ALFRED

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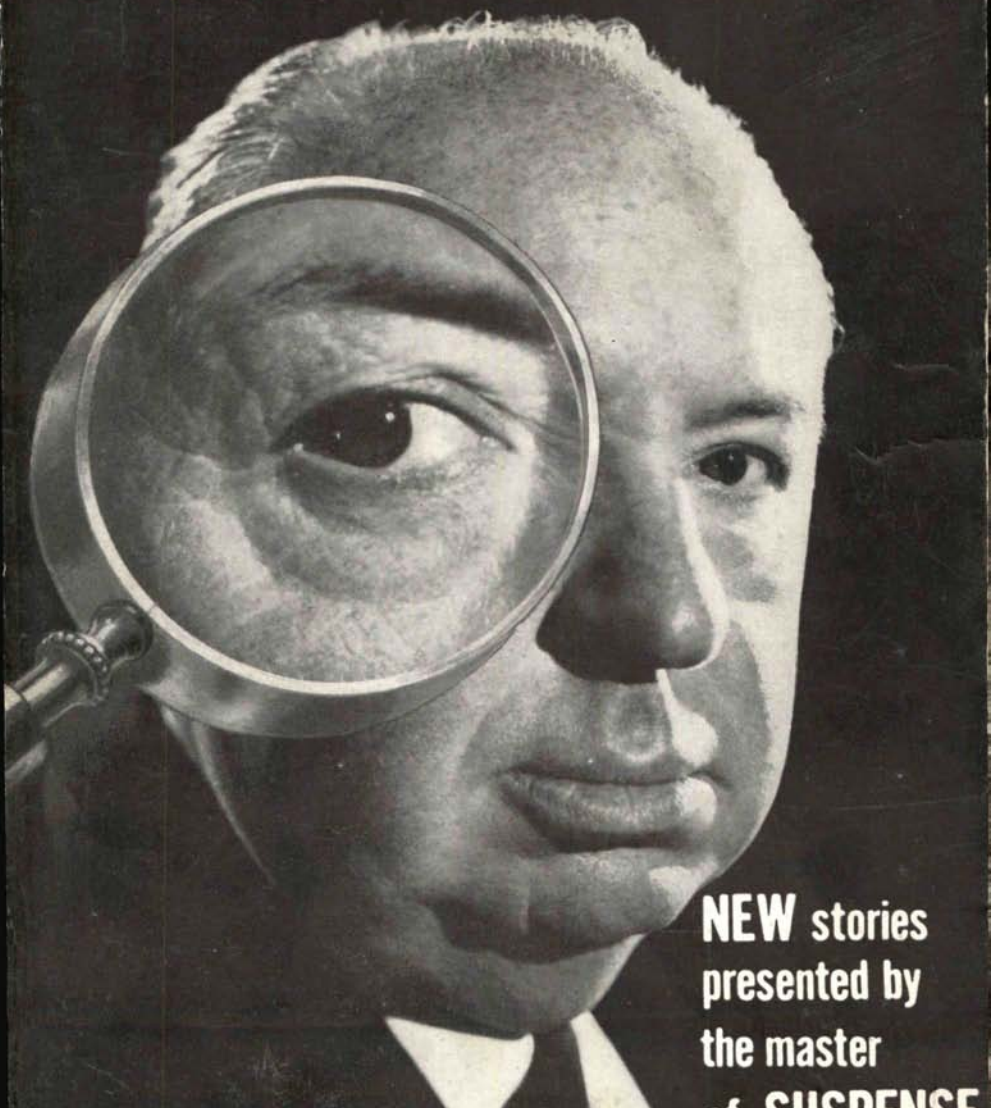
HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE



NEW stories presented by the master of SUSPENSE

Dear Readers,

A magnifying glass, of necessity, is a glass which magnifies. It takes more than one, I have found, to make an individual into a bigger, better person. (See the cover of this issue, for what you can expect to accomplish with a single glass.) Magnifying glasses may also be employed to see that which is not readily apparent: lint on one's fine damask napery, sundry footprints punctuating one's freshly seeded lawn, and human bloodstains on one's shirt front.

Your letters, for which I thank you, continue to inform me. One female high school student, for example, lets me know in no uncertain terms that my fine publication invariably arrives when she has exams confronting her. To this young lady I can only say, in ringing commencement-day phrases, that she make it a rule, as she journeys through life, to take care of those matters first which are first in importance. Then there are those who would have my fine publication appear more frequently than once a month, quote, because it is the finest mystery magazine around and I can't get enough of it, close quote. These discerning readers call to mind the following admonition which I trust may prove of some comfort: that which is like myrrh and frankincense should be savored, not consumed.

And so once again, I bid you have a shuddering good time with the riches that follow.

Alfred Hitchcock

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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FOR ALL THE RUDE PEOPLE

by Jack Ritchie

"How old are you?" I asked!

His eyes were on the revolver I was holding. "Look, mister, there's not much in the cash register, but take it all. I won't make no trouble."

"I am not interested in your filthy money. How old are you?"

He was puzzled. "Forty-two."

I clicked my tongue. "What a pity. From your point of view, at least. You might have lived another twenty or thirty years if you had just taken the very slight pains to be polite."

He didn't understand.

"I am going to kill you," I said, "because of the four cent stamp and because of the cherry candy."

He did not know what I meant by the cherry candy, but he did know about the stamp.

Panic raced into his face. "You must be crazy. You can't kill me just because of that."

"But I can."

And I did.

When Dr. Briller told me that I had but four months to live, I was, of course, perturbed. "Are you positive you haven't mixed up the X-rays? I've heard of such things."

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Turner."

I gave it more earnest thought. "The laboratory reports. Perhaps my name was accidentally attached to the wrong . . ."

He shook his head slowly. "I double-checked. I always do that in cases like these. Sound medical practice, you know."

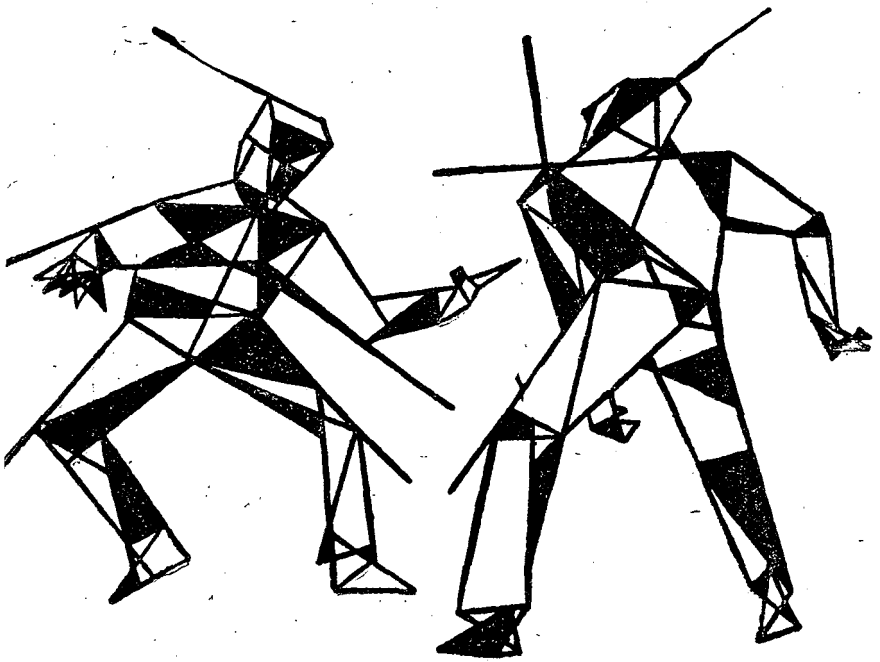
It was late afternoon and the time when the sun is tired. I rather hoped that when my time came to actually die, it might be in the morning. Certainly more cheerful.

"In cases like this," Dr. Briller

said, "a doctor is faced with a dilemma. Shall he or shall he not tell his patient? I always tell mine. That enables them to settle their affairs and to have a fling, so to speak." He pulled a pad of paper toward him. "Also I'm writing a book. What do you intend doing with your remaining time?"

"I really don't know. I've just been thinking about it for a minute or two, you know."

"Of course," Briller said. "No immediate rush. But when you do decide, you will let me know, won't you? My book concerns the things that people do with their remaining time when they know



Always be polite and courteous to everyone, for the man whom you tell to go fly a kite may have no interest whatsoever in kite flying, but is, however, a thoroughgoing gun collector.

just when they're going to die."

He pushed aside the pad. "See me every two or three weeks. That way we'll be able to measure the progress of your decline."

Briller saw me to the door. "I already have written up twenty-two cases like yours." He seemed to gaze into the future. "Could be a best seller, you know."

I have always lived a bland life. Not an unintelligent one, but bland.

I have contributed nothing to the world—and in that I have much in common with almost every soul on earth—but on the other hand I have not taken away anything either. I have, in short, asked merely to be left alone. Life is difficult enough without undue association with people.

What can one do with the remaining four months of a bland life?

I have no idea how long I walked and thought on that subject, but eventually I found myself on the long curving bridge that sweeps down to join the lake drive. The sounds of mechanical music intruded themselves upon my mind and I looked down.

A circus, or very large carnival, lay below.

It was the world of shabby magic, where the gold is gilt, where the top-hatted ringmaster is as much a gentleman as the medals on his chest are authentic, and where the pink ladies on horseback are hard-faced and narrow-eyed. It was the domain of the harsh-voiced vendors and the short-change.

I have always felt that the demise of the big circus may be counted as one of the cultural advances of the twentieth century, yet I found myself descending the footbridge and in a few moments I was on the midway between the rows of stands where human mutations are exploited and exhibited for the entertainment of all children.

Eventually, I reached the big top and idly watched the bored ticket-taker in his elevated box at one side of the main entrance.

A pleasant-faced man leading two little girls approached him and presented several cardboard rectangles which appeared to be passes.

The ticket-taker ran his finger down a printed list at his side. His eyes hardened and he scowled down at the man and the children for a moment. Then slowly and deliberately he tore the passes to bits and let the fragments drift to the ground. "These are no damn good," he said.

The man below him flushed. "I don't understand."

"You didn't leave the posters up," the ticket-taker snapped. "Beat it, crumb!"

The children looked up at their father, their faces puzzled. Would he do something about this?

He stood there and the white of anger appeared on his face. He seemed about to say something, but then he looked down at the children. He closed his eyes for a moment as though to control his anger, and then he said, "Come on, kids. Let's go home."

He led them away, down the midway, and the children looked back, bewildered, but saying nothing.

I approached the ticket-taker. "Why did you do that?"

He glanced down. "What's it to you?"

"Perhaps a great deal."

He studied me irritably. "Because he didn't leave up the posters."

"I heard that before. Now explain it."

He exhaled as though it cost him money. "Our advance man goes through a town two weeks before we get there. He leaves posters advertising the show any place he can—grocery stores, shoe shops, meat markets—any place that will paste them in the window and keep them there until the show comes to town. He hands out two or three passes for that. But what some of these jokers don't know is that we check up. If the posters aren't still up when we hit town, the passes are no good."

"I see," I said dryly. "And so you tear up the passes in their faces and in front of their children. Evidently that man removed the posters from the window of his little shop too soon. Or perhaps he had those passes *given* to him by a man who removed the posters from his window."

"What's the difference? The passes are no good."

"Perhaps there is no difference in that respect. But do you realize what you have done?"

His eyes were narrow, trying to estimate me and any power I might have.

"You have committed one of the most cruel of human acts," I said stiffly. "You have humiliated a man before his children. You have inflicted a scar that will remain with him and them as long as they live. He will take those children home and it will be a long, long way. And what can he say to them?"

"Are you a cop?"

"I am not a cop. Children of that age regard their father as the finest man in the world. The kindest, the bravest. And now they will remem-

ber that a man had been bad to their father—and he had been unable to do anything about it."

"So I tore up his passes. Why didn't he buy tickets? Are you a city inspector?"

"I am not a city inspector. Did you expect him to *buy* tickets after that humiliation? You left the man with no recourse whatsoever. He could not *buy* tickets and he could not create a well-justified scene because the children were with him. He could do nothing. Nothing at all, but retreat with two children who wanted to see your miserable circus and now they cannot."

I looked down at the foot of his stand. There were the fragments of many more dreams—the debris of other men who had committed the capital crime of not leaving their posters up long enough. "You could at least have said, 'I'm sorry, sir. But your passes are not valid.' And then you could have explained politely and quietly why."

"I'm not paid to be polite." He showed yellow teeth. "And mister, I *like* tearing up passes. It gives me a kick."

And there it was. He was a little man who had been given a little power and he used it like a Caesar.

He half rose. "Now get the hell out of here, *mister*, before I come down there and chase you all over the lot."

Yes. He was a man of cruelty, a two-dimensional animal born without feeling and sensitivity and fated to do harm as long as he existed. He was a creature who should be eliminated from the face of the earth.

If only I had the power to . . .

I stared up at the twisted face for a moment more and then turned on my heel and left. At the top of the bridge I got a bus and rode to the sports shop at thirty-seventh.

I purchased a .32 caliber revolver and a box of cartridges.

Why do we *not* murder? Is it because we do not feel the moral justification for such a final act? Or is it more because we fear the consequences if we are caught—the cost to us, to our families, to our children?

And so we suffer wrongs with meekness, we endure them because to eliminate them might cause us even more pain than we already have.

But I had no family, no close friends. And four months to live.

The sun had set and the carnival lights were bright when I got off the bus at the bridge. I looked down at the midway and he was still in his box.

How should I do it? I wondered. Just march up to him and shoot him as he sat on his little throne?

The problem was solved for me. I saw him replaced by another man—apparently his relief. He lit a cigarette and strolled off the midway toward the dark lake front.

I caught up with him around a bend concealed by bushes. It was a lonely place, but close enough to the carnival so that its sounds could still reach me.

He heard my footsteps and turned. A tight smile came to his lips and he rubbed the knuckles of one hand. "You're asking for it, mister."

His eyes widened when he saw my revolver.

"How old are you?" I asked.

"Look, mister," he said swiftly. "I only got a couple of tens in my pocket."

"How old are you?" I repeated.

His eyes flicked nervously. "Thirty-two."

I shook my head sadly. "You could have lived into your seventies. Perhaps forty more years of life, if only you had taken the simple trouble to act like a human being."

His face whitened. "Are you off your rocker, or something?"

"A possibility."

I pulled the trigger.

The sound of the shot was not as loud as I had expected, or perhaps it was lost against the background of the carnival noises.

He staggered and dropped to the edge of the path and he was quite dead.

I sat down on a nearby park bench and waited.

Five minutes. Ten. Had no one heard the shot?

I became suddenly conscious of hunger. I hadn't eaten since noon. The thought of being taken to a police station and being questioned for any length of time seemed unbearable. And I had a headache, too.

I tore a page from my pocket notebook and began writing.

> A careless word may be forgiven. But a lifetime of cruel rudeness cannot. This man deserves to die.

I was about to sign my name, but then I decided that my initials would be sufficient for the time being. I did not want to be apprehended before I had a good meal and some aspirins.

I folded the page and put it into the dead ticket-taker's breast pocket.

I met no one as I returned up the path and ascended the footbridge. I walked to Weschler's, probably the finest restaurant in the city. The prices are, under normal circumstances, beyond me, but I thought that this time I could indulge myself.

After dinner, I decided an eve-

ning bus ride might be in order. I rather enjoyed that form of city excursion and, after all, my freedom of movement would soon become restricted.

The driver of the bus was an impatient man and clearly his passengers were his enemies. However, it was a beautiful night and the bus was not crowded.

At sixty-eighth street, a fragile white-haired woman with cameo features waited at the curb. The driver grudgingly brought his vehicle to a stop and opened the door.

She smiled and nodded to the passengers as she put her foot on the first step, and one could see that her life was one of gentle happiness and very few bus rides.

"Well!" the driver snapped. "Is it going to take you all day to get in?"

She flushed and stammered. "I'm sorry." She presented him with a five dollar bill.

He glared. "Don't you have any change?"

The flush deepened. "I don't think so. But I'll look."

The driver was evidently ahead on his schedule and he waited.

And one other thing was clear. He was enjoying this.

She found a quarter and held it up timorously.

"In the box!" he snapped.

She dropped it into the box.

The driver moved his vehicle forward jerkily and she almost fell. Just in time, she managed to catch hold of a strap.

Her eyes went to the passengers, as though to apologize for herself —for not having moved faster, for not having immediate change, for almost falling. The smile trembled and she sat down.

At eighty-second, she pulled the buzzer cord, rose, and made her way forward.

The driver scowled over his shoulder as he came to a stop. "Use the rear door. Don't you people ever learn to use the rear door?"

I am all in favor of using the rear door. Especially when a bus is crowded. But there were only a half a dozen passengers on this bus and they read their newspapers with frightened neutrality.

She turned, her face pale, and left by the rear door.

The evening she had had, or the evening she was going to have, had now been ruined. Perhaps many more evenings with the thought of it.

I rode the bus to the end of the line.

I was the only passenger when the driver turned it around and parked.

It was a deserted, dimly lit corner, and there were no waiting passengers at the small shelter at

the curb. The driver glanced at his watch, lit a cigarette, and then noticed me. "If you're taking the ride back, mister, put another quarter in the box. No free riders here."

I rose from my seat and walked slowly to the front of the bus. "How old are you?"

His eyes narrowed. "That's none of your business."

"About thirty-five, I'd imagine," I said. "You'd have had another thirty years or more ahead of you." I produced the revolver.

He dropped the cigarette. "Take the money," he said.

"I'm not interested in money. I'm thinking about a gentle lady and perhaps the hundreds of other gentle ladies and the kind harmless men and the smiling children. You are a criminal. There is no justification for what you do to them. There is no justification for your existence."

And I killed him.

I sat down and waited.

After ten minutes, I was still alone with the corpse.

I realized that I was sleepy. Incredibly sleepy. It might be better if I turned myself in to the police after a good night's sleep.

I wrote my justification for the driver's demise on a sheet of note paper, added my initials, and put the page in his pocket.

I walked four blocks before I found a taxi and took it to my apartment building.

I slept soundly and perhaps I dreamed. But if I did, my dreams were pleasant and innocuous, and it was almost nine before I woke.

After a shower and a leisurely breakfast, I selected my best suit. I remembered I had not yet paid that month's telephone bill. I made out a check and addressed an envelope. I discovered that I was out of stamps. But no matter, I would get one on the way to the police station.

I was almost there when I remembered the stamp. I stopped in at a corner drugstore. It was a place I had never entered before.

The proprietor, in a semi-medical jacket, sat behind the soda fountain reading a newspaper and a salesman was making notations in a large order book.

The proprietor did not look up when I entered and he spoke to the salesman. "They've got his fingerprints on the notes, they've got his handwriting, and they've got his initials. What's wrong with the police?"

The salesman shrugged. "What good are fingerprints if the murderer doesn't have his in the police files? The same goes for the handwriting if you got nothing to compare it with. And how many thousand people in the city got the ini-

tials L. T.?" He closed his book. "I'll be back next week."

When he was gone, the druggist continued reading the newspaper.

I cleared my throat.

He finished reading a long paragraph and then looked up. "Well?"

"I'd like a four cent stamp, please."

It appeared almost as though I had struck him. He stared at me for fifteen seconds and then he left his stool and slowly made his way to the rear of the store toward a small barred window.

I was about to follow him, but a display of pipes at my elbow caught my attention.

After awhile I felt eyes upon me and looked up.

The druggist stood at the far end of the store, one hand on his hip and the other disdainfully holding the single stamp. "Do you expect me to bring it to you?"

And now I remembered a small boy of six who had had five pennies. Not just one this time, but five, and this was in the days of penny candies.

He had been entranced at the display in the showcase—the fifty varieties of sweet things, and his mind had revolved in a pleasant indecision. The red whips? The licorice? The grab bags? But not the candy cherries. He didn't like those.

And then he had become conscious of the druggist standing beside the display case—tapping one foot. The druggist's eyes had smouldered with irritation—no, more than that—with anger. "Are you going to take all day for your lousy nickel?"

He had been a sensitive boy and he had felt as though he had received a blow. His precious five pennies were now nothing. This man despised them. And this man despised him.

He pointed numbly and blindly. "Five cents of that."

When he left the store he had found that he had the candy cherries.

But that didn't really matter. Whatever it had been, he couldn't have eaten it.

Now I stared at the druggist and the four cent stamp and the narrow hatred for anyone who did not contribute directly to his profits. I had no doubt that he would fawn if I purchased one of his pipes.

But I thought of the four cent stamp and the bag of cherry candy I had thrown away so many years ago.

I moved toward the rear of the store and took the revolver out of my pocket. "How old are you?"

When he was dead, I did not

wait longer than necessary to write a note. I had killed for myself this time and I felt the need of a drink.

I went several doors down the street and entered a small bar. I ordered a brandy and water.

After ten minutes, I heard the siren of a squad car.

The bartender went to the window. "It's just down the street." He took off his jacket. "Got to see what this is all about. If anybody comes in, tell them I'll be right back." He put the bottle of brandy on the bar. "Help yourself, but tell me how many."

I sipped the brandy slowly and watched the additional squad cars and finally the ambulance appear.

The bartender returned after ten minutes and a customer followed at his heels. "A short beer, Joe."

"This is my second brandy," I said.

Joe collected my change. "The druggist down the street got himself murdered. Looks like it was by the man who kills people because they're not polite."

The customer watched him draw a beer. "How do you figure that? Could have been just a holdup."

Joe shook his head. "No. Fred Masters—he's got the TV shop across the street—found the body and he read the note."

The customer put a dime on the bar. "I'm not going to cry about it. I always took my business someplace else. He acted as though he was doing you a favor everytime he waited on you."

Joe nodded. "I don't think anybody in the neighborhood's going to miss him. He always made a lot of trouble."

I had been about to leave and return to the drug store to give myself up, but now I ordered another brandy and took out my notebook. I began making a list of names.

It was surprising how one followed another. They were bitter memories, some large, some small, some I had experienced and many more that I had witnessed—and perhaps felt more than the victims.

Names. And that warehouseman. I didn't know his name, but I must include him.

I remembered the day and Miss Newman. We were her sixth graders and she had taken us on another one of her excursions—this time to the warehouses along the river, where she was going to show us "how industry works."

She always planned her tours and she always asked permission of the places we visited, but this time she strayed or became lost and we arrived at the warehouse—she and the thirty children who adored her.

And the warehouseman had or-

dered her out. He had used language which we did not understand, but we sensed its intent, and he had directed it against us and Miss Newman.

She was small and she had been frightened and we retreated. And Miss Newman did not report to school the next day or any day after that and we learned that she had asked for a transfer.

And I who loved her, too, knew why. She could not face us after that.

Was he still alive? He had been in his twenties then, I imagined.

When I left the bar a half an hour later, I realized I had a great deal of work to do.

The succeeding days were busy ones and, among others, I found the warehouseman. I told him why he was dying because he did not even remember.

And when that was done, I dropped into a restaurant not far away.

The waitress eventually broke off her conversation with the cashier and strode to my table. "What do you want?"

I ordered a steak and tomatoes.

The steak proved to be just about what one could expect in such a neighborhood. As I reached for my coffee spoon, I accidentally dropped it to the floor. I picked it up. "Waitress, would you mind bringing me another spoon, please?"

She stalked angrily to my table and snatched the spoon from my hand. "You got the shakes, or something?"

She returned in a few moments and was about to deposit a spoon, with considerable emphasis, upon my table.

But then a sudden thought altered the harsh expression of her face. The descent of the arm diminuendoed, and when the spoon touched the tablecloth, it touched gently. Very gently.

She laughed nervously. "I'm sorry if I was sharp, mister."

It was an apology, and so I said, "That's quite all right."

"I mean that you can drop a spoon anytime you want to. I'll be glad to get you another."

"Thank you." I turned to my coffee.

"You're not offended, are you mister?" she asked eagerly.

"No. Not at all."

She snatched a newspaper from an empty neighboring table. "Here, sir, you can read this while you eat. I mean it's on the house. Free."

When she left me, the wide-eyed cashier stared at her. "What's with all that, Mable?"

Mable glanced back at me with a trace of uneasiness. "You can never tell who he might be. You better be polite these days.

As I ate I read, and an item caught my eye. A grown man had heated pennies in a frying pan and tossed them out to some children who were making trick-or-treat rounds before Halloween. He had been fined a miserable twenty dollars.

I made a note of his name and address.

Dr. Briller finished his examination. "You can get dressed now, Mr. Turner."

I picked up my shirt. "I don't suppose some new miracle drug has been developed since I was here last?"

He laughed with self-enjoyed good nature. "No, I'm afraid not." He watched me button the shirt. "By the way, have you decided what you're going to do with your remaining time?"

I had, but I thought I'd say, "Not yet."

He was faintly perturbed. "You really should, you know. Only about three months left. And be sure to let me know when you do."

While I finished dressing, he sat down at his desk and glanced at the newspaper lying there. "The killer seems to be rather busy, doesn't he?"

He turned a page. "But really the most surprising thing about the crimes seems to be the public's reaction. Have you read the Letters From the People column recently?"

"No."

"These murders appear to be meeting with almost universal approval. Some of the letter writers even hint that they might be able to supply the murderer with a few choice names themselves."

I would have to get a paper.

"Not only that," Dr. Briller said, "but a wave of politeness has struck the city."

I put on my coat. "Shall I come back in two weeks?"

He put aside the paper. "Yes. And try to look at this whole thing as cheerfully as possible. We all have to go some day."

But his day was indeterminate and presumably in the distant future.

My appointment with Dr. Briller had been in the evening, and it was nearly ten by the time I left my bus and began the short walk to my apartment building.

As I approached the last corner, I heard a shot. I turned into Milding Lane and found a little man with a revolver standing over a newly-dead body on the quiet and deserted sidewalk.

I looked down at the corpse. "Goodness. A policeman."

The little man nodded. "Yes, what I've done does seem a little extreme, but you see he was using a variety of language that was entirely unnecessary."

"Ah," I said.

The little man nodded. "I'd parked my car in front of this fire hydrant. Entirely inadvertently, I assure you. And this policeman was waiting when I returned to my car. And also he discovered that I'd forgotten my driver's license. I would not have acted as I did if he had simply written out a ticket —for I was guilty, sir, and I readily admit it—but he was not content with that. He made embarrassing observations concerning my intelligence, my eyesight, the possibility that I'd stolen the car, and finally on the legitimacy of my birth." He blinked at a fond memory. "And my mother was an angel, sir. An angel."

I remembered a time when I'd been apprehended while absentmindedly jaywalking. I would contritely have accepted the customary warning, or even a ticket, but the officer insisted upon a profane lecture before a grinning assemblage of interested pedestrians. Most humiliating.

The little man looked at the gun in his hand. "I bought this just today and actually I'd intended to use it on the superintendent of my apartment building. A bully."

I agreed. "Surly fellows."

He sighed. "But now I suppose I'll have to turn myself over to the police?"

I gave it thought. He watched me.

He cleared his throat. "Or perhaps I should just leave a note? You see I've been reading in the newspapers about . . ."

I lent him my notebook.

He wrote a few lines, signed his initials, and deposited the slip of paper between two buttons of the dead officer's jacket.

He handed the notebook back to me. "I must remember to get one of these."

He opened the door of his car. "Can I drop you off anywhere?"

"No, thank you," I said. "It's a nice evening. I'd rather walk."

Pleasant fellow, I reflected, as I left him.

Too bad there weren't more like him.

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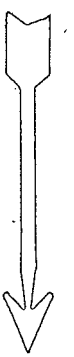

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NO AGENCY ORDERS REMITTANCE MUST ACCOMPANY ORDER

THEY received the postcard in early August. It was an innocent message, asking how they were, hadn't it been an unusually hot summer and hoping they could get together soon. But it was signed "Aunt Margaret." And neither Tom nor Helen had an Aunt Margaret. There was no return address. The card was simply postmarked Baltimore.

"Just give it back to the mailman," Tom told her.

