it came to me that among those names was someone who shared my secret—and my future.

None of the names meant anything to me, until a single name stood on the screen for an instant, bold and alone:

Written by
Leslie Parker

The name Leslie Parker had a familiar ring, as if I'd heard it before.

Still, I was unable to place the name! And I was so upset, that it was almost too much for me to make it out to the kitchen, of the apartment that I no longer shared with Maria—or with anyone.

I poured a stiff slug of Scotch, steadied my hand enough to toss it off, and followed that one with another. Gripping the edge of the sink, I waited for the liquor to dissolve some of the icy stuff in my veins. In the living room, I could hear the television set yammering the first commercial on the next program. TV suddenly disgusted me. I never wanted to see another TV show as long as I lived.

Leslie Parker . . . Leslie Parker . . .

I couldn't quite remember where we'd met—or be sure that we had. And the name went on being tantalizingly familiar, continued to remain just beyond recognition's reach.

Then as the Scotch began to relax me, I went at the job in a business-like fashion of pinning that name down. I tried association. Leslie Parker . . . the TV show . . . murder . . . Maria's death in the lake . . . lake . . . hotel . . . hotel . . .

I had it.

I'd gone to Crayton Lake openly only one time—controlling my rage, to do it—to ask Maria to come back. Waiting in a secluded corner of the hotel's terrace, I'd heard a bellhop paging Leslie Parker.

Before the bellhop appeared, I'd noticed and been curious about a couple at a nearby table. The girl was beautiful and blonde and young enough to be the daughter of the man she was with. He was robust, ruddy-faced, with close-cropped, prematurely gray hair. They'd been having tall, cool drinks, laughing together. Feeling as I did, their laughter and obvious happiness irritated me.

The bellhop had come onto the terrace with its potted palms and sweeping lake view, paging Leslie Parker. The man with the blonde had called, "Over here, boy", and the bellhop had delivered a message, his smiling, obsequious reaction indicating the generosity of Parker's tip.

In spite of all my arguments, Maria hadn't returned home with me that day. Two weeks later she was dead. I'd killed her. The county coroner had ruled accidental drowning during a moonlight swim.

Two weeks later—plenty of time for Parker to have gotten to know her. He might very well have planned to meet her for drinks, on the night she was killed. He might have come down to the lakeshore to see if she were still swimming.

I shuddered, and had another jolt of Scotch.

Yet in these intervening weeks he hadn't come forward.

Why?

Because the sense of the dramatic in him kept him from the direct action of going to the police?

I doubted it. Such a supposition was nonsense.

Because he'd fallen so deeply in love with Maria he planned a special doom for her murderer?

I doubted that also. There was the blonde, he had to remember that.

The blonde. If Parker were married, to someone besides the blonde, he'd have a very practical reason for covering the details of his stay at Crayton Lake—or for even letting it be known that he had been there, for that matter.

I'd identified the sharer of my secret, but I could do nothing more at the moment. With a sudden, strange fear of the darkness and silence of the bedroom, I carried the Scotch into the living room with me.

I sat down and began belting the

Scotch. The TV set was still on the next morning. I groaned awake with a vague memory of having talked back to the set, of cursing it, sometime during the very late hours of night.

I gagged down more Scotch, had dry toast and coffee, black, for breakfast, and drove down the valley to Hollywood.

From a drugstore phone booth on Las Palmas I got in touch with the *Tales of Suspense* production office.

I told the secretary, "This is Zenith Writer's Service. We have the typing ready for Mr. Leslie Parker. He asked us to call as soon as possible."

"He isn't here. Please try his hotel." She added the name of the hotel, and I hung up.

I came out of the booth feeling better. The ruse had saved me the delay and trouble of watching the TV studio and shadowing Parker when he eventually went in and came out. Any delay increased my risk, and I decided to move fast while things were breaking my way.

Parker's hotel was a comfortable, unpretentious building in North Hollywood. As I drove to it, I was thankful I'd been watching those screen credits as closely as I had. To the desk man at the hotel, I gave the name of someone who worked on the *Tales Of Suspense* show. It took only a moment for the desk man to ring Parker's room. He turned to me with a smile, saying, "You may go right up. Room 404."

Without another glance at me, the desk man returned to his chore of sorting and boxing the mail delivery. I walked down the wide corridor that led off the lobby to the self-service elevator. I punched the "4" button and while the elevator crawled upward, I slid the coil of thin wire from my side coat pocket and checked it to make sure it was free of kinks. I tucked the coat pocket flap inside the pocket so it would not impede the wire, and slipped the wire just out of sight below the lip of the pocket.

The elevator stopped at the fourth floor and I stepped into the corridor. A man passed, saw little of my face, for I bent my head to light a cigarette.

When the elevator door slid closed behind this man, I moved quickly to 404.

Expecting a caller, Parker answered my knock at once. His brows raised. Coolly, he said, "Yes?"

"You were expecting Greenwood," I said.

He frowned, looking at me closely as if trying to place me.

"He's still downstairs," I said. "A call from the studio caught him. He'll be right up. I'm new on the production team and some quick changes are being made. Greenwood brought me over to introduce me."

Uncertainly, Parker let me enter as I talked. I closed the door with an easy, natural motion.

"Please sit down," I said. "Greenwood may be a few minutes and we might as well get acquainted. We've got a lot to discuss."

The living room was large, air conditioned, comfortable. There was a long couch, several massive club chairs, a desk, a TV set, a cocktail table, a small, portable bar against the wall. The place, I noted, appeared to be soundproof.

As Parker walked to one of the club chairs, he moved with difficulty. Robust as he was, he needed a cane.

Parker reached the chair. He didn't sit down, but turned and remained standing in front of the chair.

"If you don't mind," he said, "I'll check the desk and see how long Greenwood is going to be."

"That won't be necessary. I'm Robert Gaither. You've finally recognized me."

He looked me up and down, his expression puzzled.

"Believe me," he said, "I've never seen you before."

"And you haven't seen my wife either," I said.

"No . . ."

"And I suppose you've never been to Crayton Lake."

He paled. His hand groped behind him for the arm of the chair, for support.

"You can see," I said, "that denials won't help you. You were there. You know she wasn't alone in the lake that night."

"Maria Conway . . ."

"Her maiden name," I said. "Maria Conway Gaither."

He fell into the chair. Staring at me, he said, "It isn't possible . . ."

"That I wouldn't find you? It was easy."

"That isn't what I meant at all." A crazy sound, part laugh, came from him suddenly. "We writers . . . the necessity of our job drives us to get inside people . . . to see as they see . . . feel as they feel . . . think as they think . . . What have I done? What on earth have I possibly done? You—killed her." That sound came from him again. "Just like in the story I made up."

"The story that thirty million people saw," I said. "What did you think you were pulling?"

"Pulling? I was writing a story . . . Using the accidental death of a woman I'd come to know, as the springboard for a script. The details of setting and character were changed enough, I was sure. I'm still sure they were—if she had died accidentally, as they said. But I see that that TV show would have meant a great deal if she had been murdered—to the man who murdered her."

"It was murder in the story," I said.

"Of course. To use my real-life germ of an idea for a story, I had to change it, for the sake of drama,

from accident to murder. But who would murder Maria? She was a fine person. She hadn't an enemy in the world. She was not rich. There was no motive in the world for her murder except in the heart of the cruel person from whom she was running."

"She told you all about me, I suppose," I said.

Parker shook his head. "She discussed her personal affairs very little with me. We became little more than casual friends, that's all. I knew that she'd experienced a recent unpleasantness, but I knew nothing more."

"In the story you gave all the—"

"In the story, Gaither, the accident had to be murder. For murder there had to be a murderer. In Maria's case there was only one possible murderer—a husband who'd kill before he'd give her freedom. It was all quite logical to the mind of a working writer who needed a story."

"You're lying!" I shouted at him. "You knew the facts all the time!"

"No," he said, "not until you came here."

"You knew—You didn't spill it to the police because you were at the lake with a blonde."

"Blonde? Oh—I see. Yes."

"She wasn't your wife, was she?"

"No," he said. "She was my daughter. Fresh from school and taking a short vacation with her father."

I felt as if the veins were bursting in my temples. To have let fear cloud my judgment, to have let it bring me here . . .

"I swear I didn't know, Gaither," he said. "You were safe. I wasn't dangerous to you."

"But you are now," I said.

He struggled to his feet, faced me squarely.

I pulled the wire from my coat pocket.

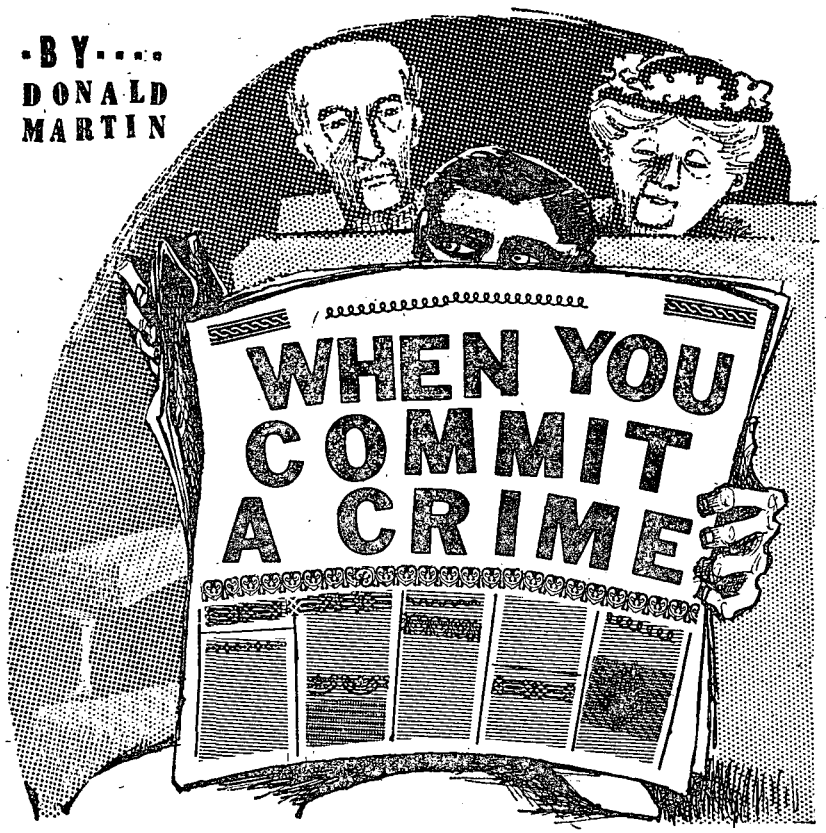
I looked at the thick neck growing from those enormously powerful shoulders. Quickly, I moved in to kill. The cripple could not flee. His cries would go unheard.

Unfortunately, under the pressure of my intention, I forgot about the cane in his hand.

When I regained consciousness, the District Attorney's downtown office was crowded with policemen. Later, the courttoom was jammed, with spectators and reporters. But this cell on death row —it vibrates with an emptiness all its own.

HE HAD taken the train out of New York to Pittsburgh. There he had gotten off and switched to another train going to Cleveland. From there he had changed again and gone to Chicago. Now he was sitting in a train that was speeding still farther west, watching the small towns appear in fleeting stage sets of houses and stores, flying through a world of flashing telephone poles and glancing trees.

He had not taken notice of the old couple until he had changed at Pittsburgh. Being acutely sensitive to faces at the moment, he was aware that they had followed him in each of his changes and were now on the same train, sitting several seats behind. They appeared innocuous enough. The man was in his mid-sixties probably, short and well-groomed, with a small



When running from the police, I suggest you travel as lightly as possible. A valise of stolen money may very likely prove somewhat disconcerting. On the other hand, I do recommend your investing in a good pair of track shoes and in considerable stamina.

mustache that lent a certain dignity to his pleasant face. The woman—Frank assumed she was the wife, they had a well-worn compatability about them—seemed of the same age, was short and gray, her face serene and motherly, with a soft reticent smile. Observing them in the dining car earlier, Frank decided they were tourists by the way they looked out of the window and made quiet but animated remarks, pointing at the rushing landscape with childlike interest.

But today, he decided, he could not trust even his mother, should that sad, long-suffering old woman appear before him. The uniformed conductors gave him a chill. Accusation and suspicion seemed to darken every face. He could not put his trust in anyone. Not with the events back in New York still smoldering, not with a bank guard lying critically wounded in the hospital, not with his—Frank's—picture staring moodily off every front page; and, this most of all, not with the valise containing the twenty thousand dollars sitting on the seat next to him.

West, his partner, was dead, shot by the intrepid but foolhardy guard who had drawn on two leveled revolvers. The loss of his partner had thrown Frank into a frenzy until he realized—after his desperate getaway—that now the contents of the valise belonged to him alone.

He had left the city that night before a positive identification had been established. In Pittsburgh he had picked up a New York paper and stared into his own face—his picture leering up at him as at some sardonic joke. The sight of it put wheels under him, sending him off on a journey without destination.

He had disguised himself as best he could, dyeing his naturally reddish hair black and obtaining a pair of glasses with plain glass lenses. This could alter his appearance slightly—but it could not affect the constant self-harassment which the hunted man inflicts upon himself.

As far as he knew the police were still searching for him in New York. Passing through the ticket gates at the Cleveland and then the Chicago stations, he had not been aware of any scrutinizing faces.

Perhaps he would go to Vegas

or L. A., or perhaps even slip into Mexico and sit there with his valise until he became less prominent and the climate he had created cooled off.

But the old couple were sticking in his mind. He had to laugh, humorlessly, when he thought of them trying to get that money away from him, if that was their game. If they had recognized him and not informed the authorities, then it certainly was their game. But he knew, too, that an excessively active distrust of all people and all things was not good either. Perhaps they were complete innocents. Perhaps it was their gentle, twilit serenity that was annoying him. The constant nearness of serenity always has a pernicious effect on tension. Privately, unconsciously, he begrudged them their peace of mind. He certainly had never known tranquility, not as a youth and he'd never know it now, because that guard was going to die.

At midnight the train stopped at a small town. After its headlong rush through the dark it seemed to be pausing for a breather. Frank had dozed off, the valise on the floor between his legs. The train's jolting halt woke him. He looked around at the bleak little station, the small dark platform, the alien lights in the little ticket office. Suddenly he became afraid of the old couple, the uncanny fear flooded him all at once; it was as if they had entered his soul during his sleep. Here he could lose them once and for all. He jumped up and picked up the valise and pulled his other piece of luggage down from the rack and hurried to the end of the car.

A cool night breeze swirled out of the strange dark, the strange town. The conductor, standing on the platform, raised an odd look to him as Frank came down the iron steps.

"Getting off here, sir?" the conductor asked.

"Yes," Frank said. "This is my home town. I've decided to pay a brief, surprise visit."

The conductor's big ruddy face cracked with a large smile, filling it with small wrinkles and an appreciative sentimentality.

"That's very nice I think," he said.

"It isn't often that I get the chance to pass through," Frank said.

"There's nothing like coming back to the old town," the conductor said. "Well," he said, flipping one finger to the peak of his little cap, "have a nice stay."

"Thank you," Frank said.

He hunched his shoulders and lighted a cigarette. The conductor picked up the portable step, waved down the train and then climbed up into it. A metal door banged. Frank stood there on the platform as the train began to pull out. He watched the thick massive cars roll

past him one by one with increasing speed, each dark window framing a sleeping or disinterested face, the iron wheels grinding and clattering. Then the train was gone and he was watching it tail off into the dark, as if into a mysterious oblivion, standing alone on the platform between his luggage.

He looked around. Across the tracks lay a small town in its repose, small clapboard buildings lining a down-sloping main street. It was dark. The stars bristled high overhead, circling over the town as though over a blessed place.

It seemed a simple enough place, a place where people went to bed at nine o'clock and didn't get around to asking questions. Perhaps it would be an ideal place.

He bent and picked up his luggage and walked into the ticket office. As the rickety wooden door closed behind him he almost dropped the luggage. It took a terrific effort of self-control not to betray himself. The old couple were sitting on the bench there with their luggage. The old woman smiled at him. The man nodded. Frank stared at them. If they were indeed following him, as it seemed, then they would have had to get off that train in a hurry, as he had. But they were sitting so placidly, bags packed and clustered around them, that it appeared hurry was the last thing on their minds.

Then he decided it was probably all a great coincidence. He had best treat it as lightly as possible. To show irritation or suspicion would perhaps be to cast an unnecessary seed. So he walked toward them, casually, forcing a smile that felt terribly stiff.

"Hello there," he said, feeling self-conscious, discovered, his disguise notwithstanding.

The two old people smiled warmly, as if they genuinely appreciated this gesture of friendship.

"Good evening," the old man said.

"Listen," Frank said, maintaining his smile, "are you following me or am I following you?" The look of concern that entered the old man's face made Frank regret that he had said it.

"We're merely traveling," the old man said, in his voice a note of apologetic explanation.

"It seems we're all traveling together," Frank said amiably.

He sat down on the bench. The old couple turned their heads and stared at him. He waited for some indication of recognition, but none was forthcoming.

"Do you live here?" the man asked.

"No," Frank said. "Do you?"

"Oh no. We're on our vacation. The first real vacation we've had in years. We decided we wanted to see the country. You see nothing from an airplane. So we're taking the train, from here to there,

trying to see as much as we can."

Frank nodded. It sounded reasonable. Perhaps. But now it was his turn. He was going to have to concoct something, and fast.

"I feel the same way about traveling," he said. "In fact I'm a writer, doing a series of articles for a travel magazine." It sounded very feeble. But these were gullible old people. They would believe it. In fact they even were impressed, he could tell. It seemed incredible now that fear of them had caused him to leave the train in the way that he had.

"You're a writer?" the old woman asked, her voice emerging for the first time.

"Yes," Frank said, easing into the role, feeling his jacket turn to tweed. "I grind out articles for a living."

"Interesting work," the old man said.

"Well, do you think they have a hotel in this town?" Frank asked. He got up—carrying the valise with him, a pure reflex action—and went to the ticket window. A bored young man was sitting there with crossed arms. He glared up at Frank from under the green eyeshade strapped around his head.

"Pardon me," Frank said. "Is there a hotel in this town?"

"There is," the young man said.

"Can you tell us where it is?"

"I can."

After an awkward pause, Frank asked, "Well, where?"

"On Main Street," the youth said with irascible logic.

"Is it very far?"

"Main Street's only four blocks," the young man said, seriously, clearly not intending this to be taken as a joke.

"Thank you." Frank turned back to the old couple. Seeing them sitting there, it suddenly struck him that they might actually become useful to him. Who would have more respectability and be less apt to arouse suspicion than a man traveling with two such mild-looking old people? He went back to them.

"Seems there's a hotel a few blocks down," he said, "I guess we ought to try it. Are you planning to stay long in this place?"

"A few days," the old man said. "They say it is very scenic here. We were planning to go all the way to California, but we had our plans changed for us."

"How was that?" Frank asked.

"Someone broke into our compartment sometime during the train ride from New York and stole part of our luggage and some of our money. So our trip will have to be shorter."

"That's a rough break," Frank said.

The old man shrugged philosophically.

Then Frank forced a laugh. "You know," he said, "I don't even know the name of the town."

"Jennerville," the old man said.

"We might not have stopped here, if it weren't for our change in plans. But they have an old Indian museum here that my wife is particularly interested in seeing."

The old woman nodded shyly and smiled.

They left the station, crossed the tracks and began walking down Main Street's slope.

"This is certainly different from some of those big cities," Frank said.

"My wife and I much prefer a small town to the city," the old man said.

"Then why don't you move to one?"

"We have our business and all our children in New York," the old man said.

"What sort of business?"

"Dry goods."

The epitome of respectability, Frank thought.

All the stores were closed. Main Street offered them an utterly dark facade except for a lone light that burned on the porch of a two-story building. They could see the Hotel sign on the porch roof. Entering, they found a small lobby replete with weary furniture and potted palms. A clerk in a red vest was standing up waiting for them.

"Pete called and said you'd be down," the clerk said.

"Pete?" Frank said.

"The ticket man."

"Oh, the ticket man. This is certainly an alert town," Frank said.

"There is more awareness in a small town than in the heart of a big city," the clerk said. "Jennerville is no exception."

"I would hate to think it was," Frank said. "Now, I would like a room for myself and one for my friends here."

The clerk turned around the register and watched them sign in. Frank used the name Jack Stein. The old man signed Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Michael of Jamaica, New York. Then the clerk gave them their keys and they went upstairs. Their rooms were adjoining and they paused out in the hall.

"I'll see you in the morning," Frank said.

"Yes, Mr. Stein," the old man said. "Good night."

Inside his room, Frank removed his phony eyeglasses and put his ear to the wall. He could hear Mr. and Mrs. Michael talking. Not all of their conversation was audible, but he was able to distinguish the words, "Nice young man." "Very friendly." It satisfied him. He smoked a cigarette and then took off his clothes and got into bed. He tucked the valise under the covers with him and switched off the table lamp. Everything seemed to be going well. He would trade on the old couple's respectability for awhile. See the sights with them. Visit the old Indian museum. Play the affable friend. Until he decided to move on.

One thing did disturb him, how-

ever. It was what the clerk had said, about small town people having greater awareness than others. It was probably merely an expression of civic pride, but it was enough to put him on his guard. He wondered if his New York notoriety was sufficient to have reached the Midwest papers. But that was a chance he was going to have to take no matter where he went.

The following morning he breakfasted with the old couple in the hotel's dining room before accompanying them to the Indian museum. Later, while strolling the streets with the old couple, he found out something about small towns: they were the worst possible places for a man on the dodge to choose as a sanctuary. A stranger in town was a novelty, a subject for seldom-used curiosity, and all the locals paid them special attention. Frank felt as if every eye were fixed upon his face, scrutinizing him, wondering about him.

The Indian museum was just outside of town, a short walk. It was housed in an old stone building which stood off by itself among some cottonwoods.

"Will you come in and look around, Mr. Stein?" the old man asked.

"Sure," Jack said, not relishing the idea of going into the place. "Why not? I might be able to pick up some interesting background material."

Admission was twenty-five cents; they paid it to a dusty-looking attendant who was sitting on a bench outside and who looked as though he might himself have become one of the exhibits. Frank thought the man gave him a rather close and unflattering appraisal and it made him nervous.

Inside there was a single large room, filled with various grim and gloomy relics of another age. Spears and tomahawks hung from the walls. In one corner was a large stone with primitive pictures chiseled into it. In glass cases were sundry pieces of pottery and cooking implements and feathers and war bonnets and scalplocks.

Frank moved around with profound disinterest, while the old couple stared and gaped at everything, murmuring to each other in those soft undertones people always use when in a museum.

They remained about a half hour and then left.

"Very interesting, didn't you think?" the old woman asked him, making one of her rare utterances.

"Fascinating," Frank said abstractedly, thinking of a cool shower and then a relaxing smoke on his bed.

After walking back to town, they had a cup of coffee and then returned to the hotel. They went upstairs and parted before their adjoining doors in the hall. Frank went into his room, glad to be relieved of the old couple's boring

company. He went to the closet and took out the precious valise and laid it on the bed and opened it, partially from nervousness, partially from a selfish desire to see the money again. It was there as before, neatly packed and undisturbed.

He was about to go to the shower when, in passing the window, he glanced out and saw the museum's crusty old caretaker across the street talking to a policeman. They both looked up at the hotel (Frank fell away from the window as they did) and then they walked on down the street. Leaning out the window and looking after them, Frank saw them turn the corner and go down the street where he had noted the town's police station was situated.

A hot fear and excitement suddenly flooded his brain. He glared at the valise full of money resting on the bed and began pacing the room, his thoughts churning desperately. Suppose that hick had recognized him? Suppose they were now going for help? Frank felt a terrific anger mounting inside him, and panic. What could he possibly do? There was no way out of here. He had no car. The next train was not scheduled until late that evening.

But he was not going to be caught cold in his room. He took the valise and went to the door and opened it slightly and peered down the hall. Satisfied by its emptiness, he stepped out into it and went back down the stairs. Crossing the lobby, straining to appear as poised as possible, he heard himself hailed by the clerk.

"Going somewhere, Mr. Stein?" the clerk asked, rising, looking at the valise.

"No," Frank said. "I'll be back shortly. Are you afraid I'm jumping the ship?"

"No," the clerk said thoughtfully. "I happen to know you have some more luggage upstairs."

Frank laughed. "You're a careful man," he said. "Your employer ought to be proud of you."

Then Frank continued on out going down the porch steps. He watched Main Street's desultory activity. Nothing seemed out of the way—yet. But he felt it would be only a matter of time before trouble started.

He remembered now having seen a freight track just outside of town during their walk from the station to the hotel. He estimated that it was not more than a mile or two away. It had been a long time since he had ridden a freight, and he would probably be the first person ever to jump a freight with twenty thousand dollars in his hand. But . . .

So he struck out in the direction of the freight track, heading for the only out-transportation in Jennerville. He hiked along the road, the valise hitting against his leg. He didn't know where the freight

he'd catch might go, but he didn't care. He looked back. The road was empty. Now he cut across a field. After going a short distance, he came upon the tracks. They curved out and around the town, making a great loop. As he hurried along, he cursed his own face, that its likeness had been sent around the country, put before the eyes of millions of people. It was known even in such a place as Jennerville. He was certainly going to have to think of some better way of disguising himself.

He sat down amid some rocks and waited for a train. Time dragged. He smoked cigarette after cigarette until he crushed his empty pack and threw it away. The wind seemed to be blowing shadows through the tall grass when at last he began to hear the freight. He jumped up and stared down the tracks. It was coming slowly around the bend, from the direction of the town. He had evidently taken the long way around to it, but that was all right too. The train was picking up speed and Frank began to run toward it, lest it have mounted too great an amount of speed for him to be able to board it. He ran through the high grass below the embankment and then, as the engine came roaring overhead, he scrambled up the embankment and began running alongside of the immense rattling cars. He reached out his free hand and grabbed hold of a rung of the iron ladder on the nearest boxcar. His other hand was occupied with the valise and it was impossible for him to get it up to the ladder. He ran along with the train, desperately trying to keep up with it, one hand gripping the ladder, the valise swinging out behind his running figure.

He would have let go then—it seemed impossible to go on—but, looking down he was horrified to see they were crossing a trestle over a pouring river. The waters rushed and churned below. His fingers on the ladder suddenly froze, suddenly they were clutching life itself. The train's increasing speed was pulling his legs out from under him. He couldn't let go, and he couldn't hang on with the one hand without being dragged to death. His head jerked around and his eyes glared as he realized that his other hand—acting almost independently of the rest of him—had released the valise and that it was plummeting toward the remorseless waters. He never saw it strike. With his now disencumbered hand, he twisted himself around and grabbed onto the ladder and was able to lift his legs up. Hand over hand he climbed up and reached the roof of the car and collapsed there, panting. As the train cleared the trestle he looked back at the foamy white water that had swallowed his money. He watched it until it had become a distant gray ribbon in the distance.

Hours earlier, at about the time Frank had sat down to wait for the freight, the old couple stood in the police station. The man from the museum was there, and several policemen, one a sergeant.

"Are you certain?" the sergeant asked the dusty caretaker.

The man nodded his head vigorously. "I'm one hundred per cent certain," he said, staring fiercely at the old couple. "They was the only ones in today. Just by luck I happened to notice it, after they'd gone. It was either them or the fellow they was with."

"Oh dear," the old woman said. "I don't want to get poor Mr. Stein in any trouble. Yes, it was I. I couldn't help it. I'm very sorry. I just couldn't help it." And she opened her bag and took out a small piece of clay pottery that she had stolen from the museum.

"Oh, mother," the old man said sadly, shaking his head, "you promised you wouldn't do that anymore if we went on this trip."

Dear Friends,

The continued response to our fan club for Mr. Alfred Hitchcock has been tremendously gratifying to all of us.

Here is some more information about the club. Membership dues are fifty cents, to cover costs and mailing. For this you will receive an 8x10 autographed photo of Mr. Hitchcock, his biography, and a bulletin of current news which will be issued four times a year. Naturally, we would like you to tell as many friends and neighbors of yours about "Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine" as possible, since this is strictly a club for loyal readers. If you want to join, write to me. And if you are interested in organizing a district club, please advise me of your intentions and also if you've had any previous experience with clubs. I do so hope to hear from you soon.

Pat Hitchcock
P.O. Box 434
Tarzana, California

WANTED: a RESPECTABLE VICTIM

by C. B. GILFORD

CELESTINE CARTER sat at the escritoire, her quill pen poised over the paper. Now and then, as she sought to compose, the tip of the feather went to her old, wrinkled, dry lips, and her teeth—still her own—gnawed upon it.

"Shall we word it the same as last time, Victoria?" she asked finally.

Victoria Carter, Celestine's younger sister by half a dozen years, stood by, her brows knit under her stylish gray coiffeur. She was vigorous and spare and straight in maroon silk that was just a trifle gayer than her sister's black.

"We may as well," Victoria answered. "I think our wording is discreet and not too misleading. What was it we said the last time? Ah yes, I think I remember. 'Gentleman. In middle sixties and in good health. Must be refined, cultured, dignified, personable. Reply by letter, enclosing picture.' Then a box number, of course. I think that was what we said last time, and it worked out very well."

"Oh yes," Celestine agreed, "it worked out excellently."

"Then write it down, dear. 'Gentleman . . .' Oh no, wait a moment. Better make it, 'Single gentleman . . .'"

Justin Gravelle perused the want ad section more out of habit than with real hope. He had few mar-

One may board at a rooming house, but it is not likely that one will be bored in the process. This is simply because the inhabitants of such an establishment are all determined to get their fill of hot biscuits before they're cool or gone.

ketable skills, and his age did not favor him. But he was near the end of his resources, his last two suits were threadbare and his meals for some time now had been skimpy and unappetizing.

When he first read the advertisement which began, "Single gentleman," he could scarcely believe his eyes or his imminent good fortune. It was almost as if a fairy godmother and Santa Claus had conspired to a solution of Justin Gravelle's insoluble problem.

He rose and strode to the dingy, clouded mirror that hung over the scarred and decrepit dresser. In the dim light—but perhaps flattering for its very dimness—he scanned his reflection with relative objectivity.

"Dignified, personable," it had said. Justin Gravelle drew himself up to his full height of six feet, thrust out his still manly chest, assumed the pose that had been so effective in the twenties when he had played fathers and fathers-in-law to some famous Juliets and Desdemonas. The picture he saw in the mirror pleased him. He was more than dignified. He was real.

"Refined, cultured," it had said. He smiled almost with disdain. Couldn't he recite entire Shakespearean scenes? Couldn't he claim some renowned past acquaintances? And couldn't he, for that matter, imagine a few others?

"Personable." He strutted back and forth before the mirror, giving to view first one profile, then the other, emphasizing his erect carriage, his aquiline nose, his luxuriant crop of silvery hair. Then he smiled, displaying teeth not badly stained, since long ago economy had dictated only a sparse use of tobacco. If "personable" meant "handsome," Justin Gravelle decided, he was rather eminently qualified.

"Free board and room." He was aware, as he rolled the tasty words about in his mouth, of a grumbling, semi-emptiness in his abdominal region. Spurred by it, he sat down instantly and penned an eloquent reply. "Dear Box 747 . . ."

Victoria and Celestine Carter were obviously more than pleased by the aspect of their visitor. Justin Gravelle perceived this pleasure in the ladies, and it sparked a response in his own breast. He had

always been one who rather enjoyed matinee audiences, and the feminine contingent, bless their hearts, had always liked him. This fresh display of admiration gave him a feeling of aliveness that he had not experienced in many a long year, and he basked and scintillated in the warmth of it.

The house—if one were to judge by this drawing room—was more than adequate, at least to Justin's somewhat old-fashioned taste. It was cool rather than stuffy, shady rather than dim. The furniture was comfortable, and though a bit worn, was immaculately kept. Justin, after years of grubby, dirty rooms with only infrequent maid service, could appreciate that.

But eventually his curiosity brought him round to the point. He seemed so to have entranced his two hostesses that they had apparently forgotten to mention it.

"The ad mentioned 'small services,'" he began. "Might I inquire what those services are?"

Both sisters hesitated. But then Celestine, the elder—he had shrewdly caught and retained the names—fetched a deep sigh which audibly strained her corseting, and launched into a frank reply.

"Mr. Gravelle, this house is a business establishment. We refer to it as a hotel for refined, elderly ladies. My sister and I are the proprietors, and it is our sole livelihood. We have five guests, all of whom are our age, or a bit older. But this is not what is sometimes referred to as a boarding house. That would imply, you see, that our guests are victims of genteel poverty. Which is not true. Our five ladies are all widows, and although they might not have the means for extravagant luxury, they can afford our pleasant surroundings here. We can boast of delicious food, clean, spacious rooms, and fine companionship. Our guests are not transients. Our newest arrival has been with us for six years. They are all very satisfied with our homey atmosphere. We call this, incidentally, The Carter House."

Justin had followed all this with rapt attention. But it had only whetted, not satisfied, his curiosity. "If this is an all-female establishment," he said, "how do I fit in?"

Victoria smiled, a knowing, almost mischievous smile. "It is precisely because The Carter House is an all-female establishment," she answered, "that you do fit in."

Justin Gravelle, despite his long service in that most wicked of institutions, the theatre, was nevertheless an innocent. "I beg your pardon," he said.

"Don't you see?" Victoria persisted diabolically.

"No, I'm afraid I don't."

"Our guests here are all widows. They crave masculine companionship. My sister and I, of course, have never married, and do not

exactly sympathize with this craving. But we operate according to the philosophy that the customer is always right. We are prepared to furnish you free board and room, Mr. Gravelle, in return for your spending a little time each day with our other guests, in the parlor, or out on the porch, or on the lawn—in any respectable place—and just simply being yourself, dining, chatting, watching television, drinking lemonade, playing croquet, whatever happens to be the activity of the moment."

"And is that all?" Justin asked after a moment, incredulously.

"That is all."

It was even better, easier, than he could have imagined. If it was merely a matter of being charming and amusing to a few doddering members of the fair sex, it was precisely in his line.

"Do you accept the proposition, Mr. Gravelle?"

It never occurred to him to drive a harder bargain. "Why, of course," he answered joyfully.

"There is just one stipulation."

His heart skipped a beat. Had this wonderful situation been offered only to tantalize him, and then to have it snatched away before he could grasp it? His mouth and throat were suddenly parched as he asked, "What is that?"

"Just that you adhere scrupulously to one little rule. We have five ladies as guests here, and they all pay the same rate. Although some of them may seek your special favor, you must never show any partiality. Do you agree?"

"Oh yes," he almost shouted with joy.

"Because if you would show partiality, it would be fatal, Mr. Gravelle. That is the precise word for the consequences. Fatal."

The above conversation took place in the morning. Justin Gravelle moved into his new quarters in the afternoon. He was not being given one of the choice rooms, he was told—those were in front—but the neat little bedroom which overlooked the fish pond in the rear garden was luxury to a man in his circumstances. It was sunny and airy, and when Celestine Carter left him alone to get settled, he discovered that the bed was a downy delight.

He lay stretched upon it—minus his coat and trousers to preserve the press—as the afternoon waned toward the promise of dinner time. His mind as well as his body wallowed in the rosy softness of his new life, and he did not question from whence it came, or why, or how long it might endure. Justin was too old to live in the future. All that mattered now was some day-to-day comfort for his tiring flesh.

But as he surrendered himself to this ecstasy, the nostrils in his theatrically shaped nose quivered

suddenly, titillated by a familiar smell. Familiar, yet puzzling in this house of females. For try as he might to deny it, or to identify it as something else, the heavy, rather sweet smell was that of pipe tobacco.

For a few moments he merely lay there and let himself be tantalized by it. He himself had given up smoking more than a year ago, not by choice, but rather out of the grim necessity of having to spend all of his Lilliputian income on poor food and poorer lodgings.

Where was the odor coming from? he asked himself. Surely not through the windows from the direction of one of the female guests. Surely not in The Carter House. And besides, the emanation seemed to surround him from all sides, as if it were a quality of the room itself.

Yes, of course! It came to him finally. The odor was in this room. And now that he analyzed it more carefully, he found it was also slightly stale. The former occupant then had been a pipesmoker.

The former occupant! A gentleman, like himself, paid to entertain the feminine guests? But if this was a fine, easy, effortless life, why had this other gentleman left?

The disturbing question was like a sudden, chilly wind blowing across the prostrate form of Justin Gravelle. He shivered in his undershorts. He had had a predecessor undoubtedly, a man something like himself, a little down on his luck. But he had left. A position, as a consequence, had been open. Why had he left? Why had he left?

Justin got up and dressed slowly and thoughtfully. Although he tried to ignore it, there was a small canker of doubt in his mind, an insistent worm, threatening to blight this bed of roses.

He might have asked questions concerning this other, pipesmoking chap when Celestine came to fetch him to dinner. But by that time he had decided that he really didn't want to know the answers. If the truth had the power of destroying his present enjoyment, he preferred to live in ignorance.