But Helen forgot. And it wasn't until several weeks later that she found it under the desk blotter. She felt foolish about returning the card after such a long time. So for some reason she could never understand, she saved it.

Summer ended, and the children went back to school. The day she was to meet Tom downtown to have lunch by themselves, the second postcard came. She decided to bring it along to show to Tom. After they'd ordered, Helen said lightly, "Aunt Margaret's been sick." She handed him the card.

He glanced over it, and then read aloud, " 'Thanks so much for the lovely asters. How nice of you to remember that the chrysopsis has always been one of my favorites.' "

Helen's smile matched his. "I thought you'd appreciate that."

"She's really got the wrong boy," Tom agreed.

"Isn't it funny that she didn't put a return address on one of the cards?" Helen mused. "I suppose, though, she thinks it isn't necessary."

He folded his glasses and replaced them in his suit pocket. "This other guy must've just moved into Silver Spring. I thought I was the only Tom Warford in the phone book." He gave the card back to her. "Well, stick it in the mailbox. Let the Post Office worry."

RELATIVE TO MURDER

by Nora and Lee Caplin

All mail, by its very nature, is mysterious. You never know when it will arrive, if at all. Whether it will be a bomb today or a dentist bill tomorrow. So I heartily endorse the U.S. mail. for without it, what exactly would the man in the street have to look forward to?

But Helen didn't do as he suggested. She felt an inexplicable reluctance to give up the cards. There was a quality of definiteness in the angular, precise handwriting, the elaborate attention given capital letters. So she put them in the top desk drawer.

Tom and she had just ordered more tulip bulbs and a blue spruce for the front yard when they received the third postcard. It was on a Saturday in late September, and the entire neighborhood seemed to be screaming outside their living room window. Helen turned off the vacuum when Tom came in. He had an odd look on his face.

"I don't know exactly what to make of this," he said. "Here, see what you think." He showed her the card.

It began as usual: "Dear Family. Hope all of you are still well. I'm in the best of health now, thanks. Give my love to Tim and Nancy. I doubt that they even remember me. We must do something about that very soon. Fondly, Aunt Margaret."

It was so unexpected that Helen couldn't comment at first. Tom's eyes were very black as she stared at him.

A moment later Tim flung open the door and bawled, "Somebody make those dumb girls stay out of our way. They're stepping all over the parts, and Nancy's already spilled the glue. She's—"

Tom's voice was sharp. "I told you the front porch was no place to be building models. Go down to the basement or up to Mike's house."

When Tom turned back to Helen, she was sitting rigid on the edge of the sofa, looking down at the card on the coffee table. Physical contact with it had made her queasy, yet she couldn't take her eyes off it.

He sat down beside her, and began hesitantly, "I suppose this other guy could have two kids who've got exactly the same given names as ours."

"You know that's impossible."

He rubbed one hand over his

unshaved chin. "Yeah, it's pretty unlikely, at that."

Helen went on, "I can't imagine what it's all about. Unless this is supposed to be a way of telling us —but you don't make that much money that anybody would try to kidnap—"

"Oh, for God's sake, honey. That's crazy." He moved over to her and put one arm around her shoulder. "It could be a lot of things, but not that."

She managed a bleak smile. "I know you'll think I'm even crazier, but I'd begun to picture her in my mind. A nice old lady, but sort of pathetic and frail. You know." She studied a Currier and Ives winterscape on the opposite wall. "What on earth do you suppose she's up to?"

He shrugged. "Who says there really is an Aunt Margaret, anyway? This could be some kid's idea of a joke. Or a crank. Who knows, maybe it's even some new advertising stunt." He was annoyed by her lack of response to any of these alternatives. "You don't know these ad men like I do. I'm telling you, there's nothing they wouldn't do for the sake of promotion. Even something nutty like this."

Helen turned to him again. "I suppose you wouldn't consider calling the police."

Tom scoffed, "I can just see us marching down to the station with a postcard signed 'Aunt Margaret.' They'd think we were the crackpots."

She answered quietly, "Three postcards. I didn't send the other two back." Helen went over to the desk and took out the others. She put them down beside the one on the table.

Tom ignored them. "All right, so we have all three. There's not a damn' thing to them. No threats. Nothing." He added with an abrupt note of caution, "So far. What do you want the police to do, dust them for fingerprints?" He stood up impatiently. "Look, honey. Let's stop imagining anything sinister. It's not worth getting ourselves worked up about. This is probably the last one we'll ever get, anyway." He nudged her shoe with the toe of his. "How about rounding up the kids for lunch?" Then he went down the hall to the bathroom. She heard him take out his shaving things from the medicine cabinet, and turn on the hot water.

After a short while he stepped out again in the hallway, one side of his face thickly lathered. "It might not hurt to look out for anything funny. You know what I mean."

Suddenly, both the situation and

Tom struck Helen as broad melodrama. She laughed, "Your first idea was better. I'm going to forget about it."

But her uneasiness soon returned. Every morning she dreaded opening the mailbox. There hadn't been any pattern to the dates on which the postcards were sent. Between the first and second there was an interval of six weeks. The third one was mailed only a month later. If there were to be another, it could arrive at any time. But October passed uneventfully into November, except for one highlight. Tom sold a group insurance policy to an important client, and they celebrated by going to the theater.

A week before Thanksgiving when Nancy came home for lunch, she called to her mother, "Guess what . . . we got another card from that lady who says she's our aunt." She came into the kitchen, capless, her brown hair windblown.

Helen emptied a can of tomato soup into a saucepan. "Take off your things and get your hands washed."

"Aren't you going to read it?" Nancy waved the card before her eyes.

"Put it down, Nancy," Helen said curtly. "It doesn't have a thing to do with you. Go on, now."

The child was undiscouraged. She pressed, "But I heard you and Daddy talking. You said she asked about Tim and me. I never got anything from her for my birthday, and it seems to me that if she's my aunt, she'd—"

Helen slammed the refrigerator door. "That's enough about it. Look what time it is, and you haven't even started lunch yet." She reached down and brusquely unfastened Nancy's coat. "Here you are in first grade, and you're still buttoning your coat wrong. And what happened to your other hair ribbon?" She didn't give her daughter a chance to explain. "I'm going to give you just about two seconds to get ready to eat, or else . . ."

After the child left for school again, Helen sat down at the table. Her face remained unmoved as she read the postcard.

"I was very pleased that you took my advice about the blue spruce. I wish Walter were as considerate of his aunt as you are. He is leaving me alone again with just Hattie for company. Give the children a kiss for me." And it ended with the same, "Fondly, Aunt Margaret."

That night Helen argued with

Tom, "But there hasn't been anybody watching our house. I'm sure of it."

He insisted, "There had to've been. You just didn't notice whoever it was."

Her voice rose, "She must be crazy. Writing to people she doesn't even know. Checking up on us. What in heaven's name does she want?"

"Take it easy, honey. The kids are still awake."

Helen remembered the conversation with Nancy at noon. She moved farther away from the hallway. "I know what you're going to say next. That I'm not supposed to worry. I'm supposed to forget all about it, even if there is someone watching us."

He shook his head. "You're wrong. This has me bothered now, too. And I'm just as concerned about you as I am about the kids." As if to convince himself as well as her, he said, "I have a feeling that either one of two things will happen next. She must know the effect this is having on us and that we might go to the police if she keeps it up much longer. So she could stop sending the cards."

"Or what else?"

He answered simply, "Or she has some reason for picking us."

"But what possible reason could she have? Or haven't you thought about it that much?" She grew irritable with the way he was methodically bending forward a row of matches, one at a time, from an open folder.

It would have been far more reassuring if he had snapped back at her, but he only said uncertainly, "I don't know. Right now, anyway." He tossed the matches onto an endtable, pushed both hands into his pockets, and turned to the window. It was cold outside. Ice tipped the branches of the spruce tree, and beyond it, the street light cast an oval of false security upon their dark lawn. Tom suddenly felt as if nothing really belonged to them anymore.

Helen must've asked him something, for her voice became insistent. "I said, who do you suppose Walter is?"

"Your guess is as good as mine." It was funny that he'd forgotten that part of the postcard. All his thoughts had centered on the lines that pertained to them personally. But he was too tired to think about it anymore. He turned on television and neglected to change the channel, even though the program was an inane panel show he never watched. And Helen fixed her attention on it, just as absorbedly unseeing as he.

Ten days later they received another postcard. Aunt Margaret

stated cryptically that she had made an appointment with her lawyers for the following Wednesday in order to arrange a pleasant surprise for them (Helen and Tom). She also hoped that they'd had a nice Thanksgiving.

The next Monday morning, Helen had begun a second cup of coffee and was starting the newspaper crossword puzzle when someone knocked at the door. She supposed that it was the laundryman, so she didn't bother putting on lipstick. But it was someone she had never seen before. A tall, attractively-graying man appearing to be in his forties—extremely well dressed in a superb, gray Italian-cut suit and black silk tie. Everything about him seemed to have been made expressly to his order, including his tanned, regular-featured face.

He smiled, "You must be Helen. I'm Walter."

She continued to observe him without recognition. "I'm sorry, but I don't—"

"Aunt Margaret's nephew." He extended his hand.

She experienced a sensation that everything had stopped. That she was held in a stilted pose like an Egyptian figure. Finally, she recovered. "Oh, of course. Come in, please." She moved aside, and he entered.

Instantly, she was resentful that he had come at this hour in the morning. The living room was a mess. Parts of the paper were scattered about on the sofa; Tom's raincoat was draped over a chair; Tim's muddy boots were lying on their sides in one corner. But she made up her mind not to apologize for the poor impression it might give him. "I was just having another cup of coffee. Would you —"

"No, thanks." He chose the least cluttered chair, pulled up the legs of his trousers a bit, to protect their crease, and sat down, completely self-assured.

Though she couldn't have felt less like it now, Helen resolutely went to the kitchen and returned with a plastic mug of lukewarm coffee. She sat down opposite him.

He said easily, "The Randolphs had me down for some shooting this week end, and I was just on my way home when I decided to stop off here." He appraised the room loftily. "This is a very—cozy sort of place. Just what I'd visualized."

Helen smiled coolly and made no reply. But it was obvious that he considered Tom and her strictly middle class, or even lower. *So this was Walter.*

"How are the children—Tim and Nancy?" he asked.

"Fine. They're both at school now."

He pulled his mouth down in an appropriate line of regret. "Sorry I missed seeing them. Aunt Margaret will be sure to ask me about them."

At this point, the logical thing would have been for her to ask him outright just why he had really come. But his whole attitude somehow put her on the defensive, irritated her. For the time being, at least, she decided to go along with his apparent assumption that she was a poor relation.

He went on, "How's Tom?"

"Fine."

"Still top man at Universal Life?"

Even this bit of knowledge about themselves didn't jar Helen's mood. She became more annoyed with him—his disinterested blue eyes, the careful way he kept the back of his head from actually resting against the chair. She answered narrowly, "He's doing about as well as usual for this time of year."

"I wonder if he ever runs into Bill Mayfield. He has something to do with the same company. President or chairman of the board, I've forgotten which. Anyway, Bill and I are old friends. We went through prep school together. Haven't seen him for quite awhile."

"Tom's just a salesman. I doubt if they really know each other."

She finished what was left of the coffee. He pulled a deceptively inconspicuous cigarette case from his pocket, and held it out to her, but she shook her head. He selected a cigarette, then replaced the case in his jacket. The act was performed with high art. As he reached for his lighter, he said, "Before I forget, I'd better ask if there's anything you want me to tell Aunt Margaret." He smiled. "You don't seem to be particularly keen on writing letters. Or even coming over to see her." Without waiting for an excuse, he shrugged. "Not that I blame you. There's nothing more boring than elderly people. But then my position is considerably different from yours. She relies on me for almost everything."

On an impulse, Helen found herself saying, "As a matter of fact, I was a little puzzled over something she mentioned in her last card. It had to do with her lawyer." She sensed a stiffening in his posture. "Tom and I were just curious. But it doesn't really matter. I'm sure she—Aunt Margaret will explain later."

He looked down at his hand, holding the cigarette. "When did she write that?"

"Her card just came Saturday,

so I imagine she must've mailed it the day before."

He reflected, "That's interesting. She's always had me mail her cards to you. Mind if I have a look at it?"

She went over to the desk and took out the last postcard. She turned it over on the back. "Yes, it's postmarked the twenty-sixth. That was Friday."

She handed it to him, and he read the lines intently. Then he returned the card to her. He put the cigarette in his mouth, and snapped the lighter. It didn't ignite. He pressed down harder. Again there wasn't a flame.

"I'll get you some matches," Helen offered.

"Don't bother." He made an impatient gesture of refusal, and crushed the cigarette into an ash tray, breaking off the filter. He got to his feet. "I wouldn't pay too much attention to what Aunt Margaret says," he commented shortly. "She's aged pathetically this past year. I hate to use the word, but I'm afraid that senile is the only way to describe her."

"I haven't been getting that impression of her at all," Helen replied with conviction, finding a definite pleasure in disagreeing with him. "She's seemed perfectly sound of mind." It was incomprehensible to her that she should have this feeling of belonging to a state of affairs in which by any normal line of reasoning she had no part; this sense of loyalty to an unseen woman.

He appeared to re-estimate her, evaluating her green wool skirt and sweater, scuffed loafers, her uninspired, casual hairdo. Finally he agreed, unpleasantly intimate, "You're absolutely right to take that attitude—assuming, of course, that it might be to your advantage. But don't you think you're being rather obvious, my dear? Renewing old ties at this advanced stage of Aunt Margaret's life."

"That remains to be seen," said Helen with an assurance that amazed herself.

He started for the door. "Well, I'd better be getting back." He brushed a fleck of lint from the sleeve of his coat. "Then there's nothing really important you want me to pass along to Aunt Margaret?"

She felt challenged by him to the very last. As he opened the door, she said, "Please give her our love, and tell her that we'd like very much to see her sometime soon."

"Of course," he said, and left.

She went directly to the phone and called Tom. "Walter was just here," she said without any initial greeting. "You can't imagine—"

"Who?" Someone was typing in the background. He could hardly hear her.

She repeated louder, "Walter, I said. You know—Aunt Margaret's nephew."

"What in hell did he want?"

She began, "Well, that's the thing of it. I'm not sure, exactly."

"Look, honey, I was just on my way to meet a client. Call me later. I'll be back around three. No, wait . . . I have to go over to Arlington."

"Oh, it doesn't matter," Helen interrupted. "I'll tell you about it when you get home."

She felt frustrated at having to wait for Tom. She made an effort to get the day back into schedule. But she was still ironing when the children came home. Tim had ripped his new jacket, and Nancy had lost her spelling paper. Helen battled against herself to stay calm until Tom could take over. But just as she had put a meat loaf in the oven, he called to say that he wouldn't be home for dinner. For once, she was thankful for *The Three Stooges* and *Quick Draw McGraw*. The children could watch TV until bedtime.

It was almost eleven by the time Tom finally arrived. His face looked haggard, and his voice was husky. "You're coming down with something." Helen felt his forehead. "Take some aspirin and go straight to bed." In her concern for him, she decided not to bring up the matter of Walter's visit just then. "And you might as well forget about going into work tomorrow. I'll call them the first thing in the morning, so you can sleep as late as you want." When he didn't show any resistance, she knew he was sick.

She indulged him with breakfast in bed the next morning, and as she was straightening their room, Tom said, "You never did get around to telling me what that guy Walter wanted yesterday."

Helen sat down beside him on the bed. When she had finished with the story, Tom flung off the blanket, and fumed, "What beats me is not only the crazy way you went along with that bit about being related to the old lady, but you didn't find out a single thing besides." He shoved another pillow behind his back and sat up. "I mean, why in the devil didn't you just ask him what she was up to?"

Helen murmured, "I knew that it'd be hard for you to understand. I don't know why I said what I did myself. I just felt belligerent and—" She ran her hand slowly across the wrinkled sheet. "The weird thing about it was that I kept feeling I had an obligation

to her—to Aunt Margaret. It was almost as if she expected something of me."

Tom was silent for awhile and then he said, "I'll have to admit that this nephew of hers sounds pretty cozy." He sighed. "But you sure messed up a chance to find out what the whole thing's about."

Among that morning's mail was an envelope addressed to them in Aunt Margaret's handwriting. In her eagerness to read the letter, Helen didn't notice that part of the contents of the envelope had fallen to the floor. The letter bore Monday's date.

"My dear Helen and Tom,

"I had planned for the enclosure to be sent to you by my solicitors, but I have decided to take care of the matter myself, having come to feel as I do now a genuine affection for you.

"No doubt you have been somewhat mystified to have received a series of postcards from a complete stranger. I chose your name from a directory. I have always been fond of the name Thomas, and one of my ancestors (on the maternal side of our family) was also a Warford. After making a discreet inquiry, I found to my satisfaction that you were entirely the sort of young people I had hoped you would be.

"I can assure you that my purpose was not to inconvenience or annoy you, and has proved to be justifiable, though it was a desperate measure on my part. In brief, I have used you as an example for my nephew. I blame myself for his lack of responsibility. Nevertheless, after finally recognizing his weakness and failing to rectify it in a number of other ways, I concluded that someone like you, a fictitious relative, would provide a more personal model.

"While it has distressed me to employ such devious means, the end result has been most happy to me, and I am certain in time to Walter, also. I had reduced his benefits from my will sometime ago. But now I shall make arrangements to have him reinstated as my principal heir.

"So you see, you have unconsciously played a great part in my life and that of my nephew's. Walter told me of his visit with you today, and how favorably you impressed him. I must say, he seems more purposeful.

"As a token of my gratitude, I am enclosing a small check. The amount hardly begins to express my thanks or regrets if this situation has caused you undue anxiety.

"And now Hattie, my pampered old Persian, is insisting that I take her out for our ritual after-dinner airing. As I drop this letter in the

mailbox, I shall be wishing both of you and the children a most enjoyable Christmas and a continuingly satisfying New Year. Affectionately, 'Aunt Margaret.' "

The check Helen picked up was for five thousand dollars, and signed by Margaret Dawes Comstock. Incredulous, she went over the letter again, and found that she had missed a postscript on the back.

"I can't resist citing an example of Walter's renewed concern for me. He is going to Philadelphia on the 10:00 o'clock train, and since I will be alone until morning, he is personally locking all the windows. The dear boy has insisted that he will even check the furnace just before he leaves."

Finally, she took the letter and the check to Tom, telling him that she hoped her news didn't make him feel any worse. "Well, I'll . . . be . . . damned," he said at last. "I've heard of crazy plots, but this one takes first prize. She had some nerve."

Helen replied with feeling, "She isn't like that at all, couldn't you see? It's just that—well, she explained everything. I think it's pathetic, her wanting to make it up to us for any trouble she's caused us, and the lengths she was driven to, attempting to straighten him out."

Tom grunted, "But look at the way she's used us."

Helen said resolutely, "Well, we're not going to take the money. That'd be just what Walter would like most. I'm going to sit right down and write to her. And whether you like it or not, I'm returning the check."

Surprisingly Tom agreed, "Do that. The sooner we get ourselves out of this, the better it'll suit me." Then he added, "How can you write to her? There's no address on the envelope."

"It's on the letterhead." Helen showed him.

"Oh." Tom lay down again. As she was leaving the room, he opened one eye and grinned wryly, "Tell her that the thing that really impressed us most was her picture of Walter puttering around the basement. I'll lay you ten-to-one odds he doesn't know a furnace from a washing machine."

Helen laughed, "I think I'll do that."

Something happened to the alarm clock Wednesday morning. Tim hysterically shook his parents awake. "It's eight-thirty!"

Tom jumped out of bed. "Oh, Lord, I'm supposed to be in Wheaton at 9:30!" After dressing, he wouldn't even wait long enough

to have a cup of coffee. "I'll stop off at a drugstore after I finish with this guy." Tom kissed Helen hurriedly. "See you tonight."

She decided to start a load of clothes before sitting down and relaxing. It was almost ten before she heated the coffee and began on the morning paper. Amid the ordinary surroundings of dirty dishes in the sink, cereal spilled on the floor, and from outside the monotonous, sharp sound of the Freeman's cocker spaniel barking at the trashman, she read:

"MARGARET DAWES COMSTOCK, 75, WIDOW OF BAY CHEMICALS FOUNDER

"Baltimore, Md. Nov. 30. Margaret Dawes Comstock, prominent resident of this city, was found dead in her home this morning by a member of her household staff. She was a victim of asphyxiation, apparently caused by a leak in the gas furnace.

"Mrs. Comstock was the widow of Andrew Comstock, founder of Bay Chemicals Company. A generous benefactress of many local charitable organizations, she was also a well-known garden enthusiast. The grounds of her estate were open to the public annually for the Historic Homes and Gardens Tour.

"A sole survivor is her nephew Walter Dawes Carew."

Helen went to the desk and took out Aunt Margaret's letter. She checked the date; then she reread the postcript. Mechanically, she folded the letter and put it in her blouse pocket. In a daze, she returned to the kitchen and cleared the table, making a point of scrubbing every dried corn flake from the plastic cloth. *It wasn't an accident. He did it.* Helen filled the sink with water. As she groped for the sponge, she was hardly aware that the water was scaldingly hot. The pain of it seemed to be suspended for the moment. *My letter should get there today. And if he reads it—that part about the furnace . . .*

She went to the phone and called Tom's office. "I'm sorry, he's not in yet," the secretary said.

"Have him call me the minute he gets there," Helen said urgently. She hung up. *Suppose the police don't even suspect Walter. But then again, why should they?* She stared at the number on the yellow sticker above the telephone dial. Emergency calls. *It would be better to talk to Tom first. He'd know how to explain everything to the police.*

She remembered the clothes. They must be through washing by now. She went down to the basement, and put the load into the dryer. Then she started up the stairs. But midway, she looked up. The shoes—gleaming black, English calf loafers.

"Oh, there you are," Walter said. "I was afraid you weren't home."

He stood in the doorway with the same assurance as before, appropriately somber for the occasion in a handsome black suit, cashmere scarf and suede gloves. Without making a single threatening gesture, it was obvious that he didn't intend to let her by. She started to back down the steps, but he must've known that there was no outside exit from the basement.

"I'm afraid I have some bad news," he said. "Poor Aunt Margaret died night before last."

She gripped the railing. "Yes, I know. It was in the newspaper this morning."

He didn't show any change of emotion. "Too bad. I'd hoped to spare you the shock."

"Is that why you came?" She could hardly hear her own voice.

"Not entirely," he smiled, and pulled something from his inner coat pocket. He extended it to her. There couldn't be any doubt now. Even in the dim stairwell, she could see that he was holding the check she had returned yesterday.

"I insist that you keep this," Walter said. "She would've wanted you to." Helen couldn't answer him. He lifted his eyebrows. "Well, if you must, then consider this a small business transaction." He took his time with elaborate ease. "For sentimental reasons, I'd like to have all Aunt Margaret's correspondence with you, particularly her last letter." He rested one elbow against the doorway. "Now that I know you weren't remotely related to my aunt, there's no reason at all why you should object to what I have in mind. It's very simple. You keep the check, and I'll take Aunt Margaret's letter."

"No," she blurted out. And immediately she realized that she had jeopardized herself further.

He straightened up. "Frankly, I can't understand what you're trying to prove. Aunt Margaret's dead. This check doesn't mean a thing to me. I'm sure you would have more use for it than I would." Walter's voice became sardonic. "Don't tell me you have a puritanical attitude toward this sort of thing."

His last remark pointed up the difference between them. His values and hers. His weakness suddenly became clear to her. The weakness Aunt Margaret had seen in him. It made her feel strong.

Emphatically she said, "You're a fool, Walter." She felt that for the first time she had the upper hand.

He removed his scarf, and edged toward her.

She repeated, "You are a fool. You did a completely senseless thing when you killed Aunt Margaret." He hesitated. "She was going to her lawyer today and have her will changed so that you would've got everything. The way it stands now, you get nothing."

He said hoarsely, "You're lying."

"Then I assume you haven't talked to her lawyer yet." Her confidence was visibly undermining him.

"Is this what her letter was about?"

Pursuing her advantage, Helen moved toward him. "Changing her will was only part of it. No one in the world meant as much to her as you did. All she wanted was for you to be a responsible human being. The last thing she said was how considerate you'd become lately, how much more mature. She was so happy that you were even taking the trouble to check the furnace." Helen continued grimly, "Just how did you fix it, Walter? I'm sure the police are asking the same question." She watched his growing bewilderment. "You've underestimated everybody but yourself. For all you know, you may be under surveillance right now. It's obvious this is another thing you didn't consider in advance." Helen was only a few feet away from him now. "Do you intend to harm me, just to get the letter? And what about Tom? He knows everything, too." She regarded him almost piteously. "Walter, don't you know you're at a deadend?"

He didn't attempt to stop her as she pressed by him into the kitchen. She never took her eyes off his. "The best you can do now," she said, "is to face up to facts. Call the police yourself, and tell them where you are."

Something about Helen immobilized Walter—her erect stance, the firmness of her voice. *She was just like Aunt Margaret.* He reverted to type. "I can't," he said.

"Then I'll do it for you." She lifted the receiver from the hook, and dialed. Before there was an answer, she turned to him again. "Cousin Walter," she said gently, "why couldn't you have grown up?"

SPEAK NO EVIL, HEAR NO EVIL

by Phillip Tremont

GOODMAN turned east off Fifth Avenue into Twenty-sixth Street and counted off seven park benches, his handsome jaw set and the anger smouldering in him like a lit fuse.

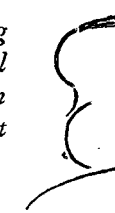
There were two people already seated on the bench. The natty, assistant shipping clerk type kept glancing from his wrist watch to the passers-by in the late forenoon crowd. The other was a long-haired artist up from Greenwich Village, wearing a grimy cowled sweat shirt, dirty khaki slacks and filthy white sneakers. He held a thick sketch pad on his knee. With a flat charcoal stick, he was dashing off an unlikely impression of the summer sunlight glinting on the windows of the office buildings bordering the park.

Goodman glared at the pair and sat on the far end of the bench. He adjusted the crease in his new De Pinna suit and turned his glare on every other human in sight. *If you want to get rid of your wife,* the note read, *be in Madison Square Park no later than eleven-thirty tomorrow morning. Seventh bench east of Fifth Avenue on 26th Street.*

Goodman had not shown the note to anyone since its arrival in Wednesday's mail. He did not know if it was a prank, or if he had been contacted by a professional murderer.

In either case, Goodman felt the scowl was called for. If the hand that had pasted the letter together

The fewer people who know about a murder—in the planning stage—the better. Should you, however, decide that maybe you'll just let your wife in on it—for, after all, she is your wife—I can only tell you this. If you are set on being a murderer, you must be prepared to pay the price: keeping your big mouth shut.



out of clipped newsprint belonged to some moronic acquaintance, he would be lurking about somewhere, snickering. Goodman wanted this person, whoever he might be, to know he was in for a thorough beating if he got his hands on him. If, on the other hand, the sender was some dangerous maniac, capable of doing Inez real harm, Goodman didn't want to have anything to do with him if he was the sort who would be scared off by a dirty look.

He scanned the windows of the buildings opposite. He could see office clerks bustling about with their hands full of papers; here, on the first floor, a girl in a red dress talking into a dictation machine; there, a slob in shirt sleeves, his jaw clamped around a cigar, pacing up and down and slamming a fist into his palm as he bawled out an unseen subordinate about the cancellation of the Amalgamated United order, or whatever.

Goodman took a careful look at the people on the adjoining benches, pedestrians, the occupants of passing taxis and private cars. Nowhere did he spot the face of anyone he knew that was leering out at him.

Time passed. The sidewalk crowd thickened as the office spilled out for lunch. The youth with the glossy hair and the forty-five-dollars-a-week face sprang from the bench with a happy yelp and threw his arms around a steatopygic file clerk in a tight blue skirt. Goodman looked at his wrist watch and cursed. A half hour had gone by.

"Don't go," the artist said. He was no longer sketching the buildings. He had turned on the bench and was now examining Goodman's profile with an appraising eye.

Goodman stood. "I'm not going to pose for you. Go home and take a bath, mister. Take two baths."