So he put the whole thing into the back of his mind, and accompanied Celestine down the broad staircase and into the cheery dining room. On the way a new odor, the odor of food, beckoned him with increasing vehemence, and besides, the challenge of a new audience was at hand.

With this double inspiration, he entered the dining room in rare good form. The first thing that caught his eye was the table itself, white cloth and gleaming silver and covered dishes from which delicious steam arose. It was only by an act of stern self-discipline that he turned his attention from the victuals to his fellow diners.

Celestine handled the introduc-

tions, as Justin bowed with courtly gravity to each lady in turn. Farsightedly, he paid strict attention to the names and their accompanying faces.

Alicia Allen was a tiny little old thing with darting blue eyes, snow-white hair, and a wicked, toothless smile. Blanche Norton was twice Alicia's size and weight, built like a battleship, with iron-gray hair and a face as square as a gun turret. Madeline Howard was wispy and willowy and wistful, with an absent, dreamy gaze, and vestiges of what might have once been good looks. Beatrice Raymond, in direct contrast, was gaunt and hatchet-faced, with hair that had not had the grace to gray. Her raven plumage gave her the appearance of a witch, and Justin wondered how she had ever married in order now to be a widow. The last of the group, Florence Talbot, was short and squat and round; everything about her was round, her barrel-like torso, her button nose, her half-moon smile, her full moon face.

Justin was accorded a place of honor at the foot of the table, while Celestine presided from the head. The meal went swimmingly. Justin had never spent a busier hour in his life. What with discreetly wolfing every scrap he could entice onto his plate, and at the same time relating to an enthralled audience the first chapter of the story of his life, his jaws, if not his mind, were most actively engaged.

After dinner they exited to the drawing room. There, buoyed up by the feeling of well-being that accompanies a full stomach, Justin continued with the second chapter of his vocal memoirs—there was, in fact, an inexhaustible supply of chapters. His actor's instinct told him that he'd been an instant success, that he was already adored. Florence Talbot's smile grew ever wider as she beheld him. Madeline Howard fetched the most genuine, audible sighs. Alicia Allen's grin was strictly of appreciation. Blanche Norton's stolid, attentive stare could be interpreted as a tribute. Even Beatrice Raymond's witch-like hardness softened under the merry sun of Justin Gravelle.

The Carter sisters were more reserved, of course. Justin didn't mind. He had never expected the theatre management to applaud his efforts, only to reward them financially. They sat together in a far corner, rather obviously auditioning him, and then just as obviously signing him up for a long run.

The evening winged by swiftly. But perhaps its high point occurred when Alicia Allen slipped out of the room, then returned a moment later like a Greek, bearing a gift. She brought it across the room, a box that seemed too large and heavy for her tiny, wrinkled hands. Then she held it out in

front of him, her thin wrists almost visibly bending under the huge weight.

"Do you smoke cigars, Mr. Gravelle?" she chirped.

Did he smoke cigars! He accepted the box with voluble thanks. Then, as the ladies watched with breathless attention, he proceeded to unwrap one of the cigars, thrust it into his mouth, and search in his pockets for a match. That is, until the horrible thought hit him.

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry," he mumbled despairingly, "but I didn't think to ask . . ."

"Please go ahead and smoke," Beatrice Raymond told him. "We all had husbands once, you know. We miss the smell so."

The circle of heads bobbed in affirmation. Even the two Carter heads nodded, though with more gravity. Blanche Norton picked a silver lighter off the coffee table—odd that it should be there, he thought—and ignited the cigar for him. Then as he blew out great fragrant clouds of smoke, the circle sighed with contentment.

When the festivities halted at ten, he took the box of cigars upstairs with him. But the moment he was inside his own room, the question came back to him. The food was excellent. The ladies were an appreciative audience. There would probably be more little extras from time to time, like the cigars. Then why—oh why on earth—had the former occupant of this room departed?

Life had perhaps never been quite as pleasant for Justin Gravelle, even in the heyday of his stage career, as it was during those beginning weeks at The Carter House. He had never, even at his zenith, had anything close to top billing. But now he was the star.

He had wondered at first what he was going to do for spending money. But he needn't have worried. The cigars were only the beginning. All of the ladies seemed to have funds. He was showered with gifts, cigars, cigarettes, pipes, pipe tobacco, shaving supplies, shirts, ties, handkerchiefs, socks, mufflers, tie clasps, cuff links—even gift bonds, which he used for a new suit and a new pair of shoes. Finally, to overflow the cup, there were passed to him little sums in cash, for necessities such as haircuts, manicures, and yes—Justin was a shrewd diplomat—nominal little gifts for his benefactresses.

And he waxed fat too. Not only from the good food served up by the Carter sisters, but also from the special concoctions which all the ladies—each anxious to prove her culinary skill—prepared. The guests, it seemed, had the run of the kitchen whenever they desired. The place hummed with activity,

and out of it poured tea and lemonade, cookies and biscuits, jams and jellies, rolls and cakes, fudges and puddings, soft things and hard things, sweet things and spicy things, appetizers and snacks and desserts, till at last even Justin Gravelle's starved capacity could hold no more—till he started hiding tins and boxes in his room, and then sneaked them out of the house under his overcoat to pass on to some startled little boy on the street.

It was a contest, of course. A battle, stealthy as it was obvious, for his special favor. He gloried in it, but it did present difficulties. Five ladies, each wanting individual attention, can become something of a burden. To be charming ten to sixteen hours a day—depending upon how often and how long he could escape from the house—was at first a challenge, then a job, next a bore, and finally a torture.

The strain began to tell on Justin. He must not be cross, but often he was weary. And on those occasions when he failed as the perfect cavalier, the slighted lady pouted or scolded, according to her temperament. Mindful of the warning of the Carters against favoritism, he tried to divide these failures evenly among his five charges. But he was no Solomon. As his failures became more frequent and the difficulties multiplied, he became more desperate. But desperation bred even more failures, and vice versa. It was a vicious circle.

Rescue, however, came in the wispy, willowy, wistful form of Madeline Howard. She had specialized in gifts of English briar pipes, aromatic Turkish tobacco, a peculiarly delicious fudge which he had never given away to a passerby on the street, and ever larger cash offerings. He was ripe therefore for Madeline's overtures.

She intercepted him as he returned from an afternoon walk and steered him past the house. She needed a bit of exercise too, she explained. It was a new bit of strategy. None of the ladies had ever before tried to extend the battleground beyond the house, the porch, and the garden.

Madeline, for all her dreamy gazes and abstracted manner, came rather briskly to the point. "You've told us so much about your stage career, Mr. Gravelle, but you've never talked much of your personal life."

"An actor doesn't have a personal life," he answered with automatic, romantic sadness. "He's always on the stage or otherwise in public view."

"You traveled about constantly."

"Oh, yes indeed."

"You never had a permanent home then?"

"Never after I joined up with the traveling troupe that came through our town."

"Were you ever married?"

"Never. Never had time to settle down."

"But now that you've retired from the stage"—what delicacy of expression Madeline had—"have you ever considered marriage?"

He maintained his romantic pose and affectations. "Alas, by the time I retired and could consider domesticity, I had nothing to offer a woman except my glamorous past."

"But that would make no difference, would it," Madeline pursued calmly, "if the woman of your choice had the necessary financial resources?"

Justin was too startled to answer. Madeline said no more. They walked once around the block in silence. But by the time they returned to The Carter House, the beginning of a new relationship had been made.

The other ladies fought back valiantly. Florence's smile beamed ever wider, and her face seemed to glow perpetually from the heat of the oven as she baked her exquisite little cakes to tempt the palate of Justin Gravelle. Alicia toddled down to the dry goods store almost daily, and toddled home again with a new necktie for him. Beatrice relied on her two special recipes, one for peach jam and the other for watermelon rind pickles. Blanche made a vulgar show of wealth by rolling up greenbacks and tying them with little yellow ribbons and depositing them not so stealthily under Justin's napkin at the dinner table.

Justin accepted all this tribute, but did not change his mind about Madeline. He was aware too of the basilisk stares of the Carter sisters as they beheld the storm brewing. But he dared not turn back. The job had been proving too much for him. He'd been expected not merely to companion five ladies, but to court them. And one was enough.

He would marry Madeline Howard. They would move away from The Carter House, set up an establishment of their own somewhere. He would be master of Madeline's little fortune, whatever size it was, rather than go on being a beggar for small favors. And he would be able to rest.

Because that was what, he concluded now, his predecessor had done. He had married one of these wealthy widows and waltzed away with her. After all, one had to better one's self somehow.

It was on the very day that he'd intended to propose formally to Madeline Howard that he took sick. It was quite a sudden thing, and had seemed to be only indigestion at first—quite a logical conclusion to come to, considering the quantities of gourmet foods he had consumed at lunch.

But as the afternoon wore on, the indigestion took the form of violent cramps, occasional nausea, and a rising fever. Alarmed, Justin took to his bed. He lay there, alternately writhing and exhausted, till toward dinner time Celestine Carter looked in on him.

"Mr. Gravelle," she began, "the ladies are clamoring for you. It's such a nice warm afternoon, and they've set up the croquet wickets . . ."

"I'm sick," he answered weakly. "Send for a doctor."

But instead of scurrying off obediently, she came over to the side of the bed and stood looking down on him. She shook her head, clucked her tongue, and finally, sad and resigned, she turned and left the room.

"A doctor!" he pleaded hoarsely after the departing figure. But the only reply was a key turning in the lock of his door.

He screamed, not loudly, because he was too weak to scream loudly. He tried to get up, but he succeeded only in thrashing about on the bed. The effort brought on another wave of nausea, and he had to lie back again, the prisoner also of his own incapacity.

Poison . . . the word wrote itself across his mind. Somebody had poisoned him. Who? Why?

But it didn't really matter, his fogged brain told him. All that mattered was that the doctor come, that he get well . . .

He drifted off. And he stayed in that nether realm of half-consciousness, half-death, almost out of contact with the living world, seeing nothing, hearing nothing, yet somehow aware of his drifting, knowing that the drift was toward the bottomless abyss, and terrified at that knowledge—till a sound woke him to some semblance of realization.

The key turning in the lock again.

The door opening and shutting.

Muted voices . . . one . . . two . . . whispering . . . indistinct . . . yet coming closer . . . one on either side of him now . . . conversing about him . . . not seeming to know that he could hear . . .

"Is he dead?"

"I don't think so."

"Well, if he's not dead, he's far gone."

"Oh yes, far gone. He wanted me to call the doctor, but I knew there wasn't any use."

"Don't you dare call the doctor!"

"I wasn't going to."

"You know what kind of trouble having the doctor here would mean."

"Of course I know. I wasn't about to call a doctor."

"Well, we don't have to worry about our consciences. We warned him."

"Yes, we did. We told him the rule. No partiality."

"And we said if he played fa-

vorites it would be fatal. Well, that's what it's been. Or going to be any minute. I do think he's breathing a little."

"Well, even if he is we still don't want the doctor."

"Oh, of course not. For sure as we had a doctor, the next thing there'd be the police. And we can't have the police around here."

"I should say not."

"But who do you suppose did it this time?"

"I don't know and I don't care. As long as they pay weekly, I'm not going to pry."

"But don't you get curious?"

"I try not to."

"Well, we know it wasn't Madeline. Not this time anyway. Because Madeline was the one he'd picked."

"I wouldn't be surprised if it was the watermelon rind pickles."

"Maybe so. He was a pig about those pickles."

"Poor old thing. I wouldn't blame her. She's never picked once. It must be discouraging."

"Yes, she has to do something to keep up her hopes."

"We are going to have a problem, you know."

"What's that?"

"Getting rid of all his junk. He did real well for himself. He collected quite a wardrobe."

"We'll just do what we did the last time. The charity agencies. That isn't the problem that's worrying me."

"What is worrying you?"

"Where are we going to put him?"

"With the others, of course."

"But it's getting terribly crowded."

"Yes, but where else is there?"

"I don't know, but sooner or later we'll have to find another place."

"When the time comes. When the time comes."

"And I wish we could find another method."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I'm just getting too old to dig."

"But we can't hire it done."

"Oh no."

"And we can't ask our guests to help."

"Of course not. But I wish sometimes we were in some other business. This cleaning up after people."

"It's a living, sister. It's a living."

"I suppose so. Shall it be tonight?

"It'll have to be tonight. Dead or alive. This isn't the sort of thing that can wait."

"All right, tonight. Midnight?"

"Yes. Gives us at least five hours before the sun comes up . . ."

The voices receded. The door opened and closed. The lock clicked. And Justin Gravelle was left to his tormented dreams.

Midnight . . . dead or alive . . . but he was still alive! Perhaps he would live. He had a rugged

constitution. Even now it seemed that some of his strength was returning. That conversation between the Carter sisters had provided him with a spur and a challenge. He commanded his muscles, discovered that he could move a little. But then he lay still again. Better to conserve his strength for one massive attempt.

Slowly life seeped back into his veins. It was very dark outside, and finally he decided he could wait no longer. He got up, dressed in his best suit, stuffed his pockets with what cash he had and the most valuable gifts from his collection.

But when he tried the door, it was locked, of course. In real fear of the Carter sisters, he declined either to try to force the door or to pound on it to summon help. He went instead to the window. There he discovered a trellis he had somehow never noticed before. He climbed down it, and sped off into the night.

"I've just checked," Celestine Carter announced, "and he's definitely gone."

"Good," Victoria answered with relief. "You know sometimes, sister, I'm afraid we might give one of them a little too much, and the old fellow will have a weak heart or something, and then we really will have a corpse on our hands."

"It's a chance we have to take." Celestine said philosophically. "Every business has its little risks."

"True, sister, true," Victoria agreed, perking up.

"We must consider the alternative, you know. That silly Madeline would have married him, and we'd have lost a good boarder. Why, by this time we'd have lost all of them."

"Shall we run another ad?"

"Oh yes, as soon as possible."

"Do you think Madeline will be inconsolable?"

"Not if we get another fine specimen like Justin. Hope springs eternal."

So saying, Celestine Carter sat down at the escritoire with her quill pen. "Now how do we word it? Oh yes. 'Single gentleman . . .'"

Justin Gravelle read the advertisement, but he didn't answer it. Nor did he take his story to the police. He concluded wisely that the police would hardly take the word of a broken-down old bum against that of a houseful of respectable ladies.

He also considered courting Madeline. But he decided against that too. After all, it was possible that she had murdered one of his predecessors when the luck had run against her.

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3. All prize winners, and all stories entered in the contest, will be considered for purchase for television by "Alfred Hitchcock Presents." Payment for television rights to any stories thus purchased will be *in addition* to any prizes or payment made for publication in the magazine. It is agreed by all contestants that they grant an option to "Alfred Hitchcock Presents" to purchase television rights to their stories for ninety (90) days after the contest ends.

4. Preferably, stories should not be less than 2,000 nor more than 8,000 words long. Any number of stories may be entered. The writer's name and address should be on each story.

5. Awards will be made solely on the basis of quality of writing, with emphasis upon plausibility, characterization and originality of plot. Anyone may enter the contest except employees of Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine.

6. Final choice of the winners will be made by Mr. Alfred Hitchcock and the editorial staff of Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine.

7. All entries must be received at Box 218, Universal City, California, postmarked not later than November 30, 1960. Winners will be announced and prizes awarded as soon as possible thereafter.

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Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine
Short Story Contest
P. O. Box 218
Universal City, California

"Long live the King!" is the cry of loyal subjects. Assassins or regicides, however, express themselves somewhat differently.

RUN, MURDERER,

I SAT in the winged leather chair sipping Armagnac, an excellent wine rather soured by the ugliness of my host. He waddled to a decanter tray and the mere effort involved in picking up a bottle of whiskey made him wheeze.

I loathed abnormality. Distortions of human figures sometimes actually filled me with a nauseous horror. And Mr. Muruk was a genuine bundle of zinc-gray suet.

He settled behind a teakwood desk and glanced at an antique clock on the wall. "Exactly on time, Mr. Weston."

"And I'd rather not waste it on unnecessary preliminary details," I said. "I'm interested first of all in the price you're offering."

"You Americans. The price must be right, eh?"

I glanced through the ceiling-high windows at an edge of the UN building, silhouetted above the East River. "I don't want you to underestimate the value I place on killing a man, Mr. Muruk. And also don't want any awkward repercussions to result from our interview."

Mr. Muruk gave one of those very eloquent Far Eastern shrugs. "You have a fine reputation in your field, Mr. Weston. A cautious and conservative and successful man. I should think you would be financially secure."

"Not quite," I said. "You see, I've never operated on any quantitative basis. I get no personal pleasure directly from my work. It's never very exciting or stimulating and it's often dull. It's strict-

ly a business. I do it for only one reason—financial gain. But I'm very selective and I operate on a strict qualitative level. For, you see, I have a deep conviction about killing."

"What is this conviction?" asked Mr. Muruk.

"A sensitive and sane man can allow himself only a certain number of killings. Beyond that, he's absolutely corrupted. I know that one more is all my conscience, such as it is, will tolerate."

"So this job must be conclusively rewarding. I see, Mr. Weston."

"I need enough from this one to retire," I added.

"Count it if you wish, Mr. Weston. Fifty thousand, would that be an adequate persuader? Fifty thousand more if you succeed? In unmarked American cash?"

I hesitated.

"Count it if you wish?"

"Oh no," I said. It was more than enough, I decided, and there was no sense in traditional quibbling. "We're in business. I must ask you to make the briefing as quick and to the point as possible. And another thing, before there's any further commitment. I never use a gun. Guns are dangerous and noisy. They're also gross and unpleasant."

RUN! by BRYCE WALTON

Mr. Muruk grunted and lifted a leather bag to the top of the desk and slid it toward me. "I don't represent some small organization or an individual," he said. "But a nation, my own country. For a purpose such as this, we can allot considerable funds."

I snapped open the bag, pleasantly taut with crisp packets of fifty dollar bills.

"I know."

"I prefer a job demanding the simplest and least brutal method."

Mr. Muruk nodded. "So do we." He sighed and waddled back to the decanter and poured more whiskey. "We have tried many approaches. All of them, subtle or otherwise, have failed." He drank and shuddered, almost imperceptibly. "A number of internationally

reputed gentlemen of your profession have been interviewed by me and sent out from almost every important capital city in the world. Failure, sir, failure every time. To say the least, our proposed victim seems to bear a charmed life."

I smiled. "You Europeans have over-indulged perhaps. As with too much whiskey or too many women, sensitivity and imagination become blunted by excess. Couldn't it be that repeated murders en masse squeezed the small individual job out of focus?"

"Maybe you are right," Mr. Muruk said. "And a fresh direct American approach is what we need. Fortunately our victim's coming to New York has made you, with your American vigor and calculated zest, available for testing."

"There is nothing easier than killing a man," I said. "It can be as simple as stepping on a cockroach. But it must be detached. A mere job that is never an end in itself."

Mr. Muruk smiled. "The price takes care of everything."

"Exactly," I said.

"Are you interested in international politics, Mr. Weston?"

"Hardly at all. But I read the papers."

"Then you may be familiar with a small Near Eastern country rich in oil and ignorance. It is called Balikshar."

"Yes," I said. "King Asazian."

Mr. Muruk nodded gloomily through the window. "Little King Asazian. You may know that five years ago he was ousted by a revolution without being assassinated, or formally surrendering his claim to rule. He was stabbed some twenty times and shot once, but proved, then as now, to be astonishingly durable."

"I don't see what it has to do with my job now," I said.

"Impatience isn't supposed to be part of your character."

"I don't like a thing cluttered up with nonessentials," I said. "I can't possibly share your motives for wanting King Asazian eliminated. Can't we dispense with background data?"

"Time hasn't dulled my emotional involvement," Mr. Muruk said sadly. "You see, he claims to be the King of Balikshar in Exile. As long as he remains alive, he will command a considerable and dangerous following in my country. Counter revolutions are a constant irritation."

"It still adds up only to his being here alive," I said. "I fail to see that it means anything else as far as I'm concerned."

"Of course, Mr. Weston. But I must point out that, being an international figure, he is always under heavy Federal and local, round-the-clock guard. Particularly here in the United States. Because your government is especially sympathetic with his cause, not ours."

"I expect legal inconveniences and other obstacles," I said.

"He's a patient in a Long Island hospital undergoing complex surgery. I'll give you the pertinent details. He came here for special treatment, just as he has visited every major city in the civilized world for some specific medical or surgical need. King Asazian is a very old man, Mr. Weston. I wouldn't presume to say how old, no one knows. Let me only say that our efforts should not normally be necessary. He should long ago have died from natural causes."

I helped myself to a bit more of the Armagnac.

"A number of countries are noted for specialists in various fields, including medicine and surgery. King Asazian has had both the desire and financial means to take advantage of such specialists. We have followed him from hospital to hospital from Moscow across the Scandinavian countries, to Vienna, France, England, Brazil. And now New York. At this Long Island clinic is a surgeon, supposed to be the best throat specialist in the world. Naturally, King Asazian selects only top men. Seems he contracted some malignancy of the neck, the vocal cords were affected, and he lost his voice. This is an insufferable handicap to a King whose only influence is through his ability to harangue crowds."

I waited.

"He's spent the better part of his roving exile in hospitals. The result of who knows what multiple afflictions. But oddly enough, we never before thought of using a hospital to dispose of him. He's been confined to this Long Island clinic for over a week. Long enough for us to work out a plan for you. I shall outline it. You may approve, make any changes or elaborations you think fit."

There were only a few minor changes that occured to me. Generally, it seemed a tight, simple plan. Before I left, Mr. Muruk gave me two envelopes, each of which contained ten thousand dollars in one hundred dollar bills, as bribe money. He also said, "We don't know why our other attempts never worked out, Mr. Weston. Our operatives were either killed, or captured and disposed of, or imprisoned one way or another before we could determine the cause of their failure."

Failure, for whatever reason, held no interest for me, so I had no comment to offer. Many are called, but few are chosen. My only feeling for those inept predecessors was one of gratitude, for having tossed King Asazian and a hundred grand my way.

It was then ten in the morning. King Asazian was to reach the end of his unnaturally prolonged existence at between eight-fifteen and nine o'clock that night.

I put the fifty thousand away in my safety deposit box on Fifth Avenue and spent four relaxing hours in the Museum of Modern Art. A special showing of massive abstract canvases intrigued me. They covered entire walls and were unframed. Standing there, I felt somewhat uneasy as a result of my immediate understanding of the artists' meanings. Their hugeness invited the viewer to step into them and become absorbed, carried away, lost in the meandering, endless complexity of space. And the fact that they had no frames further increased this sensation of something without bounds, as if each painting extended onward and outward forever. The artists were, in other words, inviting me to move out into the new space age, finite man shooting away and becoming lost in infinity.

Aside from a certain insecurity, a sort of cool draft on the back of my neck, I was pleasantly reminded of the fact that I would retire the next day. I would have a lifetime ahead of me, and sufficient wealth to spend my days leisurely roaming the world absorbing culture, art, and ideas.

I dined early at a small exclusive restaurant on 46th Street, calf's liver à la française followed by a bottle of rich Moselle which I lingered over while rehearsing the routine outlined by the repulsive Mr. Muruk.

Visiting hours ended at eight P.M. King Asazian had not been having many visitors. If he happened to tonight, they would be cleared out by eight-fifteen at the latest. There followed an immediate check by nurses and a doctor. That was the regular schedule. I would, at nine o'clock, greet the police officer sitting outside, then go into room 304, where King Asazian waited. It would be at least another hour before another scheduled round from the night nurse. Actually, only a minute or so would be required for me to accomplish that which had so stubbornly defied nature, time and man.

At seven-thirty I went by cab across the river and out the Belt Parkway, off Exit 16 to Sunrise Drive where I got out. It was a clear starry night and cool for the middle of June. I walked a block down King's Drive under the shade trees and waited on the corner. The ambulance drove up in less than five minutes.

Two attendants in white smocks and white trousers got out and walked up to me. It was an isolated spot, but they stood there for awhile, making sure no silent pedestrian was about.

"Muruk," I said.

"Balikshar," the smaller of the attendants said, a bit sullenly, I thought.

"Let's have the money," the larger one said crudely.

I handed each of them his en-

velope. Immediately they began counting and fingering the bills. Then the big one turned with a sudden enthusiasm and smashed his fist into the smaller one's jaw. The victim fell on the grass, groaning. "Take it easy, for God's sake," he said.

"For ten grand you can take a beating," the big one said.

"But I don't wanna spend it all on doctor's bills!"

He was then kicked in the ribs and lifted and smashed repeatedly in the face. He started to scream and then his nose smashed and covered his face and chest with blood. The victim passed out.

"That's what I wanted," the larger one said, rubbing his knuckles. "Blood. It's got to look right."

"It looks pretty good," I said as the victim was dragged away into the brush.

The bruiser returned and lit a cigarette and looked at his watch.

"You two friendly with one another?" I asked.

"Old buddies. We're going to pool our take and buy us a filling station."

"Such treatment could put quite a strain on friendship," I said. "And what about the ten grand on him?"

"He snaps out of it, he'll ache but then he'll think of the ten grand and feel good. He's got a place over there to hide the moola until things blow over a little. We figured it was best to separate."

We walked back to the ambulance which I, together with henchmen, was supposed to have waylaid. I looked back once, a bit concerned about the man I was supposed to have beaten up and left unconscious. The attendant whom I was supposed to force at gun point to drive me to the clinic, opened the rear ambulance doors and told me to get in.

"Change into the doc's uniform," he added. "Put on horn-rimmed glasses. Most of the younger docs at our institution wear 'em."

It was a situation in which I had no repugnance to conformity. I got in, sat on the stretcher bed, changed into white pants, white shoes, a smock that buttoned tightly in a clerical band around my neck. I put on the horn-rimmed glasses. I was not supposed to resemble any regular known staff member. Anyone walking around in a hospital in a doctor's uniform is automatically assumed to be an absolute authority. No one would dare question it, nor would it occur to anyone to do so. Or so we hoped. Before putting my folded civvies in a paper bag, I took a slim switch-blade knife out and concealed it beneath my belt under my smock. Knives were clean, neat, fast and reliable. I had used them before and Mr. Muruk's more clinical method might fail.

The attendant handed me a black plastic medical kit after we got into the front seat. There were

three syringes ready for use, a loaded fountain pen which I placed in the breast pocket of my smock.

The first hypo, the attendant pointed out, was for him. Soon as we parked at the clinic I was to let him have it. He handed me the key to the Oldsmobile which he said was the third car from the left as we drove in. After I finished, I was to walk out the rear exit, across the parking lot to the Olds and drive away.

If they questioned the attendant to the point where he got the hypo, he could show them the hypodermic needle puncture, and a subsequent blood test would reveal the stuff I had knocked him out with. He and his friend were, of course, to remain completely innocent throughout.

The gun with which I was supposed to have forced him to drive me to the clinic was on the floor in the front of the ambulance.

A mile or so from the hospital, the attendant set off the screaming siren. It amused me to see cars scrambling out of my way.

I understood that when King Asazian had been driven from the airport to the hospital, every foot of highway and byway had been lined with policemen, patrol cars, motorcycles, and even a few helicopters. Of course we missed all of that. But the hospital itself was under heavy guard. There were police cars in front and rear, uniformed patrolmen and plainclothes men gathered about like flies on a sugar cube.

The cop at the gate stopped us. He recognized the attendant behind the wheel and thumbed us through without bothering to look at me. Two more cops at the entrance to the parking lot took a closer look.

"Do you have a light, officer?" I asked.

He lit my cigarette and motioned us through. We drove across the parking lot, down the ramp and under the medical center. On the way in I checked the location of the cream-colored Oldsmobile. It was a rented car driven in early by a visitor who had walked off and forgotten it. Some friend of Mr. Muruk's.

It occurred to me that if something went wrong I might have difficulty driving away. But there was no reason for anything to go wrong. I didn't intend that anything should.

"Okay," the attendant said. I stabbed the first hypo needle into his arm and pressed the plunger. "Oh man. I want no spinal from you, Doc!" He then collapsed into what appeared to be blissful deep sleep. It seemed that ambulance drivers often goofed off in that seat for awhile when they drove in. Therefore, he probably wouldn't be disturbed for awhile. If he

were, he would be woozy, incoherent, and would effectively stall for time if I needed any.

I got out and walked through a door, down a shiny waxed floor toward the elevator, mentally retracing the floor plan in my mind. I didn't want anyone seeing me hesitate about directions. A cop stood by the elevator ogling a nurse who walked down the hall toward me. The cop twisted his gaze from her to me with reluctance. But he seemed to grow more interested in me as I approached.

"Oh, nurse," I said brusquely.

"Yes, Doctor?"

"Do me a favor, please."

"Why of course, Doctor!"

"Drop by the X-ray room as soon as possible and tell that nincompoop in charge to facilitate my report on John Stanley's broken foot charts."

"John Stanley, doctor?"

"That's right. John Stanley."

"I'll get right on that, Doctor.'"

"Thank you, nurse." I smiled, turned abruptly, elbowed the cop to one side. "Pardon me, officer. This is an emergency."

The cop jumped aside and I stepped in and pressed the 3-button. A nurse wheeling a rubber table said, "Good evening, Doctor," as I walked down the third floor hall, turned right and headed for room 304 in the private ward. The cop seated in front of the door watching me was the only one in the hall besides me at first. Then a nurse came out of a room at the farther end of the hall, turned and started toward me at a pace that would have done credit to a snail. I checked my watch and slowed down, seemed to be deep in medicative thoughts. The nurse finally passed me with a warm greeting and disappeared around the turn in the corridor.

I took the fountain pen from the breast pocket of my smock and stopped in front of the still-seated cop. He was young, did not appear to be particularly stupid. But the important thing was that he might have been given very strict orders about who was and who was not to be admitted. Also his auditory sense was probably good and might hear questionable noises coming from room 304.

"Good evening, officer," I said, and started past him toward the door.

"Sorry, Doc. I got to check your ID card."

I turned. "Seems there's an emergency here—and in the absence of Dr. Kildare, I was called in."

"Sorry," he said, smiling, as I pointed the fountain pen and pressed the discharge button, shooting a lethal spray into his eyes, nose and mouth. He collapsed at once, out cold as if he had been blackjacked. I got him balanced on the chair as if he might have been dozing or very relaxed, with one arm pushed as a prop through the back of the chair.

Then I went into room 304, shut the door, and lunged straight for the bed to prevent King Asazian from pressing an alarm button.

But the inert outline under the white sheet made no movement at all, not at first. There was the bulge of his slight stomach, the perfect V outline of his slightly parted legs, the arms each of which extended straight down at either side and each seeming to be at the same time, two or three inches from his body. As I took the second hypodermic syringe from the case and placed the case on the bedtable, I thought of King Asazian as being already a corpse covered with a shroud.

The complete stiffness and symmetry of his outline, his utter stillness, suggested anything but a living breathing human being even in its most comatose state. But then the little, yellow, hairless head moved slightly. The lips, like a split walnut, writhed back over the white porcelain shine of artificial dentures. The top edge of the sheet which covered his chin fluttered like a vein as his breathing heightened.

His eyelids snapped open. His left eye, just the left, rolled around and fixed itself on me. It was steady. There was fear, but also a bright piercing anger. It was black and bright as a shard of polished dark glass. His mouth stayed open. I heard desperate quick expulsions of air, voiceless gusts. Evidently, I thought, his vocal cords had not yet been reconstituted. This was a decided advantage to me. I could work without fear of his warning outcries.

Then the old uncontrollable revulsion at the sight of human distortion and abnormality began to work on me. I fought it. I had to fight it only a few seconds; then I would be out of there. It began to boil and twist in my stomach.

Reluctantly, I grabbed the upper edge of the sheet, pulled it down, gripped the King's left arm. It went taut, assumed the formidable consistency of coiling steel cable. I jammed the needle, heard the sharp sping running up into my fingers. The needle was bent.

I felt sweat burst out of my face as I grabbed up the third needle. It was also the last. Not only was it a neat sterile way of killing a man, but it might result in the hospital being blamed for negligence, or no cause for the King's death being discerned. If there was no alarm, and I walked out and drove away without attracting any particular attention, they would find King Asazian dead, that was all. I had injected air-bubbles into his veins, plus, for good measure, a subtle poison hard to detect. The cop outside could make up any story he wished.

The King's arm snapped from my grasp. I made several attempts before again managing to obtain a close grip on the oddly smooth

and shining forearm. Again plunged the needle down.

I stepped back. I felt a threat of panic. The needle was bent double, and there had been no penetration whatever of the King's flesh.

That eye kept watching me, widening slightly, narrowing.

His neck was invisible behind a thick cast. Not the familiar plaster of paris and gauze cast, nor the sort of cradle arrangement that supports broken and cracked necks. It seemed to be of shiny chrome with a series of regularly spaced perforated squares.

I drew the knife from beneath my smock and the blade snapped free. I had agreed to kill him, but had not restricted myself as to method. I moved slowly toward him, watching that single glaring black and penetrating eye.

Suddenly his arm shot up and reached for a button on the side of a console box setting on the bedtable. I jumped, grabbed the arm, jerked it savagely down over the edge of the bed. The effort sent me stumbling back across the room. Horrified, I still held his arm in my hand.

For some reason, although the fact was obvious, it was difficult for me to grasp its being an artificial limb. It looked genuine. But there were the cogs and fine silver wires and pulleys inside. The delicate snaps and clips on the shoulder.

King Asazian was reaching up with his head to press the button, the alarm button.

I was on him again, forcing his body away from the alarm button, then stabbing for his heart. I felt the metallic clang run like a shock up my arm and into my brain.

I heard an odd desperate cry escape from me like the sound of a child in its sleep. I was suddenly frightened. I was more than that. I was nauseated and filled with a growing terror. I stabbed again and again. Then I realized that the knife blade had snapped, broken clean at the hilt.

There were those shining metallic scratches showing through King Asazian's flesh-like exterior. But the scratches revealed some kind of thin but impenetrable metal alloy. I could not have known then, of course, that his rib cage had been removed to make way for countless operations, and had been replaced by metal plates. I didn't try to reason it out either at that time. I had seized him by the throat and was trying to choke King Asazian.

Soon I drew back, trembling. If he had any recognizable neck at all, it was invulnerable behind its metal cast.

My hands were wet and I could feel sweat running down under my shirt. My time was running out. I stood there trying to control myself, trying to think clearly. I had been in difficult situations before. There's always a way out if

you think calmly, keep your head.

I could brain him. But there was nothing to club him with. I started toward the table. But I was afraid to use it. The alarm box fastened to it might sound off if I used the table for a bludgeon. There was nothing else, absolutely nothing else in the room that I could use to brain him with, except his arm. And somehow I couldn't bring myself to pick it up off the floor.

The window. It was open. A three-floor drop would surely finish him. I pushed the window higher and unlocked the screen, turned, but I couldn't touch his torso. I tried several times to scoop him up, but a revulsion seized me so powerfully that I couldn't get my hands within a foot of his hideous hairless shiny torso.

I grabbed his leg and started to drag him from the bed.

I stumbled back and ran into the wall—the leg in my hand. I dropped it. It clanged hollowly and slid across the polished floor toward the door. It seemed that I could still hear the sharp twanging, as if a number of taut piano wires had snapped.

I tried to force myself back toward the bed. The idea of failure was no more agreeable now than it had ever been. But I found it impossible to move toward my intended victim. It was as though I were rooted in terror in one of those immobile nightmares. And all the time I watched his eye fixed on me, angry, condemning and deadly. That was it. It was a deadly arrogant and assured eye. And all the time I saw his body twisting slowly, his other arm coming over toward the button.

I simply could not touch him again. His other arm, his other leg, his entire body—if I grabbed them, I had no idea what would happen. And I had no desire to find out. I wasn't the first to fail to eliminate King Asazian, and I probably wouldn't be the last.

Then he laughed. Softly at first. Then louder and louder. It became a throbbing thunderous sound pounding around the room. It grew even louder. I think I screamed, but I couldn't hear myself.

I reached the door and started to open it. But his voice had aroused the entire hospital. I could hear voices shouting outside, and footsteps coming down the hall.

"Run, Murderer!" he began shouting at me. "Run, run, murderer! Murderer, murderer, run!"

He was still bellowing and laughing as I got through the window and clung to the sill. But I also heard shouts coming around the hospital and toward the darkness immediately below me. As I clung there, his voice blared louder until it reverberated and cracked like the voice coming from a faulty public address system.

As I dropped, the sound fol-

lowed me. It filled the hospital and the night. Laughter. "Run, murderer!" Laughter. "Run, run, Murderer!"

But I couldn't run even if I had felt a really intense urge to run. The fall had broken my leg among other things, and in any case, I was the center of attention of several uniformed cops.

I still hear him laughing and telling me to run. I hear him at unexpected and terribly disturbing moments. Sometimes in my cell. Sometimes while I'm out in the recreation yard. But more often in the middle of the night.