The artist had a long, saturnine face and a two-day growth of ginger-colored beard. "Sit down, Goodman," he said.

Goodman sat. "Did you send that note?" he demanded. The other nodded. "I ought to have you locked up," Goodman told

him. "Or wring your tattle-tale gray neck."

"Put your hands on me, and I'll call the fuzz."

Goodman sneered. "We'd get that straightened out fast enough in the station house. You've probably got a record a mile long."

The artist sneered back. "No, man. I've never been busted, never been fingerprinted."

"What makes you think I want to get rid of my wife?"

"I heard you say so, man. Monday night. In Sardi's East. You were sitting with this salty bourgeois-looking blonde chick. You told her: 'I'd give a million dollars to get rid of her so we could be together the rest of our lives, darling.' You were the end convincing. If I were a chick and you whispered that in my tiny shell-like ear, I'd have relented on the spot."

"If you *were* a *chick,*" Goodman told him, "you'd have to wash your tiny shell-like ears before I whispered anything into them." Goodman had been in Sardi's Monday night with Lucille. He remembered telling her something about doing away with his wife for her sake. She was getting hard to manage, with her old boy friend, the TV producer, back in town and being attentive.

"So I decided to try to work something out with you," the artist said.

Goodman thought he saw the trick then. This character couldn't get by the front door of a cafeteria. He must be an actor, put up to this by Lucille's television friend. "You were never in Sardi's in your life," Goodman said.

"Oh, yes, I was. I lasted three whole days, gigging as a bus boy. Now just how much bread can you lay on me for this trick, man?"

"You're crazy," Goodman said. "You overhear a more-or-less innocent remark and try to make a murder plot out of it." Goodman got extra firmness into his voice and said, "I don't want you bothering me again. Next time you'll find yourself in a mess of trouble." He would have been more convincing, if he had made some slight move to leave the bench.

"I looked you up after I got your name from the waiter," the artist said. "Vance Goodman, hot-shot amateur golfer in the Fifties married to, oh, say, the seventeenth richest chick in America. That's where you made your biggest mistake, Vance, old buddy."

"What do you mean, mistake?" Goodman could not keep himself from asking the question.

"You should have picked some *nouveau riche* chick. If you get yourself into a family that's had

money for three or four generations you bump into this public service mentality. That 'Our Wealth Is Just A Stewardship' syndrome."

Goodman shuddered. The man was uncanny. He was quoting Inez almost verbatim.

"Like, I can see where you swung with your life up to then," the artist went on. "Digging that country club scene, making it with all those Social Register chicks, poking around on a golf course all day. This is no put-down, you know. I'm taking into consideration your middle-class values."

"You're a real smart guy, aren't you?" Goodman said, staring pointedly at the cheap, soiled clothes. "The Filthy Man's Thinker."

"You goofed, marrying this Inez. First thing you knew, she had you in a button-down collar and all that jazz, sitting on the boards of her family's businesses and charities." He grinned at Goodman. "Those philanthropies of hers must hack you the most. All those millions, pouring out, while she expects you to work for a salary."

The artist shook his head wonderingly. "Pet hospitals, clinics for hard-of-hearing children—that's the biggest one, right?—homes for unwed mothers, urban renewal study committees. And all the time Little Boy Blue's putter is covered with dust."

"They are all very worthy causes," Goodman said, trying to get a little conviction into his tone.

The artist smiled wolfishly at him. "You could still have it the way you always wanted it—rich *and* free to compete in every tournament. Just say it, man. Just say, 'I want you to kill my wife.'"

Goodman licked his lips. A delicious technicolor film was unreeling in the private projection room of his mind; he was striding toward the clubhouse, liberated forever from board rooms and office hours, still trailed by a huge gallery teeming with beautiful girls. A television announcer was shouting hysterically into a microphone: "To the thunderous applause that meant the most popular champion in the history of golf had done it again, you just saw Vance Goodman sink the eighty-foot putt that clinched the National Open!"

"Just say it, man."

"Uh, what's your name?"

"Just call me Jim."

Goodman drew in a deep breath and glanced around. The near-by benches were empty. No one was within earshot. "Okay, Jim. I want you to murder my wife. But how do I know I can trust you?"

"You don't have to trust me. I'll trust you. You just meet me here on this same bench at nine o'clock tonight and show me twenty thousand in cash. Show it to me. Don't give it to me. Then, when I do her in, you pay me off and I never bother you again. I can't blackmail you because I don't have any evidence against you."

"Twenty thousand is a lot of money. I'm not independently wealthy, you know."

"I can't take a penny less. That's what I'll need to live on in Majorca for ten years." For the first time, the artist's eyes lit up. His voice grew rapturous. "That Mediterranean light! Those lush, sunwashed colors!"

It began to rain steadily at six that evening. Around seven, the phone rang in the den Inez had fixed up for Goodman's golf trophies in the house up in Scarsdale. Goodman recognized the artist's voice immediately. "Look, man, I can't come out in this weather. Like, I don't own a raincoat."

"It's just as well," Goodman said. "I haven't got all the money together, yet."

"Tomorrow night?"

"No. That still won't be enough time. And tomorrow is Friday. If you give me over the week end, I'm sure I can raise it. Monday night, at nine—the same place. Okay?"

"Solid, man, solid."

"It's after midnight," the young detective said. "You're certain they agreed to meet here?"

"Yes. Jim said, 'Right here on this bench at nine tonight.'"

The second detective, the older one, made an angry noise and came to stand beside them. "Then why aren't they here?" he growled.

"I don't know. The rain, maybe. Look, don't you believe me?"

"I've got twenty-two years in this job. And this is the craziest thing I've seen yet."

"You want to leave, is that it? You don't care that a woman is going to be murdered!"

"That's not true," the young detective, the polite one, said. "We're not going to leave. And the police department does care. There are cops all over the Village tonight, looking for Jim, or anyone who fits his description." He pinched his chin thoughtfully. "It would be a big help if you could remember the other man's name."

"I don't think it was mentioned. I couldn't catch everything that was said."

"Or his wife. Anything at all

about his wife that would help us figure out who she is."

"No. I've racked my brain, but I can't remember anything at all about her. As I said, I didn't get the entire . . . Wait! there was something! They kept talking about this man—the one who is paying to have his wife killed—they kept talking about his being a golfer!"

"A golfer?"

"Jim kept teasing him about being able to play golf again, once his wife was dead."

The second detective snorted. "That's something! A guy pays twenty thousand big ones to have his wife killed, so he can get out to play golf?"

"Well," the young detective said uncertainly, "maybe there's something in this for us. We could ask the sports departments of the newspapers to lend us all their pictures of golfers and let you go over them."

"You just look through them, taking your time. We'll sit in back here, so we won't distract you."

When the last of the glossy photos had been examined and turned face down, the young detective returned to the table. "Anything?"

"Well, this one of the fellow wearing the straw hat looks the most like him."

"Is it him? Could it be him?"

"It's the one that looks most like him."

The second detective rose from his chair and glanced at the photo. "That's Sam Snead," he said, his voice heavy with disgust. "He used to play golf with Eisenhower."

"It's dawn again. I guess we drew another blank."

"I'm sorry. I'm terribly sorry. Will you be back again tonight?"

"What do you think?" the older detective demanded angrily. "You're an educated person, an attorney. Nobody's been murdered here. Nobody's shown up for two nights. Don't you know we got other work to do?"

The young detective asked, by means of a quick shake of his head, that he hold his temper. "Look, it's not that we don't believe you. But they haven't shown up for two whole nights. Lots of things could have happened. They may be contacting each other by phone. Or one or the other of them may have changed his mind. Or lost his nerve. And we do have other work to do."

"It's very nice of you to come, Mr. Grimes. I found it lonely all by myself. And scary."

"I guess I'm just stubborn," the young detective said. "And why don't you call me Ed?"

"Please look at me."

"Oh! I'm sorry. I forget sometimes; it seems so natural. I said, 'Call me Ed.'"

"Well, that's four nights," Grimes said, rising and stretching himself.

"Will you come back tonight?"

"No, I can't. Officially, I've been called off. The past two nights were my forty-eight—my time off. Tomorrow night I'll be back on duty and they'll have a different assignment for me. Maybe you'd better stop, too. This is Monday morning. You can't work all day and stay up all night, you know."

"I guess you're right . . ."

"And don't worry. We're still looking for Jim in the Village."

"I'll give you credit for one thing," Goodman told the artist when he met him on the bench that Monday night. "You picked a good spot here, out in the open, where nobody can sneak up to listen in on us."

"Did you bring the bread, man?"

Goodman pulled the folder out of his attache case. "Here it is. Do you want to count it?"

The artist took the folder and thumbed the edges of the sheaf of bills lovingly. "Not now. I'll take your word as a gentleman that it's all here."

"When are you going to do it?" Goodman asked.

"Tomorrow morning, after you leave for work. It's going to look like she surprised a Daring Daylight Intruder while she was all alone and got killed in the struggle."

"Ed, they were there again tonight! Jim is going to murder her tomorrow morning. The other man brought the money and showed it to him, and Jim said he'd kill his wife in the morning after he leaves for work."

"Damn! If only I'd been there with you! Did Jim call the other man by name?

"No. They just spoke to each other for a minute. Then Jim walked away downtown toward the Village and the other man went into the subway. I thought it best to follow him. But when I got down the subway stairs, he'd already boarded a train."

"I'm supposed to be resting in a room at the Waldorf, under sedation," Goodman said. "So hurry up."

"I'll be finished counting in a minute," the artist said.

"And then it's off to Majorca and fame, huh? You certainly made a mess of the place."

"Strong chick, that wife of yours. I finally finished her off with your number four iron, you know."

"Really? How many strokes? Oh, never mind . . ."

It was then the police whistles blew, and the detectives began popping out of the dark doorways of the office buildings and vaulting over the pipe fences of the park walks behind them.

Ed Grimes explained it all to Goodman a few hours after midnight. This was after they'd shown Goodman the statement the artist had made and he had then signed the confession.

"Nobody ever really overheard you," Grimes said. "But there was this girl working in an office directly across the street. A smart girl. An attorney who works as a law clerk, for a firm in that building."

Goodman recalled instantly a pretty girl in a red dress, speaking into a dictation machine.

"When she was an infant," Grimes continued, "she caught some kind of an infection that ate away her ear-drums and left her a deaf mute. She learned to speak and lip-read at one of the clinics supported by your wife's money. She looked out her office window last Thursday and *saw* you say, 'I want you to murder my wife.'"

Grimes leaned back and lit a cigarette. "They've developed this new micro-surgery, where they put a funnel in the patient's ear and the doctor can operate on the inner ear with specially-built tools, while he watches what he's doing by looking through a binocular microscope." He grinned at Goodman. He was a good-looking young man with curly black hair. And there was something he felt like telling someone, anyone. "It's the answer to this girl's problem. She's going to have the operation performed next month. After she gets back, we're going to see a lot of each other."

THE TRAIN was late, and it must have been past nine o'clock when Natalie found herself standing, all alone, on the platform before Hightower Station.

The station itself was obviously closed for the night—it was only a way-stop, really, for there was no town here—and Natalie wasn't quite sure what to do. She had taken it for granted that Dr. Bracegirdle would be on hand to meet her. Before leaving London, she'd sent her uncle a wire giving him the time of her arrival. But since the train had been delayed, perhaps he'd come and gone.

Natalie glanced around uncertainly, then noticed the phone-booth which provided her with a solution. Dr. Bracegirdle's last letter was in her purse, and it contained both his address and his phone-number. She had fumbled through her bag and found it by the time she walked over to the booth.

Ringing him up proved a bit of a problem; there seemed to be an interminable delay before the operator made the connection, and there was a great deal of buzzing on the line. A glimpse of the hills beyond the station, through the glass wall of the booth, suggested the reason for the difficulty. After all, Natalie reminded herself, this was West Country. Conditions might be a bit primitive—

"Hello, hello!"

The woman's voice came over the line, fairly shouting above the din. There was no buzzing noise now, and the sound in the background suggested a babble of voices all intermingled. Natalie bent forward and spoke directly and distinctly into the mouthpiece.

"This is Natalie Rivers," she said. "Is Dr. Bracegirdle there?"

"Whom did you say was calling?"

"Natalie Rivers. I'm his niece."

"His what, Miss?"

"Niece," Natalie repeated. "May I speak to him, please?"

"Just a moment."

There was a pause, during which the sound of voices in the background seemed amplified, and then Natalie heard the resonant masculine tones, so much

When I arrive for a week-end visit, I expect to be met at the station by my host, with a fairly blatant brass band in tow. This, naturally, makes me feel wanted. And when late Sunday night rolls around, I expect my host to insist that I stay on, showing he sincerely means it by restraining me at gun point.

easier to separate from the indistinct murmuring.

"Dr. Bracegirdle here. My dear Natalie, this is an unexpected pleasure!"

"Unexpected? But I sent you a 'gram from London this afternoon." Natalie checked herself as she realized the slight edge of impatience which had crept into her voice. "Didn't it arrive?"

"I'm afraid service is not of the best around here," Dr. Bracegirdle told her, with an apologetic chuckle. "No, your wire didn't arrive. But apparently you did." He chuckled again. "Where are you, my dear?"

"At Hightower Station."

Oh, dear. It's in exactly the opposite direction."

"Opposite direction?"

★

Third Prize Winner

A HOME away from home

by Robert Bloch

"From Peterby's. They rang me up just before you called. Some silly nonsense about an appendix—probably nothing but an upset stomach. But I promised to stop round directly, just in case."

"Don't tell me they still call you for general practise?"

"Emergencies, my dear. There aren't many physicians in these parts. Fortunately, there aren't many patients, either." Dr. Bracegirdle started to chuckle, then sobered. "Look now. You say you're at the station. I'll just send Miss Plummer down to fetch you in the wagon. Have you much luggage?"

"Only my travel-case. The rest is coming with the household goods, by boat."

"Boat?"

"Didn't I mention it when I wrote?"

"Yes, that's right, you did. Well, no matter. Miss Plummer will be along for you directly."

"I'll be waiting in front of the platform."

"What was that? Speak up, I can hardly hear you."

"I said I'll be waiting in front of the platform."

"Oh." Dr. Bracegirdle chuckled once more. "Bit of a party going on here."

"Shan't I be intruding? I mean, since you weren't expecting me—"

"Not at all! They'll be leaving before long. You wait for Plummer."

The phone clicked off and Natalie returned to the platform. In a surprisingly short time, the station-wagon appeared and skidded off the road to halt at the very edge of the tracks. A tall, thin grayhaired woman, wearing a somewhat rumpled white uniform, emerged and beckoned to Natalie.

"Come along, my dear," she called. "Here, I'll just pop this in back." Scooping up the bag, she tossed it into the rear of the wagon. "Now, in with you—and off we go!"

Scarcely waiting for Natalie to close the door after her, the redoubtable Miss Plummer gunned the motor and the car plunged back onto the road.

The speedometer immediately shot up to seventy, and Natalie flinched. Miss Plummer noticed her agitation at once.

"Sorry," she said. "With Doctor out on call, I can't be away too long."

"Oh, yes, the house-guests. He told me."

"Did he now?" Miss Plummer took a sharp turn at a crossroads and the tires screeched in protest, but to no avail. Natalie decided to drown apprehension in conversation.

"What sort of a man is my uncle?" she asked.

"Have you never met him?"

"No. My parents moved to Australia when I was quite young. This is my first trip to England. In fact, it's the first time I've left Canberra."

"Folks with you?"

"They were in a motor smashup two months ago," Natalie said. "Didn't the Doctor tell you?"

"I'm afraid not—you see, I haven't been with him very long." Miss Plummer uttered a short bark and the car swerved wildly across the road. "Motor smashup, eh? Some people have no business behind the wheel. That's what Doctor says."

She turned and peered at Natalie. "I take it you've come to stay, then?"

"Yes, of course. He wrote me when he was appointed my guardian. That's why I was wondering what he might be like. It's so hard to tell from letters." The thin-faced woman nodded silently, but Natalie had an urge to confide. "To tell the truth, I'm just a little bit edgy. I mean, I've never met a psychiatrist before."

"Haven't you, now?" Miss Plummer shrugged. "You're quite fortunate. I've seen a few in my time. A bit on the know-it-all side, if you ask me. Though I must say, Dr. Bracegirdle is one of the best. Permissive, you know."

"I understand he has quite a practise."

"There's no lack of patients for *that* sort of thing," Miss Plummer observed. "Particularly amongst the well-to-do. I'd say your uncle has done himself handsomely. The house and all—but you'll see." Once again the wagon whirled into a sickening swerve and sped forward between the imposing gates of a huge driveway which led towards an enormous house set amidst a grove of trees in the distance. Through the shuttered windows Natalie caught sight of a faint beam of light—just enough to help reveal the ornate facade of her uncle's home.

"Oh, dear," she muttered, half to herself.

"What is it?"

"The guests—and it's Saturday night. And here I am, all mussed from travel."

"Don't give it another thought," Miss Plummer assured her. "There's no formality here. That's what Doctor told me when I came. It's a home away from home."

Miss Plummer barked and braked simultaneously, and the station-wagon came to an abrupt stop just behind an imposing black limousine.

"Out with you now!" With

brisk efficiency, Miss Plummer lifted the bag from the rear seat and carried it up the steps, beckoning Natalie forward with a nod over her shoulder. She halted at the door and fumbled for a key.

"No sense knocking," she said. "They'd never hear me." As the door swung open her observation was amply confirmed. The background noise which Natalie had noted over the telephone now formed a formidable foreground. She stood there, hesitant, as Miss Plummer swept forward across the threshold.

"Come along, come along!"

Obediently, Natalie entered, and as Miss Plummer shut the door behind her, blinked with eyes unaccustomed to the brightness of the interior.

She found herself standing in a long, somewhat bare hallway. Directly ahead of her was a large staircase; at an angle between the railing and the wall was a desk and chair. To her left, a dark, panelled door—evidently leading to Dr. Bracegirdle's private office, for a small brass plate was affixed to it, bearing his name. To her right was a huge open parlor, its windows heavily curtained and shuttered against the night. It was from here that the sounds of sociability echoed.

Natalie started down the hall toward the stairs. As she did so, she caught a glimpse of the parlor. Fully a dozen guests eddied about a large table, talking and gesturing with the animation of close acquaintance—with one another, and with the contents of the lavish array of bottles gracing the tabletop. A sudden whoop of laughter indicated that at least one guest had abused the Doctor's hospitality.

Natalie passed the entry hastily, so as not to be observed, then glanced behind her to make sure that Miss Plummer was following with her bag. Miss Plummer was indeed following, but her hands were empty. And as Natalie reached the stairs, Miss Plummer shook her head.

"You didn't mean to go up now, did you?" she murmured. "Come in and introduce yourself."

"I thought I might freshen up a bit first."

"Let me go on ahead and get your room in order. Doctor didn't give me notice, you know."

"Really, it's not necessary. I could do with a wash—"

"Doctor should be back any moment now. Do wait for him." Miss Plummer grasped Natalie's arm, and with the same speed and expedition she had bestowed on driving, now steered the girl forward into the lighted room.

"Here's Doctor's niece," she announced. "Miss Natalie Rivers, from Australia."

Several heads turned in Natalie's direction, though Miss Plummer's voice had scarcely penetrated the general conversational din. A short, jolly-looking fat man bobbed towards Natalie, waving a half-empty glass.

"All the way from Australia, eh?" He extended his goblet. "You must be thirsty. Here, take this. I'll get another." And before Natalie could reply, he turned and plunged back into the group around the table.

"Major Hamilton," Miss Plummer whispered. "A dear soul, really. Though I'm afraid he's just a wee bit squiffy."

As Miss Plummer moved away, Natalie glanced uncertainly at the glass in her hand. She was not quite sure where to dispose of it.

"Allow me." A tall, gray-haired and quite distinguished-looking man with a black mustache moved forward and took the stemware from between her fingers.

"Thank you."

"Not at all. I'm afraid you'll have to excuse the Major. The party spirit, you know." He nodded, indicating a woman in extreme *décolletage* chattering animatedly to a group of three laughing men. "But since it's by way of being a farewell celebration—"

"Ah, there you are!" The short man whom Miss Plummer had identified as Major Hamilton bounced back into orbit around Natalie, a fresh drink in his hand and a fresh smile on his ruddy face. "I'm back again," he announced. "Just like a boomerang, eh?"

He laughed explosively, then paused. "I say, you *do* have boomerangs in Australia? Saw quite a bit of you Aussies at Gallipoli. Of course that was some time ago, before *your* time, I daresay—"

"Please, Major." The tall man smiled at Natalie. There was something reassuring about his presence, and something oddly familiar, too. Natalie wondered where she might have seen him before. She watched while he moved over to the Major and removed the drink from his hand.

"Now see here—" the Major spluttered.

"You've had enough, old boy. And it's almost time for you to go."

"One for the road—" The Major glanced around, his hands waving in appeal. "Everyone *else* is drinking!" He made a lunge for his glass, but the tall man evaded him. Smiling at Natalie over his shoulder, he drew the Major to one side and began to mutter to him ear-

nestly in low tones. The Major nodded exaggeratedly, drunkenly.

Natalie looked around the room. Nobody was paying the least attention to her except one elderly woman who sat quite alone on a stool before the piano. She regarded Natalie with a fixed stare that made her feel like an intruder on a gala scene. Natalie turned away hastily and again caught sight of the woman in *décolletage*. She suddenly remembered her own desire to change her clothing and peered at the doorway, seeking Miss Plummer. But Miss Plummer was nowhere to be seen.

Walking back into the hall, she peered up the staircase.

"Miss Plummer!" she called.

There was no response.

Then, from out of the corner of her eye, she noted that the door of the room across the hallway was ajar. In fact, it was opening now, quite rapidly, and as Natalie stared, Miss Plummer came backing out of the room, carrying a pair of scissors in her hand. Before Natalie could call out again and attract her attention, Miss Plummer had scurried off in the other direction.

The people here, Natalie told herself, certainly seemed odd. But wasn't that always the case with people at parties? She crossed before the stairs, meaning to follow Miss Plummer, but found herself halting before the open doorway.

She gazed in curiously at what was obviously her uncle's consultation room. It was a cosy, book-lined study with heavy, leather-covered furniture grouped before the shelves. The psychiatric couch rested in one corner near the wall and near it was a large mahogany desk. The top of the desk was quite bare, save for a cradle telephone, and a thin brown loop snaking out from it.

Something about the loop disturbed Natalie and before she was conscious of her movement she was inside the room, looking down at the desk-top and the brown cord from the phone.

And then she realized what had bothered her, the end of the cord had been neatly severed from its connection in the wall.

"Miss Plummer!" Natalie murmured, remembering the pair of scissors she'd seen her holding. *But why would she have cut the phone cord?*

Natalie turned just in time to observe the tall, distinguished-looking man enter the doorway behind her.

"The phone won't be needed," he said, as if he'd read her thoughts. "After all, I *did* tell you it was a farewell celebration." And he gave a little chuckle.

Again Natalie sensed something strangely familiar about him, and this time it came to her. She'd heard the same chuckle over the phone, when she'd called from the station.

"You must be playing a joke!" she exclaimed. "You're Dr. Bracegirdle, aren't you?"

"No, my dear." He shook his head as he moved past her across the room. "It's just that no one expected you. We were about to leave when your call came. So we had to say *some*thing."

There was a moment of silence. Then, "Where *is* my uncle?" Natalie asked, at last.

"Over here."

Natalie found herself standing beside the tall man, gazing down at what lay in a space between the couch and the wall. An instant was all she could bear.

"Messy," the tall man nodded. "Of course it was all so sudden, the opportunity, I mean. And then they *would* get into the liquor—"

His voice echoed hollowly in the room and Natalie realized the sounds of the party had died away. She glanced up to see them all standing there in the doorway, watching.

Then their ranks parted and Miss Plummer came quickly into the room, wearing an incongruous fur wrap over the rumpled, ill-fitting uniform.

"Oh my!" she gasped. "So you found him!"

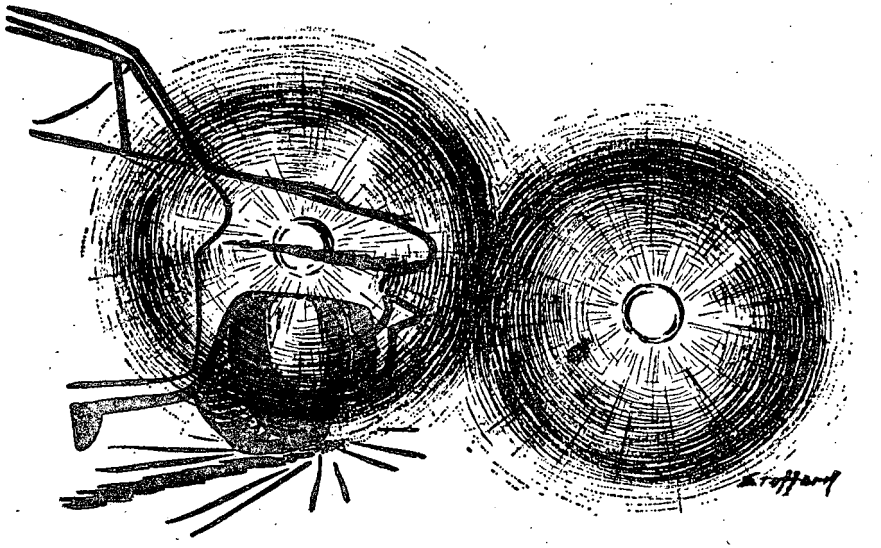
Natalie nodded and took a step forward. "You've got to do something," she said. "Please!"

"Of course, you didn't see the others," Miss Plummer said, "since they're upstairs. The Doctor's staff. Gruesome sight."

The men and women had crowded into the room behind Miss Plummer, staring silently.

Natalie turned to them in appeal. "Why, it's the work of a madman!" she cried. "He belongs in an asylum!"

"My dear child," murmured Miss Plummer, as she quickly closed and locked the door and the silent starers moved forward. "This *is* an asylum . . ."



DEATH OF A DAUGHTER

by **Donald Martin**

WHEN Peterson walked into the room, he found his old friend sitting just as he had left him the night before. And it were as if night had not left the room either, its gloom was still thickly pervasive, its brooding, its loneliness. Benton was still sitting deep in the high-backed easy chair, facing the mournful blue drapes that stretched across the picture window and hid from view the lovely morning that lay brightly over his grounds.

Peterson paused in the doorway. He seemed to be listening to his own thinking. One had to be circumspect in the presence of such grieving, particularly a grieving of this nature.

Peterson felt genuine sympathy for his friend. But there was just so much of the grief that he was able to share. After all, Norma had not been his daughter, his only child (and the only child of a widower, too). There is just so much you can feel about the death of your friend's child. To be any less callous would be to become unduly morbid. This was Peterson's thinking on the matter. It was an honesty, of a sort. After all, one had one's own problems to consider, and while they did not approach the magnitude of losing the last of your family in a tragic automobile accident, they still were more intimate, simply because they were yours. Losing most of your money on laggard horses was a lamentable misfortune, too.

Now Peterson advanced into the room, noiselessly, his natural cheeriness in severe check, the gay quips forgotten for the moment. Approaching the chair, he could see the top of Benton's head. The gray hair was still mussed (the way the Board members never saw it). Then the rest of the face came into view, still melancholy with disbelief (the disbelief which had been transfixed upon its fea-

Revenge is not sweet. So please don't let those of you who must watch your calories be loath to enjoy it. Why, I know one portly gentleman who actually lost poundage, pursuing an individual with whom he devoutly wished to square accounts.

tures since the accident, seven days ago), the eyes staring blankly, the lips lightly together.

"Good morning, Ben," Peterson said. Benton was not startled by the sound. It seemed to make him take a breath—a grateful-sounding breath, as if he had been neglecting this luxury. Peterson came around to face his friend. "Shall I bring in a little light?" he asked.

One of the man's thin arms rose, the fingers opening to cover his face, moving slowly down as if to wipe away a web. The gesture said, "Do what you want."