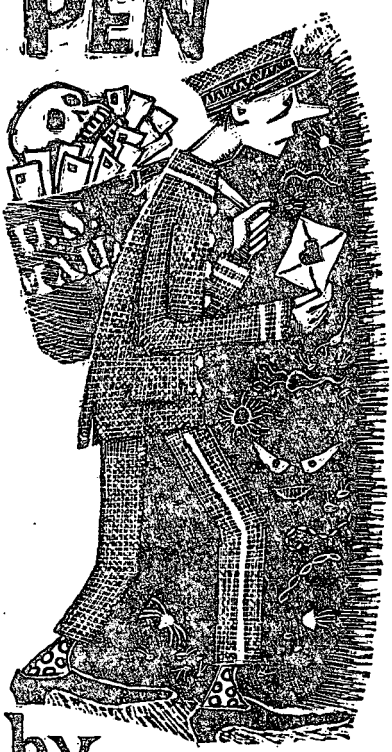
It isn't a sound that I can tolerate very much longer. It is likely that I have heard it quite too long already. You see, it wasn't a human, nor a purely mechanical sound. Either would, of course, have been perfectly tolerable. It was something like the hollow, atonal, imitation of the human voices that electronic engineers can now create out of sound waves and record on tape. Sound waves that were never titillated initially by any human vocal cords. Listen to such an icy mockery of a human voice; then imagine that only a slight trace of a genuine human voice is somehow imprisoned there.

It was not an alarm button. When he pressed that button, King Asazian switched on his newly installed electronic voice box. Full volume of course. They heard it throughout the hospital and people found it quite audible a block away. Naturally, I had no chance at all.

I've considered the implications. King Asazian is still alive and only partly human. Or perhaps there is a point where a renovated, rebuilt human is no longer really human at all. I have no idea either, how long he will continue to present to the public what appears to be something alive.

What is he, the indestructible ruler of tomorrow? I know this—that he is the product of international specialists and scientific ingenuity of the highest order. And against such frightening international wonders, against such a thing as King Asazian, there is no longer any hope for effective action by such as I—the lone entrepreneur.

Ruby Martinson's POISONED PEN



by HENRY SLESAR

FOR YEARS, I lived in mortal terror of G-Men because of my cousin, Ruby Martinson. The three most horrifying letters in my alphabet were F.B.I. and I couldn't see a picture of J. Edgar Hoover without wondering if it saw *me*. And the worst part was, the whole trauma was the result of the wildest crime that Ruby Martinson, World's Greatest Unsuccessful Criminal, ever perpetrated.

By this time, of course, I was getting used to Ruby's inability to make Crime pay. Even though Ruby was an accountant, he never seemed to get out of the red in all the capers we pulled together. Fortunately, he was making good money ($65 a week) for his age (23) so I never worried about his finances. But I was five years younger, a great deal poorer, and in contrast to Ruby's iron nerves, mine were made of chicken fat.

On the evening that it started, I was poorer than usual. I had just been fired from my fourth job in the garment district, merely because I had pushed a hand truck into an open manhole on 33rd and 7th Avenue, sending half a dozen Max Teitelbaum originals into the sewer system of New York. So when I met Ruby at Hector's

As has been well established, the pen is mightier than the sword. Naturally, only a quill pen is as mighty as all that. For though you can tickle someone into submission with such a pen; what, for example, could you accomplish with a ball point pen?

Cafeteria on Broadway, I was forced to ask him for coffee-and-cruller money. Ruby, who was normally pretty tight-fisted, handed me the coins without a murmur.

"You okay, Ruby?" I asked, genuinely concerned.

He looked up at me, and his small freckled face had never appeared so tragic before.

"I'm okay," he said bitterly. "I'll be even better when Dorothy gets that letter tomorrow."

"You wrote Dorothy a letter? What for?"

My astonishment was real. Dorothy, Ruby's fiancée, lived on 76th Street, and Ruby saw her every night that wasn't devoted to his Fiendish Activities. Not that she knew about his secret life; I was Ruby's only confidante in crime.

"I wrote her a letter, all right," he said, with a mocking laugh. "She'll never forget it. She'll be sorry for the rest of her life."

It was obvious that the bumpy road to love was bumpier than usual.

"You know what I told her?" Ruby said. "I told her what I *really* think of her. And I told her what she could do with that four-eyed freak she's so crazy about."

I looked at him queerly, since Ruby wears the biggest eyeglasses I ever saw in my life. I mean, they were so big that an optometrist could have hung them up as a sign.

"She doesn't know I saw her," Ruby continued with a snarl. "I was in the delicatessen across the street from her house, the Savoy. You remember the place."

I did, of course. We had robbed it once, and lost money on the deal.

"I was just standing there, when I see this taxi pull up in front of her place, and Dorothy gets out with this four-eyed tall guy. I mean, they were friendly. *Real* friendly!"

I liked Dorothy, so I rushed to her defense. "Gee, Ruby, he was probably some guy from where she works, probably gave her a lift—"

"Yeah?" Ruby said cynically. "So how come he kissed her good-bye? I mean a real *passionate* kiss?"

That stopped me, and I joined Ruby in a morose sip of coffee and an angry bite of cruller.

"So today," Ruby said, "I wrote her this letter and told her off good. Women are all alike, pal,

don't trust any of 'em. They'll two-time you the minute you turn your back. I shouldn't have just written her a letter. I should have gone up there and *leaned* on her a little."

"Gosh, Ruby, you wouldn't really *hurt* her?"

Ruby didn't answer. He picked up his coffee cup and downed the brown stuff like it was a hooker of rye. It's a good thing alcohol made Ruby sick, or he would have gotten potted that night. I watched him and felt an emphatic melancholy; the idea that Ruby and Dorothy might part seemed as shattering to me as if my own parents were breaking up. Big tears welled in my eyes, and I think I would have blubbered right in the middle of the cafeteria, except that a sudden thought intruded. "Hey!" I cried. "Maybe Dorothy has a brother!"

"Naw," Ruby said. "She's got a lot of relatives out in the middle west, but nobody like that. Besides, that wasn't any sisterly kiss, let me tell you."

I stood up, and made a feeble excuse about washing my hands. I tried not to show my excitement, because I had decided to call Dorothy and see if there were some reasonable explanation for her behavior. I knew vaguely that the way of the peacemaker is hard, but I didn't know *how* hard it was going to become.

In the rear of Hector's, I put one of Ruby's coins into the telephone and dialed Dorothy's home number. When she answered, I didn't know how to approach the subject delicately, so I just blurted it out.

"Hey," I said. "Who was that guy last night?"

"What guy?" She sounded surprised.

I forced a laugh. "I was across the street yesterday, and I saw you getting out of the taxi. You better not let Ruby know about that, hah-hah."

"I don't know what you're talking about; I came home by subway. Are you with Ruby? Is he playing a joke on me?"

I didn't know whether she was covering up or not. So I laughed again, in a kind of cracked debonair manner, and that made her sore.

"Look, will you stop acting so silly? If Ruby's there, tell him to be sure and get here at seven-thirty. My cousin Ruth has to leave at nine, so we have to have dinner early."

"Your cousin Ruth?"

"Ruby knows about it. Ruth came in last night, to see her husband off. He's going into the Army. Would you please ask Ruby to come to the phone?"

"He's not here!" I said wildly. "I mean, I don't know where he is," I stuttered. "Dorothy, does this cousin of yours look like you, even a little?"

"She does, as a matter of fact. Why?"

"Nothing," I said miserably. "If I see Ruby, I'll tell him to call you." And I hung up.

I went back to the table, and told Ruby what I had done. When I got to the part about Dorothy's cousin, his eyes glazed and realized the truth.

"Her cousin!" he said, slapping his high forehead. "I thought Dorothy looked different. Something about the hairstyle—"

"Boy, that's a relief, huh?" I said. "But you better call her back."

Ruby still looked stunned. I had to jog his elbow to get him to say something. When he did, the words gagged him.

"The letter!"

"What?"

"The letter I sent Dorothy! If she gets it, it's the end!"

"Gee," I said calmly, "why not just call her and tell her not to read it?"

"Are you nuts? Did you ever try and tell a girl *not* to do something? She'll be so curious she'll *have* to read it. I've got to get that letter back!"

"Maybe if you called the post office," I said timidly. His glare told me what he thought of the suggestion, so I tried another. "Well, tell her the truth then. Tell her how jealous you got when you saw her cousin—"

"You don't understand. It was a real *nasty* letter. I said things she could never forgive. I even said she was fat."

I smiled pleasantly. "She *is* getting a little plump, isn't she?"

Ruby groaned, and looked worse off than he had before. He slumped into his chair, and hid his face in his hands. I didn't know what else to do, so I went and got some cheese Danish from the pastry counter. By the time I got back, Ruby looked entirely different, I had forgotten how swiftly his ingenious Criminal Brain worked.

"There's only one thing to do," he said. "We got to *steal* it back."

"We?" I said, soprano. *"Steal* it?"

"It's the only way. You've got to waylay the postman that comes to Dorothy's apartment house."

"I've got to? But Ruby—"

"You're the only one who can do it. The mail comes at ten, and I'll be at work then. I'd take tomorrow off, but we're doing a job for our biggest client."

"Ruby, you're talking crazy. You can't rob a postman. I mean, that's a federal offense, it's like killing somebody."

"You're not stealing money, just a lousy letter. Now listen carefully how it's gonna work—"

I put my hands over my ears. "I'm not listening! I don't want to listen! I did a lot of nutty things for you, Ruby, but you're not getting no F.B.I. on my neck!"

"You won't have any trouble," Ruby said contemptuously "I've seen the guy who delivers the mail there. He's about four feet high

and built like a sparrow. When you shove that gun in his face, he'll fold up."

"Gun?" I said, spraying the landscape with the cheese crumbs in my mouth. "Ruby, I'm not sticking up any postman with a gun!"

"What else you gonna use, a bow and arrow? It'll be a fake, of course, we'll pick one up at Woolworth's. All you have to do is wait around the hallway until he shows up. When he's about to put the letter in Dorothy's mailbox, you jump out and grab it." He studied me reflectively. "Better wear a mask," he said. "Nobody could forget a face like yours."

I stood up and folded my arms. I had been browbeaten, coaxed, and cajoled into plenty of capers with Ruby Martinson, but this time I was going to be firm.

"I won't do it," I said, with manly simplicity.

Then I waited for Ruby's barrage. It didn't come. He just put his thumbnail between his teeth, looked dejected, and turned his head away.

"Oh, heck," I said. "All right, Ruby."

I had nothing but nightmares in my dream life during those years with Ruby Martinson, and that night was no different. James Cagney was after me with a machine-gun, and wouldn't even let me surrender. I went down in a hail of G-Man bullets, and woke up clutching my stomach. My mother heard my groans and suggested castor oil. I said no, but from the fishy taste of my orange juice, I suspected that she had her way.

I showed up at Dorothy's apartment house a little before nine. In the hallway, I scouted the best hiding place; it was easy enough to find. Behind the staircase was a dark, damp corner used for the storage of baby carriages, discarded tricycles, and a large piece of nude sculpture. It was embarrassing to be around the thing, so I sat on the seat of the tricycle and tried not to see it. While I waited, I checked the artillery that Woolworth had provided: it was a small, menacing pistol that went clickety-chuck when you pressed the trigger, and emitted a small hard piece of sickening candy. I hoped I would remember not to fire the darned thing; I might actually hurt the guy.

It was a long wait. For an hour, I sat there with nothing to do but eat the revolting candy and try not to stare at the naked stone lady. After awhile, I got so bored and reckless that I not only stared at the statue, but started firing little hard pieces of candy at it.

Then I heard the shuffling footsteps and the out-of-key whistle. The postman was here.

I peeked out to size up the opposition, and felt just a bit better.

Ruby had been correct, if not precise. The postman was a little guy not much over five feet, and so frail that I didn't see how he carried that heavy mailpouch on his pack. He had already sorted out the building mail, and now he was opening the bank of boxes against the wall.

I fixed my eyes on Dorothy's mailbox, and tied my handkerchief around my face. Then I took out the gun, put my finger on the trigger, and got ready to pounce. I really amazed myself that day; I wasn't even nervous.

Then it was time to act. He had an envelope in his hand and was about to drop it in the box; once he locked it, it would be irretrievable. I jumped out, waved the gun, and shouted:

"Stick 'em up!"

To tell you the truth, I didn't shout anything. I just jumped out and opened my mouth. Not a sound came out. I wasn't nervous, but my mouth was. We looked at each other stupidly for a moment, and I wondered if I would have to write it out for him. Can you imagine borrowing a guy's pencil and writing "stick 'em up?"

We were at an impasse. He didn't know what I wanted, and I didn't know how to tell him. Then I fixed everything by snatching the letter out of his hand.

He knew what I was up to then, all right. He yelled and called me something that I never saw in print, and then he picked up that big mail pouch of his like it was a pillow, and whopped me right in the head. I mean, that bag must have weighed a hundred pounds and he just slung it at me! I staggered against the wall and he raised the thing again. It must have felt heavier this time, because he wasn't so fast anymore. I had time to duck underneath his arm and make it to the front door of the apartment house.

I didn't even look back to see if I was followed. I just tore the handkerchief from my face and ran. If there's one thing I could do, it was run. I ran so hard that my shirttails came right out of my trousers. I didn't stop until I reached Sixty-eighth Street.

But I had the letter! Panting but triumphant, I stopped in the doorway of a hardware store and looked at the envelope.

It was neatly typed, and in the upper left-hand corner were the words: FRESH AIR FUND.

I opened the letter, praying that Ruby had used a second-hand envelope. But the worst was immediately evident. The letter had been run off on a duplicating machine, and it's opening line was:

"YOU CAN SEND A BOY TO CAMP THIS SUMMER!"

Right then, I fervently wished the boy could be me. In my haste, I had snatched the first letter the postman had destined for the mailbox. Ruby's letter was still in the

pouch; by now it was nestling snugly in the mailbox where it belonged. And that night, Dorothy would open it blissfully, and all would be over.

My first thought was to go down to the docks and see what ships were leaving. Then I decided it wasn't fair to Ruby to tell him anything but the truth; his fertile brain might still hatch another scheme for the letter's recovery. I phoned him at his office, and he called me exactly what the mailman had called me. Then he said to meet him at Hector's Cafeteria at noon.

I showed up, expecting to be tongue-lashed. Instead, I found Ruby looking crafty. The Great Mind had arrived at another solution.

"It's all fixed," he said cheerfully. "It took some figuring out, but I did it."

"That's great," I said. "I knew you could do it!"

"It came to me in a flash. What would stop somebody from opening their own letter?"

I concentrated, and tried to match Ruby's uncanny powers, but I got no place.

He laughed. "Would you open a letter that might kill you?"

"*Kill* me? How could a letter do that?"

"If it was contaminated! Don't you see?"

I wasn't even sure what contaminated meant.

"I called Dorothy at the office," Ruby said, chuckling happily. "I told her she'd get a letter from me in the mail today, but she wasn't to open it under any circumstances."

"Wasn't she curious why?"

"Sure she was. But I told her the letter wasn't anything important, just a poem I wrote for her."

It was like hearing that Dillinger did needlework.

"You write poems?" I said.

Ruby scowled. "So what? Anyway, I told her that I was over at a chemical laboratory, visiting a friend of mine yesterday, and I had the poem in my pocket. I sat down at one of the counters and started to read it, when all of a sudden I accidentally knocked this beaker over. Some white liquid got spilled on the letter, but it dried fast so I didn't think anything of it, and put the poem in the mail."

"What a screwy story," I said.

"Let me finish," Ruby snapped. "Anyway, after I mailed the poem, I got to talking to one of the guys in the laboratory, and mentioned about spilling the beaker. He got real excited, because he said the beaker contained a virulent-type disease germ. If you just touch the stuff, you curl up and die."

"Wow!" I said. "Are you sure it didn't get on you, Ruby?"

He punched my arm. "This is what I told Dorothy, you dope, it didn't really happen."

"Oh."

"Anyway, I told Dorothy the letter should be burned before she opens it, to make sure she doesn't get infected. She got real upset, of course, and said maybe she ought to leave work and go to the apartment. She's got this cleaning woman who brings up the mail every day, and who knows? But I told her not to worry, that I'd go up there and burn the letter for her. So that's your agenda for the afternoon, pal."

"Me? Aw, gosh, Ruby, I don't want to go back there."

"Don't give me any arguments. Nothing can go wrong this time. All you got to do is let yourself into Dorothy's apartment—the key's under the mat—and get hold of that letter and burn it. Even *you* can handle that."

"All right," I said reluctantly. "I guess that won't be so hard."

Ruby looked at his watch. "Call me at the office and let me know how things went. And I'll meet you here at six. Check?"

"Check," I said.

This time, the trip to 76th Street wasn't nearly so depressing. It was a simple enough assignment; all I had to do was burn a letter. I liked fires.

I walked up the street to the apartment house, whistling nonchalantly. To this day, I can't explain the cockeyed confidence which made me believe that a white handkerchief was an impenetrable disguise. Even if I had suspected that the two burly types lingering in the doorway of Dorothy's building were officers of the law, I think I would have merely gulped hard and kept on going, secure in the belief that I was unrecognizable. Only let me tell you what I was wearing. A pink sports shirt with a picture of a hula dancer on the back. A leather belt with a nickle-plated buckle the size of a cantaloupe. A pair of bleached denim pants, and orange shoes. Orange. They had been tan to begin with, but my shoe polish went rancid or something, and they turned orange.

It never occurred to me that the postman would take any action, and describe my outfit to the Law. After all, what was one Fresh Air Fund letter, more or less? But when I went up the elevator to Dorothy's apartment, the two big guys went with me. When I found the key under the mat, they stood at the end of the hallway and acted indifferent. When I entered the apartment, and found Ruby's letter on the coffee table, I was smugly certain my troubles were over.

Just to make doubly certain that I had the right letter this time (and because I was so curious), I opened the envelope and took a look at the contents.

The letter wasn't very long, but neither is a stick of dynamite.

Dear Dorothy, it said, *I saw you with that ugly four-eyed boyfriend of yours, and you can have him. Please send me back my ring on account of our engagement is off. If you can get it off your finger, which I doubt, since you've been getting pretty fat lately. You look lousy.* And it was signed, *Yours Sincerely, Ruby Martinson.*

I chuckled to myself, and was about to leave when I saw them standing in the doorway.

"You live here, son?" one of them said. He had a nose like a piece of modeling clay.

"Who, me?" I said. "No, my friend lives here. She wanted me to get something for her. A letter."

"A letter, huh?" the second one grunted, looking at his buddy sideways. "You got quite a thing about letters, don't you, kid?"