Peterson gently pulled the cord and the drapes opened. Sunlight struck the room. Benton hid his eyes from the scene as though it would be a gory one, thumb and index finger touching his lowered eyes. The light felt like an intruder.

Peterson pulled a chair close and sat on its edge, watching his friend.

"Don't tell me you've been sitting here all night?" he said.

Benton nodded; it was as if he were admitting a shameful thing. He placed his arms again on the rests and turned his face toward Peterson. It was a haggard face, but there was fixed in it a cruel, unanswerable resolution which Peterson had seen there when he had left, the night before, and which told him now that the mad idea had remained unbudged in Benton's grief-swollen mind.

"I'm going to do it, Les," he said. His voice was heavy, fatalistic.

"I thought a night's sleep would clear away that crazy scheme," Peterson said.

"I didn't sleep."

Peterson rose. He circled the chair, glancing down at the head which was still turned to the place he had just vacated. He moved to the great stone fireplace and stared at the cold ashes. His underlip bunched reflectively, like a man considering odds. Now he lit a cigarette and dropped the match into the ashes. He walked to the window and stood framed in the light, gazing at the Benton grounds, across the fine expanse of lawn which swelled out to the woods beyond.

"To tell you the truth, Ben," he said, the cigarette poised, the thin smoke coiling into the light, "I got no sleep myself last night. I was thinking, too. About you, and Norma, and Cassell." He turned and faced his friend. Benton's eyes were watching with predatory stillness. "You want to kill Cassell," Peterson said, "because he killed Norma—accidentally."

"You call it an accident," Benton said. "I call it negligence. It's not far from murder."

"What will killing him get you?"

"Satisfaction," Benton said. "He killed the only thing I had left in the world. Besides it's a gesture, the only thing I can do for Norma now."

"They'd connect you with it right away," Peterson said. "You wouldn't have a chance. You'd end up in jail, Ben."

"That makes very little difference. My life means nothing anymore."

"Everything you've built and worked for, Ben, your firm, your home, your name—it will all end, be over."

"As far as I'm concerned," Benton said, "it's over now."

Peterson felt exasperation. He was quite unhappy about this situation. He went to a cabinet and opened it. He took out a decanter of brandy and two glasses. He filled each glass and brought them to his friend, pushing one into Benton's hand.

"Drink it," he said. "It'll do you good." Benton held the glass as if waiting for someone to take it from him. Peterson said, "We'll drink to Norma." And he could see, from the mere mention of the dead girl's name, the life come back to Benton.

They drank. Benton put the glass down. His arms resumed their place on the rests. Now Peterson moved about the room again, bringing the cigarette to his lips as though drawing thought from it.

"I don't think you have the right idea, Ben," he said. "I think that what you're planning is as wrong as standing on your head. It seems to me that a man of your intelligence could devise a little more diabolically." Peterson stopped behind a chair, letting his voice float before Benton's gazing eyes. He watched his friend's fingers fold up under their palms, and he knew Benton was listening.

"The way I look at it," Peterson said, "you're just going to stick one half of a knife into him and the other half into yourself. Now, that's not the way J. J. Benton has been known to do business. Not at all. Why, that's the same as signing a suicide pact. I've got nothing against suicide pacts," Peterson said, letting a note of levity creep into his voice, "when it's two real jerks that sign up. But why should J. J. Benton sign up with a crumb like Cassell?"

"What are you driving at, Les?" Benton asked, in his voice a lack of patience, but also a developing interest, for he knew Peterson must be driving at something meaningful. He knew his friend too well to conceive otherwise.

With anyone else he would have been more brusque, less patient. But Peterson always intrigued him, and often amused him. That was why he had given Peterson a sinecure in the company: a large office and a large desk and a pretty secretary and nothing to do except have lunch with him and play golf with him and bring his debonair self and witty repartee to all of J. J. Benton's business meetings and social gatherings. That Peterson was a rake and a rascal, he never doubted; but he was an engaging one.

Now Peterson moved around and again faced his friend, this time with the idea brightly upon his face, about to be sprung, like a new joke.

"I'll tell you what I'm driving at, J. J. It's two things. One is to keep you from committing an irrevocable blunder; the second, is to get for you something that won't harm you, won't cost you a thing, but that will make Cassell's life as miserable as yours is now."

Benton nodded as if agreeing with Satan.

"All right," he said, angry with himself because his interest was so evident. "What is it?"

"Cassell has a daughter," Peterson said. "A girl about eighteen—just Norma's age."

He let the words depict their own significance, sketch their own image. Again he moved from Benton's sight, but not before he had observed a certain tense cunning narrow Benton's eyes. And he heard Peterson say, "A daughter!"

Now Peterson returned to his chair and sat before his friend.

"Listen to me, Ben," he said. "What happens to you happens to me. You've been a friend to me. You took me in when I was nothing, and gave me a break; more than that, you gave me a new life. All this time I've ached with a yearning to do something for you, to try in some way to repay. But what could I ever do? What was there anyone could do for J. J. Benton? And then this happened. Norma was killed. What could I do then? My consolations couldn't help you. Then you came up with this wild idea, to kill Cassell. All right, I said to myself, I'll talk him out of it and save him. But I couldn't do that. Then I said to myself, let me do something for him that will not in any way endanger him, but will give him the satisfaction he wants."

There was shrewd watchfulness in Benton's eyes. Peterson talked with excitement now, with a fluency and a sureness which, as it always did, fascinated the older man.

"You say you want to kill Cassell and don't care if you go to jail for it. But I say that's foolish. I say there's another, better way. You leave Cassell alone, entirely. But he has this daughter. She's Norma's age and like Norma an only child. I've done a little research, Ben. Why, she even looks like Norma, except she's a blonde. Wouldn't it mean something to you, Ben, to know that he's suffering just like you are now? To know that he's sitting somewhere in a room not knowing whether it's day or night? I say let him suffer the way you're suffering, let him know how it feels. He killed Norma, Ben. The court called it an accident, but you and I know it was negligence. I've heard that he's a big drinker. It wouldn't surprise me one bit to know that he was drunk that night. He probably slipped a few envelopes around here and there and those in authority forgot about it."

Peterson could see pleasure spreading like a dawn in Benton's face. Benton was nodding.

"Yes," the older man whispered. "You've got something there, Les. By God, you've got something! Why shouldn't he feel what I'm feeling? Why shouldn't he know the loneliness and the heartache?"

"That's exactly how I feel."

"But how will we do it?"

"You leave that to me. I'll take care of it."

"You? But I can't let you—"

"Please, Ben," Peterson said. "If you get involved, they'll know it was deliberate. Leave it to me. And besides, I want to do it for you. I'll do it in such a way that you'll have no danger and all the satisfaction."

Benton sank back in the chair, sliding one hand down his cheek. Already it was as if the revenge had been consummated; already he was savoring it. His whole demeanor changed. A faint smile appeared on his lips.

"Yes," he whispered. "And then I can send *him* regrets, and flowers to *her* funeral. Oh, Les," he said bursting with excitement, "I'll send her the biggest pile of flowers . . ."

He laughed. Peterson laughed. They laughed into each other's faces. Benton came forward and took Peterson's hand.

"How will you do it?" he asked.

"The only way. The same way he did—with a car."

"But the danger of—"

"Leave it to me, Ben."

"I don't want you getting into trouble."

"I won't. I'll plan it in such a way that—"

"That they won't even call it negligence," Benton said, chortling

at his joke. He leaned back, seeing and savoring again his revenge, pleased. Peterson watched him. Then something occurred to Benton. Peterson knew what it would be, had been expecting it. "You know I'll be most grateful, Les."

"You don't have to be grateful at all, Ben."

"Oh, but I will be. And I'll show it, too."

"I wouldn't dream of accepting any gratuity, Ben. This is something between friends."

"Don't be foolish, Les," Benton said sternly. "If you don't accept my gratitude, I won't let you do it. After all, there will be *some* element of risk involved. There will have to be."

"I suppose so," Peterson said thoughtfully.

"And besides," Benton said with a knowing chuckle, "I know you can always use a few extra dollars."

Peterson laughed. Benton appraised him with genuine affection. His face became stern again.

"Do this for me, Peter," he said, "and I'll give you ten thousand dollars."

"But, Ben, ten thousand . . ."

Benton waved his hand. It was a peremptory gesture. It meant he was vetoing any further mention of money.

"Just do it, Les," he said. "Just do it."

"Don't you worry about a thing, Ben," Peterson said. "And I'll tell you what else I'll do. Cassell's got a body and fender place, you know. After I've done it, I'll take the car to him and let him *hammer out the very dents that killed his daughter.*"

"Superb, Les!" Benton howled. "Superb! What an idea! It's absolutely superb!"

Peterson beamed like a child who has been acclaimed.

"But won't there be a bit of a risk in that?" Benton asked.

"I'll handle the risks, Ben."

Benton's eyes lifted serenely to the sunshine now, drinking deeply of nature's glory. He looked as if a hearth were glowing inside him.

Peterson drove home slowly that night. He let the plan formulate in his mind. He thought it was a particularly brilliant plan. It was precisely this kind of thinking that had endeared him to Benton all these years—risky, ironic, sardonic. Essentially, the plan was no different from others that Peterson had submitted to his friend through the years. That is to say, Benton would get a great deal of pleasure from it, and Peterson a great deal of money.

This was surely the greatest bonanza ever to befall him. If Peter-

son's elation had turned to fire he would have been reduced to ashes in thirty seconds. He hadn't thought Benton would go as high as ten thousand. This was truly the opportunity of a lifetime, his long-awaited bonus for ingenuity. He congratulated himself particularly on his parting idea, to take the damaged car to Cassell for repair. If ever a man had a stroke of genius that had been it.

Ten thousand dollars. It lilted through his mind like the refrain of a popular song.

Benton didn't know when Peterson would do it. He had not asked; he did not want to know. Perhaps he was ashamed of his own enthusiasm. But the plot against Cassell was helping to distract his grief; the thick, uncompromising pain of bereavement was being diluted.

Peterson came again the following evening. Benton started at his appearance. He froze for a moment, waiting to hear the news. But Peterson was chipper, dapper in his light gray suit and pink shirt and lemon-colored tie, very chipper.

"You're looking better today, Ben," he said.

"You haven't done it yet?" Benton asked.

"Not yet, Ben. But soon. Do you want me to tell you when?"

Benton raised his hand, fingers upward. "No," he said. "When it's done, then tell me. That'll be soon enough."

"Well, I can tell you this much right now, Ben," Peterson said. "You can comfort yourself with knowing that Cassell will soon be suffering the same way you are."

Benton reached into his inside pocket. When his hand reappeared, a check was hanging slack in it.

"This is for you, Les."

"As I said before, Ben, I'm not doing this for . . ."

Benton's face expressed bothered impatience. "Come on, come on, Les," he said flapping the check as if to dry the ink. "Take it. Please take it."

Peterson took the check, read it, and then folded it in two and tucked it away, smiling contentedly.

"I'm leaving now," he said. "Maybe I'll drop by later. Will you be up late tonight, Ben?"

"I'm unable to differentiate day from night anymore," Benton said gloomily. "You can come by any time you like."

Benton had dozed in the big chair. Sleep huddled him. He looked helpless. Earlier, one of the

servants had built a fire. Now the flames had shrunk to glaring embers and a chill settled like small teeth upon the room. The sound of a car in the driveway woke the sleeping man. He came instantly alert, as if he had merely been feigning his sleep. Then he sprang to his feet and hurried toward the front door.

Flinging aside the door, he was confronted by Peterson. At Benton's appearance, the younger man's face expressed exultant joy. His car was standing in the driveway, its thrusting headlights burning the mist like two monstrous eyes.

"Ben!" Peterson cried. He took the older man by the arm and led him down the steps. They appeared in the headlights, were made grotesque by the lights and the mist and the darkness. Peterson's triumphant finger pointed out a horrible dent in a front fender.

Benton covered his eyes and whirled away.

"It was simple, Ben," Peterson began. But his friend's body stiffened against the significance of his words.

"All right," Benton said. "All right. All right. I don't want to hear any more about it." He staggered toward the house, one hand still holding his face as if he had received a blow to his inner self.

Peterson looked at the fender, frowned, and then hurried after him. He followed Benton to the living room and shut the door. The room was unbearably quiet. It was as if conspiracy had fled, leaving them alone with culpability.

"It's done, Ben," Peterson whispered.

"All right," Benton said. He sank into the big chair, sighed mournfully.

"One other thing, Ben," Peterson said hesitantly. "That's quite a bit of damage. Fixing that fender is probably a hundred dollar job, at least."

"Oh," Benton said. "Oh." It was the sound of understanding. He reached into his jacket for his wallet. His trembling fingers lifted out five twenties. He handed them back over his shoulder; Peterson's hand was right there to receive them.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Ben," Peterson said. "Will you be in the office tomorrow?"

"No," Benton said. "I'm flying to Jamaica tomorrow. I'll be away quite some time. This thing's been done. Now I want to put it out of my mind. I want to get away from all this."

"All right, Ben," Peterson said. He withdrew without a sound.

The following morning, the battered fender was threading its way through downtown traffic. Peterson's head was lifted slightly, his eyes looking for a particular place. When he saw it he smiled. It was a sign that read: D. CASSELL. The lettering under the name informed one and all that body and fender repair work was done there.

"Now," he said, "for the *coup de grace.*" With pleasure, he thought of himself as an unspeakably fiendish fellow.

He drove into the yard. A gruff looking man in a grease-stained mechanic's uniform looked at him from the office, then came out.

"Good morning," Peterson said. "Can you do something about that fender?"

The mechanic looked at the damage.

"You'll have to leave her here," he said.

"Sure thing," Peterson said. "Where's Mr. Cassell?" he asked.

"He's not here," the mechanic said.

"Oh? How come?"

"Because of his kid."

"What about his kid?"

"You haven't heard?"

"No."

"Then you must be the only one in the neighborhood who hasn't."

"I'm not from this neighborhood," Peterson said.

"His kid's graduating high school today."

"How nice. Boy or girl?"

"Boy."

"Doesn't he have a daughter?"

"No. Just the one boy. Say, how'd these dents get here?" the mechanic asked running his finger over the fender.

"Made them myself," Peterson said. "With this." And he showed him the hammer that had been lying next to him on the seat.

The mechanic was startled. "What?" he said.

"Sure," Peterson said. He smiled mysteriously. "As a practical joke. To keep a friend of mine from getting into serious trouble."

"An expensive joke," the mechanic muttered.

"Very," Peterson said. But after all, he thought, "killing" a nonexistent person should come high.

by Glenn Andrews

trial by money

CLARK LORING resented the idea of growing old. When he noticed the silky auburn hair on his chest had suddenly turned a gray-white, he quickly, and reprovingly, doused it with a color rinse. He did daily pushups, knee-bends, and abdominal strengtheners. Massage for the hair on his head, at those points where scalp had taken over. Upon arising, he drank two glasses of tepid water mixed with the juice of two lemons, for whatever it might deign to do for his intestinal tract. Three martinis for lunch was sheer bravado on his part. As for sports, it was tennis, not shuffleboard, that he picked—and singles, at that.

And to top it all off, he married Doris, a hat check girl at the Club Elite—noticeably young, incredibly beautiful, expertly sculptured. He thought twice before marrying her—because he didn't have youth's impetuosity and the idea of an ancient, opulent man—though a handsome one, in a slick sort of way—marrying a young, beautiful girl struck him as too painfully cliché. For Loring was sophisticated, intelligent, and nobody's fool. And so he was both consciously and subconsciously aware that he was two inches shorter than his wife; that she was twenty-eight years younger.

Three months to the day after the nuptials had taken place, Loring had lunch with the Angela-Mia lipstick account. This, as matters developed, led to his heart attack, which in turn contributed gener-

A husband should never doubt his wife's affection. Rather he should assume, since he is such a magnificent male specimen, that all women cannot help but succumb to his spell. For no one, I seriously contend, is too old for make-believe.

ously to a somewhat unusual kidnapping plot.

Loring had had four martinis—not three—prior to and along with and after his Caneton a la Bigarde. And the next thing he knew, he was on the indoor tennis courts of the 78th Street Armory playing against, he felt fairly certain, one of the young men he'd had lunch with. Anyhow, his opponent had a flat-top haircut and he played so hard, he gave the impression of having a special animus against tennis balls.

Loring began to be bothered by a painful tightness in his chest, but he stuck out the set which he lost, 6-1, 6-1. Afterwards he remembered walking towards the bench on the sidelines, but when he came to, instead of being on the bench he was prone, looking straight up, in an oxygen tent.

During his convalescence, by way of consolation, Angela-Mia sent Loring, as a gift for his wife, a lifetime supply of lipstick, in all shades, to go with all the possible clothes of a wardrobe. And other gifts—invariably their own products—arrived from Loring's other clients. MAGIK, Sunbrite Paints, Ontime Watches. For something better to do as he gained strength, Loring conjectured on whether Doris really loved him as she insisted—just a bit too much, he thought—that she did. It could not help but occur to him that she was closer in essential foolishness to any one of the six young men with whom he had drunk martinis at that disastrous lunch, than she was to him.

And being an advertising man, he started a brainstorming session with himself. First, he must state the problem. The problem: Does Doris, my young beautiful wife, love me? No, that wasn't the problem. The problem was: How can I find out if Doris, my young beautiful wife, loves me, her not-so-young husband?

There was that test the industrious Puritans used. You put the subject in hot oil; if she didn't complain, she was okay. If, however, she suffered third degree burns and subsequently died, you had every reason in the world to

suspect her of having employed hanky-panky, and it would be wise to be rid of her.

There was trial by water—a variation. Ditto, fire and poison.

He could attempt suicide, very unsuccessfully, and notice whether Doris cried real tears or not.

A lie detector test might give him the information he wanted. *Might!*

The rubber hose—of police-third-degree fame—could undoubtedly elicit information.

More and more tests rose to the surface of Clark Loring's mind, and he let any that would bob up. None pleased him. What they all lacked was originality. And being an advertising man, he knew that if you didn't have originality—the dewy-freshness, the once-in-a-blue-moon inspiration, the block-buster—you didn't have anything.

He lay on his back and relaxed. He felt spiritual: no earthly desires, pro tem. No tightening of muscles, tendons or sinews. And while he was feeling spiritual, it came to him.

He would kidnap himself. And, in so doing, test his wife's fidelity.

Clark Loring sipped languorously at his scotch and water—doctor-prescribed, tax-deductible, fine for angina pectoris.

Opposite him, on the curve of the aquamarine sectional, sat Loring's attorney—young, fullback size, crew-cut, handsome, ambitious Joe Starett. Beside Starett, his sorrel brief case harmonized beautifully with the aquamarine of the sectional.

"Tell me, Clark, how are you feeling?" Joe Starett asked, with a shade too much sincerity and solemnity.

"I wouldn't know where to start," Loring said, "to tell you all I've got to complain about."

Joe Starett nodded his head, the muscles of his face lax, his expression ideal for looking at someone in a coffin.

"But I've got myself a hobby," Loring went on. "According to the doctor, I need one."

"Oh, everyone should have a hobby. I believe that. Sure."

"Would you help me with mine? That's what I got you over here for."

"Of course! Anything!" Suddenly wary, Joe Starett added, "Just what—what—"

"You see, Joe," Loring interrupted. "What I want to know is if Doris gives a damn about me. Me. Me as a person. And—"

"Sure she does."

"And to do this, the way I've got it all doped out, you're to be the go-between in a kidnaping. Sort of a kidnaping."

"What!" Joe Starett exclaimed, and looked like one of the Rover Boys might if he were asked to spit on the floor.

"Just listen to me. Please."

"I—I'm flabbergasted. You started talking about a hobby—"

"Shhhh." Loring had a hand raised for silence. "You know the way my will stands now. Doris is down for half, my alma mater for the rest of it. Now, for all I know, when the bell tolls the next time it'll really be for me."

"You'll outlive me," Joe Starett put in, quickly, dutifully, politely.

"If my heart doesn't get me, I swear this low cholesterol diet sure will."

"Must be tough." And Joe Starett's grimace was one of extreme pain.

"Tough? God almighty, I can't even have a slab of apple pie. And everything without salt." Loring shrugged. "So, maybe dying won't be so bad."

"Cut it out, Clark. That's no way to talk."

"I don't know. I've done a lot of thinking. And when you get knocked flat on your back, that's precisely when you do it. I've played at being a young squirt for years. Now I realize it was all a great show. A comedy. Yes, a comedy. What business did I have playing tennis? That's a sport for a young fellow—like you, Joe."

"You played a good game, Clark. Terrific back-hand."

"You really think so?" Loring said, pleased. But the flattery dissipated at once. "Come on, let's get back to the business of the will—and Doris. I don't want her to get a dime, if it's the money she's interested in and not me. I'd rather my alma mater—or a home for stray cats—got it all."

"Now, Clark, your wife's wild about you."

"Why? Why do you say that? I can't even dance with her any more. Not even a slow waltz."

"You'll be dancing again."

"Maybe she feels some affection for me, but I want to make sure she does."

"That's your privilege, of course," Joe Starett said.

But Joe Starett didn't like Loring's plan. It would backfire; it would boomerang. There might be unforeseeable slip-ups. And kidnaping was an FBI matter. But then Loring said that if Doris passed the test, he'd change his will making her his sole beneficiary, and this seemed to bring Joe Starett around. Now, Starett implied, there was a good solid financial basis to the whole thing.

They made a quick recap, so everything would be clear.

When Doris returned from a

business meeting of the little theatre group, in which she was intensely active, Loring would not be home. He would be registered at the Hotel Warwick, downtown. She would find Joe Starett instead, a dramatically upset Joe Starett. Starett would explain that he had received a call from Loring, asking him to come over to the house, mentioning that he wanted to discuss his will with him.

And Joe Starett would have the ransom note, which he had found on his arrival, as though in lieu of Clark Loring. It would inform Doris, succinctly and imperiously, that if she wanted to see her husband again—alive—she would pass thirty grand under the counter. If, instead, she went to the cops, her husband would be killed without undue delay.

The test was a good one, because it had a Grecian simplicity. If Doris loved her husband, she would pay the ransom. Or—knowing that she was down for half of Loring's estate—she would go straight to the cops, assuring her husband's untimely death and a premature inheritance.

Loring didn't sleep. For one thing, the hotel bed was much softer than the one he slept soundly on at home. But more than that he was having too good a time, thinking what the morrow would bring. Finally, he would definitely know if Doris loved him or not. If she loved him, he realized, it would do wonders for his ego, which would be a salubrious assist for his heart, and this in turn would contribute to more and better earthly existence.

The testing technique was not new to him. He'd used it, successfully, for TV commercials. You presented the viewer with two shirts and then proceeded to pour sulphuric acid on them—the same amount and out of the same bottle, to prove utter impartiality. One shirt immediately developed a man-hole sized hole. It, of course, was not the shirt you were plugging, but the ever ignominious brand X.

And thinking of the shirt-testing, Loring was amused. Who in real life, no matter how heated the rat-race, he thought, needed a shirt that could withstand anything stronger than spaghetti sauce?

And substitute money for sulphuric acid and you had the perfect test of a wife. He recalled one of his memorable advertising slogans for one of his big accounts, MAGIK, makers of magic acts for boys and girls, everything from disappearing ink to vanishable rab-

bits: "The way to a child's heart is by MAGIK."

And just as he was thinking drowsily that the way to a woman's heart was paved with gold bricks, and dozing off, the phone rang.

It was Joe Starett.

"You got me out of bed, you know," Loring said irritably. "What's up?"

"Plenty. Plenty, Clark. As far as I'm concerned, this great test of yours is over, finished."

"I hope you're not calling from my house. Are you?"

"Do you know that Doris just about collapsed? She's upstairs, took a sedative. I had one fine time convincing her that she ought to lie down and take it easy."

"What're you doing, calling from downstairs?"

"Of course."

"That's not such a bright idea," Loring said. "All Doris has to do is pick up the other phone—"

"Pick up the phone? You don't realize the shape she's in. Clark, will you please listen to me?"

"No, no. Not if you're going to tell me the test is over."

"If you had seen the way the ransom note hit her—"

"Naturally," Loring broke in, "she's not going to act overjoyed."

"She just about passed out. And you don't think this means anything?"

"Look. If this test is going to have any validity, we've got to be objective. As objective as science. Right?"

"Is that the way you want to run it? After all, Clark, it's your wife who's involved. So it's not just a cold, scientific—"

"From what's happened so far, we can't draw any conclusions. You may not know it, but Doris is quite an actress. She was in an off-Broadway show. And that job of hers at the Club Elite was a stop gap. That's all. But there's no need to go into detail about her theatrical aspirations. I'm simply not convinced that what's happened so far proves conclusively that she loves me. Has Doris considered going to the cops?"

"Yes. Yes. Only because she thought it might be the right thing to do. She's in a real, honest-to-goodness quandary."

"Let me see you with that ransom money, tomorrow. Then we'll know for sure how she feels. Okay, Joe? Let's keep it scientific, shall we?"

"I think I hear her calling. I'd better hang up. Be talking to you."

"Righto, Joe," Loring said.

And when Loring hung up, he pondered the possibility of Doris and Joe Starett double-crossing

him. There were all the ingredients: delectable wife, anginaed husband, handsome lawyer.

This time when the phone rang, Loring lay on his side and slept. His knees were drawn up and his back was curved as in a foetus. And his psyche—to further indicate withdrawal from reality—had his head buried in the pillow.

It took Loring a long moment to realize he was in a hotel room—but the reason for his being there followed automatically. Even in pajamas, Loring appeared trim, Madison Avenue; and also opulent, because the pajamas were a paisley brocade.

When he heard Joe's voice on the wire, Loring's first thought was that Joe was still at his home and calling from there. But Joe was saying that he was downstairs, talking on a house phone, and wanted to come up.

"You don't have the money," Loring complained, irked because he'd been awakened. "You couldn't have; the banks aren't opened yet. My eyes are hardly opened."

"May I come up?" Joe Starett asked with a martyred patience.

"How was Doris when you left her? You still think she was thrown for a loop by this—this whole plot?"

"I'll be right up," Joe said. "I'll explain everything."

But before saying a word upon his arrival, Joe Starett handed Loring a small package wrapped in stark white paper and tied with bright red cord.

"Hardly the hour to be delivering gifts," Loring said. "What is it?"

"Nitroglycerin," Joe Starett answered, his face lax, solemn. "Your heart medicine. From Doris. To calm her down, I said I could contact the kidnapers at any time. She begged me to do it right away, so I could get your medicine to you."

He said all this reproachfully. The implication, "And here you mistrusted a wife whose only concern was for your survival." But Loring wasn't sold. He was angered, and felt a twinge of jealousy that Doris and Joe were united, in a sense, in opposing him. And he stated quite plainly that he wouldn't be convinced until the ransom money was delivered. Getting the medicine to him, looked good—to Doris' conscience—and should she need the testimony of the pharmacist, from whom it was purchased, that would be available, but it certainly didn't prove what he'd set out to prove.

"She can still go to the cops, you know," Loring reminded his attorney. "And you have to remem-

ber that Doris knows if she pays that ransom money, she'd be giving half of it, or $15,000, out of the very money she stands to inherit."

Joe Starett nodded his head. And then without further ado, and silently, he drew a folded paper from his inside coat pocket and unfolded it as he handed it to Loring.

"Personally," he said, "I thought her sending the medicine would have meant more to you than this power of attorney authorizing me to withdraw the $30,000 from your joint account."

"You're the last of the romantics," Loring said. He struck the paper with the back of his fingertips. "This does it. Yes. The test, Joe boy, is now officially over."

"Fine," Joe Startet said. "You're certain you don't want me to withdraw - the money and bring it right here to you?"

This had been said with such a straight face, so seriously, that Loring could not decide whether Starett had been sardonic or not. Then it struck Loring that since the man was capable of being unctuous and noble at one and the same time, he might be able to juggle sarcasm, too.

"Okay," Loring said, "so I was hard to convince. But what would have been the point of this test if I hadn't seen it through right to the end?" That Starett appeared closer to Doris emotionally than he did, bothered Loring. He wondered if there was really something between the two to which he'd been blind. "Of course I'm sorry I had to subject Doris to the whole deal," he said, "but she's young, resilient. She'll bounce right back. You'll see."