"What's that?" I said, starting to shake.

The first one took out a wallet the size of a club. For a minute, I thought he was going to sock me with it, but he was only flashing his identification. "I'm Lieutenant Jakes," he said. "This is Lieutenant Cochran."

"Hello there," I said. I started to grin. That's my worst symptom when I'm nervous. I grin so hard my jaw hurts. "I didn't do anything," I said. "I was just doing my friend a favor. You could call and ask her."

"We just might do that," Jakes said. "Only there's something else we wanted to talk to you about. Were you in the building this morning?"

"Me?" I said, grinning and shaking.

"Mr. Finchley, the postman who works this building, he got attacked this morning. Somebody snatched a letter from him. You know anything about that?"

"Me?" I said.

"Is that all you can say?" Cochran growled. "Did you take that letter? The postman described you and that outfit you got on to a T, so no use acting coy."

I was about to say "Me?" again, but I figured he must have meant Me. My legs went rubbery and my eyes blurred. I held up Ruby's letter and tried to croak out an explanation.

"Wait a minute," I said, "wait. I had a reason, a very good reason!"

"You know what the penalty for mail theft is?" both of them asked, seemed like both of them.

"I know, I know," I squealed. "But I had to do it. So help me! I was looking for this letter—this letter's poisoned—"

That stopped them. They stepped back from the envelope I was waving in my hand, as if it were a hand grenade.

"What are you giving us?" Jakes said gruffly. "What do you mean, poisoned?"

"It is, it is!" I shrieked. "That's why I was trying to get it from the postman, so he shouldn't get

infected. My friend sent it to his girl friend from some chemical laboratory. A test tube got spilled on it—it's full of deadly germs—"

They looked at each other, and I could see they were uncertain about what to do next. That made three of us.

Then Cochran twisted his mouth sourly. "Oh, yeah?" he said. "Then how come *you're* touching it, kid?"

"I was going to burn it!" I shouted wildly. "I'm immune to this kind of thing, I've had shots!"

"It's a nutty story," Jakes muttered. "But who knows? Maybe we better check on it."

"Please," I stammered, "call Dorothy. The girl who lives here. She'll tell you it's true. She'll prove it."

"We'll do better than that. We'll take you and that letter into our lab. Then we'll get this thing straightened out."

"No!" I yelled. "You can't do that! I have to burn it—"

"Come on," Jakes said.

He jerked his thumb at me, and failing to think of anything else to say, I preceded them out. It was at times like these that I wished (a) to have Ruby's power of invention, or (b) to have never met Ruby at all.

I thought there would be a prowl car in the street, but there wasn't. Instead, they prodded me into a nondescript gray Buick. I was put in the back with my diseased letter, and Cochran sat beside me, well away from me and it. The officer named Jakes drove, but I don't think he was happy having me behind him. I felt like Typhoid Mary.

I thought this lab would be in a precinct house, but it wasn't; it was located in a quiet brownstone house on East 48th Street. As they led me into the place, I kept pleading with them to call Dorothy. I didn't mention anything about Ruby Martinson; some crazy sense of honor kept me from dragging his name into the mess. I guess I figured that once he was in the hands of the Law, his whole Criminal Career might be exposed.

The fellow in the lab was named Fusco. He listened to their story with interest, looked queerly at me with Ruby's letter in my hot little hand, and then beckoned us into an inner office.

Fusco was one of these kindly white-haired types; he didn't look like a cop or an F.B.I. man at all. He listened calmly to my own version of what had happened, and asked if I knew what kind of virulent germ Ruby had spilled on the letter. I said I didn't know, but that I thought Ruby had said that its victims turned blue. He then examined my face, my throat, my pulse, and took my temperature.

"Well," he said, "if you've caught anything, there's no sign of it. But maybe we'd better see that letter."

I held it behind my back. "We

have to burn it," I said. "I was told to burn it."

Fusco smiled gently. "I'd like to take a look at it under the microscope."

"No!" I yelled. "You can't do that! I mean, you might catch it yourself—"

He took a pair of forceps out of a drawer, and held them toward me. With a sinking feeling, I let him take the letter.

When Fusco disappeared into a back room, I looked at my captors and wondered what my mother would say when she learned that I was going to jail. I began thinking about prison life. I hoped she wouldn't mail me a lot of cakes and cookies and stuff like that. I mean, I wouldn't want the other prisoners to think I was a sissy.

Five minutes later, Fusco reappeared. There was no letter in his hand, and he was looking grave. I shut my eyes and waited for the worst.

Then I heard him say:

"The young man was right. There were deadly disease germs on that letter, but fortunately, he didn't become infected. You really can't blame him for trying to steal it—he was only protecting the mailman."

"You see?" I said ecstatically. "You see?"

Jake grunted. "What do we do, give him a medal?"

Gee, you don't have to do that," I said.

"I've burned the letter as instructed," Fusco said, looking at me with a funny kind of twinkle. "So you can forget the whole thing."

"What kind of germs were they, Doc?" Cochran asked.

"One of the deadliest," Fusco smiled. "I'm not sure of the exact name, but I think it's something like *zelus excessus.* But everything's fine now."

"Then can I go?" I said eagerly. "Will you let me go?"

Jakes rubbed his jaw, and then looked at his buddy.

"I guess so. If the doctor says it's okay."

I made the door so fast that I think I broke Nurmi's record. But something stopped me before I turned the knob. I looked back at the doctor, and said:

"Say, you *sure* I didn't get infected? I've got an awful weak constitution. I mean, I can catch anything."

"You're absolutely fine," the doctor said.

But I wasn't so fine by the time I met Ruby Martinson at Hector's Cafeteria that night. I was seeing spots before my eyes, my head was feverish, and my tongue felt two inches thick.

"Ruby," I said, trembling. "Ruby I'm feeling sick. Why didn't you tell me it was the truth?"

"Don't be stupid," he said.

"Ruby, you heard about what the doctor said. I think I'm coming down with this *zelus excessus.* Do I look blue to you?"

He laughed happily. "You dope! Don't you see what happened? This Fusco must be an all right guy; he read the letter and figured out what had happened. So he just played along with the gag, and pretended that there *were* deadly germs on the letter."

"He did?"

"Of course! You know what *zelus excessus* means in Latin? Too much jealousy!"

Ruby was feeling so good that he bought me a slab of lemon meringue pie. But I was too sick to enjoy it.

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the Lipstick

It has been said that a drowning person, in the brief moments between his last desperate struggles to stay afloat and his death by liquid suffocation, sees passing before his eyes, like a speeded-up motion picture, the chief events and crises of his life.

To Gaston Beaujolais, sitting in his favorite armchair in the flagstoned parlor of Henriette's house, with Henriette herself on his knee, a similar phenomenon occurred one wet spring night in the mountain village of St. Paul de Vence.

There was, however, one important difference: Gaston was in no danger of drowning—unless it was in the deep hazel pools of Henriette's eyes. He was, in fact, demonstrating his affection for Henriette when the first scene of his personal cinema flashed without warning onto the screen of his consciousness.

Curiously, this flash-back, the lightning-fast recapitulation of his past, did not begin with his childhood or early youth as such manifestations are commonly expected to do. Instead, Gaston's mental movie began only after he had attained mature manhood, married Yvonne, and become preëminent in his profession . . .

Gaston Beaujolais was a chemist. Not the kind of chemist, he was fond of saying, that messes about with nauseous batches of umbelliferone, phthalic anhydride or paradichlorobenzene. Oh, no. He

BY James Holding

Explosion

What would we do without science? It both saves and destroys lives—and you could hardly ask more of it than that. Be that as it may, there are those backward folk who have been requesting that it go away.

had put his undoubted chemical talents to far better use, placing them at the service of Art and Beauty (with capital letters). He devoted his working hours entirely to the compounding of perfumes, face powders, soothing salves, wrinkle removers, astringents, cleansing unguents and sensuous shades of lipstick and nail polish. Anything, in short, that could conceivably help the French female to look and smell more attractive was grist to Beaujolais' chemical mill. He was, in his words, a cosmetic chemist. And a good one, too. Indeed, he occupied the post of Chief Chemist at Rousseau Frères, the well-known firm of cosmetic manufacturers whose laboratories were located on the Boulevard Gambetta in Nice, just off the Promenade des Anglais.

It was a mental picture of that laboratory of his that occurred to him first, in that run-through of his past.

He saw himself, quite clearly, standing in his laboratory, a man of middle height with sensitive hands and a purely Gallic ebullience. He was dressed in his white working smock and was watching intently a concoction of some sort that simmered in a test tube over a burner.

He knew, instantly, exactly what the concoction was. It was the new lipstick ingredient he had discovered how to synthesize only that day. It had given him a great deal of trouble, the development of this particular ingredient. For it was not a substance usually included in lipsticks. Yet it was an ingredient that Beaujolais felt sure would inevitably enable Rousseau Frères to corner the world lipstick market, if he should ever divulge its secret to his superiors.

He had not the slightest intention of doing so, however. It was his exclusive formula, privately ar-

rived at and now destined for use in one lipstick only: the lipstick with which he intended to murder his wife.

And the truly Gallic touch that distinguished Gaston's planning was this: he could contemplate with equanimity the murder of his wife, and incidentally, of his best friend as well, but he felt very strongly indeed that when Yvonne died, he couldn't bear it if she didn't die quickly and happily. She had not, for some years now, of course, been a wife in the true sense of the word. Beautiful, yes, and gracious, *convenable,* affectionate she still was—but in matters of love, what had started as an attractive timidity on her part during their honeymoon had since become what he could only term outright indiffernce to him. This, Gaston Beaujolais felt, was certainly unsuitable, nay unacceptable, in the wife of an eminent cosmetic chemist.

His first attempt to solve his problem had taken the form of Henriette Deschamps, a lovely mannequin he had met at a fashion show in Cannes, where he had been present as a representative of Rousseau Frères' Commercial Make-up Service. Henriette was lonely, being only recently transplanted from Paris to the Côte d'Azur; she was basically fond of men; she found Gaston appealing in a chemical way. And she had no objections when he found a charming cottage for her in St. Paul de Vence, a village in the hills with the geographical advantage of being readily accessible to him when he motored from Nice to Grasse and back on his regular visits to secure certain flower fragrances for his work.

Henriette was a joy—a gay, intelligent girl who very soon supplanted Gaston's wife, Yvonne, in his affection. This was made all the easier by Yvonne's obvious and growing distaste for any expression of Gaston's feelings. Even a hurried kiss from him upon his return from the laboratory made her wince a little, uncontrollably. Gaston, who was blessed with a normally healthy ego, realized that Yvonne's was not a revulsion reserved only for him, but encompassed all men alike. Even Alfred, his long time friend, who had also courted Yvonne and bowed gracefully to defeat when Gaston came off with the prize, could nowadays scarcely touch Yvonne's hand to pass her into a taxi, without the same shrinking becoming painfully apparent in her.

The more Gaston found himself in love with his mannequin, Henriette, the more impatient he felt with his wife, Yvonne, and the more pity he felt for his good friend, Alfred.

But since Henriette skillfully soothed the troubled waters of his spirit, and satisfied his persistent need for sympathetic female un-

derstanding, he gave the matter of his wife very little thought for a time, living in a dream world of his own in which he found myriad excuses to visit Grasse on business for Rousseau Frères, and stop each time for a blissful interlude with Henriette in St. Paul de Vence.

Such a make-shift arrangement could not possibly last, of course. Henriette soon began to fancy herself a little. As a result, she began to put on a few charming airs. Next, she found herself wishing she were Madame Gaston Beaujolais, rather than merely Gaston's little "mountain blossom" as he called her fondly, carefully concealed from society and shut off from city gaiety as surely as though she were one of the pretty but useless white doves that gathered to gossip on the roof of Les Colombes, the local inn nearby. This, she said vehemently to Gaston one afternoon, while hugging his handsome head to her bosom, was no way for a girl to live, do you know it, *mon cher?*

Gaston was forced to agree, upon thinking it over, that she had reason on her side. He could not blame a sensitive girl like Henriette for feeling as she did. For several months after she mentioned it to him, his manner both at his laboratory and at home, was rather *distrait.*

It was during this period of restless brooding that Gaston came to his decision: Yvonne must be got rid of to make room for Henriette. It was as simple as that. Once this decision was made, he was not unduly troubled by the prospect of having to make away with his wife. It was the *method* of murder that kept him awake at night, tossing fretfully.

He would kill her, he thought feverishly. Yes, it must be. There was no other practical solution. But how? She was not to blame for her shortcomings, poor Yvonne. She was probably as bitterly unhappy in their marriage as he was. He must kill her, he thought, yes, but he must kill her in some way that would give her pleasure. She must be happy at the last. This was a sentiment that did him credit, but it posed a problem, all the same: what method of murder would be pleasant for Yvonne as well as quick and sure for him?

The "quick and sure" requirements occasioned him no difficulty. After all, was he not a brilliant cosmetic chemist, thoroughly accustomed to the compounding of all kinds of beauty aids, including lipsticks? Yes, he decided, a lipstick would be a fitting weapon. To a man of his knowledge and experience, it was the work of but a few minutes to blend a lethal solution of potassium cyanide with the pulp of one of Rousseau Frères' Petal Pink lipsticks that Yvonne always used.

After this simple preliminary step, there followed some weeks of

serious research, the net result of which was the new lipstick ingredient that Gaston now stood watching as it bubbled merrily over the Bunsen burner on his laboratory table.

Unfortunately, his brilliant solution of his problem made it imperative that Alfred, his oldest friend and Yvonne's still faithful though frustrated admirer, should die, too. But again, Gaston's conscience proved comfortably elastic, and although he regretted the necessity of finishing off poor Alfred, he was able to console himself by reflecting that Alfred, when the moment of death came, would be happy, too—happier than he had been for years.

Gaston determined to act that very night. Hastily he cooled the bubbling solution in his test tube, combined it skillfully with the body of the lipstick already liberally spiked with hydrocyanic acid, poured four precise drops of a colorless fluid he took from his laboratory shelf into the mixture, added a trifle more scent to the lipstick than was usual (to conceal the odor of almonds), then carefully rolled the finished preparation into lipstick shape, rounded it at one end as though it had been slightly used, and inserted the whole into a black and gold lipstick holder that was the exact duplicate of the Rousseau Frères 80-franc holder that Yvonne regularly used. The holder he put into his pocket.

They heard a performance of *Simon Boccanegra* at the Casino Mediterranée that evening, the three of them, Alfred, Gaston and Yvonne. Their seats were together, Yvonne sitting between the two men. It was a La Scala company from Milan, very good, and they enjoyed the opera immensely. Halfway through the last act, Gaston had the opportunity to remove from Yvonne's evening purse, without her knowledge, her black enameled lipstick holder and replace it with the one he had prepared at the laboratory. A few minutes later, as the curtain came down to thunderous applause, he struck himself on the forehead with his clenched fist and said to Yvonne: "What a fool I am, darling! I told you that I must drive up to Grasse tonight, to be there for the early flower market tomorrow." She nodded as she slipped into her wrap. "But," Gaston continued easily, "I have forgotten some important papers that I must have with me. They are at the laboratory. I'll just run down and get them now, do you mind? It will save me time in the end."

"Alors," said Yvonne with a transparent lack of interest, "I'll come with you. Then you can take me home and be on the road for Grasse by midnight."

As though suddenly struck by the possibility, Gaston said, "Unless Alfred would take you home while I go to the laboratory?"

Alfred rose gallantly to the occasion, as Gaston knew he would. "I insist on it, dear fellow," he said warmly. "I'll drive her home with pleasure. If you agree, Yvonne?"

"Why not?" she said indifferently. She took out her compact, unsheathed the pink cylinder of her lipstick and applied it to her lips as they made ready to leave the auditorium.

Gaston's own lips curled in a slight smile.

Outside, it had begun to rain very heavily. They ran to the parking lot, and Alfred hustled Yvonne into the front seat of his Renault, then went around and climbed under the wheel. Gaston waved them away, and went to his own car farther down the rank. He got in and sat listening to the raindrops beating on the canvas over his head, the while he peered through a window at Alfred's Renault. When the car left the lot, he could clearly see the silhouettes of Alfred and Yvonne limned against the lights of the Casino. The silhouettes were surprisingly close together.

Gaston did not go to his laboratory. Instead, he drove carefully from the parking lot and, at a discreet distance, followed Alfred's Renault. It turned north, up the Avenue de la Victoire toward the suburb where Gaston and Yvonne lived, but he was amused to note that at the next turning, Alfred continued straight on toward the rising hills behind the city. "Ah," Gaston said to himself with quiet satisfaction, "already it marches."

When, presently, the Renault turned off the main road into a dark tree-lined track, Gaston winked and watched the streamers of rain that his headlights disclosed lancing thickly downward. Shutting off his lights, he then pulled up calmly at the edge of the road, several hundred yards short of the dark lane into which Alfred and Yvonne had disappeared.

He lit a Gauloise and sat in his car for five minutes, savoring the strong, black, biting tobacco, then confidently descended into the rain and walked openly up the road to the track where he had last seen the Renault.

He turned into the track, making no effort to conceal his presence. He was sure no one would see him in this deserted locality on such a miserable night. The rain was a stroke of luck, he thought. Certainly Yvonne and Alfred would not see him! He began to breathe a trifle rapidly. That was the only sign of tension about him.

No car lights were visible in the gloomy tunnel before him. But he detected the looming bulk of the darkened Renault twenty yards away, parked under the dripping trees. He approached it deliberately, his feet making small sucking sounds in the wet earth he trod.

And although he knew what he would find when he opened the

Renault's door and the dome light came on, he felt a pleasant sense of accomplishment at what he saw there in the front seat.

Yvonne and Alfred were in each other's arms. Each face wore a look of joy and long-deferred satisfaction. Their half-opened lips were pressed together in a magnificently earthy kiss that roused a faint glow of envy in Gaston's romantic breast.

And both were quite dead.

For a long moment, Gaston stood there, his head inside the Renault. His expression was that of an artist who stands back to regard a finished painting, proud and a trifle awed by the masterpiece he has wrought. For Gaston's lipstick was indeed a minor masterpiece. Before him was the proof.

He could hear his own voice, very faint and off-stage, explaining to the wondering assistant chemists at Rousseau Frères exactly what a triumph of cosmetic chemistry that lipstick of his was. "You will remember," he fancied himself saying, "that Madame Beaujolais was a woman to whom any physical contact with a member of the opposite sex was unpleasant. Yet what happens when she is driven home from the opera by her husband's oldest friend? She moves closer to him in the car almost immediately. She begs him not to drive her directly home, but to take her to some dark spot where, like the veriest teen-age lovers, they can park their car, turn out the lights, and engage undisturbed in what our American allies at one time called 'necking'. Yes, my friends, and when they found them, both dead as doornails, what was their position? They were locked in close embrace; their lips were joined in a passionate kiss.

"How can this be explained—this seemingly inexplicable tableau of death? I shall tell you. It was my lipstick that brought it all about; not only the death of the lovers—that alone would have been easy. But my lipstick was so formulated that it brought death in its fairest guise—a kiss!

"The death-dealing agent? Hydrocyanic acid. But, in all modesty, I must point out to you that it was my original variations on this ancient theme that are of interest. Let us take them in order. First, I desired to make a usually dispassionate woman want to be kissed. The answer, obviously, was a completely new kind of chemical—one that would work by osmosis through the skin of the lips and enter the blood stream in the mouth area with authority enough to arouse in the woman an intense desire, nay, a need to be kissed. Such a chemical I at length compounded, using the rendered salts of a number of other stimulating chemicals as the basic building block of my formula.

"Very well. We now have a lipstick that is lethal and contains a chemical to stimulate the kissing

urge. But our difficulties are by no means at an end. Oh, no! Now we must discover some subtle means of holding the instantaneous virulence of hydrocyanic acid at bay, of making it remain quiescent and harmless until the moment of kissing. We don't want the woman to die the moment she applies her lipstick, else the kissing chemical were purposeless.

"Such a substance, too, I was successful in finding. It is a colorless liquid whose source I shall not reveal to you as you might not believe me. Only a few drops serve our purpose. But this antidote to the poison, major discovery though it is, must be a temporary inhibitor only, as you can readily appreciate. Now we must have a catalyst, a trigger, if you will, to remove the restraints set upon the poison by the inhibitor, to reactivate, at the moment of kissing, the deadly acid that lurks in the lipstick on the lady's lips.

"I see you have guessed the catalyst, my friends. And of course, you are right. The natural moisture of the mouth—here was the logical trigger to set off a lipstick explosion. But wait! Do you see the difficulty involved there? The almost insurmountable chemical problem posed by that simple requirement? The trigger cannot be the lady's own saliva. Decidedly not. Merely licking her lips will then inevitably precipitate death. No, my problem, the most difficult one I faced, was to evolve a temporary antidote for hydrocyanic acid that would volatize and release the killing poison only on contact with the moisture of *male* lips.

"Over this problem I worked with what I must call genuine dedication for some weeks, only, in the end, to be but partially successful. For my solution necessarily embodied death for the man who was kissing her as well as for the woman herself. However, I have never pretended to perfection. Sometimes we must be satisfied with workable compromises. And after all, by the simple formulation of this lipstick, I *did* succeed in my major aim: removing Madame Beaujolais to make way for Henriette, and doing it in such a way that she was very happy in the end!"

Gaston realized, of course, that to address such a monologue as this to his laboratory colleagues would be insane. But by delivering it silently to himself, with his head inside a car on a dark track above Nice, he found that he was able to enjoy, vicariously, some of the approbation for his chemical brilliance that would undoubtedly have been his had he been able to reveal the secret of his lipstick to the world.

That thought brought him up sharply. There was still much to be done. From the pocket of his wet jacket he brought out Yvonne's own harmless lipstick. He put it

into her purse, removing at the same time the poisoned lipstick and placing it in his pocket. He left her purse open on the seat beside her body, and carefully placed near her right hand a tiny vial, empty, that had the letters HCN stamped on it in tiny type.

Then he closed the door of the car. The roof light snapped off. And the tragic burden of the Renault withdrew once more into decent darkness. He walked boldly back to his own car, confident that the rain would wash out the marks of his footsteps on the soft ground of the track.

Driving through the hills half an hour later on his way to St. Paul de Vence, he tried to imagine the surprise and shock with which all his acquaintances—and Yvonne's—would react to the news tomorrow when the bodies were found. The only possible explanation would be a suicide pact, carried out by star-crossed lovers who preferred to swallow poison together as they kissed for the last time, rather than continue to dishonor a loving husband and dear friend by a shabby, clandestine love affair. Everybody in Nice knew that Alfred had always been in love with Yvonne. And now they would know that Yvonne must secretly have been in love with Alfred, too. Gaston Beaujolais smiled to himself, anticipating the efforts of the authorities in Nice to reach him at Grasse tomorrow with the ill tidings of his beloved wife's death.

Henriette received him in her small house just after midnight, delighted that he was stopping even for a couple of hours with her. She exclaimed in distress when she saw his rain-dampened clothing, and scolded him gently about going out in the rain without wearing a waterproof. She took his wet jacket and shoes into her bedroom to dry them out before the tiny coal fire that was burning there this damp night; she brought him the dressing gown and slippers that he kept at her house for just such occasions as this.

Then, settling him comfortably in his favorite armchair, she smiled bewitchingly at him and dropped into his lap with eager affection. "Darling Gaston," she said to him in a warm voice, "I feel very much like a wife to you, *tu sais*. I believe no wife could hold you in higher esteem than I do, or love you half so much." She leaned forward to kiss him, but he held her away from him by the shoulders while he said softly:

"Perhaps you *shall* be my wife before long, chérie."

Her eyes lighted up like those of a child who catches her first glimpse of the Carnaval parade. *"Vraiment?"* she asked joyfully. "You are not joking, Gaston?"

He shook his head, smiling at her tenderly.

She kissed him with even more passionate gusto than usual. Gaston returned her caress.

That was the exact moment when the curious cinema-like scenes of his life mentioned earlier in this chronicle began to flash with incredible speed before his inward eye.

Suddenly, violently, he wrenched his lips from hers and with agonized intensity whispered, "Where did you get the lipstick you are now wearing, Henriette?"

She attempted to resume their kiss. "In your pocket," she said, "when I hung up your jacket just now. The sample of Petal Pink you brought me. Why? Does it taste funny?" She giggled.

His arms tightened around her as the first dreadful strictures began. "It tastes like death," he said.

But she was no longer listening.

STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP

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RICHARD E. DECKER
Publisher

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 24th day of August, 1960.
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Notary Public, State of Florida at Large
(My commission expires November 17, 1963)
Bonded by American Fire & Casualty Co.

9 FROM 12 LEAVES 3

by Steve O'Connell

"THE CONCLUSION is inescapable," Albert Florian said. "Someone in this club has been murdering its members."

Which one of you two—besides me—has been murdering members of this club, I wondered fretfully.

"When we organized in 1946, there were a round dozen of us," Florian said. "For thirteen years we met annually on the twentieth day of October. But now we discover that within the space of one year nine of our members have met with fatal accidents." He regarded Gerald Evans and me rather severely. "I believe that we all agree that this looks a bit suspicious."

Evans and I nodded.

We three were in one of the private dining rooms at Blutow's on Sixth Street for our annual meeting. This year one of the restaurant's smallest rooms proved adequate.

Florian ticked off the fatalities. "Carson, Abnernathy, and Terwilliger met with automobile accidents."

I had arranged two of those. Carson and Abernathy both had homes at the tops of hills with delightfully suitable winding and precipitous roads leading to their bases. A simple adjustment upon the steering apparatus of their respective automobiles and they descended neatly

To make a club extremely exclusive, curtail its membership. This may be accomplished by destroying those individuals found to be in excess, a method that has much in its favor: (1) The members ousted in this way won't complain. (2) A refund of paid dues will not be requested.

and quickly from garage to eternity.

But who had disposed of Terwilliger? It was a puzzler indeed.

"Phelps fell or jumped from the roof of a ten story building."

Do you realize how *few*—if any—windows of modern air-conditioned buildings are actually meant to be opened? I had to carry Phelps all the way to the roof before I could dispose of him. I suffered an excruciating backache for weeks.

"Schaller was electrocuted when his radio fell into his bathtub."

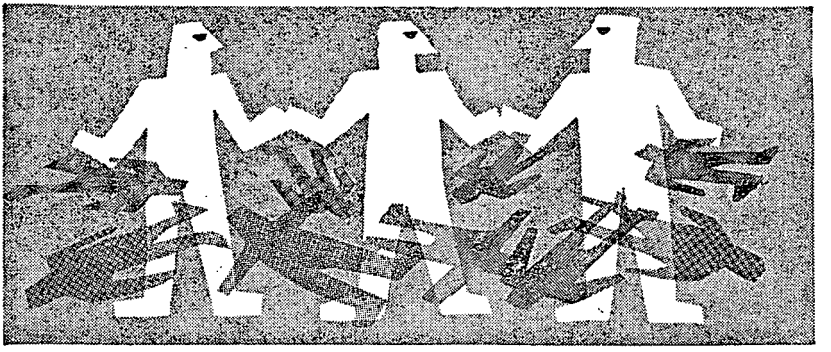
himself while cleaning his gun." Florian shook his head slowly. "But we all know that he was deathly afraid of firearms and would never allow any of them in his home."

My plans had called for him to fall off a cliff near his house. Really a beautiful view.

"Llewellyn walked into a train."

Not my work.

"Naison was struck on the top of the head by a rivet as he took his constitutional past an apartment building under construction." Florian showed teeth. "It was dusk and no work was at the moment in progress, but nevertheless the only conclusion the police could come to was that it was an accident."



Now that could have been an accident. However I know that Schaller had no use for tubs. He was a shower man.

"Wentworth accidentally shot

I wondered how that had been done. Did the murderer lurk high in the scaffolding, rivet poised between thumb and forefinger, waiting for the appropriate moment?

"And Dodsworth fell off the dock at his summer cottage and drowned."

A direct crib from my plans, I thought indignantly. I too knew that Dodsworth couldn't swim.

Florian pointed to the unopened magnum in a place of honor in the center of the table. "Now obviously our club members were not eliminated in order to gain possession of that bottle."

Obviously not.

In 1946, all twelve of us were junior officers on the cruiser *Spokane* —united by our reserve status among the trade school boys and the prospect of impending discharge from active service.

It followed that we should gather together for a misty party of farewell before we scattered to various parts of the States. As the evening became wetter, our regrets at the possibility of our never seeing each other again became unendurable and the inevitable annual reunion was suggested.

The bourbon was excellent and the suggestion blossomed until we found ourselves in the throes of a Last Man Club.

The terms were the usual. The last survivor of our group would have the honor of drinking our duly dedicated bottle of champagne in lonely grandeur. Providing, of course, that his stomach had not so aged that the feat was impossible. And we chose a centrally located city as our meeting ground.

If we had left it at that, presumably most, if not all of us, would have been alive to attend our fourteenth meeting.

However, we realized that time has a tendency to alter one's economic status, possibly for the worse, and so each one of us contributed five hundred dollars of our accrued pay toward a fund to be used to defray travel expenses for those of us who might need it.

A formal agreement was drafted which stipulated that besides the champagne, the last survivor would also inherit what remained of the fund.

If anything did remain.

And that specifically accounted for the present depleted state of our club.

At the suggestion of Terwilliger, an investment man, who could not tolerate the idea of idle money, our six thousand dollars had been invested.

Terwilliger had chosen stocks in an insignificant little oil company.

The company is no longer insignificant and the shares were now worth almost a million dollars.

Florian regarded me for a moment. "I rather suspect that you're the murderer, Henry. You're the only Harvard man among us."

"It's remarkable that the police

haven't gotten suspicious," Evans said.

Evans fancies himself an artist. I've seen some of his paintings and while I am not a master of judgment in matters aesthetic, I do reflect that he is indeed fortunate that he does not have to pursue art for a living. He boasts of an inheritance.

"These 'accidents,'" Florian said, "occurred in widely separated points of this country. Evidently no one but us knows that there is a connecting link between them all."

"Why don't we call them to the attention of the authorities?" I suggested. Naturally I wasn't serious. But I was interested in seeing which one of them would object.

"That could present some difficulties," Florian said. "Suppose the heirs of the nine untimely deceased went to court, claiming that in the course of normal longevity they might eventually have gained possession of the million. It could lead to an anarchy of lawsuits."

"Couldn't we just call this whole thing quits?" Evans asked. "Dissolve the club and divide the fund three ways?"

Florian is a lawyer. He shook his head gloomily. "As a labor of love, I made the provisions of our club absolutely iron-clad. In the event we dissolved the club, the fund would go to the Yale Alumni Society."

I shuddered. That stipulation had been entered without my knowledge. "Then must we all wait to be murdered? A chilling prospect!"

"We're safe nowhere," Evans agreed.

Florian nodded. "Not even in our bathtubs."

We smoked our cigars.

"Are we agreed that the motive for the murders is money?" Florian asked after awhile.

Evans and I nodded.

After several puffs of his cigar, Evans said, "I am an artist and therefore above money. Besides that, I have four hundred thousand, give or take a few dollars."

"Ordinarily I would say that my assets are my own business," Florian offered. "However under the circumstances I am willing to admit to being worth close to a quarter of a million."

"I have some five hundred thousand in shipping," I said.

Actually my checking account showed less than a thousand. I did have a spot of family money three years ago, but I had invested heavily in Taliaferro Transit. I should have known better. The Board of Directors was solid Princeton.

A thought seemed to strike Florian. "By George, but we are safe from murder."

I failed to see that.

Florian smiled. "Don't you see, the murderer doesn't *dare* strike again."

"Why not?"

"Because if he murders once more, that will leave just two people in the club."

"I admire your arithmetic," I said. "However. . . ."

Florian held up a hand. "Of the two survivors, one is the murderer and one isn't."

"Granted."

"And in that case," Florian continued, "The one who isn't the murderer will immediately be forced to flee to the police. It is a naked matter of survival. He cannot sit about waiting to be murdered."

Florian rubbed his hands. "The murderer will be convicted and executed and therefore the lone survivor will inherit the entire fund. Plus the champagne."

"What about the anarchy of lawsuits?" Evans asked.

"I'm sure the survivor would risk them rather than his life," Florian said. He beamed. "I think that bringing this out into the open has been salubrious. The murderer is stymied. He cannot act again."

Evans nodded. "He murders at his peril.

"We'll go on attending these reunions year after year," Florian said enthusiastically. "Who knows how long that will be."

"Fifty years," Evans said. "We all look healthy."

"And perhaps the murderer will be the last to die," I added somberly.

"There's also this tragic possibility," Florian said. "Why can't the two of us that are innocent run to the police, revealing that the one remaining is the murderer. And so, to protect himself, the murderer may kill two instead of one. That's something we've overlooked."

We all agreed that we had.

We adjourned our meeting shortly after dinner.

I drove back to my hotel, walked upstairs to my room, and locked the door. I lit a cigar and proceeded to think.

Florian had been right. I would have to murder him and Evans, but that presented a difficulty.

Which one of them should I murder first?

If I disposed of my competing murderer, the survivor would immediately rush to the police. I certainly could not have that.

However if I first got rid of the one of us who was pure as the snow, then my opposite number certainly could not go rushing to the police.

His accidents certainly could not bear the scrutiny of the police either.

And that would leave just the two of us—cautious and wary—but I had every faith that I would triumph in the finals.

But which one of them was the murderer? Evans or Florian? Could I get them together and dispatch them as one? I did not see how.

Momentarily I thought of murdering from the viewpoint of availability. I knew where Florian would be tonight. He was the only one of us who made his home in this city. Evans undoubtedly was at a hotel, but I hadn't the faintest idea which one.

But I rejected that course of action. There was a fifty-fifty chance that I might be killing the wrong man first. Not very good odds after all the work I'd done.

The motive for the decimation of our club was money, but how to discover which one of those two did not actually have any?

A sudden thought came to me. Perhaps there was a way. Not definitive, but I had to do something.

I consulted the yellow pages of the telephone book and winced when I discovered that there were some ninety-three hotels listed. I sighed, picked up the phone, and attacked the columns alphabetically, hoping fervently that Evans was not at the Zymmerman Arms.

Fortunately for my patience, I found that he was registered at the Fraidlie House. The clerk inquired whether I wanted his room rung, but I demurred. Knowing where he was was sufficient for my purposes.

I am not familiar with this city nor the status of its hotels, so I left to investigate farther.

The Fraidlie House proved to be not much more than a rat-trap in a dilapidated neighborhood. The chill of evening made it appear even worse. Why, it was hardly better than the miserable place where I was registered.

I smiled. At least that settled that. Evans was the other murderer. His story about having four hundred thousand dollars was pure fabrication. No man in his right mind, and with money, would stay in a place like that.

I was about to start my car again and return to my hotel, when I saw Evans leaving the Fraidlie House.

He carried no luggage, so he couldn't possibly be returning to Minneapolis. He had the collar of his topcoat turned up; his movements were quick, furtive. Was it possible, I wondered, that tonight he might . . .?

He hailed a passing cab.

I started my car and followed at a discreet distance.

His taxi went down the avenue and turned onto the lake front drive. After about four miles south, the road turned slightly inland and we were in a district of fine homes —semi-estates, actually, each with four or five acres of land. This was the area in which Florian lived.

I smiled. It did look as though Evans were going to get rid of Florian tonight. I had no objections. It would save me work.

Evans' taxi stopped directly in front of Florian's home.

Really now! That wasn't particularly intelligent.

Evans was paying the driver as I passed. I drove on a bit, frowning. I remembered some of the previous accidents Evans had arranged. Good heavens, I thought, he could bungle the whole thing—and at this stage we certainly did not want a police investigation of any sort.

I made a U-turn and drove back.

I stopped a good five hundred feet beyond Florian's place and then walked back. The street was dimly lit and deserted.

I had been a guest at Florian's home some years back and I remembered his house as a two story affair, spacious, but with the quarters for the servants—a butler, a chauffeur, a cook, and a maid, married couples—over the four car garage.

It was only ten in the evening, but the living quarters over the garage were dark and the only light from the house came from Florian's study.

I glanced about, determining again that I was unobserved, and then slipped into the grounds. I made my way toward the light.

The French doors were slightly ajar and I peered inside the room.

Florian lay on the couch, his face flushed, and he was snoring loudly. A portable gas heater burned near his feet, and beside him on the floor stood an almost empty whiskey bottle and a glass.

And standing over him, clumsily gripping a fireplace poker, stood Evans. He closed his eyes, raised the poker, and gave every indication of being about to strike.

I stepped swiftly into the room. "Hold on!"

Evans stopped his swing in midair, opened his eyes, and blinked. "Is that you, Henry?"

"Yes, it's me," I whispered savagely. "And keep your voice down. Do you want to wake Florian? What in the world do you think you're doing?"

Evans lowered the poker. "I was just about to bash Florian over the head."

"Is that your idea of an accident?" I demanded sternly.

Evans shifted uncomfortably. "I thought it would look as though an intruder had murdered Florian. I was going to empty his wallet and all that sort of thing."