Loring took off his pajama top, revealing a tanned torso, the color-rinsed hairy chest. "I want you to return me from the kidnapers," he said, "and while you're around you might as well take care of changing the will."

And as he spoke, he was aware that he didn't feel the contentment and pleasure he'd thought proving Doris' love would give him.

Breakfast first with Joe Starett, at the Hotel Warwick's basement coffee shop. And then when Loring had arrived home escorted by his attorney, there had been the happy tears of happy reunions. The long held embraces, too. Doris was indeed overjoyed to see Loring once again and unimpaired and, as she so vehemently put it, it was worth 30,000 times 30,000 dollars to have him home again. And as she spoke, her eyes—that had been red-rimmed and haggard upon his arrival—were alight with pleasure,

and her beautiful face, devoid of makeup, was now suffused with pink, like a dawning of joy.

"Oh, darling," Doris said, bringing it up all the way from the bottom of her heart. "You are all right? They didn't harm you?"

And Loring turned in Doris' arms and said to Joe Starett, who had thoughtfully blended with the background so as not to intrude, "Am I not a lucky man? Could anybody hope for a better welcome than this?"

Joe Starett didn't speak, implying that this was a sacred moment he certainly didn't want to profane. He smiled. His eyes blinked against tears, welling up because of the tender beauty they were beholding.

Changing Clark Loring's last will and testament took only a few minutes, Joe Starett doing the typing on a portable. Between the new will's initial statement that it revoked all wills heretofore made by Clark Loring and the standard closing and signature, only one basic change was made: that Loring bequeathed all monies, personal effects and property to his wife, Doris.

The instant it was signed Joe Starett arose, and after taking a long look at the will, as though to make one final check that everything was in order, strode from the room. And during this reading and striding, Starett completely ignored Loring, appeared totally oblivious of him.

This happened so fast and struck Loring as so odd, that he had been rendered incapable of questioning it. By the time he had arisen and started to move from the desk in the den, he heard Joe Starett calling for Doris to come down. She'd gone upstairs to fix her face a bit, having said that now that she felt human again, she wanted to look human. And by the time Loring came out of the den and into the living room, there was the tableau for him to see: Joe Starett at the foot of the stairs, holding the will in his hand, and Doris, who looked dangerously human now, coming down the stairs and going straight into Joe's arms. And though Joe now held Doris, he continued to hold onto the will, quite clearly both were of importance to him.

"All signed, sealed and delivered," Joe Starett said to Doris. The smile that went with this statement certainly needed some work done on it, but it left Starett quickly, so he could return to the comfort of his habitual solemnity.

Loring thought, "The man lacks both originality and a sense of humor," and he said, matter of factly,

"So you two did plot against me?"

Joe Starett nodded, the twist of his head suggesting surprise at Loring's calm. Doris' eyes merely brightened.

"And now that you have the will all signed," Loring said, "I suppose you expect me to become enraged and drop dead, thereby making all your monetary dreams come true. Or if I don't oblige, Joe there might bring on an attack by roughing me up a little."

Joe Starett and Doris remained motionless. And after what Loring had just said, they did appear to be waiting for him to drop dead.

"But I'm going to disappoint you," Loring said. *"Deo volente.* You know in the past, I always prided myself on being a fireball, giving the impression of unbounded energy. But anybody can be a fireball; all you have to do is operate inefficiently. Do a simple thing like opening a door, with enough force to pull it off its hinges. But now that I had my heart attack, I move slower than I actually have to." Loring glanced at his Ontime wrist watch. "This gives the impression—as both of you have undoubtedly noticed—of a vast, supercilious calm. And you know, it's just as good for the ego as playing the fireball."

Loring saw they were both listening dutifully, unperturbed, undoubtedly thinking that nothing he could say could nullify the document he had just signed. And he saw they were waiting. . . .

"So," Loring continued, "I'm not going to attempt to wrest Doris from your arms, old boy. No. I'm merely going to make a fairly obvious observation. You two have each other now. Don't you?"

This time both Joe Starett and Doris nodded.

Loring again glanced at his wrist watch. "Doris," Loring said, "I'm curious. Do you think young, dynamic Joseph would love you, if you didn't have a fortune?"

No answer. Just smiles meant to be confident, but which Loring noticed were just the least bit strained.

"Let's put him to the test. Shall we, Doris? A man's affection, I'm sure, can also be tested—by money." Loring paused and indulged himself in a secret pleasure. He glanced at his wrist watch once again and noticed that this was beginning to puzzle and bother them. Then he said, "And so can money be used in testing one's attorney. Look at it, Joe. Look at that will of mine that you've been holding onto for dear life. Look at all those fine changes we made in it. I don't particularly care for melodrama, but —"

Starett no longer had his arm around Doris' waist. He had the will in both hands and he appeared to be searching for something that he could not find. And his expression had changed from bewilderment to terror.

"But kids have an affinity for the melodramatic," Loring continued. "That's why MAGIK sells so many magic sets. I must try the other tricks in one of the dozen complimentary sets given to me, right after my attack. Ten minutes, the instructions said. I chatted somewhat longer with you two just to be sure. But my signature's gone, isn't it? As you can see, Joe, that MAGIK disappearing ink works fine."

Remains To Be Seen

by Steve O'Connell

I AM a citizen and a taxpayer," I said stiffly. "When you are through with this destructive invasion of my property, I demand that everything be restored to its exact and original condition."

"Now don't you worry about that, Mr. Warren," Detective-Sergeant Littler said. "The city will put everything in apple-pie order again." He smiled. "Whether we find anything or not."

He was, of course, referring to the body of my wife.

So far they hadn't found it.

"You're going to have quite a job of repair, Sergeant. Your men have practically excavated the garden. The front lawn resembles a plowed field. You are apparently

What, I ask you, is more heartening than the sight of stalwart American men hard at work with pick and shovel, perspiring with honest toil, searching, searching, ever searching for the body of some murderer's dear wife?

dismantling my house, piece by piece, and now I see that your men are carrying a jackhammer into the basement."

We were in the kitchen and Littler sipped coffee.

He still bathed in confidence. "The total area of the United States is 3,026,789 square miles, including water."

Littler had undoubtedly memorized the figure for just such occasions.

"Does that include the Hawaiian Islands and Alaska?" I asked acidly.

He was not ruffled. "I think we can exclude them. As I said, the total area of the United States is 3,026,789 square miles. This encompasses mountains and plains, cities and farm land, desert and water. And yet when a man kills his wife, he invariably buries her within the confines of his own property."

Certainly the safest place, I thought. If one buried one's wife in the woods, invariably some trespassing boy scout digging for arrowheads would uncover her.

Littler smiled again. "Just how big is your lot?"

"Sixty by one hundred and fifty feet. Do you realize that I worked for years to produce the loam in my garden? Your men have burrowed into the sub-soil and now I see yellow streaks of clay all about."

He had been here two hours and he was still certain of success. "I'm afraid that you'll have more than the tilth of your garden to worry about, Mr. Warren."

The kitchen window gave me a view of the backyard. Eight or ten city laborers, supervised by the police, were turning the area into a series of trenches.

Littler watched them. "We are very thorough. We will analyze the soot of your chimney; we will sift the ashes from your furnace."

"I have oil heating." I poured more coffee. "I did not kill my wife. I do not, in fact, know where she is."

Littler helped himself to sugar. "How do you account for her absence?"

"I do not account for her absence. Emily simply packed a suitcase during the night and left me. You did notice that some of her clothing is missing?"

"How do I know what she had?" Littler glanced at the photograph of my wife I had provided him. "Meaning no offense, why did you marry her?"

"For love, of course."

But that was patently ridiculous and even the sergeant didn't believe it.

"Your wife was insured for ten

thousand dollars, wasn't she? And you are the beneficiary?"

"Yes." The insurance had certainly been a factor for her demise, but it had not been my primary motive. I got rid of Emily for the honest reason that I couldn't stand her any more.

I will not say that when I married Emily, I was in the throes of flaming passion. My constitution is not shaped in that manner. I believe I entered into matrimony principally because I succumbed to the common herd-feeling of guilt at prolonged bachelorhood.

Emily and I had both been employed by the Marshall Paper Products Company—I as a senior accountant and Emily as a plodding typist without any prospect of matrimony in her future.

She was plain, quiet, subdued. She did not know how to dress properly, her conversation never soared beyond observations on the weather, and she exercised her intellect by reading the newspaper on alternate days.

In short, she was the ideal wife for a man who feels that marriage should be an arrangement, not a romance.

But it is utterly amazing how once the security of marriage is established, a plain, quiet, subdued woman can turn into a determined shrew.

The woman should at least have been grateful.

"How did you and your wife get along?"

Miserably. But I said, "We had our differences, but then doesn't everyone?"

The sergeant, however, was equipped with superior information. "According to your neighbors, you and your wife quarreled almost incessantly."

By neighbors, he was undoubtedly referring to Fred and Wilma Treeber. Since I have a corner lot, theirs is the only house directly next door. I doubt if Emily's voice carried over the garden and the alley to the Morrisons. Still, it was possible. As she gained weight, she gained volume.

"The Treebers could hear you and your wife arguing nearly every evening."

"Only when they stopped their own infernal shrieking to listen. And it is not true that they heard *both* of us. I never raise my voice."

"The last time your wife was seen alive was Friday evening at six-thirty as she entered this house."

Yes, she had returned from the supermarket with frozen dinners and ice cream. They were almost her sole contribution to the art of cooking. I made my own breakfasts, I ate lunch at the company

cafeteria, and in the evenings I either made my own meal or ate something that required forty minutes of heating at 350°.

"That was the last time anyone *else* saw her," I said. "But I last saw her in the evening when we retired. And in the morning when I woke, I discovered that she had packed up and gone."

Downstairs, the jackhammer began breaking up the concrete floor. It made so much noise that I was forced to close the door to the rear entry leading to the basement. "Just who was it who saw Emily last? Besides myself, I mean."

"Mr. and Mrs. Fred Treeber."

There was a certain resemblance between Wilma Treeber and Emily. They had both become large women, Amazon in temper and dwarf in mind. Fred Treeber is a small man, watery-eyed by nature or by the abrasions of marriage. But he plays a credible game of chess and he rather admires me for possessing the inherent firmness that he lacks.

"At midnight that same evening," Sergeant Littler said, "Fred Treeber heard an unearthly scream coming from this house."

"Unearthly?"

"His exact word."

"Fred Treeber is a liar," I said flatly. "I suppose his wife heard it, too?"

"No. She's a heavy sleeper. But it woke him."

"Did this so-called unearthly scream wake up the Morrisons?"

"No. They were asleep, too, and they are also a considerable distance from this house. The Treeber place is only fifteen feet away." Littler filled his pipe. "Fred Treeber debated waking his wife, but decided against it. It seems she has a temper. But still he couldn't go back to sleep. And then at two in the morning, he heard a noise coming from your yard. He went to the window and there, in the moonlight, he saw you digging in your garden. He finally got up the nerve to wake his wife. They both watched you."

"The wretched spies. So that was how you knew?"

"Yes. Why did you use such a large box?"

"It was the only one I could find. But it was still not anywhere near the dimensions of a coffin."

"Mrs. Treeber thought about that all day Saturday. And when you informed her that your wife had 'taken a trip and wouldn't be back for some time,' she finally decided that you had . . . ah . . . organized your wife's body into a more compact package and buried her."

I poured more coffee for myself. Well, and what did you find?"

He was still faintly embarrassed about that. "A dead cat."

I nodded. "And so I am guilty of burying a cat."

He smiled. "You were very evasive, Mr. Warren. First you denied that you had buried anything."

"I felt that it was none of your business."

"And when we found the cat, you claimed that it had died of natural causes."

"So it appeared to me at the time."

"The cat was your wife's and someone had crushed its skull. That was obvious."

"I am not in the habit of examining dead cats."

He puffed at his pipe. "It's my theory that after you killed your wife, you also killed the cat. Perhaps because its presence reminded you of your wife. Or perhaps because the cat had seen you dispose of your wife's body and just might lead us . . ."

"Oh, come now, Sergeant," I said.

He colored. "Well, animals *have* been known to dig at places where their masters or mistresses have been buried. Dogs, usually, I'll admit. But why not cats?"

I actually gave that some thought. Why not cats?

Littler listened to the jackhammer for a moment. "When we get a report that someone is missing, our routine procedure is to send out flyers through the Missing Persons' Bureau. And then we wait. Almost invariably after a week or two the missing person returns home. Usually, after his money runs out."

"And then why in heaven's name didn't you do that in this case? I'm sure that Emily will come back home within a few days. As far as I know she took only about a hundred dollars and I know that she is mortally frightened of self-support."

His teeth showed faintly. "When we have a missing wife, a person who hears a scream, and *two* witnesses to a mysterious moonlight burial in a garden, we recognize all the symptoms of a crime. We cannot afford to wait."

And neither could I. After all, Emily's body would not keep forever. That was why I had killed the cat and managed to be seen burying the box. But I spoke acidly. "And so you immediately grab your shovels and ruin a man's property? I warn you that I will sue if every stick, stone, brick, and scrap of humus isn't replaced exactly as it was."

Littler was unperturbed. "And then there was the blood stain on your living room rug."

"My own blood, I assure you. I accidently broke a glass and gashed my hand." I showed him the healing cut again.

He was not impressed. "A cover-up to account for the stain," he said. "Self-inflicted."

He was right, of course. But I wanted the spot on the rug in the event that the other circumstances were not enough to drive the police to their search.

I saw Fred Treeber leaning on the boundary fence watching Littler's men at their devastation.

I got to my feet. "I'm going to talk to that creature."

Littler followed me outside.

I made my way between mounds of earth to the fence. "Do you call this being a good neighbor?"

Fred Treeber swallowed. "Now, Albert, I didn't mean any harm. I don't think you really did it, but you know Wilma and her imagination."

I glared at him. "There will be no more chess games between us in the future." I turned to Littler. "What makes you so absolutely positive that I disposed of my wife here?"

Littler took the pipe out of his mouth. "Your car. You took it to the Eagle Filling Station on Murray Street Friday afternoon at five-thirty. You had the car lubricated and the oil changed. The attendent placed the usual sticker inside the doorframe of your car, indicating when the work was done and the mileage on your speedometer at the time it was done. Since that time, the only additional mileage registered by your car has been eight-tenths of a mile. And that is the exact distance from the filling station to your garage."

He smiled. "In other words, you brought your car directly home. You do not work on Saturdays and today is Sunday. Your car hasn't moved since Friday."

I had been counting on the police to notice that sticker. If they hadn't, I would have had to call it to their attention in some manner. I smiled thinly. "Have you ever thought of the possibility that I might have carried her to an empty lot near here and buried her?"

Littler chuckled indulgently. "The nearest empty lot is more than four blocks away. It hardly seems conceivable that you would carry her body through the streets, even at night, for that distance."

Treeber took his eyes from the group of men at my flower patch. "Albert, as long as your dahlias are being dug up anyway, would you care to trade a few of your Gordon Pinks for some of my Amber Goliaths?"

I turned on my heel and stalked back to the house.

The afternoon wore on, and gradually, as he received reports from his men, the assurance drained from Littler's face.

The daylight faded and at six-thirty the jackhammer in the basement stopped.

A Sergeant Chilton came into the kitchen. He looked tired, hungry, and frustrated, and his trousers were streaked with clay. "Nothing down there. Absolutely nothing at all."

Littler clamped his teeth on his pipe stem. "You're positive? You've searched everywhere?"

"I'll stake my life on it," Chilton said. "If there's a body anywhere here we would have found it. The men outside are through, too."

Littler glared at me. "I *know* you killed your wife. I *feel* it."

There is something pitiful about a normally intelligent man retreating to instinct. However, in this case, he was right.

"I believe I'll make myself liver and onions tonight," I said cheerfully. "I haven't had that for ages."

A patrolman came into the kitchen from the backyard. "Sergeant, I was just talking to this Treeber character next door."

"Well?" Littler demanded impatiently.

"He says that Mr. Warren here has a summer cottage at a lake in Byron county."

I almost dropped the package of liver I was removing from the refrigerator. That idiot Treeber and his babbling!

Littler's eyes widened. His humor changed instantly and he chuckled. "That's it! They *always, always* bury them on their own property."

Perhaps my face was white. "Don't you dare touch one foot of that land. I put two thousand dollars worth of improvement on that property since I bought it and I will not have the place blitzed by your vandals."

Littler laughed. "Chilton, get some floodlights and have the men pack up." He turned to me. "And now just where is this little retreat of yours?"

"I absolutely refuse to tell you. You know I couldn't have gone there anyway. You forget that the speedometer reading of my car shows that it hasn't left the garage since Friday afternoon."

He hurdled that obstacle. "You could have set the speedometer back. Now where is that cottage located?"

I folded my arms. "I refuse to tell you."

Littler smiled. "There's no use stalling for time. Or do you plan to

sneak out there yourself tonight, disinter her, and bury her someplace else?"

"I have no intentions of the kind. But I stand on my constitutional rights to say nothing."

Littler used my phone to route out officials in Byron county and within forty-five minutes, he had the exact location of my cottage.

"Now see here," I snapped as he put down the phone for the last time. "You can't make the same mess out of that place as you have of this one. I'm going to call the mayor right now and see that you're fired."

Littler was in a good humor and practically rubbing his hands. "Chilton, see that a crew gets here tomorrow and puts everything back in place."

I followed Littler to the door. "Every flower, every blade of grass, or I'll see my lawyer."

I did not enjoy my liver and onions that night.

At eleven-thirty, there was a soft knock at my rear door and I opened it.

Fred Treeber looked contrite. "I'm sorry."

"What in heaven's name made you mention the cottage?"

"I was just making conversation and it slipped out."

I had difficulty controlling my rage. "They'll devastate the place. And just after I finally succeeded in producing a good lawn."

I could have gone on for more furious minutes, but I pulled myself together. "Is your wife asleep?"

Fred nodded. "She won't wake up until morning. She never does."

I got my hat and coat and we went next door to Fred's basement.

Emily's body was lying in a cool place under some canvas. I thought it had been a rather good temporary hiding place. Wilma never goes down there except on washdays.

Fred and I carried Emily back to my house and into the basement. The place looked like a battlefield.

We dropped Emily into one of the deepest pits and shoveled about a foot and a half of clay and dirt over her. That was sufficient for our purposes.

Fred looked a bit worried. "Are you sure they won't find her?"

"Of course not. The best place to hide anything is where somebody has already looked. Tomorrow the crew will be back here. The holes will be filled up and the floor refinished."

We went upstairs into the kitchen.

"Do I have to wait a whole

year?" Fred asked me plaintively.

"Certainly. We can't flirt with suspicion. After twelve months or so, you may murder your wife and I will keep her in *my* basement until the search of your premises is over."

Fred sighed. "It's a long time to wait with Wilma. But we flipped the coin, fair and square, and you won." He cleared his throat. "You didn't really mean that, did you, Albert?"

"Mean what?"

"That you'd never play chess with me again?"

When I thought about what the police were at this very moment undoubtedly doing to my cottage and its grounds, I was tempted to tell him I had meant it.

But he did look pathetic and contrite, and so I sighed and said, "I suppose not."

Fred brightened. "I'll go get the board."

Special Award Winner

SPOOK

I MADE it all the way through last season without a nickle's worth of trouble—right up until the last night, almost the last hour of the last night. And then I ran into enough trouble to make up for every minute of that peace and quiet and still last me a couple of lifetimes.

I run a little game of chance on the midway of one of the biggest amusement parks in the midwest. Got myself a nice one-man operation that I work in a seven-foot-long wooden stand with a counter in front for my wheel. Behind me, on the backboard, I've got shelves with all kinds of toasters and radios and shiny stuff like that to attract attention. It's a nice little setup, see, and I keep the place dressed up with colored banners and crepe paper to make it kind of stand out from the rest of the stalls.

My gimmick is simple. I got this wheel with twenty-one numbers on it. It's like a roulette wheel only it stands up straight. You pick a number for two-bits a chance and if your number hits, you get a coupon. Three coupons and you pick out any prize in the house.

I control the wheel, naturally. I ain't in business for my health or anything like that. But I generally give the players a fair shake. I get all the prizes at wholesale, see, and all I want to do is make a dollar or two on everything I hand out; it's

The word spook, gentle student of semantics, is riddled with onomatopoeia, for like cuckoo and whippoorwill and zigzag, spook sounds precisely like the thing it designates. I need not belabor the word house, for we all know that it is not a home, but an object related somehow to a mortgage.

HOUSE

by Clark Howard

just like running a store or something. Most people lay down a buck and after four turns of the wheel they only got one coupon so they quit. So I give 'em a cheap ballpoint pen or a pair of paste earrings for the coupon and I've made 85 cents. A few of them, if they're really after one of the big prizes, keep laying the money down as fast as I can pick it up. In that case, I let 'em feed me until I've got my two or three bucks profit on the prize and then I let the wheel hit for their third coupon. They get their radio or whatever they want for a few bucks less than it would cost them in a store, and I got a coupla bucks more than it cost me in the beginning, so everybody's happy.

Like I said, it's a nice little one-man operation and I usually don't have any trouble. The season is four months long, May to September, and I take it easy the rest of the year with what I make during the summer. My location on the midway is a choice spot, right next to the Spook House. I get the people as they're coming out, see, after they've been scared out of their pants by all those big spiders and weird faces that jump out of the walls in that place. By the time they've been through the Spook House, they're ripe for a nice, quiet little game of chance.

The park closes at midnight. It was a little after ten, the last night of the season, when these three guys came up to my stall. They were young, but all pretty big guys —the motorcycle-boots and leather-jacket types, the kind that tries to push everybody around. They looked mighty mean under the amber lights I had strung across my stall.

I went into my spiel right away and they all three started playing. I let one of them have a coupon the first time around and then passed all three of them for the

next two turns. On the fourth turn I let another guy have a coupon and then let 'em all pass again for four more turns. After that, I gave the last guy his first coupon and then they all had one apiece. Each player gets a different color coupon, see, so they can't put 'em together and snag a prize before I make my profit.

They kept laying the dough down and I kept spinning the old wheel. In the next eight runs of the wheel, I gave only one of them a second coupon. The game goes pretty fast. They'd been at the counter only about five minutes and already I'd pulled in twelve bucks.

Two of the guys finally quit and each of them took a ballpoint pen. But the third guy was bound and determined to go away with one of my little pocket radios. He was the biggest and meanest-looking of the three and he got meaner-looking everytime he lost. Also, he was the guy with two coupons already and he was hot after that last one.

He started playing a buck at a time, taking four numbers on the board. I kept a mental count on how much he had laid down and he was still about fifteen bucks away from that little portable. But he kept flipping those dollar bills on the counter and I kept spinning, making sure the wheel didn't hit any of his numbers.

Ten bucks later he was real mad. And he was also broke. He scratched around in his pockets looking for more money, but I could tell by his face he knew he didn't have any. While he was dragging everything out of his pockets, though, I saw something he did have. A long, shiny switchblade knife.

Finally, he stepped real close to the counter and pushed out his jaw at me.

"I want one of them radios," he said.

I gave him my best carny smile. "Sure, friend," I said. "A few more turns of the wheel ought to do it for you. Your luck's bound to change."

"I ain't got any more dough," he said accusingly. "You got it all."

"Sorry, friend," I said. "If you want a radio, you gotta keep playing. Get a few bucks from your pals." I encouraged, trying to tip him off. "Number eighteen's about due in four or five more turns." For another fin, I figured, I'd let him have the radio and be glad to get rid of him. But he wasn't having any of it.

"I ain't borrowing any dough," he told me. "You got all you're gonna get, sharpie. Now gimme

one of them little radios before I come behind there and get it!"

I stood my ground, dropping my hand down to a wooden club I kept handy under the counter. I looked at the guy and got a little scared. It wasn't hard to see he really meant what he said.

"I ain't kidding, you sharpie," he said, and started around the side of my stall. He shoved his hand in one pocket of his jacket and right away I thought of that switchblade he'd flashed.

I snatched the club out and held it up just high enough so he could see it. "Hold it!" I said, trying to sound as mean as he looked. "Don't start no trouble in here if you know what's good for you. There's cops all over this place. And all I gotta do is yell 'Hey, Rube!' and there'll be fifty guys down on you before you know what's happening!"

He stopped cold and looked straight at me, his face contorting in anger. One of his pals came over quick and grabbed him by the arm. "Better not, Frankie," he warned. "We can't afford no trouble now! Don't forget, man, we're still on probation for that gang fight."

When I heard that, my mind went back to a few weeks ago when I'd read about a big teenage gang war where one kid was killed and another one lost an eye. I wondered if these were three of the guys that were in it. They sure looked the parts, all right. Not that it made any difference right then, anyway. The guy called Frankie was still watching me, still keeping one hand in his pocket, still looking like he wanted to cut me up into one-inch squares.

"Maybe you're right," he said reluctantly to his friend. But he shook the guy's hand off his arm and straightened up real tall. Then he took out the knife and very slowly and deliberatedly flicked it open for me to see. He stuck one arm out in front of him and shined the blade up and down his jacket sleeve.

"I'll give yuh one more chance to give me one of them little radios," he said. "What about it?"

I glanced over my shoulder and saw two cops walking idly toward my layout. Then I looked back at the punk and said boldly, "Nothing doing, brother!"

Frankie's eyes narrowed. He closed the knife and put it back in his pocket. He had seen the cops, too, but his face didn't soften any. No fear at all showed in his eyes.

"Okay," he said softly. "I'll be seeing *you* later."

He turned and walked away, followed quickly by his two pals. I watched them move off into the

stretch of midway, until they were lost in the crowd, and then I put the club back under the counter. The two cops went by and I bobbed my head at them and they waved back. For a couple of minutes I just stood there watching the people, not even trying to snag a customer, and then I sat down and had a smoke.

I didn't have too many players after the three punks left, so I started getting my few personal things together. I'd sold my stock of prizes to one of the other hustlers who was going down south with a carnival. I started packing a few of the things for him.

A little after eleven, Corinne came over. She was one of the change girls at the Fascination layout; a brunette, stacked up nice, but kind of tough-looking like she'd been around—which she probably had.

"Hi, Sam," she greeted me.

"Hiya, doll. How's tricks?"

She shrugged her shoulders and came on behind the counter. "So-so," she said, sitting down on one of my camp stools. "What you doing after we close tonight?" she wanted to know.

"I dunno. Why?"

"Some of the gals are throwing a little party over at Rollo's. Wanna come?"

Rollo's Tap was a little place just outside the park. A lot of the last night crowd would be in there. I kept thinking about those three guys and how mean that Frankie looked.

"I don't think so, doll," I said. "I'm gonna be driving south early in the morning and I wanna get some sleep."

I had cleared nine grand that season and I was planning to take it easy for a few months down in Miami Beach. And the more I thought about those three guys, the more I was tempted to hit the highway right after I closed.

"Thanks anyway, Corry," I said. "I'll see you next season."

After she left, I shut off my banner lights and got the rest of the prizes packed. Along about midnight, all the big lights started to go out and pretty soon the midway was just about dark. The last of the people drifted toward the front gate. For some reason, I kept looking around me every couple of minutes, like I was expecting something to reach out and grab me. Those three guys were really under my skin.

The guy I sold my stuff to came over. He had his station wagon by his stall, but couldn't get it over to mine because the maintenance men were already dismantling the ferris wheel and it was laying across the drive. I helped him carry

the boxes over to his place. We had to make five trips, but finally it was all packed in his wagon. He paid me and we said our goodbyes and I started back to my stall to lock up for the last time.

The midway was dark and deserted all over now. I kept glancing around with every step, keeping away from the shadows and empty stalls. I wasn't exactly scared, but I was sure uncomfortable. Frankie had really got to me with his mean face and his "I'll be seeing *you* later" bit.

I hurried on to my stall and picked up my little canvas bag and closed the place up. Just to be on the safe side, I decided to leave by the side gate. I was halfway there, when I saw a shadow looming up ahead of me, coming slowly toward me. I froze in my tracks, too startled to even run. The shadow came closer, closer, until it was right up in my face.

Then a flashlight went on and I let out a long breath and smiled. I looked down into a wizened, weather-beaten face. Old Fritz, the night watchman.

"Whatya say, Sam," he greeted me. "Calling it a season, huh?"

"Yeah, Fritzie," I said, "guess so." I pulled out a handkerchief and wiped my face. "How about you?"

"Same," he said. "Front gate's closed already. Looks like you're the last one to leave."

"Yeah, next to you."

"Well, one more time around the midway for me and then out the side gate and she's closed up for the winter."

I slapped him on the shoulder and said, "Take it easy, Fritz," and walked away. When I got close to the side gate, I looked back and saw his flashlight bobbing in the blackness far down the midway.

I pulled open the big iron gate and stepped out to the public sidewalk. The little side-street looked deserted, was dimly lit. Just as I was about to close the gate, I heard the snarling voice.

"Hello there, sharpie."

I swung around and faced Frankie. He was standing about six feet away from me, smiling coldly.

I started to step back through the gate, but two arms suddenly went around me from behind. Then I heard Frankie's laugh, low and mean, a cruel, sadistic laugh. He moved toward me slowly.

I wasn't scared now. I was terrified. These punks meant business! I realized I was going to have to fight for my life!

I don't know what made me do it—instinct, maybe, the law of survival—but all at once I was fight-

ing like a wild man. As soon as Frankie was close enough to me, I hit him solidly in the stomach. Then I shoved backward as hard as I could and slammed the guy behind me into the iron gate. I heard his head hit the gate and felt his arms drop away from me. For a second then, I just stood there, feeling pretty damn brave over what I'd just done. Then something crashed into the side of my face and I saw stars. The third guy, I thought dumbly as I fell to the sidewalk, dropping my canvas bag, hitting the concrete solidly—I had forgotten about the third guy.

I just lay there, trying to focus my eyes and my mind, when I got caught by a hard kick in my side. I groaned, began to crawl away quickly, scrambling as best I could to my feet.

Then two of them were rushing toward me. One of them was Frankie, and he was holding the open switchblade in his hand. The guy with him was the one who had hit me from the side; light glinted off the brass knuckles on both his fists.

Desperately, I sized up the situation. I was to one side of the exit gate now and they were beyond the other. The gate still stood partway open. I sucked in a mouthful of air and ran like hell for it.

I made it about six inches ahead of the guy with the brass knuckles. Leaping through the gate, I swung it behind me furiously, hoping frantically that it would catch and lock them out. Instead, it hit the guy square in the face and knocked him down. Then the gate swung wide open again.

I paused long enough to see Frankie stop and drag the guy to his feet. By this time, the third guy was up again, too. All three of them started through the gate. I turned and ran like hell again, down the darkened midway, and behind me I heard three pairs of feet coming after me.

I ran until my lungs were bursting and my tongue hanging out. Then I had to stop or else fall on my face. I moved into the shadows and leaned heavily against one of the stalls. My hand touched crepe paper and I looked up suddenly. It was my own stall. Or was it? I looked around quickly. The Spook House was right behind me. Yeah, it was my stall, all right.

I turned back to the Spook House. It looked funny to me. The moonlight made it look odd, but that wasn't it. It was something else. I looked closer, squinting my eyes. Then I realized what it was. The doors—that's what looked funny. During the season they were red and white and yellow,

bright carnival colors. Now they were a dull gray, all of the windows were, too.

Then I remembered. They were metal storm doors, put on for the winter. The windows had matching metal shutters. Sure. I had watched one of the maintenance men put them on the back windows before I opened my stall that day. They fitted the windows and doors snugly and clamped in place with snap-locks. They could be opened from the outside but not the inside, and they—

The outside but not the inside—

A sudden crazy plan began to beat in my mind. I dropped to my knees and peered around the side of the stall. I listened intently. I couldn't see Frankie and his pals, but I could hear their footsteps. They had stopped running and were moving around quickly from one place to another, looking for me. I guessed they were about a hundred feet away.

I might make it, I thought wildly, if I hurry—

I turned and crept on my hands and knees toward the Spook House. The cement was hard on my knees. I kept going. I moved quickly, as quickly and as quietly as I could.

At last I made the front of the Spook House. I stopped for a second and listened again. The footsteps were getting louder. I started crawling as fast as I could go.

I went past the front door and down to the corner of the building and around the side. At the first window I came to, I stood up, staying close to the wall. I reached up and withdrew the latch slowly and opened the metal shutters, then reached past them and pulled gently at the window. Silently, I prayed. Then the window opened. I sighed heavily.

I left them both open and began to crawl back around to the front of the building. My luck was running perfect so far. Now if only the front door was unlocked. No reason why it shouldn't be, I thought hopefully. If the window was open, then the door should be open, too. What would be the sense in locking the doors and leaving the windows open? What was the sense in locking anything at all, when the park had a 10-foot fence around it with electric current at the top to stop anybody that tried to climb it? I knew in my heart the front door would be unlocked. But still I trembled at the thought it might not.

I got back around to the front and back to the door, and again I stopped and listened. The footsteps of Frankie and his pals were so loud now, I thought they were right on top of me.

I stood up quickly and threw open the four snap-locks that held the metal door in place. I didn't bother to be quiet anymore; it didn't make any difference now. They were so close to me, I knew I'd never be able to get away if they saw me. Not unless the inner door was unlocked.

I slid the metal door roughly across the concrete. It made a loud, scraping sound in the stillness. I listened for an instant and heard the footsteps stop momentarily; then they began running toward me. I turned and tried the inner door.

The door flew open. I started breathing again.

I ran in quickly and began feeling my way along the wall in the pitch darkness. I had been in the Spook House a couple of times and I tried to remember the layout. I knew I was in the first room, the one with all the scary pictures that light up all over the place. The window I had opened should be the first one along the next wall, the side wall.

I kept going, inch by inch, foot by foot, until I got to the corner. Then I heard them at the front door.

I froze. I could barely make out their figures in the open doorway. They were standing very still. I knew they were listening for me, waiting for me to make a move, a noise. The window was only a few feet away from me. I tried to take another step sideways, but the wooden floor began to creak and I stopped the movement of my foot at once.

I began to sweat. Maybe, I thought frantically, maybe I've trapped myself!

One of the figures in the doorway moved into the room and disappeared into the darkness. I could hear him as he felt around, his hands hitting the wall, his footsteps sounding unusually loud in the quiet, empty room.

My heart pounded wildly. I turned my head in the direction of the open window and tried to judge how far away it was, wondering if I could make it in two or three quick steps. I looked back toward the doorway, squinting my eyes, trying to figure how much closer I was to the window than they were to me. Then I heard the guy inside the room make another noise. He sound dangerously close to me. I expected any minute to feel his hands reach out and grab me by the throat. Suddenly, I wanted desperately to run for that window, to dive right through it. But deep down inside me I knew I would never make it. The guy in the room would take off after me as soon as I took the first step. The

few seconds it would take me to scramble through the window would be all he needed to get to me. My feet probably wouldn't even touch the ground. If only they would look on the other side of the room, go the other way—

Then I got a brainstorm. Quickly, I unbuckled my belt and slipped it off my trousers. I wrapped it around one trembling hand, then took it off and pulled it into a tight ball. I fingered it anxiously, hoping it would be heavy enough.

Holding my breath, I raised the belt above my head and tossed it lightly across the room. It seemed like twenty minutes before it landed. Then it hit and hit perfectly. It sounded exactly like a clumsy footstep. I braced myself and got ready to move.

The two figures disappeared from the doorway and moved across the room, away from me. I heard the guy that was already in the room run toward the noise.

Then *I* moved. I hurried along the side wall, not caring about the noise I made, knowing the sound of my footsteps would be silenced by the noise of their own.

I groped ahead of myself in the blackness until my hand found the empty space of the window. I threw a leg over the ledge and got out fast.

I paused for a split-second outside the window, listening to the movements inside. Then, leaving the window open, I slammed the steel shutters closed and quickly shoved the latch in place. I pulled at them twice, to make sure they were shut good and tight, then turned and started for the front door.

All the panic and tension and fear began to take hold of me then. I was panting for breath, shaking all over; my side burned like fire, where I had been kicked, and my cheek was numb with pain where the brass knuckles had smashed against my jaw; my mouth was dry, my tongue swollen, and my eyes blurred with sudden tears. I ran like a drunk man, tripping twice, falling to my sore knees once, groping along the side of the building blindly. And all the time a single thought in my mind, screaming at me: THE DOOR—THE DOOR—RUN—RUN—RUN—

I made the corner of the building and hurried along the front. I stumbled again and almost fell a second time, clutched at the wall to keep my balance. I cursed. I sobbed. And I kept moving. And I made it to the door.

From inside I could hear a mutter of voices. I dragged the heavy metal door forward. It came toward me noisily in jerky, broken mo-

tions that matched my rising and falling strength.

In an instant of silence, from inside again, I heard loud, echoing footsteps running toward me. I heard Frankie curse. The sounds grew louder, nearer. I dragged the door closer, then stepped behind it and braced my body against it. I got a last burst of strength from somewhere and pushed for all I was worth.

The door would have closed all the way with that last push, but just before it slammed shut, an arm shot through the opening and stopped it. The heavy steel edge smashed into the arm and I heard a sharp, sickening crack. From within, echoing loudly but muffled by the almost closed door, came an agonizing scream. I leaned my weight against the door and, in the dim moonlight, I watched the protruding fist writhe and twist. And then the fingers opened and stiffened, and then went limp, and as they did, I heard something fall to the concrete at my feet. It was the switchblade knife. I stared at it dumbly. The hand obviously belonged to Frankie.

I let up the pressure against the door just a little, and the arm fell back inside. I slammed the door fully closed then and braced myself against it heavily as I groped with the snap-locks. Heavy fists pounded and heavy feet kicked at the door from the inside. But it did no good. The fourth snap-lock fell in place and the big door was tight.

I heard them yelling as I walked slowly away, down past my old stall, on down the darkened midway. Before I had gone far, I stopped to rest, to listen. I couldn't hear them anymore. It's them doors, I thought. Them heavy metal doors. They keep all the noise inside.

I went on back to the side gate. From there I could see the bobbing white spot of old Fritz's flashlight as he came down the side street of the midway. It was two-and-a-half miles around the park and Fritz looked like he was still a quarter of a mile away. I didn't wait for him, but picked up my bag where it had dropped and walked on out of the park.

At the corner I stepped into a phone booth. Digging a dime from my pocket, I dropped it in the slot and dialed the operator. She answered right away.

"Give—give me the police," I said softly.

I could hear her making the connection. My face was throbbing in pain. I reached up and touched it gently with one finger. It was tender, swollen, crusted with dried blood. I felt my side then, where I

had been kicked. When my hand touched one spot, I had to moan in agony. My ribs, I thought, must be broken.

I was hurt, trembling, crying again—and mad. They were dirty hoodlums. Rotten, good-for-nothing, punk hoodlums.

So what now? The cops come and get them and lock them up for a few days and then some judge has to turn them loose again because they're under age? Just kids, is that it? Teenagers? A little wild, somebody will say, but not really bad kids. And then they'd be back on the streets again.

I shook my head slowly. No, not this time. Not these three. Not if I can help it.

I hung up the phone, got my dime back and stepped out of the booth. As I walked slowly down the street, I thought: *It's going to be a long cold winter in that Spook House, boys.*

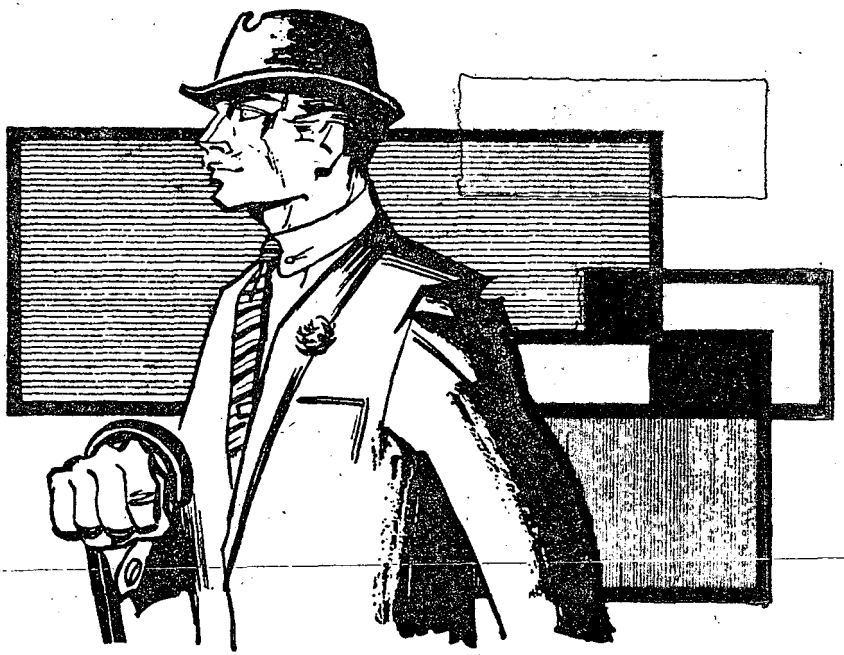
Dear Friends,

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. I do so hope to hear from you soon.

Pat Hitchcock
P.O. Box 434
Tarzana, California

Kidnapers, generally, prefer wealthy men—men of distinction, in short, whose distinction is money. In addition to money, it should be pointed out, these preferred ones also have individual, distinguishing markings: a whisky tint to the cheeks, or a bit of water in the eyes, or jowls that may range from an uncertain pink to a decided magenta.



by **Donald Honig**

THE *MAN* WE

Now that I've retired from the interesting business of scooping people up and hustling them off to remote cabins and deciding how much they're worth in, to use that very crude word, ransom (my own personal expression is "reimbursement"), I feel less inhibited about recounting some of my experiences. I believe that every man who has at least an ounce of boldness will be sure to gather tons of success, and I believe further that these men should record their adventures for the edification of those yet unborn generations who, because of the increasing stagnation of our society, will have to seek inspiration from the past rather than from the dukes and dudes around them.

So I'm telling this bizarre little tale because I believe its moral justifies it, and because I would like to explain one of the reasons why I finally retired from a profession where I was the acknowledged master.

There are many uncertainties and impulses inherent in all trades and professions. Uncertainties were the daily hazard with me and my associates, but impulses were to be resisted, fought, thwarted, impeded, strangled and shipped south as soon as they achieved maturity. The following will elucidate upon that somewhat extreme view.

We were on Park Avenue one evening, Jack and Buck and myself, cruising about looking for some mischief. We hadn't scooped up anyone in a long time and there was a general restiveness beginning to brood over the clubhouse.

"Look at that guy," Jack said pointing.

We looked. Strolling along on the other side of the street was an admirably dressed, distinguished looking gentleman. He was strutting along like Prince Caviar himself, tapping the sidewalk with a swinging walking-stick. A homburg big as a roaster sat his head as if set down there by the Archbishop of Canterbury. White-haired

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gentleman, maybe sixty, air of pleasure and distinction, like a diplomat who has just helped carve up three small republics.

"A real nabob," said Jack.

"Should be worth fifty grand if a penny," I said.

"We're short of cash, Bush," said Buck's beery back seat voice.

Even as I was deciding, Jack was making the U-turn. That was one of the things I liked about our little organization, one of the prime reasons for our enviable success—our minds anticipated each other. Intellectual conjunction. Team work. Rapport. Without it you can't have successful wars, politics, dramatics, acrobatics or double plays.

"The next street looks good," Jack said. "We'll net him there."

"You ready, Buck?" I asked. He was always ready. The brawn of the outfit. You've got to have a man like that, able to feed a protesting citizen into the back seat of a car as easily as a stoker levels a stream of coal into a furnace.

We cruised slowly, passing the nabob to have a good look, to make sure he wasn't a wandering stage prop. But to my eye he had that serenely ravenous look of the rich. And the way he was popping along with that stick flicking and his belly round and firm as a July melon, you could tell he was the top shelf.

"Wall Street," I said.

"Manufacturing," said Jack.

We passed him up and stood on the corner. Best place to park. Gives you terrific mobility. You've got the straightaway or the quick turn at your discretion, depending on the look of the situation. Buck and I slid over and released the doors, leaving them slightly ajar. Jack kept the motor purring.

We heard him coming on. Never look back. Just sit still like you're thinking about your traffic violations. We heard his stick. Click click click. Then he became a spot in the corner of my eye. Then we opened the doors. Perfect timing. That's what I was talking about. When Buck and I got out the nabob was between us. I stepped up to him and took the ends of his homburg and pulled down as hard as I could. Strategy. Do that to a man, that above all, and he'll not shout out, not immediately anyway, and that's all you want, that one split second of peaceful maneuverability. The nabob's face reddened with rage as the hat bulged down and made his ears flap over. The Buck got him from behind, under the arms, lifted him right off the sidewalk and I gathered him at the ankles and we hustled him right into the back seat. This was a beauty, a classic, because he didn't utter a peep, sputter, gasp or shout until he was rolled onto the floor. Then

he said, "What—" and Buck said, "Shut up."

The car was running then. Jack turned at the corner and we went into Madison and continued on crosstown, cruising with the innocence of the elect.

"Just maintain your peace down there," I said.

"This is an outrage," said the nabob.

"From your point of view, yes," I said. "But from our point of view it's a business arrangement. You look as if you're familiar with the world of commerce, of supply and demand, have and hold, negotiation and liquidation. So you ought to understand what it's all about."

"You're abducting me, going to hold me for ransom," he said.

"We're speculating on you and then placing you in the open market," I said. "Please appreciate our position."

"You won't get away with this," he said. They always say that. It's like a reflex, like saying Not Guilty. We let them utter their stock phrases: "What is the meaning of this?" and, "What do you think you're doing?" and one or two others just to show we're not absolute barbarians and believe in freedom of speech even for suppressed peoples. Then we put our finger against our lips, and they cease.

The nabob resigned himself soon to things evil and insurmountable and lay there with the homburg on his chest and the stick at his side and his face fixed with static anger that gradually relaxed into submission and acceptance.

Once he said, "Where are you taking me?"

"To the country," I told him, truthfully. "You can rest assured that we treat all our clients with utmost deference, commensurate with their positions in life. My staff has instructions to that effect."

It was a balmy autumn night and the ride was very pleasant. We took the West Side Drive uptown and then the Washington Bridge across the dark old Hudson. The boys were quite relaxed and content, looking forward to the events of the new situation. We were working again, and until you've been away from it for a while you just don't know how good it is.

We had a brand new cottage to break in, too. I had rented it a few months before. It was waiting for us, cupboard stocked with food, beds turned down. I always made sure that we had a new place ready. It was on a back road, very secluded and just right for our purposes.

In a little while we pulled into the driveway. Jack turned off the motor and the headlights melted into the dark. The brisk night air rang with crickets.

"You can get up now," I said to our prone passenger.

He made a gruff, opulent grunt and sat up. I helped him to his feet and showed him into the cottage. There we endeavored to make our guest comfortable.

"As far as we're concerned," I told him, "you are a guest here (and ultimately a well-paying one, I might add) and we'll be at your beck and call. Any reasonable request, from a hot water bag to the morning paper will be granted with alacrity. But let me also impress upon you that while you will be treated with all due respect and consideration, that any attempt on your part to either run away, tunnel out, whistle, howl, send up flares, lecture us or otherwise give us a hard time will be met with firm retaliation."

He regarded us coolly. Substantial looking man, I thought. Whisky tint to his cheeks, bit of water in his eyes, double chin. Fine gentlemanly bearing. Poised. Not in the least flustered, and I was grateful for it. The nervous and hysterical ones are the worst. (The overly-hysterical ones, we generally send right back.)

"All right," he said, voice quiet, refined. "Who is your cook?"

"Jack," I said. "Very adept at scrambling eggs. Wizard at taking the pink out of lamb chops. His coffee smiles and says good morning to you."

"I'm very fussy about my eggs," he said. "About all my meals. I have a nervous stomach, and I'm sure this experience isn't going to help it any. For breakfast I have poached eggs and two slices of buttered toast. And strong coffee. I'm accustomed to porterhouse steaks at one o'clock and at six, promptly. I'll give you instructions later about the vegetables."

"Yes, sir," I said. "We'll remember that. I'll send Jack down to the town first thing in the morning to get some choice cuts."

"And caviar," he said.

"Caviar? Sure."

"And I enjoy a nip of brandy before going to bed. Brandy from the heart of the cellar, mind you."

"We'll lay in a supply," I said.

Then we showed him to his room. He jabbed the mattress with his stick.

"I generally rise at seven," he said. "But under these circumstances, I'll sleep till ten."

"Fine," I said. "I'll see to it you're not disturbed. Now, about our end of the arrangement. Let me say that scooping you up was an impromptu sort of thing, so we really don't know too much about you. Give us your dossier, so we can put a tag on you."

He removed his hat and coat.

"My name is Oscar Sigmund," he said. "My residence is on Park Avenue. My business is investments."

"Doing well, are you?" I asked.

"Quite," he said.

"Good fellow. Whom do we contact?"

"My wife."

Oscar Sigmund retired at about eleven and then we got together around the kitchen table to make our plans.

"Fifty thousand, at least," Jack said.

"Maybe even seventy-five," said Buck.

"A hundred," I said. "This guy has cream in his blood. Don't you fellows know yet, after all I have taught you, that the less concerned a client is about his situation the more digits he has in his bank account? Only a very, very wealthy man behaves with the aplomb he has demonstrated here tonight. One hundred thousand."

"Maybe we ought to ask more," Jack said. Rambunctious youth.

"Jack, Jack," I said. "Please. It's not how much you ask, it's how much you get. To ask for more than a hundred thousand, no matter who the client is, is to look for trouble. The world never takes an extravagant person seriously. One hundred thousand," I said. "And then we incorporate ourselves."

I let two days pass before making the call. From conversations I had with Sigmund, I gathered the fact that he wasn't on particularly amicable terms with his wife and that his disappearing for a day or two would not be alarming at all. So I let two full days pass. I might have let it be three, but he was getting to be a nuisance. Jack had to go into New York to buy him a special cushion to sit on because he had boils. And Sigmund was driving us crazy with his meals. Everything had to be absolutely correct. Fork on the left, napkins, all that. And a new set of dishes and new silverware, too. Then the meals had to be done just right or else he sent them back. We had to make and remake his bed until it was just right, and we had to buy him a pair of silk pajamas because he refused to sleep in his drawers. And buy him also a box of dollar cigars. But he was a big fish and we were only too happy to do it all.

Then on the morning of the third day I made the call, from a phone booth in mid-Manhattan.

"Mrs. Sigmund?" I said to the woman's voice that answered.

"Yes," she said. "Who is this?" A Viennese clip to her voice. Irritating, like a pin in the ear. I could see why the old boy cut out from time to time.

"Listen, and listen carefully now. We have your husband. If you want to see him again, keep this strictly to yourself. Get a valise and fill it with one hundred thousand dollars in tens, twenties, fifties and hundreds." She started to interrupt, a note of hysteria wiping off some of that continental accent, which I had figured was affected anyway, but I told her to shut up. "You do this by four o'clock this afternoon and I'll call back with further instructions. Remember: secrecy is your only hope."

Then I hung up on her and went out into the lovely sunshine. Mingled in the crowds. Crowds are the most democratic organizations in the world; every man has his place. I took the subway uptown, met Jack with the car and we had a leisurely drive back to the cottage, where we found Oscar Sigmund patiently explaining to Buck via pencil and diagram the difference between polo and croquet.

That was the morning. At lunch I received a stern lecture from Sigmund about my eating habits. It was snobbish, but constructive. Two more bottles of brandy (when he nipped he really nipped) pushed the expenses over a hundred dollars, a new record. Then it was four o'clock and I was in a phone booth in a nearby town.

"Mrs. Sigmund?"

"Yes," she said. "I take it you're the scoundrel that called this morning."

"Yes, I am that scoundrel. Did you do as I asked?"

"Of course not."

"You didn't?"

"I think it's a bluff."

"Have you looked around for your husband recently?"

"I still think it's a bluff," she said. "And I'm going to call the police. If you're some crank who thinks he can extort a lot of money from innocent people—"

I hung up. Back to the cottage for some profound discussion. Sigmund was part of the council.

"Mr. Sigmund," I said, "your wife is treating this very lightly. She thinks it is all a bluff. Now, since it is your well-being that is involved here, perhaps you can tell us how we can—"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Bushel," he interrupted, glancing down at his watch, "but it is time for my aperitif."

Conversation suspended while Jack got up, washed his hands, put on his jacket and brought Mr. Sigmund a glass of brandy. We watched silently as he sniffed, savored, sipped and contemplated it before finally finishing it. Ten minute operation. Then I was allowed to renew the conversation.

"Mr. Sigmund, this is quite serious, I assure you."

He folded his hands on the edge of the table and regarded me as if I were someone trying to sell him an encyclopedia written in a dead language.

"Quite serious," I restated, emphatically.

"I understand, Mr. Bushel," he said.

"*How* can we convince your wife?"

"She's a terribly difficult person. Very stubborn. I'm afraid that once she's made up her mind, well, it's made up, and that's all there is to it."

"Have you ever been away from home this long?"

"No."

"So she should be alarmed by now."

"If I know her," he said, "she's already spoken to the police and the newspapers. She's not a woman to be trifled with."

Spoken to the newspapers was right. The next morning it was on the front pages. Oscar Sigmund had been kidnaped, it said. Well, we knew that much. Now, it is always a sticky situation when the police come into the thing. The most successful deals are those that are consummated without the story ever getting out. Often, once the police and newspapers get the story, I prefer to let the client go. There are always thousands of potential clients, the way I look at it, and dismally little advancement in jail.

But I figured I'd have one more go at Mrs. Sigmund. This time from a phone booth in lower Manhattan. Had to make it short and sweet, for the police were sure to be on the wire.

Two rings and then a man's voice, annoyed.

"Hello?" I said.

"Hello?" he said.

"Hello?" I said again.

"Who is this?" he demanded, the irritation growing in his voice changing it like discoloration.

"Who is this?" I asked him right back. I wasn't going to hang on for much more. They could trace the call and be sitting in my lap in five minutes.

"This," he said slowly with measured emphasis, "is Mr. Sigmund."

That was all. I hung up and walked out of the booth. Not a thought in my head. Perfectly calm. I believe in poise at crucial moments.

I waited around for the afternoon papers. When they hit the stands, I picked one up and looked at it like a man looking to see if the date of his execution has been scheduled yet. The story was front

page. Hoax, it said. Oscar Sigmund had turned up at his home early today. He had been off on a hunting trip to the Adirondacks and had been inaccessible until last night. And there was his picture. The face was not familiar.

When I got back to the cottage I handed the paper to our guest, with my other hand snatching the aperitif from his fingers as I told Jack to take off his serving jacket and spit on the floor.

"Who the fritz are you?" I asked him.

"My name is Skindig," he said. "I'm a gentleman's gentleman."

"I take it the gentleman to whom you belong is Oscar Sigmund."

"That is correct," he said. Dignity unruffled. Nose cool as ice.

"I say we hang him," said Buck.

"By the neck," said Jack.

"Can you explain this, Skindig?" I asked.

"Yes, sir," he said. "First of all, if you remember correctly, it was you who pulled me into your car and brought me here."

"But you claimed you were Sigmund."

"I confess to that one lone indiscretion," he said with some contrition. "I knew that Mr. Sigmund was going off for a week's shooting. So, as was my custom in these instances, I borrowed one of his suits, his hat and his stick and was on my way to a Third Avenue pub for an evening's relaxation when you swept me into your car. Once I caught onto your game, I felt the opportunity was too great to be missed."

"What opportunity?" I asked.

"To have other people, for once, fawn over me. After all these years you don't know what it meant to me. Hang me if you wish. It will have been well worth it."