"Do you want the police to investigate?"

He looked at the floor. "Well, no. But I've run out of ideas."

I examined Florian and determined that he was indeed in a thorough alcoholic sleep, and not likely to be revived by anything short of an earthquake. I spoke in normal tones. "Right before you, Evans, you have the instrument for an ideal accident."

He looked about helplessly. "I don't see what you mean, Henry."

"The gas heater," I explained patiently. And far in the back of my mind, the question arose as to what a gas heater was doing in a home of this sort. "We simply extinguish the flame of the heater. In a few hours Florian should be dead. The police will assume that Florian either forgot to light the heater or that it went out by itself."

Evans looked at me with admiration. "You're really much cleverer than I am, Henry. I'm not practical at all. Are you the other murderer?"

I was aghast. "Didn't you know?"

He shook his head. "I just tossed a coin. I've always been pretty lucky."

It was incredible! He could have ruined everything if he'd murdered me instead.

"Henry," Evans asked. "How did you know that I was the other murderer?"

"Simple. I merely ferreted out the hotel at which you were staying. The Fraidlie House is a building in a complete state of disintegration. Therefore it followed that you have no money for better accommodations. Circumstances forced you to choose that particular residence."

Evans thought about that. "But I do have money. Four hundred thousand or so."

I swallowed. "But that hotel . . .?"

"It's in the center of the art colony," Evans said. "I wanted to be near the people I love."

"But then what *is* your motive for killing?"

"Money, of course."

"But you already have four hundred thousand."

"It isn't exactly for myself. I want to erect an arts building in Minneapolis. The Evans Art Center. That would require at least a million dollars and I don't have that much."

I sighed and then looked about the room. "Wipe your fingerprints from that poker and put it back. And also remove any other prints you may have left in the room."

I watched him go about with a handkerchief and he raised quite a bit of dust as he wiped here and there.

When he was through, I extinguished the flame of the heater. The gas began to hiss into the room. "Let's go," I said.

Evans used his handkerchief to pick up the phone.

"What are you doing?" I demanded.

He seemed surprised at the tone of my voice. "I'm calling a taxi."

I closed my eyes. He was pretty pathetic. "I'll drive you," I said.

On the lake drive, with Florian's home a good two miles behind us, I felt more at ease. "How did you get Schaller to electrocute himself in his tub?"

"I visited him one night and we had a few drinks. I put something into one of his and when he passed out, I undressed him and put him in his tub. I filled it, and then dropped in the radio."

That was about the way I had figured it. "But you blundered when you shot Wentworth. If the police had discovered that he was afraid of firearms you could have ruined everything."

"I'm sorry," he said contritely. "But I'm not too good at this sort of thing."

"How did you manage to drop that rivet on Naison's head? Surely you didn't climb up on the scaffolding and . . .?"

"No. I put a wallet on the sidewalk in front of the building being

erected. When Naison came along he bent down to pick it up. At that point I shot a rivet from a slingshot and hit him on the top of the head. To the police it looked as though the thing had fallen from the building."

I had to admit that was ingenious. "And I suppose you altered the steering mechanism on Terwilliger's car so that he would have his accident?"

Evans shook his head. "No. Didn't you?"

I rubbed my jaw. "That could have been an authentic accident. I suppose you struck Llewellyn over the head and then put his body on those railroad tracks?"

Evans looked at me. "No."

We were silent for a while, and then Evans said, "Of course you pushed Dodsworth off his dock?"

"No."

We drove on for half a mile.

"Dodsworth was the last to go, besides Florian, I mean," Evans said. "And so if you didn't . . . and I didn't . . .?"

I remembered the dust Evans had raised when he was wiping his fingerprints off various surfaces. I spoke more or less to myself. "One does not have a dusty house when one has four servants."

Evans nodded slowly. "*If* one still has four servants."

I also remembered the dark servants' quarters over the garage. And it had been only ten o'clock. And the gas heater—certainly out of place in an extremely opulent home.

After awhile, Evans voiced our mutual discovery. "So Florian got rid of Terwilliger, Llewellyn, and Dodsworth. Evidently he needed the fund too."

And what now? I thought.

Evans was thinking of that too. "I suppose I'll have to kill you," he said. "I really regret that, Henry, but I do think that Minneapolis needs an art center."

We were in the traffic of the avenue now. Yes, I thought, I would have to kill Evans, unless. . . .

It was ridiculous . . . but still . . . considering Evans' mental equipment . . .

"Evans," I said. "I don't believe it'll be necessary for each of us to try to kill the other."

"Really?" he asked hopefully.

I nodded. "We can split the fund."

"But that's impossible. Florian said our charter terms were absolutely unbreakable."

"There is another way. I will write a suicide note and leave it, along with my coat perhaps, on a conveniently high bridge. The police will assume that I jumped off, was drowned, and that my body floated out into the lake."

Evans considered that. "And then when I inherit the fund, I split it with you?"

"Well, not exactly. You see I will have to disappear. Leave the country, as a matter of fact. It would be inconvenient and dangerous to our plan for me to reappear for my

share. I have a much better idea."

Evans waited expectantly.

"You say that you have some four hundred thousand dollars. Why not convert that into cash, give it to me, and then I will disappear. You will inherit the entire fund."

Evans looked vaguely dubious.

"I'm perfectly willing to settle for four hundred thousand," I said. "Even though my honest share should be half a million. You may consider the extra hundred thousand my contribution to your art center."

Evans beamed. "That's awfully decent of you, Henry. I'll name one of the galleries in your honor."

"Small bills, please," I said. "But remember that this is our little secret. Don't tell your lawyers why you're converting your assets to cash."

"Of course not," Evans said stiffly. "Do you think I'm a fool?"

It took Evans two months to make the conversion to cash. I accepted the money, arranged my suicide, and moved to Mexico.

Evans inherited the fund, but I'm afraid that he was in for a bit of a shock.

Really, it is criminal how little the government left poor Evans. Something in the neighborhood of two hundred thousand, I believe.

And I, of course, had four hundred thousand intact.

Dead men do not pay inheritance taxes.

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FASTER THAN AN HONEST MAN

"It's a question of legs," Hart said. He leaned forward in the narrow booth and the table edge cut into his paunch. Skinner, sitting opposite with a knuckle in his mouth, looked at Hart's fleshy middle and didn't feel so inferior anymore. Okay, so he was driving a cab and Hart's suit had cloth that was soft as silk, but Skinner still had a lean, hard body inside his workclothes. He was in shape, including legs.

"My legs are fine," he said casually. "Only what's that got to do

by O. H. Leslie

with anything? What's the pitch?"

"Stanley will tell you," Hart said. He looked at the costly watch on his plump wrist. "He'll be here any minute."

"Look, I got to put some time on the hack—"

"A minute, a little minute," Hart grinned. Skinner hadn't seen him in almost seven years, not since they stood in the same line at the graduation exercises of Montgomery High. In seven years, Hart had gained weight and affluence. Skinner didn't know how, but if Stanley Peace was his partner, he could make a good guess. Peace hadn't stood in the graduating line; a year before, he had made a scholastic switch, to the county reform school.

"There he comes!" Hart said.

Skinner looked up as Peace came through the restaurant's revolving doors. Peace was a thin, round-shouldered man with his small head perpetually cocked to one side, as if he was listening for something. Usually, he was. He could hear the squeak of a cop's shoe at fifty yards.

"Well, if it ain't Speedy Skinner," Peace said, with an attempt at camaraderie. "Sure nice to see you again. Hey, they still call you that, Speedy, I mean?"

Skinner flushed. The red tint, under his blond crewcut, made him look High School age again. "Naw," he said.

Peace slid into the booth beside Hart. "You earned the name, pal, you really did. I ain't never seen anybody run like you could. What was that mile record of yours?"

"It was 4:10, but that was only the school record. It was the 220-yard dash I made my big record."

"Sure, sure," Peace said vaguely, snapping his fingers at a waiter. "Hey, how about some coffee here?"

"I did the two-twenty in under twenty-four seconds. That was the year Bragg made the A.A.U. mark, twenty-one point one. I almost made the State scholastic championship, but Lester Arnow beat me out by two seconds. Can you imagine that? Two lousy seconds!"

"Yeah," Hart chuckled. "I thought sure you had him, Speedy.

The problem of our story is precisely one hundred and fifty yards in in length, but our hero is a mere five-foot-nine—or thereabouts. This disparity makes for an underdog, which in turn stimulates interest and creates drama.

I never liked that stuffed shirt Lester Arnow."

"Whatever happened to him, anyway?" Peace said.

"I dunno," Skinner said gruffly. "He's probably some big-shot executive by now. He was the type."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. And what are you doing these days?" Peace said slyly.

"Me? I'm driving a cab."

Peace closed his eyes and smiled. "Lester Arnow's a big shot, and you're driving a hack. Guess he beat you out again, didn't he?"

Skinner clenched his fists on the table. "Look, you guys got something on your mind, let's hear it. I know you looked me up for a reason."

"Sure we did, Speedy. Fifty thousand reasons."

"Huh?"

"Fifty grand, Speedy. How'd you like to make that kind of money?"

Skinner paled, and the loss of color made him look older again. "You mean a robbery?" he whispered. "Is that what you guys are talking about?"

"You know about me and Hart, Speedy, don't look so surprised. If you're not interested, no hard feelings. We'll just make some other guy rich."

"But why me?" Skinner asked. "I never buddied with you two in school. Why pick on me?"

"It's a question of legs," Hart said. "I told you."

Peace said: "The job's fast and it's foolproof. The payoff's big. You interested or not?"

"How can I tell?"

Peace nodded understandingly, and then bent closer.

"You know the Triton Tool Works? Sure, everybody in town knows it. I used to work there myself, summers. Hart here, he's been working there past two months, in the maintenance department, just to figure out the setup."

"It's a beaut," Hart grinned. "The sweetest payroll heist yet."

"Pavroll?"

"A hundred fifty grand, at least," Peace said. "They bring it in by armored car the first of every month." He took a folded square of paper from his pocket; it had been creased so often that it was as soft as a towel. Skinner looked at the crude diagram, but couldn't make sense out of it. Peace explained, spreading the paper flat and pointing, "This whole area here is the front yard of the factory. It's a real big yard, maybe five hundred feet across; they used to park cars here until they bought the lot on the other side. Now the whole thing's fenced in; you can't get an auto anyplace near the main building. That's why we got to do this different."

"Different?"

"I'll explain in a minute. Now this here's the front gate where the workers come in, and this here's the side gate; that's where the executives come in. Understand?"

"I guess so."

"Now there's one time when that dough is out in the open, and that's on paydays. They take it out of the safe and put it into little envelopes; Triton likes to pay off in cash. Hart checked the time for five weeks, and it's always on the button—ten-fifteen, every Friday morning, Wexler the paymaster, and three old dames, lock themselves in the office and start counting it out."

"But if they lock the door—"

"It won't be locked on the day we do the job, "Peace said. "Hart's gonna fix that, right?"

"You bet," Hart said. "See, I'm on the maintenance crew, Speedy, I can make a routine check of the doors the day before. I'll fix that lock so that one good shove will open it. You won't have any trouble."

"Me?" Skinner said.

"Only a guy like you could do it," Peace said soothingly. "It won't be any trick to get the money bag; old man Wexler will be too scared to put up an argument. But the tough part is getting out with it; like I said, we can't park a getaway car near the office. Somebody's gotta run with it."

"It's a good hundred and fifty yards from the payroll office to the side gate," Hart said. "The main gate is closer, but it's always shut up tight by that time."

"Oh, no," Skinner said. "I'm not taking that kind of risk, not for a million bucks. Besides, how would I even get *into* the place? You got to have identification if you're—"

"You'll use Hart's badge. He won't be working that day; he'll be sitting in a car by the side gate, with me. Nobody'll stop you; they got new workers reporting into the factory every day. I'm telling you, Speedy, the whole thing is a cinch —for a guy like you, who can run."

"I can't run faster than a bullet —"

"There won't be any bullets," Hart said. "Old man Wexler couldn't fire a gun if he had one. All you got to do is run like hell."

"Fifty grand," Peace said dreamily. "You could kiss that hack goodbye. You could get yourself a fleet . . ."

"Sorry," Skinner said. "It's not for me."

"What'd I tell you?" Peace said contemptuously. "I told you he couldn't run no more, Hart."

"It's not that—"

"Sure, we know. It's your wind. That's why you let Lester Arnow beat you." Peace laughed, and dropped a dollar on the table. "Come on, Hart, let's beat it." He stood up, and touched Skinner's shoulder. "If you change your mind, Speedy, give Hart a call at the Palace Hotel."

"I won't change my mind," Skinner said.

But that night, he called Hart and did.

On Saturday morning, Skinner

woke at six, put on a sweatshirt, khaki pants, and a pair of track shoes. He took a bus to Green Park at the edge of town. It was still early enough for the park to be deserted; only the birds and squirrels saw him pace off a hundred yards on the empty ballfield, and then race the distance with all the speed he could muster. He was puffing hard by the time he reached the imaginary finish line, but he was satisfied with the way his legs had behaved.

On Sunday morning, he went out on another field trial, and his speed was even better. He was pleased with himself; he had dreams all week, about the State track event back in High School; only this time, he breasted the tape ahead of Arnow.

On Wednesday morning, they tested half of the scheme. Skinner took Hart's identification badge, put on a pair of grimy coveralls, and reported to the Triton Tool Company. The guard at the main gate didn't blink an eye. Skinner wandered around the buildings for a while, and then strolled casually about the front yard. It was just as Peace had described it; he could see the window of the payroll office, and the old guy at the front desk. He measured the distance between the office and the sidegate with his eye; it wasn't more than a hundred and fifty yards. It wasn't going to be hard.

On Thursday night, the trio met in Hart's hotel room and went over the plan again, carefully, step by step. Skinner had heard it so often by then that he was sick of it; but he was even sicker when Peace handed him the small revolver that was part of the action.

"It ain't loaded," Peace said. "Don't be scared of it, Speedy, we're not taking any risks."

"I'm not scared," Skinner gulped, pocketing the gun. "You sure about that door, Hart?"

"Positive. One good push does it. Just act fast; shove that gun at Wexler and grab for the bag. But make sure you get there at ten-fifteen, on the nose."

"How's the wind?" Peace grinned.

Skinner's wind wasn't so good when the alarm woke him on Friday morning. He knew it was only a quirk of his nervous system; he had felt the same shortness of breath on the day of every race.

When he reported at the main gate of the Triton Company, his heart was thumping violently under the big metal badge that identified him as a member of the maintenance department. This time, the guard at the gate even nodded familiarly to him. He moved along with the tide of employees entering the main factory building, but detached himself before he reached the time clocks. There was a men's room at the end of a long corridor; he went inside and locked himself

in a booth until five minutes of ten. Then he came out, and went to the front yard.

There were two men in mufti strolling about, both gray-haired and paunchy; they looked like company executives on a tour of inspection. Skinner started to sweat inside the unfamiliar coveralls; then he got the idea of picking up a loose two-by-four and parading through the yard with it. The prop made him feel more authentic; he even whistled as he passed the executives, who didn't give him a passing glance.

At five minutes past ten, the gray-haired types went into the administration building. Skinner, alone in the empty yard, began to feel conspicuous. He leaned the two-by-four against the brick wall, and stooped down to tie his shoelace. Then he began walking across the yard, slowly, giving Wexler, the paymaster, plenty of time. He put his hand in his pocket, and felt the cold muzzle of the small revolver.

It wasn't quite ten-fifteen when he neared the payroll office, but luck was with him. Wexler had started early; he was bending over and twirling the knob of the chunky office safe.

Skinner kept on coming; his timing was perfect. At the very moment when he was within fingertip distance of the doorknob, Wexler was lifting the heavy black bag out of the safe.

He put his hand on the door knob, and pushed. It resisted for a moment, and Skinner almost panicked. Then he pushed again, and it gave inward.

The old paymaster looked up with an expression that was more indignant than surprised or frightened. Skinner fumbled in his right hand pocket and produced the gun. The woman in the office gave a short, sharp scream, and Skinner snapped:

"Everybody shut up! You hear me? Hand over that bag, you!"

"I can't!" the old man gasped. "It's our payroll!"

"That's what I want," Skinner growled. "Hand it over!"

"Mr. Wexler!" the woman whimpered.

"Give it to me!"

The old man handed it over reluctantly; Skinner grabbed it and was startled at its weight. It was a good twelve pounds; it would be a handicap, but he could manage it.

"Don't make a sound," he said, backing towards the door. "If anybody chases me, I'll shoot!"

Then he was out of the doorway. He slammed the door shut, and started to run.

Speedy! Speedy! Yay, yay, yay!

It was like seven years ago. He could almost hear the ocean roar of the crowd. He could feel his legs pumping beautifully. He could feel the sun on his face, hear the wind whistling by his ears. Behind him, he was conscious of other feet pounding after him on the con-

crete pavement of the factory yard, but they were leaden feet and his were winged. He saw the side gate ahead of him, more desirable than any tape he ever wanted to reach, and he knew he was running the race of his life. Faster and faster, wishing he could be timed, wishing his feat could be recorded in the annals of the sport forever . . .

Speedy! Speedy. Yay, yay, y—

He was tackled from behind!

He saw the concrete rise up, and managed to twist his body to meet it with his shoulder. The impact knocked the last bit of wind out of his lungs. He tried to get up and run again, but his legs were pinned. He cried out in disbelief; he had never run so well before. How could this happen?

He twisted his head around. The young man who was holding his ankles looked at him, and grimaced.

"Sorry, buster," he panted. "I couldn't let you get away with our dough. That's my salary in there—"

Skinner stared at him, and recognition came slowly. The man's hair was darker, and there was less of it. The chin was dominant, and still determined. He hadn't gained any weight since school days, and that made it easier to remember Lester Arnow, the track champion.

"Arnow," he groaned. "Lester Arnow! What are *you* doing here?"

"I work here," Arnow said stiffly. "I'm a department manager. What's wrong with that?"

Then there were others surrounding him, picking up the money first and Skinner second; vaguely, he heard them talking about the two men who had been apprehended by company guards outside the gate. But he didn't care about the fate of Peace and Hart—or about his own. He didn't even care about the payroll. All he cared about was the fact that he had come in second again.

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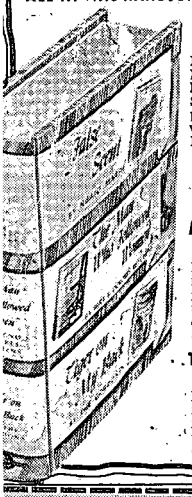

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