No, we didn't hang him. The vote was three to none in favor, but we granted him amnesty. We even drove him back to the house and left him to make his own explanations. (He promised not to inform on us and, being a gentleman, he never did). Later we totaled up everything and it came out that we lost $158.75 on the deal. This hurt almost as much as not getting the hundred thousand, in our current financial state. Somehow a man's mistakes have more sting to them than his successes have satisfaction.

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I'M BETTER

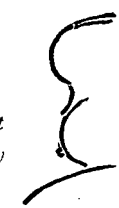
Nicki wasn't home when the telephone call came and the roommate who took the message was too flustered to make a coherent report. She wasn't sure about *where* Mr. Wolfe had seen Nicki perform: summer stock or the two-minute walkon in *Gypsy* or the television commercial for that upholstery cleanser; but what was the difference? Nicki was supposed to go to the Broadhurst Theatre at four *prompt,* if she wanted a reading. Nicki was so flustered that she burst out of the rooming house without even passing a comb through her tangled blonde hair. She walked the thirteen blocks to the theatre, not allowing herself the indulgence of a taxi ride. It might be a job, sure, but the casting had been in progress for over a month, and nothing could be left but the smallest of parts.

There were only five people on stage when Nicki walked in, and four of them barely glanced up when she stepped hesitantly onto the boards. The fifth, a youngish, bony-headed man in a pullover, grinned and came over. She knew it was Wolfe, the director, an import from a downtown theatre who was making his Broadway start with a new comedy.

"I know you," he said. "You're Nicki Porter. Thanks for coming."

"Thank *you,* Mr. Wolfe," she said shyly, using her full-throated voice well, Nicki wasn't outstand-

Young actresses making their way in an indifferent world must do it on foot. They should also think they are terrific when they are merely good, and good when they are extremely inept.



ingly pretty or even provocatively plain; her best feature was her voice.

"I'll tell you what this is," Wolfe said. "There's a young widow in this play, very young, not exactly the mourner type. The part's pretty small, but it's the kind of thing that gets noticed. Hey, Jerry," he called to the heavy-set man talking earnestly to a handsome woman in blue slacks. "Toss me a script."

Nicki fingered the pages eagerly, and the director said, "Try the speech on page twelve, Mary Lou's speech. She's a Southern type, but we don't want any fried-chicken accent." He started to walk off, but

THAN

stopped to say, "Oh, look, Nicki, I want to make something clear. Frankly, we stopped casting the show last Friday. The only part I was dubious about was Mary Lou's, and we sort of settled on somebody. Then I remembered seeing you in something or other at Watkins Glen—"

"Voice of the Turtle."

"That's right. Anyway, you kind of *looked* like Mary Lou in that, so I traced you through Equity. But don't get *too* hopeful about this, because who knows?" He shrugged, sharing with her his understanding of the theatre's uncertainty.

The speech on page twelve was meaty. She knew she was reading well, and when she was through, the woman in the blue slacks struck her hands together in light, approving applause.

"Well, fine," Wolfe said with a sigh. "That's just fine, Nicki. We won't keep you waiting for the decision very long; rehearsals have to start next week." He flashed a smile. "Where's my manners? Want you to meet the gang." He propelled her towards the group, and tossed off the prominent theatrical names as if they were casual guests in somebody's living room. Nicki shook hands,

YOU!

by Henry Slesar

fighting the flush that was rising and spreading to the tips of her exposed ears. She was always this way, shy and tongue-tied before the easy-mannered people who knew the rewards of theatrical success. They were the anchored ones, solidly fixed on what seemed to her to be a capricious and treacherous ocean. As she left the theatre, she felt like a small craft drifting out to sea.

But the watery analogies that filled her mind vanished once the stage door closed behind her. The solid reality of the sidewalk brought her with a bump to the realization that she had been liked, really liked, and that the part was going to be hers. She turned and looked again at the theatre posters, and when she saw the young, dark-haired girl coming out of the lobby pause to look at her, she felt an impulse to run up to this stranger and babble out the story of her sudden hopefulness. Instead, she turned and headed for the cafeteria on the corner.

She was about ready for her second cup of coffee when she spotted the dark-haired girl just three tables away, looking as if she expected an invitation. Nicki smiled, just a small smile that could be construed as a private pleasantry or an acknowledgment. The girl must have taken it the latter way; she picked up her purse and came over.

"May I sit down?" she said. There was a breathless quality in her voice, and her white teeth were biting her lower lip. She was pretty, Nicki thought, in a pinched-face Julie Harris way, but her eyes were swollen, even protruding. "I'd like to talk to you a minute," she said.

"Sure," Nicki said, moving things closer to her side of the small table. "I think I saw you at the theatre—"

"Yes," she said, sitting down. "I was there, but please don't mention it, not to Mr. Wolfe, I mean. You see, I'm Jill Yarborough, maybe Mr. Wolfe mentioned me."

"No, he didn't."

"Not even that?" She made herself laugh, and it struck Nicki as being theatrical.

"Are you an actress?"

"That's what I keep telling them. I was sitting in back of the theatre during your reading. You were pretty good, I thought. I couldn't hear you too well, you weren't projecting, but I think you were good."

"Thanks," Nicki said, stirring uncomfortably and suddenly afraid of the heat content in the girl's eyes.

"I'm surprised Mr. Wolfe didn't say anything about me, because he

practically promised me the part last Friday. The Mary Lou part. You wouldn't know it to listen to me, but I'm from the South, deep South, that is, but I've been North so long you can hardly tell by my accent. Can you?"

"No."

"Well, I worked like crazy to get rid of my drawl, and then *this* thing comes along. Wouldn't it kill you?" She put a gloved hand to her lips as if to stifle a giggle, but there wasn't any. "I haven't had a *real* job, an acting job I mean, for almost a year. When Wolfe said I was just what he was looking for, I could have crowed like a rooster. Only then he called me Saturday morning and said he wasn't sure yet. That was a lousy Saturday morning, let me tell you."

"I'm sorry, Miss—"

"Yarborough. Only call me Jill. Your name's Nicki?"

"Yes."

"Well, I didn't turn on the oven or anything," Jill Yarborough said, her eyes staring through Nicki's forehead. "But I didn't crow anymore either. I thought I'd hang around the theatre today, just to see what would happen. And I saw."

Nicki wanted to touch the girl's hand, or do something to mitigate the pain in her voice. But all she could do was answer in choked tones.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I know how it is, too. I've been sitting in casting offices for the last eight months myself. But I don't think anything's definite about this—"

Jill Yarborough laughed. "Oh, come on. You ought to be able to tell. He *likes* you, Nicki. That's for sure." The smile went. "Only I'm better than you are. Better for the part, better in every way."

Nicki, embarrassed, looked into her empty cup. The girl didn't say anything else for awhile, but her swollen eyes were still on Nicki's face, and she could hear her breath clearly, even in the clatter of the restaurant. Then she said, her voice so low that Nicki had to strain to hear:

"Don't take the job. Nicki. Tell him you can't take it."

"What?"

"Don't take the part. Call up Mr. Wolfe and tell him you don't want it. That there's something else you have to do, that you've got a conflict."

It was a shock to hear the blatant words, the unashamed suggestion.

"You can't be serious?"

"I am. I *am*. I'm better than you are, Nicki, I've worked harder. You don't deserve it the way I do."

"But *I* need the work, too. You can't—"

"Not like I need it. Not the way

I do. You couldn't." The girl shut her eyes, and the action was merciful, like a shade pulled down over a glaring window light. Then her eyes opened and she said, "If you take the part, I'll kill you. So help me, Nicki, that's what I'll do."

Nicki gasped, and scraped back her chair.

"I'll kill you and then I'll kill myself. I've thought of doing that for a long time anyway. I gave myself this one last chance, and that's all. I was going to take this."

She fumbled in her purse. Half-hidden in her trembling fingers she exposed a small, dark-brown bottle, the skull and crossbones clearly outlined at the bottom of the label.

"You can't threaten me," Nicki said in a whisper. "I won't let you scare me out of taking the—"

"I'm not trying to scare you. I'm just telling you the fact. You say yes to Wolfe, and we both die. If you want to tell the police about this, you go ahead and see what it gets you. I'll laugh my head off and say that you're crazy, see what good it does you."

She rose swiftly from the table, turning her head as if to avoid a display of tears, and gathered up her purse and the single glove she had yanked off her hand in her nervousness. Then she dropped half a dollar on the table and went hurriedly to the revolving doors.

It wasn't a matter of calculating her decision. It was being made for Nicki in some busy chamber of her mind, all the time she walked back to the rooming house, and all through the excited conversation with Theresa, the friend who shared her room and her aspirations. She didn't even mention Jill Yarborough; she wasn't going to be bluffed out of her first real break in almost a year.

At eight-thirty the next morning, the telephone rang. Nicki pushed pillows off her bed and fumbled for the receiver.

"Nicki? This is Carl Wolfe—"

She shut her eyes and prayed.

"If you like us, we like you," the director said. "We're having the first meeting of the cast Tuesday morning at ten. Can you be there?"

"Oh, sure," Nicki said casually. Then she hung up, walked nonchalantly around the bed, picked up the pillow, and thumped the back of her sleeping roommate. "Wake up, you fool!" she screamed ecstatically. "I got the job!"

She forgot about Jill Yarborough. Memorizing her three-page part made her forget. Carl Wolfe, gracious, demanding, and biting at

the first meeting she attended, made her forget. And then, a faltering first-time "blocking" rehearsal, followed by a triumphant run-through that Wolfe grudgingly called "pretty near perfect," made her forget the burning, protruding eyes, the small brown bottle, the agony and threat of Jill Yarborough.

On Wednesday night, she walked home from the theatre at seven-thirty, tired but still elated. Theresa had wanted them to go out that evening; she had a boyfriend named Freddy, and Freddy had a friend who'd *love* to meet an honest-to-God working actress, but Nicki had refused. When she used the key to the apartment, she walked into darkness and solitude. She undressed, washed her hair, put on a housecoat, and flopped on the sofa with a book. When the doorbell rang, she got up to answer it without hesitation, because Nicki had forgotten about Jill Yarborough.

She was wearing a long black coat with a fake fur collar high around the neck, clasped by a nervously-working hand. She said Nicki's name, and Nicki almost moved to slam the door on her, but she didn't. The girl walked in.

"Wasn't easy finding you," she said. "I had to ask the stage doorman—"

"Please don't make any trouble," Nicki said wearily. "It's all settled now. There's no need to make a scene, Miss Yarborough—"

"Call me Jill," the girl said. She looked around the apartment briefly, and then moved to take off her coat. For a moment, Nicki thought it was going to be all right. Her manner was relaxed, casual. She dropped the coat on a chair. "It's a nice place," she said. "Do you live here alone?"

"I have a roommate. She should be back any minute . . ."

Jill Yarborough smiled. "I'll bet she won't. I'll bet she's got a date, and you haven't. I know how it is when you're working. You don't even care if there's a man in your life. Isn't that true?"

"I—was too tired to go out tonight."

"Naturally." The girl sat, folding her hands primly in her lap; until then, Nicki had been afraid to meet her eyes. Now she did, and saw that their hot light was undiminished since the time of their first meeting. "How did the first rehearsal go?" she said lightly.

"All right, I suppose."

"He's a funny guy, isn't he? That Carl Wolfe, I mean. One minute he's sweet as pie; the next, he's chewing you out like a top sergeant. I've heard about him."

"He's really very nice."

The girl smiled again, sleepily. "I'll bet you thought I didn't mean what I said to you that time. Did you?"

"You were upset that day—"

Jill Yarborough shifted the coat onto her lap. Her hand dipped into a pocket. Nicki, on the sofa, stiffened. The hand came out with the brown bottle.

"Oh, I meant it," the girl said dreamily. "I meant every word. I was going to kill you, and then myself."

"Please," Nicki said anxiously. "Don't do anything foolish that—"

"You thought I was only bluffing, but I wasn't. I was right for that part. I'm a better actress than you are, a whole lot better. You know what's wrong with you?" she asked, matter-of-factly. "You're all voice and no body. You only act with your larynx." She turned the bottle around in her hand. "I'm going to make you drink this," she said.

Nicki squirmed to the edge of the sofa and stood up. "I'll scream," she whispered. "If you try anything I'll scream the house down. There are people right next door . . ."

"You don't have what it takes," Jill Yarborough said bitterly. "You're not willing to fight for a part, not the way I am. To get someplace in the theatre, you have to be a little mad, and you have to be able to fight every step of the way. That's why I'm better than you, Nicki."

She uncorked the bottle.

"Get out of here!" Nicki yelled.

Jill Yarborough grinned, and stood up. She came forward, her shoulders hunched, her eyes and teeth grotesquely white in her dark, tormented face. She moved slowly, a dream figure, nightmarish.

"This is for you, Nicki," she said, holding up the bottle. "For you . . ."

Nicki screamed.

The girl stopped, and her face changed. She put her shaking hand to her forehead; the heat in her eyes faded. Then she caught her breath, and tipped the mouth of the small bottle to her lips. She threw back her head, and the contents disappeared down her throat. She swallowed hard, painfully, and let the bottle drop from her fingers and bounce on the carpet. Nicki screamed again and covered her eyes; when she looked once more, Jill Yarborough hadn't moved, stunned by her own action. Nicki, sobbing, went to her.

"Get away from me," the girl said hoarsely. "You got what you wanted, get away." She took a step, and her knees buckled. "Oh, God, it hurts," she said, holding her stomach.

"I'll get a doctor—"

"Stay where you are!"

"You've got to let me help you!"

Jill Yarborough went to the sofa, leaning against its arm. She began to retch, and sank to her knees. It was then that Nicki grabbed the telephone.

The internes who took Jill Yarborough into Nicki's bedroom were both young, cool, and taciturn. There were strangled sounds behind the closed bedroom door for almost half an hour; Nicki sat quaking on the sofa in the living room, waiting for word.

Finally, one of the internes emerged, a crisp young man with blond hair. The ordeal over, he was more willing to be friendly. When Nicki babbled her questions at him, he grinned.

"She'll be okay," he said. "Good as new in a day or two. We used the stomach pump and gave her a sedative." He sat down and lit a cigarette. "There's something I have to ask you now. Something rather important."

"Yes?"

"The girl claims she thought she was drinking cough syrup, that the whole business was a mistake. Were you here at the time it happened?"

"Yes, I was."

He considered her thoughtfully. "You know if she swallowed that stuff deliberately, we'd have to report it to the police. Suicide's a crime in this state."

"You mean, she'd be arrested?"

"Not as bad as all that. She'd be sent to an observation ward in one of the city hospitals, so we'd keep an eye on her, give a psychiatric checkup. These suicide types, they don't quit on the first try. He eyed her speculatively. "Could you corroborate her story, Miss?"

"Yes," Nicki said, looking away. "It was purely an accident. She had no reason to commit suicide, none at all."

When the ambulance had gone, Nicki tried calling the Broadhurst, but there was no answer. She found Carl Wolfe's telephone number in the directory and, luckily, he was home. He listened to her opening statements in silence.

"It's just something I can't help," she said. "I'll have to be out of town for the next few weeks, and that means I won't be available for rehearsals. So maybe it's best we call it off."

"I understand," Wolfe said, finally. "I'm sorry about this, Nicki. I think you were right for the part. Maybe some other time . . ."

"You have someone else in mind, don't you? I wouldn't want you to

be stranded or anything like that."

"Yes," Wolfe said, "we do have another candidate. The one I was giving the part to, until you came along."

Thank God, Nicki thought. Then she said a quick good-bye and hung up.

She tiptoed quietly into the bedroom. The girl was still asleep, but she stirred and opened her eyes as Nicki approached the bed.

"I've called Carl Wolfe," Nicki said coldly. "Can you hear me, Jill? I called Carl Wolfe and said I didn't want the part. It's all yours," she said bitterly. "I don't want it half as much as you do."

Jill Yarborough smiled. "I'm better than you are," she said softly. "I deserve the part. Didn't I prove it to you? Didn't I?"

"What do you mean?"

"I nearly died," Jill Yarborough said, and then laughed raspingly. "Could you swallow water and nearly die? That's all it was, you know. Water! Could you do it? Could you?" She struggled to sit up, and Nicki backed away from the bed. "Could you?" Jill Yarborough screamed at her, in rage, in righteousness, and in exultant triumph.

SEE PAGE 45

MONEY, MURDER OR LOVE

by Talmage Powell

THE CALL came in shortly before I was due to go off duty at 7 A.M.

York stuck his head in the squadroom. "We got a job, Nick. A kid just found a stiff in an alley off Kilgo Street."

We went downstairs to the garage and got in one of the black, unmarked cars. As I drove across the city to Kilgo Street, York kept up a barrage of talk. He's been a cop almost as long as I have, twelve years, but he's never got used to the idea of death. He talks to cover his nervousness.

He talked about his wife and kid, as if really interested in selling me on the idea of marriage. He talked about the weather and of Sergeant Delaney's gall stone operation. He talked of anything except the violation of a human life.

The city was awakening, and

for this brief moment it felt vital and clean, qualities that never extended to the street we were headed for.

By the time we reached Kilgo Street, York had run out of extraneous talk. "Well," he muttered, as I stopped in the mouth of the alley, "I guess he can't be much. Some bum. Who else would get himself killed in a Kilgo district alley?"

We got out of the car. The beat cop—a heavy, porcine guy intended by birth, reflexes and mentality never to rise far—came forward to meet us.

Hemmed in by scabby brick walls, a Kilgo Street alley is a particularly unpleasant place to die.

The beat cop grimaced. "He's back there."

"Touch anything?"

"No, sir."

"That kid find him?" I asked, pointing toward the skinny youth pressed against the wall.

"Yes, sir. He was short-cutting it through the alley, on his way to work at the produce market."

I saw York had that pale look about him. So I said, "Take over with the kid."

"Sure, Nick," he said quickly.

In our society, few people find their natural place. York should have been an insurance salesman. Instead, he'd needed a job years ago and the civil exams had been open. It's the little fates that put us where we are.

I walked back to the dead man and stood looking down at him. He was not big. He was slender, wiry, with a narrow, cruel face. I guessed that he had been arrogant and vicious when he hadn't had his way. He looked to be about thirty-five.

The strangest thing about him was the fact that he didn't belong in that alley. His clothing—suit, shoes, shirt, tie—had cost about what I draw for working a month.

I kneeled beside him. He'd been shot under the heart. Most of the bleeding had been internal. He hadn't lived long after the small bore bullet had struck him.

I touched his pockets, turned him slightly. His wallet had been jerked out of the hip pocket of his

Consider the policeman's lot. He must sell tickets to the Policemen's Ball, purchase his own bullets and be perfectly honest and civil at all times. And, what is more, to do all this he must be qualified; he must have a foot whose arch is flattened so that its entire sole rests on the world.

trousers. The wallet, soft, hand-tooled calfskin, was ripped. It had been cleaned of money. There was a driver's license, a club membership card, a diner's card, and a picture remaining in the wallet.

I had to look at the picture first. Even in that pocket-sized image, she was that kind of woman.

I stood up, holding the wallet. York had been wrong. This was a big one. The dead man was Willard Ainsley, according to the driver's license. And Willard Ainsley was a financier and playboy. Worth so much, if you believed the newspapers, that it was a remote, unreal figure to a man like me. Seven or eight million. No one knew for sure. In that category, it seemed to me that a million more or less wasn't terribly important.

The gun that had killed Willard Ainsley was nowhere around. There were two parallel lines in the cinders of the alley, marks his heels had made. He'd been killed elsewhere and dragged into the alley.

On the sidewalk, the beat cop was breaking up a gathering crowd. A siren growled the approach of the meat wagon and lab boys.

Ainsley had lived with his wife in the penthouse of the Cortez, the sumptuous apartment hotel overlooking the lake.

I was on overtime, but I wasn't sleepy. The doorman didn't want to admit me. The desk man endured the shock of having a policeman on the premises. I pocketed my identification, told him I was seeing Mrs. Ainsley, and asked him not to announce me. For York it would have been an ordeal. I didn't much care.

On the top floor, I crossed the wide, carpeted hall and knocked on Ainsley's door. It opened as I knocked a second time. I lowered my hand.

"Ramoth Ainsley?"

"Yes," the woman said.

"Mrs. Willard Ainsley."

"Yes. What is it?"

I pulled out my wallet and showed her my I.D. She gave me a cool look. "Nicholas Berkmin," she said. "Come in, Mr. Berkmin."

I followed her down a short, wide stairway to a large, sunken living room. Tall glass doors across the room opened on a terrace, as green as a landscaped park. The terrace offered a view of the lake, sparkling in the early sunlight.

Ramoth Ainsley paused near the concert grand and turned toward me. She wore a simple, silken

dressing gown over her pajamas. It suggested the lines of a beautiful, supple body. There was strength in her face, and the wallet photo had failed to catch the texture and richness of her black hair.

She was lovely and fashionable, like many rich women. But she had an undefinable quality that money won't buy. Call it a sensuous vitality. You sense it on rare occasions when a woman, possessing it, enters a room or passes on the street.

"I assume," she said, "that something rather drastic has happened."

I nodded, and she said, "To Will?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Has he been hurt?"

"No," I said.

She continued to look at me. "He's dead."

"Yes."

"How?"

"It appears that someone killed him."

"I see," her lips framed the words, but didn't speak them.

I took her arm and guided her to a chair.

"Do you expect me to faint or have hysterics, Mr. Berkmin?"

"No," I said. But I must say you are taking it very well."

"Is there any reason why I shouldn't?"

"I don't know."

"Well, there isn't," she said. "I'd like—Would you please hand me a cigarette from that box on the table?"

I opened the ivory box, extended it, and when she had the cigarette between her lips, I picked up the lighter and struck it for her.

"Thank you." She inhaled deeply. "When did it happen?"

"Last night, I think. We know very little yet. He was found by a boy on Kilgo Street."

"Not a very nice place to end up, is it, Mr. Berkmin?"

"Do you know what might have contributed to his ending up there?"

"No."

"It looks as if he was robbed. His wallet had been stripped of money. Did he carry much?"

"He considered five or six hundred dollars pocket change."

"There are a lot of people who wouldn't consider it that."

"I suppose."

"What time did he leave here last night?"

"Right after dinner. Seven-thirty or so."

"Did he say where he was going?"

She didn't answer right away. She smoked, then looked at the ash on the tip of her cigarette. "We'd had an argument. He

slammed the door on the way out."

"Did you argue often?" I asked.

The cigarette ash broke and fell to the carpet. "You'll find out everything anyway," she said.

"We try to."

"We were on the point of splitting up, Will and I," she said. "You see, I come from one of those old families with a hallowed name and social connections. And for the last generation, we've been worse than on our uppers. How we've managed— Anyway, I let myself be talked into marrying Will. I believed that I could—well, develop some feeling for him in time. I didn't know then how domineering and cruel he could be." She rose and got herself a second cigarette. "I'm sure you understand these things, Mr. Berkmin."

"You've told me quite a bit," I said. "Do you remember what the fight last night started over?"

"He accused me of an indiscretion."

"Was he in the habit of storming out?"

"The cruelest thing that he could think of—at the moment—that's what he did."

"Did you expect him back later in the evening?"

"I didn't know. And I was certainly too angry to ask him what his plans were."

"And you heard nothing more from him?"

She shook her head.

"Did he have many enemies?"

"More than his share."

"Any who'd think of doing away with him?"

"I don't think so."

"I'll need the names of his business associates and his attorney," I said.

"I can supply those."

"I'll also need you downtown."

"Right now?"

"It would be better to get the identification over with," I said.

She nodded and started out of the room. Then she paused. "Murders like this—killing and robbing in an alley—are they always solved?"

"Not always."

She went out of the room, and I stood there with the feeling that her husband's murderer had a silent cheering section.

I slept for awhile and went back on duty at four-thirty. I wanted this case.

A list of facts was in. Willard Ainsley had been killed with a .32 caliber bullet. It had been removed from his body and turned over to ballistics. Death had occurred at about eleven the night before. Gumshoeing had turned up no one

in the Kilgo district who admitted to having seen Ainsley around that time.

I checked the reports on Ainsley's business associates. None had seen him since late on the afternoon of his death.

His attorney, Bayard Isherwood, was possibly the last of his acquaintances to have seen Ainsley alive. They had met in the elevator of the building, where they both had offices. Each had been on his way home. They had exchanged greetings. Ainsley, Bayard Isherwood had stated, had seemed on the point of bringing up a business matter, but had said that he would see Isherwood the next day. Isherwood had dined alone in his bachelor apartment. He had then attended a concert, alone. And he had retired immediately upon returning to his apartment.

Bayard Isherwood was the senior member of the city's most sedate and respected law firm. There was no doubting his statement, nor the statements of any of Ainsley's associates.

I closed the file and went over to the Cortez.

There were several people, a dozen or so, in the Ainsley apartment. I supposed it had started as a sort of wake, people dropping in on a sympathy call. It now had the earmarks of a party, as the memory of good-old-Will was washed clean with drink.

Mrs. Ainsley led the way to a den off the main hallway and closed off the noise in the living room. She stood with her back against the door. "How are you progressing, Mr. Berkmin?"

"We're punching," I said. "Bayard Isherwood says your husband was concerned with a business matter, so much so that he made a compulsive mention of it during an elevator ride, without saying what it was. Do you know what it might have been?"

"No." She moved from the door and rested her hips against the edge of a desk, studying me.

"It probably isn't important," I said. "The case looks cut and dried. Robbery and murder. It may break if we pick up a punk spending beyond his means."

"Really?"

"Or liquor loosens him up and he starts bragging. Or he tells his girl and they have a fight and she makes an anonymous phone call out of spite."

Suddenly, a shiver crossed her shoulders. "You're a very good cop, aren't you?"

"I like promotions," I said, "and the bigger paychecks."

"But you don't like being a policeman?"

"Not particularly."

"You're a rather strange man."

Her words seemed to hang in the room, forming a quick, strange bond between us.

She looked away from me, found a cigarette on the desk, and lighted it.

"Thank you for coming," she said.

"Why don't you call me Nick?"

She ventured a look at me. "Okay, Nick. I hope you catch your punk and get a nice promotion."

The break came twenty-eight hours later. I was again on duty early. Fresh routine reports, masses of detail, were on my desk. Included was the fact that three phone calls had emanated from the Ainsley apartment the night of the murder. One had been to Bayard Isherwood, who'd been out at the time, ten o'clock. The others, between ten and eleven, had been to friends. In both instances, Ramoth Ainsley had asked if the friend had seen her husband that evening.

I pushed the reports back, wondering where we went from there. It was then that York came into my office, his breath short, his face very red.

"We got the gun, Nick!"

"Yeah?"

"Punk kid named Jim Norton hocked it this afternoon. Thirty-two revolver. The pawnbroker reported it. Ballistics checked the gun. It's the one that killed Willard Ainsley, all right."

I stood up. "Where's the kid?"

"That's the catch. When Simmons and Pickens went over to pick him up, he bolted. He's teetering on the roof of a six story tenement on Kilgo Street, threatening to jump."

I'd been through this kind of thing twice before in my years on the force. The youth looked like a skinny doll pinned against the night sky by spotlights. The fire department had roped off the block and unfolded the big net. Uniform-grade police had cleared out the rubberneckers.

I skidded the black car to a stop at the barricade. York hung back, needing all of a sudden to tie his shoe laces.

I knew most of the men on duty. I learned quickly that half a dozen men were inside the building, including a priest. They'd opened the skylight trap and reached the roof. Now they were stymied. Every time they moved a muscle, the kid got ready to jump.

A weeping girl was huddled in the shadows at the base of a building.

"Who's that?" I asked an assistant fire chief.

"Kilgo Street girl. Her name's Nancy Creaseman."

"Norton's girl?"

"Something like that."

"Why didn't you get her out of here?"

"Chief told Norton on the loud speaker she was down here. It may have kept him from going off. She's made no trouble."

I walked over to the girl. There are thousands like her in any large city. Thin, malnourished body. Mousy brown hair. Eyes shaded with long-continued anxiety. Wrong colored lipstick, attempting to hide the thinness of the pinched face.

"Nancy," I said.

"Yes, sir."

"My name is Nick Berkmin. I'm the homicide man in charge of the Ainsley case."

"Jimmy didn't kill him, Mr. Berkmin."

"How do you know?"

"He couldn't."

"Has he ever been in trouble before?"

"Not with the police. He's not the kind, I tell you."

"Willard Ainsley," I said, "was carrying a lot of money on him."

"Jimmy wouldn't, he wouldn't, he wouldn't!"

"Take it easy," I said. "I'm not saying he did it. But we don't want him doing anything foolish now, do we?"

Her anxious eyes lifted toward the spot of light in the night sky. A sob burst out of her.

"Where did he get the gun, Nancy?"

"He found it."

"Where?"

"In a gutter, around a corner off Kilgo Street. He didn't do anything with it at first. Then he went and pawned it."

"Why didn't he tell us that? Why did he break and run when the police came?"

"He's scared of the police, of everyone. He overheard them asking his mother where he was, if she'd seen him with a gun. Then he got scared, lost his head, and ran. Please help him, Mr. Berkmin!"

She grabbed my hand and clung to it with her sweaty, thin, sticky fingers. "I know it looks bad, but Jimmy didn't do it. You've got to help him. You see, he got hurt—"

"Hurt?"

"Weeks ago. He had a job, delivering for a drugstore. Some guys caught him one night, took his money, and beat him up. He's had these blind spells ever since. It's why he's so scared."

I got my hand loose from hers. "I'll tell you what, Nancy. You go

up there, on the roof, and talk him down. I'll see that he gets a break."

Now it was her eyes clinging to me. Her weeping stopped. She squared her shoulders and started across the street.

I called Ramoth Ainsley from my office. She agreed to see me. I drove over, brought her down to my car, and we got in.

When she saw the direction I was taking, she said, "I was under the impression we were going to your office."

"Isn't this nicer?"

"I'm not at all sure," she said.

"I wanted a chance to talk to you in private."

She sat in cautious silence as I drove through the clean luxury of her neighborhood. I drove far down the lake shore to an undeveloped area. There, I picked a side road, turned off and parked.

"We might put the case on ice," I said.

"Really?"

"We've got a kid in a cell right now who was in possession of the murder gun. He says he found it, where someone had thrown it after wiping it clean. It isn't registered, but there are people who will sell unregistered guns—for a premium."

"Do you think he killed Will?"

"We have a case. We can make a monkey of him in court, with his statement about finding the gun. He had blackouts, and conceivably might not remember mugging somebody. There are ways of wrapping a thing like this up. Fact is, it probably would be best for the kid for me to wrap it up quick. A jury wouldn't go hard on him. He'd get needed hospitalization and treatment—and I promised his girl the best break for him."

She moved restlessly in the car seat. "You've got something on your mind, Nick."

"Yes, I have. You're a very beautiful woman."

"Thank you."

"One who'd do most anything for enough money."

"Now wait a—"

"I'm not being critical," I broke in. "Only analytical. By the way, why did you try to call Isherwood shortly before the time your husband was killed?"

"I didn't, Nick. Why are you asking me—"

"I thought so," I said. "You see, a call was placed from your apartment to Isherwood's residence. Only it was Will calling, wasn't it? You didn't know he'd made that call, did you? But now I can wise you up. He was in another

room, using the phone a good two hours *after* the time you said he'd left the apartment. The call places him in the apartment very close to the time of his death. Why'd you want us to think he'd left earlier—unless he was in the apartment up to and including the time of his death?"

Her lips seemed to redden. The shift of color was actually in her face, not her lips. "Nick! What are you saying?"

"That you had motive. He was about to throw you out, separate you from all that nice money, wasn't he?"

"What makes you think I'd even considered killing—"

"First thing started me wondering was the matter of the car. Kilgo Street is a long way from your neighborhood. If Will had driven to Kilgo and got himself bumped off, why hasn't his car been found in that vicinity? The kid in jail hocked only an unregistered gun, he didn't peddle a hot car.

"When you've been a cop a long time, you get to wondering how a thing might have happened, if a detail strikes you wrong. You wonder if a beautiful woman gets herself a little gun as a last resort. You wonder if she, finally, feels she has to use it. You wonder if she has sneaked her dead husband down the service elevator from their swank apartment, driven him all the way to a crummy place like Kilgo Street. You wonder if she stripped him of money there to make it appear he'd been robbed. You wonder if she then drove herself home, her plan completed, satisfied that nothing could possibly connect her with a dump like Kilgo Street and the death of her husband."

"Nick, honestly, how could I, a woman—"

"Looked pretty good, didn't it, the whole plan? But you're strong, athletic, well-kept, and he was a small man. There was a service elevator to help get him downstairs. It was late at night. You envisioned little risk of being seen, and you weren't. The whole setup looked great and you saw no reason why you couldn't carry it off."

She hesitated a long time before she spoke. "Nick, you can't prove any of this . . ."

"I'm in charge of the case. I can prove that kid guilty, if I want to. I got the power to close this case, but quick. On the other hand, there's a limited number of places where you can buy an unregistered gun. I know these places. I know how to make people talk. Believe, me, baby, I can make them talk when I want to. If I took you to those places one by one, I'm

sure I'd get an identification sooner or later. Of you. As the buyer of an unregistered gun."

"Nick—"

"Shall we start? Pay a call on one of those places?"

"Nick, please . . ."

"You killed him," I said.

"No, Nick."

"Okay. Let's get started on this detail of the gun."

"Nick, you can't do this to me!"

"You killed him," I repeated.

She slid toward me. "Nick," she said, "it was self defense. I swear it!"

"Self defense—with the purchase of the gun a prior act?"

She put her arms around me. I felt her shiver. "Nick, will you give me a break?"

"I guess that'll do it," I said. I held her away briefly and reached under the seat. I clicked off the switch of the compact, portable, battery-powered tape recorder. Her eyes got large as she watched me put the tape carefully in my inside coat pocket.

"You tricked me," she said. "You didn't know—"

"I suspected," I said. "But I needed proof. Now I've got it. It's the finest insurance I can think of."

"Insurance, Nick?"

"Sure. I'll see that that tape's put in a safe place and fix things so it'll reach the right people—if anything ever happens to me."

She began to understand.

"You," I said, "are a beautiful woman worth six or seven million dollars. What's my future on the cops compared to that? You'll mourn, and I'll work awhile before I resign. For appearances sake."

Her eyes showed that her mind made a lightning fast survey of the situation. She saw no way out. And so, recognizing the inevitable, she accepted it.

She linked her arm in mine and rested her head on my shoulder. "You're right, Nick darling. We must think of appearances, mustn't we?"

cotton cloak, wood dagger

by James Holding

I LEFT the Rices' house the same way I entered it—by a sixteen foot ladder leaning against the sill of a back bedroom window.

Admittedly, this was an unorthodox mode of exit. But then, the house didn't belong to me. And I certainly had no desire to disturb the Rices, who were watching "Spy Ring" on television downstairs, nor Anton Juracek, their Hungarian houseman, who was watching the same program in his room over the garage.

In fact, it was because I was familiar with the Rices' fanatical devotion to "Spy Ring" on Monday evenings, that I had chosen this particular time for my informal visit to their home. It seemed only sensible to me to make my nocturnal calls coincide, whenever possible, with the watching of television by my hosts. For I've learned that nothing is more thoroughly distracting than television; nothing keeps men, women and children so absorbed, so oblivious to everything else, as a favorite television show.

And it is soothing to my nerves to know that while I'm busy ransacking drawers, closets, clothing and handbags for cash, the owners of these articles are safely preoccpied with television in another room and unlikely to disturb me.

Only last month, the newspapers

in Fairhaven had begun calling me "The TV Burglar." Not that anybody connected the TV Burglar with me, you understand. I was Andy Carmichael, that pleasant loquacious fellow who for five months now had been delivering groceries for Corrigan's Independent Market, and who seemed so well-educated and articulate for his menial station that everybody called me "Professor" as a matter of course.

I have china blue eyes, set wide apart, and a frank expression that invites confidences. Housewives talked to me when I carried a box of groceries into their kitchens the way they'd talk to a family friend, or the woman next door. They even told me what television programs they favored. And they let me use their phones occasionally to call the Market about rush deliveries, and thus afforded me excellent opportunities to learn the layout of their houses and where they dropped their purses when not in use.

But to get back to the Rices'. As I hastily searched their bedroom for the only commodity in which I was really interested—cold cash—I heard faintly from below the harsh voice of some television G-Man mouthing the tired old clichés of espionage drama. Good. As long as that lasted, I wouldn't be interrupted.

Finally, I found a hundred and four dollars in small bills, stuffed into an old glasses case and hidden in Mrs. Rice's lower dresser drawer under a black nylon slip. This was her secret hoard, no doubt, saved bit by bit from her house money and destined, one day, to indulge Mrs. Rice in some long-anticipated extravagance.

I took it.

Then I descended the ladder, picked it up, carried it to the garage and hung it neatly on its brackets, just as I had found it. I took great care to move quietly, so that Juracek, on the floor above me, would hear nothing. I slipped through the gate into a lane that ran behind the Rices' house, and calmly walked toward the center of town. I was well pleased with myself.

Burglars have to be wary of many things, of squeaky floor boards, of Ming vases that step directly into their path, and of stuck windows that come suddenly unstuck. After reading our drama, you will agree that to this list should be added, getting chummy with a small boy.

The next evening I was sitting on the front porch of the shabby boarding house I called home, reading an indignant item in the Fairhaven Register about the failure of the police department to unearth any clues about the identity of The TV Burglar, when Wilbur Crandall came over and sat down on the porch steps.

Wilbur lived next door with his widowed mother. He was twelve years old, serious for his age, freckled, quiet and friendly. I liked him. He liked me. We were pals, in the curious manner in which some men and boys are.

Wilbur said, "Hiya, Professor." He leaned back against a porch pillar.

"Hi, Wilbur," I said. "How's with you?"

"Okay. You going anywheres tonight, Professor?" Wilbur had a high-pitched, little-boy voice that hadn't begun to change yet.

"Nowhere in particular," I said. "Thought I might go down to Beck's Tavern for awhile to watch the fights on TV. Why?"

"I just wondered, is all."

"Isn't that being a trifle nosey?" I was teasing him. "It's none of your business, pal."

"I was just trying to tell you something," Wilbur said, "and I don't know how to get started."

"Relax," I advised him. "The right words will come to you."

"All right," Wilbur said and looked away. "It's about this Club I belong to."

"Club?"

"Yeah. We got a Club, me and a bunch of other kids," Wilbur said with some pride. "We call it the Junior Detective Club." He smiled. "We're all training to be detectives like in those TV programs—'Line-up' and 'Jack Martin' and 'Private Eye' and like that."

"It sounds like a lot of fun."

"It is, Professor. It's really great." Wilbur was silent for a moment, thinking. "We all got to write up a report once a week and turn it in to the Club, like for homework, you know?"

"A report on what?"

"On our detective work for the week. On our assignments."

"Assignments?" I was watching a pretty girl, John Severn's niece I believe it was, who was walking past the boarding house with her girl friend. Their voices were soft and pleasant in the dusk. They nodded to me. I wasn't paying much attention to Wilbur.

He persisted. "Yeah, Professor. We each get assigned somebody to follow around and practice detection on, see? Usually it's somebody next door to us, or at least in the same block, so our assignments will be handy for us."

Wilbur looked directly at me. Suddenly his voice seemed a little deeper and his eyes older than twelve. "You're my assignment, Profesor," he said.

I felt a chill breeze begin to blow on the back of my neck, even though the evening was still and warm.

"I been following you, Professor," Wilbur said, apologetically almost.

"Last night?" I said.

He nodded. "Gee, I could hardly believe my eyes." He got a little excited as he remembered the glorious results of his detective work. He also began to quote what I could only assume would be his report to the Junior Detective Club—and to the Fairhaven Police, too, I imagined. "You left Beck's Tavern at nine forty-two. You walked over to Farragut Street by way of Main, and got a ladder out of Rices' garage and put it up to their back window and went inside, where you stayed for thirteen minutes before you came out again." He gestured toward the newspaper on the floor at my feet. "You're that guy," he said, the misery of youthful disillusionment with a pal in no way impairing his discernment. "You're the TV Burglar, Professor. Right?"

My hands were beginning to sweat. I rubbed them up and down on my thighs to dry them. "You're the detective, Wilbur," I said. "Don't ask me."

My answer didn't help him any. He wanted me to deny it. His beseeching expression begged me to give him a big fat negative—to present a host of credible reasons why my expedition to the Rices' was capable of innocent interpretation.

So on an impulse, born more of a desire to retain Wilbur's admiration and friendship than of any desperate determination to escape the trap in which I found myself enmeshed, I obliged him.

I said, "Listen, Wilbur, you've got it all wrong." I hoped my voice didn't sound as hollow to him as it did to me. "I'll tell you the truth about last night. But you can't put it into any report for your detective club, understand? It's top secret. Dangerous. Vital to security. Can I trust you?"

Wilbur was impressed. "Gosh!" he said. "I think so. Sure."

I still had no notion of what I was going to say next. I was temporizing while I extemporized, so to speak. Then suddenly, the words I had heard emanating from Rices' TV set the night before, while I was prowling their bedroom upstairs, recurred to me. "You're acting very peculiar late-

ly," the voice of the G-Man had said harshly to whatever culprit faced him on the nineteen-inch screen, "and I'm beginning to suspect that you're hiding something."

That was enough to cue me in. I took it from there.

"I'm a federal agent," I said to Wilbur in a hushed tone, looking about me for possible eavesdroppers. "FBI. I'm not really a delivery man at all. That's just a front. I'm on a case here in Fairhaven."

Wilbur's eyes got big. "FBI?" he breathed. "Boy!"

"Yes, Wilbur. You know that new atomic power plant on the edge of town?"

The boy nodded.

"That's the reason for my being in Fairhaven," I said. "A few months ago we got the word in Washington that somebody was trying to pass along information about that reactor to a foreign power." I paused, watching Wilbur narrowly for signs of disbelief. I saw none. On the other hand, I saw no signs that Wilbur was believing me, either.

"There's a hidden transmitter here in town, somewhere," I went on, inventing now with reckless abandon. "Somebody uses it to send secret radio messages to this foreign country about our atomic plant. I'm trying to discover who uses the transmitter. And where it's hidden. I have to search a lot of houses when I get the chance, like the Rices' last night. You can understand that, can't you?"

"Well . . ."

"Mr. Rice works at the power plant," I said darkly. I knew that was correct. "He's assistant superintendent, did you know that? He *could* possibly be the spy I'm looking for."

"*Is* he? Didn't you find out last night?"

I shrugged elaborately. "I only had a chance to search one room. So who knows? But I'm not going to give up. I'll find the spy yet. And the transmitter. Provided you cooperate, Wilbur, by keeping quiet about this."

He sat without moving, his back braced by the porch pillar and his eyes straight ahead. I could tell he was trying to convince himself my story was true. He whistled gently between his teeth without tune or rhythm. I could also see that he was strongly tempted to accept his own theory that I was the TV Burglar, for he lifted one thin hand and rubbed it reflectively over a spot on his chest where a boy detective might logically wear his detective's badge.

"Do you believe me, Wilbur?" I asked, keeping my question calm and confident. "I'm counting on

you—and so is your Uncle Sam."

How corny can you get, I thought. I was suddenly conscious of a keen regret that I *was* The TV Burglar, and not an FBI man as I claimed. How does one explain that? The sudden resurgence of a sublimated conscience? Unsuspected fondness for a disillusioned boy?

Wilbur said, "Gee, Professor, I'm sure glad you told me." He got up. "If you're really an FBI man, I oughtn't to say a word to anybody. But if you're the TV Burglar, I ought to tell the police. I don't know *what* to do!" His little-boy voice went higher yet in bewildered indecision.

"That's right," I said, "and you have to be the judge, Wilbur. Nobody else can decide for you. Am I a FBI man or The TV Burglar? That's your big problem."

"Yeah," said Wilbur. "Well, goodnight, Professor."

He disappeared into the darkness. "Goodnight, Wilbur," I said.

I sighed and got out of my chair and went inside to my room. I pulled my old plastic suitcase from the cupboard and began to throw my few clothes into it. I was confident Wilbur would require some hours to decide my fate—until tomorrow morning, probably. He owed our friendship that much deliberation at least, I felt, and Wilbur was not one to regard his loyalties lightly.

There would be time enough, in any event, for me to catch the midnight train west and prudently exchange Fairhaven for some distant and safer community. I was glad I had Mrs. Rice's hundred and four dollars intact. I could travel far on that.

As it turned out, I was woefully inaccurate in my calculations; Wilbur made his decision promptly and acted upon it with regrettable dispatch. It was about 11:20, almost time for me to leave for the train, when the police cruiser pulled up in front of the boarding house and Patrolman Vince MacCready came in. I knew him from Beck's Tavern. Off hours, of course.

"They want you at the station, Professor," Vince said.

I was surprised by Wilbur's unexpected precipitancy, but endeavored to conceal it. "Okay." I said. "What's the beef, Vince?"

"You'll find out," he said. We climbed into the car and rolled away. He sat stiffly withdrawn in the driver's seat, the way a man will who suddenly discovers that a fellow he thought he knew quite well is a perfect stranger to him.

I was taken to the office of a Lieutenant Randall at Headquarters. He was a tall, quiet, nice-look-

ing man with eyes as yellow as a cat's, and a soft, bland way of speaking that frightened me more than I cared to admit.

"Sit down, Carmichael," he said.

"You know my name?" I asked.

"Sure," he said. "The kid was very specific about that. Professor Carmichael. Right?"

"Right. Has that doggone kid . . .?"

"I brought you in where we could talk privately," Randall said.

"I see."

"Don't hold it against me, Carmichael. I know you're averse to any publicity. And of course, I know why."

I sat and sucked my lips. I wasn't quite sure what to say. So I said nothing. Luckily.

"That was quite a story the kid told us tonight, Carmichael," Randall went on smoothly. "And do you know something?"

I risked one word. "What?"

"I thought the kid was nuts at first. Or that he was way over his head in this junior detective bit. But under the circumstances, you surely understand why we had to check."

"Yes, Lieutenant, I can understand that, I suppose." Now it was coming.

"I'm a little embarrassed about it, frankly. We kind of stepped on your toes, I'm afraid."

I tried not to stammer in my astonishment. "How do you mean?"

"By acting before we were called in officially by the Feds," Randall said. "It could have loused you up good. But under the circumstances, as I say, we *had* to find out for sure whether there was anything to the yarn you gave the kid about a spy." His tone could have held a modicum of apology.

My mouth fell open. I swallowed. Again, I found silence golden.

"Personally," Randall purred, "you had my vote as The TV Burglar. I want that guy, Carmichael. I want him so bad I can taste it. He's making the Department look like a bunch of stupid amateurs. But the kid was trying to be fair to you. He gave us your side of the story, too. And told us he was sure you were okay, but since he couldn't quite be certain, he'd put the whole thing in our lap. Pretty smart kid, wouldn't you say?"

"He's a bright one, all right." I thought that was noncommittal enough.

"And I just happen to know Mr. Rice pretty well. So I went over there and filled him in, and asked him what he thought. He told me to check his whole place, if I felt like it, before I checked

with Washington on you. Might save time, and avoid embarrassment, you see?"

It took all my strength to raise my eyebrows inquiringly. I licked my lips and finally managed to articulate. "Find anything?" I asked. My voice was a croak.

He waved his hand at me. "Sure. You were right, Carmichael. Dead right." He spoke with a certain relish. His yellow eyes reminded me more strongly than ever of a cat's, watching the futile struggles of a mouse between his paws.

But I did him an injustice, I suppose. "You were surely pointing in the right direction," he said. "The whole thing was just like you told the kid. Except for one thing." He paused, for dramatic effect, no doubt. I played up to him meekly.

"What was that?" I said.

"It wasn't Mr. Rice who was broadcasting data about the atomic reactor. It was that houseman of his, that Anton Juracek, the Hungarian freedom-fighter that lives over the garage. He's the one's been getting the dope and sending it out. We found the transmitter hidden in the closet in his room."

"You found the transmitter? Great, Lieutenant!" I was existing in a fuzzy vacuum of astonishment, incredulity and yes, relief, but I seemed to be talking sensibly. "I was a bit off. I thought it would have to be Rice, since he's the one with direct access to the plant. But I can see how the Hungarian could operate, driving Rice to work every day, hanging around the plant and so on."

"Sure," said Randall. "A breeze." He regarded me thoughtfully for a moment. Then he said, "I could use you in the Department here, Carmichael. You seem to have a very sensitive touch, a special feeling for our kind of work. But forty-two hundred a year and a lousy pension is all we could offer you at the best. You're doing much better where you are, of course. Is it really FBI like you told the kid? Or CIA? Do you want to take custody of the prisoner yourself? He's downstairs."

I tilted a hand deprecatingly. "I'd like your department to get public credit for this, Lieutenant," I said. "My bureau wants to avoid publicity at all costs. You know that. I'm not even going to tell you what bureau it is. I'll be on a new assignment now, of course. I've enjoyed Fairhaven, but I'm afraid Corrigan's Market will have to get themselves another delivery boy, now you've cleared up my case for me."

Randall nodded, portentously, regretfully. "Yeah. But what a cover—delivering groceries!" I

couldn't be sure, but was there a trace of irony in his words?

"Did you tell Wilbur Crandall the results of your investigations?" I asked.

"Sure. I telephoned him you were okay. Just what you claimed to be. And I told him to keep the whole thing under his hat or I'd arrest him for impersonating an officer!" Randall grinned briefly.

I stood up. "Good luck on your next assignment," Randall said. Butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. "And thanks for the hot tip—even if it was unintentional. Don't these kid detectives break you up?"

"We're all working together after all," I said gravely. "Goodnight, Lieutenant."

It was too late to catch the midnight train when I got back to the boarding house. I sat on the front porch in the warm summer night and smoked and thought.

Did they really find a transmitter in Rices' garage, I asked myself? Were they really going to pin an espionage charge on Juracek?

Or was Randall just snowing me about that—because he couldn't face the public shame of having the newspapers play up the fact that a twelve-year-old Junior Detective had ferreted out the identity of the TV Burglar who had kept the cops running around in circles for weeks?

By some fantastic chance last night, had I heard in Rices' home not merely some "Spy Ring" TV dialogue as I thought, but a flesh-and-blood Mr. Rice actually stating his suspicions to Juracek, his house man?

Or had Randall wisely seized the chance not only to save face for the police department and Fairhaven the cost of a trial, but to force the TV Burglar (me) to leave town, and thus transfer responsibility for my capture to some other cops somewhere else?

Whatever the truth was, I was certain of one thing: I was going to get out of Fairhaven immediately. I'd take the early morning train and nothing could stop me.

But I didn't take the early morning train. Because Wilbur came over to see me bright and early the next morning. He had nine other boys with him. And I could see that even if he'd kept my FBI identity under his hat as ordered, he had already issued some kind of preliminary report to these members of his club. For, as a personal favor to him, he asked me to fill the kids in on the best way to get to be a detective.

His voice was high with excitement; his eyes shone with hero-worship; I had obviously regained

his respect, in spades. So I couldn't refuse him. Especially since, as Lieutenant Randall said, I *did* seem to have an instinct for the work.

That's where I made my mistake.

I'd just begun to explain a few of the fundamentals of detection to my young audience, when Vince MacCready pulled up in front of the boarding house again in his police cruiser. Only this time, Lieutenant Randall was with him.

Randall got out of the car and came over to me. I stopped talking to the boys and waited for him to say something. I kept wishing I'd caught a fast freight out of town last night, or hitched a ride on a truck or something.

Randall said, "I've been talking to Juracek this morning, Professor. He admits his subversive activities. But he wanted to know how we got onto him. So I told him about you."

I didn't say anything.

"He cussed you out for a dirty informer, Professor."

"Naturally," I said.

"He said he thought you were strictly a phony. But if you *were* an FBI man, you were a typical corrupt member of the capitalist police, because he was sure you had stolen money while on duty."

I stared. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"He thinks you're The TV Burglar. That's what it means." His yellow eyes made me feel like squirming. "And Juracek had a couple of interesting ideas to back up his guess about you. As part of his security precautions on this spy job of his, he kept pretty close track of everybody he got to know in Fairhaven—including Corrigan's grocery delivery man."

I waited for him to go on. I had that cold feeling at the back of my neck again.

Randall gave a tight grin. "I wouldn't say Juracek is vindictive," he said. "He just wants to get back at you for tipping us about him. So he suggested that I check the list of victims of The TV Burglar, and bet I'd find that every single one was a customer of Corrigan's Market. And that you delivery groceries to every one of the houses involved. And you know something? It's true."

I shrugged it off. "A coincidence," I said. Wilbur and his friends were taking in every word. I tried to seem nonchalant.

"He had another idea," Randall said imperturbably. "He suggested I call Mrs. Rice and ask her to check her bedroom carefully to see if anything was missing. He said if he was right and you *were* The TV Burglar as well as an FBI man, you must have stolen some-

thing when you entered Rices' house the other evening."

Now it was coming. I could sense it in Randall's calm yellow gaze, his bland voice. "And sure enough, Mrs. Rice went and looked carefully, and discovered that some money she kept hidden in her dresser drawer was missing. What about that, Professor?"

"I'd say you were too good an officer to accept evidence like that," I said. "You know how women are, Lieutenant—they mislay money all the time, forget where they put it, even forget that they even have it."

He nodded. "Yeah, I suppose so. But Mrs. Rice says one of the five dollar bills that are missing from her drawer was torn. And she'd mended it with Scotch tape. An S-shaped tear."

I just stood there, under the concentrated gaze of the ten kids and Lieutenant Randall.

"As a matter of friendly cooperation," Randall said quietly, his cat's eyes on mine, "would you let me take a look at your wallet?"

I hadn't noticed any mended tear in a five spot when I counted Mrs. Rice's money. This could be just a trick on the Lieutenant's part to make me react in a guilty way. But then, I hadn't examined the money very carefully, either. The mended bill might be there. And if the Lieutenant found it . . .

I was trapped. I slowly dug my shabby wallet out of my hip pocket and handed it to him without a word.

The mended bill was there.

It's a funny thing, but on the ride to police headquarters with Vince MacCready driving and the Lieutenant and I sitting quiet on the back seat, I wasn't thinking about going to prison. Or about the irony of Juracek's revenge. I was remembering the hurt lost look in Wilbur Crandall's eyes when they took me off to jail.

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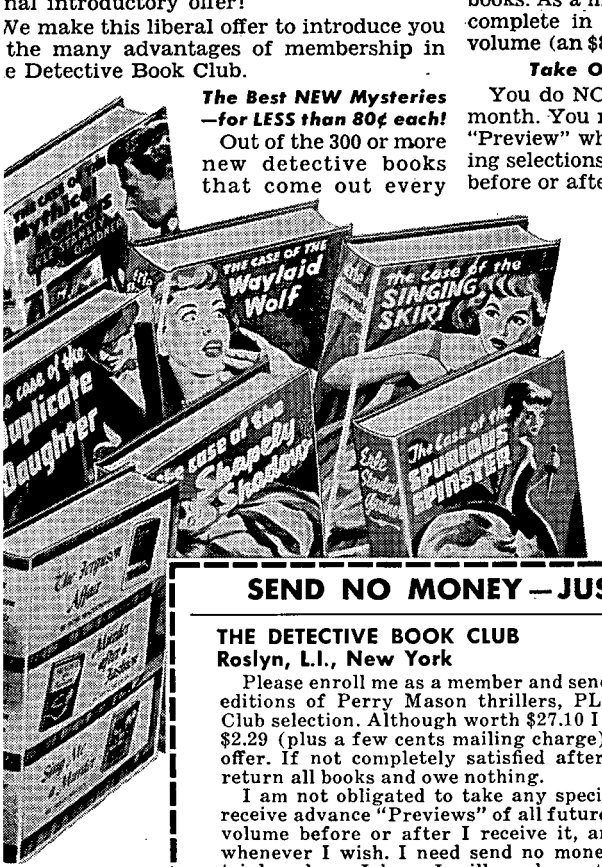

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